

# MOMENT ASKS 35 AMERICAN JEWS TWO BIG QUESTIONS

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ALSO FEATURING (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

THEODORE BIKEL • GERALDINE BROOKS • MICHAEL BROYDE • ALAN DERSHOWITZ • STEPHEN J. DUBNER • DIANNE FEINSTEIN • DAN GLICKMAN • ARTHUR GREEN • BLU GREENBERG • ROYA HAKAKIAN • MICHAEL HAMMER • SUSANNAH HESCHEL • MADELEINE MAY KUNIN • DANIEL LIBESKIND • YAVILAH MCCOY • RUTH MESSINGER • SHERWIN NULAND • JUDEA PEARL • JUDITH SHULEVITZ • GARY SHTEYNGART • ILAN STAVANS • LEON WIESELTIER

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# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A JEW TODAY? WHAT DO JEWS BRING TO THE WORLD?

## THEODORE BIKEI

I consider myself to be a Jew in the vertical and horizontal sense. Horizontal, because I feel myself to be kin, relative and family of every Jew who lives today, wherever he or she may be. Vertical, because I am son, grandson and descendant of all the Jews who came before me; I am also father, grandfather and ancestor of all those who will come after me. Am I special because I am a Jew? Too often, people misunderstand the notion of Jewish specialness. Being the “chosen people” meant chosen for a task, not for privilege. That task was to bring the Word to a world that needed to hear it—still needs to hear it. Call it the Word of God, call it an ethical orientation, call it the knowledge of the difference between good and evil. We are not better than our neighbors, not nobler; we just carry a knapsack that is heavier with memory, with pain. We peddle the lessons of history. As for survival in the face of mortal threats, we who have repeatedly stared into the jaws of death are better able to deal with the threats than those who face them for the first time. But when we tell the world about survival, we are talking about creative survival, not mere physical survival. Everybody who is threatened with extinction fights for physical survival. Yet to survive as a moral people is as important, maybe more important. Far too often people forget this.

*Theodore Bikel is an actor and folk singer.*

## SHMULEY BOTEACH

American Jews are phenomenally proud of the history and the modern contributions of our people. But the biggest mistake the Jews have ever made—and we



**"WE CAN CERTAINLY OFFER MATZOH BREI" MEL BROOKS**

have yet to correct it—is believing that Judaism is only for Jews. We are not a proselytizing faith, nor should we be, yet we have much to offer. Christianity and Islam focus on macro-cosmic issues: Where do I go when I'm going to die? What's heaven like? How can I be saved? Judaism is focused on micro-cosmic issues: How do I learn not to gossip? How do I learn to be spiritually fulfilled? How do I get an intimate relationship with God? How do I create a viable family structure and avoid divorce? We have mastered certain tenets of life that the modern world fails at. We know how to create passionate marriages. We know so much about inspiring children. We have focused on these things as

a people for three millennia. We ought to share what we have learned with the rest of the world.

*Shmuley Boteach is a rabbi and the author of Kosher Sex.*

## GERALDINE BROOKS

When I announced my plans to marry a Jew and convert to his religion, everyone assumed I was doing it for my fiancé. When I told friends that he greeted my decision with bemused indifference, they were baffled: “So if he doesn't care, and you don't believe in God, why on earth would you do it?” God, I explained, had nothing to do with it. It was about

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history. Since Judaism is passed through the maternal line (a fact I admired for its hard-headed pragmatism as well as its feminist implications), there was no way I was going to become the end of a tradition that had made it through Roman sackings, Babylonian exile, Spanish Inquisition, Russian pogroms and the Shoah. And reciting the ancient Hebrew blessings encourages me to notice the small gifts of daily life—the dew on the grass, the new moon, the swift grace and subtle hues of sparrows. Slow down, take a minute, bless the bread and be grateful. This, I tell myself, is what Jews do. This is who I am. What can we offer the world? I think of the poem: “Try to praise the mutilated world.” The world is a tangle of the beautiful and the ugly, the cruel and the gentle, the funny and the tragic. We know from the Torah that it has always been this way and from the sages that it is our business to mend it. *Geraldine Brooks is the winner of the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in fiction for March.*

