

The Power of Ideas

Words of Faith and Wisdom

Jonathan Sacks


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Introduction

A Polymath of Our Age Who Guides Us Still

The untimely passing of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, in November 2020 was mourned by people of all faiths and of none. The outpouring of shock and grief spoke volumes about the man he was, the impact he had, and the continued relevance of the legacy he leaves behind.

In bringing together some of Rabbi Sacks' many broadcasts, writings and speeches, this collection draws on part of that legacy and on the wisdom of a man who was considered, both within and beyond the Jewish community, in Britain and in many countries around the world, as a national treasure, a moral voice of reason, and one of the most relevant and important philosophers and commentators for our age.

I particularly want to thank HRH The Prince of Wales for providing such a heartfelt foreword to this collection, together with Ian Metcalfe, Chairman of Hodder Faith and Rabbi Sacks' publisher for many years, and Dan Sacker from The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust, who worked so professionally and diligently to compile this volume. I also want to acknowledge the support of Lady Sacks and the Sacks family for this project and the ongoing work of the Trust.

Rabbi Sacks once wrote that 'the choice with which humankind is faced in every age is between the idea of power and the power of ideas'.^{*} His was a life defined by ideas, his own and other people's. Our physical time on Earth is finite, but ideas live on in the infinite space of time. Reading his writings several years

^{*} Jonathan Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas: A Weekly Reading of the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020), p. xxiii.

on from when they were originally published, one is struck not only by the clarity of thought, moral wisdom and eloquence they contain, but by the continued relevance of his ideas to our world today.

This goes to the heart of Rabbi Sacks' genius. He had a wonderful ability to extract the timeless from the timely, to see in current events enduring values and to challenge us and our age when these values slipped. His was a voice that caused us to pause, to stop for a moment and consider our actions as individuals and as a society. Taken together, this collection forms a commentary on our culture and society in recent decades and represents the inspiring and enduring idealism of an individual who spent much of his life in the public eye.

Part One of this collection contains a selection of transcripts from Rabbi Sacks' *Thought for the Day* broadcasts on BBC Radio 4. Delivered during *Today*, the most influential morning radio news programme in Britain, this slot of around two-and-a-half minutes is given to a person of faith to offer their reflections on something in the news. Despite its inclusion sometimes being questioned, in a *Thought for the Day* broadcast in March 2001*, Rabbi Sacks explained that it remained an important space in the Radio 4 schedule because it offered public broadcasting opportunities for faith leaders to speak to audiences beyond the confines of their own religion. He wrote delivering *Thought for the Day* meant that 'I have to speak in a way that spans differences and communicates across boundaries,' which was 'a habit we all have to learn if we're going to be true to ourselves and yet make space for the people who aren't like us'.† Reading these broadcasts today, it is possible to see them in a renewed light and ways which continue to resonate.

* The full text of this particular *Thought for the Day* broadcast, together with a number of others, was published as part of a collection entitled *From Optimism to Hope* (London: Continuum, 2004).

† *Thought for the Day* broadcast by Rabbi Sacks on BBC Radio 4 on 26 March 2001.

Introduction

Part Two is a selection of Rabbi Sacks' Credo columns, originally published in *The Times*. As one of the first four regular contributors to the Credo column, Rabbi Sacks wrote a column every month until he stepped down as Chief Rabbi in 2013. He valued Credo because, like *Thought for the Day*, it created a bespoke – one might say sacred – space for the religious voice within the day-to-day, fast-paced world of newspaper publishing. A number of his earlier Credo columns were re-worked and published in an earlier collection^{*}; as such, the columns selected here are taken from 2000 onwards. Reading them today does not lessen their impact; on the contrary, they continue to provide powerful examples of how the wisdom of Judaism provides a prism for understanding our world today and the many challenges we face.

Part Three includes a selection of articles written for a variety of newspapers and publications. As a public intellectual and a religious leader, Rabbi Sacks was always careful not to insert himself into the political arena – with a very few exceptions – but rather to go beyond the news and offer a broader perspective in whatever he wrote. The news focused on today. But the great faiths, he believed, 'remind us both of yesterday and tomorrow'.[†] They were, he argued, 'our living dialogue with the past and the future; those two essential things called memory and hope'.[‡] As such, his articles always constructed a bigger picture for the reader, placing current issues in a historical light and drawing from them lessons that could enhance their lives today, and improve the lives of generations not yet born.

