

Responding to the Clive Lawton Challenge
Presented by Lewis Warshauer
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At Limmud Festival 2018, Clive challenged us to think and talk about some of the hard issues for a sincere Jew in the 21st Century. We'll explore some modern thinkers on the not-obvious questions of why be and do Jewish today.

Joan Rivers, in *Stars of David*, by Abigail Pogrebin (2005)

“First of all we’re the chosen people, and I like that we’re continuing; I don’t want it to stop. If these people have struggled thousands and thousands of years, it should not stop with me. Who am I to say, ‘You buried your candles during the Inquisition and now I’ve decided not to continue’? And I love going to temple—I love Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah. And then when Hanukkah’s over, I do the biggest Christmas tree you can imagine! But I love the Jewish tradition. On Passover, I look forward to doing my meal. I love when you break the fast on Yom Kippur.” She fasts? “No. Never have. I don’t think God cares.”

Yael Kanarek, *New York Artist Re-Genders the Torah While Keeping Tradition* (2019)

Unanticipated things happen when you flip the gender of the entire Torah. Eve/Hava becomes the first human created by Elohim, or God in the feminine plural. Out of Eve’s side Adam is created, and men (midhusbands?) rather than midwives Shifra and Puah make possible Moses’ birth in Egypt. The shifts change far more than their names. They alter the experience of those who created the story of the Jewish people. Yael Kanarek, 52, a New York-born, Israel-raised self-taught artist whose career began by painting tourists’ portraits on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv, has become enmeshed in biblical text. What do I work with? Women don’t have any books,” she said. “We don’t have anything that describes our relationship with the Divine in our image at all.” And she wondered: “What if it was all reversed? How do I make it mine? How do I bring my spiritual body into it?”...Spurred by a need to see herself in the text, “two years ago I sat down to do it. I started with Bereshit” (Genesis). Kanarek has finished re-gendering Genesis. (Jewish Journal, Los Angeles, August 28, 2019)

Tony Bayfield, *Being Jewish Today* (2019)

[Will]Herberg [in *Judaism and Modern Man*, 1951] argued that Jews exist on two levels: on a ‘natural’ level as individuals and citizens of our native lands – whether that land be America, Britain or the new State of Israel. But, collectively we also exist on a ‘supernatural’ level, as what he called ‘a covenant folk’. All Jews, wrote Herberg, are living during ‘the great parenthesis’ – between the call of Abraham and the return to Zion as the Promised Land. During that parenthesis the task in the Land is to establish national life and seize the opportunity of building towards the community of Judaism’s vision. In Diaspora the Jewish task is to be maladjusted, at odds with the flaws of the present, and so bear witness to God and God’s values.

Jonathan Sacks, *Letters in a Scroll*, (2000)

I found myself in the presence of not one mystery but two: Who were and are this people who have exercised so great an influence on Western civilization? And why this strange contrast between what non-Jews and Jews have to say about them? Why was it that, while non-Jews saw in Jews and Judaism something extraordinary, Jews themselves went to such elaborate lengths to deny it, to claim the virtue of being ordinary as if it were a rare and special achievement? This much was clear to me: that there is confusion and demoralization at the heart of contemporary Jewish identity.

Why am I a Jew? How can the mere fact that my parents were Jews obligate me? How can I be bound by a covenant enacted long ago in the desert by my distant ancestors? Though the vast literature of early and medieval rabbinic Judaism raises almost every conceivable issue, this one question is conspicuous by its absence. The very fact that a question of this kind is posed testifies to a crisis, because it calls into question something that at all other times is taken for granted.

How can an ancient covenant still obligate the descendants of those who first made it? How can the past bind the present? The second is: Who are we? What is the nature of the collective Jewish journey that I am asked to continue? What makes it different from other journeys, other faiths, other ways of relating to the world? And what makes it not just different but exhilarating, enlarging, a journey that, given the chance to take part in it, we would not lightly decline, not then and not now? The third is: How did we lose our way? For if there is such a journey, and at least half of young Jews today are not choosing to take it, I want to understand why.

Everything I had studied in modern philosophy, everything I had experienced in contemporary culture, told me that truth was universal and all else was individual—personal preference, autonomous choice. But what I had experienced was neither universal nor individual. Jewish identity was not, nor did it aspire to be, the universal human condition. Nor had I chosen it. It was something I was born into. But how can anyone truly be born into specific obligations and responsibilities without their consent?

Several centuries of Western thought, beginning in the Enlightenment, have left us with the idea that when we choose how to live, we are on our own. Nothing in the past binds us. We are whoever and whatever we choose to be. Against this whole complex of ideas, Jewish life is a sustained countervoice. To be a Jew is to know that this cannot be the full story of who I am. A melody is more than a sequence of disconnected notes. Unlike almost every other vision of the ideal society, Jews knew that theirs was the work of many generations and that therefore they must hand on their ideals to their children so that they too would be part of the journey, letters in the scroll. To be a Jew, now as in the days of Moses, is to hear the call of those who came before us and know that we are the guardians of their story.

