

THE HUMAN
CHALLENGE

BEING JEWISH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

The Treasure in Your Own Backyard

Yitzchak ben Moshe, known as Reb Ayzik (Isaac) Yekeles, lived in Krakow in the early 17th century. Night after night, Reb Ayzik had a recurring dream in which he traveled to Prague where he would find a treasure buried underneath a certain bridge. Finally, he went to the bridge in Prague he had seen in his dreams but found it guarded by soldiers. Afraid to search for the treasure, Reb Ayzik left and came back the next day, and the next, and the next, hoping in vain for an opportunity to dig unobserved. The captain of the guard stationed at the bridge noticed the stranger who came back day after day, and asked him what he was doing there. When Reb Ayzik told him the story, the officer laughed and said, “Who believes in dreams? I dreamed that I should journey to Krakow and find someone there named Ayzik Yekeles, and that if I dig in the home of that Jew, I will find a treasure under the stove.”

The point of the story, of course, is that we don’t need to go elsewhere to find a treasure. It is waiting for us, right “at home.” This is a book for Jews who want to find that treasure.

Erich Fromm commented in *The Sane Society*, “Whereas in the nineteenth century God was dead, in the twentieth century man is dead.” That was before the internet created a whole new wave of dehumanization. This is a book that shows that Judaism believes that man can be not only alive, but fully human.

2 *The Human Challenge*

To do so is to engage every aspect of oneself, as I will show, but also to engage the sparks of holiness that lie in the world around us. The Hebrew word for world is *olam* (עולם), which comes from the word *he'elem* (העלם)—hidden. And that is because real spirituality is not openly seen.¹ And yet, when we scratch under the surface of ourselves and our surroundings, it is everywhere, all over. By peering below the surface, we connect to our inner selves. This is what Micah was telling us when he said, “to walk modestly with your God.”² The Hebrew word for “modesty” actually means hidden. So, Micah was telling us that if we want to walk with God, we have to walk below the surface of superficial reality, where spirituality resides.

Together, in these pages, we will learn where and how to look.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT AND WHO IT IS FOR

Judaism has been something utterly profound for me. Every time that I think I have plumbed the depths of a particular issue, I turn the corner to find a whole new world of depth and meaning. As the prophet Job put it, “Its measure is longer than the earth and wider than any sea.”³ This book is an attempt to share some of that depth—to show an overview of Judaism as a way of looking at and understanding life in a way that leaps far beyond the boundaries of our initial expectations.

The question, “What are the most important things that someone approaching Judaism needs to know?” has many answers. It depends on the age, intellect, background, predilections, and commitment of the inquirer. But perhaps it is the wrong question. Real questions arise from the personal:

- What are the most pressing issues in my life and how does Judaism address them?
- How do I grow?
- How do I feel spiritual?

1 Rabbeinu Bachya, beginning of Genesis.

2 “And what does God demand of you except to do kindness and justice and to walk modestly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

3 Job 11:9.

- How do I become wise?
- How do I sanctify the world around me and make it a better place?
- How do I work on my character?
- How do I integrate work and food and intimacy into my life's goals?

What follows in this book is an attempt to answer these questions for an intelligent and sensitive adult reader. It draws significantly on deeper Jewish thought—made comprehensible to the novice while still giving a sense of the astonishing depth of Torah.

My hope is that it will be a rich and exciting entry to Judaism for those who are at the early stages of their relationship with Judaism. Having said that, because these chapters reflect a summary of the wisdom of the generations, this book will also be of significant benefit to those who have an extensive background in Judaism by providing a methodical and sourced overview of many topics that may otherwise have remained fragmented insights.

The content of this book is most decidedly for both genders. I often used the male pronouns “he” because the alternatives—“he/she” for example—were often awkward in their context. The English language will require a more radical makeover to accommodate all the sensitivities involved here.

The Torah that is presented here is not my own. It is all taken from many of the great books written during the last 2,500 years and going back to that greatest book of all, the Torah itself. I have therefore been careful to source everything that I have written. The wording in the contemporary idiom is mine, but I see myself as merely the faithful transmitter of timeless wisdom that ultimately comes from God Himself.

I have also tried as much as possible to go back to the source of sources—the Torah itself—and to show how the issues I bring forth emerge out of the Torah itself.

Each chapter of this book can be read independently, though the full richness of the topics will only be gained if the book is read in order.

I pray that this book transmits a message that is faithful to our profound tradition. I hope that it shows that Torah has a message that

is contemporary and relevant, exciting and engaging. I have found Judaism to be so for me. I hope the reader will too.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THIS BOOK

The innovation of this book begins with its conceptual framework. I have taken four major categories of life—a Purposeful life, holiness, wisdom, and patterns of growth—and explored the Jewish approach to them, devoting twelve or so chapters to each.

1. **Section 1: A Purposeful Life.** This deals with the big questions: Who are we? What is our purpose? Freedom, body and soul; passion and choice; relationships with God and with man.
2. **Section 2: Holiness.** This section starts with an overview of what is holiness, how we sanctify the material world, and what God's role is in this. I then move onto specific applications of sanctity—the Commandments, the Shabbat, eating kosher, physical relations between husband and wife, and the Hebrew language.
3. **Section 3: Wisdom.** Jews are about holiness, and they are about wisdom. There is the wisdom of the Written and Oral Laws; the wisdom of the heart, mind, imagination, and action; the wisdom of silence, speech, and protest. There is also the wisdom of the Kabbalah, of prayer, and the halachah.
4. **Section 4: Patterns of Growth.** How does Judaism serve as a system of growth? Where does our intense desire to express our individuality as well as our negativity come in? What are some of the big growth principles in Judaism? How should we relate to tests and challenges in our life? What is the Jewish idea of love, kindness, and charity? How do we develop our traits of modesty, humility, happiness, repentance, and forgiveness? Where does sensuality fit in?

Judaism provides a vast canopy of ideas. No one book can begin to contain them all. There is no end to the judgment calls that could be made. Why should one include this and exclude that? In the end, I made my choices based on a lifetime of involvement with Jews getting closer to their Judaism. I hope the reader looks kindly on those choices.