Also by Harold Kushner

Who Needs God
When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough
When Bad Things Happen to Good People
When Children Ask About God
Commanded to Live

TO LIFE!

A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking

Harold S. Kushner

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1

Life Is the Question, Judaism Is the Answer

THIS IS a book about Judaism, a four-thousand-year-old tradition with ideas about what it means to be human and how to make the world a holy place. Judaism goes back beyond Buddha, beyond Confucius. Its notions of God and life were the sources of Christianity and Islam. Yet despite its age, perhaps because essential human nature hasn't changed that much over the centuries, because issues of life and death, parents and children, human hopes and human failures remain constant over the generations even as the surrounding landscape changes, the ideas of Judaism are important to us today. Anyone who takes his or her destiny as a human being seriously has to be acquainted with these ideas.

This is a book about the Jewish people. From the visions of the biblical prophets and the poetry of the

Psalms to the theories of Einstein and Freud, from the custom of measuring time in weeks to the polio vaccine and a dozen other major medical discoveries, this tiny sliver of the human race has influenced our world (and inspired more irrational fear and hatred) than any group its size.

But mostly, this is a book about life, how to understand what it means to be authentically human and how to respond to that challenge. The question to which it addresses itself is not "How [or why] should I be Jewish?" but "How can I be truly human?" Judaism is not the problem. Life is the problem, and Judaism is the answer. It can teach you how to find the hidden rewards of holiness in the world, and how to cope with its uncertainties and disappointments. A prominent literary critic once said, "Being Jewish is the easiest way to be a human being."

That is what this book is about. Who are you, the reader, and who am I, the author? You may be a Jew whose Jewish education was largely confined to the years of your childhood. There were so many things your teachers wanted to tell you then but could not, partly because we had so little time and partly because even if you could have asked the serious questions back then, you probably weren't ready to hear the answers. Though there is much in Jewish life that children can enjoy and be thrilled by, and

though children can read and respond to biblical tales, the real stuff of Judaism is a system of great power and subtlety. It is meant to be confronted by adults, not children. Becoming Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen was meant to begin, not to conclude, the process of learning what it means to be a Jew. For you, then, this book will tell you all the things you never learned in Hebrew School. It will continue the conversation that was abandoned years ago, but this time on an adult level.

You may have come away from your childhood exposure to Jewish learning with the impression that Judaism was a collection of irrelevant customs and unconnected prohibitions stemming from its origins in ancient times. You may have gotten the impression from the popular culture — from movies and television programs — that Jewish religion was something old-fashioned and ill suited to the modern world, a subject of humor or a source of conflict between parents and children, between boyfriend and girlfriend. You may be a Jewish woman who grew up in an age when people believed girls didn't need to learn about Judaism. You may have seen your brothers going to Hebrew School and becoming Bar Mitzvah and felt yourself excluded from the whole enterprise. You may be a self-proclaimed secular Jew, a bearer of a Jewish name and sense of Jewish identity, aware that your name and identity

may make you a target of antisemites, too proud to give up your Jewishness for that reason yet unconvinced that the label stands for anything you could take seriously. Or perhaps you have just come to a point in your life when you find yourself musing that "there must be more to life than this." Wherever you may be coming from, I will try to show you the relevance, the coherence, and the importance of those fragments of Judaism you have picked up along the way, how they fit together to make sense and speak to us today. But more than that, I will try to go beyond making sense and show you how these customs open the door to passion, to holiness, to a deepening of life's joys and a fearless confrontation with its sorrows. I will try to help you understand, as you may never have understood, why your ancestors considered these ideas worth living by and worth dying for.

Some years ago, my wife and I were vacationing in Nepal in the shadow of the Himalayas. There our group was joined by a young Jewish man named Bill, who had just completed a six-month stay at a Buddhist monastery. Bill was a soul questing for spiritual meaning. I asked him what he was looking for in Nepal that he had never been able to find in Judaism, and he recited the familiar complaints about the superficiality of his home and Hebrew School upbringing. (My wife's comment was that if Bill had

been born a Buddhist, at age thirty-five he might have entered a yeshiva.)

I spent a lot of time talking to Bill on that trip, trying to show him how he could find in Judaism the spiritual depth and seriousness he had been looking for around the world, without having to uproot his soul from its Jewish origins. I ran into Bill recently when I was lecturing in the city where he lives. He told me that he is active in the local Jewish federation, that he volunteers at a nursing home, and that he is continuing to study Judaism. If you are at all like Bill, I hope this book will do for you what our conversations did for him.

