

# COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION

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



## Jewish Identity

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 Way of Identity: On Being a Jew”

View the video at [rabbisacks.info/identityvideo](https://rabbisacks.info/identityvideo)

Taken from the first unit of the **Ten Paths to God** curriculum.

#### TRANSCRIPT

Uniquely, Jews are born into a faith. It chooses us before we choose it. Physically we come naked into the world, but spiritually we come with a gift: the story of our past, of our parents and theirs, through almost forty centuries from the day Avraham and Sarah first heard the call of God and began their journey to a land, a promise, a destiny and a vocation. That story is ours.

It is a strange and moving story. It tells of how a family, then a collection of tribes, then a nation, were summoned to be God’s ambassadors on earth. They were charged with building a society unlike any other, based not on wealth and power but on justice and compassion, the dignity of the individual and the sanctity of human life – a society that would honour the world as God’s work and the human person as God’s image.

That was and is a demanding task, yet Judaism remains a realistic religion. It assumed from the outset that transforming the world would take many generations – hence the importance of handing on our ideals to the next generation. It takes many gifts, many different kinds of talent – hence the importance of Jews as a people. None of us has all the gifts, but each of us has some. We all count; we each have a unique contribution to make. We come before God as a people, each giving something, and each lifted by the contributions of others.

And yes, at times we fail or fall short – hence the importance of teshuvah, repentance, apology, forgiveness, re-dedication. Judaism is bigger than any of us, yet it is made by all of us. And though Jews were and are a tiny people, today a mere fifth of a per cent of the population of the world, we have made a contribution to civilisation out of all proportion to our numbers.

To be a Jew is to continue the journey our ancestors began, to build a world that honours the image of God in every human being and to be part of a people summoned by God to be His ambassadors down here on earth.



### Questions to Consider

1. What claim can a story written millennia before we were born make on our lives?
2. Who decided that the 'Story of the Jews' was one driven by a destiny?
3. What contribution can you make to this unfolding story?
4. How does Rabbi Sacks summarise the mission and destiny of the Jewish people?
5. How does that connect to Judaism's rich and complex framework of religious faith and practice?

## Writing the Next Chapter in the Jewish Story

---

RABBI SACKS

---

Radical Then, Radical Now, pp. 45–46 (also titled A Letter in the Scroll, pp. 43–44)

The fact that any of us is born a Jew is no mere fact. It happened because more than a hundred generations of our ancestors decided to be Jews and hand on that identity to their children, thus writing the most remarkable story of continuity ever known. Nor was this mere happenstance. It flowed from their most basic conviction, that Jews had entered into a covenant with God that would take them on a journey whose destination lay in the distant future but whose outcome was of immense consequence for humankind. What that journey was would be the subject of the next part of my search, but one thing was clear from the outset. It would not be completed instantly. Unlike almost every other vision of the ideal society, Jews knew that theirs was the work of many generations and that therefore they must hand on their ideals to their children so that they too would be part of the journey, letters in the scroll. To be a Jew, now as in the days of Moses, is to hear the call of those who came before us and know that we are the guardians of their story...

I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come thus far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. I can give no simpler answer, nor do I know of a more powerful one.



### Questions to Consider

1. What arguments for continuing our Jewish traditions does Rabbi Sacks present here?
2. Which of these is most compelling to you?
3. Who has been responsible for Jewish continuity until now, our ancestors or God? Who will be responsible for Jewish continuity going forward?

## What Does it Mean to Belong to the Jewish People?

---

RABBI SACKS

---

Future Tense, pp. 47–48

The Jewish people exists in all its bewildering complexity because it is both a religion and a nation, a faith and a fate. Remove either element and it will fall apart. That is what is wrong in focusing exclusively on fate – antisemitism, the Holocaust, the people that dwells alone. For it is faith that keeps bringing us back to the idea that Jews are a people: it was as a people that our ancestors left Egypt, as a people that they made a covenant with God in the desert, as a people that they took up the challenge of life in the Holy Land, and as a people that they understood their destiny. Jewish life is quintessentially communal, a matter of believing and belonging. Maimonides rules: ‘one who separates himself from the community, even if he commits no sin but merely holds himself aloof from the congregation of Israel ... and shows himself indifferent to their distress’ has no share in the world to come.

