

## INTERVIEW OF RABBI YEHOSHUA ELLIS

*We were privileged to be invited to the Jewish Synagogue of Warsaw (Nożyk Synagogue), Poland and interview Rabbi Yehoshua Ellis, the Emissary of Shavei Israel organization and the Rabbi of Katowice, Poland. Born in Kansas city, Missouri, United States, Rabbi Yehoshua Ellis has been in Poland for more than a decade. We are delighted to dedicate this issue to this interview.*



Sennaya Swamy Naickar with Rabbi Yehoshua Ellis



Rabbi Yehoshua Ellis in his office in the Synagogue of Warsaw, Poland



Rabbi with the Holy Torah Parchment.



*The Holy Torah Parchment completely hand written and made of Leather. This is the only one that has survived World War II in the Synagogue. The writings are in consonants and with no punctuations. Hence memory is often relied while chanting the prayer.*



*We were gifted traditional Matzah (Unleavened bread) and Kasher Grape Juice from Ukraine.*

5. The Jewish community is spread across the world and have been so for thousands of years. What teachings can it give for people like us who are also diaspora to live a proper and better life away from our homeland.

So a book I would recommend to read about this - The Jew in the Lotus by Rodger Kamenetz, In the late 80s or early 90s, the Dalai Lama asked a group of Jews visit the Dharamshala and meet him. This book is about that trip. They have all these discussions, and they eat. And after eating, the Jews all pray together and the Dalai Lama's says, what are you doing? And they said, after we eat we have to pray, it's called Birkat Hamazon. What are the themes of the prayer? there are four parts to it. The first part, we thank God for food. The second part, we thank God for Jerusalem. The third part we thank God for our temple, or how we want to return to both of these. And the 4<sup>th</sup> part, we thank God for all the good things done. And so the Dalai Lama says, so every time you sit and eat, you mention together The Jerusalem and the temple, you're longing for it. And you put it in between thanking God for very concrete things, the food and for these non concrete things like the general good. Diaspora is a huge challenge for us. And the biggest challenge, On the one side, there is anti-semitism And on the other side, there is assimilation, And probably but in general, I think we're more for assimilation than we are of anti-semitism. For me its about How can I keep my children Jewish. First and foremost by fostering our personal connection with our children. This is one of the strongest ways to keep them connected to our tradition. Our tradition is so precise. And I feel like the most important thing for me to do is to emphasize how much I love them, and how our tradition brings us closer and to do everything to minimize the conflict that can arise. To do everything possible to make traditional practices fun; to show how they create connection. We have to be careful not to take it too seriously. That anything and any feelings involved are enjoyable. For e.g. The food is great on holidays. The smells are wonderful. The special clothes, etc. All these things that help us create memories. So, another example is that we are aware that a very important thing for Jews is marrying other Jews. if you want your kids to marry other Jews, put pictures of your parents and grandparents on the wall. Look, these are all Jews who married Jews, right? So it's something they see every day. Its about creating something that they feel they're part of and want to continue to be a part of. And of course, for us going to Israel. We try to go Israel once a year, and when we go there our kids feel normal And they feel at home. The longing for home. It's such an important feeling. So additionally, the Jewish practice every time we pray, we mention Israel. We mention Jerusalem. We mention our longing to go there. And this seems to be one of these things that has kept us very strong. Longing is one of the most important emotions we have. I was listening to a psychologist talking about Dopamine. So dopamine isn't about getting what you want. it's about expecting reward. this is the classic problem. If you give kids everything they ask for they don't care about it much. My daughter's was playing with a doll we got her, And she wasn't that excited. And my wife asked, 'is it not what you wanted?' My daughter replied, 'no, it's exactly what I wanted. Everything I thought it would be.' 'So why aren't you so happy with this?' my wife asked. My daughter replied, 'Do you know what was happiest? It was when we ordered it. And when it was on the way. when I knew that in a few days, I'm gonna get exactly what I want. I was so happy.'. That's when the brain's firing. That's when it's giving us all the dopamine. I try to emphasize to my kids how our tradition makes us closer to each other, how it makes us closer to God, and how it is a tool to make us better people. - Sennaya Swamy Naickar



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*(Far Left) Inside the Synagogue . The Synagogue was built 120 years ago, the only one that has survived the World war II in Warsaw. The Synagogue was part of the Jewish Ghetto and the Nazis used it as a stable for horses.*

*(Near Left) Kids room in the synagogue.*

started getting popular. The actual national symbol for the Jews is a Menorah. This is in the temple. This is written about in the Torah. You look at the seal of the state of Israel, it's a menorah . It's not the star of David. The star of David evolved slowly during the early 19<sup>th</sup> and then 20<sup>th</sup> century. Basically, you had the Holocaust, and the state of Israel, which we mark ourselves. This cemented it as a universal Jewish symbol. This is according to [Gershom Scholem](#). I traveled in Morocco at one point and I found money from Morocco, which is an Islamic state which has a 6 sided star on it. it's hard for us to believe that a Islamic state would put a universally Jewish symbol on money. this seems proof of what a recent adoption this is. In Kabballic literature, they talk about awakening. There's awakening from below, where we reach out and awakening from above where god reaches down. the star represents this meeting point. That's the general concept. But as a symbol. it's a very recent.

**3.What are the texts you recommend to get a better understanding about the Judaism, its people and its significance.**

There's a book from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin called Jewish literacy. A good book on what does every jew need to know to be a good Jew. it includes history , faith, religion, literacy, he's a very wise man. I would also advise - Simple Words: Thinking About What Really Matters in Life by [Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz](#) . An important part when you can talk about Judaism is to talk about Israel. And a good book about Israel is the book called Time immemorial (by Joan Peters).

**4. There is a widespread perception to the Jewish people being ardent businessmen. Wanted to understand a different perspective to this. In the cemetery in Okopowa st I was able to see many selfless people who were part of a social cause. Could you give us a selfless story of Jewish person and his/her contribution to the common good to society.**

One of the most well known person in Poland is Janusz Korczak. There's a memorial to him at the cemetery. He was a writer, and a pedagogy. He was one of the first people who spoke about children's rights. he wrote in the 1920s and 30s. He was in the ghetto and he was universally recognized as one of the best expert pedagogy in child rearing. he was so well known that there was an international campaign to convince the Nazis to let him go. The Nazis agreed . But he refused to go. he said, I won't leave my children. He stayed at the orphanage, and he refused to leave his children. When Children were transported to the death camp, he went with them. *(More details can be found here - <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/janusz-korzczak>)*

I'll also tell you one of my favorite stories about this. There's a story about the Yossele , the [Miser](#) of Krakow. This is told by Rabbi [Shlomo Carlebach](#).. So there were a lot of Jews in Krakow. There are few rich ones and a lot of poor ones. That's almost true for most of history. It's still pretty much today. there was one of them called Yossele. And everyone knew he was rich, and everybody knew he was cheap and miser.



*Another angle of the Synagogue in Session. The Virtual tour of the Synagogue can be found here. <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=RHAH4a3bdQ>*

The Ants

During my childhood when I was studying in my third standard. There was not much printing technology in the country. In my book there was the story of King Solomon's army marching. At that time ants were crossing the road. The ants were talking among themselves that they are going to die as Solomon's army may trample over them. King Solomon on hearing this he ordered his army men to not step over the ants. His army men followed the orders. So all the ants were saved. This story truly brought a good impression for me on King Solomon. But today Democratic system, Socialist system or any political system is utilising it's weapons markets and killing people. There are no leaders who are present currently who could benefit the people alike to King Solomon. So that is why I have begun to research on the Star of David hoping it would benefit the people. As King Solomon used this symbol. When I went to Warsaw Poland to meet my son. At that time my son unexpectedly took me to visit the Jewish cemetery in Okopowa street. There I saw the Star of David Symbol. In the place and a board explaining that the Jews were killed mercilessly during the World War II. But I did not get a chance to go inside cause it was a holiday. But I had the eagerness to go inside . The next day we were there early to visit the cemetery. Many others were there getting lamps for their ancestors. On seeing this I also wanted to get a lamp . The person lit me a lamp and gave it to me. But I was wondering who shall I keep it to. At that time I felt like one of the grave called me to keep the lamp. According to the Asian method we folded our hands and prayed to that tombstone – [Samuel Portner](#). Most of the time during my stay at Warsaw I visited the same tombstone. When I was praying at the tombstone I had the same feeling of what I have while praying to my ancestor clan goddess Veera Sennamal. Before leaving to the airport to return to India for Diwali I prayed to the same tombstone again. I felt a strong connection despite me having no relation to that person. - [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t\\_D6P\\_1M7f5hXHTcdViQK5nPh2qL/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t_D6P_1M7f5hXHTcdViQK5nPh2qL/view)

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he wouldn't spend money on anything.. And he was getting old, and every Kadisha, the burial society, they went to him, and they said, look, you're getting old. And, you know, we have all these needs in the community, and you never give anything. So. we're not going to bury you. and he said, 'What? No way. You are crazy. I have nothing to give'. And after saying so, they leave. And the next day he dies, his neighbor, in the dark at night, buries him . the next day is Friday morning. The Rabbi get a knock at his door and it's one of the poor people. And he says , 'Usually on Friday morning, there's this little money that shows up under my door. It didn't come this week. I need some money for Friday night as it is Shabbat and I need food for my family'. The Rabbi gives him some Money. Another knock and the same story. And all morning he gets all the beggars coming to him with the same story. And after the fourth or fifth time he starts getting curious. And so on the next knock, he asks the beggar that if he has asked anyone for money for help before as this is the first time you have come to me for money and I have never heard of this. He said yes he had gone to Yossele for money . 'So I went in and he gave me a cup of tea sat me down asked me how my family is, how many kids I have. And then I asked him, if he can give me some money. Hearing this Yoselle face turned red, and said that 'what do you think I'm rich?' and he kicked me out. 'So every beggar that came afterwards to the Rabbis home told the same story, and then the rabbi figured out what was happening. Yossele was giving these people the money. He was doing it in a hidden way.

Our tradition talks about this . They're different levels of giving, when you give money to someone who needs it. It's called 'Tzedakah', which is the Hebrew root word for 'justice'. It's not a good deal. it's what's expected, what's needed. There different levels of giving. One of the highest level is to get someone a job. So the next level is when the person giving doesn't know who they're giving it to. And the person is receiving it doesn't know really where he is getting it from. That way they don't feel embarrassed. So the understanding is that Yossele went out of his way to make sure that no one knew that he was giving this money. You know, there's certainly a stereotype that we as Jews love money, And I won't lie. We like money. I don't know anyone who doesn't like money. Judaism is where in an ideal world according to our tradition there's a clear understanding that profits are good, and that development is good and you're expected to loan money, but not take interest . if you live in Israel, you have a field (land), which is like most people would, you have to give. You are obligated to give away the minimum 20% to support the community, to support the poor. it's clearly understood that whenever anyone asks you for money, you have to help them. You don't have to give them everything you have. But you're not allowed not to give something.

There's a very big tension between particular aspirations for myself, for my group, and my nation and the universal. It repeats itself throughout history. you see it in the Torah. You see it in the books of the prophets. Throughout our history, we see people becoming corrupted, especially leaders and not, being interested in justice. Our tradition clearly shows that God is interested in justice. it's not a small problem we have today in Israel. So there's a case where one of the ministers, that the court won't allow him to be a minister. Because he's been repeatedly found guilty of tax fraud. That's horrible. It's really embarrassing. Additionally, this person is supposed to be religious, even more embarrassing. But the worst still is that all of these people, all of these jews claim to be religious, who claim to care about Morality, justice support him . if you've read the Bible, very much like what the prophets complain about 2000 years ago, that there's no justice.

I can say for my personal experience. When me and my friends were trying to raise money for some poor people in Israel , it was remarkably easy. Israel is a very expensive place. But if there was some cause that people perceived 'as just' It was remarkable for me to see people contribute . But Indeed there is still tremendous amount in inequality present.