

I am a Jew

DAVID ARNOLD

My paternal grandparents immigrated to Western Europe from Lithuania at the turn of the twentieth century to escape the combined effects of anti-Semitism and grinding poverty. My mother was born and brought up in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. She fled Germany at the end of June 1939, a refugee from Nazi persecution. She and her father were the only members of my maternal line to survive, the rest of the family are numbered among the millions of Jews murdered in the Holocaust. We live in a predominantly secular world, where religion and spiritual values are often assigned a very low priority. But, for me, my Jewish faith and family history have shaped and defined my identity. I attach great value to the traditions of democracy, freedom of speech and equality before the law. I also feel a personal responsibility to contribute to building a better understanding and harmonious relations between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish majority among whom we live.

I also think I am incredibly lucky to be Jewish. I draw inspiration from the courage and fortitude with which my mother confronted both the difficulties of her childhood and the humiliation and poverty of being a refugee. No less inspiring is the example of friends who are Holocaust survivors. They are often the sole surviving members of their families, whose homes and communities were completely destroyed. Their suffering and loss is unimaginable. They were brutalized and terrorized solely because they were born Jewish. Yet despite all this, so many of the survivors have chosen to renew and rebuild their lives firmly rooted in the Jewish faith and tradition into which they were born. This, for me, is proof of the eternal and enduring nature of their Jewish faith. The triumph of their humanity is truly inspiring.

Many of those murdered in the Holocaust were condemned in part because of the failure of so many countries, including the Western democracies, to take in Jewish refugees. So for me and most Jews living in the diaspora (i.e. Jews who live outside the borders of Israel) Israel represents a life insurance policy, a place of safety to which we can go if we feel we are once again endangered by anti-Semitism. Israel is, therefore, very important for the worldwide Jewish community. I have visited Jerusalem twice. It is at the heart and geographical centre of the Jewish world. Synagogues around the world are all built facing Jerusalem. The festival of *Hanukkah* and the fast days of *Tevet*, *Tammuz* and *Av* have their origin in the sieges of Jerusalem and the desecration of the Temple. Each time I prayed at the *Kotel* (formerly known as the 'Western Wall' or 'Wailing Wall') I sobbed uncontrollably, such was my emotion.

For me Judaism is not just a religion, but a complete and distinctive way of life. It defines my relationship with God, my relationship with other people, Jewish and non-Jewish, and my obligations as a human being. The central and defining principal of Judaism is the belief in a single God

who is responsible for the creation of the universe and everything in it. The foundation of Judaism is the Torah, also known as the Five Books of Moses. I remember as a five-year-old schoolboy going after school to *cheder* (the Jewish equivalent of Sunday school) where I was taught to read Hebrew. At school I had to attend assembly each morning for Christian prayers, while at home, at the synagogue and at *cheder* I was expected to follow Jewish religious practice and traditions. For a few years I found this mixture of Jewish and Christian teaching all very confusing, especially when one day at school I was beaten up because, according to my accuser, I had 'murdered little Lord Jesus'!

The Torah contains not only the Ten Commandments but a total of 613 laws which are obligatory. These include the obligation to study of the Torah, observation of *Shabbat* (day of rest) and the festivals and the dietary laws. The whole of the *Tanakh* (known to Christians as the Old Testament) is sacred for Jews. There is also a vast library of Jewish scholarship, upon which many Jewish practices are also based. The most important of these other sacred writings is the Talmud, which comprises both the Mishnah and the Gemara.

Every Jew is obliged to obey the law of the land, to do all they can to preserve human life (*pikuach nefesh*) and give to charity. This includes not only donations of money or goods, but acts of kindness, the promotion of education, and caring for the sick, needy, elderly.

The dietary laws are complex, precise and exacting. Only certain kinds of fish and meat are permitted. Only meat and poultry killed by the Jewish humane method of animal slaughter, known as *Shechita*, is permitted. Milk and meat foods may not be eaten together – dairy and meat foods must be cooked, prepared and served separately using different utensils, plates and pans.

On *Shabbat* Jews are obliged to refrain from all forms of work: using machines, operating mechanical or electrical equipment, cooking, handling money and travelling in a vehicle. For me, *Shabbat* is the one day of the week to which I always look forward. It is truly a day of both physical and spiritual renewal.

I am a Christian

JASON HOOD

I am twenty-seven years old and live in Memphis, Tennessee, USA. My wife Emily and I have a six-month-old boy named Noah. We are members of an Evangelical Presbyterian congregation.

