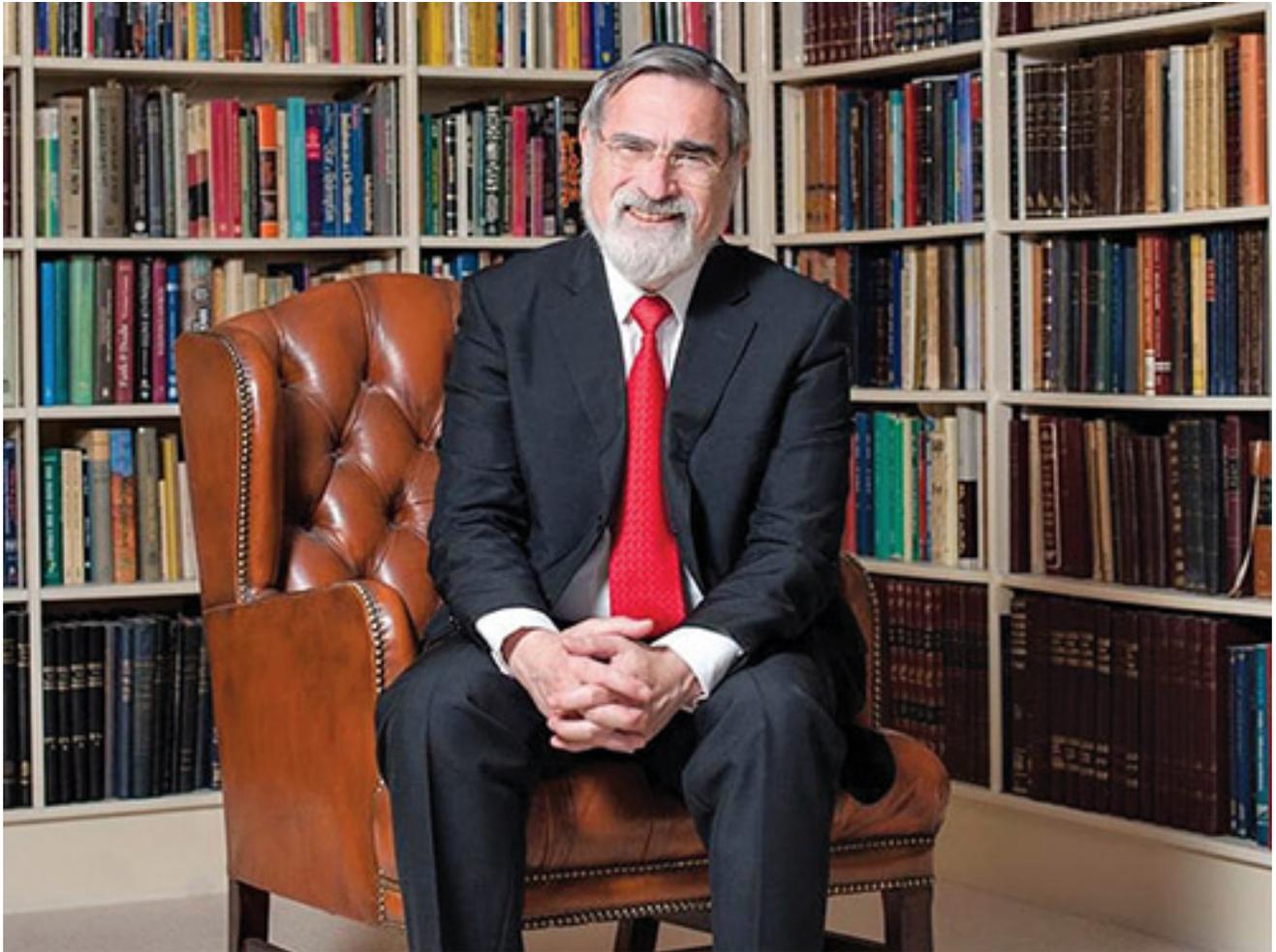


Memories of Rabbi Sacks, zt”l

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By Rabbi Dr. Stu Halpern | November 12, 2020



Editor’s note: While Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom from 1991 to 2013, he was a towering figure of inspiration and faith to Jews and non-Jews worldwide. A daily contributor to BBC Radio, Rabbi Sacks delivered an enormously popular study of the weekly parsha, lectured worldwide and was the author of over 40 books and commentaries. He passed away last week at the age of 72. Rabbi Dr. Halpern worked for Rabbi Sacks when he was a visiting scholar at Yeshiva University.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks stood balancing high up on a plastic chair and I was terrified. Enthusiastically leading hundreds of members of Englewood’s Cong. Ahavath Torah in singing during seudah shlishit, he roused the crowd from his perch to “sing so loud they can hear you in Teaneck!”



