

Va'eira 5778

BS"D Parashat Va'eira 5778

An interview with Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Stop Being Jewish!

In place of his usual article on the parashat and current events, this week Rabbi Nachman Kahana prefers to share with you this video interview about being a Jew vs. being Jewish, along with his personal aliyah story and some of his family's experiences living in Israel.

This video was published on the Or Haraayon Jewish Idea YouTube channel), you may also **view the video directly on YouTube**

Transcript

An interview with Rabbi Nachman Kahana (on April 30, 2017)

I was coming out from my house in the Jewish quarter in the Old City and I saw a group of Americans, middle-aged people, and I usually go over and speak to them, which is a very pleasant thing to do. And this group, I asked them "where do you come from?"

They said, "*we come from Texas.*"

"Oh, we have something in common."

"What is that?"

"We both have one star on our flag."

They were very impressed that an Israeli knew that Texas is the Lone Star State.

Then one woman says to me, asks me, *"are you Jewish?"*

I said to her, "I'm not Jewish". And they are very surprised, I'm not Jewish?

I said, "let me explain it to you. Let's say you have something that's the color red, but it's not really red, but it tends to be red, what do we call it? Reddish. Yellow, not really yellow, but it tends to be yellow, you call it yellowish. I'm not *Jewish*, I'm a Jew. There's a difference. In Israel, you're a Jew – outside you're *Jewish*. And that makes the whole difference."

It depends what you want to be, how much do you want to be a Jew? Or do you want to be *Jewish*? The choice is in your hand to be the historical person that has a continuation from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and giving us devar Torah on Mount Sinai, and coming into the Land of Israel. And to all the time, the thousands of years we are here, and of the Temple and the grandly high priest, and all Jewish history. You want to be part of that? Then you have to be a Jew, not to be *Jewish*. If you'll be *Jewish* you're going to go the way of the world, more things. Judaism is like a big river, like the Mississippi, a big river nobody can stop. If you're in the middle of the river, you continue on. If you're on the side of it, you just got sidetracked and you dry up. And that happened to many people in the galut, many, many people, I know how the numbers are – many people went away of assimilation, many Jews were killed.

Let me give an example, let's say you have a pile, a huge pile of metal shavings and wood and some sawdust – a huge pile,

big, and you have been asked to take out the metal shavings from the wood. You could sit your whole life long and never finish. So, there are three ways that you can do it:

- One way is to blow a big, big wind that takes away the lighter pieces of wood and leaves the metal shavings.
- Or you can burn it, the wood burns and just the metal is left.
- Or a magnet.

When it comes the Jewish people, there are three ways that God is able to distinguish between the the authentic Jew and between those who are just hanging on:

- One is fly the wind, the wind is assimilation – go out.
- The other way is unfortunately fire, which you know what that means
- The other is the magnet, the magnet is that you feel an attraction to the Holy Land when you are an authentic Jew. And this is the test that we have in every generation, not just this generation.

In the United States according to what I understand, which I read, any number of Jews that you say that there are 5 million, 6 million, half of them are non-halachic Jews. Either they became Jews through reform conversion, or the reform and conservative recognize the patriarchal lineage – *“if your father is Jewish then you’re Jewish”* – but that’s not halachic Jew. So, any number you say in America, half of them are not Jewish. After that 70% of intermarriage of those who are Jewish, what are they left with in America? The Jewish people are going down, going down, there’s no question now the future of Judaism, of historical and religious Judaism, is in the original land of Israel.

It took us many years to come back here, 2,000 years, and along this time there’s this *replacement theology* of Christianity as they replace the Jewish people as God’s chosen

people. In other words, there was a recognition that we were God's chosen people, but now take a look at our situation in the world and obviously God's replacing Jews with Christianity. Then the Muslims came, and they say we replaced both of you. And then came the Shoah which gave credence to all these claims that we are not, no longer, God's chosen people. And all of a sudden three years later, after Auschwitz, came the Jewish state! How did that come about? It was the Hand of God. Six hundred thousand people, before next day of declaring the state, were invaded by seven standing armies. We had no planes, we had no tanks, there was no way that we could survive here, and we won the war! We extended the area that was given to us.

