

# Jerusalem Letters

## **Jordan Peterson and Conservatism's Rebirth**

By Yoram Hazony, July 16, 2018

Jordan Peterson doesn't seem to think of himself as a conservative. Yet there he is, standing in the space once inhabited by conservative thinkers such as G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley Jr. and Irving Kristol. Addressing a public that seems incapable of discussing anything but freedom, Mr. Peterson presents himself unmistakably as a philosophical advocate of order. His bestselling book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, makes sense of ideas like the "hierarchy of place, position and authority," as well as people's most basic attachments to "tribe, religion, hearth, home and country" and "the flag of the nation." The startling success of his elevated arguments for the importance of order has made him the most significant conservative thinker to appear in the English-speaking world in a generation.

Mr. Peterson, 56, is a University of Toronto professor and a clinical psychologist. Over the past two years he has rocketed to fame, especially online and in contentious television interviews. To his detractors, he might as well be Donald Trump. He has been criticized for the supposed banality of his theories, for his rambling and provocative rhetoric, and for his association with online self-help products. He has suffered, too, the familiar accusations of sexism and racism.

From what I have seen, these charges are baseless. But even if Mr. Peterson is imperfect, that shouldn't distract from the important argument he has advanced—or from its implications for a possible revival in conservative thought. The place to begin, as his publishing house will no doubt be

pleased to hear, is with *12 Rules for Life*, which is a worthy and worthwhile introduction to his philosophy.

Departing from the prevailing Marxist and liberal doctrines, Mr. Peterson relentlessly maintains that the hierarchical structure of society is hard-wired into human nature and therefore inevitable: “The dominance hierarchy, however social or cultural it might appear, has been around for some half a billion years. It’s permanent.” Moreover, young men and women (but especially men) tend to be healthy and productive only when they have found their place working their way up a hierarchy they respect. When they fail to do so, they become rudderless and sick, worthless to those around them, sometimes aimlessly violent.

In viewing political and social hierarchies as inevitable, Mr. Peterson may seem to be defending whoever happens to be powerful. But he’s doing nothing of the kind. He rejects the Marxist claim that traditional hierarchies are only about the self-interested pursuit of power. Human beings like having power, Mr. Peterson acknowledges. Yet the desire for it also drives them to develop the kinds of abilities their societies value. In a well-ordered society, high status often is a reward conferred for doing things that actually need to be done and done well: defending the state, producing things people need, enlarging the sphere of knowledge.

Mr. Peterson does not deny the Marxist charge that society oppresses individuals. “Culture is an oppressive structure,” he writes. “*It’s always been that way*. It’s a fundamental, universal existential reality.” But he breaks with prevailing political thought when he argues that the suffering involved in conforming to tradition may be worth it. When a father disciplines his son, he interferes with the boy’s freedom, painfully forcing him into accepted patterns of behavior and thought. “But if the father does not take such action,” Mr. Peterson says, “he merely lets his son remain

Peter Pan, the eternal Boy, King of the Lost Boys, Ruler of the non-existent Neverland.”

Similarly, Mr. Peterson insists it is “necessary and desirable for religions to have a dogmatic element.” This provides a stable worldview that allows a young person to become “a properly disciplined person” and “a well-forged tool.”

Yet this is not, for Mr. Peterson, the highest human aspiration. It is merely the first necessary step along a path toward maturity, toward an ever more refined uniqueness and individuality. The individuality he describes emerges over decades from an original personality forged through painful discipline. The alternative, he writes, is to remain “an adult two-year old” who goes to pieces in the face of any adversity and for whom “softness and harmlessness become the only consciously acceptable virtues.”

Like other conservative thinkers before him, Mr. Peterson’s interest in tradition flows from an appreciation of the weakness of the individual’s capacity for reason. We all think we understand a great deal, he tells his readers, but this is an illusion. What we perceive instead is a “radical, functional, unconscious simplification of the world—and it’s almost impossible for us not to mistake it for the world itself.”

Given the unreliability of our own thinking, Mr. Peterson recommends beginning with tried and tested ideas: “It is reasonable to do what other people have always done, unless we have a very good reason not to.” Maturity demands that we set out to “rediscover the values of our culture—veiled from us by our ignorance, hidden in the dusty treasure-trove of the past—rescue them, and integrate them into our own lives.”

