

A Letter in the Scrolls: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Quotes

There is a rule in Jewish law that someone can impose a benefit on another person without his knowledge. Because he gains, we can therefore assume his agreement. But by the same token someone cannot impose an obligation on another person without his knowledge, for there is no reason to assume that he would agree. For that reason, children do not inherit their parents' debts unless property was explicitly mortgaged to meet them.¹

We have evidence that these questions troubled the minds of even the most faithful Jews. Don Isaac Abrabanel, contemporary of Rabbi Arama, was the most distinguished Jew of his age. He had been treasurer to King Alfonso V of Portugal and a member of the court of Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile. He was also an outstanding Jewish scholar and wrote a great biblical commentary, still studied today. He lived through the Spanish expulsion and escaped to Naples, where he wrote a commentary to the Haggadah. In the course of this work he makes an extraordinary confession. There were moments during those tragic years when, he says, he came close to feeling that "all the Prophets who prophesied about my redemption and salvation are false ... Moses may he rest in peace was false in his utterances, Isaiah lied in his consolations, Jeremiah and Ezekiel lied in their prophecies, and likewise all the other prophets ... Let the people remember... all the despairing things they used to say at the time of the Exile." This tone of despair, too, is unprecedented in more than a thousand years. When Jews ask the question "Why be Jewish?" we know that we are in the presence of a major crisis in Jewish life.²

And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him ... About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they had to become a nation of educators. Freedom, Moses suggested, is won, not on the battlefield, nor in the political arena, but in the human imagination and will. To defend a land, you need an army. But to defend freedom, you need education. You need families and schools to ensure that your ideals are passed on to the next generation, and never lost, or despaired of, or obscured. The citadels of liberty are houses of study. Its heroes are teachers, its passion is education and the life of the mind. Moses realized that

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a people achieves immortality not by building temples or mausoleums, but by engraving their values on the hearts of their children, and they on theirs, and so on until the end of time.³

The first question Moses asked of God was *mi anokhi*, “Who am I?” On the surface, this was an expression of doubt as to his personal worthiness to lead the Israelites to freedom. But there is also an echo of an identity crisis, rare in those days though all too familiar now. Who, after all, was Moses? A child hidden in a basket of reeds, found and adopted by an Egyptian princess, given an Egyptian name and brought up in Pharaoh’s palace. Many years later, when circumstances force him to leave Egypt and take flight to Midian, he comes to the rescue of Jethro’s daughters, who tell their father, “An Egyptian man delivered us.” Moses looked, spoke and dressed like an Egyptian. Yet the text tells us that when he grew up he “went out to his brothers and saw their burdens.” Somehow he knew that the enslaved Israelites were “his brothers.” By upbringing he was an Egyptian; by birth he was a Jew.⁴

The relationship between God and Israel was sometimes tempestuous, often strained, but never broken. The Jewish people would be the bearers of God’s presence in a sometimes godless, often unjust and violent world. In eras that worshiped the collective—the nation, the state, the empire—they spoke about the dignity and sanctity of the individual. In cultures that celebrated the right of the individual to do his or her own thing, they spoke of law and duty and mutual responsibility. They were the first people in history to moralize power, to insist on the supremacy of right over might and on the authority of a prophet to criticize a king. They believed that though a vast distance separates the infinity of God from the finitude of man, something unites us, the moral enterprise of perfecting the world, in respect of which we are “partners of the Holy One, blessed be He, in the work of creation.” No people has insisted, so strenuously and consistently, on the overarching sovereignty of the moral imperative. As Paul Johnson has written: “The Jewish vision became the prototype for many similar grand designs for humanity, both divine and man-made. The Jews, therefore, stand right at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.”⁵

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