

# Yom Kippur Debate 5780

## Resource Pack



**tribe**

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## Welcome to the Yom Kippur Debate 5780!

Now an established community-wide programme, this is a crucial opportunity to capture the imagination of the many youth and students who fill our shuls on Yom Kippur so that we can discuss contemporary issues within the framework of our Jewish community.

This year, we have selected a topic which is at the very heart of our own community and its future.

### **The motion is: This House believes that our Jewish community is failing the next generation.**

We know that on one hand the community feels increasingly vibrant with creative programmes and engaging leaders. Yet, on the other hand statistics show a declining trend in membership and participation.

Is it the case that we are missing something in making Judaism relevant enough for the next generation? Or, will disconnected Jews make their own choices no matter what. Where is our Jewish community heading? Who is control?

The key theme of the High Holydays is teshuvah. Commonly translated as 'repentance', teshuvah literally means 'return'. The Yom Kippur Debate provides a forum in which we can return to a reflective space at the start of the year and spend time considering ideas that will help to guide us in the coming months.

Tremendous thanks to Rabbi Gideon Sylvester, the United Synagogue Israel Rabbi, for his expertise in writing this resource pack; to Oliver Anisfeld of JTV and his team for producing the promo clip; and to Rabbi Michael Laitner, David Collins and Tamara Jacobson for reviewing the debate content. I also want to acknowledge David Turner, the President of South Hampstead Synagogue and the young people of the South Hampstead community for helping to initiate the Yom Kippur debate project several years ago.

I hope you have stimulating conversations, an engaging communal experience and a meaningful Yom Kippur.

*Shana Tova!*

*Rabbi Eli Levin*

Tribe Rabbi



Small numbers in the text like this<sup>1</sup> refer to footnotes.

Small letters in the text like this <sup>A</sup> refer to the Torah sources which are listed at the end of this booklet.

# This house believes that our Jewish community is failing the next generation.

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## Introduction to the Topic

Imagine British Jewry at full tilt with every Jew engaged in the community, excited by their religion and captivated by our extraordinary history, Zionism and the State of Israel. Despite the increasing aliya rates, we would still be astonished at the community's growth. We would need to keep expanding our shuls, schools and youth movements.

Indeed, we would have to start building new ones to keep up with demand. More young people would go on gap years to Israel, so the level of Jewish literacy would rise and with more people keeping kosher, the range of kosher shops and restaurants would spike. Our charities and welfare organisations would



be boosted by a massive growth in donations of time and money as British Jews became more committed to supporting the community.

It's a fabulous vision and it's one to which we should always aspire. What would it take to get there? Perhaps the first condition is that our community would need to intensify its love, not only of Jewish culture, but also of God and Judaism. This is because it is our religion above all which creates a sense of obligation to our traditions and to our communities. The Shema teaches us to love God. "You shall love the Lord your God with

all your heart and with all your soul and with everything you have”<sup>A</sup>. In an exquisite insight into human nature, the great French commentator Rashi (1040-1105) points out that we cannot push people to be more religious. Only when a person develops their own love of God and of our religion will they create a long-lasting relationship with our faith which can withstand every possible pressure<sup>B</sup>

What does it mean to love God? Moses Maimonides, the great philosopher and codifier of Jewish law (1135-1204) was known as a great rationalist. Yet, he portrayed it in the most romantic terms, like the love of a couple who adore one another. He says that a person who truly loves God will speak about him non-stop just like a besotted lover.<sup>C</sup>

The question we will be looking at today is whether British Jewry is succeeding in inspiring the next generation to have that strong connection to G-d, our faith and our communities. Have we succeeded in instilling that love of God and Torah?

And if not, is that the communities’ fault or does the blame lie with the individuals who opt out of the many opportunities provided to learn more about our heritage and practice our beliefs?



## Notes for the Debate Moderator

Did you look around shul this morning? It's inspiring to see just how many Jews come to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It creates a wonderful sense of community for us all. But, how many of us rushed to arrive at the beginning of the service? How many were deeply engrossed in the prayers? How many could even explain the sequence, meaning and relevance of those prayers to one of their non-Jewish friends?

