

# Faith as Protest: Remembering Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l

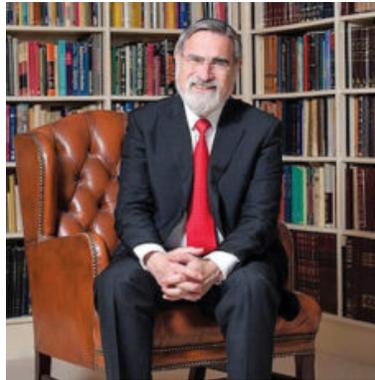
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*Samuel Gelman*  
*Communications and Program Officer*



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l

On October 26, 2021, Straus Center faculty member Rabbi Dr. Dov Lerner gave a virtual shiur [lecture] to over 100 participants titled “Remembering Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l” in honor of the late former British Chief Rabbi’s first *yahrzeit* [anniversary of death]. The shiur was sponsored by Stern College for Women, Undergraduate Torah Studies, the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies and the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration.



Rabbi Dov Lerner

After being introduced by Shoshana Schechter, associate dean of Torah studies and spiritual life at Stern College, Rabbi Lerner gave a brief overview of Rabbi Sacks’ books, calling his works “not just descriptive but warnings about the future and a calling to face the future.”

Rabbi Lerner then introduced the “one fundamental tenet that opens the door to the rest of his [Rabbi Sacks’] world”—faith as protest. He explained that Karl Marx argued before penning *The Communist Manifesto* that religion was the “opium of the masses”—one of the most pernicious factors keeping them

from revolting against the profound inequalities that stalked their lives, as it served to “justify” their destitution and suffering and numbed their will to fight back.

Rabbi Sacks, Rabbi Lerner argued, claimed that Marx had it backward, and that our faith demands that we not accept fate as it is but protest against injustice. Rabbi Sacks brought two biblical examples to back up his claim. The first is the story of Abraham and Sodom, where, after God informs the Patriarch that He will destroy the city, Abraham protests and calls for God to spare the city if he can find a certain number of righteous people among its inhabitants.

Here, Rabbi Sacks said, God is teaching Abraham how to react to the problem of evil. Claiming that all injustice is “just” is the cheap way out, according to Rabbi Sacks, and not what God wants or expects of us. It is the Marxist way of understating religion and leaves us “less curious and less driven to change the world,” in the words of Rabbi Lerner. By presenting Sodom’s fate to Abraham, God is “endorsing” his passion against injustice. In the words of Rabbi Sacks, “God asks us not to understand but to heal.”

The second example Rabbi Sacks brings is the story of Moses at the burning bush. When God first appears in front of Moses, the prophet turns his head away, seemingly terrified of God. However, Rabbi Sacks argues that Moses turns away not out of simple fear but because had he looked at the face of God, he would have seen “history from the perspective of heaven.” It would have robbed him of his sympathy and compassion, the same sympathy and compassion that compelled him to save the Jew from the Egyptian slave master earlier in the story. He did not want to understand why suffering is sometimes necessary, for then he would have been unable and unwilling to fight it.

Rabbi Lerner continued, saying that Rabbi Sacks saw three components to the world. The first is Creation—the world as it is; the second is Revelation—the world as it ought to be; and the third is Redemption—what happens when the second is applied to the first. Rabbi Sacks argued that only through Torah and Wisdom—Torah U’madda—can we apply Revelation to Creation, leading to Redemption.

These two themes—compassion and redemption—stand at the heart of what YU stands for, argued Rabbi Lerner, citing President Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman’s Five Torot (Five Core Values), two of which are Compassion and Redemption. When we see injustice, we must have compassion, which will bring redemption.

Or, in the words of Rabbi Sacks: “Opium desensitizes us to pain. The Bible sensitizes us.”

To watch the full *shiur*, [click here](#). To learn more about the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks Center for Values and Leadership, [click here](#).