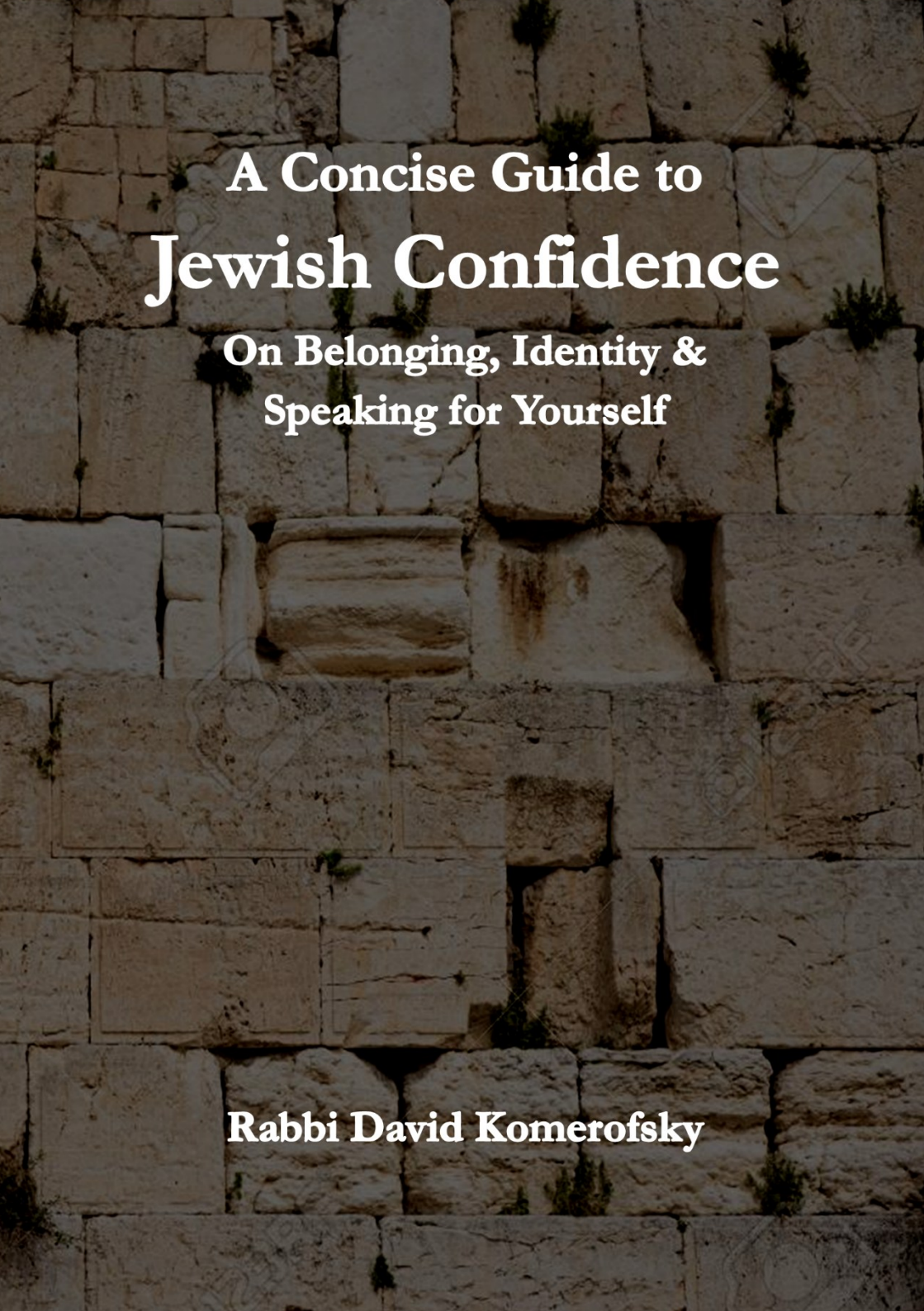
A Concise Guide to
Jewish Confidence
On Belonging, Identity &
Speaking for Yourself
Rabbi David Komerofsky

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Introduction

This is not a scholarly volume; it is a practical handbook. You will not find footnotes, endnotes, or a bibliography. If you wish to learn more about my research into Jewish identity, I invite you to read my final project at Ashland Theological Seminary. It was a study of Jewish identity at Temple Israel in Canton, Ohio, and it informs this little book you're now reading.

This handbook was inspired by two conversations I've had with people over the last year.

One conversation was with someone who does not feel confident enough in her Jewish knowledge to be a leader. She did not grow up Jewish but has been practicing Judaism for more than thirty years, raised Jewish children, participates actively in Jewish life, and is part of a large Jewish family. She lacks confidence because she compares her knowledge to those around her. She doesn't know the Yiddish expressions that pepper my vocabulary (and her husband's) and she assumes that means that she is an outsider looking in. I hope that she will read this book, see herself in it. She is already a Jewish leader and ready for the next challenge.

The other conversation was with someone who is on the path to choosing Judaism but has not felt ready to take the plunge (that's a bad mikvah/ritual bath joke). He is hung up on the question of theology. Everything else, he insists, is fine. He gets Jewish peoplehood, he studies Hebrew, he loves to learn. He feels at home in the synagogue. But he is concerned that his belief system is not complete enough for him to be an authentic Jew. I asked him if he believes that Jesus is the messiah (that's where I draw the line between Judaism and Christianity) and that's not the issue, either.

He is holding back from becoming Jewish because, I think, he assumes that everyone else has figured out something that he hasn't. I hope he reads this, sees that our tradition says he is ready, and moves forward.

That's why I wrote this short book. If these two people are struggling with these issues, there must be others in the same situation, and not only in my community.

The book can be read in a single sitting. Each chapter is organized in the same way for clarity:

- I lay out the concept in the chapter title. This is meant to be straightforward and accessible.
- "In My Experience" reflects examples of what I have seen and heard. These are real situations that show how these issues have come up in my rabbinate.
- "In Practice" focuses on what the ideas look like in everyday life.
- "What You Can Say to Yourself and Others" offers language you can use when wrestling with an issue.

You do not need to read every section in order. Taken together, they are designed to move from idea, to reality, to action.

Enjoy!

Chapter 1 — What Makes Someone Jewish?

For more than twenty years I have taught an introduction to Judaism class for Jewish and non-Jewish seekers, and one of the texts I assign is *What is a Jew?* by Morris Kertzer and Lawrence Hoffman. I used to think of the title as a Jeopardy! game show response. As in "This is the person who voluntarily gives up shrimp and bacon." "What is… a Jew?"

The question of who is Jewish, what qualifies one to be Jewish, what boundaries there are between Jews and others, how Jewish one has to be to qualify for membership, all of these questions have come up over the decades of my teaching. I have seen the demographics change in the intro courses, and significant variations between geographic settings. I have taught the class in Cincinnati, Austin, San Antonio, and Canton. Each community has its own flavor, but most of the students share one or both of these traits: they are seeking clarity for themselves about the role of Jewish identity and practice in their own lives, and they want to be confident in expressing their understandings to others.

For some reason, I have chosen to live out a rabbinate in places where Jews are a small minority. I take it for granted that most of the people I teach and serve do not encounter a lot of (other) Jews at work, school, socially, or even in their own family circles. I live and work as a rabbi in a place that forces me to hunt for kosher food and drive fifty miles to get Passover products. Maybe it's because I am a product of a smaller Jewish community and graduated from public schools, but whatever the reason, I know that I enjoy interacting with people who do not meet too many Jews. This draws me to interfaith work and informed my decision to pursue an additional graduate degree at a Christian seminary a

few years ago. I like being Jewish and sharing that story with people for whom Judaism is an oddity.

I am confident enough in my Judaism to be the only Jew in the room, and my wish is that every Jew could say the same thing. First, though, we have to have an understanding of what is a Jew, beyond the correct response to my imaginary interaction with the host of Jeopardy!

What is a Jew?

A Jew is not defined by a single category. Judaism operates simultaneously as a religion, a culture, an ethnicity, and a people. Each of those dimensions carries weight, and none of them, on its own, is sufficient to account for the whole. A person may relate strongly to one aspect and less to another, but Jewish identity emerges from the interaction of all of them together rather than from any single component. At the most basic level, a Jew is someone who is part of the Jewish people, either by birth or by choice.

Historically, this has meant being born into the Jewish community or entering it through a recognized process of conversion. In both cases, the result is the same: the individual becomes part of a people that understands itself not only as a religious community, but as an extended family with shared history, memory, and responsibility.

Peoplehood is central. Judaism is not only a set of beliefs or practices. It is a collective identity shaped by shared texts, rituals, language, and historical experience. Thinkers like Mordecai Kaplan described Judaism as a civilization, encompassing land, language,

law, custom, and social structure, precisely because no single category captures what it is.

Religion is part of that identity, but it is not the sole determinant. A Jew may be deeply observant, minimally observant, or not observant at all and still remain fully within the Jewish people. Jewish identity persists through participation, relationship, and connection, not only through theological agreement. This is why Jews who differ widely in belief can still recognize themselves as part of the same collective.

In contemporary settings, Jewish identity is often experienced less through doctrine and more through relationship, connection to community, shared ethical commitments, and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. (That was the finding in my doctoral project). In this sense, to be a Jew is not only to hold certain beliefs or perform certain practices, it is to locate oneself within a historical and communal framework that continues across generations.

