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WHO ARE THE JEWS?

Physicist Albert Einstein, physician and philosopher Moses Maimonides, historian Heinrich Graetz, physician and poet Yehuda Halevi, Foreign Minister Henry Kissinger, artist Marc Chagall, lawyer Ruth Bader Ginzberg, and Ruby of Cochin are all Jews. They are also Germans, Spaniards, Americans, Russians, and Indians. This immediately signals to us that Jews are not a race, not a biological entity, but an ethnicity, a nation with a religion, with a culture, with a history. This does not mean that there are no genetic markers at all, merely that the markers among the general population are sufficiently diluted from centuries of intermarriage that they are no longer distinct. The *kohanim* or priests are genetically identifiable, because they are traditionally forbidden from marrying proselytes, so that their blood line is intact.

In the beginning, approximately 4,000 years ago, one man by the name of Abram, who lived in Haran, Mesopotamia, with his family, was singled out by God for the task of creating a way of life that differed from that of the culture he lived in. Abram left his father, Terach, and journeyed into an unknown future, solely relying on a God who spoke to him, but whom he could not see. The relationship they established was one of trust. God asked that as a physical sign of the covenant between them Abram circumcise himself and all the males in his household. This covenantal act resulted in a name change from Abram to Abraham and for his wife from Sarai to Sarah. The newly added consonant is a letter from the Tetragrammaton, God's ineffable name, sealing the pact between Abraham's clan and God. Abraham therewith became the father of the Jewish

people. Through Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph a patriarchal tribal structure was established that survived the years of slavery in Egypt. In 1250 BCE Moses was able to rally all of the tribes of the Israelites in Egypt and lead them out of slavery and into national renewal. Why was it the Jewish people who were given the Torah at Mt. Sinai? One version of the story is that no other people was willing to accept the Torah as their teaching because it was too hard, another version claims that God held the tablets with the Ten Commandments over the people's heads and threatened to drop them if the Israelites did not accept the Law. Accept they did, whatever the reason, and a new generation, the generation born in the desert, learned the ways of Torah. When they were ready to accept the responsibility of nationhood, Moses showed them the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo, in today's Jordan, and then he, too, expired. No one from the slave generation was allowed to enter the Jewish homeland, only those with a new heart.

In the Land of Israel, or Eretz Israel, the tribal structure evolved into a monarchy. The Jews wanted an earthly king like other nations, and God wanted a permanent place of worship among the people. With Saul and David, the warrior leader evolved into a king; and Solomon, the first king who was not tainted by war, was allowed to build the Temple in Jerusalem, along with the establishment of the priesthood. The ancient forebears of the Jews, the Israelites, were now a full-fledged independent nation-state. They engaged in trade with many nations, to the far corners of the world. Merchants came to trade and some of them did not return home. Hence communities were created outside of Israel, many of which exist to this day. Jews in Africa claim descent from the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. When the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom, known as Israel, in 722 BCE, the Jewish population was dispersed. When the First Temple in

Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, new Jewish communities established themselves in Babylon and in Shushan, Persia. Shushan provides the location for the Book of Esther and the holiday of Purim. During the Second Temple period, 535 BCE – 70 CE, communities established themselves in the Greek and Roman Empires, in cities such as Athens and Rome. Following the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, a few Jews remained in Javneh, in what the Romans called Palestine, where they reconstituted the Jewish religion without a Temple or priests or sacrifices. At the time of Josephus, the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, already numbered one million. With the Roman advance to Northern Europe, Jews traveled along the Rhine River to England, hence the communities in Mainz and Cologne, which date to the third and fourth centuries CE. When Mohammed the Prophet conquered Arabia, Jews had long lived in Mecca and other places in Arabia as well as throughout the Iberian Peninsula (slides 1 and 2), where they built great cultural centers, such as Cordova, Seville, and Toledo. Soon after the Muslim conquest of Spain, Jews were also reported in China, in the city of Kaifeng, the capital of Honan Province (slide 3). Emperor Heaou-tsung reportedly allowed them to erect a synagogue in 1163 CE (slide 4). The Kaifeng Jewish community persisted until the modern period. In the Middle Ages, the Jews of France and Germany populated Eastern Europe. When they were expelled from Spain by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand in 1492, they settled throughout the Mediterranean and as far north as the Black Sea in the East and Amsterdam in the Northwest. The Jews of Cochin on the Malabar Coast of India (slides 5 and 6) came to Western attention during the period of Dutch rule in the seventeenth century (slide 7), and the B'nai Menashe on the East Coast of India, in Calcutta, first came to our attention in the eighteenth century.

