

A Jewish Credo



What does it mean to be a Jew? I am often asked this question. People want a concise statement of what Jewish teachings are and how we find meaning in our faith.

Judaism does not have a catechism. There is no statement of belief that we are required to recite and adhere to in order to be a Jew. Maimonides developed a statement of Thirteen Principles, each beginning with the phrase "I Believe," and this statement is summarized in the prayer

Yigdal with which we conclude our Friday night services, but it is not required that each of us subscribe to it.

On the second day of *Rosh HaShanah*, I discussed a statement of faith developed from the writings of Edmond Fleg, each sentence of which begins with the phrase "I am a Jew because. . . ." Fleg's affirmation of his Jewish identity is printed in many prayer books, including our own newly revised edition of *Seder Avodah*, and can be found there on page 945.

With this article I am beginning a series on the Fleg *Credo* which will appear here from time to time, based on my sermon, articulating different aspects of the piece for your consideration as a way of understanding what being a Jew can mean to us in the modern world.

Fleg's *Credo* begins with a preamble that is often omitted in many versions, but which I believe is key to understanding it, and part of what makes it resonate for me. He writes:

*I am a Jew because, born of Israel and having lost her,
I have felt her live again in me, more living than myself.*

*I am a Jew because, born of Israel and having regained her,
I wish her to live after me, more living than in myself.*

Before addressing the profound meaning this statement has for me, we have to answer the question "Who was Edmond Fleg?" Fleg was born in 1874 in Geneva, and died in 1963. Educated in Paris, he was an author. Born a Jew, he never embraced it in his youth as part of who he was.

The anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus Affair was the catalyst for his return to Judaism. This piece from which his *Credo* is taken was written in 1927. He addresses it to an unborn grandchild, saying "People ask me why I am a Jew. It is to you that I want to answer, little unborn grandson."

He explains that Judaism was not always meaningful to him. "When I was twenty I had no lot, nor part in Israel; I was persuaded that Israel would disappear, and that in twenty years' time people would no longer speak of her. Twenty years have passed, and another twelve, and I have become a Jew again — so obviously, that I am asked, 'Why are you a Jew?'"

What was it that changed him? It was the Zionist Movement that provided the turning point in his life. The Return of a People to Its Land. In 1899 he attended the Third Zionist Congress in Basel. What moved him was not the words he heard, but the

diversity of the Jews he was with. "What Jewish contrasts! A pale-faced Pole with high cheekbones, a German in spectacles, a Russian looking like an angel, a bearded Persian, a clean shaven American, an Egyptian in a fez, and, over there, that black phantom, towering up in his immense caftan, with his fur cap and pale curls falling from his temples."

And then it happened. "In the presence of all these strange faces, the inevitable happened; I felt myself a Jew, very much a Jew!"

Like many of us, Fleg discovered a Jewish aspect of himself that he did not grow up with, but that became an essential part of who he was. And like us, we want our children and grandchildren to embrace it also, so that it "will live after me, more living than in myself."

Sensing that his grandchild may have to go through the same journey he had, he writes to his unborn grandchild: "If you believe that the flame of Israel is extinguished in you, watch and wait; one day, it will burn again. This is a very old story, repeated in every generation: A thousand times Israel it has seemed, must die, and a thousand times she has lived again. I want to tell you how she died and lived again in me, so that, if she dies in you, you in your turn can feel her born in you once more."

We are Jews when we know that we are part of something that is more than we are. That we are part of a drama that links us, grounds us, to past, present and future. That gives our undifferentiated lives purpose and meaning.

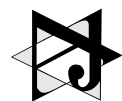
But every person must find it for himself or herself, just as Fleg did, and just as he knew his grandchild would have to. Parents cannot demand it of their children, and even when they do, they cannot guarantee it. Each one of us is a Jew by Choice, and each one of us who chooses will choose for reasons that are uniquely our own, based on unanticipated moments of revelation.

And if our children stray, we must never give up hope that they will one day return, their faith kindled, and burning independently from the fire of their soul. Some will bring others with them, who have no native Jewish blood in them, but in whom the Jewish spirit will be ablaze.

I believe in the Jewish future. Not a future imposed by obligation, but a future guaranteed by the miraculous process of God's love that touches souls and makes them burn for Judaism, just as it did for Edmond Fleg. The Jewish soul is the foundation of our future, and each of us will find our unique expression that gives it meaning.

This is the foundation of our faith, and the guarantor of our future.

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