

COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION

A GLOBAL DAY OF LEARNING IN MEMORY OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"ל



Community

To launch the inaugural *Communities in Conversation*, Gila Sacks spoke of how her late father viewed conversation as a key vehicle for learning: “[My father] learned from books, from text, from laws, from history, and from world events. But mainly, he learned from people. He would seek out people to learn from, from every possible path of life, and he would do this through conversation – through talking and listening. For him, conversation was a defining and spiritual act, a way of opening ourselves up to something beyond ourselves. A training, perhaps, for opening ourselves up to God.”

It is our pleasure to provide resources to generate conversation and learning in memory of Rabbi Sacks. This resource was developed for the 2021 *Communities in Conversation*. May the soul of Rabbi Sacks be elevated in merit of the learning we will do today in his memory.



Opening Video: “The Meaning of Community”

View the video at rabbisacks.info/communityvideo

Filmed in 2017 when Rabbi Sacks sat in conversation with Rabbi Ari Lamm at Yeshiva University's 'World of Tomorrow' Conference

TRANSCRIPT

Rabbi Ari Lamm: Speaking of thinking locally on the particularity, what does it mean to be part of a community nowadays? On the Jewish end, I can think of people whose closest rabbinic teachers live in Israel, whose friends live on either the East Coast or the West Coast, who may themselves live in the Midwest, so can we still speak of a local Jewish community? Or in the broader, general sense you may think of a person in the world of tomorrow – or in the world of today – whose employer is working remotely from Spain, whose colleagues switch Airbnb’s every six months, and who communicates with their best friends primarily over Skype or FaceTime. So, what in the world of today is the advantage, or is it even possible to think locally? What is local community nowadays?

Rabbi Sacks: A local community is actually dealt with in Psalm 1, “*Ashrei ha’ish asher lo halach ba’atzat...v’hayah k’aitz shatool al-palgay mayyim...*” (Psalms 1:1, 1:3) To be strong, you need roots somewhere. *Lo chein harsha’im ki im kamotz asher tidfenu ru’ach* (Psalms 1:4). Whereas the *resha’im* – we won’t call them wicked, we’ll just call them just alienated or destabilised – “are like chaff blown on the winds.” And that’s what Facebook culture actually is. You know, whatever is this week’s fashion or this week’s viral video. I mean, you don’t have grinning cats do you, or whatever it is this week? I don’t know. This is *kamotz asher tidfenu ru’ach*. This is blown this way and that. That is not an identity.

So here it is, in 2011 a British medical charity – Macmillan Nurses – did a survey of young Brits between the age of 18 and 30. This is 2011, six years ago. (Which in the history of Facebook is quite something because Facebook just had its bar mitzvah. It’s been around for 13 years. It has 2 billion subscribers. So, six years ago it was still in cheder, you know?)

Now, they asked, “How many Facebook friends do you have?” and the average answer six years ago was “237”. When asked, “How many of those can you rely on in an emergency?” The average answer was “two”. A quarter said “one”. An eighth said “none”. That is the difference between a Facebook friend and a real friend. The guy you sit next to in shul, or even better, the guy you don’t speak to in shul.

I was doing a Facebook Live a week or two ago with the head of Facebook in Europe, Nicola Mendelsohn, who I have to tell you is an Orthodox and practicing Jew, and we were talking about just that, because Mark Zuckerberg has changed the mission statement of Facebook to supporting communities. The truth is, yes, Facebook can support communities, but it can’t create communities. Communities have to be down here on the ground. That’s why you need a minyan. That’s why you don’t drive on Shabbat, so Orthodox Jews live in close proximity to one another. You need those things, and you need face-to-face encounters.

Therefore, we came up with this wonderful idea of a digital detox. In order not to be totally dependent on your smartphone, (and my smartphone is a lot smarter than I am, so I’ve already got an inferiority complex, and I haven’t even bought the iPhone X yet. I’ll actually be completely inadequate then), the fact is, that one day a week you’ve got to switch off the iPhone and meet real people in real time and real space, and I proposed, “let’s call it Shabbos!”

Here it is, all these technologies can *support* community, but they can’t *create* and *sustain* community. For that, you need physical presence, ‘I-Thou,’ and there’s no true substitute for it.

Questions to Consider

1. What is the meaning of the metaphor of communities needing “roots”?
2. Why does Rabbi Sacks compare Facebook to “chaff blown on the winds”? Do you agree?
3. If Facebook cannot “create communities” how can communities be created?
4. What connects digital detox, Shabbat, and community?
5. If Rabbi Sacks’ message here is physical presence is critical for creating community, how can we approach this in an age when we cannot always be together physically? How has your community approached this?



Faith Lives in Communities

RABBI SACKS

Celebrating Life, pp. 136–137

Judaism is an insistently communal faith. There have been belief systems that emphasised the individual... For them the primary religious experience is the private communion of the soul with God. That has never been the Jewish way. To be sure, we have had our share of mystics and contemplatives. But the greatest challenge as Judaism has seen it is not to ascend from earth to heaven through the journey of the soul, but to bring the Divine Presence from heaven to earth and share it with others. That is an essentially collective task, which is why the covenant at Mount Sinai was made, not with individuals but with an entire people. In biblical times it was the task of a nation. In the Diaspora it became the function of communities.

