

WHAT JONATHAN SACKS GAVE

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/jewish-world/2020/12/what-jonathan-sacks-gave/>

Two friends, a leading Catholic thinker and a leading American rabbi, pay tribute to the late chief rabbi, and his legacy both here and in Europe.

December 11, 2020 | Robert P. George, Meir Soloveichik

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This past weekend marked the shloshim, the end of the 30-day mourning period following the sudden death of the beloved Jewish leader Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. To mark the occasion, we invited two distinguished friends of his to reflect on his legacy.—The Editors



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks on November 10, 2013 in Jerusalem. *Lior Mizrahi/Getty Images.*

How a Rabbi Became Britain's Voice of Faith

by Robert P. George

The death of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks—Ya'akov Tsvi Zaks—on November 7, 2020 in London, at age seventy-two, is a blow to the world. He was a rare and precious man, who taught not only the Jewish community, but all of humanity. There are few such people in any age, and at some points in history there seem to be none at all. The world can ill afford to lose those it has.

That Rabbi Sacks's death was a blow to the Jewish community in Britain and beyond goes without saying. For 22 years (1991-2013) he served with enormous distinction as chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. In that capacity, he was a teacher of

Judaism, a judge on the rabbinic court, a spokesman for the Jewish community, and what might be described as British Jewry's ambassador to Jews throughout the world, including in Israel, and to the non-Jewish world.

When he assumed the office of chief rabbi, he had a tough act to follow in his greatly admired predecessor, Immanuel Jakobovits. Moreover, the job of chief rabbi is never an easy one. How does one lead a community where the number of opinions and points of view exceeds the number of members? Sacks, however, came close to making it look easy. There were to be sure controversies, and he got into a scrape or two and, being human, occasionally stumbled; but most of Britain's Jews felt that in Jonathan Sacks they had the man who was born to be chief rabbi. Who can gainsay them? He excelled in every dimension of the job.

His predecessor, Rabbi Jakobovits, was deeply respected and, as I noted, even admired by Jews and non-Jews alike in Britain. His memory is, indeed, for a blessing. I intend no invidious comparisons when I point out that Rabbi Sacks achieved something greater still—indeed something astonishing. In an age of fashionable skepticism and growing secularism, with religion of all types on the defensive in the lands that were once Christendom, Sacks became—for Christians as well as for Jews—the “voice of faith.”

In an Anglican nation with a large Catholic minority and only a tiny Jewish presence, it was a rabbi to whom believers—Christian no less than Jewish—looked to explain and defend in the public square belief in God and allegiance to the moral principles of what Sacks did not hesitate to refer to as “the Judeo-Christian tradition.”

I will not here speculate as to why that role was not played by, say, the Anglican archbishops of Canterbury or York, or by the Catholic cardinal archbishop of Westminster. But they did not play that role, and Ya'akov Tsvi Zaks did.

The Jewish community there is tiny—approximately 250,000 people, far from all of whom are active participants in Jewish life, in an overall population of more than 68 million. Although respected today, Britain's Jewish community was subject to discrimination and other forms of mistreatment for much of its history, not to mention the four centuries in which Jews were barred from Britain altogether. What's more, like any community, Anglo-Jewry has internal conflicts, stresses, and strains, and it can exhibit a certain insularity in its efforts to avoid assimilation and absorption into the far larger Christian—though now largely secularized Christian—culture. How does the leader of such a community become the nation's voice of faith?

Rabbi Sacks did it by remaining rooted in, and unambiguously and unbendingly faithful to, Judaism. Although he spoke *to* the non-Jewish as well as the Jewish world, and though he came, in a sense, to speak *for* believers generally, and not merely for those of the Jewish faith, he always spoke *from* the Jewish community—from its sources, practices, traditions. He never purported or sought to transcend Judaism, or to create or embrace some universal religion that subsumed Judaism and all the others. He did not disdain particularism for the sake of delivering a universal

message; faux teachers of humanity try that all the time—and always fail. What he did was share with the world what, as a Jew, he understood to be of universal significance in the teachings and the moral witness of Judaism.

Jonathan Sacks did not find Judaism “too limited” or “too limiting” for a man of his formidable learning. On the contrary, he found it to be a limitless source of liberating wisdom—wisdom he enthusiastically and brilliantly shared with anyone who was willing to listen and learn. It turned out that there was a large market for the teachings he had on offer—in Britain and beyond. People were interested in what he had to say. The fact that he spoke precisely as a Jew, as a rabbi, as a teacher of Jewish wisdom presented as universal truth was no impediment to non-Jews and even nonbelievers.

