

Speech given by
The Chief Rabbi
Dr. Jonathan Sacks

at the NSPCC Annual Council Meeting
The Barbican Centre, London, 14 June 1995

NSPCC
A cry for children.

When I heard the inspirational address made by the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Jonathan Sacks, at the NSPCC's Annual Council Meeting in June, I felt that it was such an accurate and moving view of the work of the Society that a printed version should be made available as a permanent record.

Vauxhall Motors are delighted to sponsor this publication of the speech - I believe that it will be greatly appreciated by those members, volunteers and supporters who were not able to attend on the day, as well as those who were.



Tony Spalding

Director of Public Affairs, Vauxhall Motors Limited
Honorary Member of Council, NSPCC



NSPCC - Vauxhall
Working Together for Children

The NSPCC launched 'A Cry for Children' Campaign at the end of 1994 to challenge the whole of society to reappraise its attitudes and behaviour towards children and take responsibility for their care and protection.

The Campaign asks everyone to respond to three cries:

A cry to us all to stop and think again about how we treat children

A cry for us to understand how our behaviour can harm children

A cry to change our behaviour and change the future for children

The NSPCC believes that without changing attitudes and behaviour towards children, particularly the everyday harm caused to them, we will never stop the more extreme forms of violence against children.

We are grateful to the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Jonathan Sacks, for his support of this Campaign, and hope that this inspiring and motivating speech will help us all to respond to the three cries for children.

Our special thanks too to Vauxhall Motors for their generous support throughout the years, and in particular for sponsoring this publication.

Your Royal Highness, Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I am glad to say that reports of my absence are greatly exaggerated, and it is with a sense of deep privilege that I address you today because all of you, through your work for, and your support of, the NSPCC have shown a commitment that can hardly be over-valued. The society we are building for tomorrow depends more than anything else on the way we treat our children today, and it is this obvious, but so often neglected, truth that you are driving home, and how badly it needs to be heard.

Over a century ago Charles Dickens revolutionised the way we thought about children. In novel after novel - *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House* - he took his readers behind the façade of Victorian England and brought them face to face with scenes of poverty, abandonment, exploitation and cruelty that shocked and awoke the conscience of a generation. There were many other campaigners at the time, and it was through their work that the NSPCC had its origins 111 years ago. But somehow Dickens was the most effective voice of all, for one simple reason: he taught us to see the world through the eyes of a child. He taught us to hear the cry of a child. He made people understand what was all around them, but something that they had not fully noticed before, that though Britain then ruled a vast and distant empire, it was neglecting its own children.

If Dickens were to come to life today and see what had changed, there would be so much that would give him immense satisfaction. He would see standards of medical care, schooling, welfare and social support that would amaze him. He would see centres of relative deprivation, but he would be astonished by the advance in absolute living standards. Above all, he would see a revolution in the freedom and confidence of children and their protection from exploitation and abuse. He would see much for which to give thanks, and that we must never forget.

But he would also be perplexed. He would have read, as we have read, about the quantum leap since the 1950s in juvenile crime; he would have read two weeks ago in the report of Sir Michael Rutter and Professor David Smith of the sharp increase over the past 40 years in depression, psycho-social disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and actual and attempted suicide among young people. He would have heard all about the NSPCC's own campaign against sexual and other child abuse, and surely he would have asked himself the obvious question: "If things are so good, how come they are so bad?" It is an important question, and how might he have answered it? He might have said simply enough that though our social and economic situation has changed, human nature has not changed. We are all frail and fallible people. It is never easy to be a parent. Dickens himself found it very hard to be a father. So the battle for children has to be fought in every generation; that much does not change.

Alternatively, he might have said that things have changed and changed for the better, and the proof is that our threshold of concern has risen. Today we worry about abuse that previous generations would have taken for granted. After all, in Dickens' day what had to be fought were child labour, high infant mortality, and the absence of the most basic necessities of food and clothing. Today, having won those battles, we fight on more elevated ground, so our problems are proof of our success.

But he might, just might, have given a third answer, and it is this that must give us pause for thought. "Could it perhaps be", he might have said, "that in solving one set of problems we have actually created another? Might it be that in securing a whole range of human freedoms, we have created a crisis at the very heart of our children's world, a crisis in the institution of parenthood itself?"

