

# A DECADE OF JEWISH RENEWAL

Address delivered by

**Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks**

On his installation as

Chief Rabbi  
of the United Hebrew  
Congregations of the Commonwealth

September 1, 1991, at the  
St John's Wood Synagogue, London





I have had more than a year to contemplate this moment, but the closer it has come the more overwhelmed I have been. The greatest leader the Jewish people has ever known, Moses, trembled when he contemplated the burden of leadership, and said *Mi anochi*: 'Who am I?' What then shall I say, who until the age of twenty-five never dreamed of becoming a rabbi, let alone a Chief Rabbi? Thirteen years ago, almost exactly to the day, I began a journey as rabbi of the Golders Green Synagogue, and today, on my bar mitzvah in the rabbinate, you have bestowed on me the honour of one of the great positions of leadership in the Jewish world. Now as then, I am determined never to rely on my own merits. Instead I pray to God, in the words of King Solomon, for a *lev shomea lishpot et amcha*, a listening and discerning heart, attentive to the needs of His community and ever obedient to His word. *Ana avdah deKudsha brikk Hu*: I am a servant of the Holy One, blessed be He. No Jew can say less; no Jew can aspire to more.

Let me begin by paying tribute to my distinguished predecessor Lord Jakobovits. Here in this pulpit, nearly a quarter-century ago, he spoke at his own installation of the three crowns of rabbinic leadership: the crowns of kingship, priesthood and Torah. Since then no one has done more to raise those crowns to their proper glory: Kingship, in addressing and securing the admiration of the wider public, recognised in his elevation to the peerage and the award of the Templeton Prize; Priesthood, in his great work for Jewish education; and Torah, in his adoption of the mantle of the prophets as the voice of Jewish ethics in confused times. Lord Jakobovits, you have raised the standing of the Chief Rabbinate in both Jewish and non-Jewish eyes; and for you and Lady Jakobovits, may your years of retirement be as long and as creative as your years of office.





At this emotional moment let me express my thanks to those in whose merit I stand here today: to my teachers, especially to Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, from whom I learned that love of Torah and moral courage go hand-in-hand; to the distinguished dayanim of our Beth Din, for their constant encouragement and advice; to my revered colleagues in the rabbinate without whom I could not hope to achieve what must be achieved in the coming years; and to all those with whom I had the privilege of working at Jews' College, and in the Golders Green and Marble Arch synagogues - true friends who made each of those experiences memorable.

Above all, my heart goes out today to my family. Elaine and I married young, and little did she know then where this strange journey of ours would one day lead. But she has been with me every inch of the way, as have our children. Joshua, Dina and Gila, giving strength and support and love. Most of all on this day of days I thank my parents, who gave me a *Yiddisher neshomo*, a Jewish soul, and who made me realise that the greatest love parents can have for a child is to want him always to grow. To you all: I pray that I may be worthy of your hopes.

I want today to set out the direction of my Chief Rabbinate, and to share with you the vision that lies behind it. Let me begin with the vision. Time and again this past year, as I sat in Jerusalem, breathing its inspiration, one saying came into my mind, the saying of one of the great heroes of Judaism, Akavia ben Mehalalel. He said: *histakel bishloshah devarim ve-ein atah ba lidei averah* - Reflect on three things, and you will not transgress, go wrong, lose your way. *Da meayin bata* - know from where you came. *Ulean atah holekh* - and where you are going. *Velifnei mi atah atid liten din vecheshbon* - and know before whom you will have to give an account.

Akavia was suggesting something daring and fundamental. We can go wrong as individuals or as a people, not necessarily because we are driven by malice, but simply because of a failure of imagination. For a moment we lived for the moment; and we forgot what the past should

have taught us, what the future consequences would be, and we forgot that there is always an accounting, a moral price to pay. We can go astray simply because of a failure of imagination. A failure of *historical* imagination: we forgot where we came from. A failure of *prophetic* imagination: we forgot where we were travelling to. Or a failure of *spiritual* imagination: we forgot before Whom we stand. Akavia spoke of individuals. But I want today to apply his three great questions to the Jewish people as a whole, because it is there that my vision belongs.