That was in part because he was an extraordinarily gifted speaker and writer with a special knack for turning a phrase. It was in part because he was a man of deep and broad learning whose extensive academic training in philosophy made him at least the equal of any interlocutor, and who was at home with “the best that has been thought and said” across the arts and sciences. It was in part because religious folk facing militantly secular cultural and intellectual elites need and look for champions; and because secular folk cannot quite shake the need to ask and to wrestle with the great existential questions to which religions propose answers. And in no small part, it was because he was delivering the wisdom of a powerful and compelling tradition of faith and thought which he had utterly mastered, and in which he was himself spiritually and intellectually anchored.

What treasures from within that tradition of faith did Rabbi Sacks offer humanity? What was his message?

It was not some “technique” such as “the power of positive thinking.” It was certainly not “I’m OK, you’re OK.” It was not “be true to yourself,” or even “relax, God is in charge.”

Rabbi Sacks taught that life is not meaningless; the universe is not absurd; it is not all some cosmic “accident”; nor is it an illusion. Reality exists. It has its mysteries, yes; but the world is fundamentally intelligible and thus it can be known. The evidence for that is that we do indeed know things. And, Rabbi Sacks insisted, women and men endowed with reason can, with effort, understand the truth.

The independent existence and intelligibility of the truth means that human life is not all about force, power, and domination. It need not be, to quote his 17th-century countryman Thomas Hobbes, “poor, solitary, nasty, brutish, and short.” To avoid that darker, diminished existence, Rabbi Sacks inspired us to exercise our higher capacities and search for truth in all domains, the scientific and social-scientific, to be sure, as well as in the spiritual and moral domains. And it is worth the self-discipline needed to conduct ourselves personally and collectively in such a way as to establish and maintain something meriting the term “civilization.”

As rational creatures we have free will; as possessors of reason and freedom we humans, unlike brute animals, make choices and are responsible for our actions. There is an explanation for our powers—our literally Godlike powers—of reason and freedom: we were made, and sustained in being, by a loving God who fashioned us in His own image and according to His own likeness. Although finite and limited, our Godlikeness is real and cannot be erased. We are not God and must not seek to displace Him or usurp His supreme authority, yet God has, in His wisdom and love, seen fit to give human beings a share in His creative powers, making us, in certain respects, co-creators with Him.

That core idea, drawn from Genesis, and known by its Latin phrase *imago dei*, is the foundation of Rabbi Sacks's teaching, just as—indeed, precisely because—it is the foundational teaching of Jewish ethics. And it is here that his fundamental commitment to the particular teaching of the Jewish tradition yielded wisdom of universal significance. For, he taught, as creatures made in the image of God, human beings are bearers of inherent and equal worth (or what, adopting the modern parlance, Sacks called “dignity”). This is the predicate, though not necessarily the only predicate, of all more proximate ethical teachings, including those pertaining to truth-seeking and truth telling; sexuality, marriage, and the family; the just and responsible use and allocation of resources and opportunities; toleration, dialogue, and respect for difference; the formation and maintenance of a decent political order; the use of force in self-defense and defense of the innocent; and respect for human life. All of these require the recognition of human dignity, rooted in our being created in God's image.

The dignity that inheres in each of us also imposes on all of us universal obligations—universal, that is, because they are duties binding not only on Jews but on all men and women. It is not just Jews, or monotheists, or members of any particular religion or nation or tribe or race or class or caste who possess dignity. Nor is fundamental worth in any sense something we acquire by virtue of some quality that certain people possess and others don't, or that some possess in greater degree than others, or that may come and go over the course of a life, such as intelligence, strength, beauty, charm, or wit. People are of course unequal in various ways, and those ways can matter. But the Jewish claim on whose basis Rabbi Sacks became a global witness for the irreducible dignity that resides in the soul of every person is that, in the most fundamental respects, human equality is the truth of God's creation.

The truth of human equality, moreover, enables us to affirm that there are some things that justice requires and others that it forbids irrespective of the consequences. From the belief in human dignity it necessarily follows, for example, that the harvesting of vital organs from, say, a severely cognitively disabled child, to save the life of a great scientist who needs a heart transplant or a great athlete who needs a liver transplant is forbidden. It is this same belief that grounds the peremptory and absolute rejection in Judaism of the pagan idea that some human beings are “expendable,” even “defective” or “undesirable,” “useless eaters,” “*lebensunwertes Leben*.”

It was above all in proclaiming and brilliantly explaining and defending this radical belief, and its concrete moral implications, to men and women across the globe of all traditions of faiths, and

even those who profess no faith, that Jonathan Sacks—whose own tradition of faith represents a mere 0.02 percent of the world’s population—was a teacher of humanity.