You may be a person of whatever religious affiliation or no formal affiliation at all, who wants to know more about Jews and Judaism. You may want to understand more deeply the religious background of the conflict in the Middle East. You may have Jewish friends and co-workers who invite you to share their holidays and family celebrations. Increasingly in the late twentieth century, you may have a Jewish daughter-in-law and Jewish grandchildren, and you may feel the need to know more about their tradition.

Or you, the reader, may be a committed Christian who has come to realize that you cannot fully understand your own faith without understanding the Jewish roots from which it grew. You may know that

Jesus was born and lived as an observant Jew, that all the apostles and most of his early followers were Jews, that the Christmas story can only be understood against the background of an oppressed Jewish people longing for the promised Messiah of the House of David, and that the account of the Crucifixion is a retelling of the original Passover story. As one professor of theology puts it, "He who knows only one religion doesn't really know any." Moreover, at a time when the forces of paganism and secularism are so prominent in American life, you may have come to realize that Jews and Christians need to see beyond their differences, significant though they may be, and rediscover the heritage we have in common. Though I myself am a committed Jew and not a Christian, one of my purposes in writing this book is to enrich your Christian commitment, not to challenge it.

I have written this book for the person who grew up Jewish but never learned what it was about, and for the person who never grew up with a Jewish identity but now has a serious interest in Judaism. I have written it to convey to you both the clarity and the passion of Jewish life.

And who am I? In addition to being somebody's husband and somebody's father, in addition to being a fan of folk music and the Boston Red Sox, I have been a rabbi for more than thirty years, most of them in a suburban community west of Boston. As a rabbi,

I have taught my congregants about the Jewish tradition and called on its wisdom and spiritual resources to help them in their time of need, whether the need was bereavement, unemployment, divorce, or problems with growing children. Then, at age forty-six, having written a book I felt compelled to write about how we coped with a family tragedy, I unexpectedly found myself an author with a national audience for what I had been teaching my suburban congregation, connecting the traditional wisdom of Judaism to the quests and concerns of modern men and women.

I have written three books in that vein. This is the fourth. It is a very personal book, Judaism as I have come to understand it, live it, and teach it. Another rabbi would have written a different book, emphasizing different things, explaining some things differently, and including things I may have left out. (I hope this is not the only Jewish book you will ever read.)

This leads me to what I would call Rule One: Any time we ask a question "What does Judaism say about . . . ?," the only correct answer will always begin: "Some Jews believe as follows, and other Jews believe something different." The reason for this is not just that we are a highly individualistic, independent-minded people. The main reason is that we have never found it necessary to spell out exactly what we are

supposed to believe. With no precise definition of what Judaism believes, you would expect the result to be chaos and anarchy, but it's not, because Jewish identity is not centered in belief. It is centered in community and history. We can tolerate great diversity of theological opinion, in part because nobody can be completely sure he or she is right about the nature of God, heaven and hell, and other theological matters, but mostly because Jews have something that binds us together beyond, and more effectively than, common belief.

One of the most important differences between Judaism and Christianity is that we were a people before we had a religion. Christianity begins with an idea — the incarnation of God in Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as a way of redeeming man from sin. If a person believes that idea, he is a Christian. If he doesn't share that belief, however liberally or metaphorically he may understand it, one might question whether he is in fact a Christian. Ultimately, Christians form communities, but the faith-commitment is always primary. That is what they have in common. That is what makes them Christians.

But Judaism begins not with an idea but with a community, the great-great-grandchildren of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, going through the experience of Egyptian slavery and miraculous liberation from

slavery. Out of that shared experience and the subsequent encounter with God at Mount Sinai, we shaped a religion — holy days and rituals to celebrate the formative events of our history, prayers and Scriptures to spell out how we understand our relationship to God. But throughout it all, it is the participation in the community that defines us as Jews; the creeds and rituals are secondary.