Judaism is not a sect of the like-minded. The Jewish people is not a self-selecting community of saints. It is not, in other words, like most communities of faith. Jewish identity, with the exception of conversion, is something into which we are born, not something we choose. This mix of fate and faith, nationhood and religion, means that from the very beginning, Jews have had to live with the tension of these two very different ideas, and it is that tension that has made Jews creative, unpredictable, diverse, conflicted, yet somehow more than the sum of their parts.

There were times – between the first and nineteenth centuries – when the primary bond between Jews was faith. There were others – during the Holocaust – when it was fate. It is that double bond that has held Jews together. When one failed, the other came to the fore. Call it chance, or the cunning of history, or an invisible hand, or Divine Providence, but the old polarities – fate and faith, *goral* and *ye’ud* – remain, dividing Jews and uniting them in a way that is sometimes exasperating but often inspiring.

---

RABBI SACKS

---

Future Tense, p. 25

In 1992 a new word appeared in an English dictionary for the first time: *peoplehood*. The spellchecker on the word-processing programme on which I am writing this book has still not come across it: it signals a mistake every time I write the word. According to an article in the Jewish newspaper *Forward*, its appearance may have something to do with Jews. The first uses of the word were either by Jewish writers or by people writing about Jewry. Before 1992 there were peoples, nations, races, ethnic groups, tribes, clans and communities but not *peoplehood*. Why did the word appear in the 1990s, in America, and in a Jewish context?

Words are often born when the phenomenon they name is under threat. The adjective *orthodox* first appeared in a Jewish context in France in the early nineteenth century in the course of the debate about Jewish citizenship in the new nation-state. For the first time in the modern world the traditional terms of Jewish existence were thrown into question. Alternatives were proposed. Some argued that Judaism must change. Those who disagreed were given the label ‘orthodox’. Only when something is challenged does it need a name. Until then it is taken for granted, part of the background. So it may have been in the case of Jewish *peoplehood*.



### Questions to Consider

1. What is the difference between the 'Fate' of the Jewish people and the 'Faith' of the Jewish people?
2. What is the difference between a religion and a nation? Which best described the Jewish people?
3. Which would you say is the primary bond between Jews today, 'faith' or 'fate'?
4. Why is the term peoplehood an apt and unique way to describe belonging to the Jewish people?
5. Why do you think it was first coined only in our generation, and specifically in an American context?

## Receiving the Story of Our Past and Handing It On

---

RABBI SACKS

---

Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?, p. 34

*The secret of Jewish continuity is that no people has ever devoted more of its energies to continuity. The focal point of Jewish life is the transmission of a heritage across the generations. Time and again in the Torah we are drawn to dramas of the next generation. Judaism's focus is its children. Avraham's first words to God are 'What can You give me, if I am without children?' Rachel says: 'Give me children, for without them it is as if I am dead.' To be a Jew is to be a link in the chain of generations. It is to be a child and then a parent, to receive and to hand on. Moses 'received the Torah at Sinai and handed it on...' and so must we. Judaism is a *religion of continuity*.*

---

RABBI SACKS

---

The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, p. 2

Through the Haggadah more than a hundred generations of Jews have handed on their story to their children. The word '*haggadah*' means 'to relate, to tell, to expound'. But it comes from a Hebrew root that also means 'to bind, to join, to connect'. By reciting the Haggadah, Jews give their children a sense of connectedness to Jews throughout the world and to the Jewish people through time. It joins them to a past and future, a history and destiny, and makes them characters in its drama. Every other people known to mankind have been united because they lived in the same place, spoke the same language, were part of the same culture. Jews alone, dispersed across continents, speaking different languages and participating in different cultures, have been bound together by a narrative, the Pesach narrative, which they told in the same way on the same night. More than the Haggadah was the story of a people, Jews were the people of a story.



### Questions to Consider

1. Why is Judaism so focused on children?
2. Why has Judaism devoted so much of its energies to continuity?
3. How does it do it this?
4. Why is Seder night a perfect example of this?
5. How is the Haggadah a paradigm example of good Jewish education that works towards achieving Jewish continuity?

