



GEULAS YISRAEL

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RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

# Pesach: What is Jewish Identity? Can It Exist Without Torah and Mitzvot?

We were promised redemption from *Mitzrayim* through five divine assurances—the *arba leshonot of geulah*, along with an additional fifth pledge that Hashem would bring us to the Land of Israel. Woven into these five promises are two profoundly different stories of Pesach.

The first two promises – והוצאתי and הצי – describe the first story of Pesach: our liberation from slavery. The final three promises – ולקחת, וגאלתי, and והבאתי – describe a second and different story of Pesach: the birth of our nation and the covenant we forged with Hashem. This second story, about the genesis of our people, isn't explicit in the book of *Shemot* but is the dominant narrative in *Shir HaShirim*. In this second story of *Pesach*, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the *makkot* fade into the background. They are mere scenery to a far greater drama—the birth of the Jewish nation. Pesach was not only the night of *liberation* but also the night of *transformation*, when we shifted from a band of slaves into a nation of Hashem. It is on this first Pesach night that Jewish peoplehood was first born.

What is Jewish identity? For the past two thousand years, that question was easily answered: Jewish identity consisted of

adherence to the word of Hashem, delivered at Har Sinai. Without Torah and mitzvah observance, what Jewish identity was there to speak of?

We have now returned home to Israel and have begun the long process of resettling our Land and rebuilding Jewish history. Alongside these events, many Jews have abandoned classic mitzvah performance and fidelity to Torah. Is there still validity to Jewish identity even without Torah and mitzvot? Of course, a complete and ideal Jewish identity must not merely incorporate *Torah* and *mitzvot*—it must be streamed through them. However, are we willing to validate Jewish identity even when it is autonomous to Torah observance?

Some would answer no. Some would cite a statement of Rabbeinu Sa'adia Gaon (*Emunot V'De'ot* 3:7) לפי שאומתינו בני ישראל אינה that there is absolutely no validity to Jewish identity and expression outside of Torah observance. Yet, others, like the *Tzaddikat HaTzaddik* (perek 54, omitted in many recent versions of the sefer), assert that the essence of Judaism is in the name “Yisrael,” “ישראל,” בקריאת שם - עיקר היהדות, and that there can be partial validity to Jewish identity even without full Torah observance.

If we recognize partial Jewish identity without full Torah compliance, what, then, are the core features that define Jewish identity on their own? How can we better appreciate Jews who do not embrace נעשה ונשמע and the ideals of Har Sinai? How can we better understand our *own* Jewish identity and amplify its various components?

### THE FIRST LAYER- A MORAL NATION

The most fundamental and minimal level of Jewish identity is the belief that we are tasked with inspiring the world toward a moral and ethical life. *Sefer Bereishit* implies that we were chosen only after humanity repeatedly failed to establish even the most basic moral standards. In the aftermath of the annihilation of the דור המבול, Avraham was chosen to forge a new path. Subsequently, Lot—Avraham’s nephew—had an opportunity to rehabilitate the corrupt city of Sodom but failed; Sodom suffered the same fate as the generation of the flood while Lot became disqualified from our national moral mission.

In Bereishit most of the encounters between the Avot and foreign cultures—whether with *Mitzrayim*, the *Phlishtim*, or the people of *Shechem*—revolve around the contrast between our moral code and other societies that lacked any ethical framework.

We are expected to be an *ohr lagoyim*, a guiding light, helping the world advance toward a more just and dignified existence. Belief in this mission of *tikkun olam*, is an elementary component of Jewish identity. In the modern context, many Jews who have completely abandoned Jewish practice—and even Jewish faith—still cling fiercely to the mission of reforming society.

Ironically and sadly, their commitment to *tikkun olam* often leads some to adopt stark



and harsh anti-Israel positions. Lacking a prophetic connection to the Land of Israel, they question the Jewish right to settle in a Land so hotly disputed, a Land from which we had been exiled for thousands of years. Tragically, they believe that opposing Jewish settlement is part of their Jewish moral mission.

As frustrating and infuriating as this may be to us, their hostility stems from a deeply embedded Jewish belief that Jews are the moral conscience of the world.