What Jonathan Sacks Saw in America

by Meir Soloveichik

In the 1830s, a French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville authored *Democracy in America*. He wrote this book for his own countrymen, to help them understand that curious experiment in democracy unfurling across the ocean. Of course, the work has proven to be an inexhaustible source of instruction not only for his intended French audience, but for America itself. In our times, Lord Jonathan Sacks, a British peer and former chief rabbi of the Commonwealth, authored *The Home We Build Together*, which like *Democracy in America*, is a tribute to the United States. He further reflected on the unique nature of American society in many other works, including in his commentary on the Haggadah—the liturgy that orchestrates the ceremonial Passover meal—and in many of his reflections on the *parashah*, the weekly portion of Torah that Jewish communities study all over the world. Not since Tocqueville has a foreigner seen the United States with such clear eyes, and written about it in such an insightful way. These writings have greatly impacted me, as a Jew and as an American; and as the Jewish people marked the *shiva* and *shloshim*, the traditional seven- and thirty-day periods of mourning for Rabbi Sacks, it was in these writings that I found myself especially moved to appreciate his significance. The British peer and rabbi imparted to me the meaning of America.

Speaking to my community, America’s oldest congregation, in the week following his death, I noted that Sacks’s *shiva* coincided with the 400th anniversary of the event in which he located the beginning of the American story. On November 11, 1620, the newest arrivals to Massachusetts Bay affixed their names to the Mayflower compact, in which they pledged “solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another” to “covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick.” For Sacks, this moment marked America as unique. The settlements that would one day become the United States were inspired at the moment of their very birth by the Hebrew Bible, and therefore would forever be, in their very makeup, different from other nations around the world. He wrote:

American society is different because from the Pilgrim Fathers onward it was based on the concept of covenant as set out in Tanakh, especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The early settlers were Puritans, in the Calvinist tradition, the closest Christianity came to basing its politics on the Hebrew Bible. Covenantal societies

always represent a conscious new beginning by a group of people dedicated to an ideal.

A covenant is a political compact that is about more than self-interest; it is done in dedication to an ideal, binding the parties together in the presence of God. The institution of a covenant entered America with the Pilgrims, and continued in the days of Puritans, who were so inspired by the Bible's ideas that they not only adopted its political forms, but even named their children and their towns with words from the text.

Rabbi Sacks did not think—and of course, it isn't historically the case—that the arrival of the Pilgrims marked the founding of America. But like Tocqueville before him, Sacks saw that the ideals at the heart of American political culture could all be traced back to these covenantal origins. Commenting on a passage in Deuteronomy, the most political book in the Torah, Sacks suggested that “what is extraordinary about America is that this deeply theological way of speaking about national purpose did not end (as it did in Britain) with the 17th century.” In the best of American inaugural addresses and civic celebrations, he continued, leaders of the United States spoke of a freedom that was “biblical rather than libertarian: a matter less of rights than responsibilities, not the freedom to do what one likes, but the freedom to do what one ought,” portraying America as “the promised land to which successive generations of immigrants have come to find freedom from oppression and build, in John Winthrop's famous phrase, ‘a city upon a hill.’” America thereby illustrated that it had learned from the Bible that a society that does not perpetuate its ideals cannot sustain and does not deserve its freedom.

It is for this reason, Rabbi Sacks commented, that Moses commanded the laws pertaining to generational transmission at the very outset of the Exodus, before any other laws more immediately necessary for political order and national survival. To a modern political thinker this may seem strange: one might have thought that Moses, on the cusp of the most important political liberation in the history of the world, would speak to the Israelites about political structures that would govern the newly liberated nation. Instead, he speaks about parents and children: “And thou shalt tell thy son in that day saying: it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.”

Moses, Sacks argues, “fixed his vision not on the immediate but on the distant future, and not on adults but children. In so doing he was making a fundamental point. It may be hard to escape from tyranny, but it is harder still to build and sustain a free society.” The Jewish people ritualized this wisdom and developed it into the elaborate Passover meal, in which parents transmit to their posterity the story of the origins of national liberty, its ultimate meaning. In so doing, the elder Jewish generation nurses the seedbeds of the younger generation's freedom. And “civil religion,” Sacks wrote, “has the same relationship to the United States as Passover does to the Jewish people.”

It is first and foremost not a philosophy but a story. It tells of how a persecuted group escaped from the old world and made a hazardous journey to an unknown land, there to construct a new society. . . . It is no accident that the founders of America turned to the Hebrew Bible, or that successive presidents have done likewise, because there is

no other text in Western literature that draws [on] these themes. . . . Israel, ancient and modern, and the United States are the two supreme examples of societies constructed in conscious pursuit of an idea.

But Rabbi Sacks did more than admire America: he recommended the covenantal idea to the West at large. In a moving reflection in *First Things*, Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, described how Rabbi Sacks addressed the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops. He was, Williams remarked, “the first Jewish speaker to be invited to this event.” There, Sacks “spoke precisely about covenant, and transformed the word for us.” The bishops weren’t the only ones to be so moved by Sacks’s wisdom. Tony Blair, Britain’s former prime minister, seemed to me on the brink of tears on the occasion of Rabbi Sacks’s *shloshim*. Reflecting on his moments studying the Bible with his friend, Blair, a religious man who has since converted to Catholicism, clearly saw Sacks as his rabbi.