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Taken together, a Jew is someone who stands within that framework, by birth or by choice, and participates in the life of the Jewish people at some level. The form that participation takes may vary. The connection may be expressed through ritual, culture, community, or memory. But the defining feature is not uniformity. The defining feature is belonging to, and remaining within, the ongoing life of the Jewish people.

What Does Being Jewish Mean?

What does it mean to be Jewish in a thoughtful way? For some, the issue is belief. They assume that being Jewish requires a set of theological commitments they are not sure they hold. For others, it is practice. They measure themselves against what they do—holidays, rituals, synagogue attendance—and conclude that they fall short. For some, it is less defined. It is a general sense that there is a standard somewhere, and that they are not certain they meet it. This is not a marginal experience, it is common across levels of knowledge, affiliation, and background. The persistence of the question suggests that the issue is not simply personal uncertainty, there is something structural beneath it. The very fact that Judaism is more than one thing at once makes it accessible and elusive: I am practicing Judaism, but am I doing it right?

Judaism does not organize itself around a single category. If Judaism were primarily a religion, belief would function as the central criterion and questions of faith would determine inclusion in a straightforward way. If it were primarily a culture, participation might be sufficient. Engagement with language, food, and shared practices would define belonging. If it were primarily an ethnicity, ancestry would resolve the question. One would either be inside or outside based on lineage. In practice, Judaism operates across all three domains simultaneously. It is a religion, with texts, practices, and theological claims. It is a culture, with patterns of life, language, and memory. It is a people, connected through shared history and continuity. These categories overlap, but they do not fully align. A person can be strong in one dimension and uncertain in another. Someone may feel culturally fluent but theologically unconvinced. Another may be consistent in practice but unable to

articulate what they believe. A third may have clear ancestry but minimal engagement. None of these positions place a person outside Jewish life. They each reflect the way Jewish identity functions.

The contemporary context intensifies this dynamic. For most of Jewish history, Jewish life was communal and ambient. It structured time, behavior, and expectation. A person did not need to decide whether to be Jewish in a given moment, it was the environment in which they lived. That is no longer the case for most Jews. Jewish life today is typically situational. It appears at specific times—holidays, life-cycle events, occasional communal settings—rather than as a constant framework. Outside of those moments, the surrounding culture operates on a different calendar, with different assumptions. As a result, Jewish identity becomes intermittent. It is present, but not always reinforced. It must be activated rather than assumed. Over time, that pattern produces a predictable effect. People begin to interpret the gaps between those moments as evidence of distance or insufficiency. The experience of intermittence is misread as a lack of legitimacy.

There is no single metric that resolves the question of Jewishness across all dimensions of Jewish life.

This leads to a common assumption, that there exists a clear standard for what it means to be "Jewish enough," and that one's task is to determine whether one meets it. That assumption is incorrect. There is no single metric that resolves the question across all dimensions of Jewish life. The categories themselves—religion, culture, peoplehood—do not collapse into a single

standard. What exists instead is a framework within which people participate at different levels, in different ways, and with different forms of understanding. The expectation of uniform clarity is a modern projection. It reflects the influence of systems that define identity through fixed criteria. Judaism has not historically operated that way.

This has implications for how the original question should be approached. If the system itself is multi-dimensional and non-aligned, then uncertainty is not a sign of failure. Uncertainty is a natural result of engaging something that does not reduce to a single definition. The issue, then, is not how to eliminate the uncertainty. The issue is how to locate oneself within the system without requiring that it be resolved.

In My Experience

Unfair Comparisons

"I grew up Jewish but didn't do much at home or pay attention in Sunday School. I don't think I count. Everyone else seems to know a lot more than I do."

This person was a past president of a synagogue, raised Jewish children with his Jewish-by-choice wife, and attended Shabbat services regularly. His home was filled with Judaica items and his grandchildren were being raised as Jews. But he didn't think he counted because he compared himself to his friends and peers, wrongly assuming that they were more worthy of Jewish inclusion than he was. If someone who is that involved thinks this way, then it should not be surprising that others won't speak up in meetings or show their faces in a class where they might be called on to share an opinion.

His mistake was comparing himself to others and assuming that there is a hierarchy. No one is more or less worthy than anyone else. Quite the contrary, we are all supposed to be learning and growing, and the one with all of the answers is more threatening to the stability and integrity of the community than is the one with all of the questions.

Knowledge-Based Insecurity

"My kid knows more than I do—I feel like a fraud."

I have heard this from more than one religious school parent over the years. A child comes home correcting a blessing or pronouncing a Hebrew word more confidently than their parent, and instead of feeling proud, the parent feels exposed, as if they've been pretending to be Jewish and just got found out by a ten-year-old. I hear the same thing from adults in the intro to Judaism class, though they express it differently: "I should already know this." Some of them grew up Jewish, some did not. But the assumption is the same—that there is a baseline of knowledge required for legitimacy, and they somehow missed it. What stands out to me is not the lack of knowledge, but the assumption that knowledge is what makes someone count.

The parents bringing their children to Hebrew school, rearranging their schedules, sitting through programs, showing up to services, they are doing Jewish life. The adults who walk into a class, often nervously, and choose to learn something new, are doing Jewish life. And still there are people in both groups that feel like outsiders because they have absorbed the idea that Judaism is something you qualify for through literacy rather than something you live through participation.

The mistake is not ignorance. The mistake is thinking that ignorance disqualifies you. If anything, the opposite is true. The person who is willing to admit what they do not know and still show up is far more grounded than the person who believes they have already mastered it. Jewish life has never depended on everyone knowing everything, it has depended on people staying connected long enough to keep learning, questioning, and participating.

The parent whose child knows more than they do is not a fraud. The adult learner who is surprised by something they now think should have been obvious, those are signs that something is working.

Family Dynamics

"I am a non-practicing Christian and my Jewish partner and I are planning to raise Jewish kids. Will they be Jewish enough to enroll in religious school?"

This question was asked as if the asker was anticipating a boundary they may have already crossed. What they are really asking is not about enrollment, they are asking if their future family will be accepted, if their children will count. This question came long before the child was born, long before any real decisions about practice, education, or identity have had time to take shape. That anxiety shows up at the very beginning, rooted in the assumption that there is a standard of "Jewish enough" that must be met before one can even begin.

In reality, the families asking this question are already making a significant choice: to raise Jewish children. They are thinking about education, community, and belonging before any institution has

asked anything of them. That is not a marginal commitment, that is the beginning of a Jewish life. The mistake is assuming that legitimacy is something granted from the outside once certain criteria are met. But Jewish life, especially in a Reform context, does not begin with a checklist. It begins with a decision, a commitment to raise a child within the story, rhythms, and community of the Jewish people. The question is not whether the child will be "Jewish enough." The real question is whether the community will recognize what is already being built. I hope that the answer is always "yes!" And if we all do our work in the proper way, those children will end up teaching us more than we teach them.

In Practice

In practice, this means you do not need to determine whether you "qualify" before participating. You can engage with Jewish life through one dimension even if others remain unclear. You can show up, observe, learn, or take part without first resolving questions about belief, knowledge, or consistency. Participation is not the reward for clarity, it is the context in which clarity, if it develops at all, tends to emerge.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If a question about your Jewishness arises, internally or in conversation, reduce it to something accurate and manageable: "I'm Jewish." If a further explanation is needed: "It's not just one thing. It's religion, culture, and peoplehood, and they don't always line up neatly." That is not a deflection, it is a precise description. The question of what makes someone Jewish in a meaningful way does not disappear but it does change form. Instead of functioning as a test, it becomes a point of entry. Questioning is not something

to resolve before participation, but something that becomes clearer, in part, through participation itself. That shift does not eliminate ambiguity, it places it where it belongs, within the structure of the tradition, rather than as a judgment about the individual. Judaism is more about questions than answers, so do not be afraid to ask, and do not think that you have to have all of the answers.

Chapter 2 — Belonging Without Resolution

An assumption shapes how some people think about Judaism—before you can belong, you need to figure out what you believe. That assumption seems reasonable in a religious setting, particularly one in which a confession of faith is sufficient for membership. That's not how it works in Judaism. In many areas of life, clarity does come first; you understand something, you agree with it, and then you commit to it. Judaism does not operate that way. The Torah itself tells us that when the Children of Israel were preparing to accept the commandments, we said that we would first do and then listen. Bad strategy for buying a house or a car, but it makes sense when it is applied to a system of practice that does not explicitly require a coherent set of complicated beliefs.

The Torah itself tells us that when the Children of Israel were preparing to accept the commandments, we said that we would first do and then listen.

For modern Jews, belief can be a primary point of friction. Questions about God, prayer, obligation, and meaning are not peripheral, they are often the first things people encounter when they try to take Jewish life seriously. And for some people, those questions do not resolve cleanly. Some find traditional language difficult to accept. Others are unsure what they mean when they say words like "God" and "faith." Some move in and out of belief depending on context, experience, or stage of life. This creates a problem if belief is treated as a prerequisite. If clarity is required before participation, then uncertainty becomes a barrier. People wait to resolve questions that may not be resolvable in the way they expect. Over time, waiting becomes distance.

Practice, after all, takes practice, and practice in Judaism is more direct than belief. One can demonstrate practice, but one cannot demonstrate belief. If I believe that God created humanity in the divine image, I have to treat people accordingly, and if I believe that I am obligated to pursue justice then I have to show it through my deeds. It is insufficient to profess these beliefs without demonstrating them.

