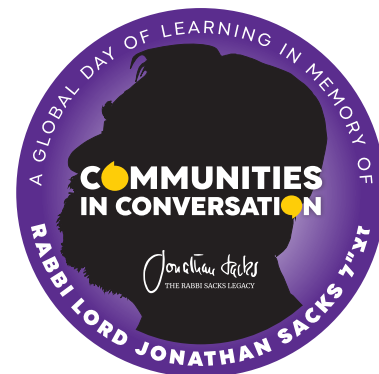


COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION

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



The Home We Build Together



“We are a diverse society. But we are also a fragmenting one... We need to reinvigorate the concept of the common good... Society is where we come together to achieve collectively what none of us can do alone. It is our common property. We inhabit it, make it, breathe it. It is the realm in which *all* of us is more important than *any* of us. It is our shared project, and it exists to the extent that we work for it and contribute to it.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together*, p. 5

To mark Rabbi Sacks' yahrzeit, we want to pose several questions and open a conversation that relates to the essence of our collective – our families, institutions, and society at large. Consider these overarching questions as you explore the sources below:

- How can we achieve a unified society, notwithstanding our differences?
- What habits foster and allow us to build together in a diverse environment?
- What individual and social behaviours hinder cohesion and weaken communities?



1. A Biblical Case Study: The Tabernacle

The Book of Exodus – Development of the Nation of Israel: Freedom, Revelation and Tabernacle					
Shemot Va'era Bo	Beshallach	Yitro Mishpatim	Terumah Tetzaveh]	Ki Tissa	Vayakhel Pekudei]
Egypt: From slavery to freedom	Salvation at the sea	The Giving of the Torah	Tabernacle: instructions	Golden Calf	Tabernacle: construction

(From Torah LAm, used here with permission from LSJS)

RABBI SACKS

The Home We Build Together (Continuum, 2007), pp. 136–140

Read the book of Exodus and you will see that the early chapters are all about the politics of freedom. They tell of slavery, oppression, the mission of Moses to Pharaoh, the ten plagues, liberation, the division of the Red Sea and the revelation at Mount Sinai. All of this is a sequential story about liberty.

But the last part of Exodus – roughly a third of the book as a whole – is taken up with an apparently minor and irrelevant episode told and retold in exhaustive detail: the construction of the Tabernacle...

So why is the story of the Tabernacle told at such length?

The question becomes all the more acute when we realise that the narrative is deliberately constructed in such a way as to create a set of linguistic parallels between the Israelites' construction of the Tabernacle and God's creation of the universe. The key Hebrew words – for *make, see, complete, bless, sanctify, work, behold* – are the same in both texts. The effect is to suggest that making the Tabernacle was the human counterpart of the divine creation of the universe... The Bible is clearly intimating something important, but it is hard to see what it is. What has making a portable sanctuary to do with exodus, freedom and national identity?

The Hebrew Bible is, as already stated, a political as well as a spiritual text, and it tells a political story. Despite the miracles, the essential narrative is remarkably human. The Israelites are portrayed as a querulous, almost ungovernable group. Moses, their deliverer, comes to them with the news that they are about to go free. His first intervention, however, only makes things worse, and the people complain. Eventually the people leave, but Pharaoh and his army pursue them. They are trapped between the approaching Egyptian chariots and the Red Sea, and again they complain. Moses performs a miracle. The sea divides. The Israelites cross through on dry land. They sing a song of deliverance. But three days later, they are complaining again, this time about the lack of water.

Some six weeks later, at Mount Sinai, they receive the great revelation. God speaks directly to the people. They make a covenant with him. Moses reascends the mountain to receive the tablets on which the covenant provisions are engraved. While he is away, the Israelites commit their greatest sin. They make a golden calf and dance before it, saying, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' The episode of the golden calf is told in Exodus 32–34, in the middle of the account of the making of the Tabernacle, so clearly there is some connection between them.

Putting all this together we arrive at the boldest of all Exodus' political statements. A nation – at least, the kind of nation the Israelites were called on to become – is created through the act of creation itself... In commanding Moses to get the people to make the Tabernacle, God was in effect saying: To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together.

Freedom cannot be conferred by an outside force, not even by God Himself. It can be achieved only by collective, collaborative effort on the part of the people themselves. Hence the construction of the Tabernacle.

