

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Thank you to the sponsors of this week's drasha :

- Pinchas and Toby Fader, "In memory of Toby's father, Mordechai Briks, Mordechai ben Shlomo Halevi, whose *yahrtzeit* is on the 3rd of Kislev."
- Les Vogel, "In memory of my late wife, Sandy Vogel, whose second *yahrtzeit* begins this Motzei Shabbat, and my late father-in-law, Meyer Listernick, Sandy's father, whose *yahrtzeit* will be on November 27.
- Shimmy and Chaya Weichbrod, "In memory of Shimmy's mother, Cecile Weichbrod, whose *yahrtzeit* is today, on the 27th of Cheshvan."
- Tommy and Judy Weiss, "In memory of Judy's father, Max Paschkusz, whose *yahrtzeit* was on the 25th of Cheshvan."

May all the *neshamos* have an *aliya*, and may all the sponsors be rewarded for their generosity and dedication to our shul, with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

This week, Klal Yisrael mourned the loss of two great leaders, Rav Dovid Feinstein, zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem (MTJ), and Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, zt"l, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain.

Beginning this afternoon, I will be dedicating the Shabbos afternoon shiurim this month to studying *teshuvos* written by a *talmid* of Rav Dovid Feinstein, based on his *pesakim* and *chidushim*, called Vedibarta Bam. Many stories are told about his erudition, knowledge, humility, and kindness. I was struck by one simple example. A number of years ago, a Jewish magazine asked 20 Jewish leaders the following question: "if you could invite three people from any time in Jewish history to your Shabbos table, who would it be?" There was a lot of overlap in the answers—most chose the *avos*, *imahos*, great sages from the Talmud, and deceased loved ones. Rav Dovid had a unique answer. He simply said—"three *aniyim* who could use a place to eat a *Shabbos seuda*." He reminded us that inviting guests should be focused on helping others, and not just on enjoying the meal, ourselves.

The **Gemara in Yevamos 79b** teaches us the essential qualities of the Jewish people--we are רחמנים ביישנים גומלי חסדים, compassionate, humble, and kind. That truly sums up the genuine and Godly character of this spiritual giant—a giant in Torah knowledge and Torah *midos*. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.

I would like now to focus my attention on Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, an eloquent spokesman for the Jewish people, Judaism, ethics, and morality. In an age where religion and God are under attack, he was an ardent defender of God. He was a walking *kiddush Hashem*, bringing honor and glory to Hashem through his speeches, books, and exemplary character. His writings have had a profound effect on me, since I read my first Rabbi Sacks book, which my British roommate lent me close to 25 years ago.

He describes how it all came to be, in his eulogy for the **Lubavitcher Rebbe**.

"In 1968 I was a second-year undergraduate at Cambridge, studying philosophy at a time when being a philosopher with religious faith seemed, at least in Britain, almost a contradiction in terms. So that summer I traveled to America to see if I could meet the leading rabbis and Jewish intellectuals and hear from them how they wrestled with some of the problems I had encountered. What fascinated me from the outset was how many of those I met mentioned the Rebbe. Already then, he had assumed almost a legendary stature. It didn't matter where I went or whom I spoke to, somehow his name would come up in the conversation and it would be spoken of in awe, whether the person I was speaking to was Chassidic or not, Orthodox or not. People seemed to know that there was something special about this man that transcended the normal parameters of religious leadership.

I soon found out what it was, when I had the chance to meet the Rebbe in the course of that visit. He was the only person among the dozens I encountered who performed a role reversal in the course of our conversation.

Within minutes I discovered that it was not me who was interviewing the Rebbe, but the Rebbe who was interviewing me. He wanted to know about the state of Jewish life in Cambridge, how many Jewish students there were, how many were engaged with Jewish life and what I was doing to increase their number.

This was wholly unexpected and life-changing. Here was one of the leaders of the Jewish world taking time—considerable time—to listen to an unknown undergraduate student from thousands of miles away and speak to him as if he mattered, as if he could make a difference. He was, powerfully and passionately, urging me to get involved. Years later, looking back on that encounter, I summed it up by saying that good leaders create followers. Great leaders create leaders. That was the Rebbe’s greatness. Not only did he lead, he was a source of leadership in others.

I think this statement can be applied to Rabbi Sacks, as well. He was truly a great leader, who created leaders, educators, and thinkers. He inspired a generation to commit to live godly lives, to be more tolerant of one another, and to build bridges between people. He believed in humanity, in the potential for good in each and every person, in learning from everyone, and in our responsibility to contribute to making the world a better, less fractured place.