Historically, Judaism has not required the belief first and practice second sequence. Participation has not depended on prior theological agreement. People observed practices, took part in communal life, marked time through Jewish rhythms, and argued, often extensively, about what it all meant. Disagreement was not an obstacle to belonging, it was an integral part of it. The system did not require uniform belief in order to function, it assumed a range of positions and allowed them to coexist within a shared framework of action and memory. What is the Talmud if not a series of disagreements?

The modern shift toward belief as a prerequisite reflects broader cultural patterns. In contemporary Western contexts, identity is often treated as an expression of internal conviction. What you are is expected to align with what you affirm intellectually. That model works in some areas but it does not map cleanly onto Judaism. Judaism is not only, or even primarily, a statement of belief. It is a structure of life that organizes time, behavior, relationships, and memory. It persists through what people do, not only through what we think. When belief is made the entry point, the system becomes harder to access. On the other hand, when participation rather than affirmation is recognized as the entry point, the system becomes navigable again.

This does not mean that belief is irrelevant. Belief matters. It shapes how people understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. It is not, however, the condition that determines whether someone can stand confidently inside Jewish life. A person can participate while holding unresolved questions. They can engage practices, engage in communal settings, and take part in Jewish time without having settled their theology. In many cases, that is how understanding develops, if it develops at all. Practice may not make perfect, but practice does build confidence. Read the story of the four children in the Passover Haggadah and you will see that there are many points of entry, and each question requires its own kind of response. The critical point is that all of the askers are at the same table even as they disagree. We don't have a Seder for the wise child, a separate Seder for the wicked child, etc.

There is also a misconception about what confidence requires. It is sometimes assumed that confidence comes from having answers. In this context, that assumption does not hold. Confidence can come from recognizing that the absence of answers does not disqualify participation. Confidence here is built on permission instead of resolution. This is a kind of permission to take part without first reaching conclusions that may never come, or conclusions that may change over time.

Confidence can come from recognizing that the absence of answers does not disqualify participation.

This reframes the original sequence. Instead of Understand → Agree → Participate the structure becomes Participate → Reflect → Continue (with or without resolution). In the first model, uncertainty prevents entry. In the second, uncertainty is central to

the process. On the cover of my syllabus for introduction to Judaism I include this gem: "A child once asked her rabbi, 'What is the meaning of life? I must have the answer!' The rabbi replied, 'But it's such a wonderful question, why would you want to exchange it for an answer?'"

In My Experience

Quit Apologizing

"I come to the services, but I don't read Hebrew and I don't know that I believe what we're saying and singing."

Rabbis don't take confessions, but people sure do try to tell me their perceived transgressions. This admission never surprises me, it delights me. It makes me happy that someone is already confident enough to admit that, though they may not know it, they are doing Judaism the same way I do. What's more, this "confession" is usually before or after a Shabbat or holy day service. As if attendance requires a disclaimer, or being present without fluency or certainty needs to be explained. Guess what, confessor, most people in the room are thinking what you're courageous enough to be saying out loud.

No one seems to me to be apologizing for showing up to anything else in their life without full understanding. People attend concerts without knowing how to read music. They participate in civic life without mastering constitutional law. They go to the gym without fully understanding physiology. They drive cars without knowing how the transmission works. But somehow, when it comes to Judaism, people feel the need to justify their presence unless they can translate, explain, and affirm every word.

The assumption underneath the apology is that synagogue participation requires two things: technical proficiency and theological certainty. If I cannot read Hebrew and I am not sure what I believe, then I am somehow participating improperly. Jewish life has never depended on either of those as entry requirements. Hebrew is a language of connection, not a barrier to entry. And belief, in Judaism, has never been a fixed prerequisite. It has always been something with which people wrestle, to which they return, that they question repeatedly, and reshape over time. The person who shows up without fluency and without certainty is not doing something wrong, they are doing something deeply Jewish. And one should never apologize for doing Jewish things.

Belief Without Practice

"I believe in God, I just don't really do anything Jewish."

This one was said with confidence, as if belief alone is enough to anchor a Jewish identity. There was no embarrassment here, no apology, just a sense that the essential piece is already in place. This framing is prominent in the broader culture. Religion is often reduced to belief: what you think, what you affirm, what you hold to be true. If you believe the right things, you are in. If you do not, you are out. Judaism has never operated that way.

Judaism is not primarily a system of belief, it is a system of living. It is made up of rhythms, actions, practices, and communal experiences that shape identity over time. Belief may be part of that, but it is not the center of it, and it has never been sufficient on its own. The person who says this is not wrong about their belief. They are, however, misunderstanding what sustains Jewish life. Belief without practice does not create connection, it does not build memory, it does not transmit anything to the next generation.

Belief alone is self-indulgent. Nurture your relationship with God, and don't leave out God's other creations while you're going about your life.

The mistake that this person made was assuming that belief is the core and that practice is optional. In Judaism, it is often the reverse: practice creates the conditions in which belief, whatever form it takes, can take hold. That practice does not exist exclusively in ritual; it can manifest itself in expressions of culture, peoplehood, and advocacy. You do not live a Jewish life because you believe. More often, you come to believe something because you have lived a Jewish life.

Maybe It's the Snacks

"I don't understand most of what's happening, but I keep coming."

This person shrugged apologetically, as if she needed a lighthearted excuse for her own persistence. I've heard it many times, and sometimes they'll add, "Maybe it's the food," or "I like the people," as if those are secondary reasons that don't quite count. These seekers are doing something beautifully consistent, and Jewish, without giving themselves any credit for it. They show up, again and again, without full comprehension, without a sense of mastery, and often without being able to explain why. I wish more people would find that entry point and take regular advantage of it. (It's why I always have our Shabbat services at the same time. I want repeat customers—people who make coming to the Shabbat service their "custom").

In most areas of life, we assume understanding comes first. Learn it, make sense of it, and then decide if it's worth your time. Jewish

life often works in the opposite direction. First you come, you sit in a strange place with strange people doing strange things. Rinse and repeat. Over time meaning begins to take shape and you feel at home amongst fellow seekers. When you recognize that you are not alone in your questions, you come to see that you are not alone and are in good company.

The people who keep coming without understanding are not on the outside, they are in the midst of a process. Familiarity is forming, language is becoming less foreign, certain moments start to feel recognizable, even if they are not yet fully understood. The common misunderstanding is thinking that understanding is what justifies participation. On the contrary, participation is what makes understanding possible. And let's be honest, the snacks don't hurt.

In Practice

In practice, this means you do not need to wait until your beliefs are clear to engage Jewish life. You can attend, observe, or participate in rituals even if parts of the language feel unfamiliar or unresolved. You can say words that you interpret differently than others do. You can take part in a structure that is larger than your current level of certainty. The expectation is not that you resolve everything, it is that you remain engaged long enough for something to take shape.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

When belief becomes the focus, internally or in conversation, keep the response accurate and limited: "I'm still figuring out what I believe, but I'm part of the Jewish community." "Judaism isn't only about belief. It's also about practice and belonging." Both statements reflect how the system works. Belonging, in this

context, is not the result of resolution, it is the condition within which resolution may or may not occur. The absence of certainty does not place someone outside Jewish life, it places them in the same position as many others who are already inside it.

Never assume that someone else knows more than you do or believes more firmly than you do. Maybe they do, or maybe they are more conflicted than you. Jewish life is not graded on a curve.

Chapter 3 — Saying "I'm Jewish" in the Real World

When I was in rabbinical school in Los Angeles, either in 1996 or 1997, a rabbi who was guest lecturing in our practical rabbinics class asked, "What would you do if you were on an airplane and a hijacker stood up and shouted: Every Jew, identify yourself?!" My classmate and study partner, Scott Corngold (of blessed memory) answered: "I would regret that I ordered a kosher meal." I miss Scott. His humor and wisdom had a way of connecting with people that I aspire to emulate. Scott's levity that day predated the barbarous execution of Jewish-American journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002, in whose memory a book was created by his parents: *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl.*

There are times and places when the statement "I am Jewish" is simple, and others when it is more profound than any words can express. I am writing this at a time when public expressions of Jewish identity are not to be taken for granted. Once again, Jews are tempted to hide their outward identifiers for fear of violence.

In less complicated moments, the statement "I am Jewish" becomes meaningful for consideration based on internal rather than external factors. In other words, when we take the hatred of Jews off the center stage and reflect on an understanding of what it means to say the words without fear of antisemitism, they mean something else. It could be in a conversation about holidays, or a question about food, or a comment about religion or current events. At some point, there is an opening where identity becomes relevant, and in that moment there can be a hesitation. This is not because the answer is unclear, but because of what might follow.

Saying "I'm Jewish" is rarely received as a complete statement. It is more likely treated as the beginning of a conversation that may

include explanation, clarification, or even justification. People anticipate the next question before it is asked. What do you believe? Do you keep kosher? What do you think about Israel? The assumption is not only that one will identify, but that one will account for that identity. That expectation creates a pattern. Instead of stating the identity and allowing it to stand, people begin to manage it.