How does Jewish history begin? With a journey. *Lech lecha*, 'get thee out.' The very first words of God to Abraham set him on a journey, *el haaretz asher areka*, towards a land, *ve'escha legoi gadol*, towards nationhood, *va'avarechecha va'agadla shemecha vehyeh berakhah*, towards being blessed and becoming a blessing unto others. The whole of the Torah from Genesis to Deuteronomy is the story of that journey. But what happens?

And here we come to a mystery which haunts the whole of Jewish existence. The story the Torah tells about Israel begins with the journey of Abraham to the land. But by the time it ends his children still have not arrived. The book of Devarim ends with Moses on the mountain looking down on Israel from afar but still not having crossed the Jordan. *Meayin bata ulean atah holech*. Where have the children of Israel come from and to where are they going? From a small family to a great nation. From exile to a land. From slavery to freedom. The five books of Moses tell that story. What they do not tell is what happened when Israel finally arrived.

We are an ancient people, older than almost any other. We have seen one civilisation after another rise to power and then decline and fall. But in almost four thousand years of our history, only three times have we stood on the brink of our destination. Only three times have we been a great nation with freedom and a land. Once, in the days of Joshua. A second time when Cyrus of Persia gave the Babylonian exiles permission to return. And the third time today. The whole of Jewish history has been a journey to those three moments. What happened when we arrived?





On the first occasion, Israel fell apart. There was the period of the judges, when *ish hayashar be'eno yaaseh*, each person did what was right in his own eyes. Then, after only three kings - Saul, David and Solomon - the country split into two with the ultimate loss of 80 per cent of the people of Israel, the lost ten tribes. Those that remained were too few and weak to overcome the might of Babylon. And so the first Temple was destroyed, the first arrival failed.

On the second occasion, Israel fell apart. Under Ezra and Nehemiah they renewed the covenant. But then they succumbed to Hellenisation, what we would today call assimilation. There were fierce divisions within Jewry, even at times civil war. It was, said the rabbis, a time of *sinat chinam*, of groundless hatred between Jew and Jew. And by the time Vespasian and Titus marched on Jerusalem, Jews were too disunited to resist. And so the second Temple was destroyed, the second arrival failed.

And at that moment a great question mark was raised over the Jewish people. We have an unparalleled capacity to travel hopefully. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, all of them spent their lives travelling in hope. But do we have the capacity to arrive? That is the single most crucial question facing Jewry today. Because, for only the third time in the annals of our people, we stand as Moses stood at the end of his life: within sight of the destination to which the whole of Jewish history has been a journey.

For nearly two thousand years of exile, we longed for freedom. We have it now. We prayed for a land. We have it now. We prayed to stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. We have it now. We prayed for the ingathering of exiles from the four corners of the world. We have it now. Nothing stands between us and the realisation of the greatest dream ever dreamed by our grandparents or theirs all the way back to Abraham: to be a *mamlechet kohanim vegoi kadosh*; a people dedicated to God in freedom and sovereignty. We stand at the threshold of millennial longings. And only one thing stands in our way. A failure of imagination.

Of historical imagination, remembering where we came from. Of prophetic imagination, remembering where we are travelling to. Or of spiritual imagination, remembering before Whom we stand.

Consider this. For two thousand years we were the people of the book. No nation has ever cherished Jewish learning, education, as did we. Against every other civilisation, Jews said education is not for an elite but *morashah kehillat yaakov*, the heritage of every Jew. It isn't just for the young but *chayenu veorech yamenu* - it is our whole lives and the length of our days. Only one people ever predicated its very survival not on might or power but on a book: education is the link that binds the generations.

And today? Despite the great advances in Anglo-Jewish education, how many of our children have been to a Jewish school? How many of them can understand Hebrew, the one language that connects us to the Jewish people? How many of them carry on studying about Judaism beyond the age of twelve or thirteen, perhaps the earliest age that it begins to make sense? How often do we study a Jewish book?

Or consider this. Since the time of Abraham and Sarah, if there was one thing Jews guarded as the very fulcrum of their survival it was the family. What did they pray for more than anything else? For children to carry on the covenant. When the prophets rose to the climax of religious passion, how did they describe the relationship between God and Israel? In the language of the family. *Bni bechori Yisrael*. We are God's children and He is our father. *Ve' erastich li leolam*. We are God's betrothed and He is our beloved. The family was where Jews learned who they were, where they came from and to where they were going. The family was where Jews learned to love. The family was the crucible of Jewish survival.

