



A Tribute to our Rabbi and Teacher, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ztz"l: "Separating and Connecting...to his Legacy"

Dear friends,

At this time, Erev Shabbat, of last week, our world was a bit more whole and our people a bit more capable of holiness. For the very next day, on Shabbat Parshat Vayera, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks left this world to earn his well deserved place in Olam Habah. The aftermath of his loss has been very difficult on his family, Klal Yisrael and for all of us who have benefitted from his many works that have enlightened our understanding of Judaism and humanity. His eloquence, in the written and spoken word, and his ability to express profound concepts in equally profound simplicity have left indelible impressions upon countless Jews and non-Jews alike. He was our spokesman for a modern, philosophically resonant and contemporary Judaism that was, at the same time, grounded in our Mesorah, faithful to the millenia-old Torah centered outlook that has sustained generations. The output of significant books (over 30), essays (thousands) and the countless videos, programs, and lectures that he has left us with is truly other worldly. Names like Rashi and the Rambam come to mind when I think of what we have lost in a man that tragically died at the age of 72.

When Hashem resigns Himself to having to destroy the world at the end of Parshat Bereshit, the Torah describes God's emotional state by saying, "Va'Yit'atzev El Libo - He was sad in His heart." What "saddened" God? God was saddened over the loss of potential that all of humanity had, which we now would never have the chance to see. Thinking about what could have been - made God sad, as it were. Last Saturday night, when I heard that Rabbi Sacks passed away, I began to cry. I cried at the thought that we would no longer be able to look forward each week to his masterful thoughts on the weekly Parsha, in "Covenant

and Conversation." I cried about all of the books that he was yet to publish, which we would never see. I cried at the realization that we would never again have the opportunity to welcome him into our midst to inspire us to build a better world and become more dedicated and educated Jews. This has been a hard week for Klal Yisrael. And this whole COVID period has seen us lose sages and leaders of our people from all sectors of our community, culminating last weekend with Rabbi Dovid Feinstein ztz"l and Rabbi Sacks ztz"l.

So where do we go from here? The only place to look is in Rabbi Sacks' own writings. Last Shabbat, I brought one book with me to Shul, Rabbi Sacks' latest work on the weekly Parsha, "Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas." In the essay on Vayera he outlines a dilemma about Avraham; he is literally called the "Av," the father of all people, the quintessential father. Yet, he seemingly acts in ways that are the antithesis of how a father should act towards his child and how a child should act towards his father. He leaves his own father in his old age to set off on his "Lech Lecha" journey to the Land of Canaan and he also cuts himself away from his own children, by sending away Yishmael and by being prepared to sacrifice Isaac on an altar. Asks Rabbi Sacks, how can he be held up as the model familial-figure for all to follow? The answer, he says, is that the Torah is teaching us a fundamental lesson in the value of the individual. "First separate, then connect; it is the carefully calibrated distance that allows us to grow as individuals." He asserts that in the ancient world, people were tethered to their families in ways that inhibited individuals, specifically, children and wives, from breaking away from their father's patriarchal hold on who they should or should not become. In Rabbi Sacks' inimitable way, he declares that "in this world-transforming moment of the birth of the individual, God is teaching him (Avraham) the delicate art of making space, without which no true individuality can grow."

I remember reading that last week on Shabbat morning and not quite fully comprehending it in the context of Avraham's life, but over the course of this week of shiva and introspection, I have come to understand what he was telling us at the very moment that he was passing on from this earth. You see, Rabbi Sacks, in all of his various modes and means of expression to us - throughout the years we were blessed to have him as the luminary of our generation - did it all for one reason: to empower us. To give us the ability to recognize the truth of Judaism, of its many blessings and fulfilling ideals. He empowered us with a thirst and yearning for Torah knowledge that can only be found in its midst. And he empowered us to not succumb to the challenges of secular society and modernity, but to be up to the challenges and elevate ourselves to rise to them, even embrace them.

"First separate, then connect." God ordained that the time had come for him to "separate" from us and our world, and the Jewish community, is bereft. "Then connect." How do we fill this incalculable void? We "connect" in all the ways he taught us to. Connect to God. Connect to people. Connect to Judaism. Connect to Torah. Connect to morality and justice. Connect to Am Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael. In this way we connect to him and his teachings as his legacy endures and inspires forever and ever.

Yehi Zichro Baruch.

Rabbi Jonathan Morgenstern

For a moving tribute, expounding on the Vayeirah essay I referenced above, see the eulogy delivered Rabbi Sacks' daughter, Gila Sacks, about her father.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHhP-uNLtnw&feature=emb_title

Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ztz"l at the Young Israel of Scarsdale, Sept 9, 2015.