Part Four features a selection of his speeches from the House of Lords. Rabbi Sacks took great pride in being a British citizen and was humbled to be raised to the peerage in October

^{*} This collection was entitled *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places*. First published by Fount in 2000, it was subsequently republished by Bloomsbury Continuum, most recently in 2017.

[†] *Thought for the Day* broadcast by Rabbi Sacks on BBC Radio 4 on 26 March 2001.

[‡] Ibid.

2009. He chose his title as Baron Sacks of Aldgate in the City of London to reflect his love of the country and the city that was home to his mother and offered his father refuge as he fled persecution in Europe. Sitting as a member of the Crossbench – effectively an independent – he never once formally voted, passionately believing in the separation between religion and politics, a theme that appears prominently in many of his writings. Rabbi Sacks' contributions in the Chamber gave him a voice, not a vote. He wanted to share ideas in the hope they would inform, and perhaps at times influence, public debate, not because he wanted to exert any power.

His speeches focused on national topics such as the state of British society, the importance of education, the role of Britain's faith communities and the universal right to freedom of religion and belief, and, when required, specifically advocated for the needs or concerns of the Jewish community he represented on issues such as Israel, the religious slaughter of animals and rising levels of antisemitism, among others. Although his participation was limited due to the pressures of his role, his speeches always garnered the attention of fellow Peers. Members of both the House of Lords and the House of Commons would frequently refer to comments Rabbi Sacks made, demonstrating the impact his words had on the public conversation.

Part Five includes a small selection of his many and varied speeches and lectures. In every speech he delivered, Rabbi Sacks proved himself to be a master storyteller and communicator of ideas whose insight and passion for the breadth of subjects he spoke about was internationally renowned. Certain overarching themes are evident across many of his lectures: interfaith relations; the relationship between religion and the state; the nature of society; the meaning of the common good; and the loss of morality suffered during the course of the twentieth century and beyond, and how to recover it and our collective moral sense. He was, once

again, accomplished at delivering a universal and particular message; speaking on behalf of, and to, all faiths (for example, when he greeted Pope Benedict XVI on his 2010 visit to the United Kingdom) and being an ambassador on behalf of the global Jewish people (for example, when he travelled to the European Parliament in 2016 to warn Europe's leaders of the growing dangers of antisemitism).

As a teacher of Torah, Rabbi Sacks dedicated his life to enlightening the world with his insights into the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish faith.* As a moral philosopher and public intellectual, Rabbi Sacks sought to offer his perspective on some of our world's biggest challenges, always acknowledging the role his religious beliefs played in the formulation of those views, but not being restricted in his thinking by them. In doing so he was able to demonstrate, in an inclusive rather than exclusive way, to both Jews and people of all faiths and of none, the role faith could contribute to the public square or to, as he described it, 'the conversation of humankind'.

Rabbi Sacks taught us to prioritise the collective over the individual, the 'Other' over the 'Self'. He emphasised that 'our common humanity precedes our religious differences', and that society was 'a conversation scored for many voices'. His voice was but one in this conversation, yet he found a way to balance the timely with the timeless, and to do so with a humility and a grace rarely seen. He was a giant of our age, a polymath, whose ideas continue to resonate and impact our world and inform the challenges we face. May the wisdom found in this collection and Rabbi Sacks' remarkable canon of work stand as a testament to

* Much of this work is contained in Rabbi Sacks' published series of essays on the Hebrew Bible called *Covenant & Conversation*, as well as in his commentaries to the Jewish prayer book and festival prayer books. This collection is focused more on his work as it addressed societal, cultural, economic and political issues at a national and international level. A full bibliography of Rabbi Sacks' published works is included at the end of this collection.

The Power of Ideas

a life well lived, and as a source of inspiration that will continue to guide us long into the future.

*By Henry Grunwald OBE QC,
Chair of The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust
London, August 2021*

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust exists to promote and perpetuate the teachings and ideas of Rabbi Sacks, of blessed memory. To access the digital archive containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, recordings and speeches, or to support the Trust's work, please visit www.rabbisacks.org. You can also follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust on social media. Find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (@RabbiSacks).