The weakened religious identity of our communities is reflected in terrifying statistics of assimilation. While in the more observant-Orthodoxy, we see expanding Jewish communities which are better educated and more engaged, some centrist-Orthodox communities are shrinking at an alarming rate. More people intermarry and fewer people join shuls than a generation ago.<sup>1</sup>

Today's debate looks at the causes of the decline and asks who should bear the blame? Are we letting our fellow Jews down or do they only have themselves to blame?

Hopefully, our debate will go beyond finger pointing. We will look at some examples of good practice from other countries which may help us to identify our communities' problems and how we can begin to find solutions to our difficulties.

In this sense, our discussion is very relevant for Yom Kippur. For today is our annual day of religious introspection. We spend the day weighing up our actions over the year, repenting for what we have done wrong and thinking about how we can improve in the coming year. If this is true for the individual, it is every bit as important on a communal and national level. If we have not entirely fulfilled our responsibilities to the next generation, then we must think about our failures and how we can improve in the coming year.<sup>D</sup>

Put this way, the deep discussion that we are about to enter is not a distraction from our Yom Kippur services, but central to the challenge of the day. That said, we must be careful to ensure that our discussion remains in the positive spirit of the day.

<sup>1</sup> For the latest statistics see the Institute for Jewish Policy Research Report [https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR\\_2016.Jews\\_in\\_couples.Marriage\\_intermarriage\\_cohabitation\\_and\\_divorce\\_in\\_Britain.July\\_2016.pdf](https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR_2016.Jews_in_couples.Marriage_intermarriage_cohabitation_and_divorce_in_Britain.July_2016.pdf)

For a summary of the report in the Guardian see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/05/quarter-married-or-cohabiting-uk-jews-non-jewish-partner>

Note also that some of the statistics for intermarriage may be lower than we expect because they count as Jewish people who have undergone conversions which do not meet the requirements of halacha.

## Proposers of the Motion

**Our team propose the motion that: This House believes that our Jewish community is failing the next generation.**

- Our argument falls into two categories:
  1. We are failing to present the next generation with a compelling vision of a Jewish future.
  2. We are failing to give them the tools to build that vision.
- Rabbi Shlomo Riskin was one of America's most successful Rabbis. He created one of New York's most popular and dynamic communities. But to everyone's surprise, he left this incredibly successful enterprise and made aliya to Israel. When asked why he did this, he said that he wanted to deal with bigger, moral questions of the mission of the Jewish people in the world and how it can be fulfilled. In New York, he generally dealt with issues relating to kashrut and other details of religious practice. Rabbi Riskin felt that Judaism needed to be about vision as well as about details and that this focus would be more tangible for him in Israel.
- Our religion is founded on big questions. The Shema opens with a mission statement for the Jewish people. "Listen Israel, the Lord is our God the Lord is one".<sup>E</sup> Rashi explains this means that currently only part of the world accepts God and the ethical lifestyle he demands ("The Lord is our G-d" - but not currently the G-d of other people). Our job is to become a model nation that will persuade the whole world to embrace ethical monotheism, so that everyone will understand the importance of serving God and living caring, compassionate lives ("The Lord is one" - accepted by everyone). Ultimately, we aim for an era called Messianic times in which we live out these values to the fullest.<sup>F</sup>
- Sadly, while some communities offer this exciting vision, too many rely on trying to find titbits of Judaism with which they hope to show that their religion is cool.
- On a practical level, our Rabbis, Rebbetzins and leaders should be

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Caroline Scharfer, "Sarah Schenirer Founder of the Beit-Yaakov Movement: Her Vision and Her Legacy." In Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, Volume 23, Jews in Krakow, edited by Michal Galas and Antony Polonsky, 2011, p. 271

aware of just how bored some young people are by aspects of their religion such as some of the prayer services that we offer them. Surely, this should prompt them to make the changes necessary to make our services more accessible and meaningful. Here's an example of one woman who achieved just that.

