



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Baron Sacks of Aldgate, was *niftar* on the day VP Biden appeared to have won the electoral college for next president of the United States.

The Jewish world is now bereft of a spokesman the likes of which it has not seen in generations. His eloquence and inspiring media presence gave modern orthodoxy a legitimacy it was losing in the face of the growing Charedi narrow focus.

His views were enlightened and informed by classical Jewish medieval philosophy, Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi and Saadia Gaon. His 3 mentors included Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson who *"was fully aware of the problem of the missing Jews... inventing the idea, revolutionary in its time, of Jewish outreach... [He] challenged me to lead."* Indeed, Sacks called him *"one of the greatest Jewish leaders, not just of our time, but of all time"*

The second was Rabbi Joseph B Soloveitchik whom Sacks described as *"the greatest Orthodox thinker of the time [who] challenged me to think."* Sacks argued that for Rav Soloveitchik *"Jewish philosophy, he said, had to emerge from halakhah, Jewish law. Jewish thought and Jewish practice were not two different things, but the same thing seen from different perspectives. Halakhah was a way of living a way of thinking about the world – taking abstract ideas and making them real in everyday life."*

The third figure was Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, a former principal of the London School of Jewish Studies. Sacks called Rabinovitch *"One of the great Maimonidean scholars of our time, [who] taught us, his students, that Torah leadership demands the highest intellectual and moral courage. He did this in the best way possible: by personal example. The following thoughts, which are his, are a small indication of what I learned from him – not least that Torah is, among other things, a refusal to give easy answers to difficult questions"*

Born in London in 1948, Sacks attended my shul in Finchley Central, where his father was one-time president. The shul was structured with pews facing each other in front of the *bima* like the Sephardi custom. Ironically his father sat opposite my father which reflected their differing views on orthodoxy. As Gabbai I remember my father calling Jonathan to the Torah *"Ya'akov Zvi ben David Arie'el"* on his *Barmitzvah*. His mother hailed from the illustrious Frumkin family of learned scholars.

Jonathan went to Christ College whereas I attended the Hasmonean Grammar school for boys. At 14, I befriended him, and we would meet Shabbat afternoons along with Barry Shechter (Rabbi in Skokie), Robert Reiner (Professor of Sociology and a pioneer in policing scholarship) and Motty Abramsky (scion of Dayan Yechezkiel Abramsky and the polyglot Chimen Abramsky of Sotheby). These afternoon sessions would last hours and opened me up to the intellectual world of Jewish philosophy. The central theme would inevitably center around theodicy and the Holocaust.

He went up to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge to read philosophy but had a sudden change in philosophical direction after a trip to NY and a meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He then pursued Jewish Studies at Jew's College in London and a year in a yeshiva in Israel. He became the rabbi of the Golders Green synagogue in London's most Orthodox neighborhood in the late

70s and then rabbi of the Marble Arch synagogue in central London, before becoming the UK's chief rabbi in 1991, a position he held until 2013.

Sacks was among the world's leading exponents of Orthodox Judaism for a global audience. In his 22 years as chief rabbi, he emerged as the most visible Jewish leader in the United Kingdom and one of the European continent's leading Jewish voices, offering Jewish wisdom to the masses through a regular segment he produced for the BBC. He had a close relationship with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who called Sacks "*an intellectual giant*" and presented him with a lifetime achievement award in 2018.

Sacks was a prolific author, addressing pressing social and political issues in a succession of well received books. His popular commentary on the prayer book, published by Koren, helped to be used as the preeminent prayer book in American Modern Orthodox synagogues.

Sacks, who was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2005 and awarded a Life Peerage in the British House of Lords in 2009, (Baron Sacks of Aldgate) was an outspoken advocate of religious and social tolerance throughout his career.

He, like all other Chief Rabbis had the untenable position in the spectrum of British Orthodoxy. Torn between the lackadaisical observance of most of the united synagogue membership (what would be considered right wing conservative here) on the one hand and the post war influx of stricter observant Jews on the other.

For instance in July 2012 a group of prominent British Jews criticized Sacks for opposing plans to allow civil marriage for gays and lesbians. He said that he understands

*"the fear that gays have of prejudice and persecution "and went on to say, in a lecture on the institution of marriage, that a world that persecutes homosexuals is one "to which we should never return."*

*"I fully understood... that gays, not just Jews, were sent to the concentration camps, and I did not want to become a voice that would be caught up in a very polarized debate and be seen to be heartless towards the gays in our own community. I am not heartless towards them; I really seek to understand them, and they seek to understand where I am coming from."*

He also faced criticism, not least from fellow right wing Jews, with some referring to him as the "*rabbi of the goyim*," in reference to his visible comfort in the company of royalty, prime ministers and journalists and what they saw as his lack of relevancy to Jewish communal life.

His careful negotiation of the delicacy of his position as Chief Rabbi and also public figure vis a vis the crown was most deftly expressed in his nonattendance of Lady Diana's funeral due to it occurring on Shabbat. But what about his attendance at the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in Westminster Abbey?

