

Why Be Jewish?

“Because Judaism can teach us how to deepen our lives, to improve the world, to join with others who have the same lofty aims. Judaism can teach us spiritual and moral mindfulness, a way of living in this world that promotes joy inside of us and also encourages ethical action. But finally, the answer to why be Jewish must reside in the mystery of each seeking soul, trying to find its place with others and with God.”

Rabbi David Wolpe, “Why Be Jewish?”

“Our goal should be to make it possible for every Jewish person, child or adult, to be exposed to the mystery and romance of Jewish history, to the enthralling insights and special sensitivities of Jewish thought, to the sanctity and symbolism of Jewish existence, and to the power and profundity of Jewish faith”

Rabbi Isadore Twersky, “On the Goals of Jewish Education”

Day school leaders seeking to advocate on behalf of their school easily grasp the need to make the case for day school education. At a more essential level, however, proponents need to be prepared to respond to the basic question that underlies the purpose of Jewish education: Why be Jewish? The responses below are organized according to four common approaches and include quotes from contemporary thinkers. Ultimately, day schools transmit all of these messages and challenge learners to answer the question, “Why be Jewish” for themselves.

Link to Past/Traditions/Jews Around the World

Being Jewish links individuals with traditions, history, and values much larger than themselves. For many, this cross-generational, international, and timeless connection gives a sense of rootedness, builds identity, and removes the sense of being “alone in time.” An understanding of, appreciation for, or belief in Jewish practice calls on the individual to act in accordance with proscribed patterns.

“A Jew remembers a great past and anticipates a glorious future. Judaism is a living memory and an exciting prophecy.” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

“Only a person who is connected to his past, to his people, and to his roots can be free, and only a free person has the strength to act for the benefit of the rest of humanity.” Natan Sharansky

“To be Jewish is to be part of a people that gave the world monotheism and the Torah, and with those contributions changed the course of civilization...To be Jewish is to belong to this people that has held onto its life-affirming principles against all odds.” Francine Klagsbrun

“Can a man know who he truly is, if he doesn’t know who his ancestors were?” Kirk Douglas

Meaning/Holiness

Being Jewish brings meaning to life. Associating with Jewish values, prayers, and practices elevates the everyday to a sacred realm and offers moments of transcendence. In Hebrew “kedushah” or holiness also connotes “separateness.” Being Jewish often means being different from the universal.

“There is a fundamental human need for context, a need for meaning, a larger narrative in which our own personal story makes sense” Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

“Judaism can save your life from being wasted, from being spent on the trivial....Judaism is a way of making sure that you don’t spend your whole life, with its potential for holiness, on eating, sleeping, and paying your bills. It is a guide to investing your life in things that really matter, so that your life will matter. It comes to teach you how to transform pleasure into joy and celebration, how to feel like an extension of God by doing what God does, taking the ordinary and making it holy.” Rabbi Harold Kushner

“What we have learned from Jewish history is that if a man is not more than human then he is less than human. Judaism is an attempt to prove that in order to be a man, you have to be more than a man, that in order to be a people we have to be more than a people. Israel was made to be a “holy people.” This is the essence of its dignity and the essence of its merit. Judaism is a link to eternity, kinship with ultimate reality.” Abraham Joshua Heschel

“The purpose of Jewish existence is to be a People in the image of God.” Mordechai Kaplan

“The essence of Judaism is that all of life is rooted in the divine; we are commanded by God to live in a special way.” Blu Greenberg

“To me, being Jewish means having help in answering life’s most fundamental questions, such as, ‘How did I come to this place?’ and ‘Now that I am here, how should I live.’ My faith, which has anchored my life, begins with a joyful gratitude that there is a God who created the universe and then, because He continued to care for what He created, gave us laws and values to order and improve our lives.” Senator Joseph I. Lieberman

Community/Peer Support

For many contemporary Jews, being Jewish is about being part of a community of shared practices, values, and traditions. Belonging to a group makes the world a smaller place. Existential loneliness is quelled by being part of a vibrant community. Judaism is practiced in the presence of peers, thereby supporting the viability of tradition.

“Jewish life provides something that is profoundly lacking in contemporary America—a sense of belonging.” Rabbi Irwin Groner

“There is a fundamental human need for connection” Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

“For us Jews there can be no fellowship with God without the fellowship with the people Israel.” Abraham Joshua Heschel

“As a member of an extended family, I embrace the common heritage and future I share with my fellow Jews around the world.” Lynn Schusterman

Justice and Compassion

In a world filled with injustice and cruelty, being Jewish means believing you can and must change the world. The Jewish value of tikkun olam, repairing the world from its primeval chaos, gave mystics a motivation for how their actions could have an impact on the world and invoked the Biblical prophetic call for justice. Finding definitions of good and evil and applying them to their lives are how some Jews understand Jewish law.

“There is a fundamental human need for compassion, the need to give and to receive love” Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

“Judaism, done right, has the power to save your life from being spent entirely on the trivial and elevate it to the level of authentic humanity. But it can do more than that....The ultimate goal is to transform the world into the kind of world God had in mind when He created it.” Rabbi Harold Kushner

“To say that the Jewish religion is but a set of rituals is to reduce Judaism to a parochial affair....It is true that Judaism is much more than a dogma. But this is not because it has no dogmas. It is rather because there are no dogmas which can sufficiently express the depth and grandeur of its insights. Judaism is not legalism; this is precisely what the opponents of Judaism claim. It is an answer to the ultimate problems of the individual and of society.” Abraham Joshua Heschel

“Civilization is our problem. Judaism is the art of surpassing civilization. It teaches us how to help cure civilization’s ills.” Abraham Joshua Heschel

“The meaning of Jewish existence is to foster in ourselves as Jews, and to awaken in the rest of the world, a sense of moral responsibility in action.” Mordechai Kaplan

“The demand for justice runs through the entirety of the Jewish tradition.” Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

“I am blessed to be a voyager on an ancient pathway that continues to offer new insights and responses to new questions of meaning, ethics, and responsibility...I am Jewish because the religion, the tradition, and the community inspire me and support me to follow the path that the Prophet Micah challenges us all to walk: ‘To do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.’ (Micah 6:8).” Rabbi Rachel Cowan

“Service is my way of encountering God in the world, since God can only be found in our response to the needs of others. Through this response we can hope to fulfill the mitzvah of tikkun olam (repairing the world).” Ruth Messinger