One of the most common ways this is expressed is through qualification. "I'm Jewish, but I'm not very religious." "I'm Jewish, but I don't really go to synagogue." "I'm Jewish, but I don't know that much." The structure is consistent: the identity is stated, and then immediately narrowed. The assumption behind the qualification is that "Jewish" on its own is either too broad or potentially misleading, and needs to be adjusted before it is understood. Religion becomes "not very religious." Practice becomes "I don't really do much." Knowledge becomes "I don't know enough." The result is that the first statement of identity is also a partial retraction of it.

A different version of the same dynamic appears in more cautious settings. "I don't usually bring this up, but I'm Jewish." This frames Jewish identity as a disclosure rather than a fact. It suggests that saying it carries some level of risk, or at least requires a degree of management. What is being anticipated is not an innocent curiosity, but a negative reaction. In both cases, the underlying assumption is the same: identifying as Jewish creates an obligation to explain, qualify, or defend. That assumption is not entirely imaginary. There are contexts where it happens. But it is also not an absolute requirement. There is a difference between what may happen and what is required.

If every statement of identity must be followed by explanation, then hesitation becomes rational. People delay, soften, or reshape the statement in order to control what comes next. Over time, that becomes a habit. But if that expectation is removed, the statement becomes simpler. "I am Jewish" can function as a complete sentence. Not because there is nothing more to say, but because nothing more is required at that moment.

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A number of years ago I was on an interfaith panel at Texas State University in San Marcos with a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and an imam. We had a lovely conversation, after which the imam said to me "You seem very nice. What's the difference between you and a Zionist Jew?" This was in the first decades of the twenty-first century, I was much younger than I am now, and am grateful that I had the presence of mind to say "There is no difference. I am a Zionist Jew." Phew. At least in that moment, I heeded my own advice. I didn't take the bait.

In My Experience

The Preemptive Disclaimer

"I'm Jewish, but I'm not very religious."

I hear this in social settings, often before anyone has asked a follow-up question. The speaker is not responding to pressure, they are anticipating it. They are trying to prevent a misunderstanding before it happens, as if "Jewish" on its own

might give the wrong impression. What stands out is not the content of the disclaimer, but its timing. It comes too quickly to be a response; it is a reflex. The assumption underneath it is that Jewish identity needs to be translated into more familiar terms, usually by reducing it. But once the statement is qualified, the original identity has already been narrowed. The person has decided in advance how much of it counts.

When I was forty, I had unexpected surgery to remove a kidney stone. I had met the doctor only once, the day before, and I was not in the best condition to answer questions about Judaism or anything else (except for my excruciating discomfort). Now, as a rule, I do not tell people in limited social settings that I am a rabbi. On airplanes, for example, when asked what I do, I say that I am a teacher. This is not because I am embarrassed, it is because experience has taught me that too many people will either try to convert me or tell me how much they dislike their own rabbi. Back to my kidney stone. I was on the gurney being prepped for surgery and the nurse began administering a mild sedative and asked what I did for a living. In my fog of pain and medication, I answered her truthfully. She said "You're a rabbi? One of our other nurses was just talking about a question she had for a rabbi!" Great timing.

Long story short, the other nurse was a friend of mine whom I had forgotten worked at that surgery center. I was scheduled to officiate her wedding a few weeks later. She came over to the bay, looked at my chart, and called out to the doctor "Don't kill him. We need him for our wedding." The doctor came over and asked "Why, is he the caterer?" She said "He's the rabbi." The doctor bowed his head and said "Rabbi, I want you to know that I'm a bad Jew." I responded that I hoped he was at least a good doctor.

Fast forward to my follow-up appointment. I helped to arrange to have him trained as a mohel (Jewish ritual circumciser) and had the honor to officiate at a brit milah with him a few years later. The world unfolds in strange ways. It turns out he was a good doctor and a good Jew, and I've not had a kidney stone since. Hallelujah.

The Hesitation

"I don't usually tell people this, but I'm Jewish."

The assumption is that saying "I'm Jewish" will shift the conversation in a way that needs to be controlled.

This tends to come out in workplaces or mixed social environments. The person is not unsure of their identity. They are unsure of how it will be received. There is a pause before the statement, and sometimes a lowering of the voice, as if the information itself requires careful handling. What is being managed is not the identity, but the anticipated response to it. The assumption is that saying it will shift the conversation in a way that needs to be controlled. I may not quickly reveal that I am a rabbi in strange settings, but I never hide my Jewishness. And other than airplanes and similar forced social settings, I am proud to identify myself as a rabbi. One time on a plane I did tell my nervous seatmate, who was rubbing her rosary beads raw, that I am a rabbi and she held my arm tightly for the next three hours of turbulence. I like to think that I made that frightened grandmother a little more comfortable.

The Straightforward Version

"I'm Jewish."

No follow-up. No disclaimer. No adjustment. When people say it this way, the conversation either continues or it doesn't, but it does so on different terms. The identity is presented as a fact rather than an introduction to a defense. If someone wants to ask more, they can. If not, the statement stands on its own. What changes is not the content, but the posture of the person sharing the information.

In Practice

In practice, this means separating the statement of identity from the obligation to elaborate. You can say "I'm Jewish" without immediately adding qualifiers about belief, practice, or knowledge. If the conversation continues, you can decide how much to say based on the context, rather than assuming that everything must be explained at once. Explanation is not the problem, a reflexive explanation is the issue. The goal is not to avoid conversation, it is to control the sequence in which it happens.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

Start with the simplest accurate statement: "I'm Jewish." If a follow-up is needed, expand without reducing: "It's part religion, part culture, part peoplehood." "I'm connected to it in different ways." "It's something I take seriously, even when I'm still figuring parts of it out." None of these statements require apology. None of them reduces the original claim. You do not need to anticipate every question before it is asked, you do not need to narrow your identity in order to make it easier for someone else to understand. Say what is true, let it stand, and then decide what, if anything, comes next.

Chapter 4 — Questions, Assumptions, and Conversations

Once you say "I'm Jewish," the next part is not always under your control. Sometimes the conversation moves on, often it does not. A question follows. Sometimes it is simple curiosity. Sometimes it is based on incomplete or inaccurate information. Sometimes it carries an assumption that is harder to address than the question itself. The question may be about belief, practice, Israel, history, or something the person has heard and never had the opportunity to ask directly. What matters is not only the content of the question, but the expectation behind it.

Many people assume that when they ask a Jewish person a question about Judaism, they are asking someone who can speak with authority on behalf of the whole. That assumption is rarely stated explicitly, but it shapes the interaction. A single person becomes, in that moment, a representative not just of their own experience, but of Judaism more broadly. If you only get one chance to meet someone from an exotic culture or background, how can you afford to waste the opportunity?

That expectation creates pressure. If you are asked a question about Judaism, the assumption is that you should know the answer. If the question touches on something sensitive or complicated, the pressure increases. The conversation shifts from casual to evaluative. Do you know enough? Can you explain it clearly? Will your answer reflect well on what you represent? For many people, this is where hesitation returns. This is not hesitation at the level of identity, but at the level of explanation. If it gives

If asked a question about Judaism, the assumption is usually that you should know the answer.

you any comfort, know that I get asked a lot of questions to which I do not know the answer. I say "Let me find out." Or if I'm not really that interested I'll just make up an answer and see how convincing I can make it sound. Just kidding.

There is a second layer to all of this. Some questions are not neutral, even when they are asked sincerely. "Why don't Jews believe in Jesus?" "Why do Jews care so much about Israel?" "Why are there so many rules?" These questions are not only requests for information. They reflect a framework that has already been formed. Responding to them requires more than providing an answer; it requires identifying and, at times, gently correcting the assumption underneath the question.

This is where people begin to feel that they are responsible not only for answering, but for representing. That is the point at which the conversation becomes heavier than it needs to be. I noted earlier that I have chosen to be a rabbi in places where Jews are a minority. I am the only rabbi working full-time in the county where I presently live, so I am regularly called on to be on panels (like the one in San Marcos!) or speak to classes. Imagine the pressure that is placed on the only Jewish kid in class, or their parent(s). "Can you come to the school in December and make latkes for a hundred third graders and while you're at it tell the kids why you don't celebrate Christmas." "Your kids will be out of school for two days in October for Jewish holidays? But Passover isn't until April." Oy.

In My Experience

The Unexpected Question

"Why don't Jews believe in the New Testament?"

I've been asked this many times, but never with hostility. It is asked with genuine curiosity. I answer that it's not that we don't believe in it. I believe the text exists, and I've read it. But the structure of the question assumes that the New Testament is the default, and that Judaism is defined by its absence. Jews call what Christians label the Old Testament the Hebrew Bible. For us, it is sufficient. Answering the question directly by saying "The Old is enough for us," would reinforce the framework. Instead, I explain that Judaism developed its own canon and system of interpretation long before the New Testament emerged, and that Jewish identity is not built around what it does not accept, but around what it does accept. The question does not disappear with this framing, but it does shift the perspective.

The Representational Burden

"I don't know enough to answer that."

I have heard this from people who are otherwise fully engaged in Jewish life. The question might be about a holiday, a practice, or something in the news. The hesitation is not about the topic itself, but about whether their answer will be "correct." The assumption is that if they speak, they are speaking for Judaism. That assumption is not accurate, but it is widely felt. Speak for yourself, not for the entire Jewish people.

The Long Conversation

"Can I ask you something about Israel?"