All of these communities have persisted for many centuries. They have often been obliterated by waves of persecution and afterwards repopulated by a tenacious group of survivors who, in the absence of a Jewish state, had become attached to this piece of land. Thus, Judaism is not only a religion and a culture, but a full-fledged civilization that proudly stands with the other ancient civilizations that have survived to today, such as China, Japan, and India. With the creation of modern Israel in 1948, the Jewish people has also been reconstituted as a nation-state.

Individuals have been intrigued for some time with the reasons why a dispersed people, without a political center, and no place to call home between 70 CE and 1948, has survived as a coherent entity for nearly two thousand years. For all intents and purposes, a group in dispersion ought to eventually disappear. But the Jews have not. What accounts for this? Let me give you some of the reasons.

- The Jewish people's original effort in building a society with a common focus – God.
- The development of a social structure that is the hallmark of a civilization, with holidays and life cycle events.
- An oral and literary tradition that perpetuates the people's history.
- A tradition of learning.
- A national culture, with visual art, music, and poetry.
- Throughout the Diaspora, acculturation to the host culture, but not assimilation.
- Contributions to the public life and culture of the host nation.
- The desire to return to the ancient homeland in Eretz Israel and to reconstitute a Jewish state.

- The major nations' and worldwide Jewry's support of the state of Israel and call to make aliyah in 1948.
- Continued support of modern Israel by worldwide Jewry.
- Continuation of proud Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

I shall comment on each of these points.

1. The culture in which Terach and Abram and Lot originated was one of polytheism, with many different gods. This can still be seen in the story of Rachel, who takes her father Laban's household god when she leaves his home with Jacob. The God of the Israelites was a jealous God, who declared Himself to be One, Unique, and who would not tolerate any other Gods. In the Second Commandment we learn, "Thou shalt not have other gods besides me." This new God of the Israelites demanded absolute loyalty and obedience. Abraham went as far as being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, his most beloved son, because God asked him to. Only at the last moment did God open his eyes to the impending deed and provide an alternative for sacrifice, a ram. The God of the Israelites clearly did not desire human sacrifice, a departure from the cultures among whom the Israelites lived. While intermarriage was frowned upon in some Biblical stories -- such as in the story of Lot who marries foreign wives, and that of Jacob, who marries only women from his own family -- intermarriage was also a necessity throughout the ages. The Jewish people was much too small in number, only about 15 million today, to procreate safely only from within. Thus, we have Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, a Moabite, whom we celebrate every Shavuot as the *ger zedek* extraordinaire. Conversion to Judaism has been one way to maintain the Jewish population over time. In spite of the fact that in the modern period there are different

branches of Judaism, the focus for nearly four thousand years has been the same -- the worship of One God.

2. Crucial to Judaism's development as a civilization was the establishment of clear religious, hence social, guidelines. How do we worship this One God? When Moses took the Israelites out of Egypt in about 1250 BCE, they were, according to the Bible, a motley crew of slaves, perhaps along with some other fringe groups who were likewise oppressed by the Pharaoh. Several months into their journey in the Sinai desert, they camped at Mount Sinai, where Moses experienced his theophany, that is to say, he met God face to face up on the mountain, for forty days and forty nights. The people had already given him up as dead when he returned with the Tablets of the Law. He was a changed Moses, with only one purpose, to teach the people how to live a God-fearing life. The beginning was not good, for the people had despaired of his return and had built a Golden Calf, an idol, exactly the opposite of what Moses wanted to achieve. So they had to wander in the wilderness for forty years, some commentators say, as punishment for the Golden Calf, others say, so they could learn the ways of God as told to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Only when they had learned how to be a people, how to take care of each other, and how to singlemindedly worship the One God, was Moses allowed to die. All of the slave generation had died by the time Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land. But the experience of the wilderness had created a strong bond between the people and their God and among the people. This bond reemerges, no matter how diffuse the Jewish people, whenever we are endangered from the outside.

The periods of the First and Second Temple established formal ways of worship, with a central place of worship, a priesthood descending from Aaron, elaborate religious

rituals such as various types of sacrifices, pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and processions in the Temple, prayer, fasting, beautification of the service through music (slide 8), oral teachings of the Law handed down from father to son, and home rituals for Shabbat and holidays.

Life cycle events, from circumcision of boys on the eighth day, as practiced by Abraham, to coming of age ceremonies at age 13, to marriage (slide 9), caring for the sick, and elaborate rites at the time of death, all served to give meaning to individual Jews and to keep them within the communal fold. Since prayer services, including sitting *shivah* at the time of a death, require a quorum of ten, Judaism is not a religion to be practiced alone, but a religion that is lived with one's family and friends.