- When this woman went to shul, at this time of year, a depressing scene unfolded in front of her:

We have an empty festival. It is bare of Jewish intellectual content. The women have never learned anything about the spiritual meaning that is concentrated within a Jewish festival. The mother goes to the synagogue, but the services echo faintly into the fenced and boarded-off women's galleries. There is much crying by elderly women. The young girls look at them as though they belong to a different century . . . Outside the synagogues, the young girls stay chattering; they walk away from the synagogue . . . They leave behind them the wailing of the older generation and follow the urge for freedom and self-expression. Further and further from the synagogue they go, further away, to the dancing, tempting light of a fleeting joy.<sup>2</sup>

She thought deeply about the disaffected Jewish women and why they felt so disconnected from the service. She realised that while many of them were achieving advanced secular education, but most had insufficient knowledge of their faith. They desperately needed an intellectually robust and spiritual meaningful Jewish education.

What made her special was that she did not just analyse the problem. She set about solving it. After consulting with leading rabbis, she established a small kindergarten in sewing studio where she worked. Within five years, she had established 7 schools. By 1935, when she died at the age of 51, she headed a movement of 265 schools across Poland with an enrollment of 38,000 students.

That woman was Sara Schenirer. Her shul was in Cracow and she became one of the great pioneers of advanced Jewish education for Jewish women. Sara Schenirer's story illustrates the genius of a heroic woman who identified a



Sara Schenirer

problem, analysed it, found a solution and acted upon it. What she achieved for the women of her time, we must do for every Jewish man, woman and child who feels disconnected from tradition.

- British Jewry can be proud of our many wonderful schools, youth movements, shuls and adult education programmes. However, we must judge, not just by the effort put in by heroic Jewish leaders and educators, but by the results they deliver.
- We must judge, not just by whether we manage to fill a room or a Shul or an overflow service, but by what proportion of our community are excited by their faith. What proportion of our community comes regularly to Shul and learning activities? What proportion of our community is committed to marrying a Jew and raising children who proudly and proficiently practice their faith?
- Yom Kippur is our day of introspection. It is the day on which we weigh up our successes and atone for our failures. It is true, that people do bare personal responsibility for their own actions. But Judaism is also unequivocal that the leaders of a generation are responsible for its failings.<sup>3</sup> If the next generation is not inspired by the Judaism we present them with, then this is a sign of our failure. We must take responsibility.
- We have mentioned the outreach work of Sara Schenirer and Rabbi Riskin. Another great proponent of reconnecting Jews with their faith was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994). He created a mass movement with branches in every major city to warmly welcome Jews, offer them kosher food and encourage them to explore their faith. Former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks has suggested that ironically, one inspiration for this was the Nazis who hunted down every Jew in the world in order to kill them. The Lubavitcher Rebbe said if they cared about every Jew, we must care about every Jew even more. We will look out for every Jew to embrace them, love them unconditionally and rekindle their interest in their faith. This is our responsibility.<sup>4</sup>
- The United Synagogue is a wondrous institution that provides an Orthodox umbrella for every Jew. We are achieving huge amounts, but while there remain Jews disconnected from their faith and their communities, we are failing in our duty to embrace and inspire them.



**FAILURE**

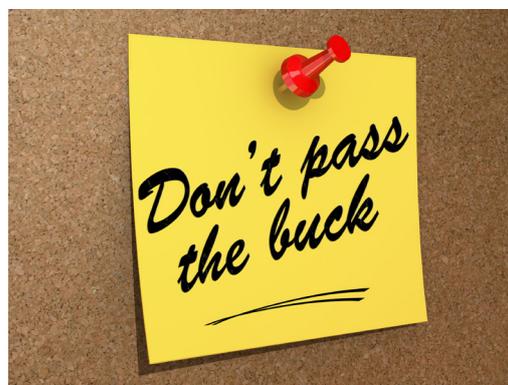
<sup>3</sup> See Bemidbar 31: 14 where Moshe becomes angry with the officers in the army for the failure of the troops to carry out instructions regarding the punishments of the Midianite women who lured the Jewish men into immorality and idolatry. Noting that Moshe's anger is focused on the officers rather than the soldiers themselves, Rashi comments, "This comes to teach you that when a generation is corrupt, its leaders are held responsible, for they have the power to protest."

