

“God promises, but we have to act”

A D’var Torah in Memory of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z”l

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This past Shabbat, a week ago today, when I was walking home from shul with Ezra, a member of the congregation who had not been in services that morning came to alert me that Pennsylvania had determined that former Vice President Joe Biden had won the vote count there, and that the Biden-Harris ticket had been declared the winners of the election. This person knew that I would not have access to television or cell phone, and wanted me to know without delay that the election had been decided. The very next day we learned that America’s favorite gameshow host, philanthropist, and all around mensch, Alex Trebek had succumbed to his two year battle with pancreatic cancer. Between the hysteria of the election results and the tributes to an American entertainment icon, another piece of news registered for the Jewish world...the death of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. If there were cards, like baseball cards, but with famous rabbis’ faces and stats on the back, undoubtedly Jonathan Sacks would be one of the most coveted. He was a rabbi of international renown, respect, and even fame. I remember hearing him speak here in Washington at Sixth and I. As he lectured in his mellifluous British accent, I imagined what it must have been like for the disciples in the Talmud to sit at the feet of the great Sages in the *beit midrash*. My own understanding of Torah and the rabbinate has been indelibly shaped by Jonathan Sacks. I was examining my *te’udah*, my ordination certificate from the Jewish Theological Seminary recently. It affirms that my vocation is: “*le’harbitz Torah b’rabim, u’lehafitz ruach da’at ve’yirat Hashem bein kahal adato.*” To be a rabbi means “to disseminate the knowledge of Torah among the masses, and to spread the spirit of knowledge and awe of God among the congregation of God’s people.” No one in modern times accomplished that more compellingly than Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who was truly a *gadol ha’dor*, an unparalleled leader of this generation.

But like many outstanding historical personalities beginning with Abraham and Moses, it was not apparent that the future Chief Rabbi of the of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, author of more than 30 books, member of the House of Lords, knighted by the Queen of England, radio and television personality, confidant of prime ministers, and dear friend of royalty, popes, and archbishops of Canterbury alike would pursue such a life. The young Jonathan Sacks, who grew up attending Anglican rather than Jewish primary schools, who earned an undergraduate degree from Cambridge, came to the United States as an adventurous 19 year old with a Greyhound bus ticket. A meeting with the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson in New York changed the course of his life. Schneerson expressed concern about the state of Jewish life at Cambridge, and more poignantly asked what Sacks was doing about it. That conversation was pivotal. He returned to England, dropped his plans to become an accountant, and enrolled in rabbinical school. His career skyrocketed from there...by age 42 he had already led some of London’s most prestigious synagogues and had been appointed Chief Rabbi and successor to Lord Immanuel Jacobovits. But rather than attending to the minutiae of running Britain’s mikvehs, *batei din*, schools and cemeteries, Sacks used his post to project an intellectually challenging yet relatable Judaism; he leveraged his deep knowledge of secular and literary sources to translate complex Jewish ideas not only to Jews but to an increasing audience

of non-Jewish followers as well. I think the first of his many books that I read was “To Heal a Fractured World,” which begins with these words:

The God who created the world in love calls on us to create in love. The God who gave us the gift of freedom asks us to use it to honour and enhance the freedom of others. God, the ultimate Other, asks us to reach out to the human other. More than God is a strategic intervener, he is a teacher. More than he does our will, he teaches us how to do his. Life is God’s call to responsibility.^[1]

This idea of personal responsibility also comes through in a *d’var Torah* he wrote for this week’s parasha in a collection of commentaries called *Lessons in Leadership*. Rabbi Sacks notes that God has made fabulous promises to Abraham...

Throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah, God promises them two things: children and land. The promises of land is repeated no less than seven times. The promise of children occurs four times. Abraham’s descendants will be a “great nation” as many as “the dust of the earth” and “the stars of the sky; he will be the father not of one nation but of many. Despite this, when Sarah dies, Abraham has not a single inch of the land that he can call his own, and has only one child who will continue the covenant-Isaac, currently unmarried. Neither promise has been fulfilled...