Then came the miracle of the Six Day War, which if we could add chapters to the Bible this would certainly override many of the miracles which are stated today in the Bible, the whole Bible. The Six Day War was something else. In fact, if we are going a little bit to speak about it, that we brought down the Soviet Union. Because the Israelis when we fought the Arabs, we were fighting against Russian equipment and Russian advisors, and we destroyed them. We showed that Russian equipment cannot stand up to Western equipment, and that brought down the Soviet Union in such a way.

But to go back to our thing, I think that there are many rabbis in Israel, I don't know exactly why you chose me, maybe because I'm here fifty-five years and that makes a statement. And all of our children were born here, our children are produced in Israel for domestic use not to export. And all of our grandchildren here, and all of our great grandchildren here, and we are part and parcel of this great adventure for the State of Israel. See, but the problem is you can't explain something which is round to someone who is blind, there's no way. To explain to you what it means to live in Israel, is something which if you're not here you can't understand it. The total being of a Jew, we have to walk in the street and

just scream out “Shema Yisrael”, and you wouldn’t even look strange. Walk with tefillin in the street, you put this on at home [because in galut], nobody’s your brother.

I recall once I was in the United States and I had to ask somebody a question, directions, people run away from me. Here standing on a bus, you can start talking to anybody, brothers and sisters here, it’s something else. Of course, we have Israel, it’s not on a silver plate. Tomorrow, or today actually (filmed April 30, 2017), we’re beginning the day that we commemorate the fallen soldiers – 23,544 soldiers were killed to give us what we are today in Medinat Yisrael. But that’s equal to two days of Auschwitz. Auschwitz in its prime was killing ten to twelve thousand Jews a day. And that’s the number of soldiers, of course everyone that falls that’s the world – a world unto himself – but that’s what it is, it’s two days of Auschwitz. And the Jews have a choice, you can have a physical Auschwitz, or you can have a spiritual Auschwitz.

People talk about, I meet people who are survivors from the camps and I say I am also a survivor because losing, we probably lost in the United States over the last 70 years, we probably lost six million Jews – that’s also a Shoah, so it’s a holocaust of some kind. So, I’m a survivor too – I’m survivor. I think that it was put very succinctly several years ago, the Jewish Agency put up road signs in Florida every couple of miles, and the signs said – it was directed to Israelis who left the country, we call them “yeridim”, those that go down [descend]. And the sign said, “Come home before “Abba” becomes daddy”. That’s a little story, but my understanding was the Prime Minister didn’t like it and he told them to take down the sign. But that’s the message, because if you stay there long enough so ABBA, which means father, is going to become daddy.

Now, I say about aliyah [to those who say] “we wait a little bit, another 50 years”, I say they’ve got to have an immediate aliyah. Every day that you remain there you’re putting your

children in jeopardy of assimilation. Assimilation doesn't mean they just stop putting on tallis and tefillin. Assimilation is something else, assimilation where you inside, your value becomes those of the people that you live among. You cannot jump into a pool and remain dry – going to live with the Gentiles not to be like them. And then the most important thing is, I'd say, the most the foundation stone of Judaism is one idea, one concept, and in Hebrew it's called "atah b'chartanu" (אתה בחרתנו בך) – you chose us, we are God's chosen people. That this is the fulcrum around where people, the war between the men and the boys.

Do you believe that God – the Creator of all things, the God which we have no idea, Who is so great and so almighty, we have no concept of what He is – chose the Jewish people more than other nations to be his special people? There are some religious Jews that deny it, they say that Judaism could be the common conglomeration of rituals or even prophecies, but all people are basically created equal. But that's not Judaism, it may sound nice, liberal Judaism, but Judaism is that there were seventy root nations and God chose the Jewish people as something else.

The people, the nations of the world, the Gentiles, were given 7 basic commandments. Jews were given 613 basic commandments. And we're judged differently than other nations. We're judged that like a parent that disciplines a child, a parent will not hit the child of a neighbor, that's not my problem, but he punishes his own child. HaShem punishes the Jewish people when we don't stand up to the level what He demands of us. But one thing, Jews suffer, but Jews always remain, Jews always remain.