There is a second flaw latent within this minimal level of Jewish identity: Jewish identity built solely upon a universal moral mission can become excessively *universalistic*, leaving little room for Jewish particularism. The noble aspiration of *tikkun olam* is often misunderstood as a vision where Jews and all nations merge into a singular, utopian society of justice and compassion, erasing the distinct identity of the Jewish people. If our *entire purpose* is to advance humanity’s moral progress, Jewish identity risks dissolving into a broader universal human experience, losing its unique covenantal character and historical destiny. This minimum level of Jewish identity—moral identity—isn’t shaped by prophetic destiny and risks eliminating Jewish distinctiveness.

### LAYER TWO- CULTURAL DISTINCTIVENESS

The second layer of Jewish identity is the

belief that, as a nation entrusted with a moral and historical mission, we are meant to *live apart*, maintaining a distinct cultural experience. This idea was first voiced by Bilaam in his prophecy: “הן עם לבדד שכון”—a nation that dwells alone. Even without separate religious rituals or traditions, Jews are meant to look different, live differently, and conduct themselves in a manner that sets them apart. At this “low” level of Jewish identity, Jewish cultural distinctiveness is not about maintaining our separate *halachic* code but about preserving our unique identity and mission. Our customs and values are safeguards against assimilation and essential to fulfilling our calling—to bring moral truth and spirit into the world. We are *different* and must preserve our distinct national identity.

In Egypt, our cultural distinctiveness endured despite the crushing weight of slavery, even as our religious experience faded. Chazal make it clear that by the time we left Egypt, nearly all the theological and religious achievements of *Sefer Bereishit* had eroded. The Midrash describes the *Malachim* questioning why we were granted safe passage through the sea while the Egyptians drowned, arguing that both nations were steeped in paganism. A similar picture emerges from Yechezkel, perek 20, where Hashem calls

upon us to abandon our idolatrous ways as a prerequisite for redemption. Tragically, we resisted, nearly jeopardizing the *geulah*.

In response to the claims of the incredulous angels at the *Yam Suf*, the Midrash asserts that despite our religious shortcomings in Egypt, we did not compromise our Jewish language, names, or dress. Even as our faith faltered, our distinct cultural identity remained intact. This cultural distinctiveness became the foundation for Jewish identity, a platform to enable a full spiritual rejuvenation at Har Sinai. Evidently, cultural distinctiveness—even when not rooted in active religious commitment—holds intrinsic value. It preserves the framework within which a spiritual revival can occur.

Throughout history, and especially over the past two centuries, as traditional religious commitment waned among many Jews, cultural distinctiveness remained a means of preserving national identity. In many circles, particularly where religious commitment diminished, great emphasis was placed on cultivating an internal, distinct culture to preserve Jewish uniqueness.

The flourishing of Yiddish literature and theater in the 19th and early 20th century, for example, was not driven by a belief in Yiddish as a sacred language but rather as the language of a distinct and enduring people.

At this second level of Jewish identity, being a Jew means living differently, even when those differences do not manifest as halachic codes.

### LAYER THREE – WE ARE A FAMILY

The third layer of autonomous Jewish identity, even in the absence of Torah and mitzvot, is the belief that we are not just a nation—we are a family. Our national history began in



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*Bereishit* as a family, and that foundational identity remained intact even as we evolved into a nation on the night of Pesach.

This is why the *Korban Pesach* was designed as a family offering: שֶׁ לְבֵית אָבוֹת שֶׁ לְבֵית. The short time frame for eating the *Korban Pesach* ensured that *families* would gather to finish the meat before dawn (or midnight, based upon a Rabbinic *gezeirah*). Similarly, the *issur* against taking the meat outside the home emphasized that the offering was meant to unite the entire family in the *Korban*.

On the night we were born as a *nation*, we experienced redemption as a *family*.

A family bond is more than just unity—it demands deep care, responsibility, and commitment. A nation is tied by shared interests, but a family calls for devotion and sacrifice. When discussing the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* the Rambam writes (*Hilchot Matnot Aniyyim* 10:2): “All of Israel, and those who join them, are like brothers... And if a brother does not have mercy on his brother, who will have mercy on him?” Our connection to other Jews is not just legal or national—it is familial, urging us to extend compassion and support beyond mere duty.

Jewish identity has always been anchored in a shared sense of family. Even when dispersed across the world, we maintained a bond that defied geography. When we lost our Land, sovereignty, and military strength, our familial identity sustained us, forging an unbroken connection across distant lands. Having returned to Israel, our family experience has only been amplified: we are eager to help one another, open our homes, and engage in meaningful conversations with average Israelis who we hardly know, yet

feel deeply connected to.