3. Since many of the holidays are connected to historical events, story telling is extremely important to reinforce knowledge of Jewish history. The best known story is The Story, the recounting of the Exodus from Egypt, which we do every year at Passover (slide 10). In the Sephardic or Mediterranean tradition, Jews dress up during the Passover seder and march around the table with a *packerl* (bundle) on their back, literally reliving the Exodus. Other parts of the Exodus experience are recounted during the other two pilgrim festivals – the Law-giving at Sinai during the holiday of Shavuot, when we rise for the reading of the Ten Commandments, and the building of a sukkah, or portable hut, during the holiday of Sukkot (slide 11), to reenact the forty years of living in the wilderness. The holiday of Purim is based on the Book of Esther in Persia, and the festival of lights, Hanukkah, tells the story of the Jewish revolt against the Romans in the second century BCE.

4. All of the Jewish holidays also have customs associated with them that make for great stories while sitting around the dining room table – from bubbe’s (grandma’s) chicken soup recipe for Shabbat, to zede’s (grandpa’s) telling of the Passover story, to the carp in the bathtub for Rosh Hashanah. The lively and creative activities surrounding Jewish holidays have been a major way of teaching Jewish tradition to the next generation. Likewise, boys have always been instructed in the rituals connected to the worship service, today girls receive the same instruction. Children learn Biblical Hebrew, the sacred language, so that they can read the Hebrew Bible for themselves. Many Jewish communities have a yeshivah, or Jewish college, where boys study the commentaries on the Bible contained in the Talmud, and many other texts. Continuing education for those who have completed their religious education is expected. Most Jewish communities have adult education classes that cover a variety of topics, small groups engage in Torah and Talmud study, and some study the mystical texts as well. Many of today’s Jews of all ages learn Modern Hebrew, so that they can converse with their extended family in Israel and read the popular press and listen to the Israeli media. Again, this shared base of common knowledge of Jewish sources and practices creates a strong bond among Jews anywhere in the world. One can go to a religious service in Berlin, Jerusalem or Tokyo and know what is going on, because the main components such as the prayers and reading the Torah and the prophetic portion are the same anywhere in the world.

5. Every civilization is a rich treasure chest of national cultural expressions – in visual art, sculpture, music, dance, architecture, and poetry. Already during the Exodus, God instructed Bezalel how to make a menorah for the Tabernacle (slide 12). This

seven-branched candelabra, which can be seen life-sized in the Old City of Jerusalem, is the oldest Jewish symbol. Much of the Hebrew Bible was written in poetry, all of the psalms are attributed to King David, and the Song of Songs is attributed to King Solomon. Miriam, Moses' and Aaron's sister, danced with timbrels at the Red Sea. The Levites beautified the Temple service with their beautiful voices and instrumental music. In an effort to soothe the dark spirits of King Saul, a young David plays his harp, with Saul's daughter Michal at his side.

After the destruction of the two Temples, and the disappearance of the priesthood including the Levites, no more instrumental music was played during worship services until the emergence of the Reform movement in the nineteenth century. Only the human voice was heard. Some of the melodies such as *Aleynu* are said to go back to the Temple period. There were a number of great composers, such as Louis Lewandowski (1821-94) in nineteenth-century Germany. Cantors such as Yossele Rosenblatt (1882-1933) (slide 13) and Salomon Sulzer (1804-90) (slide 14) became famous for their renditions of Jewish sacred music, some of them even became opera stars, Richard Tucker (1913-75) (slide 15) and more recently Beverly Sills (1929-) among them.

As previously noted, Judaism had ceremonial art from the very beginning. The continuation of this tradition is ensured by the commandment to beautify the Torah, *hiddur mitzvah*. Every tradition is surrounded by artifacts that suit the occasion, such as seder plates, Hannukah candlesticks, Purim plates for gifts, Shabbat candlesticks (slide 16), *mezuzot*, Torah covers, breast plates and finials, *tallitot* (prayer shawls), *kippot*, and *zedakah* boxes. Only representative art, also known as figurative art, was problematic. In the Second Commandment we are taught, "Thou shalt not make graven images, and

bow down to them.” It is for the second part, the danger of idol worship, that both sculpture of figures and the painting of images were eschewed during certain periods in Jewish history. Even during the ancient period there periodically were coins with a human image or during the late Middle Ages a portrait might emerge, but in general, only in the late nineteenth century in Europe did Jews also dare to produce figurative art. Artists such as Josef Israels (1824-1911) in the Netherlands, Hermann Struck (1876-1944) in Germany (slide 17), Marc Chagall (1887-1985) in Russia (slide 18), and others asserted themselves with Jewish themes.