Today we know that in Anglo-Jewry there are too few synagogue marriages. Divorce has become an epidemic. Non-marriages, mixed marriages and broken marriages have become not the rare exception but the rule. How can we, almost within a single generation, have taken





perhaps the Torah's greatest single contribution to human happiness and simply thrown it away?

Or consider this. For the last eighteen hundred years Jews were scattered across every country of the globe, from Babylon to Birmingham, from Buenos Aires to Berditchev. And yet they knew, and their neighbours knew, that they were an extended family, a single nation *Yeshno am echad mefuzar umeforad bein ha'amim*. Though they were dispersed, they were united: by a common past, a common hope and a common faith. They knew where they had come from, to where they were going and before Whom they stood. Though they had no land, they were one people.

And today: we have a land, but are we one people? We are more deeply divided than at almost any time in our history. Israel is divided. We in the diaspora are divided. A few years ago, Jewish thinkers asked the question: Will there be one Jewish people in the year 2000? Today there are already many prepared to give the answer "No". These are fundamental rifts which threaten the very integrity of Jewry as *am echad*, a single people.

The Jewish people has lost its way. For generations we travelled hopefully; but do we now have the courage to arrive? For generations we prayed; but can we live with the answer to our prayers? We survived slavery; but can we handle freedom? We have eaten the bread of affliction; but can we handle affluence? We learned to live with Israel as a dream; can we live with Israel as a reality?

Can it be that on the very brink of the fulfilment of the hopes of generations, our strength of will might desert us at the last moment yet again? It cannot be. The first failure brought us an exile of seventy years. The second failure brought us an exile of one thousand eight hundred and seventy years. There can be no third failure.

In this fifty-eighth century, Jewish time, Jews have passed through the *shoah*, the greatest human tragedy ever to befall our people; and the

rebirth of the State of Israel, our greatest collective miracle in two thousand years. In Israel during the Gulf War, I could not believe what was happening, that even through the missiles and the danger, Russian and Ethiopian Jews kept on coming; and I knew that though Jews had said these words for thousands of years, it was our generation that had been privileged to see them come true: *im yihyeh nidachacha bikzei hashamayim*, 'Though you are scattered to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back.' And within the last two weeks we have witnessed Soviet communism, one of the greatest attempts ever made to eliminate God, Judaism and the biblical value of individual freedom, bring upon itself its own destruction. Can any of us believe that we live in ordinary times?

A Jewish writer once said, "The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Yet ... big things seem to happen around us and to us." This century things have happened to us, for evil and for good, so big that they have no precedent since the days of the Bible; and they summon us to greatness. I pray: let our imagination not fail us now.

We must work together to renew the Jewish world. For nearly two thousand years we travelled in hope; and now on the brink of arrival let us not lose our way. We have suffered from complacency and religious underachievement. We have injured ourselves by divisions and petty rivalries. A section of our community is slowly drifting away. We are losing our most precious possessions - Jewish identity, the Jewish family, above all our commitment to the Torah which inspired generations to lead lives of holiness and moral beauty. Are we, who once heard the call of destiny, deaf to it now? Are we, who taught the world that religious faith is a journey from slavery to freedom, unable to cope with the challenges of freedom? God forbid. We have lost our prophetic vision. But we who live at this momentous time can recover it together.

Because - *meayin bata*. Where did we come from? From a hundred generations of Jews who suffered because of their faith and people yet





remained loyal to both. *Le'an atah holekh*. Where are we going to? 'To the day when, living our faith in freedom and pride, *verau kol amei ha'aretz ki sham Hashem nikra alecha*, 'all the nations of the earth shall see that we are called by the name of God.' *Velifnei mi atah atid liten din vecheshbon*. And to whom are we responsible? To God, and to all the generations of Jews who came before us and prayed for what we have; and to all those generations yet unborn whose Jewish fate is in our hands.