### MEL BROOKS

I’m part of the generation that changed their name so they’d get hired. I went from Kaminsky to Brooks. My mother’s name was Brookman. But I couldn’t fit Brookman on the drums. I was a drummer. So I got as far as Brook and then put on an “s.” There was a lot of comedy when I was a little kid, street corner comics. We couldn’t own railroads, so prize fighting and comedy were open to us. We’re still comedians. Maybe because Jews cried for so long, it was time to laugh. Who knows? I started in the Borscht Belt with terrible jokes. The first joke I ever

wrote, I think, was, “You can’t keep Jews in jail, they eat lox.” I’ve seen Jews come through an awful lot in my life, especially the Holocaust. In the Army, I suffered a lot of anti-Semitism. Sometimes, I suffered a lot of curiosity from southerners: “Mel, what’s a Jew? What do you people eat?” There’s much less stigma attached to being Jewish today than there used to be. But it’s still an excuse for gathering hate and anti-Semitism. What can we offer the world? We can still offer what Maimonides and Moses laid down. We can offer the law of human behavior. We astonishingly were one of the first cultures to create this thing called law, what is right and what is wrong, based on the tenets of the Old Testament. And, if they want something tasty, we can certainly offer matzoh brei.

*Mel Brooks is a comedian, writer, actor, director and producer.*

### MICHAEL BROYDE

Jews have a particular model of thinking about the relationship between law and ethics from which there is much to learn. Secular law is a white line—you are either on the legal or the illegal side of it. Jewish tradition is about shades of gray. In Judaism, something can be legal but discouraged, frowned upon but not prohibited. Medical bioethics is about shades of gray and is one area in which Jewish tradition has had an enormous impact on secular American law. For example, in sharp contrast to the stance taken by the Catholic Church, all major Jewish denominations have stood in favor of stem cell research, provided that it is carried out for medical or therapeutic purposes. As Jews we can continue to offer the world reasonable answers to complex biomedical and other ethical questions in the name of religion.

*Michael Broyde is a rabbi and law professor at Emory University.*

### ALAN DERSHOWITZ

Being Jewish today includes both a positive and a negative element. On the positive side, Jews have contributed enormously to every aspect of life in the world—literary, scientific, legal, medical. We tend to be overachievers, leaders and people who exert considerable influence on our communities. But this success continues to breed jealousy. To be a Jew today means always being put on the defensive about something, whether it’s Israel’s imperfections or the imperfections of individual Jews. Being a Jew means never being bored, never being able to say that we are completely safe and secure and never being able to forget the past. As Jews, we must offer the world a vision of moral clarity. There is no clearer moral litmus test in the world today than attitudes toward Israel. By defending Israel while being critical of some of its actions, we force the world to confront its bigotry, its imposition of a double standard on the Jewish state and its refusal to confront the oldest of prejudices in the newest of guises.

*Alan Dershowitz is an author, trial lawyer and professor at Harvard Law School.*

### STEPHEN J. DUBNER

Judaism provides a social, political, historical and religious blueprint for the way civilization has unfolded. That’s not because Judaism was necessarily the best or even the first, but because it is a very robust religious tradition that taught the world what civilization can and should look like. It has informed the way people have thought for centuries about vengeance, guilt, punishment, law and order and justice. Millions of Jews since then have done a remarkable job of extending that religious tradition into political, social and moral realms. Marx, Freud and Einstein, three of the essential intellects who shaped the 20th century, were Jew-

ish. Not only is that not a coincidence, but it's also not insignificant in informing how we think about Judaism beyond the shul. Judaism has a great deal to offer the world in terms of thinking about justice, government, science, medicine, language and music, as do a great many other traditions that I also love with all my heart.