The great nations of the world, the great empires that made a big noise when they were here 200 years, 300, 400 years, and now there's no sign of them anymore. Jewish people, the smallest of all the nations, continue on and on, and we came back here.

I recall there's a place called the Bible Lands Museum, near the Israeli Museum, and several years ago that had exhibits of 15 ancient capitals that really were the powerhouses in those times, and they showed that not one of them is in existence anymore. And yet the Jewish people were not an exhibit in anyone's museum, we're the exhibitors, we're not being exhibited. Jewish people are something different. Now the question is do you want to be part of that Jewish people? Be part of that excitement, be even different, to be a part of eternity? Because when HaShem chose us, he gave us eternity. Other peoples of the world I don't know, I'm a rabbi for Jews, not a rabbi for people who are not Jews.

Want to be part of eternity, not only this world? Judaism is like an iceberg. An iceberg is 1/9th above the water, 8/9ths under the water. The real part of Judaism is that part of the world which is not the material world, but the spiritual world. And we'll all get there, and one day we're going to get there, no one's able to beat the game we all live 70, 80, 120 years, but the real life of a person is the next world. And that's where Judaism comes in. It promises a person eternal life. You can believe it or deny it, it's in your hands. But if you believe it, then you have to be able to understand that the place of a Jew is here.

I want to just go back for a moment, if I may, to the story of the sacrificing of Isaac. That Abraham was commanded by HaShem, by God, to take his son Isaac to the Temple Mount, which is 100 meters from where we're sitting now, and to sacrifice his son. The command was given by God to Abraham, it was not given to Isaac. Isaac could have said, "father, your commandment, not my commandment, I don't want to, I'm not cooperating. And if I disagree so you're off the hook, because there's no lamb, there's no sacrifice". Isaac didn't do it, why? Because Isaac said to himself, "this is the Will of HaShem. That's what God wants, that's what He wants, and I have to acquiesce to what He wants. He didn't command me, but

I don't have to wait for a command, when I know that that's what He wants".

So, I asked myself the question, "does God want you to live in Philadelphia? Does God want you to live in Milwaukee? Does God want you to live in the Holy Land?" The answer is quite plain, if you're a cognizant, conscious Jew, enough to realize God wants you to be here. For 2,000 years we could not come here until a British Mandate which ended on May 14th, 1948 – that would be my birthday by the way, the 5th day of Iyar in the year Taf Shin Chet. The British Mandate ended and the gates of Eretz Yisrael opened for the first time in 2,000 years and the call came out to all Jews to come home. Many people heard it and they came, many people don't.

I have a very big problem, not with the layman, Jews a wonderful people. There are some rabbis out there that are anti-God. How can a rabbi be anti-God? In this world anything can happen. A rabbi that says to you "we'll come when the Moshiach calls us – when Moshiach, Messiah comes".

I recall being in New York about thirty years ago, I was riding in the subway and next to me came in two young Chassidim, and they sat next to me, and started to talk. They speak English better than me because they're already fifth generation in America, and I'm from the second generation in America. We started talking, they said they're followers of the Satmar rabbi, so I said, "when are you coming to Israel?" And he said, "*when Messiah sends a limousine for us, we will come*". I said, "so you think he's going to send a limousine for you to come to Israel?" What they're saying was don't bother us, we're not coming to Israel. And they have a rabbi that backs them. And there have always been, in every generation, all kind of leaders that took advantage of their position to control. Religion is a tremendous tool for control – it depends how you control.

I also want to talk about the idea of the Messiah, in terms of

the way I see the Messiah it's a great anesthetic, it puts you to sleep – don't do anything, don't move, wait for the Messiah, don't build a country, don't go to the army, don't work, you share, they'll take care of your overdraft in the bank. It's not that way. God made the world for people to do things. It's up to us to do it.

If you're up to it, and you can make it, then you gain eternity. If not, and you want to escape, you can escape your Judaism, that's not difficult. If Jane marries Jacob, then you've done it, you've finished it already.