That question can turn into a long conversation. It is not only information the asker is seeking. They may be trying to understand how someone could hold a connection to Israel without reducing it to a political position. The conversation is never resolved at that exact moment, and that doesn't really matter. What matters is not providing a definitive answer, but demonstrating that it is possible to engage a complex issue without simplifying it beyond recognition.

In Practice

In practice, this means recognizing that you are not required to function as a spokesperson. You are allowed to answer as yourself. You can respond from your own experience, your own level of knowledge, and your own understanding. You can say what you know, and you can also say what you do not know. You do not need to resolve every assumption embedded in a question. You can choose which part of the question to engage and which to leave aside. Not every question requires a full answer. Not every conversation requires completion.

You can say what you know, and you can also say what you do not know. You do not need to resolve every assumption embedded in a question.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If you are asked a question and feel the pressure to represent, you can reduce it: "I can tell you how I understand it." Or try "That's a big question. I don't have a complete answer, but here's how I think about it." If a question carries an assumption you do not want to accept: "That question assumes something I wouldn't

frame that way." Or "I'd approach that differently." If you do not know: "I don't know, but I'm happy to think about it." These are not evasions, they are accurate statements of position.

Questions are part of the structure of Jewish life. But not every question needs to be answered in full at a specific moment, and not every answer needs to carry the weight of representation. You are not responsible for explaining Judaism in its entirety. You are responsible for responding honestly, within the limits of your own understanding. That is enough. Dayenu.

Chapter 5 — Israel: Attachment Without Simplification

Few topics generate more emotion, hesitation, questions or pressure than the State of Israel. For many Jews, the difficulty is not a lack of concern, it is quite the opposite. We care deeply, and we are not always sure what to do with that care. Jews who live outside of the Land of Israel, like I do, can be overwhelmed by the avalanche of information, disinformation, and propaganda competing for our attention and loyalty.

Anti-Zionists label Israel as an occupier. For such a small country, I will concede that Israel does indeed occupy a lot of space. It is the obsession of many people who've never been there, could not locate it on a map, have no sense of its history, and conveniently latch onto a barely-disguised hatred of Jews because it fits their narrow understanding of intersectionality. More than all of that, however, Israel has been occupying Jewish minds and hearts for millennia. Since 1948 and the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty in our historic homeland, the State of Israel occupies a central place in modern Jewish life. And that occupation is nuanced and complex.

The State of Israel is a country, with a government, policies, and political debates. It is made up of real people with real problems and real aspirations and real challenges. It is surrounded by an increasingly hostile world that finds in it a convenient scapegoat for unrelated troubles. And long before the advent of modern political Zionism, the Land and People of Israel have been a central part of Jewish history, memory, and identity. Those two realities, the peoplehood and the political, do not always align neatly. When they do not, people assume they are required to choose between them. That assumption creates a familiar pattern. Someone will

say, "I don't know what to say about Israel." Or "I'm afraid to bring it up." Or "I care about it, but I don't agree with everything." Each of these statements reflects the same underlying expectation—that one must have a clear, defensible position before speaking at all. That expectation does not hold. You can love Israel and have questions about it. You can believe that Israel has a right to exist and not deny the humanity of others who lay claim to the same land. You can, in short, walk and chew pita at the same time.

People are rarely asked to have fully developed positions on other complex global issues before acknowledging that they matter. But when it comes to Israel, the expectation is different. There is an assumption that if you identify as Jewish, you should be able to explain, defend, or critique Israel in a coherent and comprehensive way. That is not a reasonable expectation, nor is it a sustainable one. I am a citizen of the United States and do not recall ever having been asked to defend the right of this country to exist. I am a native of, and live in, Ohio. I have never been asked to defend my right to own property that once was part of the Lenape nation. Indeed, I have less historical and ethnic claim to my house in Canton than I do to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. When I lived in California and Texas I never prayed eastward facing Ohio (on purpose, at least); I prayed eastward in the direction of Jerusalem.

Part of the difficulty comes from a category error. Israel is often treated as if it is either entirely political or entirely symbolic. It is neither. It is both a modern state and a focal point of Jewish historical continuity and peoplehood. Ancient Israelites are not Israelis, and the descendants of Levites own land in the State of Israel; they are not dependent on the sacrifices. That ended with

the Roman destruction in 70 CE. Reducing Israel to only one of those categories makes the conversation easier, but less accurate. For many Jews, the connection to Israel is not primarily ideological, it is relational. The connection may come from family, travel, education, or a general sense that Jewish history does not end in diaspora alone. That connection can exist even when a person disagrees with specific policies or decisions of the sitting Israeli government. The presence of disagreement does not negate the connection. Quite the opposite. If you want to read or hear the most thoughtful debates about Israel you should learn Hebrew, because it is in Israel that those conversations are happening. They are family disputes, and not easily resolved. Prolonged and ongoing protests against the prime minister may gather attention on US college campuses, but they are nothing compared to the ones happening outside of his home and office, in his native language, by citizens of his own country.

People are rarely asked to have fully developed positions on other complex global issues before acknowledging that they matter. But when it comes to Israel, the expectation is different.

There is also a tendency to assume that complexity is a problem, when it is not. Israel is complex because it is real. The expectation that one should be able to reduce it to a simple position, either fully supportive or fully critical, reflects a preference for clarity over accuracy. Jewish tradition has never required that kind of reduction.

In My Experience

The Panel Question

At an interfaith panel, I was asked, "Why do Jews care so much about Israel?"

The question was direct but not hostile. The asker assumed that Israel is an external issue, something Jews choose to prioritize rather than something that is already embedded in Jewish identity. I answered that I cannot speak for all Jews, and that Israel is not an abstract political concern. It is part of how many Jews, I included, understand our past and our present. That does not eliminate disagreement, it explains why disengagement is not a simple option. I hear that question as "Your heart is giving you trouble? Why not have it removed?" I cannot remove my heart and live. I cannot abandon a commitment to the right of my people to live freely in our ancient homeland and maintain my integrity as a Jew living in the twenty-first century.

The Hesitation

"I don't want to say the wrong thing about Israel."

I hear this often, especially from Jews who are asked to speak on behalf of all Jews because they are regularly the only Jew in the room. I also hear it from Jews who are afraid of being labeled as disloyal because their parents or grandparents have a different kind of connection to Israel than they do. In both cases, the concern is not only about being informed, it is about being judged. People assume that if they speak, their words will be evaluated not just as an opinion, but as a statement of identity. So they remain silent.

The Direct Statement

"I care about Israel, and I struggle with parts of it."

This is one of the most honest statements a person can make. It does not resolve the tension, it embraces it. And it allows the conversation to continue without forcing a conclusion that may not be accurate. Judaism is not all or nothing, and neither is Zionism. One can be deeply committed to an idea and still wrestle with it. Don't believe me? Check my source at Genesis 32:29.

The Challenger

"I am not comfortable coming to a service in which you pray for the State of Israel and sing Hatikvah. I am not a Zionist."

That is fair. I welcome you to come to our congregation any time you would like. I will never ask you to leave, and in return I ask that you respect the reality that there are many places where one can hear anti-Israel arguments; I am determined that prayer services at the congregation I serve will not be one of them. I do not ask that everyone agree with all of the prayers we offer communally (see elsewhere in this book for my comments about the role of belief), and I encourage exploration. Still, I could no sooner remove prayers for Israel than my friends who are Catholic priests could remove the eucharist from the mass.

Usually, these challengers end up not coming back because they don't like the answer. As disappointing as that is, I can live with it. It's the price of having principles.

In Practice

In practice, this means allowing for attachment without requiring simplification. You can care about Israel without agreeing with everything it does. You can engage with the topic without having a fully formed position on every issue. You can remain connected without feeling obligated to defend or critique every policy decision. The goal is not to avoid the conversation, it is to enter it honestly. Complexity is not a failure of understanding, it is often a sign of understanding. Simple answers to complex problems are, I think, reflective of the simplicity of the one giving the answer.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If the topic comes up and you feel pressure to simplify: "I care about Israel. I don't reduce it to one position." Or "It matters to me, even when I'm still working through what I think about it." If someone expects a definitive answer: "It's complicated, and I'm not trying to pretend it isn't." If the conversation becomes polarized: "I'm more interested in understanding than in taking a side in this moment."

Israel is not a question that most people resolve once and for all. It is something they return to, reconsider, and re-engage over time. That does not make the connection weaker. It makes it real. And it allows a person to remain connected without pretending that something complex is simple.

Finally, if you've not yet been to Israel, go. You will come away with more questions than answers, and with a deep appreciation for why this place on the other side of the world is so central to Jewish identity regardless of one's citizenship status. I visited Israel for the first time when I was twenty-two, and I stayed for a full

academic year. There are more convenient options, but that's what happened. I have been back more than thirty times since and go as often as I can. I was Jewish before I lived in or visited Israel, but that Judaism was incomplete. When I consider how fortunate I am to be alive at a time when there is Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, and how my ancestors yearned for such a day, I cannot imagine forgoing the chance to maintain a relationship with the Jewish state. No matter how imperfect it may be, it is mine. It is all of ours, whether we asked for it or not. That's family for you.

Chapter 6 — Antisemitism: Recognition and Response

Antisemitism is not new. It has taken different forms in different times and places, but its presence in Jewish history is consistent. That alone can make it feel inevitable, as if it is something Jews are expected to anticipate and carry. That expectation deserves to be examined.