*Stephen J. Dubner is the co-author of Freakonomics and SuperFreakonomics.*

## DIANNE FEINSTEIN

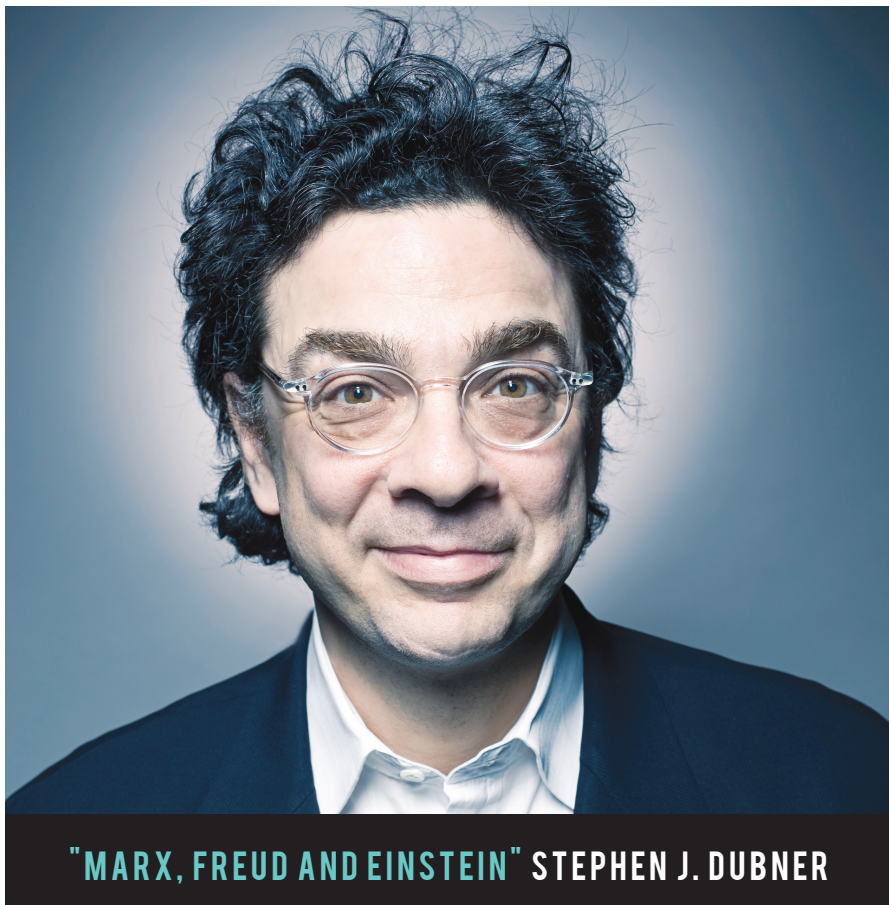
For some, religious identity may be cut and dried, but it isn't for me or for many Jews who saw what happened as a result of Hitler and who have been denied homes and land because of their religion. All these things enter into who we are today. Since the whole history of the Jewish people has been one of struggle, there's much strength to draw from Judaism. The motivation, drive, staying power, all those traits we have needed, are not just inherent in the scriptures or the Ten Commandments but in the whole of our history. The strength of purpose and the care and compassion we give to others are important. Whatever God has given us, we use to the fullest. I think that defines who we are and what we bring.

*Dianne Feinstein is a United States senator from California.*

## RUTH BADER GINSBURG

I am a judge, born, raised and proud of being a Jew. The demand for justice runs through the entirety of Jewish history and Jewish tradition. I hope, in all the years I have the good fortune to serve on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States, I will have the strength and courage to remain steadfast in the service of that demand.

*Ruth Bader Ginsburg is an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.*



"MARX, FREUD AND EINSTEIN" STEPHEN J. DUBNER

## REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN

What I've always admired about Judaism is its worldliness, its earthliness, its impatience with metaphysical questions about God's existence and the afterlife, which has always struck me as a realistic assessment of the limits of human understanding. Judaism focuses on the here and now with a zestiness that infuses all different aspects of life, whether intellectual, cultural or spiritual. It's a life-celebrating attitude, and I love that. There's also a certain greediness, which I also love, a greediness for life itself. It seems significant that Judaism never went in for monasticism. Moral growth has to be strived for within the mess of human life itself, because the mess itself is valuable; the mess is life, and life is good.

*Rebecca Newberger Goldstein is the author of 36 Arguments for the Existence of God.*

## DAN GLICKMAN

Being Jewish has always been a big part of my life because I was one of the limited number of Jewish people in my community. I got a good Jewish education growing up in Wichita, Kansas, a small Midwestern town, where you were expected to conduct the entire bar mitzvah service. As a result, I came away with a strong sense of identity, which I've carried with me as I've worked in various fields, including the movie industry, where there are many Jews, and agriculture, where there are very few. Bill Clinton always used to think it was somewhat humorous that he appointed me as the first Jewish secretary of agriculture. Once, when a change of

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rules for meat and poultry inspection was under consideration, a group of rabbis came to see me, worried that I was going to make kosher slaughtering illegal. I looked at them and said, “Do you think the first Jewish secretary of agriculture would outlaw kosher slaughtering?” My Jewish upbringing has been valuable for dealing with both Jews and non-Jews. The dignified treatment of fellow human beings and other principles laid out in the Torah and the Talmud have created a value system that teaches us how to live our lives and is one we can impart to the rest of world.

*Dan Glickman is president of Refugees International.*

### ARTHUR GREEN

I grew up in Newark, New Jersey, in a white ethnic neighborhood where a couple of kids could still grab you on a street corner and say, “What are you, kid?” Answering “Jewish” got you a bloody nose, but Jewish was who we were. I still had a close relationship to Yiddish-speaking Eastern European grandparents and to that world of native Yiddishkeit. There was no question about whether you should “keep being Jewish,” which meant both religion and ethnicity. I am aware that now we have to ask the question, “Why be Jewish?” People who are fifth-generation American Jews have no connection to Eastern Europe, no memory of Yiddish accents. It’s a very different time, a great change in my lifetime. What the Jews have to offer the world today, however, is our ancient truth, to which we were covenanted so long ago. All of existence is one and

holy; every human being is the image of God. As what happened in Rwanda, Bosnia and many other places shows, it is a lesson that the world has not learned. We Jews, as survivors of the Holocaust, should never again let that happen to other human beings. As bearers of the memories of slavery, of liberation and the covenant, we still need to bear witness and help make the world hear.