I was raised as a Christian in a family that took the faith seriously. I went to a Christian private school until I was fourteen. At home I was taught to read the Bible daily. I enjoyed reading it (especially the Old Testament books of Proverbs and Psalms) and read it in its entirety before the age of thirteen. My sister and I were raised on Bible stories, right behaviour and respect for our parents and others. More than that, we were encouraged to seek God on our own. My parents held, as I do now, that beliefs must be heartfelt. A relationship with God is personal and must be freely entered into. Although instruction and example guided me in my formative years, my own public profession of faith and a personal prayer of surrender, forgiveness and acceptance seemed to demarcate the beginning of my individual life of faith. It was then, and remains today, a life I base on the fact that God is perfect, I'm not, and Jesus makes up that infinite difference.

I feel confident in my personal relationship with Jesus, who I believe to be Lord and God, and I am continually trying to bring every element of my life under God's authority. This means, with the help of God's Spirit, continually working to understand the Bible and live by its principles, bringing my desires in line with God's guidelines, which I believe are revealed in the Bible. My aim is to live a life of gratitude for the gracious love God has shown me, living in the peace and joy that comes from knowing I am loved and accepted by my maker. I've sometimes tried to live by ideas that run contrary to what I believe the Bible teaches and, frankly, have wound up hurting myself and others.

My practice of faith is not very ceremonial or ritualistic. For me faith is more about believing and practising what the Bible teaches. I believe Christianity is about a relationship with Jesus as a personal saviour, lord and friend. One of my guiding principles is Jesus' commandment to love others in the same way that he has loved us. For example, after college I spent four years teaching and mentoring inner city youths. My wife and I currently live with her parents so that she can help care for her mother, who is paralysed. These experiences have taught how difficult such love and commitment can be. Following Jesus has also helped me to respect others, learn from them and seek ways to increase their health and well-being.

Jesus' example of love has led my wife and me to tithe our earnings (sharing 10 per cent of our income every month with our church and others). That said, we understand 10 per cent to be a bench mark and seek to give more. For example, having won some money on a game show, we felt strongly that at least half of it should be donated to a relief fund. Loving others means making sure that whatever I do in life – including my occupation and all other activities – I do for God's glory and the benefit

of others, not primarily for my own gain, reputation or personal satisfaction.

Because God loves the whole world and because a person's greatest good is found in a relationship with Jesus, I feel obliged and privileged to share Jesus with believers and unbelievers (always being sensitive to the needs and rights of others).

The fact that my wife and I were both Christians was of paramount importance to us in our decision to marry and also very important to our families. Having said that, the marriage was not arranged. Our parents were not involved in the decision-making process. However, I did formally ask my wife's father for her hand in marriage. Following this we received the blessing and encouragement of both our families. My wife and I take our relationship of love to each other and to God seriously. We pray together frequently, discuss the Bible and talk honestly as partners on a shared journey, never making big decisions without first seeking God's will.

One of the most important parts of being a follower of Jesus is living in community with other Christians. I feel enormously privileged and grateful to be part of the large, global Christian family – imperfect, to be sure, but a real family nonetheless. The main gathering of our local branch is the church service on Sunday morning, which always includes thanksgiving for what God has done, prayers of petition and confession, hymns of worship, statements of belief about God and salvation and a talk/sermon on a passage from the Bible.

Sunday is a special day to us, when we celebrate a day of rest and worship. It is the Lord's Day, a day of the week that reminds us of Jesus' resurrection. Other important celebrations are Christmas, when we celebrate the event of God becoming human in the person of Jesus, and Easter, when we remember Jesus' death on a cross for sinners and his subsequent victory over death and evil in his resurrection from the dead.

Since our church is quite large, we break down into groups for social and educational purposes, meeting on Sundays and during the week. Our group consists of newly married couples and within this group there are smaller 'mentor groups' which meet for intimate conversation, prayer and Bible study. Whereas the larger groups are led by pastors, the smaller group is led by an older couple with more wisdom and experience in life than we possess. These groups and leaders are important to us. I always pray before making important decisions and seek counsel from my group leaders, pastors and peers.

Finally, the heart of my religion and religious experience can be summed up in the word 'love'. I celebrate the love God has for me and others and I love God in return. My deep desire is that my love for Jesus and his love for me and others will be evident in my life in all places and at all times.