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article\\_cdo/aid/395795/jewish/A-Mystical-Covenant.htm](https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/395795/jewish/A-Mystical-Covenant.htm)

## Opposers of the Motion

### Our team opposes the motion that British Jewry is failing the next generation.

- We do not dispute the crisis facing our communities, but we feel that the motion is “passing the buck” rather than taking responsibility for our actions. Furthermore, this team will argue that rather than British Jewry failing the next generation, the next generation is failing us.
- At the heart of Yom Kippur lies the idea that each of us is blessed with free will. God gives us the ability to determine our own actions and therefore, we are responsible for them. If we make mistakes, then we must recognise them, own them and repent for them. Tempting as it is to do so, we cannot pass the blame for our own lack of Jewish awareness and engagement on other people. If we are not taking advantage of the opportunities provided by our communities; the failure is ours.
- There is a famous story of a religious man who swam out a little too far from the coast, was caught by the current and found himself thrashing about in the Mediterranean Sea. As the waves crashed around him, he showed no fear. “God will save me!” he boasted. A man in a canoe came by and offered him a life jacket. “No thanks”, he said. “God will save me!” An hour later, a helicopter swooped down. The crew threw down a rope to winch him to safety, he dismissed their offer of help saying, “No thanks. God will save me!” Finally, the coast guard swam out to him, “Climb on my back” said the guard, “I will swim you to shore.” Again, the drowning man turned away the help, saying, “No thanks. God will save me!”
- Inevitably, the man drowned. His soul flew up to heaven, and standing before the heavenly throne, he complained, “I was a deeply religious man. I did everything the holy books demanded of me, so, why did you let me drown?” To which God replied, “I sent a canoe, a helicopter and a coastguard to bring you to shore. What more did you want of me?”
- Isn't this the situation of those who complain that the community is not providing for them?



- We cannot talk of lack of vision with initiatives such as the Chief Rabbi's Ben Azzai programme taking young adults to volunteer with needy communities in the developing world. We cannot talk about a lack of inspirational activity when Tribe has clubs in our schools, camps and



trips across the world during school holidays and youth directors working in our shuls. It is wrong to speak of a lack of motivation to observe mitzvot when Shabbat UK is drawing our communities into Shabbat observance. And it is impossible to speak of a lack of robust education when Tribe together with Mizrahi and Bnei Akiva runs a vibrant Beit Midrash for students.

- Chief Rabbi Hertz described the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as “the lighthouses on the shores of eternity”<sup>5</sup>. This is the time of year to recognize that unless we all invest in our own Jewish future, our Jewish identity and our communities can crash on the rocks.