I'd like to speak to you about life, life in this country. I've been, as I said, fifty-five years here. Life when I came in 1962, the country before the Six Day War in 1967. Sixty-seven, that was the parting of the ways of the old customs and the new customs of Israel. Before '67, Israel was, I'd say, a third-world country. My wife came from West End Avenue in Manhattan, I came from Flatbush, and we came, I taught in a yeshiva on a moshav called Nehalim, between the airport and Petah Tikva, and we lived in a tzarif, a wooden hut. My hero was Lincoln because he had a log cabin, and I had a thin little balsam hut – that's what it was, hot in the summer, cold the winter, and the grass would grow up between the floor, and I taught in the yeshiva, and that was life.

There was no meat, Shabbat only chicken, it was poor, but we loved it! Life was so sweet, and then came the 1967 war, which in itself is a discussion that war – that was a miracle beyond belief! Everything changed in a most radical way. Aliyah came, money started coming into the country, and the great economic powerhouse that we have today in Israel – which is a powerhouse – remember India wants to make deals with Israel, China's making deals with Israel, even though we can stay in a hotel, the whole population of Israel can fit into a hotel in Shanghai, these countries are looking for us – to use your technology, use your brain power.

Today, in Israel, already we've got plans, they're ready for building a 100-story building in Ramat Gan – in Israel a 100-story building! This country is rich, but people don't realize how much money is in this country! From what? From where? A little country on the edge of the desert with no resources to speak of, except the Jewish mind and the blessing of HaShem. Want to be a part of it? It's an experience – it's a one time, you go through this world only one time, you don't get another chance. You have to make good of every single day. And there are many excuses that people can say my children are in school, and one may get parnasa / get work, and this and that, there are a hundred excuses not to do something good. But you need one excuse to do something, to do something good. There are many reasons that a Jew should come back home – religious, or as I said because to protect your children, or a good life feeling – you've heard of people say, the most comfortable pillow to sleep on at night is a clean conscience. Here in Eretz Yisrael you have a clean conscience.

Of course, if you want to make a living, you'll make a better living there. If you want to make a life, you make a life here. These are not just words. Now, many people will say, "it's not easy to make aliyah". I realize that, I went through it, but my experience was the most – and other people which I know – the most difficult thing about aliyah is the moment of decision – that's murder. But the moment that you make it, things fall into place. Try it, try it out.

What else can I tell you? I know that the words which I'm saying doesn't have in them the ability to override all the other reasons to stay where you are. Especially if you have today a young new community like Syracuse I saw, and Rochester, and other places – young vibrant religious communities – come and take part in the community, we have a young rabbi, we have a mikveh, we have a day school, and everyone gets a private home, it's nice. Nachon, it is very nice for today, but Judaism always has to look for tomorrow,

because we have a tomorrow. Other people may not have it, other people may say live, eat, and live because tomorrow we die. Jews always live for 'tomorrow, and tomorrow is here in this country.

And there are many other issues, for example, I have a son, one of my sons, the younger son who is a general in Israeli army, very special. How would I ever believe, with me born in Brooklyn and my wife, as I said, in Manhattan were going to have a son who would be a general in the Israeli army – infantry general. I have another son who is a building engineer, he just finished the most magnificent hotel in Israel called the Waldorf Astoria, which classifies as the 8th most beautiful hotel in the world. Now the third son teaches Torah in Hevron (חברון). I have three daughters, two of them are midwives – nurses of the specialty in assurance of the world. Another daughter who is a medical practitioner in a different field, all born in Israel, all went through the system. People say you bring your children here and they'll become not religious, what are you talking about? Pure religious people, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. What are you talking about? It's only lashon hara about the country. Of course, children in America all of them turned out perfectly, a hundred percent, right? All of your children are wonderful, only here they get spoiled. It doesn't work that way. Again, you cannot explain to someone who is blind what something round is, to come and tell you what life is in Eretz Yisrael is difficult if you don't experience it – you have to come.

And I'll say it again, there's a magnet. If you don't feel the attraction, then you have to think, *"maybe I'm not an authentic Jew, maybe somewhere around the line something happened – my grandfather, great-grandmother, who knows what"*.