I was sitting one Shabbat afternoon watching children playing in the streets of Jerusalem. There was a stillness and a peace which exists only on Shabbat in Jerusalem as the sun begins to set and the houses turn red and gold. And then I remembered how almost two thousand years ago Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah and Rabbi Yehoshua had seen this city in ruins and they wept. But Rabbi Akiva, that giant of faith, said: One day Zechariah's prophecy will come true. 'Old men and women will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem ... *urehovot ha'ir yimalu yeladim viyladot mesachakim birhovoteha*, and the streets of the city will be filled with children playing.' And I thought, *Ribbono shel olam*, how long we waited; how many exiles, expulsions, persecutions and pogroms we endured; but we never lost that vision.

Here was Israel, the oldest of lands, renewed; here was Jerusalem, the oldest of cities, made new again; here were Jewish children giving an ancient faith new life. I understood as never before what the rabbis meant when they said that when God gave us the Torah *chayei olam nata betochenu*, He planted everlasting life in our midst. And at that moment I knew what it was I had come to Jerusalem to learn. That in each generation the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence rests with those who take our old faith and make it new again. It rested with the builders of Israel; with the builders of yeshivot and Jewish schools; with those who lived not for the moment but for the sake of future generations of Jewish children. It is they who gave us, as a people, new life.

And I no longer doubted what I had to do in Anglo-Jewry. I had to begin by calling on you to join with me in creating a *Decade of Jewish Renewal*.



Let us cease to be a community whose institutions and attitudes are growing old. Let us start this day and for the next ten years a process of working together to build a community where Jewish children can stand proud and free, knowing where they came from, where they are going to and before Whom they stand.

I call on you to join with me in renewing our *ahavat Yisrael*, our categorical commitment to the love of every Jew. We must reach out to every Jew with open arms and an open heart. If we must disagree, and sometimes we must, let us do so with love and dignity and respect. We can prove the Torah's greatness only by inspiration not by negation. We are a divided community. But let us work to lessen those divisions by coming closer to one another and to God. We have suffered enough from antisemitism. Let us practise philosemitism. We have suffered enough from the assaults of others. Let us never inflict them on ourselves.

Help me to renew *ahavat Torah*: a love of the way of life which is our one claim to distinctiveness as a people, and above all a love of learning. Let us renew Jewish learning at every level, formal and informal, child and adult, in every context and every form. There is no more radical idea than *vedibarta bam*, "You shall speak words of Torah, when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up." That we should never stop learning. That we should continually grow. That we should serve God not only with our hearts but also with our minds. The greatest single renewal of Anglo-Jewry will come about if we make learning the heritage of every Jew.

Help me to renew *ahavat Hashem*, love of God who brought the Jewish people into being and lifted us above the shifting winds of history to make us an eternal people. We have become secularised. There are times when we believe that Jews can survive without beliefs, as an ethnic group sustained on nostalgia. But faith is not a luxury we can live without. It is the air we breathe. If we can speak to God in prayer; if we can give to God through charity or service to the community; if we can create in our private lives a home for the Divine presence, and in our





public lives a *kiddush ha-Shem*, a sanctification of God's name, we gain that one sense without which there can be no human happiness. That in this fleeting transitory span of years we did something great. We walked in *derekh haShem*, the path of God.

Let us renew our contribution to British society. Here in this country we love, we have found freedom, tolerance and respect for our traditions. Britain was and is a moral giant among nations; and we must play our full part in carrying it forward as a caring and compassionate society. As Jews we must care about the environment, about social, medical and business ethics and about the image of God in our fellow human being, Jew and non-Jew alike.

Let us renew our attachment to the land and State of Israel. For there, in the land where we were born as a people, we have been reborn as a people. Because of Israel, after two thousand years Jews have taken up their destiny once again as a sovereign people. Because of Israel there is some place that every Jew whose life or liberty is threatened can call home. Because of Israel, Jewish learning flourishes as never before and as nowhere else. Without sidestepping any of the dilemmas Israel faces, let our love for it be unequivocal and our attachment to its people unbreakable.

A Decade of Jewish Renewal: Let me be quite clear what I mean. I do not mean that I have a personal programme which I am determined to impose on the community with or against its will. That is not how I understand leadership. I want to encourage leadership in others; to be a catalyst for creativity; to open closed doors and let in the fresh air of initiative and imagination. I want to start a process that will gather momentum over time. I want to listen to and involve everyone willing to work with me in three great areas - leadership, education and spirituality.