For some people, the difficulty is not only recognizing antisemitism, but knowing what to do with it when it appears. Sometimes it is explicit. It is a comment, a slur, or a threat. Sometimes it is indirect. It is a joke that lands poorly. An assumption about money, power, or loyalty. A question that is framed in a way that reflects something deeper. And sometimes it is harder to name. That uncertainty creates hesitation. Is this antisemitism? Am I overreacting? Should I respond?

The goal is not to eliminate antisemitism on your own. It is to understand how to recognize it without allowing it to define your experience of being Jewish. There are plenty of good reasons to celebrate being Jewish, and an identity that develops based on a negative is unnecessarily reactive and fragile. Remove the external force and what have you got? For some American Jews, we thought that antisemitism was a thing of the past and were shocked to learn that it's still here and getting worse. If we do not have a core of Judaism that exists outside of other people's prejudices against us, we are vulnerable.

The goal is not to eliminate antisemitism on your own. It is to understand how to recognize antisemitism without allowing it to define your experience of being Jewish.

Part of the challenge in our present reality is that not everything that is uncomfortable is antisemitism, but some of it is. Distinguishing between the two requires judgment, and that judgment is not always clear at the moment. If everything is labeled antisemitism, the term loses meaning. If nothing is labeled antisemitism, it goes unaddressed. The task is not to resolve that tension completely, it is to navigate it responsibly.

There is another layer. Some Jews assume that recognizing antisemitism requires absorbing it. If something antisemitic is said, the instinct is to take it personally, to carry it, and to respond in a way that corrects or defends. That instinct is understandable. It is also not always necessary. Not every instance of antisemitism requires a response. Not every comment needs to be corrected in the moment by one person. And not every person who says something problematic is open to being taught. The decision to respond is situational. It depends on context, relationship, and purpose.

This does not mean ignoring it altogether. It means recognizing that responding and internalizing are not the same thing. You can identify something as antisemitic without allowing it to define your sense of self or your place in the world.

3-D Test of Antisemitism:

- **Demonization**
- **Delegitimization**
- **Double Standards**

For a quick gut-check, I use Natan Sharansky's "3-D Test" to evaluate if someone asking questions or being critical of Jews and Israel is crossing the line into antisemitism. Sharansky was a Jewish prisoner of conscience in the Soviet Union, a member of the Israeli Knesset (parliament), and the executive of

the Jewish Agency for Israel. A highlight of my years as a Hillel director was hosting him on campus. Sharansky says that if someone is demonizing Israel and Jews, de-legitimizing Israel and Jews, or holding Jews and Israel to a double standard compared to the rest of the world, that crosses the line into antisemitism.

In My Experience

The Casual Comment

"I didn't know you were Jewish, you don't look Jewish."

This might be offered as an observation, not intended as an insult. But it reflects an assumption about what a Jew is supposed to look like, and by extension, who counts. The response does not need to be confrontational. It can be as simple as: "There isn't one way to look Jewish." The goal is not to escalate the moment, it is to correct the assumption. By the way, I hear Jews say that to each other and that's not good, either.

The Misplaced Joke

"I can't afford that, I'm not a rich Jew." "It must be nice to control the media."

This is usually framed as humor. I know humor, including many Jewish jokes that are not suitable for print. This kind of "humor" noted above draws on stereotypes that have been used historically to justify exclusion and led to the attempted elimination of European Jewry. The question in the moment we are faced with these sentiments is not only what did the person say, but what is the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. Sometimes the right response is direct: "That's not a great joke. You can do better." Sometimes it is enough to let the discomfort register and

end the conversation. If the humor is coming from a Jew and punches up rather than down, I say bravo. For example, I loved Jeff Ross' *Comedy Central Historical Roast* of the worst person in the history of the world (his name starts with "H") in which almost every actor was Jewish, including the one who played "H." Same with Mel Brooks' *The Producers*. Humor that empowers is great; humor that threatens is not.

The Direct Question

"Are Jews responsible for what's happening in Israel?" "How can you support a genocidal state?" "Are you Israeli or American?"

This question is posed in various ways, but the assumption is the same: that individual Jews are accountable for the actions of a state. That assumption needs to be addressed. No one asks individuals from other backgrounds to account for the actions of governments in the same way. The response can be clear: "I'm not responsible for the decisions of a government any more than you are." The goal is not to debate policy, it is to reject the premise. No individual (save the president or prime minister) should be held accountable for any nation's policies. Furthermore, to engage with people who begin with the erroneous and hateful assumption that Israel is genocidal is counterproductive. I choose to converse with the thoughtful and curious moderate rather than the zealous extremist. If someone believes that Israel is controlling the United States, they are quite mistaken. No one is controlling the United States, including our own elected officials.

A few years ago I was asked to speak at a church whose denomination was considering a BDS resolution (boycott, divestment, and sanctions). My first response to the invitation was to ask "Is the church considering BDS against any other

countries?" That was too snarky. At the meeting, however, I called it like I saw it, challenging the assumptions of the denomination's leadership and building on the strength of the local relationship. That I was invited in the first place was a good sign and I quickly realized that it was far better to be listened to in person than to be talked about while absent. Score one for the blessings of relationship and interfaith cooperation.

In Practice

In practice, this means learning to distinguish between recognition and internalization. You can name something as antisemitic without carrying it with you. You can decide when to respond and when not to respond. You can correct an assumption without taking on the responsibility to educate fully in every moment. And you can choose your response based on context, not pressure. In other words, you may not control the media and the banks, but you do control what comes out of your own mouth and with whom you associate.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If you are unsure whether something is antisemitic: "That doesn't sit right. I'm going to pay attention to it." If something crosses a line: "That's not appropriate." If a question carries an unfair assumption: "I wouldn't frame it that way." If you choose not to engage: "I'm not going to get into that right now." These are not evasions, they are your decisions.

Antisemitism is real. It should be recognized, named, and addressed when appropriate. But it does not need to be internalized as a defining feature of Jewish life. A strong Jewish identity is not built in reaction to hostility. It is built through

participation, connection, and continuity. Recognizing that distinction allows a person to remain grounded, even in the presence of something that has existed for a long time and will not disappear quickly.

Antisemitism is not a Jewish problem. Jews did not create it and Jews cannot solve it. And we can determine the ground rules for how we address it in a free society. Sometimes it's better to let things go, and sometimes it is absolutely appropriate to tackle it head-on. With confidence, you'll know the difference.

I did not title this book "How to Beat Antisemitism" for a reason. That's not something any of us can do on our own. We can, however, each bolster our confidence as Jews to live Jewish-ly on our own terms and for good reasons.

Chapter 7 — Everyday Jewish Life (What Builds Identity)

After all of this (what a Jew is, what belonging requires, how to speak about it, how to respond to questions, how to navigate Israel and antisemitism) it is reasonable to ask a simpler question: What really builds Jewish identity? What is the practice that lives out the theory? For the first seven years of my professional life I was an academic administrator, culminating in the directorship of the Reform Movement's flagship rabbinical school. I had not yet worked full-time in the field as a practitioner, and was confident before the age of thirty that my theory was pure, unburdened by reality. Ah, the joys of being young.

Some people assume that identity is built through understanding. Learn enough, believe the right things, become fluent in the language of the tradition, and then identity will follow. Since leaving the ivy-covered halls and working in Hillel, and then a congregation, I have learned that that assumption is backwards. Jewish identity is not built primarily through understanding, it is built through repetition and relationships. Jewish identity is created and nurtured through participation, marking time, being uncomfortable, experimenting, and then starting all over again. Over time, those actions accumulate.

Judaism is, at its core, a system that organizes life

Judaism is, at its core, a system that organizes life. It marks time daily, weekly, annually, across a lifetime. It creates shared experiences through holidays, rituals, and communal moments. It provides language via words, phrases, and patterns that become familiar through use. None of these require mastery to begin, they require only participation. You don't have to lead

the first Passover Seder you attend; it is enough just to be at the table. You don't have to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. It is fine to listen and absorb and experience.

There is a tendency to treat Jewish practice as something that should be taken on only once a person feels ready and is more knowledgeable and confident. But that moment sometimes does not arrive. In the absence of participation, confidence does not develop, it remains theoretical. The system does not wait for readiness, it creates it. I was ordained as a rabbi at age twenty-seven but I don't think I was really comfortable with the painful life cycle work until I officiated at the first funeral after the death of my own father a full decade later. I had studied grief, but I had not experienced it. I knew the ritual but not the value. I hope that I was able to be of comfort to other mourners while my father was alive, but those were technical actions. Every funeral since has been different. And on a happier note, every baby naming and Bar or Bat Mitzvah since those of my own kids has also been different.

This is why small, repeated actions matter more than occasional intensity. A person who lights candles once a year will not experience what that ritual is meant to do. A person who lights them regularly, even imperfectly, will begin to notice something shift. The same is true of showing up to services, marking holidays, or using even a small amount of Hebrew. Familiarity develops through exposure, not explanation.

I think often of my late teacher and boss, Rabbi David Ellenson, who was a professor when I was in rabbinical school and later president of the seminary when I was a dean. He told the story of how he and his family did the Shabbat rituals every Friday even when they were tired and it seemed like a routine rather than a

commandment. He said that fifty-two weeks a year they did the steps, lit the candles, drank the wine, ate the challah. Fifty of the weeks were the same, but two of them were exceptional. The sun was setting at just the right angle, the wine was especially sweet, the light of the candles reflected in his children's eyes. Those two weeks made the other fifty worth the effort. His point was that you cannot have the two unless you do the other fifty, because you never know which two weeks will stand out. In other words, you'll never win the lottery unless you buy a ticket. Make a habit that creates possible the moments that matter most.