If you feel an attraction to this country – now don't have to be religious to feel the attraction. I have a young man who married a cousin of mine, he is a leftist, his friends are Arabs. He received the Israel prize for making motion

pictures, and he produced pictures which portrayed the army not a good light, and other things and so forth. He was in London at the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, totally irreligious, and a leftist – a “give away the territory, give the Arabs whatever they want” leftist. He was in London when the Yom Kippur war broke out and he fought tooth and nail to get on a plane to come back here to join his parachute unit. He had the magnet. No religion? Okay, that’s a private thing with him and God, but he has that magnet. It pulled him here, he was going to the thick of the war, why? Why are you doing that? Because he’s a Jew, not Jewish, he’s a Jew. Of course, it has to be a little bit, you have to round out the corners a little bit with him, but that’s what it is.

Now, in the name of truth, I cannot say that everybody walks around here la la la land, everyone is happy, and everyone is singing. Life is real here, you have to work to make a living. You have to get a job, have to get a house, need a place for your children to study, and it’s a real world, it’s a real world. And with that it really depends between your personal relationship, your relationship between you and HaShem, everyone has their thing. But once you settle in, and become part, then you’ll feel that your life has value. There’s an ideal to what you’re doing.

I see even more in the Holy Land no such thing as a secular act. I once met a man, many years ago, who lived in Bnei Brak and he told me a story that he has a daughter, a teenage daughter, normal in every way, went to Beit Yaakov school, and one day she became very introverted, closed into herself come home from school and go into her room and lock the door. And he didn’t know what happened to her suddenly. And then after a while, *“I questioned her, and she opened up she said she never knew what my work was”*, the man says. *“One day she was riding on a bus with her friends from Petah Tikva to Bnei Brak, and she saw me working on the roads, and I paved the roads. And she was so, she was so devastated that her father is working*

like a common laborer on the road. So, I sat down, and I said to her, "my daughter, you're right, I'm a common laborer but on that road, that I'm making millions of people will be going through all the years – this one's going a doctor going to help someone, this one is going to learn in yeshiva, there's one for another mitzvah, and every person on that road that I paved, I might have a part of their mitzvah".

Of course, in Eretz Yisrael, there's no such thing as a secular act, whatever you do has religious and spiritual connotation, no matter what your profession is, the very fact that you are doing it in the Holy Land it has a part of spirituality attached to it. It's better today than tomorrow, no one knows what tomorrow can bring, but one thing the Prophets in two places say the same words "b'Har Zion yeh plita" (הארץ יישוב ויחיה) – on Mt. Zion, meaning the Land of Israel, there shall be refuge, the Jewish people are saved in Eretz Israel. That's not the case outside of Eretz Yisrael.

Don't be fooled by certain rabbis, even great names. If a rabbi says to you, "where are you going? Stay here", he's not a legitimate rabbi. A rabbi's summoned, his job is to strengthen the Torah, and strengthen the Jewish people, not to make the Torah weak. And here we get strong, just take a look at statistics, just take a look where we are – 8-1/2 million people in this country, and they're predicting in 2048, a hundred years after the establishment of the state, we're going to reach 15 million. But I say that's wrong, because at some point there's going to be the return of the descendants of the twelve tribes that were of the tribes that were sent out, and many, many of the Marranos – these are the people who Spain and Portugal accepted Christianity out of coercion are to come back. There's a movement going on now all over the world, I said South America, and Portugal, and Spain to be able to come back. There's such a great future in this country and also, we're not going to remain so small – the Biblical boundaries of the country – of the State of Israel – is a huge

country! It's not just this little bit at the eastern end the Mediterranean between the river of Jordan and between the Mediterranean. Half of Turkey was the land of the Hittites, is the Biblical Land of Israel, from where the Euphrates River begins to the Nile River, we take in a half of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula, until the Nile River – Eretz Yisrael, is part of an economic unit.

I once read a book about the way each different part of this great land has an economic input to the whole of it. Mountains and the rivers and the different – even this little country we're on now – there are 30 different areas of vegetation. You take your car and you drive half an hour in any direction – a different kind of vegetation, like the most assorted in the whole world in such a small space.

In any event, I see the Land of Israel being according to the Biblical boundaries. I see how people in the tens of hundreds of millions of people in the future in this country. My dear brothers and sisters I say think about it, the future's in your hands and only in your hands, and everybody has to make decisions. If you come here, you'll become part of the eternal Jewish people. If you stay there, stay there, then you're lost to the Jewish people and you'll fade from the platform of history.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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