Throughout history there have been Jewish national poets, who endeared themselves to the Jewish people for their poetry or short stories. They often wrote in the sacred language, but sometimes also in the vernacular of the country they lived in. Among the most famous are Yehuda Halevi (?1075-1141), a medieval Spanish physician and poet philosopher (slide 19); Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) (slides 20 and 21), who practiced medicine in Fustat (Cairo), Egypt (slide 22), around the same time, and became the leader for his generation of Sephardic Jews, writing philosophical treatises and responsa for communities from Egypt to Yemen. Yosef Karo (1488-1575), a famous rabbi in Israel, wrote the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Prepared (or set) Table, which became a guide to living a Jewish life for Polish Jewry. A beloved East European writer was Shalom Aleichem (1859-1916), creator of Tevye, the milkman, main protagonist in “Fiddler on the Roof,” (slide 23) and 1966 Nobel Prize winner Shmuel Agnon (1888-1970). One of the most popular Israeli poets who died recently was Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), perhaps the closest thing we have to a modern Yehuda Halevi. And then there are American Jewish writers such as Saul Bellow (1915-2005) who won the Nobel

Prize in Literature in 1976 and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-91) (slide 24), another Nobel Prize winner (1978).

6. The fact that writers would use the vernacular to communicate their ideas already points us to the phenomenon known as acculturation. This meant first and foremost that individuals did not only receive a Jewish education, which allowed them primarily to function within the Jewish community, but also a secular education, consisting of the host country's language and subjects beyond the Jewish world, such as world history and world literature. Acculturation was also important for economic reasons. A merchant sold his merchandise not only to his Jewish customers, but he also had a non-Jewish clientele. He or she, as in the case of Glikel von Hameln, in Germany, might not have been as highly educated as a humanistic scholar, but was in command of the vernacular. During the era of Emancipation, from the French Revolution in 1789 forward, Jews also became involved in politics and sports, as well as higher education and the arts, which were often controlled by the government.

The step from acculturation to assimilation is a dangerous one for the Jewish people, because assimilation can lead to conversion to Christianity or other religions and to the loss of that individual for the Jewish community. Before Emancipation conversion to Christianity happened especially in Germany and Austria for the purpose of employment. Moses Mendelssohn's grandson, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartoldy, a composer and conductor in Berlin, was converted by his father for economic reasons. Many German Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were assimilated and thereby only marginally Jewish. They no longer contributed to the life of the Jewish

community. While the outflow of Jews is tempered by an influx of Jews by Choice, losing a member of the tribe is always painful.

7. The fact that Jews until 1948 had no place to call their own left them no choice but to live among Gentiles, or non-Jews. While they were at times persecuted by the host country and often expelled overnight, there were also periods of peace and prosperity. Jews were valuable members of the society they lived in, even though they were never citizens, only subjects. In the Middle Ages and earlier, individual rulers, the German emperor for example, would avail themselves of the expertise of some Jews in financial and business matters and invite a small number of families to live among them. Sometimes these small groups grew and many of the large European cities had sizeable Jewish communities. Later on these Jewish businessmen became known as Court Jews, they helped a given lord to finance his wars or help him recover economically after a battle. Since a Jewish family was in need of a teacher, butcher, baker, tailor, as well as a burial plot and living quarters, a court Jew and his entourage could easily number one hundred persons. After Emancipation in Europe, Jews participated in all parts of society, contributing to the sciences like Albert Einstein (slide 25), to sports like Hank Greenberg in baseball (slide 26), to medicine like Hasdai ibn Shaprut of Cordoba, to film like Carl Laemmle (1867-1939) who founded Universal Studios in Hollywood in 1914 (slides 27 and 28), and Steven Spielberg, who directed the acclaimed "Schindler's List," and like Howard Shultz, founder of Starbuck's (slide 29), one of the popular American coffee houses. Thus, society on the whole has been considerably enriched by the eager contribution of Jews living among Gentiles.