So we pray together, celebrate together, confess our sins together, even mourn together. The holiest prayers in Judaism require a quorum, minimally defined as ten men. The sages ruled that “one who separates himself from the community” forfeits his share in the world to come. Moses Maimonides defines this as simply living apart from others, not sharing their burdens or their grief. One who separates himself from the community may lead a life of righteousness. But he or she leads it alone, and that is not the Jewish way.

It’s at moments of distress that you understand why. To face crisis is one thing; to face it alone is another. There is by now an enormous literature spreading across several disciplines to show how important it is to wellbeing to be surrounded by friends. Merely having people to talk to makes a difference. We speak of “unburdening” ourselves to others, and the metaphor is exact. There is something about human nature that makes troubles shared easier to bear. We are, as Aristotle and Maimonides said, social animals. What distinguishes homo sapiens from other life-forms is the extent and complexity of our sociality.

One of the researchers who discovered that regular attendance at a place of worship added years to life-expectancy hazarded a guess as to why. People who do so, he said, “have friends and a sense of importance in the scheme of things”. He’s probably right. Faith makes a difference, and the biggest difference it makes is sustaining the bonds between people. Faith lives in communities. They are the human face of the Divine reality that tells us we are not alone.

RABBI SACKS

Community of Faith, pp. 92–93

Despite its insistence on the dignity of the individual and the infinite value of a single human life, Judaism sees the person within the network of relationships, as part of a family, a community and a society. It is society as such that must be sanctified if the individual is to find God in the daily life of the world He created and pronounced good. The great symbol of Jewish spirituality is the tabernacle, a fragile sanctuary made by human hands and placed at the centre of the camp as a visible reminder that God is in the midst of the community as well as in the secret spaces of the soul.

Judaism is of its essence a collective endeavour, and as a result it is deeply communal in its spirituality. Its most sacred prayers cannot be said in private. The liturgy, other than occasional meditations, is written in the first-person plural, not the singular. When we pray for an individual, we include them amongst ‘all others in Israel’ who need healing or consolation. We confess our sins together. When a couple stand under the bridal canopy, the blessings said on the occasion, the sheva brachot, speak of ‘Zion rejoicing in her children’ as if the whole Jewish people past and present joined in the celebration. Jewish mourning customs draw the bereaved gently back into the ambit of community at the very time when they feel most alone. Even the Jewish home is not a closed institution, a ‘haven in a heartless world’. Jewish teachings emphasise the open house, the extended family, and welcoming the stranger. Hospitality is ‘greater than welcoming the Divine Presence’. We discover God in our togetherness, not our isolation. Martin Buber misdescribed the faith of Judaism when he spoke of I-and-Thou. The primary relationship in Judaism is We-and-Thou, the Jewish people standing collectively before God.



Questions to Consider

1. How is Judaism a “communal faith”?
2. Why do you think this is critical to Judaism as a faith system?
3. What impact do you believe this has made on the Jewish people throughout their history?

Communities Are the Human Expression of Divine Love

RABBI SACKS

Celebrating Life, pp. 147–149

The psychologist Abraham Maslow [says] we have physical needs, for food, shelter and security. Above these we have psychological needs, the deepest of which is to be recognised, known and valued for what we uniquely are. Eventually I realised that this was a major part of my work, to communicate not only ideas but also a sense of worth to the many people who make up our communities. There may be several hundred people in the room, and I may have only an hour to spare, but while I am talking to someone they must be the one person in my universe. That may be the most important thing I can give.

Ideas can be found in books. But a sense of value and recognition can only be had from other people. It matters. It gives us the strength to continue. It's a source of moral energy, perhaps the most powerful there is...

It was only after my experience of visiting communities that I understood the last of [the priestly] blessings. What does it mean for God to “turn His face towards you”? And how does that “give you peace”? What's revolutionary about the Bible is the idea that God knows us, values us, cares about us. There's a line in the Psalms that says, “He counts the number of the stars and gives each a name.” A Big Bang could give rise to a near-infinity of stars. Only a person can give something a name.

God knows us not abstractly but personally and intimately. He knows our name. He turns His face towards us. There is no greater source of peace – peace of the soul – than this, knowing that we are known, recognising that we are recognised. Then I understood how community is the human expression of Divine love. It's where I'm valued simply for what I am, how I live, what I give to others. It's the place where they know my name.



Questions to Consider

1. Why is it a basic emotional need to ‘be seen’?
2. How does being a part of a community provide for this need?
3. What is the connection between community and Divine love?

