FIVE CHALLENGES FACING THE JEWISH PEOPLE

1. BE AFRAID; BE VERY AFRAID

“In the last few years a new cycle of fear, one that shares many common features in Europe and the United States, has invaded our consciousness. I do not think it actually began with 9/11, which only confirmed and deepened it. In both regions of the West, this new cycle includes fear of the Other, the outsider who is coming to invade the homeland, threaten our identity, and steal our jobs. In both regions, it includes fear of terrorism and fear of weapons of mass destruction, the two being easily linked. It includes fear of economic uncertainty or collapse. It includes fear of natural, environmental, and organic disasters, from global warming to disease pandemics. In sum, it involves fear of any uncertain and menacing future, over which there is little, if any, possible human control. All these fears are widespread among both Europeans and Americans today.”

(Dominique Moïsi, *The Geopolitics of Emotion*)

“Fear plays a key role in twenty-first century consciousness. Increasingly, we seem to engage with various issues through a narrative of fear. You could see this trend emerging and taking hold in the last century, which was frequently described as an ‘Age of Anxiety’. But in recent decades, it has become more and better defined, as specific fears have been cultivated.”

“...the impact of fear is determined by the situation people find themselves in, but it is also, to some extent, the product of social construction. Fear is determined by the self, and the interaction of the self with others; it is also shaped by a cultural script that instructs people on how to respond to threats to their security.”

“...experience tells us that the intensity of fear is not directly proportional to the objective character of the specific threat. Adversity, acts of misfortune and threats to personal security do not directly produce fear. Rather, our responses to specific circumstances are mediated through cultural norms, which inform people of what is expected of them when they are confronted with a threat; how they should respond, how they should feel.”

“Fear today has a free-floating dynamic. It can attach itself to a wide variety of events and phenomena. Consider the fear of terrorism. Since 9/11, this fear has continually expanded to cover almost all aspects of modern life. ‘Corporations must re-examine their definition of risk and take seriously the possibility of scenarios that only science fiction writers could have imagined possible one year ago’, argues a leading economist. In the five years since 9/11, what were previously seen as fairly normal hazards have been turned into exceptional threats by their association with the action of terrorists. So we no longer worry about the apparently everyday
hazard posed by a nuclear power station; we also fear that it may be used as a weapon of mass destruction against us by terrorists.

The fact that more and more areas of life are seen as targets for terrorists – buildings, power stations, the economy and so on – has little to do with the increased capabilities of terrorists; rather it reflects the growth in competitive claims-making around fear and terror.

Today's free-floating fear is sustained by a culture that is anxious about change and uncertainty, and which continually anticipates the worst possible outcome. This ‘culture of fear’, as I and others have called it, tends to see human experience and endeavour as a potential risk to our safety. Consequently, every conceivable experience has been transformed into a risk to be managed.”

(Frank Furedi, “We have nothing to fear but the culture of fear itself,” Spiked, 4 April 2007)

“More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”

(Woody Allen)

“My belief is that many, perhaps most, Jews within Israel and outside have forgotten the Jewish story: the journey from slavery to freedom, darkness to light, exile to the Promised Land, a journey of faith sustained by faith. In its place has come another story, so often recited, so often seemingly confirmed by events, that it has come to seem the Jewish story.

It goes like this: Jews have been persecuted throughout the ages. They were in Christian Europe from the eleventh to the twentieth century. They are now in the predominantly Muslim Middle East. To be a Jew is to be hated and to defy that hate. As one twentieth-century Jewish theologian, Emil Fackenheim, put it: Jews are commanded to stay Jewish in order to deny Hitler a posthumous victory. Jews are, in the biblical phrase, ‘the people that dwells alone’ (Num 23:9).

First, [this] isn’t the Jewish story. The facts may be true, but the narrative is wrong. Second, it risks becoming a classic case of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Believing themselves to be alone, Jews will find themselves alone. Third, it leads to a set of attitudes utterly inconsistent with classic Jewish self-understanding. It turns Jews into victims. It renders them passive-aggressive. It makes them distrust the world, which can lead to other- or self-hatred. Fourth, it generates policies that are self-destructive. Fifth, it demoralises at the very time when the Jewish people need strength. Sixth, it will lead Jews to leave Judaism. Seventh, it deprives Jews and humanity of the very thing that constitutes the Jewish message to humanity: the Jewish story, told and lived, whose theme is the audacity of hope.”

(Jonathan Sacks, Future Tense. AVision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture, 2009)
2. THE CHOOSING PEOPLE AND THE HERETICAL IMPERATIVE

“The English word ‘heresy’ comes from the Greek verb hairesis, which means ‘to choose.’ A hairesis originally meant, quite simply, the taking of a choice. A derived meaning is that of an opinion. In the New Testament... the word already has a specifically religious connotation – that of a faction or party within the wider religious community; the rallying principle of such a faction or party is the particular religious opinion that its members have chosen... In the later development of Christian ecclesiastical institutions, of course, the term acquired much more specific theological and legal meanings.

For this notion of heresy to have any meaning at all, there was presupposed the authority of a religious tradition. Only with regard to such an authority could one take a heretical attitude. The heretic denied this authority, refused to accept the tradition in toto. Instead, he picked and chose from the contents of the tradition, and from these pickings and choosing constructed his own deviant opinion...