Dickens would find himself bewildered by the extreme fluidity of family arrangements today: co-habitation, single parenthood, divorce, serial monogamy and virtually every other imaginable combination of alternative lifestyles. Nothing in his Victorian upbringing would have prepared him for this, but then nothing in anyone's upbringing would have done so because different societies at different times, have had different marital and family structures, but none before has tried them all together and all at once. Dickens would have tried to understand the logic of all of this, and he would be told that our guiding principle was simple. Relationships have only one test of acceptability, namely, that they take place between consenting adults, and at that point he would surely have asked one question. He would have said: "I understand the principle of consenting adults, but what about the children?" That is the right question, and I wish I knew the answer.

I believe that in the past half century our culture has taken a decisive shift toward the pursuit of adult interests and away from the interests of children. Our patterns of relationships, our ways of work and career, may make sense from an adult perspective, but how do they look from the perspective of a child? How do they look to those children

who find themselves without a father, or with a succession of stepfathers whose interest in them may be at best temporary, and at worst run the range from indifference to resentment? How do they look to children whose mothers, because they have to bear a dual burden alone, are forced into either work or poverty or both? How do they look to children of any kind who, according to a survey published yesterday, find that their

fathers, on average, spend less than five minutes a day with them? And how do they look in the light of another survey published by Barnados yesterday?

A few months ago I published a book called *Faith in the Future*. In it

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I argued that children today are suffering from a massive demoralisation because of the breakdown of families, communities and the shared moral values that once gave meaning and shape to our lives. I was then writing on the basis of my own conversations with children up and down the country, but yesterday my concerns were quantified by the Barnados survey and an accompanying Mori opinion poll. Over half of those questioned - and they ranged right across the social spectrum - thought that the world their children will inherit will be worse than the one they experienced as children. 53 per cent were convinced that things have got worse for children. Only 13 per cent believed that things had improved. The headline in one paper read: *Britain has Lost Faith in the Future*. Why is it so?

Our children today face insecurity on a global scale. They worry. All of our children worry - about whether they will find a job and whether, if so, they will keep it. They wonder about whether they will make a marriage and, if so, whether they will keep it. And such is

the pace of technological, economic and social change that, less than any previous generation, can we say with any confidence what the world is going to look like in ten years' time. Ours is an age of uncertainty, and when we bring children into a world of external uncertainty, more than anything else we owe it to them to give them some internal certainty, a compass to navigate by, fixed points of reference, somewhere a matrix of stability. And nowhere does this count more than in the earliest years of childhood because it is then that we acquire the skills, the confidence, the trust, the self-respect, the capacity to make and sustain relationships, that will affect us for the rest of our lives.

And it is precisely this, the social environment as it affects young children, that almost in a single generation has been de-stabilised.

Since the 1960s the divorce rate has multiplied six times. The number of children born outside marriage has risen five times. The number of dependent children living with a lone parent has risen three times. Within marriage itself, because of economic pressures, parents find that they have less time to spend at home, and I will never forget the moment last year when I was talking to the great sociologist, Professor A. H. Halsey, as part of the television documentary I was making about the family when, in the middle of our conversation, he turned to me and said: "Our age has been described as the century of the child, but I would call it the century of child neglect." How should we respond? Not, God forbid, by accusation, or condemnation, or blame, but simply by support.

I am moved by the commitment we still feel, all of us, towards children and parenthood. Last year, for example, I met with some of the

people at a centre for young offenders.

On average they were about 18 years old and they had spent the last eight years in crime. All of them had come from broken, some of them violent, families but every one of them spoke with passion about the father they wanted to become, because in a sense every one of them was still mourning the loss of the father they wished they had. Each of us, whatever our situation, wants to be a good

parent. It is just that in an age of so many conflicting pressures, we need support.

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The time has come for a fundamental re-evaluation of our priorities. I speak from within the Jewish tradition, from a people whose history has been longer than most

and more fraught with insecurity than most, and central to our survival through 3,500 years was the value we placed on the home, the family, education and parenthood. We tried our hardest to put children first, and the key to the long-term future of any society is whether we do indeed put children first, whether we give them our attention, our guidance, our love, our consistency, our conversation, our time.