His works deal with a wide range of issues, and leave us with many important and relevant insights. In one work, called Celebrating Life, which he wrote after the death of his father, he said “*there is, however, one spiritual discipline which religion once gave us and which we still need. It is the simple act of saying ‘thank you’ to God. There are prayers in which we ask God for the things we do not have, but there are others in which we simply thank God for the things we do have; family friends, life itself with its counterpoint of pleasure and pain, the sheer exhilaration of knowing that we are here and we might not have been. Gratitude, the acknowledgement that what we have is a gift, is one of the most profound religious emotions. ...there is no single route to happiness...but the daily discipline of thanking God for what we are and what we enjoy is the most ancient form of what is today called ‘cognitive therapy.’* **Making a blessing over life is the best way of turning life into a blessing.**”

On that note, thank you, Hashem, for the gift of Rabbi Sacks; his 25 impactful works and for his life of *kiddush Hashem*. We are also grateful for his positive approach to problems. As his daughter Gila said in her eulogy for her father, when a colleague told her there are “solvable problems and unsolvable problems,” she said her immediate reaction was “*I don’t understand--of course all problems are solvable, some are hard, many are bigger than one person, even a whole nation can solve. And I had a moment of clarity about what my Dad had given me, that single belief that nothing was inevitable—that no problems were too big for people to try to solve, that things can always be changed and people can always change them...that belief shaped everything else.*”

Rabbi Sacks believed that problems are there to be solved...and human beings were placed here to work on solving every problem. This is an idea he discussed in his book To Heal a Fractured World, when he wrote: “*One of Judaism’s most distinctive and challenging ideas is its ethic of responsibility, the idea that God invites us to become, in the rabbinic phrase, his ‘partners in the work of creation’ ...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...*”

He ends that book by analyzing a statement of the mystic, **Ar”i Hakadosh**, who “*framed a vision of hope in the midst of catastrophe. The Divine light which flooded creation proved too strong. There was a breaking of the vessels, as a result of which fragments of God’s light lay hidden under the rubble and wreckage of disaster. It is our task to heal or mend the world by searching for the fragments and rescuing them, one by one. It was a lovely image, because it refused to accept the fractures of the world as incurable, but neither did it suppose that repair would be instantaneous, easy or dramatic.*”

Similarly, in his Letters to the Next Generation 2, an ethical will Rabbi Sacks dedicated to his children, he expanded this idea when he said “*I want to explain one of the most difficult, revolutionary, ideas of Judaism – something still not well understood but which is absolutely fundamental to our view of the world. Judaism is a religion of what one writer called ‘sacred discontent.’ There’s an ancient midrash – a rabbinical commentary dating back some fifteen centuries. It is asking the question, what made Avraham begin his religious quest? The answer it gives is very strange indeed. It says that he was like a man on a journey in some remote place when he sees in the distance a palace in flames. He asks, Can the palace be without an owner? While he is puzzling about this, he hears a voice coming from the burning building saying, ‘I am the owner of the palace.’ So Avraham heard God saying, ‘I am the owner of the world.’ This is a haunting story. Let’s figure out what it means. Avraham is saying, the palace must have an owner. Someone designed this building, and had it built. Palaces don’t suddenly appear of their own accord. And the owner, or at least someone working for him, must be there now, because you don’t abandon a palace or leave it unattended.*”

*“In which case, why is it burning? Somebody should be putting out the flames. I have never heard a more profound and unsettling account of the nature of the universe. We believe that it is like a palace. Someone designed it. Someone built it. Someone therefore owns it. As I wrote before, the more we understand of how finely tuned the universe is for the emergence of stars, planets and life, the less likely it is that it simply appeared by spontaneous self-generation. Someone made the universe that gave rise to us. In which case, why is there so much evil and suffering and injustice and cruelty and violence and terror and disease and needless death? **The universe is a contradiction. On the one hand, order, on the other, chaos. On the one hand, the palace, on the other, the flames. Avraham lived, and we live, with that contradiction. And as the midrash indicates, there is only one way out. God is calling us, as He called Avraham: ‘Help Me put out the flames.’**”*

I want to share his insight along these lines on this week’s parsha, Chayei Sarah. It is published in his Lessons in Leadership. “*Describing the death of Avraham, our parsha says that he ‘breathed his last and died in good old age, old and satisfied’ (Gen. 25:8). His is the most serene death in the Torah. Yet consider his life, fraught as it was with trial after trial.*

To pursue the call of God, he had to say goodbye to his land, his birthplace and his father’s house and travel to an unknown destination. Twice, famine forced him into exile, where his life was in danger. Promised countless children – as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky – he remained childless until old age. Then God told him to send away his son by Sarah’s handmaid Hagar. And if that trial were not heartbreaking enough, God then told him to sacrifice his only son with Sarah, Isaac, the one whom God had told him would be his spiritual heir and bearer of the covenant into the future.