*Arthur Green is a rabbi and author of Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition.*

### BLU GREENBERG

To be a Jew is to live a joyous, vulnerable, purposeful existence, mindful of the noble legacy we carry and the incredible ethics Judaism contributed to the world. It is to take enormous pride in the Jewish state and in Jewish contributions all around the world. It is to feel responsible for all Jews, no matter where they are and to care for the downtrodden, the outsider and the stranger in our midst. It is exhilaration in the cup half full—the many ways Judaism has integrated the new feminist values. It is to be grateful for the core value of family that tradition contributes to my life. It is sitting in shul, people-watching and loving my community more than conversing with God, yet deeply sensing the two go hand in hand. It is to believe in God at some moments but not others—accepting this as all-of-a-piece in an ongoing faith. It is to be forever scarred by the Holocaust, yet because of it more intensely bound up with our partners in the covenant. It is to worry about and marvel at Israel in its ethical, restrained use of power despite continuous war and threats to its existence. I have faith in the promise of an eternal people, yet I know it demands of us a continuous struggle to stay alive. What a great gift to be chosen to walk through history as a Jew, a direct descendant of those who stood at Sinai and accepted the mission that is not yet finished! I know what it

took my ancestors to get me here as a Jew, and I intend to make the same effort for my line, improving the world, I hope, in the process.

*Blu Greenberg is the founder of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance and author of On Women and Judaism: A View From Tradition.*

### JEROME GROOPMAN

Being Jewish is a dynamic struggle with identity. It’s Jacob with the angel, or whoever it is who comes in the middle of the night to wrestle with him. That’s what Jews do: We wrestle with God, we wrestle with others, and, most fundamentally, we wrestle with ourselves. One of the wonderful legacies of Jewish thought is challenging authority and doubting. As a scientist, I believe that real scientific progress comes from being an iconoclast, smashing idols in the tradition of Abraham so that you challenge traditional wisdom. You don’t accept things at face value, and you demand a great deal of yourself with regard to the validity of your knowledge. The excitement and the energy of science comes from disputes, and the Talmud is nothing but great authorities arguing with themselves. As a physician who takes care of patients, I look to the wonderful prayer (*refuat hanefesh u’refuat haguf*) for the healing of spirit and body. Judaism long ago appreciated these two dimensions in the experience of illness. As a real-world, pragmatic people, we are determined to do everything possible to improve the physical condition of the person but understand that there is an emotional, psychological and spiritual dimension that also needs to be addressed. What we call “healing” requires both. As a writer, I remember that we are people of books who understand that words have power. There are rabbinic injunctions against using words incorrectly and false testimony. What I extrapolate from our tradition is that the words I offer in public to describe science and medicine

have to be carefully chosen and, as best as possible, filled with truth.

*Jerome Groopman is a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School.*

## ROYA HAKAKIAN

I was a lot less open to the idea of being a Jew as a teenager in Iran because the context in which I could exercise my Judaism was not a democratic one. When I emigrated to the United States in 1985, however, I had options. Living in a democracy means that Judaism is not a monochromatic exercise, it is a multi-colored fact, a brilliant spectrum of many possibilities in which the range is so vast that all of us can find a shade that becomes us and allows us to continue to identify as Jewish. I love that our task for the Day of Atonement is to collectively read a single book in a day. One community, one book project. This is what we do as Jews: We read. Our connection with the higher authority is through a very rigorous exercise of reading. Human religious proxies are dangerous because it is easier to manipulate people this way. If there is to be a proxy, let it be a book. As Jews, we can help bring all other faith communities, including Muslim ones, in contact with the texts that they worship. Enhancing literacy among all populations is the way to engender the greatest Jewish value there is.

