The wellspring of my soul

i have never written a poem about being a Jew. i have written of god, of the universe, of the taste of my love, all good things, all valid and worthy. but i have never examined in the light of ink that wellspring of my soul.

it is not that i am a religious man. a man may be an atheist and a Jew. he cannot be a catholic and an atheist, or a Muslim and an atheist. he may be French, or Zimbabwean, or Bengali and be an atheist, but a Jew is a camel of a different sort.

i cannot discuss my Jewishness without discussing my father. he was not born a Jew, but he has grown old as one. he became one for love, and sacrificed much for it. and yet it was he who gave me the greatest lesson in Jewishness of my life.

he sleeps in his chair, his inner eye focused, and questions everything. it is what it means to be one of us. many years ago, at the height of my youthful pain, i begged him, what is it, the thought that will liberate me?

i was straight-jacketed, you see. i was trapped in a deterministic and meaningless world, a torment no eight-year-old should suffer. what can i think, what is the next thing, that will lift me above the lonely plateau?

and came the answer, the only answer, the answer of a true Jew, the answer of one who has given up more than i could have imagined, the answer that in the fewest words contained the new world, and changed me more than all things before or since: the unity of all things.

this is the most Jewish of truths. so many of us have replaced God with the Universe he once ruled. no matter — this is a game of names. but to tell me at once, without hesitation or fear, that i am one with creation, there is no rabbi can speak more profoundly.

much later, my mother changed me again, as deeply, but in another way. i was ranting in my teenage haze: are you God? she asked me. i am god, i am not God, i had no clear answer, save contrition. tikkun olam, she said later, heal the world, don’t hate it.

those things are the basis of my Jewishness even to this day. but let me tell you of myself: you must see the picture in order to see my meaning. i am tall, blonde, blue-eyed. my voice is deep and my shoulders wide. i cultivate my masculinity.

i cannot be intimidated, you see, save by my own appearance. my first and middle name are Jewish. my last name is not. my last name is the name of a conqueror king of Christendom. i have been asked, are you sure you’re Jewish? that was a knife to my heart.

make no mistake. i am Jewish, in spite of my dual heritage. i feel entitled to some goyishe traditions, but i feel the yiddishkeit in my core. i identify with the underdog, rather than the great builders of empire. i am obsessed by compassion, and not by victory.

as a child, however, i was torn between worlds. never fully accepted as a Jewish boy, never anointed as an English one, and besides those two, always cognizant of my atheism, my need to believe myself the master of my fate, even knowing it was illusion.

my Jewish identity, therefore, was never based on my full immersion in the Jewish world. i attended religious school and temple services, but felt like a member of a club that would have me only reluctantly. this is the crime of all cultures, not just mine.

my Jewishness, rather, was based on philosophy. hear o Israel, the Lord is one became hear o Israel, all is one. i am one, the universe is one, we are one. these are the only things you need to be a Jew. the unity of all things, and the compassion born of its knowing.

still, i was a troubled youth, my mind sharp but twisted, my body an alien territory, driven by resentment. i felt cursed, forgone and forgotten. in spite of myself, i learned to talk to the universe-god/myself, and asked the only questions.

why did you make me so? i asked. why put me on this world to suffer? why give me the intelligence to know that i am not normal? why give me this body, this mind, this heritage, and this burden of pain?

and was answered, with the words of the universe-god/myself — did you never make a mistake? with six billion souls on the face of the world, do you expect perfection? i have made you suffer, but i have given you a deep soul, now use it, thumb your nose at misery.

i was not blessed with children. i have no one to pass this to but you. i wear my hat, and i know my story, though it makes my heart ache at times. if i am large and obvious, it is to say to you that 3000 years of history will not end with me.