Did God just forget about those promises that were made to Abraham? Was God speaking metaphorically, somehow not literally referring to actual descendants or any specific land? Can you imagine what Abraham must be thinking as he buries his beloved wife Sarah without seeing any of these promises fulfilled? Rabbi Sacks teaches us that the delay in fulfillment not at all accidental...rather God “slows down” the action in order to teach a timeless lesson:

God promises, but we have to act. God promised Abraham the land, but he had to first buy the field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham first had to ensure that his son was married, and to a woman who would share the live of the covenant, so that Abraham would have, as we say today, “Jewish grandchildren.”

Despite all the promises, God does not and will not do it alone. By the very act of self-limitation (tzimtzum) through which He creates the space for human freedom, He gives us the responsibility, and only by exercising it do we reach our full stature as human beings. God saved Noah from the Flood, but Noah had to make the ark. He gave the land of Israel to the people of Israel, but they had to fight the battles. God gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed. What changes the world, what fulfills our destiny, is not what God does for us, but what we do for God.^[2]

This call to personal responsibility, whether as individuals or religious communities or humanity as a whole was a core message of Rabbi Sack’s teachings. Addressing a multi-faith audience Rabbi Sacks declared in no uncertain terms:

^[1] Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal a Fractured World; The Ethics of Responsibility*. Schocken 2005, page 3.

^[2] Sacks, Jonathan. *Lessons in Leadership; A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*. Maggid, 2015, page 25

When religion turns men into murderers, God weeps....too often in the history of religion, people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love, and practised cruelty in the name of the God of compassion. When this happens, God speaks, sometimes in a still, small voice almost inaudible beneath the clamour of those claiming to speak on his behalf. What he says at such times is: Not in My name!^[3]

Reacting to challenging texts that every religion has in their canon, he said:

Never say, I hate, I kill because my religion says so. Every text needs interpretation. Every interpretation needs wisdom. Every wisdom needs careful negotiation between the timeless and time. Fundamentalism reads texts as if God were as simple as we are. That is unlikely to be true.^[4]

Rabbi Sacks did not insist that Judaism was the only religion to possess truth. In fact he once said that “God is greater than religion. He is only partially comprehended by any faith.”^[5] This claim got him in hot water with the Haredi community, which always suspected him of being a closet liberal and labeled him a heretic. The Talmud famously says: *Ain navi be’iro*, meaning, “You can’t be a prophet in your own town.” As Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks had plenty of detractors on the right as well as the left. While many Britons looked forward to his radio broadcasts and television appearances, his hold on British Jewry was narrower than his title suggested. But the politicking of the chief rabbinate would not hamper his message. Arguably after he retired he became even a more widely globetrotting champion of God, rational religion, and always the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

One of my favorite teachings of Rabbi Sacks, came as a response to a question by a member of the audience in one of his lectures. This person asked the age old question of why God allows bad things to happen to good people. His answer is astonishing...the single best answer to this unanswerable question I have ever heard. Rabbi Sacks said: “God does not want us to understand. Because if we ever understood, we would be forced to accept that bad things happen to good people, and God does not want us to accept those bad things. He wants us not to understand, so that we will fight against the bad and the injustices of this world, and that is why there is not answer to that question. God has arranged that we shall never have an answer to it.”^[6]

I urge you to familiarize yourself with the works of this great spiritual genius whose body left the world last Shabbat, but whose soul remains very much alive in the hearts of all those he inspired and taught, myself included. Perhaps read one of his parasha commentaries each week as part of your Shabbat preparation. But let us all dedicate ourselves, in the memory of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, to refuse to accept the bad things that happen to good people; to fight against the injustices of the world, and never to surrender to them. And may the memory of this righteous teacher and *rav* continue to inspire many people to deeds of goodness in this world, in God’s name. *Yehi zichro baruch*...may his memory always be a blessing.

^[3] Sacks, Jonathan. *Not in God’s Name; Confronting Religious Violence*, Maggid, 2015, page 3.

^[4] Ibid. Page 219

^[5] Goldman, Ari L. “Jonathan Sacks, the U.K.’s Inclusive Former Chief Rabbi, Dies at 72.” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2020.

^[6] <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/09/933230474/rabbi-jonathan-sacks-towering-intellect-of-judaism-dies-at-72>