In Western countries, that effort at rediscovery leads to one place. “The Bible,” Mr. Peterson writes, “is, for better or worse, the foundational

document of Western civilization.” It is the ultimate source of our understanding of good and evil. Its appearance uprooted the ancient view that the powerful had the right simply to take ownership of the weak, a change that was “nothing short of a miracle.” The Bible challenged, and eventually defeated, a world in which the murder of human beings for entertainment, infanticide, slavery and prostitution were simply the way things had to be.

As many readers have pointed out, Nietzsche’s critique of Enlightenment philosophy—he once called Kant “that catastrophic spider”—is everywhere in Mr. Peterson’s thought, even in his writing style. It is felt in his calls to “step forward to take your place in the dominance hierarchy,” and to “dare to be dangerous.” It is felt in risqué pronouncements such as this: “Men have to toughen up. Men demand it, and women want it.”

A famous passage from Nietzsche describes the destruction of the belief in God as the greatest cataclysm mankind has ever faced: “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?”

Mr. Peterson chronicles the misery of individuals now drifting through this “infinite nothing.” But he rejects Nietzsche’s atheism, along with the conclusion that we can make our own values. In telling readers to return to the Bible, Mr. Peterson seeks to rechain the earth to its sun. That seems impossible. Yet a vast audience has demonstrated a willingness, at least, to try.

For Mr. Peterson, the death of God was followed inevitably by a quick descent into hell. During the “terrible twentieth century,” as he calls it, “we discovered something worse, much worse, than the aristocracy and corrupt

religious beliefs that communism and fascism sought so rationally to supplant.” The Holocaust and the gulag, he argues, are sufficient to define evil for us, and “the good is whatever stops such things from happening.”

That is perfectly good Old Testament-style reasoning. Mr. Peterson adds Christian tropes such as the need for an “act of faith,” an “irrational commitment to the essential goodness” of things, a recognition that although “life is suffering,” sacrificing ourselves, as if on the cross, is pleasing to God.

Mr. Peterson’s intellectual framework has its weaknesses. He invokes recent social science (and its jargon) with a confidence that is at times naive. His often brilliant *12 Rules for Life* is littered with Heideggerian rubbish about “the betterment of Being,” in places where a thinker of Mr. Peterson’s abilities should have seen the need for a more disciplined effort to understand God. He lacks Nietzsche’s alertness to the ways in which the great religious traditions contradict one another, leading their adherents toward very different lives. Thus while Mr. Peterson is quite a good reader of the Bible, it is at times maddening to watch him import alien ideas into scripture—for instance, that the chaos preceding the creation was “female”—so as to fill out a supposed archetypal symmetry.

Nonetheless, what Mr. Peterson has achieved is impressive. In his writings and public appearances, he has made a formidable case that order—and not just freedom—is a fundamental human need, one now foolishly neglected. He is compelling in arguing that the order today’s deconstructed society so desperately lacks can be reintroduced, even now, through a renewed engagement with the Bible and inherited religious tradition.

Before Mr. Peterson, there was no solid evidence that a broad public would ever again be interested in an argument for political order. For more than a generation, Western political discourse has been roughly divided into two

camps. Marxists are sharply aware of the status hierarchies that make up society, but they are ideologically committed to overthrowing them. Liberals (both the progressive and classical varieties) tend to be altogether oblivious to the hierarchical and tribal character of political life. They know they're supposed to praise "civil society," but the Enlightenment concepts they use to think about the individual and the state prevent them from recognizing the basic structures of the political order, what purposes they serve, and how they must be maintained.

In short, modern political discourse is noteworthy for the gaping hollow where there ought to be conservatives—institutions and public figures with something important to teach about political order and how to build it up for everyone's benefit. Into this opening Mr. Peterson has ventured.

Perhaps without fully intending to do so, he has given the dynamic duo of Marxism and liberalism a hard shove, while shining a light on the devastation these utopian theories are wreaking in Western countries. He has demarcated a large area in which only conservative political and social thought can help. His efforts have provided reason to believe that a significant demand for conservative ideas still lives under the frozen wastes of our intellectual landscape.

If so, then Mr. Peterson's appearance may be the harbinger of a broader rebirth. His book is a natural complement to important recent works such as Ryszard Legutko's *The Demon in Democracy*, Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* and Amy Chua's *Political Tribes*. Representing divergent political perspectives, these works nevertheless share Mr. Peterson's project of getting past the Marxist and liberal frameworks and confronting our trained incapacity to see human beings and human societies for what they really are. As the long-awaited revival of conservative political thought finally gets under way, there may be much more of this to come.

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