Seven times promised a land, when Sarah died, he owned not a single square inch of territory in which to bury her, and had to entreat the Hittites to let him buy a field and burial cave. This was a life of disappointed hopes and delayed fulfillments. What kind of man was this that the Torah can say that he died “in good old age, old and satisfied”?

“I learned the answer to this question through a series of life-changing encounters with Holocaust survivors. They were among the strongest, most life-affirming people I have ever met. For years I wondered how they were able to survive at all, having seen what they saw and known what they knew. They had lived through the deepest darkness ever to have descended on a civilization.

Eventually I realized what they had done. Almost without exception, when the war was over, they focused with single-minded intensity on the future. Strangers in a strange land, they built homes and careers, married and had children and brought new life into the world.

Often, they did not talk about their experiences during the Shoah, even to their spouses, their children and their closest friends. This silence lasted, in many cases, for as long as fifty years. Only then, when the future they had built was secure, did they allow themselves to look back and bear witness to what they had suffered and seen. Some of them wrote books. Many of them went around schools, telling their story so that the

Holocaust could not be denied. First, they built a future. Only then, did they allow themselves to remember the past.

*That is what Avraham did in this week's parsha. He had received three promises from God: children, a land, and the assurance that he would be the father, not of one nation but of many nations (Gen. 17:4-5). **At the age of 137, he had one unmarried son, no land, and had fathered no nations. He uttered not a single word of complaint. It seems that he realized that God wanted him to act, not to wait for God to do the work for him.***

So, when Sarah died, he bought the first plot in what would become the Holy Land, the field and cave of Machpelah. Then he instructed his servant to find a wife for Isaac, his son, so that he might live to see the first Jewish grandchildren. Lastly, in his old age, he married again and had six sons, who would eventually become progenitors of many nations. He did not, except briefly, sit and mourn the past. Instead he took the first steps toward building the future. . .

That is what the Jewish people did collectively when, a mere three years after standing eyeball-to-eyeball with the angel of death at Auschwitz, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the Jewish State in our people's ancient homeland, the land of Israel. Had world Jewry sat passively and wept from then till now for the murdered generations of European Jewry, it would have been an understandable reaction. But it did not. It was as if the Jewish people had said collectively, in the words of King David, "I will not die but live" (Ps. 118:17), thereby giving testimony to the God of life. That is why the West's oldest nation is still young, a world leader in life-saving medicine, disaster relief, and life-enhancing technology.

Rabbi Sacks has now left the world deprived of his talents, his intellect, and his humanity, but our world is a better place because of the life he lived and the important message he left behind in his writings and legacy. He also left us with a mission to carry on the work he was not able to finish. Our task is to continue to build bridges, to advance understanding, compassion and humanity. Our mission is to be passionate advocates for faith in God and religion, to support the State of Israel and the Jewish people, and to promote Torah values whenever possible. But not just in theory—in practice. As it says in **Pirkei Avos 2:16** *ממנה ליבטל ממה לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה*, *It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.* In other words, you need not finish the mission of fixing the world, but you have no right to abdicate your responsibility from attempting to solve the problems.

Rabbi Sacks wrote in To Heal a Fractured World that for fourteen years he carried around in his pocket a poem by **Theodore Roosevelt** "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

In his memory, let us rededicate ourselves to the Jewish people...and remember, as he writes in his work, A Letter in the Scroll that "Judaism is not a theory, a system, a set of speculative propositions, an "ism." It is a call, and bears our name...It is a summons to us, mediated through more than a hundred generations of our ancestors, written in the history of their lives and now confronting us as our heritage and responsibility. . . This, then is our story, our gift to the next generation. I received it from my parents and they from theirs across great expanses of space and time. There is nothing quite like it. It changed and today it still challenges the moral imagination of mankind. I want to say to my children: Take it, cherish it, learn to understand it and love it. Carry it, and it will carry you. And you may in time pass it on to your children. For you are a member of an eternal people, a letter in their scroll. Let the eternity live in you.

Thank you, Rabbi Sacks. We will miss you.