## The Final Word: A Letter in the Scroll

RABBI SACKS

Radical Then, Radical Now, pp. 39 (also titled A Letter in the Scroll, pp. 40–41)

We can see life as a succession of moments spent, like coins, in return for pleasures of various kinds. Or we can see our life as though it were a letter of the alphabet. A letter on its own has no meaning, yet when letters are joined to others they make a word, words combine with others to make a sentence, sentences connect to make a paragraph, and paragraphs join to make a story. That is how the Baal Shem Tov understood life. Every Jew is a letter. Each Jewish family is a word, every community a sentence, and the Jewish people at any one time are a paragraph. The Jewish people through time constitute a story – the strangest and most moving story in the annals of mankind.

That metaphor is for me the key to understanding our ancestors' decision to remain Jewish even in times of great trial and tribulation. I suspect they knew that they were letters in this story, a story of great risk and courage. Their ancestors had taken the risk of pledging themselves to a covenant with God and of thus undertaking a very special role in history. They had undertaken a journey, begun in the distant past and continued by every successive generation. At the heart of the covenant is the idea of *emunah*, which means faithfulness or loyalty. And Jews felt a loyalty to generations past and generations yet unborn to continue the narrative. A Torah scroll which has a missing letter is rendered invalid, defective. I think that most Jews did not want theirs to be that missing letter.

RABBI SACKS

Radical Then, Radical Now, pp. 41–43 (also titled A Letter in the Scroll, pp. 42–44)

Imagine that we are in a vast library. In every direction we look there are bookcases. Each has shelves stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and every shelf is full of books. We are surrounded by the recorded thoughts of many people, some great, some less so, and we can reach out and take any book we wish. All we have to do is choose. We begin to read, and for a while we are immersed in the world, real or imaginary, of the writer... Once the book no longer interests us, we can put it back on the shelf, where it will wait for the next reader to pick it up. It makes no claim on us. It is just a book.

That, for the contemporary secular culture of the West, is what identity is like. We are browsers in the library. There are many different ways of living, and none exercises any particular claim on us. None of them more than any other defines who we are, and we can try any for as long as we like. As browsers, though, we remain intact, untouched. The various lifestyles into which we enter are like books we read. We are always free to change them, put them back on the shelf. They are what we read, not what we are.

Judaism asks us to envisage an altogether different possibility. Imagine that, while browsing in the library, you come across one book unlike the rest, which catches your eye because on its spine is written the name of your family. Intrigued, you open it and see many pages written by different hands in many languages. You start reading it, and gradually you begin to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into this family can learn where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last, which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name.

According to the intellectual conventions of modernity, this should make no difference. There is nothing in the past that can bind you in the present, no history that can make a difference to who you are and who you are free to be. But this cannot be the whole truth. Were I to find myself holding such a book in my hands, my life would already have been changed. Seeing my name and the story of

my forebears I could not read it as if it were just one story among others; instead, reading it would inevitably become, for me, a form of self-discovery. Once I knew that it existed, I could not put the book back on the shelf and forget it, because I would now know that I am part of a long line of people who travelled towards a certain destination and whose journey remains unfinished, dependent on me to take it further.

With that newfound knowledge, I could no longer see the world simply as a library. Other books may make no special claim on me; they may be interesting, inspiring, entrancing, but this one is different. Its very existence poses a set of questions addressed, not to the universe, but to me. Will I write my own chapter? Will it be a continuation of the story of those who came before? Will I, when the time comes, hand the book on to my children, or will I by then have forgotten it or given it away to a museum as an heirloom from the past?

This is more than an imaginative exercise. There is such a book and to be a Jew is to be a life, a chapter, in it. This book contains the knowledge of who I am, and is perhaps the most important thing I can be given. Each of us, to feel we belong, needs to know something about our personal history – about who gave birth to us, where they came from, and the history of which they are a part.



### Questions to Consider

1. What is the message behind every Jew being a letter?
2. What languages would feature in the book with your name on the spine?
3. Are there Jews who return their book to the shelf? How can we as a community address that?
4. How can you convince your children and grandchildren not to return the book to the shelf?
5. How can you support the members of your family who are each writing their own chapter?
6. What will your chapter say? What does being Jewish mean to you?