Yet the social context of this phenomenon has changed radically with the coming of modernity: In pre-modern situations there is a world of religious certainty, occasionally ruptured by heretical deviations. By contrast, the modern situation is a world of religious uncertainty, occasionally staved off by more or less precarious constructions of religious affirmation. Indeed, one could put this change even more sharply: For pre-modern man, heresy is a possibility – usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity. Or again, modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative.

An example may serve here... – that of Jewish emancipation. In the situation of the ghetto, as in the shtetl of eastern Europe, it would have been absurd to say that an individual chose to be a Jew. To be Jewish was a taken-for-granted given of the individual’s existence, on-goingly reaffirmed with ringing certainty by everyone in the individual’s milieu (including the non-Jews in that milieu)... The coming of emancipation changed all this. For more and more individuals it became a viable project to step outside the Jewish community. Suddenly, to be Jewish emerged as one choice among others. Ethnicity internally and antisemitism externally served to brake this development, but it went quite far in central and western Europe in the nineteenth century. The fullest development was reached in America in the twentieth century. Today, within the pluralistic dynamic of American society, there must be very few individuals indeed for whom being Jewish has the quality of a taken-for-granted fact.”


3. IN SEARCH OF MEANING

“More and more, the meaning of Judaism in America transpires within the self. American Jews have drawn the activity and significance of their group identity into the subjectivity of the individual, the activities of the family, and the few institutions (primarily the synagogue) which are seen as extensions of this intimate sphere. At the same time, relative to their parents’ generation, today’s American Jews in their thirties, forties and early fifties are finding less meaning in mass organizations, political activity, philanthropic endeavour, and attachment to the
State of Israel. In broad strokes, that which is personally meaningful has gained at the expense of that which is peoplehood-oriented. American Jews today are relatively more individualist and less collectivist. Taken as a group, their patterns of belief and practice are more idiosyncratic and diverse, less uniform and consensual. No less important, they regard the ever-changing selection of Jewish activities and meanings from the broad repertoire available as part of their birthright as Jews. They celebrate the autonomy of this choosing and do not worry about its authenticity. Indeed, they welcome each change in the pattern of their Judaism as a new stage in their lifelong personal journeys.”


4. FAITH AND INSTANT GRATIFICATION

“A crucial part of any faith is the investment of value in something more durable than the evanescent and endemically mortal individual life; something lasting, resistant to the eroding impact of time, perhaps even immortal and eternal. Individual death is unavoidable, but life may be used to negotiate and earn a place in eternity; life may be lived in such a fashion that individual morality is transcended – that the trace left by life is not completely effaced. Faith may be a spiritual matter, but in order to hold firm it needs mundane anchoring; its fastenings must reach deep into the experience of daily life.

Artists used to take the greatest care to ensure their murals and canvasses were durable, architects used to erect buildings meant to last for centuries to come. Now the favoured art materials are those that brandish and flaunt their perishability; the favourite form of visual art is a ‘happening’ or installation – patched together as a one-off event, for the duration of an exhibition, and destined to be dissembled the night after the gallery closes. In all fields of culture (including science – concerned allegedly with *eternal* truths) *notoriety* replaces *fame*; and notoriety is, admittedly and unashamedly, the instant version of immortality, oblivious and indifferent to all other versions. If dedication to lasting values is today in crisis, it is because the very ideas of duration, or immortality, is in crisis too.”


5. THE NET-GENERATION, TECHNOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF JEWISH LIFE

“Born between 1977 and 1996 inclusive..., the Net Generation spends time searching, reading, scrutinizing, authenticating, collaborating, and organizing (everything from their MP3 files to protest demonstrations). The Internet makes life an ongoing, massive collaboration, and this generation loves it. They typically can’t imagine a life where citizens didn’t have the tools to constantly think critically, exchange views, challenge, authenticate, verify, or debunk. While their parents were passive consumers of media, youth today are active creators of media content and hungry for interaction.
They are also a generation of scrutinizers. They are more sceptical of authority as they sift through information at the speed of light by themselves or with their network of peers. Though they have greater self-confidence than previous generations, they are nevertheless worried about their futures. It’s not their own abilities that they are insecure about – it’s the external adult world and how it may lack opportunity.

Research shows that this generation also tends to value individual rights, including the right to privacy and the right to have and express their own views. Throughout adolescence and later in life, they tend to oppose censorship by governments and by parents. They also want to be treated fairly – there is a strong ethos, for example, that ‘I should share in the wealth I create.’ They have a very strong sense of the common good and of collective social and civic responsibility...

The Net Generation’s modus operandi is networking. Young people dominate many of the huge, online communities, from Facebook to MySpace, where millions of youths socialize and collaborate to do everything from evaluating companies’ products and services to providing entertainment and services of their own...

The bottom line is that the N-Gen... [is] on a quest for newness. They are open to new ideas. They tend to believe in diversity in all aspects of their lives. This demographic’s need for freedom will take it to uncharted territory. There is strong evidence that N-Geners will demand highly collaborative and collegial work environments that balance work and life, and most of all, value fun. Their playfulness will inject entertainment value into the workplace. And while their appetite for authenticity means that they are resistant to ill-considered attempts by older generations to ‘speak their lingo,’ companies able to adapt to the new demands of N-Gen now will gain a tremendous source of competitive advantage and innovation. Those that don’t will be left on the sidelines, unable to refresh their workforces as the N-Geners flow to other opportunities.”