Previous Chief Rabbis have dealt with this problem in radically different ways. Israel Brodie was still in office when Winston Churchill died. He took care not to attend the funeral service (in St Paul's Cathedral, in January 1965) but took equal care to send into the church an emissary, the

dog-collared Isaac Livingstone, then emeritus minister of the United Synagogue's Golders Green kehillah.

Lord Jakobovits attended the Queen Mother's 80th birthday thanksgiving service at St Paul's in 1980 but was not invited to the Westminster Abbey wedding of Charles and Diana (1981).

Lord Sacks, who declined to attend the funeral of Reform Rabbi Hugo Gryn (1996), clearly had no qualms about playing his full part in the Queen's golden jubilee service of thanksgiving held at St Paul's six years later.

Attending and taking part in a Christian marriage service in Westminster Abbey in the 21<sup>st</sup> century however might well offend the growing ultra-orthodox segment of British Jewry.

*This might all sound banal to the American reader but Brits love pomp and circumstance and British Jews even more. The way the upper class sees us is a litmus test of our acceptance in a society riddled with "velvet" antisemitism.*

His impact, however, has been enormous. His erudition beyond criticism. His legacy is assured. Unfortunately, at the end of the day his legacy as Chief Rabbi provided a litmus test as to the very need for such an institution. As two scholars have argued:

Meir Persoff (*Another Way, Another Time*,) noted *the chief rabbinate is no longer viable.*

*"many (if not most) regard the Chief Rabbinate as divisive and would not miss it should it cease to exist."*

His detailed and source-driven analysis of Sacks's failure to implement the inclusivist agenda with which he entered office, allied with an assessment of the changing affiliation structures of the community, leads Persoff to his conclusion. He suggests that the viability of the post has been in doubt for some time and Sacks has done nothing as chief rabbi to reverse that trend.

Benjamin J. Elton's *Britain's Chief Rabbis and the Religious Character of Anglo-Jewry, 1880–1970* in contrast, while not bringing his study up to the present day, suggested that it is precisely the chief rabbinate that is to be credited with determining the direction of Anglo-Jewry. He argued that Britain's chief rabbis have kept the community broadly united, overseen a consistent religious position in Anglo-Jewry, and secured Orthodox dominance among British Jews.

Sacks has openly supported various political causes, especially (but not only) if he believed it would benefit Israel or the Jewish community.

For example, in 2002 he openly supported an invasion of Iraq, assuming specific conditions were met. In 2011, he called for the British government to tax married people at a lower rate than single ones, a position then promoted by the Conservative Party but opposed by its Labour and Liberal Democratic opponents.

He argued for Israel's rightwing perspective on its conflict with Palestinians and settlements, and he celebrated Trump's decision to move the American embassy to Jerusalem. He literally consulted on Vice President Mike Pence's speech to the Knesset celebrating that moment.

In 2017, in a widely circulated YouTube video, Sacks called anti-Zionism a new form of anti-Semitism, arguing that it denies Jews the *"right to exist collectively with the same rights as everyone else."*

The video was based on a 2016 speech Sacks delivered in Brussels, which is widely seen as having paved the way to Britain's adoption later that year of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-Semitism.

In recent years, he came out strongly against what he perceived as antisemitism in the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as leader.

In his latest book *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, Sacks makes the case that society has undergone what he calls *"cultural climate change,"* in which individualism has eroded collective morality. As with meteorological climate change, he argues, there are forces fueling a dangerous shift — he points to social media as a leading one — but there is also time to avert disaster.

The way to become moral, Sacks writes, is both simple and a great challenge: *"We need direct encounters with other human beings. We have to be in their presence, open to their otherness, alert to their hopes and fears, engaged in the minuet of conversation, the delicate back-and-forth of speaking and listening."*

One can learn little about him from his writings. They are not confessional. They reflect the preachy role of a nineteenth century moralistic, pietistic pastor retooled for our age. It is just as crucial to recognize what's not in his writings. Though he seldom mentions it, Sacks battled cancer twice, once in his 30s, and later in his 50s. Yet unlike many other rabbis and scholars of religion, from Rabbi David Wolpe to James Kugel, who incorporated their bouts with cancer into their theological reflections, Sacks makes no reference to it in his voluminous output.

In the end he was a Rabbi par excellence, but his eloquence and command of the language filled his (especially orthodox) listeners with pride. Able to quote Chaucer and Plato, Shakespeare and Wittgenstein he represented the Jew, fully integrated on the world stage as an equal intellectual partner with the likes of the Dalai Lama and the Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Katherine Jefferts Schori.

Clearly his impact on the global level occurred after his leaving rabbinical office and he will be remembered precisely for having transcended the local purview of the rabbinate to become a global leader and thinker for not just modern orthodoxy but for all people who are spiritually sensitive to culture.