#### LAYER FOUR - LAND, DESTINY AND PROPHECY

The next and fourth layer of Jewish identity is the belief in a historical destiny of the Jewish people known as redemption. Our redemptive destiny is inseparably tied to the Land of Israel. Finally, this national destiny is foretold in the Torah. Said otherwise: this layer of Jewish identity believes deeply in Jewish destiny in the Land of Israel as foretold by prophecy.

Belief in redemptive destiny in Israel is outlined in the *tochacha* of *Bechukotai* when the Torah describes our redemption from exile: Hashem will remember the *brit Avot* and redeem those whose lives still embody that covenant.

וּזְכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת אֶת בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶת אֶת בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֲזַכֹּר וְהָאָרֶץ אֲזַכֹּר

But what about Jews for whom the covenant of the *Avot* is no longer compelling? The Torah designates a separate covenant:

וְהָאָרֶץ אֲזַכֹּר

A *separate* covenant regarding the Land, people, and historical destiny is established. This *brit ha'aretz* is predicated upon the fourth layer of Jewish identity

Millions of Jews, primarily in Israel but not exclusively, live out this *brit* of redemptive destiny. It infuses their and our dreams of a

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rebuilt Yerushalayim and Mikdash. It resonates within the soul of modern Israeli music which taps into Jewish heritage and years for Jewish destiny. And, of course, it is evident in the unwavering willingness of so many to go to war and sacrifice for the larger “story” of our people.

These types of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel are often referred to as *traditional* or *masorati* Jews. I prefer to call them *Biblical* Jews because they believe in the prophecies of the Torah: both about the Land of Israel being promised to our people, and about our final redemption in that Land. Unfortunately, the mitzvot of the Torah don’t resonate but the prophecies do.

#### LAYER FIVE - DIVINE AUTHORITY

The fifth and final element of a partial Jewish identity, even without full halachic commitment, is the acknowledgement of Divine authority or *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*.

The first verse recited in the *Malchuyot* section of Rosh Hashanah Mussaf is the four-word declaration: ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד—a proclamation of Hashem’s eternal sovereignty. Weeks before declaring *Na’aseh v’nishma*, we already affirmed His supreme authority and submitted to His rule. Ideally, *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* translates into a life of 613 mitzvot. Yet even those who cannot or will not fully embrace the Torah’s system may still uphold *malchut shamayim*.

The only person in Tanach explicitly referred to as a *Yehudi*—the origin of the term “Jew”—is Mordechai. Since he was not from *shevet Yehuda*, his designation as a *Yehudi* is not genealogical but ideological. The Midrash explains that *Yehudi* signifies someone who acknowledges Hashem and rejects all other gods. By refusing to bow to

Haman, Mordechai reaffirmed his belief in Hashem’s authority, even amid the carnivals of Shushan. For this reason, he is the first and only person in Tanach to bear the title *Yehudi*—the essence of Jewish identity.

Many not-fully-observant Jews not only embrace the redemptive destiny of Israel but also accept Heavenly authority. They recite Shema, lay *tefillin*, say *Tehillim*, observe basic kashrut, and uphold a skeletal form of Shabbat along with other fragments of mitzvot. Though they may not display full halachic fidelity, their religious experience is anchored in *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*—a recognition of Hashem’s rule.

These are the five sub-components of Jewish identity that retain ‘partial validity’ even without full Torah and mitzvot observance. The ideal is to integrate these five values with Torah and mitzvot which is the supreme value and the highest expression of Jewish identity. Not only should these five components of Jewish identity be combined with Torah and mitzvot, but they should be experienced through the lens of Torah and mitzvot.

However, loving fellow Jews means acknowledging whatever level of Jewish identity they are able to maintain, even if it is still lacking full Torah and mitzvot observance.

Pesach is not only זמן חרותנו, but also a *chag* to reflect on Jewish identity in a world that still remains religiously lacking and incomplete. ■



Rabbi Taragin’s newest sefer entitled “To Be Holy but Human: Reflections upon my Rebbe, Rav Yehuda Amital (Kodesh)” is now available at: [mtaraginbooks.com](http://mtaraginbooks.com) and in bookstores