I believe the debate about children will prove as central to the nineties as the debate about the environment proved to be in the eighties. Just as in the eighties we understood how close our patterns of consumption were coming to endangering the natural world, so in the nineties we will come to realise how close our patterns of work and relationships are coming to damaging our children's world.

We must now make relationships and parenting part of our education. It can be done. In family therapy situations I have seen not only adults but also young children taught how to listen to one another, how to solve

problems together, how to negotiate with one another and how to praise one another. Those are the key elements of sustaining a relationship without recourse to violence or abuse. They are skills that can be taught to every child, and whatever the cost of teaching them is, the cost of not teaching them is ultimately more.

We have to develop family education, pre-marital training and a widespread awareness of children's needs. We should begin examining ways in which schools, families, communities and voluntary groups can work together so that problems can be picked up hourly and addressed in a supportive way. We have to begin to understand the long-term cost of patterns of work and career, and even taxation, which penalise couples who get married and want to spend time at home. We have to construct child-friendly policies, just as we have learned to construct environmentally friendly policies. There is now too much cumulative evidence to ignore that something is going badly wrong for young people, not only in the form of violence and abuse, but in their own multiple strategies of despair - from depression to alcoholism, to absenteeism, to crime - each one of which is, in effect, a cry for understanding not given, attention not paid, from parents who were not there.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the work of the NSPCC. Your Child Protection Teams, Projects and Centres throughout the country, your Child Protection Helpline, your research and training and publications have been giving help where help is most needed and in the most constructive way - working with and not against the grain of the family. And every

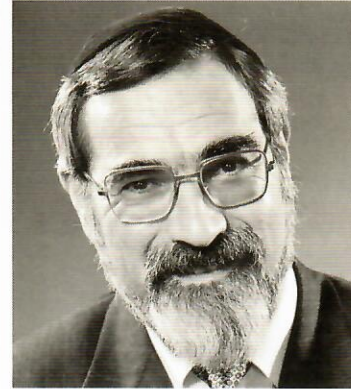
one of the stories of the children you have helped is enough to give me faith in the future.

But most of all, in your current campaign you have become a voice, a cry for children, encouraging us as individuals and as a society to stop and think again about how we treat children, to understand how our behaviour can harm children and to change the future for children. You have become the Dickens of our time, reminding us that, though through space telescopes we can now see almost infinitely distant galaxies, sometimes we fail to see those closest to us. And though, through the Internet we can communicate across the world, we still have to learn to communicate with our own children, listening and responding to their needs.

“There is nothing more miraculous that we can be given than a child, and nothing more precious that we can give it than our love.”

Vayishma Hashem et kol hayeled - “And God heard the cry of the child”. Those words from Genesis 21 must never cease to echo in our minds. There is nothing more miraculous that we can be given than a child, and nothing more precious that we can give it than our love. May God bless you in your work and may He bless our children with our care.

The Chief Rabbi, Dr. Jonathan Sacks
14 June 1995



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Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks was installed as the sixth Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth in 1991.

As such, he is the leader of the Jewish faith throughout the Commonwealth. This appointment represents a further stage in a distinguished Rabbinic and academic career. The Chief Rabbi has held a number of significant academic positions and holds an Honorary Doctorate from Cambridge University. He is the former Principal of Jews' College, London, and was Visiting Professor of Philosophy at the University of Essex. He was also Rabbi of the Golders Green and Marble Arch Synagogues in London.

*As a famous communicator, the Chief Rabbi appears frequently on TV and radio. He gave the 1990 BBC Reith Lecture on the theme of **The Persistence of Faith** and was a member of the Central Religious Advisory Committee to the BBC and IBA. He is also a prolific writer and author of a number of books including **Tradition in an Untraditional Age** and **Faith in the Future**.*

The Chief Rabbi's formidable intellectual abilities, coupled with an energetic and engaging style, have won him many friends and admirers from all communities. He is actively involved in a number of community projects demonstrating that, while having a passion for ideas, he is also a man of action.

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