*Roya Hakakian is author of Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran.*

## MICHAEL HAMMER

When I look at the Jews, I see continuity among people of different communities—Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardi Jews, the Bukharan Jews from Central Asia—who remained apart for thousands of years. From a population geneticist's point of view, to be Jewish today is to be a beautiful example of the process of descent with modification from a common ances-



tor. We not only share a common culture and religion, our genes tell us we share a common origin. One example is the special genetic marker of the Cohanim, the priestly class, which is represented by a unique Y chromosome lineage carried by Cohanim in different Jewish communities today that traces back to a common male ancestor over 100 generations ago. I'm not a Cohen but knowing this has an emotional impact on me. Our ancestors almost went extinct many times in history, so it's amazing that Jews still exist today as a people. Our genetic heritage brings with it all the forces that shaped that struggle for survival. Genetic variation is influenced not only by chance but also by selective pressure. Whether you have what it takes to survive changes in the environment depends on what you carry with you, so in our genes and our

culture, we carry the special talents we have as Jews. There are many explanations for this. Perhaps Jews, as a result of having evolved through the many near-extinctions and persecutions, had to be clever and outthink others to survive. Perhaps because Jews could not own land in many places in the past, they had to work with numbers and mental constructs and abstractions more than others. And, of course, our culture has always taught us the importance of education and studying. So what do we offer the world? We offer our unique brand of intelligence. *Michael Hammer is a population geneticist at the University of Arizona.*

## SUSANNAH HESCHEL

My father, Abraham Joshua Heschel, was once asked at a demonstration against

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the war in Vietnam, “What are you doing here?” My father replied, “I’m here because I can’t pray. Whenever I open the prayer book, I see images of children burning from napalm. How can I pray?” For me, that captures it. On the one hand, we have a need to pray. But if we’re able to pray easily when there’s so much suffering around us, it’s not really prayer. My father believed that prayer had to be subversive, that prayer should make you feel that you need to strive for something more. To be a serious Jew means you can’t be complacent. A life of *kedusha* means that we have to be concerned about humanity, about others who were also created in God’s image.

*Susannah Heschel is a professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College.*

### MADELEINE MAY KUNIN

We came to the United States when I was a child because my mother feared that Hitler would occupy Switzerland, as he had all the countries around it. Being a Jew in America is very different from being a Jew in any other country. Here, your religion is not your identity, at least from the viewpoint of other people. You are Madeleine Kunin, governor of Vermont, not the Jewish governor of Vermont. But when I returned to Switzerland as an ambassador, I was considered the Jewish American ambassador. There’s a difference. Jews offer the world diversity, intellect and ambition. We also offer a sense of history, particularly the lesson that silence in the face of injustice is never acceptable.

*Madeleine May Kunin, a former governor of Vermont, is a professor at the University of Vermont.*

### TONY KUSHNER

What Jews have to offer the world right now is what we always have offered it, although the world has not always been willing to pay attention. We have a vast experience of oppression, of displacement, of a refusal to accept nonexistence. Jewish history, culture, theology and ethics have immense amounts to teach the world in terms of how majorities relate to minorities. They teach us how minorities come to understand themselves as being a model for the rest of the world, of being more exemplary as a result of lessons that either history or God has chosen to teach. The question is: Does our survival, which has always been a difficult proposition, mean that we’re exempt from our own moral codes when nobody else is following them?

*Tony Kushner is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright.*

### LIZ LERMAN

The Jews are known as “the people of the book,” but we could have been “the people of the body,” too. It’s the body that carries the books. It’s the body that remembers the stories. It’s the bodies that touch each other when we stand in a circle. It’s the body that stood up to the pogroms. Our bodies are sources of knowledge, memory and deep connections that are inexpressible through language. But we decided to define ourselves as the people of the book and that has been both fantastic and difficult for us. The difficult part is being addressed today with a renaissance of artistic activity in the Jewish community. We can offer the world our notion of survival. We’ve absorbed massive amounts of beautiful things from the cultures in which we lived, visited, even were oppressed by. I am interested in the compromise that emerges from these influences. I don’t see compromise as a bad thing but as the border where we nego-

tiate what we’re going to keep and what we’re going to let go of. Being Jewish is a daily act of creation. We can’t keep out our creative impulses because they’re so-called “not rational.” You cannot survive unless you keep and let go, keep and let go. And that is painful and sad—and very inspiring.

*Liz Lerman is the founder of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.*

### DANIEL LIBESKIND

What it means to be Jewish today is what it has always meant to be Jewish, which is to bring together memory, the past and the quest that is part of the Jewish sense of life. Being Jewish is not just a one liner. It’s a complex tradition with many different strands, both religious and secular. The challenge and meaning of being Jewish today is to bring together the various, often even contradictory, threads of the Jewish tradition into the future. It’s to assert the very deep Jewish values that are always under threat in any contemporary society. What Jews offer the world today is to question the world. The fantastic thing about being Jewish is that Jewishness offers freedom of discourse and imagination in all directions. There’s no limit to it; that’s the eternal. That’s the Jewish mind. It’s very important for us to bring something positive to the world in which there is so much negativity. Ultimately, despite all that has befallen the Jewish people, the Jewish tradition is a tradition of joyfulness, of celebration. Above all else, that is a key to what Jews can offer to the world: to be the leaders against dark shadows.

