

The Thought Worlds of Rabbi Sacks

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David Shatz and Jonathan Sacks

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks' contributions to Jewish thought are massive and breathtaking. They span works of philosophy, *parshanut*, history, and homiletics, along with commentaries on the Siddur, *Mahzor*, and Haggada. Countless Jews know his name; many of them, particularly among the Orthodox, have read his works, heard him speak, perused his *parasha* sheets, regularly used his *siddur*, and viewed or heard his online conversations. He addressed robustly issues of paramount concern for Jews: anti-Semitism, Jewish identity, the Shoah, Israel, the family, unity, community, and continuity. Here was a man who had little formal Jewish learning until his 20s and yet — by harnessing brilliance, vision, commitment, and stunning eloquence — sensitized hearts, expanded minds, and animated Jewish life. His readers and audiences always emerged edified and inspired. Those who met him were greeted warmly and witnessed his capacity to engage. All are saddened by his passing, which sprang upon us so quickly.

Yet one of the most striking things about Rabbi Sacks' body of work is how often he spoke not of Judaism but of religion, not of Jewish society but of politics, not of halakha but of morality. This reveals much of who he was — a Jew with a fierce, proud commitment to a particular religion, but whose mind and soul were broad. I do not mean only that he published (particularly in his later years) books on science and religion, politics, economics, and morality aimed at a global audience; nor just that his work is studded by astonishingly erudite insights from literature, world history, psychology, science, and linguistics; nor merely that he engaged extensively with relativism, postmodernism, pluralism, and scientism. I mean also that on the ethical level he preached tolerance, the “dignity of difference,” and love of the stranger, to a degree that is especially striking for an Orthodox writer.

Yet obviously the outlook of this great rabbinic leader was not a commonplace cosmopolitanism or globalism. He understood, first of all, that we Jews are part of humanity, and that the challenges that confront our religion, such as fanaticism, confront religions generally. The more we situate ourselves in a larger human context, the better we comprehend our own problems and predicaments. Hence, his universalist discourse can inform our Jewish self-understanding.

Moreover, he believed that the universalism that prevailed in the West since the Enlightenment was in some ways a menace. It threatened to obliterate traditions. The more the world would appreciate traditions and seek to sustain them, the more it would appreciate what is truly distinctive and valuable about Judaism's teachings. In fact a leitmotif of his work is the uniqueness, novelty, and greatness of Judaism's contributions to world history. Ultimately his message in numerous places is that the values of Judaism can speak to modern societies and ideologies, and can improve the world. His extensive use of the Bible adds to the wide appeal of his reasoning.

Rabbi Sacks' broad vision and his prominence as a public intellectual in the UK earned him accolades — now, alas, in the form of eulogies — from the spheres of politics, royalty, religion, and academia. His projects culminated in his being awarded the \$1.5 million Templeton Prize in 2016 for his work in countering religious extremism and religious violence. A look at his awards, honorary degrees, and appointments boggles the mind. To name but one tiny instance of his standing in the larger intellectual universe, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, two of the most important philosophers of recent decades, joined twelve Jewish contributors to a *festschrift* in Rabbi Sacks' honor, with MacIntyre authoring the lead essay.

R. Sacks' attainment of both Jewish and global renown reflects a central theme of his thought (better, *the* central theme): the meeting of the universal and the particular. His worlds were not segregated but rather integrated. I recall vividly the 1997 commencement at Yeshiva University, when Rabbi Sacks received an honorary degree. With his wonderful blend of creativity, eloquence, oratorical power, and humor, he made a pointed argument on behalf of the ideal of *Torah ve-Hokhma*, one that merges the universal and the particular in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Rabbi Soloveitchik: "*Hokhma* reminds us that we are humans, we are citizens of the universal enterprise of mankind, and Torah reminds us that we are Jews, heirs of the greatest heritage ever conferred on a people."

We Jews must not simply receive from the world; we must also give. As he wrote elsewhere, "To be a Jew is to be true to our faith while being a blessing to others regardless of their faith." Jews must help "heal a fractured world" and live up to the "ethics of responsibility." With his face to the future, he taught that different groups, Jews included, must "build a home together," a society for the common good, even while keeping their distinctive characters.

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There is much else to say about R. Sacks' talents. Apart from works that developed his central themes for a broad audience, he wrote lucid philosophical essays about abstruse technical concepts, as in his review of the Rav's most challenging work, *The Halakhic Mind* (which appeared in *TRADITION*, Spring 1988), and in several books, he offered incisive analyses of individual thinkers. His prose was remarkable. With elegant sentences, often short and pithy, replete with wonderful turns of phrase and *bon mots*, he made readers as riveted by his writing as by his oratory.

Readers did not always agree with R. Sacks' views and arguments. He at times endured strident criticism, whether from the left or from the right. But this is exactly what his philosophy urges us to welcome: conversation, disagreement and difference, albeit, decidedly, without the stridency. About one point there should be no disagreement: the world was privileged to receive the riches that R. Sacks offered. He was among the most compelling and inspiring authors, orators, and leaders to have graced the Jewish world in modern times. *Yehi zikhro barukh*.

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