A nation is built by building. What they built was a 'home' for the Divine presence. The Tabernacle, placed at the centre of the camp with the tribes arrayed around it, symbolized the public square, the common good, the voice that had summoned them to collective freedom. It was a visible emblem of community. Within the Tabernacle was the ark, within the ark were the tablets of stone, and on the tablets of stone were written the details of the covenant. It was the home of their constitution of liberty... Society is the home, the Tabernacle, we build together.

It was built out of difference and diversity. That too is the point of the narrative. Each of the Israelites brought his or her own distinctive contribution. Some brought gold, others silver, others bronze. Some gave jewels, others animal skins, and others drapes. Some gave of their skills and time. The point is not what they gave but that each was valued equally. As the Bible says about the half-shekel contribution: 'the rich not more, the poor not less'. The Tabernacle was built out of the differential contributions of the various groups and tribes. It represented orchestrated diversity, or in social terms, integration without assimilation. That is the dignity of difference. Because we are not the same, we each have something unique to contribute, something only we can give.

Moses was faced with a problem not unlike ours. How do you turn a group of people – in his case, liberated slaves – into a nation with a collective identity? His answer – God's answer – was dazzling in its simplicity. You get them voluntarily to create something together. The voluntariness is essential: Moses was commanded to ask for contributions 'from each whose heart prompts him to give'. At the same time, of course, he had to create a mood, a cultural climate, in which giving was expected. The story of the construction of the Tabernacle has an inescapable political dimension. It is about how you create a sense of national belonging. The best way of making people feel 'I belong' is to enlist them in a shared project so they can say, 'I helped build this.'...

Society is made out of the contributions of many individuals. What they give is unimportant; that they give is essential. Society is what we build together – and the more different types of people there are, the more complex and beautiful will be the structure we create. The important thing is that we build together.



Questions to Consider

1. In Exodus, God delivers the Israelites, but they keep failing. Why is the construction of the Tabernacle such an important moment?
2. How does the Tabernacle express "the dignity of difference"?
3. "A nation is built by building." Have you ever been involved in a project that reminds you of this? How did it make you feel?
4. In your family, office, community and school, what could a "building" project look like that would "create identity out of diversity"?



2. A Story: Solving Middle-East Peace, One Plate at a Time

RABBI SACKS

The Home We Build Together (Continuum, 2007), p. 173

The most brilliant act of creative diplomacy I encountered was undertaken by the late Lord (Victor) Mishcon. He cared passionately about peace in the Middle East, and in the early 1980s he realized he had the chance to do something about it. He knew the then ruler of Jordan, King Hussein. Their children had gone to the same school and the families had become friends. He also knew the Israeli Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, because he was his lawyer.

He decided to bring the two of them together. He invited both to dinner at his apartment. The evening proceeded agreeably until the two got up to leave. They thanked their host for his hospitality. Mishcon put on an air of surprise. ‘You can’t leave yet,’ he said. ‘What about the washing up?’ ‘Are you serious?’ they said. ‘Absolutely,’ Mishcon replied. And so the two men removed their jackets, rolled up their shirtsleeves, went into the kitchen and did the washing up.

People bond when they do something together. So, the king of Jordan washing, the Israeli foreign minister drying, a friendship was struck between the two. The result would have been a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan had it not been overruled by the then Prime Minister of Israel. But the treaty did eventually happen.



Questions to Consider

1. What did Lord Mishcon achieve by asking his guests to wash up? Why was this effective?
2. How does this relate to the presentation of the building of the Tabernacle found in the previous source?
3. How can this model be applied to your family, community, and society as a whole?

3. A Metaphor: The Country House, The Hotel, and the Home We Build Together

In his book, “The Home We Build Together”, Rabbi Sacks used three analogies to describe three models of how a diverse society might be structured. The models are the country house, the hotel and the home we build together. This is how Rabbi Sacks described it in 2005:

RABBI SACKS

How to Build a Culture of Respect (The Demos Lecture, King’s College London, 18 May 2005)

Can we recreate a society of the common good? Here’s a metaphor. I call it “the country house metaphor”. Society is an enormous country house. Newcomers arrive. The host of the country house comes out with an enormous smile on his face and says: “Welcome visitors”. But you’re conscious as long as you’re there that you are a guest. It’s his home, not yours.