And so I call, first and foremost, to our rabbis: my colleagues. Let us lead from the front. Let us be driven by our calling to reach out, bring close, enthuse and inspire. If there is only one great leader in Anglo-



Jewry and it is the Chief Rabbi, I will have failed. Because my greatest ambition is not my success but your success.

I call to our educators: let us see how we can make the whole of Anglo-Jewish education greater than the sum of its constituent parts. Let us see how we can bring the school, the synagogue and the Jewish home closer so that they reinforce one another.

I call to our lay leaders: let us work together to plan, not for today or even tomorrow but for the next generation. Let us start now to recruit the leaders of ten and twenty years' time. Let us be less cautious, less insular, less afraid of experiment and open debate. Above all I call to every member of Anglo-Jewry to join me in the task of renewing this great community. I cannot, nor will I ever try to, lead alone. I call not for your appreciation but for your participation. I will only succeed if you will join the ranks of the doers. I call on every group in the community to begin this year the process of defining objectives and constructing plans. Let us become joint architects of the Anglo-Jewish future.

A Decade of Renewal: I choose the word renewal carefully. Judaism recognises not *shinui* but *chiddush*, not change but revitalisation. And if we do not renew our institutions they will die the slow death of increasing irrelevance. There is more than one way of building a shul, or conducting a service, or teaching Torah, or constructing a communal institution. Every year Rosh Hashanah tells us that we are living now, not a century ago. We must search out a hundred new ways of letting prayer speak to our souls, learning to our minds and mitzvot to our lives; and if they fail we must search for the hundred-and-first way. Our community has been immeasurably enriched in recent years by yeshivot, Chassidic groups, outreach movements, new ventures in adult and informal education. I see in each of these developments a priceless source of spiritual energy; and I want above all to liberate spiritual energy so that Judaism lives as if it were given new this day.





What then should we hope to achieve?

An Anglo-Jewry in which we reach out in love and with respect to every Jew.

An Anglo-Jewry in which we do not pretend that all is right with our community so long as there are groups who feel neglected; and there *are* groups who feel neglected: women, the young, intellectuals, the less well-off, the provinces, the small communities.

An Anglo-Jewry in which Judaism challenges us at the highest levels of our minds, hearts and souls.

An Anglo-Jewry in which we praise the successes of others, because we are not threatened but enlarged by the many ways of serving God.

An Anglo-Jewry in which, precisely as committed Jews, we make a distinctive contribution to Britain as a compassionate society.

An Anglo-Jewry in which we bring all our powers of leadership, creativity and energy to the service of God.

An Anglo-Jewry in which we are never afraid to grow as Jews.

An Anglo-Jewry of open doors, open hearts and open minds. Open to the love of God, Torah and the Jewish people.

A small agenda. Can it be done? *Ein haKodosh barukh Hu ba betyrunia im beriyotav*. God never sets us tasks that cannot be done. Never for one moment believe that it cannot be done.



You have given me, as Chief Rabbi, one precious gift above all: the gift of time. One of my great predecessors of blessed memory once said: "Chief Rabbis never retire and only very rarely die". Well: all men are mortal, and nowadays Chief Rabbis retire as well. And yet since 1845 there have been only five Chief Rabbis, and I am the sixth. You have given me the mandate to build for the future. What I cannot achieve one year, I will work for the next. I recognise the problems. We are a declining and ageing community. We are in the midst of a recession. We must work with limited resources. There are in our community attitudes and divisions which will take a long time to change. I approach my task with open eyes. I will make mistakes, but I will learn from them. I will have failures, but I will try again, another way, another time. But I will never give up or relax or despair. And if it is not for us to complete the task, neither are we free to desist from it.

Together we have great things to do. For this is a rare and special moment in the history of the Jewish people. Only twice before in our long life as a people have we had the chance to practise Judaism in freedom and against the background of a sovereign State of Israel. For two thousand years we prayed for it to come again, and now that it has, we must not fail the challenge of this *et ratson*, this window of opportunity. We will not fail. Because *haba letaher mesayin oso*; because God helps those who turn toward Him; and never does He allow those who seek Him to fail. We will succeed because *ein bererah*: this time there is no choice but to succeed.

Let us work together to plan and create a Decade of Renewal of Jewish leadership, education and spirituality. And may God, who will not forsake His people, cause His spirit to rest in the work of our hands.