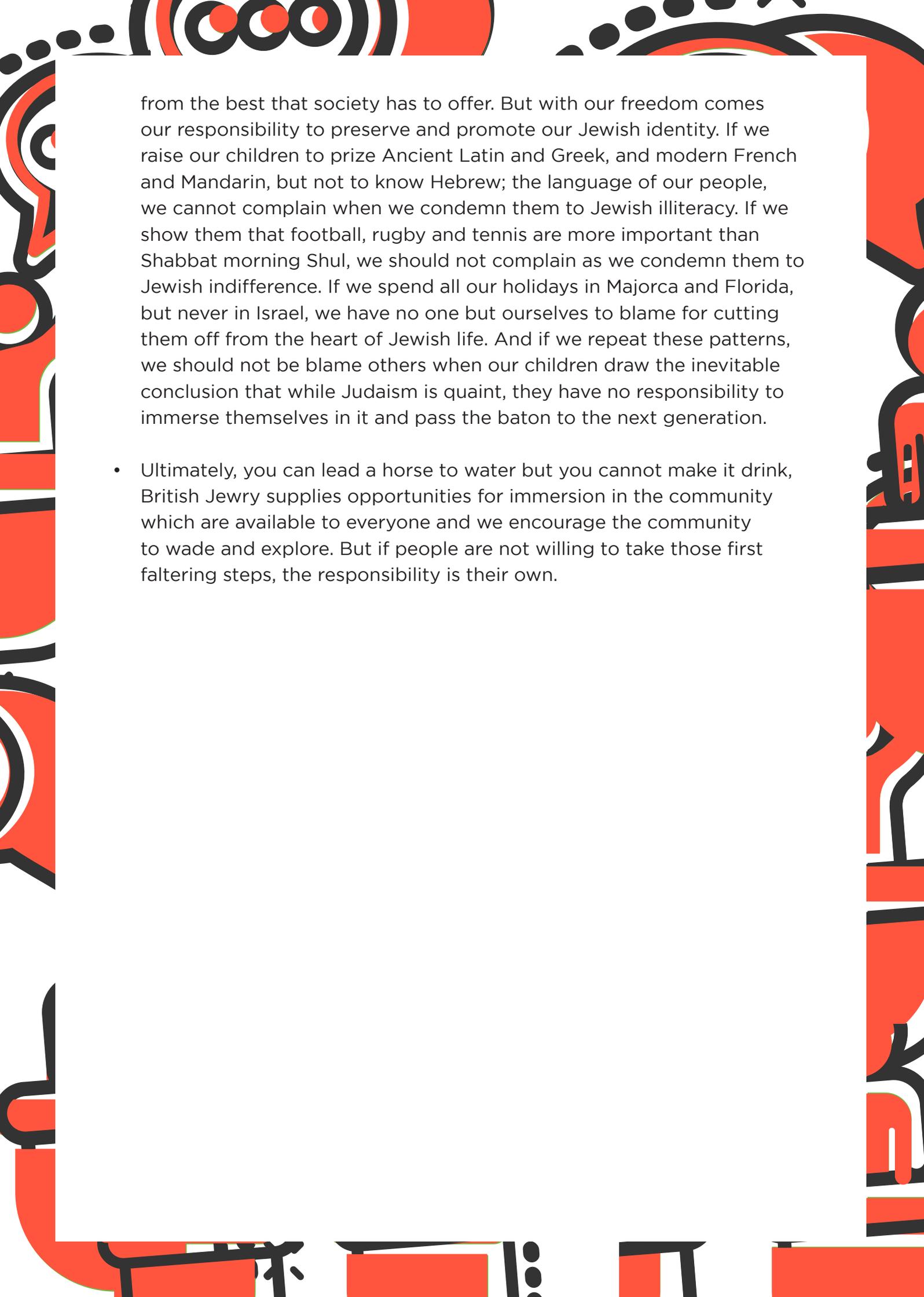
- To extend the metaphor, Viktor Frankl the famous psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz said that America is rightly proud of its Statue of Liberty which stands majestically on one coast<sup>6</sup>, but liberty is not everything. Society needs to balance its focus on liberty with emphasis on responsibility. America needs a new Statue of Responsibility on its other coast.



- All of us value the liberty and the opportunities that we have. Few of us would wish to return to ghettos or a world where we could not benefit

<sup>5</sup> Derek Taylor, Chief Rabbi Hertz: The Wars of the Lord, p.144.

<sup>6</sup> Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, pp. 209-210.



from the best that society has to offer. But with our freedom comes our responsibility to preserve and promote our Jewish identity. If we raise our children to prize Ancient Latin and Greek, and modern French and Mandarin, but not to know Hebrew; the language of our people, we cannot complain when we condemn them to Jewish illiteracy. If we show them that football, rugby and tennis are more important than Shabbat morning Shul, we should not complain as we condemn them to Jewish indifference. If we spend all our holidays in Majorca and Florida, but never in Israel, we have no one but ourselves to blame for cutting them off from the heart of Jewish life. And if we repeat these patterns, we should not be blame others when our children draw the inevitable conclusion that while Judaism is quaint, they have no responsibility to immerse themselves in it and pass the baton to the next generation.

- Ultimately, you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink, British Jewry supplies opportunities for immersion in the community which are available to everyone and we encourage the community to wade and explore. But if people are not willing to take those first faltering steps, the responsibility is their own.

## Sources

### A. The command to love G-d

The command to love G-d is found in the first paragraph of the Shema. This a passage from the Bible (Devarim 6: 4-9) which is recited by observant Jews every morning and night. The full text can be found in the Authorised Daily Prayer Book (Rabbi Sacks edition) p.68.