The Architecture of Jewish Values

RABBI SACKS

Community of Faith, pp. 5–6

Jews cared about institutions. They, rather than the buildings in which they are housed, are the true vehicles of the Divine Presence, and they have an architecture – a shape, balance and structure – of their own. Institutions are more than meets the eye. They embody values, principles and ways of life. Their day-to-day functioning can often be depressingly routine. But beneath the service, they are our most powerful way of turning our abstract ideals into tangible and living relationships. Through families, associations and communities, a civilisation passes on its values from one generation to the next in the most vivid and comprehensible way, through patterns of behavior learned and internalised until they become, in Alexis Tocqueville's phrase, ‘habits of the heart’. If we seek to understand a faith or culture, it is to these institutions that we must turn, listening attentively to their spoken and unspoken language, their distinctive rhythms and nuances. It is here that we will learn what makes a

group something more than the individuals who comprise it at any given moment – what makes it a community of memory and character, or in Hebrew a kehillah.

It is in its institutions – the Jewish home, the house of study and place of prayer – that Judaism's unique religious genius is best expressed. The Torah is a code of great ideals: freedom, responsibility, justice, compassion, family, community and the fellowship of man. But it is in everyday life that the dry bones of abstract ideas take on flesh and begin to live and breathe. In Judaism emunah is not faith contemplated but faith lived, in specific ways and particular relationships. It exists not in books of theology but in the deeds we do and the words we say, in actions, transactions and conversations. It is easy to find God in heaven, harder to make space for Him on earth, but that is what Jews have been summoned to do, and our institutions are of the essence of that project.



Questions to Consider

1. How do institutions embody values, principles and ways of life?
2. How are the values of your community expressed in its institutions?
3. Where has your community 'made space for God'?

Being Rich in Social Capital

RABBI SACKS

Morality, pp. 34–35

Jews like my parents were poor, but they were rich in social capital. They had strong families and immensely supportive communities. They had an almost Calvinist ethic of hard work, together with a strong respect for scholarship and study. These values were embodied in the communities they made or joined. People helped one another.

Judaism tends to have a strong communal dimension... This may be true generally of minority faiths, and especially of immigrant communities. In a profound way, religion is the consecration of community, the place where our togetherness under God is given shape and strength.

In practical terms, our human connections shape us in ways of which we are not always consciously aware. Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler have documented the enormous impact social networks have. If our friends... don't smoke, the likelihood is that neither will we. We are affected not only by our close friends but also to a surprising extent by our friends' friends. Indeed, most job opportunities come our way through these second-order networks, which are vastly more extensive than our close friends. Community plays an important role in the way our lives unfold, and is the living face of a shared moral order. All of which makes the breakdown of community deeply problematic at both a personal and societal level. Once we feel that we are really alone and cannot call on neighbours for help, then we are part of a new social poverty, which can be demoralising and debilitating.

RABBI SACKS

Morality, pp. 34–35

In a book entitled *American Grace* (2010), Robert Putnam documented the good news he had discovered, that a powerful store of social capital still exists in religious environments: the churches, synagogues and other places of worship that still bring people together in shared belonging and

mutual responsibility. The evidence shows that religious people – defined by regular attendance at a place of worship – actually do make better neighbours.

An extensive survey carried out throughout the United States between 2004 and 2006 showed that frequent church- or synagogue- goers are more likely to give money to charity, regardless of whether the charity is religious or secular. They are also more likely to do voluntary work for a charity, give money to a homeless person, give excess change back to a shop assistant, donate blood, help a neighbour with housework, spend time with someone who is feeling depressed, allow other drivers to come out in front of them, offer a seat to a stranger, or help someone find a job.

For some minor acts of help, there was no difference between frequent and non-churchgoers. But there was no good deed among the fifteen on the survey more commonly practised by secular Americans than by their religious counterparts. Religious Americans are simply more likely to give of their time and money to others, not only within but also beyond their own communities.

Their altruism exceeds this. Frequent worshippers are also more active citizens. They are more likely to belong to community organisations, especially those concerned with young people, health, arts and leisure, neighbourhood and civic groups and professional associations. Within these organisations they are more likely to be officers or committee members. They take a more active part in local civic and political life, from local elections to town meetings to demonstrations. They are disproportionately represented among local activists for social and political reform. They get involved, turn up and lead. The margin of difference between them and the more secular is large.

Tested on attitudes, religiosity as measured by church or synagogue attendance turns out to be the best predictor of altruism and empathy: better than education, age, income, gender or race. On the basis of self-reported life satisfaction, religious people are also happier than their non-religious counterparts.

Interestingly, each of these attributes is related not to people's religious beliefs but to the frequency with which they attend a place of worship. Religion creates community, community creates altruism, and altruism turns us away from self and towards the common good.

Putnam goes so far as to speculate that an atheist who went regularly to church (perhaps because of a spouse) would be more likely to volunteer in a soup kitchen than a believer who prays alone... He came to the conclusion that religion, as a moral force, is more about belonging than believing.

There is something about the tenor of relationships within a religious congregation that makes it the best tutorial in citizenship and good neighbourliness. Religions in liberal democratic societies are our ongoing tutorial in the 'art of association' that Alexis de Tocqueville saw as our apprenticeship in liberty. Religion creates communities, and communities create moral people.



Questions to Consider

1. What does it mean to be 'rich in social capital'?
2. How have you been impacted by the people in your community?
3. Why do you think those who belong to a community are more likely be altruistic?