Rabbi Sacks' serving as a scholar in residence in our shul instantly left a legendary imprint upon our community's collective memory, recalled to this day by so many, despite having taken place over six years ago. His Friday night lecture had drawn such a large crowd, notwithstanding the late hour, that a friend quipped to me before the shiur started that we might as well take out the sifrei Torah and start saying Kol Nidrei. After all, the crowd in attendance that night matched that of the holiest day of the year.

This magical memory—of Rabbi Sacks raising himself, and all who experienced his teaching, to new heights—is reflective of a legacy unmatched in modern times. I was honored to have worked closely with him over three years during his visiting professorship at Yeshiva University (among my responsibilities, besides working with him on strategy, community engagement and writing projects, was to make sure he didn't fall off that chair). Having accompanied him from Philadelphia to the Five Towns, Manhattan's East Side to Englewood, in classrooms and convention halls, I experienced firsthand how his was an incomparably elevated voice, inspiring those who heard him to appreciate Judaism in a higher register, regardless of their knowledge or background. As comfortable giving a sichat mussar in the YU beit midrash as he was giving a speech in defense of marriage and the family at the Vatican, he taught Torah in a way that inspired confidence, warmth, humor and societal impact.

A long-time admirer of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose impact on Rabbi Sacks the latter discussed often, he embodied the duality of Avraham Avinu that the Rebbe described in a sicha on this week's parsha in 1961. Noting that, in Chayei Sarah, Avraham is described as both "zakein" (old) and "ba ba-yamim" (advanced in days), the Rebbe, citing the Gemara in Kiddushin, praised Avraham for balancing both the long view of an elder sage alongside a youthfully enthusiastic desire to maximize each and every day of his life. Over the course of his all-too-short 72 years, Rabbi Sacks brought a remarkable energy to his days, producing an oeuvre unrivaled by those decades younger. His focus on each moment, and its accompanying challenges, was met by a belief in the timelessness of ancient Jewish wisdom and an appreciation for, and an articulation of, how Jewish ideas have left their mark across the broad sweep of world history.

Judaism's most public-facing spokesperson, particularly following his retirement as Chief Rabbi of the UK, he produced an entire library of inimitably eloquent yet accessible Jewish works for audiences of all streams. As Israeli public intellectual Micah Goodman put it, "in his philosophical writing over the last 15 years, Rabbi Sacks transformed from being just a Jewish theologian to becoming a major Western philosopher, without losing his Jewish patriotism in the process." As Senator Joseph Lieberman (also a visiting professor at YU) remarked in introducing Rabbi Sacks' opening prayer to Congress on Nov. 2, 2011, "the old advertising slogan went, 'You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's Jewish Rye...' Well, you don't have to be Jewish to benefit from Rabbi Sacks' writing."

Despite his elevation to the highest echelons within and beyond the Jewish community, maintaining friendships with heads of state and global thought leaders, he was a ceaseless mentor to countless young people. At Yeshiva University he hosted dozens of one-on-one meetings with students to learn their personal stories, hear of their aspirations, struggles and dreams. The insights, comfort and inspiration he offered them was reflected on their faces as they inevitably emerged from these meetings with the glow one gets having been near greatness. As recently as this year, he and his wonderful wife Lady Elaine Sacks hosted a group of YU Straus Center students in their home for a private seminar, followed by a Facebook Live conversation with the Straus Center's Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, viewed by thousands. Even his most recent book, "Morality," a bestseller of course, integrated insights he gained from a series of conversations with UK high school students. One of his last events was a Zoom Q&A with a diverse group of young Christian leaders in the Philos Project (well worth watching on YouTube).

Bolstered by his talented and tireless staff in the UK, Joanna Benarroch and Dan Sacker, Rabbi Sacks leveraged emerging technology to spread his prolific output across the globe more than any individual Torah teacher in history. His TED Talk, videos and radio addresses have been consumed by millions. His books, *Koren machzorim*, and "Covenant and Conversation" series, are read by hundreds of thousands. Countless students will learn the educational curricula based on his writings. As he told the Washington Post in an October 31, 2017, symposium marking the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, "what the reformation of the West now needs is to use our technology to spread a love of liberty and the nonnegotiable dignity of the individual, created in God's image. We can do this by using words, images and music to communicate a mood of spirituality through brief videos for YouTube and Facebook. We can use the new media to make the study of sacred texts globally accessible."

Balancing, as he did during that Shabbat in Englewood and throughout his life, learning, music and humor, Rabbi Sacks embodied a ceaseless commitment to elevating individuals of faith to the highest of sacred heights. *Yehi zichro baruch*.

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