*Daniel Libeskind is an architect and artist.*

### JOSEPH LIEBERMAN

To me, being Jewish today means what it has always meant—a covenantal responsibility to honor and enjoy God’s creations (natural and human), and to do

whatever we can to protect and improve their existence. But being Jewish today also means something unique—being blessed to be alive at an extraordinary time in Jewish history, when so many of us have the privilege of being citizens of the United States, which has provided Jews with more freedom, opportunity and respect than any other country in history, and when the State of Israel has been re-established after centuries of praying and working for that result. As Jews, we can try, each in our own way, to advance and implement the great principles of ethics, justice and humaneness that were given at Sinai.

*Joseph Lieberman is a United States senator from Connecticut.*

## YAVILAH MCCOY

What it means to be Jewish today is to be an African-American-Jewish woman. People need to understand that the choice to be Jewish cuts across different racial identities. We are not looking to be integrated and absorbed. We are a manifestation of what Judaism has become. We are the Jewish community. If I lined all of us up as a Jewish people in terms of color, we would look more like the United Nations than the United Nations itself. Yet what binds us together is deeper than skin color. Our morals, ethics and values have impacted the world. The Exodus was the model the Founding Fathers used to found our country. The United States of America was supposed to be the next Zion. The idea of freedom that permeates the Bible is what helped to create the Constitution of the United States. Care for the stranger is the model that Jews can give to the world in a graceful way. We must understand that it's not those who have and those who don't, it is who we all are when we stand before God.

*Yavilah McCoy founded Ayecha, a Jewish diversity resource organization.*



"THE DEMAND FOR JUSTICE"

RUTH BADER GINSBURG

## RUTH MESSINGER

Being Jewish is being part of a thousands-year-old faith that offers guidance as to the importance of connecting to the world with a moral agenda requiring action. To help others, the Talmud tells us, is the way of peace. I take very seriously the obligation to pursue justice and address the problems of inequity, injustice and poverty. The American Jewish community in the 21st century has reached a level of affluence and influence far beyond what our grandparents could have imagined. While the Jewish community still faces serious problems, there are billions of people whose lives are worse off today. As citizens of the world, not just of our own community, whether this becomes a world of greater or less equity and justice will reflect on us all. A more just world is one that will hopefully be

one of less intolerance and less violence. Because we have the capacity, because we have the obligation, because it directly affects how we're seen in the world and because it creates a better world for us and our children, we should take action.

*Ruth Messinger is the president and CEO of American Jewish World Service.*

## LEONARD NIMOY

I'm a first-generation American. My parents were very ghettoized people; they were immigrants. For everything that broke in the news, their concern was: "Was it a Jewish person?" and "Is it good or bad for the Jews?" If there was something terrible that somebody did, you prayed that it wasn't a Jewish person because it would inflame anti-Semitism. We're past that to some degree. We don't

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have Father Coughlin on the radio spouting anti-Semitism. Still, we take pride in the accomplishments of Jews and worry about the negatives. What can we offer the world today? It would be wonderful to say, “Oh, we’re honest, striving, liberal, educated, persevering, cultured, sophisticated, people of the book, all that good stuff.” But it’s not so easy today to hold ourselves as an example. Just look at the question of Israeli-Arab relations. I was having a conversation with an Israeli cab driver once and he said, “They lie to us! We can’t negotiate with them; they lie to us!” After a moment’s pause, he added, “And we lie right back!”

*Leonard Nimoy is an actor and photographer.*

### SHERWIN NULAND

Our faith is based on learning and a constant increase in knowledge and understanding. We believe in improvement and progress, based on our notion of free will. We live for the here and now rather than for rewards that will be given to us in some unspecified afterlife. This is probably why the accomplishments of Jews have been so remarkable. Remember that famous Rabbi Tarfon quote from the Pirkei Avot?: “It is not your duty to complete the work, but you are not free to desist from it, either.” We give the world the Jewish personality, whose restlessness tells us that this is not a perfect world, and we have the responsibility to do something about it.