In My Experience

The Inconsistent Regular

"I only come a few times a year, but it still matters to me."

I believe it. What stands out to me is what happens when that pattern changes. Someone who attends occasionally begins to come more regularly not because they suddenly understand more, but because it begins to feel familiar. The service is less foreign, the rhythm is recognizable. They meet more people and see them week after week. Certain moments begin to stand out though nothing dramatic has changed. But something has changed. Maybe they are coming because of the snacks. Maybe they are coming because someone in their life is coming with them. Whatever the reason, it matters more when you make it a habit and a custom than an anomaly.

One Step

"We're going to start doing Shabbat at home. Nothing elaborate, just candles and dinner."

This family did not take on everything at once. They did not wait until they understood every blessing or every custom, they chose one practice with which to start. They liked to send me pictures of the kids doing the blessings. That went on for a few weeks. Several months later when I asked how it was going they described it as something they looked forward to doing. They stopped sending pictures because it was no longer extraordinary. It had become a practice for the entire family, and for their guests. The kids started to invite friends for Friday night dinner. And from that beginning, identity followed.

Gateways

People do not always enter Jewish life through belief. Sometimes they enter through community, or music, or routine, or even food. The entry point does not determine the outcome. What matters is whether they stay long enough for something to take shape. Shabbat and holidays can be the gateway, an entrance to Jewish life. How we nurture that identity determines whether the entrance remains open for further exploration or whether it becomes an unintentional exit when the novelty wears off.

In Practice

In practice, this means focusing less on doing everything and more on doing something consistently. Choose one point of entry:

- light Shabbat candles
- come to a Shabbat service
- attend a Torah study or adult education class
- mark a holiday
- learn a small amount of Hebrew
- engage with the Jewish community in a regular way

Do it imperfectly and consistently. The goal is familiarity, not immediate transformation. And from familiarity comes connection. With that, eventually, comes confidence.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If you feel like you should be doing more: "I'm going to start with one thing and do it regularly." If something feels unfamiliar: "It's supposed to. That's part of the process." If you feel like you don't understand enough:"I don't need to understand everything to begin." If someone asks why you are doing something: "Because it's part of being Jewish."

Jewish identity is not built in a single moment. It is built over time, through repeated engagement with a system that is larger than any one person's level of understanding. You do not need to wait until you feel ready. You do not need to master the system before entering it. You just need to begin, and then continue.

By this point, the pattern should be clear. You can belong without resolving everything. You can participate without certainty. You can speak without apology. You can respond without representing everyone. You can care without simplifying. You can recognize without internalizing. And you can build a Jewish life the same way it has always been built, by showing up, again and again, until it begins to feel like your own. And then keep learning and growing.

But if you create an artificial boundary (like not coming because we pray for Israel), you miss everything else, too.

Chapter 8 — Belief, Doubt, and Intellectual Honesty

Belief does not go away. Even after everything that I have presented here about belonging, participation, identity, speaking, questions, Israel, and antisemitism, the question remains: What do I really believe? For some Jews, this remains the point of greatest tension. They are willing to gather in Jewish community, they are willing to participate, they are willing to say, "I'm Jewish." But when it comes to belief, to God, prayer, and obligation, they hesitate because they are not sure their thoughts are acceptable. They are not sure they can be confident without a clear answer. I don't recall ever asking anyone about their belief before welcoming them to a service, class or program.

There is an assumption at work beneath that hesitation, the assumption that Judaism requires a coherent, stable, and defensible set of beliefs, that confidence comes from having those beliefs in place. As I have noted above, that assumption does not hold. From the beginning of this book, my message has been consistent:

- You do not need to resolve identity before belonging.
- You do not need belief before participation.
- You do not need expertise before speaking.
- You do not need to represent everyone when answering questions.
- You do not need simplicity in order to engage complexity.
- You do not need to internalize hostility in order to recognize it.
- You do not need mastery in order to begin building a Jewish life.

Belief is no different. Judaism has never been a system that depends on uniform belief.

It has texts, certainly. It has language about God, obligation, and meaning. It has structures that assume something about the nature of the world. But it has never required that every individual resolve those ideas in the same way.

If anything, the opposite is true. Jewish tradition preserves disagreement; the Torah presents multiple voices; the rabbinic tradition expands them; the Talmud records arguments without resolving them. Disagreement is not a failure of the system, it is one of its key features.

Confidence, in Jewish life, has never depended on theological certainty, it has depended on the ability to remain inside the conversation with your doubts and questions.

In My Experience

The Direct Question

"Do you believe in God?"

What is being asked is not only what I believe, but what someone else is allowed to believe and still remain within Jewish life. The expectation is that there is a correct answer, and that once it is stated, it will clarify everything. It does not. My answer is "yes," though maybe not in the way you might assume. And you don't have to agree with me to be right.

The Attempted Confession

"I don't know if I believe in God."

This one sounds like a confession, but it is really just an honest statement. What makes this meaningful to me is not the uncertainty, but the assumption that uncertainty disqualifies confidence. It does not.

The Confident Statement

"I believe in something, I'm just not sure how to define it."

This is closer to how many people actually experience belief, and it is sufficient. The process of re-examining and refining is part of the work of building confidence.

Intellectual Honesty

There is a difference between doubt and disengagement. Doubt is engagement. It reflects a willingness to take the question seriously enough not to accept an answer that does not hold. Disengagement avoids the question altogether. Judaism has far more room for the first than the second.

There is also a difference between clarity and certainty. Clarity is the ability to describe what you think, even if it is incomplete. Certainty is the claim that the question has been resolved. Judaism does not require certainty, and Jewish confidence does not depend on it.

Intellectual honesty means saying what is true for you rather than what you think you are supposed to say, were taught to say, or what you think might make the conversation easier. That truth may change over time and your confidence does not require that it stay the same. When I was little, I believed that the sun and the moon were the same thing, with two sides, and that one side was visible at night and the other during the day. Now that I am older I know that not to be true. How could it be? The moon is made of cheese and obviously the sun is so hot that if its other side was cheese it would melt. (I think I now understand why I got mediocre grades in high school astronomy class).

In Practice

In practice, this means you do not need to arrive at a fixed belief system in order to be confident in your Jewish life. You can pray without resolving what you think about God. You can use traditional language while understanding it differently than others do. You can engage with texts without agreeing with everything they assume. You can continue to belong, participate, speak, respond, engage, and build, all without final theological clarity. The system is capable of holding that range.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If you are asked what you believe: "I'm still working that out." Or "I have a sense of it, but I wouldn't say it's fixed." If you feel pressure to resolve the question: "I don't need a final answer to stay engaged." If you are unsure how to relate to traditional language: "I understand it in my own way."

Belief, in Judaism, is not a single point of arrival. It is something that develops and sometimes resists definition altogether. That makes it honest, not weaker. This is where confidence returns, from knowing that you do not need a clear definition in order to remain inside. You do not need to force clarity where it does not exist. You do not need to claim certainty you do not feel. You do not need to step outside Jewish life until you have resolved questions that may not resolve. You can remain inside the system while thinking, questioning, and reconsidering. You can be intellectually honest without losing your place. You can be uncertain without being hesitant. And you can be confident because you understand that the big questions were never meant to be answered definitively.

Chapter 9 — Raising (or Influencing) the Next Generation

Up to now, the questions have been personal: Am I Jewish enough? Do I belong? What do I believe? Can I say it out loud?

Just as on an airplane we put our own oxygen mask on before helping others or, for a Jewish example, we follow Maimonides' admonition to learn and then to teach, our obligation begins with ourselves but does not end there. Ideally, we are no longer only asking what Judaism means for ourselves alone and we begin to think about what it will mean for someone else. If your own engagement with Judaism began because of your children, you're already on track.

You do not need to be raising children to influence the next generation, you only need to be present. Some of the strongest influences on my own Jewish path were from people outside of my family. Youth group advisors, rabbis, cantors, religious school teachers, all played a role. Every one of those people built my confidence by demonstrating their own curiosity and connection.

People assume that transmitting Jewish identity requires a high level of knowledge, consistency, and clarity. They assume they need all of the right answers, the right practices, and the right structure before they can pass anything on. That assumption does not hold.

Transmission does not happen through perfection, it happens through exposure, through repetition, through normalization. Transmission comes through what is seen, heard, and experienced over time. Children do not learn Jewish identity primarily from what is explained to them, they learn it from what they see, and from what happens regularly enough to feel normal. They learn

identity from what is treated as part of life, rather than an occasional performance. A child who sees Shabbat candles lit regularly learns something, even if they do not understand the blessings. A child who attends synagogue occasionally but predictably learns something, even if they cannot follow the service. A child who hears Jewish language, stories, or values in everyday conversation absorbs something, even if it is not formalized.

The transmission of various components of Jewish identity happens through repeated exposure and normalization.

The same is true in the opposite direction. If Jewish life appears only at isolated moments, through holidays without context, rituals without repetition, identity without practice, then it is experienced as occasional rather than foundational. It becomes something that happens, not something that is lived. Consistency is more important here than intensity.

