

**Time to Change?**  
**The Challenge of Jewish Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
Dr. Erica Brown

**I. A Quiz on Personal Identity**

You have 100 points that must be distributed into percentages of influence on your identity within the following categories. You cannot exceed 100 but you can divide up the percentages anyway you like. If a category is not relevant, you need not score it. Alternatively, you can add a category or more that you feel needs representation:

- **Parents/Guardian:**
- **Partner:**
- **Work:**
- **Education:**
- **Siblings:**
- **Friends:**
- **Neighborhood:**
- **Volunteer activities (you can be specific):**
- **Birth place:**
- **Hometown (if different):**
- **Race:**
- **Religion:**
- **Citizenship:**
- **Significant life event (You can be specific):**

1. Ten years from now, what factors might be added or dropped in the identity equation? Circle them.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What do these changes tell us about identity generally? Is it fluid or stable?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Please explain the factors on this list that have *most* influenced your Jewish identity?

## II. Biblical Texts on Identity

### Numbers 13: 30-33

Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.” But the men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.” Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and *we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.*”

### Numbers 22:4

“...and Moab said to the elders of Midian, “Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us *as an ox licks up the grass* of the field.”

## III. Contemporary Quotes on Jewish Identity:

Leon Wieseltier, interviewed by Abigail Pogrebin in *Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk about Being Jewish*, believes that being Jewish is not like other identities, and “perhaps there is a relief in allowing it to be different.”

I think to be Jewish is not to be an American or a Westerner or a New Yorker. To be a Jew is to be a Jew. It is its own thing. Its own category; its own autonomous way of moving through the world. It’s ancient and thick and vast, and it’s one specific thing that is not like anything else.

Tony Judt in *The New York Review of Books* (May 11, 2010) says of his Jewish identity:

I participate in no Jewish community life, nor do I practice Jewish rituals. I don’t make a point of socializing with Jews in particular – and for the most part I haven’t married them. I am not a “lapsed” Jew, having never confirmed to requirements in the first place. I don’t “love Israel”...and I don’t care if the sentiment is reciprocated. But whenever anyone asks me whether or not I am Jewish, I unhesitatingly respond in the affirmative and would be ashamed to do otherwise.

In A.B. Yehoshua’s novel, *Friendly Fire*, the main character, Yirmiyahu, relieves himself of Jewish identity. Yirmiyahu moves to an obscure location in Tanzania after the death of his wife to illness and the loss of his soldier son to a friendly fire incident in the West Bank. His sister-in-law, Daniela, wanting to find out more about her sister’s death, travels to Africa to see Yirmiyahu. Visiting during the holiday season, she brings him a box of Hanukah candles and a stack of Israeli newspapers which he quickly throws into the fire.

He is not interested, even remotely, in anything to do with Judaism or Israel. Only late in the novel does Yirmayhu explain his mysterious behavior and why he will not be returning to Israel:

Here there are no ancient graves and no floor tiles from a destroyed synagogue; no museum with a fragment of a burnt Torah; no testimonies about pogroms and the Holocaust. There's no exile here, no Diaspora. There was no Golden Age here, no community that contributed to global culture. They don't fuss about assimilation or extinction, self-hatred or pride, uniqueness or chosenness; no old grandmas pop up suddenly aware of their identity. There's no orthodoxy here or secularism or self-indulgent religiosity, and most of all no nostalgia for anything at all. There's no struggle between tradition and revolution. No rebellion against the forefathers and no new interpretations. No one feels compelled to decide if he is a Jew or an Israeli or maybe a Canaanite, or if the state is more democratic or more Jewish, if there's hope for it or if it's done for. The people around me are free and clear of that whole exhausting and confusing tangle. But life goes on. I am seventy years old, Daniela, and I am permitted to let go.

Natan Sharansky presents a different view in *Defending Identity*:

I discovered that only by embracing who I am – by going back to the *shtetl*, by connecting to my own people, by building my own particular identity – could I also stand with others. Far from negating freedom, identity gave me both inner freedom and the strength to help others. When Jews abandon identity in the pursuit of universal freedom, they end up with neither. Yet when they embrace identity in the name of freedom, as Soviet Jews did in the 1970s, they end up securing both. When freedom and identity are separated, both are weakened.

Winston Churchill had this to say about Jews...

"Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are, beyond any question, the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has appeared in the world."

The last word goes to Leo Tolstoy:

"The Jew is that sacred being who has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire, and has illumined with it the entire world. He is the religious source, spring, and fountain out of which all the rest of the peoples have drawn their beliefs and their religions."

#### **IV. Three Identity Frameworks:**

**Behavioral** (what you do):

**Emotional** (what you feel):

**Cognitive** (what you think):

1. After each word, list 3 things related to the identity category and its connection to your personal Jewish life. For example, if matza balls make you cry, put that next to emotional.

2. In a word, what identity framework most accurately describes your Jewish life now. What framework would you *like* to describe your Jewish life moving forward?

## **V. Judaism: Your Elevator Speech**

1. Share one word that sums up your Judaism:

2. Put that word into a sentence that answers the following question: **Why Be Jewish?** referencing what you do, what you feel and what you think about. Begin your Jewish identity statement with the following four words:

I am Jewish because...