*Sherwin Nuland is clinical professor of surgery at Yale University.*

### JUDEA PEARL

Being Jewish is to see oneself as a member

of an extended family, bonded by shared history and shared destiny. Our whole culture is based on the tribal idea that we have a special responsibility to one another and to the world around us. It’s not that we aspire to greater ideals than other collectives but that we have found a cognitively compelling way of encoding those aspirations, so that they will be pursued effectively, using a unique symbiosis between tribalism and universalism. God promises Abraham: “I will make you into a great nation and all people on earth will be blessed through you.” Thus, our reward is in the progress of mankind, not in personal redemption; to be Jewish is to be universal in compassion and tribal in responsibility. In the time of our grandfathers, the prayer shawl was our unifying symbol. Today, Israel is our unifying force, for it is the most powerful symbol of our potential as a collective. Empowered by Israel, we offer the world an unprecedented role model of a society that was blighted by oppression and managed to lift itself from the margin of history to become a world center of art, business and science. We also provide an example of a society which constantly creates, questions the status quo, innovates and aspires to improve the lot of mankind. The strengthening of Israel and peace in the Middle East should be our highest priority as Jewish people, for this will enable us to continue our collective identity and channel all of our cultural charge to the betterment of mankind.

*Judea Pearl is professor emeritus of computer science at UCLA.*

### ITZHAK PERLMAN

You’re Jewish, you’re not Jewish, there’s no difference. Perhaps I think this because of the two places where I’ve lived my life. The first 15 years were in Israel—it’s your land, your *mishpacha*, that’s it. The next 51 years I’ve been living in New York City, a very special place.

There is freedom, and I don’t experience discrimination. What it means to be Jewish hasn’t changed throughout time, it’s just the question of others’ attitudes. As far as the Jews are concerned, we are a people with a serious past history and should always remember who we are. What Jews can offer the world is what they’ve offered in the past: Whether in science, art or literature, we excel. I love music. I love traditional klezmer music and traditional cantorial music. Somebody asked me once, “Why are so many Jews great violinists?” I don’t know. It’s a cycle, it’s a hunger. Today, the cycle is not necessarily toward the Jewish violinists but Asian ones. Koreans are number one right now. A lot of people say, well, you have to be Jewish to play it this way. I don’t know if this is true or not. But maybe pain and suffering, a little *krechts* in what you’re doing, a sigh—a real sigh—helps.

*Itzhak Perlman is a violinist and conductor.*

### JONATHAN SARNA

How is being Jewish today different than it was 500 years ago? Back then, nobody would likely have asked, “What does it mean to be Jewish?” Today, the question yields over 14 million hits on the Internet, and the answer, in many ways, is, “It’s completely up to me.” It is common to suggest that Jews can offer the world Torah or tikkun olam. The former, though, we have already given to the world, and the latter tends to be the latest universalistic cause with a Jewish inflection. I believe that the value that is distinctively ours is the idea of *klal yisrael*, the remarkable notion that “all Jews are responsible for one another” whether we know them or not, like them or not, agree with them or not. Millions of Jews around the world are alive today because other Jews—who never set eyes upon them but felt a strong sense of kinship toward them as fellow Jews—

reached out to save them or their ancestors during times of persecution. Sadly, today less than half of all American Jews feel comfortable embracing the notion of *klal yisrael*. Rather than abandoning this crucial Jewish value, it must be reinforced and shared with others. If everyone learned to embrace their own people as family, perhaps someday we might advance to embrace other peoples around the world as well.

*Jonathan Sarna is professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University.*

## JUDITH SHULEVITZ

To be Jewish is to inherit both a wealth of riches and some daunting, even alarming, responsibilities. The first part of this inheritance is intellectual and spiritual—the Torah and Talmud and the rituals endorsed therein and the extraordinary body of law and legend and philosophizing and interpreting that have grown up around them. The second part of the inheritance is less appealing; it features a history of horror, persecution and displacement. All outsize inheritances make demands on those who receive them; you can't hold on to something you don't manage wisely. So how are we going to manage our Jewish tradition? Are we going to be halachic Jews, following it to the letter? Or are we going to see ourselves as interpreters of the tradition, bringing it up to date but letting observance wither? How do we deal with the darkness of our history? How do we make sense of it? What Jews can bring to the rest of the world—must bring to the rest of the world—it seems to me, are the good ideas contained within Judaism, and the lessons we've learned both from extreme powerlessness and our brief period of nationhood. We were slaves, and we wrote the greatest liberation narrative ever written. We invented the commandment to honor your father and mother. We invented the Sabbath. We invented



"LEADERS AGAINST DARK SHADOWS" DANIEL LIBESKIND

the idea that everyone has the right to rest, an egalitarian notion that is not only the basis of all thinking about modern labor rights but is fundamentally the ancient notion of human dignity. To be Jewish is to remember these things and grapple with the obligation to do right by them.

*Judith Shulevitz is author of The Sabbath World.*

## GARY SHTEYNGART

I live in New York, which is, in many ways, more Jewish than Israel. Yiddishisms are used by everyone: Latinos, Chinese, Indians, Koreans. It is the lingua franca of New York. The most important role for Jews has been the ability to migrate between different cultures, to absorb things and to create a kind of mish-mash

that uses the best ideas from around the world. Jews have been cosmopolitan in the best sense of the word and, in that way, other ethnicities are now becoming Jewish themselves.