I heard a story about a rabbi new to town who was invited to the synagogue president's home for Shabbat dinner. The president had made a big deal about how important the Shabbat rituals were to the family. The rabbi showed up and when the president lit the candles one of the children called out "Candles at dinner? Is it someone's birthday?" So much for consistency.

In My Experience

<u>The Concerned Parent</u>

"I don't know enough to teach my kids."

The assumption is that transmission requires expertise. It does not. Children do not need experts, they need models. They need to see

that Jewish life is part of the rhythm of the home, even if that rhythm is simple. You just need to know a little bit more than the kids in that moment to be able to teach them. Many parents teach their kids to drive without themselves having trained to be driving instructors. When you are ready to teach them, they are already accustomed to sitting in the front seat and as you start to explain your movements, they watch, they repeat, they learn. And you live nervously on the edge of your seat hoping that they're listening. Doing Jewish life is like driving in that way. Start slowly, build confidence, and see where the path leads you. Plus you can feel safe going slowly at first without the expectation that you need to be in the express lane on the first outing.

The Interfaith Question

"We want to raise our kids Jewish, but we're not sure what that looks like."

This question usually comes before any real structure is in place. What they are asking is not only what to do, but whether what they do will count. The answer is the same as it has been throughout this book: Start somewhere. Raise Jewish children by doing Jewish things, even in small, consistent ways. The structure can grow over time.

The Unexpected Influence

"I didn't grow up with much, but I remember what my grandparents did."

What people remember is rarely the full system, they remember specific moments like a holiday meal, a phrase (usually mispronounced or made-up), a routine, or a feeling of being part of something. Those moments stay because they were lived rather

than taught. And if you didn't have them with your family growing up, create them for your family now (biological, adoptive, or via friendships).

A few years ago I gave a High Holy Day sermon about Jewish ritual objects as collectibles. I noticed that as older congregants were downsizing or moving away, they wanted to ensure that their heirloom Menorahs, candlesticks, Seder plates and more found good homes. At the same time, I noticed that people new to Judaism had not inherited these collectibles from Jewish grandparents. So we set up a table for people to bring and take. I invited people to write stories of the items' origins on tags attached to the mementos. I hope that the new owners are creating meaningful traditions and that the donors are confident that their family traditions have found good homes.

Normalization

What becomes normal becomes lasting. If Jewish life is treated as something optional, occasional, or secondary, it will be experienced that way. If it is treated as a regular part of life, even in modest ways, it becomes part of how a person understands themselves.

In Practice

In practice, this means focusing less on doing Jewish life perfectly and more on making it visible and regular. Do not wait until you feel fully prepared. Children are not evaluating your accuracy, they are absorbing your patterns. And if they are attending religious school, they can share what they've learned and own the journey with you.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If you feel unprepared: "I don't need to have all the answers to pass something on." If you feel inconsistent: "I can start with one thing and make it regular." If you feel like what you are doing is too small: "This is how it begins." If someone asks what you are teaching: "I'm showing them what it looks like to live Jewishly."

Jewish identity is not transmitted in a single moment, it is built through repeated exposure to a way of living. And this returns us to confidence. You do not need to be perfect to pass something on. You do not need to resolve every question before modeling a life. You do not need to become something else before you can influence someone else. You need to be consistent enough for something to take hold.

The next generation does not need a finished version of Jewish life. They need one that they can live and model. What they see, regularly and without apology, is what they will come to recognize as their own.

Chapter 10 — Remaining Inside the Story

At this point, very little should feel unfamiliar. The questions that brought you here, questions about identity, belief, belonging, and confidence, have not disappeared. Their function, however, has changed. At the beginning, those questions might have felt like tests. Do I know enough? Do I believe enough? Do I do enough? Am I qualified to say this out loud? If the answer is no, then the conclusion seems obvious: I am not there yet. That framework assumes that Jewish life is something you enter once you are ready. It assumes there is a point at which you cross from outside to inside. As I've stated before: that assumption does not hold. There is no single threshold. There is no moment at which a person becomes fully formed, fully informed, fully resolved. There is no point at which the questions stop. Jewish life is not structured that way. Judaism is not a test that you pass, it is a story that you enter. And once you are inside it, the task is not to complete it; the task is to remain within it.

From the beginning of this book, the same pattern has appeared in different forms. You do not need to resolve identity before belonging. You do not need belief before participation. You do not need expertise before speaking. You do not need to represent everyone when answering questions. You do not need to simplify what is complex. You do not need to internalize hostility in order to recognize it. You do not need to master the system before beginning to build a life within it. You do not need certainty in order to think honestly. You do not need perfection in order to pass something on. Taken together, these are not separate ideas, they are a description of how Jewish life works. There will still be moments of uncertainty, there will still be gaps in knowledge, there

will still be questions that do not resolve. None of these place you outside.

What sustains Jewish life is not resolution, it is continuity. People remain connected in different ways and at different levels. Some through regular practice. Some through community. Some through family. Some through moments that return again and again. There is no single correct form. There is only continued presence.

In My Experience

The Return

Sometimes I meet people who have been away from Jewish life for a long time. They often assume that if they step away, even for a long time, they have to begin again from the beginning. That is not how it works. They return with memory, with language, with fragments that remain. The story does not reset, it continues.

If they grew up in the community I serve, I take them to the hallway with the consecration and confirmation classes and ask them to show me their class. Then I tell them which of their peers is still here, and make an effort to reconnect them. It's a start, and that's what I'm preaching here.

In Practice

In practice, this means you do not need to locate yourself at a fixed point. You do not need to determine whether you are ahead or behind. You do not need to measure yourself against others. Instead, stay connected, return when you drift, continue when you can. Engage in something regularly enough that it remains part of your life.

What You Can Say to Yourself and Others

If you feel like you are not doing enough: "I'm still part of this." If you feel like you have fallen behind: "I can return without starting over." If you are unsure where you stand: "I'm inside, even if I'm still figuring things out." If someone else expresses doubt: "You don't need to have it all resolved to stay connected." Jewish identity is not something you complete, it is something in which you actively live. It shifts over time, it expands and contracts, it takes different forms at different stages.

You are not standing at the edge, waiting to qualify. You are already part of something that has been unfolding for a very long time. Your role is not to prove that you belong, it is to remain connected to it, to participate in it, and to carry it forward in whatever way you are able. Not perfectly or completely, but consistently enough that it remains part of your life. That is what it means to remain inside the story.

Conclusion

After everything presented here—questions about identity, belonging, belief, practice, Israel, antisemitism, and daily life—it is worth stating clearly what this has all been about: Jewish confidence is often misunderstood. It is not knowing everything. It is not believing everything. It is not doing everything correctly or consistently. It is not having a fully formed answer to every question you are asked. If that were the standard, very few people would qualify.

Jewish confidence is the ability to remain inside Jewish life without apologizing for where you are. It is the ability to say "I'm Jewish" without immediately qualifying it. It is the ability to participate without waiting for certainty. It is the ability to respond without assuming you represent everyone. It is the ability to care without reducing something complex to something simple. It is the ability to recognize hostility without allowing it to define you. It is the ability to begin, and to continue.

Over the course of my rabbinate, I have met people at every possible point along the spectrum of Jewish life. People who know a great deal and people who know very little. People who believe with clarity and people who struggle to define what they believe at all. People who are deeply engaged and people who are just beginning to explore what any of this means.

What I have learned is this: the difference between those who build a Jewish life and those who remain on the outside is not knowledge, and it is not belief. It is whether they stay.

The people who keep showing up, who keep asking questions, who keep participating even when they feel uncertain, those are the

ones for whom Jewish life becomes real. Not all at once, and not in a straight line, but over time. It becomes real through repetition, relationships, and moments that accumulate into something that begins to feel like their own. The people who wait until they feel ready often end up waiting indefinitely.

If you have read this book, you have already done something meaningful. You have taken the question of Jewish identity seriously enough to engage it. That alone places you inside the process. You do not need to resolve everything in order to continue. You do not need to reach a final answer in order to belong. You do not need to become a different kind of Jew in order to be a legitimate one. You are already part of the Jewish people, by birth or by choice. That is not something you earn by reaching a certain level of knowledge or practice. It is something you live into, in your own way, over time.

If any part of you still wonders whether you are ready—whether you know enough, believe enough, or fit well enough to take your place—consider the people who inspired this book in the first place. The one who had been living a deeply committed Jewish life for decades but assumed she was still on the outside looking in. The one who felt at home in Jewish life in every way except for the belief he thought he was supposed to have already resolved. They were not waiting to become Jewish. They were already there.

If you're not Jewish but have been thinking about becoming Jewish, all of this is waiting for you as much as it is for every other Jewish person. Jump in when you are ready to start asking questions, not when you have all of the answers.

If you are wondering what comes next, the answer is simple: Do something Jewish. Say something Jewish. Show up somewhere Jewish. And then do it again.

You do not need to wait until you feel confident to begin. Confidence is built through the act of continuing. After all of this, the goal is not to arrive at a conclusive definition of what it means to be Jewish. The goal is to remain inside the story. And you already are.

What makes someone "Jewish enough?"

This brief and practical guide explores what it means to claim Jewish identity with confidence, without having to know, believe, or do everything.

This book is for anyone who has ever felt unsure about being Jewish enough, and wants to step more fully into their Jewish selves on their own terms.

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