I remember the first day of a course in rabbinical school called Philosophies of Religion. The professor, Mordecai Kaplan, asked us all to write down the names of the ten greatest Jews of the twentieth century. We listed Einstein, Freud, Theodore Herzl, and other scientists, statesmen, and writers. When we were done, he said, "Now, next to each name, list the synagogue he attended each week." The point was that virtually none of them was a regular synagogue-goer. Yet they were all clearly Jewish. They thought of themselves as Jewish, the world saw them as Jewish, rabbinical students considered them the greatest Jews of the century. But they were not Jewish by virtue of their religious observance. They were Jewish through their devotion to the Jewish people and community.

The implications of this difference in emphasis between Jews and Christians are major. For one thing, it means that you are born a Jew in a way that you cannot be born a Christian. The child of Christian

parents is born a pagan and must be baptized in order to become a Christian. In some traditions, that choice can be made only when the child becomes an adult. But the child of a Jewish mother is automatically a Jew because he or she is part of that historical community. He does not have to become Jewish through a ceremony any more than he needs a ceremony to make him the child of his parents.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the ultimate punishment, the worst thing the Church can do to a person, is excommunication, cutting him off from communion, breaking his church-mediated relationship to God. Judaism, too, has a form of excommunication (though it hasn't been used seriously since the days of Spinoza in the seventeenth century). But in Judaism, excommunication does not cut you off from God. It separates you not from communion but from community. The reprobate Jew who has been excommunicated can pray to God every morning and every evening if he wishes, but none of his Jewish neighbors will talk to him, buy from him, or sell to him. (In the modern world, this is all hypothetical. Whenever I have heard of an attempted excommunication, it was by some fringe group and not taken seriously by anyone else.) The excommunicated Jew can pray to God alone, at home or elsewhere, but if he comes to synagogue, he will not be counted toward the *minyan*, the quorum of ten required to

conduct a public service. If the essence of religious identity is not your beliefs about God but your membership in a God-seeking community, then the ultimate heresy is not to deny the existence or attributes of God but to deny your obligations to the people around you, and the most severe punishment is not to cut you off from God (can any human being do that to another?), but to cut you off from the surrounding community. (Is it only because I am Jewish that I find that a more dreadful prospect?)

These are the reasons why Judaism can tolerate so much diversity of belief. If I may stretch a metaphor, being Jewish is like being part of a family, while being a Christian is more like belonging to an organization that exists for a specific purpose. In such a group, people who are strangers to each other are brought together by their shared beliefs and goals, and that sharing of belief is what they have in common. When you find you no longer share the beliefs of the other members of the organization, and you can't convince them to see things your way, you consider leaving to join, or even form, another organization for people who see things the way you do. But in a family, there may be people with whom you have very little in common — you may be a political liberal and your uncle a staunch conservative; you enjoy Mozart and Vivaldi while your cousin is into heavy metal — but you feel bound to them by family ties. You may not

like each other, you may not agree with each other, but you know that you belong to each other.

(Though it may seem surprising to those who have grown up in an American-European culture shaped by Christianity, most world religions grew out of a community, a people, rather than an idea. No other world religion, except perhaps some strands of Buddhism, places the emphasis on belief and theology that Christianity does.)

This difference in emphasis may help us understand the phenomenon of Jews who feel very strongly and proudly Jewish but have never thought seriously about what they believe about God and may go for months at a time without uttering a prayer or performing a religious ritual. It may shed light on the readiness of American Jews not only to respond generously to American charitable causes, but to work on behalf of Jews in foreign lands whom they don't know and will probably never meet. Judaism is less about believing and more about belonging. It is less about what we owe God and more about what we owe each other, because we believe God cares more about how we treat each other than He does about our theology.

The story is told of Dr. Chaim Weizmann, the chemist who became the first president of modern Israel, at a time when he was lobbying British politicians to win

their support for the Zionist effort to gain a Jewish homeland. One member of the House of Lords said to him, "Why do you Jews insist on Palestine when there are so many undeveloped countries you could settle in more conveniently?" Weizmann answered, "That is like my asking you why you drove twenty miles to visit your mother last Sunday when there are so many old ladies living on your street."

We love Israel not because it is perfect, but because it is ours. We love our parents not because they are better parents than anyone else has, but because they are *our* parents. They gave us life and nurtured us. And we love Judaism not because we have examined its theological postulates and found them compelling and valid, but because it is ours. It is the community through which we learn how to be human and how to share life with the people around us.

But if Judaism is about belonging, about learning to be part of a community, it is not only about that. It is about being part of a very special community, a community made special by its relationship to God. And it is to the story of that relationship that we now turn.