8. Emancipation from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century in Western Europe was considered the high point of progress for the Jews living there. After 1871 the world was open to Western Jews. The realm of possibilities was not restricted to participation in the host culture, or the free practice of a variety of Judaisms, but also included the desire to return to the ancient homeland in Eretz Israel and to establish settlements in what was then called Palestine. Palestine then belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Zionism emerged as a spiritual idealist movement long before Theodor Herzl, but it is Herzl (slide 30) who gave Zionism its stamp of a political movement for the purpose of returning the people to Eretz Israel. The idea was welcome enthusiastically in Eastern Europe, where Emancipation had not occurred and persecution continued, but less so in the West, where such a movement was considered dangerous, casting aspersions of dual loyalties on Western European Jews. While Herzl did not see his dream fulfilled at the time of his untimely death in 1904, his dream came true in 1948 with the creation of the modern state of Israel (slide 31). Herzl and his entire family are buried on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem. Many years of determination and hard labor allowed a small number of Jewish immigrants to drain the swamps of the Galilee and to cultivate the stony fields on the Coastal Plain, to conquer disease and malnutrition in Jerusalem, and to establish modest stakes in the many agricultural kibbutzim throughout Eretz Israel. When David Ben Gurion declared the modern state of Israel on May 14, 1948, the half million Jews who lived there were ready for the challenge.

9. With the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, a new dimension of Judaism had been established. Israel was intended to be what Herzl had envisioned, a state for Jews. Israel was to give the Jewish people what we had not had since 70 CE, a normal

existence. It was understood there were people of other religions and nationalities living in the modern state of Israel, and that, too, was normal. There was euphoria that the United Nations as well as the United States of America and the Soviet Union recognized Israel immediately. Jewry worldwide chose to support the new Jewish state in the various ways available to them, from making aliyah to fighting in the war of independence, to sending supplies and money in support of the cause. The Jewish population swelled from half a million before May 14 to more than a million by the end of 1949. Today Israel has a population of about six million, four-and-a-half million are Jews. Demographers estimate that by 2020 the Arab population of Israel will have caught up with the Jewish population, because of the higher Arab birthrate. This will provide a challenge of a different kind (identity) for the state of Israel.

10. Next year Israel celebrates its sixtieth anniversary. It has not been an easy sixty years. The high point was no doubt the Six-Day War in 1967 for many different reasons. Since then life in the Middle East has become an increasingly greater challenge. A case in point is the idealistic vision of Israelis that pulling out of Gaza would allow Palestinians to take over the infrastructure and build on the strong Israeli greenhouse culture established there. Gone are the greenhouses, and most everything else good with it. No one can say what the future holds. However, in spite of ideological disagreements with Israeli politics, worldwide Jewry has, on the whole, stuck with Israel, supporting the state and even using it as a refuge again and again, whether for Ethiopian Jews, Yemenite Jews, Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian Jews, Russian Jews, and most recently, French Jews. This year Israel also took in about a hundred refugees from Darfur.

At the same time, the Jewish Diaspora communities have survived, even grown. Most Jewish communities in the Americas are strong and proudly and openly Jewish, South African Jewry and Russian Jewry hold their own with spiritual support from Israel. There are still 1,500 Jews in Cuba; I will be visiting them later this year. While there were just a handful of Jews in Germany before the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990, there are today again about one hundred thousands Jews living in German communities.

Jews in Israel and Jews worldwide are an integral part of the world community. Whether in the areas of medical research, scientific progress, agricultural improvements, environmental concerns, expertise in case of emergencies such as droughts, floods and earthquakes and avalanches, Israelis are at the forefront, carrying on cutting-edge research and offering expert emergency aid. Together with partners in the United States, but also other countries, they see their ideas realized for the good of humanity. No other people has made as many sacrifices as Israelis to take in fellow Jews from other places who need a safe haven. World Jewry often provides the funding for these humanitarian actions, but it is Israel that absorbs these fellow Jews in need into their society.

So, who are the Jews? The Jews are a people that descends from Abraham and Sarah, takes its name from Jacob's son Jehuda, and has persisted for nearly four thousand years. Why did the Jews as such not disappear over time? Because there always is a strong remnant of faithful who believe in the One God, who practice the religion and the tradition as we are taught in the Torah, who remember the history and pass it on to the next generation, who live the Jewish culture of any given diaspora community, and because the modern state of Israel has allowed Jews to return to the ancient homeland. This spiritual and political center in the Middle East with its modern Hebrew language

and modern Jewish culture has been providing energy and purpose to Jewish life in the diaspora for the past sixty years. We in the Diaspora, in turn, have strongly supported the modern state of Israel.

Although the roller coaster of history continues, with no certainty of what tomorrow will bring, the Jewish people lives. *Am Israel Chai!*

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Simon Wiesenthal Center – www.wiesenthal.com

Tel Aviv Museum of Art- www.tamuseum.com

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem – www.imj.org.il

The Jewish Museum, New York - www.jewishmuseum.org

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – www.ushmm.org

Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority – www.yadvashem.org