Eliezer Berkovits, Commentary Magazine symposium (1966)

Judaism did not [only] once contribute monotheism to the world...it is still being contributed. Monotheism is not yet the possession of the overwhelming majority of mankind. It is not even a reality in the kingdom of Christianity. This is not merely a matter of dogma and its theological interpretation; it is a question which fundamentally affects one's interpretation and evaluation of the whole of existence.

Eugene Borowitz, Commentary Magazine symposium (1966)

Today, only religious faith, only Judaism or Christianity, can provide the basis for a social (and therefore personal) ethic worthy of the name. The man who values high intellectuality, social responsibility, compassion for the underprivileged, and justice for the powerless, the man who insists that self-fulfillment must simultaneously mean devotion to mankind's ennoblement, finds those values increasingly without foundation in today's world.

Angela Buchdahl, Commentary Magazine symposium, 2015

In our collective Jewish memory, we came out of Egypt an *erev rav*, a mixed multitude. As we fled, we accepted like-minded people of all kinds who wanted to join us in this journey to freedom... In 50 years, Jews will be Jewish because they choose Judaism—for its profound meaning and purpose. We will have multitudes of others, like-minded people of all kinds, who will choose to join us as *gerei tzedek*, righteous converts to Judaism, or as *gerei toshav*, non-Jews who become part of our community and raise Jewish families. *Am Yisrael* will still be a nation set apart, but it will be forged together in our freedom, not thrust apart by our enemies.

Jacob J. Schacter, Commentary Magazine symposium (2015)

[The Jewish community's] survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination." Exactly what that is was made clear by Maimonides, who wrote: "We are in possession of the divine assurance that Israel is indestructible and imperishable, and will always continue to be a preeminent community." But it is not for *Klal Yisrael*, the nation of Israel, that I am concerned. It is for "Reb Yisrael," the individual Jew, that I am concerned, very concerned. What will that individual Jew who will still identify as a Jew in 50 years look like? I believe that only those for whom Jewishness is a central—if not the central—defining value of their lives will withstand the challenges of the most welcome and blessed freedom that Jews experience in America. Only those who are prepared to sacrifice for their Jewish identity—to pay (a lot) for day school and yeshiva education, to pay (a lot) to support schools, synagogues, mikvahs, and to live by the values they represent—will constitute the majority of Jews at the end of the next half-century.

Lynn Schusterman, Commentary Magazine symposium (2015)

Many Jews—by birth, marriage, and, especially, choice—are weaving “Jewish” into their daily lives and drawing on their Jewish identities to inform who they are as global citizens.

The onset of this trend is spurred by the transcendence of Jewish values. Distilled from Jewish text and tradition, Jewish values are more relevant than ever. They call us to serve others, to build strong families and communities, to love and cherish Israel as a centerpiece of the Jewish experience, to defend justice, to ensure all have the opportunity to learn and treat everyone with mercy, kindness, care, and respect. They call us to play our part in making a positive difference in the world. Many of these are universal values, but it is their connection to Jewish thought and their call to action that serve as the strongest ties binding the global Jewish people together.

Avi Weiss, Commentary Magazine symposium (2015)

Among what may be the largest group of Diaspora Jews, the unaffiliated, I believe that, contrary to the pundits and the Pew-type reports of the death of the search for God among young Jews, in the next 50 years we will see a renewed search for God. In a world where technology has brought people closer together yet further apart, there will be a backlash as people will yearn to find meaning in their lives. Many more young Jewish men and women will be attracted to spiritual leadership to meet this desperate need.

Rachel Leah Fry, *Leaning Into Yiddishkeit: A Short Story of Jewish Growth* (2019 ?)

The process of finding your Jewish soul, regardless of the age at which you begin (and I am 67), not only turns you away G-d has become an integral partner in my life from whatever other life you have been living, it abruptly sets you on a path cleared of confusion and fear, and offers a way with more light and transparency. Each new Jewish experience makes this clearer to me. Suddenly, G-d has become an integral partner in my life. I can feel His guiding presence and approval as I study Hebrew—the language of my people—or participate in High Holy Day services, or sit quietly and read and absorb the beauty of the Psalmists’ voices. When I asked Rabbi Yosef Goldwasser, the Chabad-Lubavitch emissary in Mobile, Ala., to place a *mezuzah* on the doorframe of my bedroom, he did so with a short blessing. In that moment, I felt a sense of calm and Divine protection. I do have a *mezuzah* at my front door already, but somehow the certainty of G-d’s presence and protection for myself and my husband in the hours we sleep is powerful and comforting. During the rabbi’s coming visits, I plan to add a *mezuzah* to each appropriate doorway of my home. (Chabad.org/theJewishWoman)