I found Blair’s reflection redolent with meaning, as some of Rabbi Sacks’s best reflections on faith and politics emerged from these private study sessions with Blair. At a public conversation at Yeshiva University’s Straus Center, Rabbi Sacks describes how Blair had opined to him, “Jonathan, I’ve come to the boring bit of the Bible.” Sacks replied: which boring bit of the Bible have you reached, Prime Minister? Said Blair, “That stuff about the tabernacle at the end of Exodus. Does go on a bit, doesn’t it?” Indeed it does. After all, as Rabbi Sacks noted, the Almighty brings the entire universe into being in only 34 verses, whereas it takes more than 600 verses to describe the erection of the tabernacle.

What wisdom is to be found in such a baroque description of the Tabernacle? Rabbi Sacks’s immediate answer was pithy and profound: if a difference exists between the brief creation in Genesis and the lengthy construction of Exodus, it is because it is easy, effortless, for the Almighty to create a home for man; it requires extraordinary effort for man to make a home for God. But it was only afterward, he told me, that he began fully to understand what the Tabernacle truly teaches us. The purpose of the Tabernacle, it would seem, is sacrifice and cultic ritual; but if so, then the proper place for its construction to appear would be in Leviticus, where the laws of sacrificial ritual are delineated. If the Tabernacle is described in Exodus, it is because its central lesson is political.

[T]o turn a group of individuals, or diverse tribes, into a nation, they must build something together. It was built out of difference, each a distinctive contribution. Some brought [metals], others jewels, others their skills and time. . . . How do you turn a group of people into a nation? God’s answer was dazzling in its simplicity. You get them voluntarily to create something together. A nation is built by building. . . . The tabernacle represents integration without assimilation. Because we are not the same, we each have something unique to contribute, something only we can give.

The understanding of society that emerges from these passages is, in Rabbi Sacks’s words, “the home we build together,” and the Tabernacle story teaches that we need not deny our differences

to join ourselves in covenant as one nation. Biblical Israel is of course unique, but Rabbi Sacks argued that this message could inspire other nations as well.

The question, of course, is how resonant Rabbi Sacks's message is today. Tony Blair may be a religious man, but as Rabbi Sacks shared, the prime minister's Bible sessions with the chief rabbi were kept secret because in Europe political leaders know not to speak openly about faith. Indeed, he wryly noted, Tony Blair's spokesman Alastair Campbell offered a famous reply to the press's inquiries about the prime minister's faith: "We don't do God." What about the political culture in the United States? To what extent do we still "do God" on these shores?

In the face of the dominant secularism of the West, Rabbi Sacks persisted as a witness to his faith. What kept him going? Rabbi Sacks mentioned to me that he tried to read Tocqueville at least once a year, and I believe that he, the 21st-century Tocqueville, turned to the 19th-century Tocqueville for inspiration and hope. In one of the most famous passages in *Democracy in America*, the author puzzles over the fact that "philosophers had a very simple explanation for the gradual weakening of beliefs: religious zeal was bound to die down as enlightenment and freedom spread." In a free America, however, this did not seem to be true. "It is tiresome," he wrote, "that the facts do not fit this theory at all."

Tocqueville offered an answer to this conundrum, but Rabbi Sacks put forward a suggestion of his own. Religion survives, according to Sacks, "because it answers three questions that every reflective person must ask. Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?" To be human is to seek meaning, and that is why even modernity has not destroyed faith. The great achievements of the modern age—science, technology, liberal democracy, and the market economy—have given us innumerable benefits, but they do not help us answer these questions. And since these questions nonetheless persist, Sacks wrote, "we will always find ourselves turning to religion."

In this way, Rabbi Sacks teaches us how, in the face of biblical forgetfulness, not to despair. The Jewish notion of hope, he was wont to remark, is very different from optimism: "Hope is the faith that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope." As I noted in *Commentary*, the time may be ripe for a "1620 project," an attempt to rediscover how Hebraic ideas impacted America. In this endeavor, it is an extraordinary fact that it is the eloquence of a British rabbinic member of the House of Lords that will help us do so.

Reflecting to my community on the life and legacy of Rabbi Sacks on the week in which we marked the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival, I suggested that we ourselves engage in thanksgiving for all Rabbi Sacks has taught us, and prayed that we seek as a society to continue to perpetuate his teachings. We are deeply saddened by the loss of this great teacher, but it is he who would remind us to be also inspired by what he has taught, and to focus on what we can achieve in the future: "Judaism," he wrote, "is the principled rejection of tragedy in the name of hope." May his memory be a blessing, as it no doubt will be, so long as we continue to learn from his words.