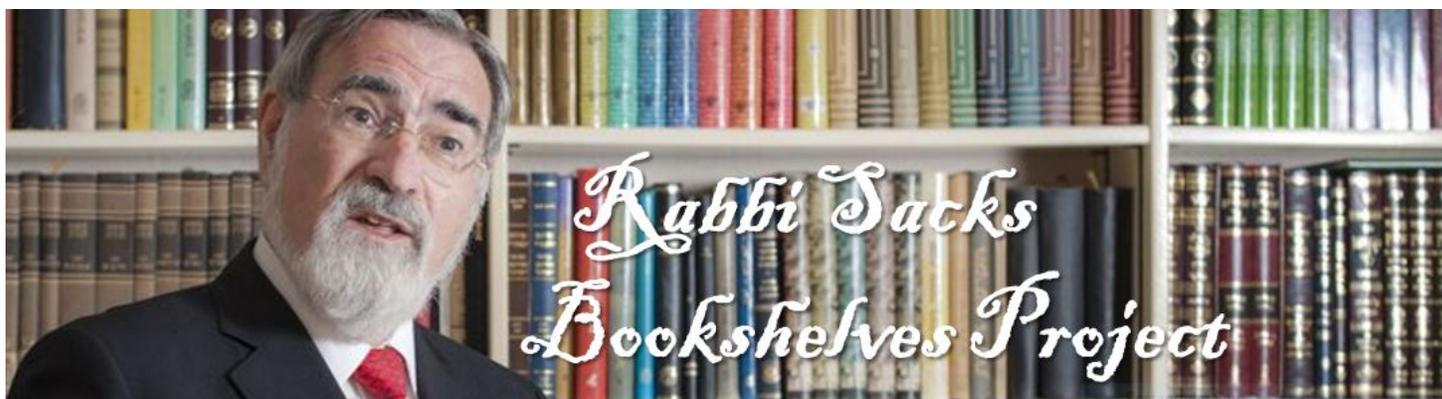


The BEST: Democracy in America

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Summary: Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was the French nobleman's attempt to help his countrymen understand the democratic experiment flowering on United States soil. Appearing in two volumes (one in 1835, the other in 1840), it reflected upon his nine-month sojourn in the new American republic. Almost two centuries later it remains a classic – cherished by Americans on both sides of the political aisle, and cited often by liberals and conservatives alike. It is also beloved by those who admire the American project from afar, as did Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

Why this is The BEST: “Turn it, turn it, for everything is in it,” Ben Bag-Bag says of the Torah in the well-known Mishna in Avot. When it came to understanding the modern world, R. Sacks felt the same of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

R. Sacks often said that he tried to read Tocqueville's *magnum opus* every year. The book inspired him throughout his career, from his writing on the *parasha* to speeches in Parliament. It served as a wellspring of guidance in his thinking about politics, community, and the family.

In his 2009 maiden speech in the House of Lords, R. Sacks said:

Democratic freedom is not just a matter of political arrangements, of constitutions and laws, elections and majorities. It depends, too, on what Alexis de Tocqueville called “habits of the heart”: on civility, the willingness to hear the other side, respect for those with whom you disagree, and friendships that transcend the boundaries between different parties and different faiths. And those things must be taught again and again in every generation.

In addition to emphasizing the role of respectful dialogue in the public square, Tocqueville also stressed the role of the family and of faith as bulwarks against tyranny. That the Passover Seder is performed not communally but in the privacy of one's home, reminds us, wrote R. Sacks:

that, in Alexis de Tocqueville's words, "As long as family feeling is kept alive, the opponent of oppression is never alone"... Freedom begins with what we teach our children. That is why Jews became a people whose passion is education, whose heroes are teachers and whose citadels are schools. Nowhere is this more evident than on Passover, when the entire ritual of handing on our story to the next generation is set in motion by the questions asked by a child. In every generation we need to cultivate afresh the habits of the heart that Tocqueville called "the apprenticeship of liberty."



Tocqueville's thought played foundational roles in many of R. Sacks' books, including *The Home We Build Together* and, most recently, *Morality*. After all, it was the Frenchman who taught us that "Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith." And

the emphasis on "we" as opposed to "I," of individuals to come together in what Tocqueville called "voluntary associations" that would enhance the flourishing of society is central to both works. As R. Sacks put it, "democracies are at risk of a completely new form of oppression for which there is no precedent in the past. It will happen, he [Tocqueville] says, when people exist solely in and for themselves, leaving the pursuit of the common good to the government. As my colleague and friend R. Meir Soloveichik has written in *Mosaic*, R. Sacks, in offering Americans and so many others a means of navigating liberal democracy, the market economy, and ever-advancing science and technology, was a 21st century Alexis de Tocqueville. His own insights into the challenges of the modern age, the roles of faith and family, and the power of community will be turned and turned, like Tocqueville's, over the generations.

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