*Gary Shteyngart is author of The Russian Debutante's Handbook.*

## ILAN STAVANS

To be Jewish is to have a sense of otherness, to be at once an insider and an outsider. To be Jewish is to be able to speak the language of power but not be at its command, for power corrupts. To be Jewish is to serve as a bridge between cultures. As time and space travelers, Jews have survived the nightmare of history by learning the codes of the various environments in which they have found themselves, although never to the extent of forgetting

COURTESY OF DANIEL LIBESKIND

their inner essence. I was born and raised in Mexico City, and, in spite of my Ashkenazi upbringing, I feel a strong connection to the Iberian Peninsula. I share not only some of its languages but its collective imagination. The Jews of Spain before 1492 were into materialism while also devoting themselves to mathematics, philosophy and poetry, believing—foolishly, as it turned out—in the coexistence of religions. American Jews have many of those same traits and will share the same fate. The American experiment isn't eternal; like other civilizations of the past, it is meant to give place to other varieties of human interaction. Medieval Spain disappeared but not its Jews. While this wonderfully complex nation of ours isn't ahistorical, the Jews in it are. That's an enormous responsibility that dispenses a crucial knowledge: Jews must always see our day and age from what Baruch Spinoza called *sub specie aeternitatis*—under the aspect of eternity.

*Ilan Stavans is a professor of Latin American and Latino culture at Amherst College.*

## ELIE WIESEL

As a Jew, I know that not everyone can make history. But it's incumbent on all of us Jews to be part of Jewish history. And the way to accomplish that is to be part of the community of Israel. That community includes learning, solidarity and memory with all of its components, the tragic and the glorious. Memory is part of learning, but learning without memory is impossible. We should remember and feel solidarity as a Jewish people, Israel, whatever we call Jewish destiny individually and collectively. As Jews, we must help teach the world that whenever a community is targeted, all are affected. Hence, as Jews, we must help all who need help, wherever they are. We must understand their needs, understand their fears and understand their joys. And, ultimately, understand what is theirs is also ours. It is incumbent on the Jewish people because this is what we have done since we

became a people. God gave us the Torah, and, in a way, he said, "Oh no, not only for us." He gave it to everybody.

*Elie Wiesel is the author of Night, co-founder of Moment Magazine and the winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize.*

## LEON WIESELTIER

The meaning of Jewishness, however much we refine it and contribute to it, is not anything that we wholly invent and is not just an affair of self-expression. It is something that we inherit. To be a Jew today means still to be a member of a people that is one of the primary facts of human history, that created an entire civilization around the religion that is its core. I find it impossible to imagine a meaningful Jewishness without some deep relationship to Judaism in its philosophy or its practice. For all our devotion to this world, which our tradition more or less mandates, Jewishness must also have an otherworldly element, some acknowledgment of meanings that we cannot see or touch. Otherwise it will be merely ethnic or tribal or anthropological. Being born a Jew is a stroke of good luck, and an honor and a summons to work. We bring to the world all the things we are, high and low, good and bad. The important thing is to be able to distinguish between our high and our low, our good and our bad. The ethical ideals and the spiritual challenges that our tradition teaches are certainly a light unto the nations, though they ought to be first a light unto ourselves. As for our low things and our bad things, we are as human as the rest of the species, but in

this regard we at least offer the example of flawed and fallible people who have (usually) preferred to be strict with themselves about themselves. We certainly have been among the world's great teachers of the spirit of criticism.

*Leon Wieseltier is the literary editor of The New Republic.*

## RUTH WISSE

To be a Jew means being part of a civilized people who live according to the law of Moses and Israel. That remains no simpler today than it was in the desert, or under the rule of Romans, Christians or Muslims, though perhaps simpler than it was under Nazism and communism. The value of Jewish national discipline, creatively refined over many centuries, was proven when Israel reclaimed independence three years after the Holocaust. No Jewish offering to the world could possibly be greater than the example of a people ground to ashes whose remnants had the wisdom, strength and courage to reclaim its land and gather its displaced persons. What we can offer the world depends, alas, on the world. Today, as in the past, the most corrupt and barbaric forces commit aggression against the Jewish "entity," forcing Israel to become the front line of defense for human decency. Until the aggressors come to terms with Israel, the best we Jews can offer is to resist our defamers and would-be destroyers. Repairing the world begins with stopping wars against the Jews.

*Ruth Wisse is a professor of Yiddish literature and comparative literature at Harvard.* ☞

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