You shall love the Lord your God  
with all your heart and with all your  
soul and with everything you have.

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לִבְּךָ  
וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדְךָ:

### B. Rashi's commentary on the command to love G-d.

The command to love G-d is found in the first paragraph of the Shema. This a passage from the Bible (Devarim 6: 4-9) which is recited by observant Jews every morning and night. The full text can be found in the Authorised Daily Prayer Book (Rabbi Sacks edition) p.68.

**Rashi (1040-1105)** Rashi is short for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki. He was a French rabbinical scholar. His main contributions are his brilliant commentaries on the Chumash and Babylonian Talmud. These are reproduced in almost every standard edition of these books. They are the most widely studied Jewish commentaries and serve as the basis of many later commentaries.

(5) And you shall love the Lord Fulfill his commands out of love. For one who acts out of love is on a higher plane than one who acts out of fear. One who acts out of fear will end up leaving when his master overburdens him.

(ה) ואהבת" - עשה דבריו מאהבה  
אינו דומה עושה מאהבה לעושה  
מיראה. העושה אצל רבו מיראה  
כשהוא מטריח עליו מניחו והולך לו.

### C. The command to love G-d, Rambam, Sefer Hamitzvot, Positive Commandment Number 3

The great Jewish legalist and philosopher Moses Maimonides – The Rambam (1135-1204) composed the Mishneh Torah a fourteen volume compendium of Jewish Law and philosophy. The first volume is called Sefer Hamitzvot (The Book of Commandments) in which he lists each of the 613 commandments found in the Bible. In this passage, he discusses the command to love God.

The third command is the mitzvah to love the sublime God . . .

Included in the commandment is the responsibility to bring all people to believe in God and serve Him.

When you love another person, you speak of their good points and emphasise them, and you also try to bring others to love them.

The same is true when you truly love God.

When you have some idea of His true nature, you are certain to try to bring those who are unaware and ignorant to recognise this truth.

In the words of the Sifri (a Midrash on the Book of Devarim): You shall love the Lord your God - make all people love Him, just like Abraham your father did. . .

### D. Rambam, Laws of Repentance 2: 7

As part of his Mishneh Torah (see above), the Rambam included a section on the Laws of Repentance. This includes a discussion of freewill and our responsibility for our actions and how we go about repenting. Naturally, it also includes a description of repentance on Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is the time of Teshuvah for all, both individuals and the community at large. It is the apex of forgiveness and pardon for Israel. Accordingly, everyone is obligated to repent and confess on Yom Kippur . .

והמצוה השלישית היא שצונו לאהבו  
יתעלה . . .

וכבר אמרו שמצוה זו כוללת גם  
כן שנדרוש ונקרא האנשים כולם  
לעבודתו יתעלה ולהאמין בו.

וזה כי כשתאהב אדם תשים לבך עליו  
ותשבחהו ותבקש האנשים לאהוב  
אותו. וזה על צד המשל כן כשתאהב  
הא-ל באמת כמה שהגיעה לך  
מהשגת אמיתתו הנה אתה בלא ספק  
תדרוש ותקרא הכופרים והסכלים  
לידיעת האמת אשר ידעת אותה.  
ולשון סיפרי (שם) ואהבת את ה" וכו'  
אהבו על הבריות כאברהם אביך . . .

יוה"כ הוא זמן תשובה לכל ליחיד  
ולרבים והוא קץ מחילה וסליחה  
לישראל לפיכך חייבים הכל לעשות  
תשובה ולהתודות ביום הכפורים

### E. The opening line of the Shema

Listen Israel, the Lord is our G-d the Lord is one.

### F. Rashi's Commentary to the Shema

(4) The Lord who is now our God, but not the God of other peoples of the earth will in the future become the only God as it says . . . On that day the Lord will be one and his name will be one. (Zechariah XIV:9)

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה | אֶחָד:

(ד) ה' אלקינו ה' אחד" - ה' שהוא אלקינו עתה, ולא אלהי האומות, הוא עתיד להיות ה' אחד שנא' (צפניה ג:ט) כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה לקרוא כולם בשם ה' ונאמר (זכריה יד:ט) ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד.