

A remarkable reunion took place a few months ago in a room above a pub in London. It was the first time that Jonny Benjamin and Neil Laybourn had met in six years. Back on that cold, rainy January day six years previous, the two young men had only spoken to each other for about 25 minutes. But they were the 25 minutes that saved Jonny's life.

Neil, walking across Waterloo Bridge on his way to work, had stopped Jonny from committing suicide. Earlier this year the two met for the first time since that fateful day in London, and the would-be jumper was able finally to thank the man who saved his life..

"At first I was so overwhelmed. I just went up and gave him a hug," said Johnny, 26. "Out of nowhere, I suddenly pictured him trying to persuade me not to jump." All Jonny could remember about Neil was that he was white, that he had hair, that he said "things can get better", and that he suggested the pair go for a coffee.

Neil, a personal trainer, could remember Jonny very well, however. He had often wondered what had happened after the young man, then just 20, whom he had talked to and tried to keep calm until the police had bundled him into a car and taken him to hospital.

"I had no idea what had happened to him. I wondered if he had got over it, or whether he had gone back and that day had made no difference," Neil said

But Neil Layburn's caring and heroic effort made a difference. At the end of 2013, Jonny – with the help of a Mental Illness charity – launched a campaign to "Find Mike", his nickname for the stranger. Doing so, he decided, would not only allow him to "close the door on that chapter of my life", but also help to generate more interest in mental health issues.

Jonny grew up in a middle-class Jewish household and had done well at school, but from the age of 11 started hearing voices in his head. Too ashamed to get a proper diagnosis, in desperation, Jonny almost took his own life. Jonny Benjamin said after an emotional reunion with Neil, his guardian angel:

"I am not trying to romanticise this. I was very fortunate someone came along. The point is, there is always support out there. Having someone able to listen – can make such a difference.

Having someone to listen can make a tremendous difference -- and perhaps, save someone's life.

Can you imagine what it would be like to have someone save your life? Can you possibly imagine the eternal, unpayable debt of gratitude that would create? Can you imagine how you'd struggle to properly pay that debt of gratitude?

Today is Shabbos HaGadol -- the 'Great Shabbos', just before Pesach. In these final days before our seminal holiday, I'd like to explore with you what I believe to be the essence of the Yom Tov: a one line phrase in the Haggadah.

B'chol dor v'dor chayav adam liros es atzmo k'eelu hoo yatza mi'Mitzraim. In every generation it is one's duty to see himself as though he personally had gone out from Egypt.

We recite this phrase each year, twice for those of us outside of Israel. However, I think we all have a sense that this is MUCH easier said than done.

According to the Hagaddah it is not enough simply to remember or even retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Rather, one must also project oneself into the story in order personally to experience the move from slavery to liberation. You just can't think it. You can't even just say it. You have to *liros es atzmo* -- FEEL -- as if you, personally, had gone out of Egypt.

How can we possibly do that?

The easiest way to understand the obligation to see and feel oneself as personally having come out of Egypt is to read this statement in light of the Hagadah's earlier comment:

"It was not only our ancestors whom God redeemed from Egypt, for if God had not redeemed our ancestors, then we and our children and our children's children would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt."

We'd still be enslaved in Egypt? To Pharaoh? The last Pharaoh I know of was ...Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs! Remember *Wooly Bully* from the 60s Pop group?

True, the Hagadah tells the story of our national liberation. Approximately 3 million Jews, having fallen to the 49th level of spiritual impurity, were taken out of Egypt at the last possible moment. But we should also understand that if G-d hadn't redeemed our ancestors you and I wouldn't be here -- at least, not Jewishly.

What does being Jewish mean to you? How would your life be different, if you weren't Jewish?

When I was a single Yeshiva student my Rosh HaYeshiva (Yeshiva Dean), Rabbi Noach Weinberg, came to our dorm for a chat with six or seven of us. He asked us, "What would you do if you found out if you weren't Jewish? Imagine the scene your parents tell you that your maternal grandmother really wasn't Jewish. What would you do?"

One of my dorm-mates said, "Rabbi, in such a case, I'd run to McDonalds!" With a slight smile, Rabbi Weinberg waited for the rest of us to answer. But no one was certain enough -- or brave enough -- to answer. Rabbi Weinberg then said,

If you wouldn't run immediately to the closest rabbi you could find and beg him to immediately convert you -- then you really don't understand what being Jewish is all about.

I've often thought about Rabbi Weinberg's answer. It resonates with me as being absolutely true, though emotionally I'm nowhere near that point.

I'd like to share with you what being Jewish means to me. I share the following only as a means to encourage you to think about what being Jewish means to you and how your life is different because you're Jewish.

-- Being Jewish means I'm in a special, unique partnership with Hashem, as part of the Chosen People. I'm a member of a nation that has a mission statement to be a *mamleches Kohanim* and *goy Kadosh* -- a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

-- Unlike non-Jews whose task is to simply observe 7 Universal laws of ethical conduct, my marching orders are to bring about a *tikun olam*: to make the world a place where the light and presence of G-d can be seen and felt. My job is to champion what is arguably the single most revolutionary concept in the annals of history -- a concept introduced to the world by the Jews -- Monotheism.

-- To be Jewish means welcoming the pioneering effort to establish a universal moral code of conduct, where previously there was none to speak of. It's not by accident that America's Founding Fathers chose the words of Leviticus for our nation's Liberty Bell: *Proclaim liberty throughout the land.*

-- Being Jewish means having pride in the immense Jewish contribution to the defense of human dignity and human rights. Not by accident was the Exodus the source of inspiration for the American Civil Rights movement.

-- Being Jewish means that I can have, through observance of the Torah, the deepest possible spiritual, intellectual and emotional connection to G-d -- in a most personal and emotional way. In no other way could I find such meaning in my life or reach my potential.

-- Being Jewish means the joy of belonging and community wherever I go. Especially the state of Israel. It creates an instant bond with people I've never met worlds away that I can draw on.

-- To me, being Jewish means I aspire to act as if the code of conduct provided by the Torah is my daily GPS. Every action I take in my daily life -- from waking in the morning to washing my hands to preparing food -- is a way to glorify Hashem, bringing Him into my life, and into the world.

-- And finally, as Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said, "to me, being Jewish means not necessarily seeking to make the world more Jewish, but rather, more human." That's the goal of my people, through good times and bad. And it has been the goal of my people from the very beginning of our extraordinary historical journey (Passover), to the present day.

And if I wasn't Jewish, I'd be missing out on all that.

Ironically we exhibit a degree of thanksgiving in life in reverse proportion to the amount of blessings we've received. The greater G-d's gifts, the less it seems they are regarded.

A hungry man is more thankful for his morsel than a rich man for his heavily-laden table. A lonely woman in a nursing home will appreciate a visit more than a popular woman with a party thrown in her honor. A Jewish refusenik in Russia who finally gets his own copy of a Chumash after 75 years of state-imposed atheism is more thankful for his little book than we are for all the Jewish books and magazines and translations that overflow our shelves.

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that if the constellations appeared only once in a thousand years, imagine what an exciting event it would be. But because they're there every night, we barely give them a look

The words "Thank" and "Think" hail from the same root, reminding us that thanksgiving comes from thinking about our blessings. Is there a greater blessing than being Jewish? Helen Keller once said, "I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his early adult life. It would make him more appreciative of sight and the joys of sound."

Today, how is Jonny Benjamin (about whom I spoke in the introduction to today's remarks) doing? With a mixture of medication, physical exercise, cognitive therapy exercises and mindfulness – a technique focusing on living in the present – Jonny is on top of his condition. And there's not a day that goes by that he doesn't think about Neil Layburn.

For his part, Neil says he had no option but to act. "I saw him from far away on the bridge; it clicked immediately why he was there. I didn't think I would reach him first, because a lot of people were going by. No one stopped; hardly anyone looked. It was obvious he needed help." And Jonny Benjamin will be eternally grateful for the unpayable debt of gratitude, to the man who saved his life.

B'chol dor v'dor chayav adam liros es atzmo k'eelu hoo yatza mi'Mitzraim. In every generation it is one's duty to see himself as though he personally had gone out from Egypt.

How?

It was not only our ancestors whom God redeemed from Egypt, for if God had not redeemed our ancestors, then we and our children and our children's children would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt."

Our lives were saved, Jewishly. What does being Jewish mean to you?