

Chief Rabbi's Pesach Message 5770

At the very beginning of the story of the exodus as recorded in the Torah, three words appear that are mistranslated in virtually every Christian Bible. Moses has met God in the burning bush. God summons Moses to lead his people from slavery to freedom. Moses asks, when I go to the Israelites and they ask me who sent me, what shall I say? God replies: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Three simple words. What do they mean?

They are usually translated as "I am what I am", "I am who I am", "I am that I am" or "I am: that is who I am." Each of these is a mistranslation. It does not take much knowledge of Hebrew to know that the words mean, "I will be what I will be." The name of God is written in the future tense.

Why did these words prove so hard to understand? In the ancient world, and still today, people believed that nothing ultimately changes in the human condition. We are born, we grow, we live, we die, and the world stays what it was. Politicians come, politicians go, great powers rise and fall, and still the strong rule the weak, the rich exploit the poor, and might, not right, prevails.

Within such a worldview, what is God? God is eternity. God is beyond time. God does not sully his hands with the messy business of human life. Hence the translation, "I am what I am". I am pure being as it is in heaven, not earth. That is a fine and noble belief. But it is not Judaism. Had it been true, there would never have been an exodus, or freedom, or Pesach.

Ehyeh asher Ehyeh in fact means, if you seek to know who I am, look to the future, not the past. For I am about to do what has never been done before. I am going to perform signs and wonders the like of which have never been seen before. I am going to lead an entire nation from slavery to freedom. I am going to take a people others despise and make it My own. All this lies in the future. And now I want you to become part of that future.

Those three words changed history, and not for Jews alone. For they meant that the future need not be like the past. There is such a thing as change in the affairs of humankind. History is not a closed loop endlessly replaying itself. Right can win a victory over might among those who have been touched by the hand of God. In that one moment, hope was born.

Pesach is the festival of hope, and Jews are the people of hope. For we are the people who outlived every empire that sought to destroy us, survived adversities that would have defeated any other nation, that emerged from the Holocaust still affirming life, and built the land and state of Israel against unceasing opposition.

The world in the twenty-first century needs hope. The difficulties ahead, environmentally, politically, economically, are formidable. It is all too easy to fall into despair, to say nothing ever really changes, and to think of God as a remote reality in the high and distant heavens. That is not the Jewish way. The Jewish way is to have faith in the future and in the God whose name is *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*.

This Pesach, as we celebrate together with family and friends, remember that the seder service that begins with the words, "This is the bread of affliction", ends with the wine of freedom and with a children's song in which God defeats the angel of death. No force has lasted as long as, or had greater influence on humanity than, the voice of Jewish hope. It was born when God told Moses, My name is *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, meaning: I am the God you will find if you have faith that the future can be different from the past.

A *chag kasher vesameach* to you, your family, and the Jewish people, in Israel and throughout the world.


Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks

לא עליך
המלאכה
לגמר
ולא אתה
בן חורין
להבטל
ממנה

Jeremy Jacobs, Chief Executive of the US believes we have cause for optimism

The more that my understanding of the United Synagogue deepens the more it excites me.

All too often, when people think of the United Synagogue (or 'The US' as it is increasingly referred to) they are inclined to see it in one of two lights: either as a particular local shul community that one may belong to, or as the subject of (usually) unflattering headlines in the Jewish press. I firmly believe that this overlooks an extraordinary range of significant benefits that the US brings to its members and to the wider Jewish Community. Perhaps more importantly, it ignores the huge potential that the US has to develop itself and to become an even more effective force for good amongst today's generation of British Jews.

The new leadership at the helm of the US is bringing a fresh energy to the organisation. Whilst it is true that the US faces a number of major historic challenges as it seeks to re-invigorate itself, there is a strong team of motivated and effective people who are emphatically rising to meet these challenges in a considered and strategic way.

Education, welfare services, youth provision, community development, connections with Israel, support for poorer members ... all are being systematically and holistically developed to make a real, positive difference to people. Sadly the long time threat of apathy and assimilation is as big as ever. A strong United Synagogue, proudly embracing the very best values and traditions of Jewish life, has great plans to make a real difference.

We have already shown that this is no mere pipe dream with the success of the creation of our youth arm; Tribe. But this is just the beginning – there is so much still to do. Here are just a few initiatives which our members can look out for to see how the US is improving the service they receive.

Jewish Living & Learning: The Jewish people understand the value of learning, but if we cannot bring that learning to life we fall well short of our great potential. Understanding this is the key to our strategy to develop a whole range of educational initiatives over the coming years which will bring learning to life across all our communities. There are a growing number of programmes; for newly weds, fledgling Hebrew readers, children (and parents!) wanting Summer Schemes and camps, US Website browsers, the list goes on... something for all our members.

US Chesed: The *chesed* (loving kindness) that we show one another is a core value of Judaism. Since becoming Chief Executive I have seen a wonderful growth in this side of the US' work. Not only outward facing initiatives under the Project Chesed banner (everything from blood drives to mobile phone recycling) but also inward looking work embodied in the countless thousands of acts of care that our many wonderful US Community Cares volunteers are able to perform to help those in need.

Burial: Our world-leading initiative over the use of MRI scans to avoid the trauma of autopsies is already making a big difference to many bereaved families. We are also about to launch the opportunity for members in our burial scheme to be buried in Israel. For many families making aliyah this is an incredibly valuable step forward.

P'eir: Our Rabbis are a wonderful (and often undervalued) part of the US. These inspirational and learned people can offer so much to their communities. The work of P'eir is supporting our Rabbis to develop further skills that will help them to help us. For example in providing training such as the recent Mental Health First Aid course and the hugely successful P'eir Induction Programme which has provided 10 Rabbis new to the US with invaluable skills support from which we will all ultimately benefit.

The US has enormous potential to show over 100,000 Jewish people how it can make a meaningful and positive contribution to their lives. I hope that we can continue to do this as we build our exciting vision of authentic Judaism alive and well in our contemporary lives.

Best wishes for a kosher and happy Pesach!