

Rabbi Josh Beraha
“Rupture and Rebirth: Four Shifts in Jewish History”
A Letter to Jude on the Occasion of his Bar-Mitzvah
May 24, 2025

Dear Jude,

You asked me what events changed Jewish culture or the Jewish way of living the most.

I really like this question—mostly because I love Jewish history. So fair warning: I packed a lot in here.

Ready? Okay.

To begin, what should we consider “an event”? I think for this letter, I want to define it as moments immediately recognized as transformative—clear *ruptures* that mark an *end* and a *beginning*. So I’m not including things like the composition of the Mishna, the birth of influential thinkers, or the invention of the printing press, whose significance only became clear over time. I’m after *paradigm shifts*. I’m after events that *reframed reality*.

With that in mind, here’s what I would consider to be the **major shifts in Jewish history. (There are four of them).**

Shift one– The Destruction of the Second Temple

Jude. The period of the early Israelite kings, the destruction of the First Temple, and the Babylonian exile, merit serious discussion, but the destruction of the *Second* Temple in 70 CE was *the defining rupture* in ancient Jewish history. When the Romans looted and burned the building in 70 CE after a brutal, months-long siege of Jerusalem, led by General Titus (later Emperor), what they effectively did was dismantle the center of Jewish ritual, and Jewish national, and political life.

In response, Jewish leaders—many of whom emerged from the Pharisaic tradition and whom we now call “the rabbis”—began to reshape Jewish life. They shifted its focus from sacrifice to prayer, study, and ethical living. From Temple to text.

Take the upcoming holiday of Shavuot: once an agricultural pilgrimage festival marked by the offering of first fruits at the Temple, it was reimagined by the rabbis as the anniversary of the giving of the Torah. Temple to text.

Still with me?

Good—because now we’re about to leap forward on the timeline to **shift number two– the Jewish enlightenment and emancipation.**

But before I go into that, it’s important to say that in the hundreds of years that followed the destruction of the Temple, Jewish life was *not static*. The centuries between the Temple’s

destruction and the modern age saw the development of The Jewish Library, and waves of expulsion.

With books on their shoulders, Jews were forced out of England in 1290, France in 1306, and, following the Black Death—for which they were blamed—from cities across what we now call Europe. Most famously, in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella expelled Jews from Spain (unless they opted to convert). The Jews who left resettled in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and eventually became known as Sephardic Jews—*Sepharad* being the Hebrew word for Spain.

Meanwhile, Ashkenazic traditions—think heavily salted foods and stricter interpretations of Jewish law— were taking shape in Central and Eastern Europe. As time went on, each group—with lots of sub groups— developed its own language, customs, and legal frameworks. Though less dramatic than the fall of the Temple, these migrations reshaped Jewish life.

So now back to the **second major shift— the Jewish Enlightenment and emancipation.**

A common starting point for this second major shift after the destruction of the temple is the French Revolution of 1789, when Jews were, for the first time, granted citizenship—not as a people, but as individuals. “*To the Jews as individuals, everything; to the Jews as a nation, nothing,*” said Count Clermont-Tonnerre.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, a Jewish thinker named Moses Mendelssohn was emerging as a leading voice of what would become the Jewish Enlightenment. He debated ideas with famous thinkers like Lessing and, from a distance, Kant, and notably, he translated the Torah into German so more people of his day could read it!

From Mendelssohn onward—from Yehudah Leib Gordon to Ahad Ha’am, Smolenskin, and Mapu—Jews began stepping beyond the confines of the ghetto, entering a new, modern world where Jewish identity was no longer *inherited*, but *chosen*.

The *chosen* people became the *choosing* people, and with that shift came a new set of questions: How do you live as a Jew in a modern, secular world? Can you really be both fully Jewish and fully part of a nation like France or Germany? And maybe the biggest one of all: what happens if history isn’t just something *God* does to us—but something *we* can shape ourselves?

This last question—about human agency—brings us to the **third shift: the rise of Zionism, the Holocaust, and the founding of the State of Israel.**

I’d start this chapter in 1862, when Moses Hess published *Rome and Jerusalem*, laying the groundwork for modern Jewish nationalism. Two decades later, pogroms swept through Russia, sparking the first trickle of Jewish immigration to Palestine, including Ben Yehudah, the father of Modern Hebrew. In 1897, Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress and—building on Hess—turned an ancient longing into a modern political project. Herzl gave structure, language,

and urgency to the dream of Jewish sovereignty. The Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 only sharpened that urgency.

What followed was a turbulent half-century. World War I then the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which was Britain's pledge to support a Jewish homeland in Palestine. There were the Arab riots of the 1920s and 30s, and in 1939, the British White Paper all but closed the doors to Jewish immigration—just as European Jews were most in need of escape.

The tragedy that many foresaw but could not prevent quickly unfolded. Exits were blocked, and six million Jews were murdered.

In the aftermath came rebirth. In 1948, the United Nations recognized Israel as a sovereign state. For the first time in nearly two thousand years, the Jewish people were not only a people of memory and diaspora, but once again a people with a homeland.

This was more than a political milestone. It was a civilizational rebirth which reshaped Jewish identity. New cities continued to be built like Petach Tikvah, Rishon Le'zion, Zichron Ya'akov, and Tel Aviv. Hebrew could be heard on the streets!

And this leads us directly into **the fourth**—and perhaps most complex—**shift in Jewish life: grappling with sovereignty, and exploring what it means to be Jewish in the modern world.**

If the third shift was about reclaiming Jewish agency, the fourth is about learning how to live with it. For the first time in nearly two thousand years, Jews are not just surviving—we *have power*.

But power brings its own complications, especially for a people whose identity was shaped in powerlessness. We want to defend ourselves, but we are still learning how to do so without compromising our morals. The shift from being history's *object* to one of its *actors* is... disorienting. And so, even now—even with real strength—we sometimes feel exposed. Moral choices are hard. Old fears resurface, like the fear of violence simply for being in a Jewish space. This is the tension we live with: how do we honor a history of suffering while learning to wield power with integrity?

Now, to the present moment—It's too soon to say whether October 7th will be remembered as a historical rupture. But for many, already people talk about "October 8th Jews"—those whose view of Jewish life changed overnight.

For some, it was a reawakening of solidarity. For others, questioning and shame. For nearly everyone, a recognition that Jewish identity remains bound up in history.

Which brings me to today, May 24th. Your bar mitzvah may not make tomorrow's history books, Jude—but it marks a turning point in *your* life. And *your* life is bound to the life of the Jewish people.

So maybe the best answer to your question is this: Jewish history is shaped not just by major events, but by life cycle rituals—and then the questions we ask, the traditions we carry forward, and the ways in which we see ourselves and contribute to the ongoing story of the Jewish people. In stepping into Jewish adulthood, Jude, you've stepped into that ongoing story.

Mazal tov, my friend. You're a good kid, and I can't wait to see how you help write what comes next.

In admiration,

Rabbi Beraha