What I call the country house model says there’s one single dominant culture, and if you come and you want to belong and not just feel a guest you have to get rid of your culture or play it very, very low profile indeed.

What took its place, the second model which we have been living in for the past half century, is that society is not a country house – it is a hotel. You pay for services rendered and in return you get a room, you get room services – beyond that, you are free to do whatever you like so long as you don’t disturb the other guests.

That is great, except a hotel in principle generates no loyalty. A hotel is somewhere where you don't belong. It isn't a home. It's a convenience. And therefore when society becomes a hotel, as it has become in the past 50 years, you get no sense of national identity, of belonging, of common history, of common good, of moral consensus, of social solidarity – and that is where we are now.

So, is there a third model, a post multicultural model? I suggest there is and I offer, as my third model, society not as a country house, not as a hotel, but as the home we build together.

We are not dealing here with self-interest. We are talking civil society. How? Not by appealing to interests but by appealing to altruism. If we are to make such a society, we are going to have to put the collective good back at the heart of political discourse, and it is not therefore simply that politics is the agenda – who has the most persuasive voice or the largest number of votes. It is the collective good we make together.”



Questions to Consider

1. Where you live, was there a period in which “the Country House” model held sway? When was that? How did that effect your religious community or ethnicity?
2. Rabbi Sacks says that the “hotel” model has held sway for fifty years. What does he mean? What are the advantages of the hotel model? What are the disadvantages?
3. Rabbi Sacks calls for a different model. Elsewhere he says that this approach “values differences because we each have something different and special to give to the common good.” Have you ever participated in an environment that reflects this? Can you share how it looked and how it felt? If you haven't seen this model in action, discuss what it might look like?

4. A Practical Application: Moving Forward, What Can I Do?

Rabbi Sacks offers several practical skills and practices, habits and gestures that we can employ to generate unity alongside diversity:

RABBI SACKS

Based on *Seven Principles for Maintaining Jewish Peoplehood* (www.rabbisacks.org)
and *Jewish Diversity & Unity* (Jewish Action, 20 June 2012)

Tool 1: A culture of debate. Judaism is the only religion I know, all of whose canonical texts are anthologies of arguments: arguments between God and humans, humans and God, humans and one another. The Mishnah preserves the arguments of the Sages even when it knows that the law is like one not the other. So difference, argument, clashes of style and substance, are signs not of unhealthy division but of health. The law of entropy states, all systems lose energy over time. Not Judaism. Where you find argument, there you will find passion.

Tool 2: Keep talking. Remember what the Torah says about Joseph and his brothers: *Lo yachlu dabro leshalom*, “They couldn't speak to him in peace” (Genesis 37:2). In other words, had they kept speaking, eventually they would have made peace. So, keep talking to one another.

Tool 3: Listen to one another. *Shema Yisrael*, “Listen: Israel” calls on us to listen to one another in a way that we can actually hear what our opponent is saying. If we do this, we discover it is not just a powerful way to avoid conflict, but profoundly therapeutic as well.

Tool 4: Work to understand those with whom you disagree. Remember why the law follows Hillel as opposed to Shammai. According to the Talmud, Hillel was humble and modest; he taught the views of his opponents even before his own. He laboured to understand the point of view with which he disagreed.

Tool 5: Never seek victory. Never ever seek to inflict defeat on your opponents. If you seek to inflict defeat on your opponent, they must, by human psychology, seek to retaliate and inflict defeat on you. The end result is though you win today, you lose tomorrow and in the end everyone loses. Do not think in terms of victory or defeat. Think in terms of the good of the Jewish people.

Tool 6: If you seek respect, give respect. Remember the principle of the Book of Proverbs: “As water reflects face to face, so does the heart of person to person.” As you behave to others, they will behave to you. If you show contempt for other Jews, they will show contempt to you. If you respect other Jews, they will show respect to you.

Tool 7: You can disagree, but still care. Jews will never agree on everything, but we remain one extended family. If you disagree with a friend, tomorrow they may no longer be your friend. But if you disagree with your family, tomorrow they are still your family. In the end, family is what keeps us together, and that is expressed best in the principle *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, “All Jews are responsible for one another.” Remember that this is the ultimate basis of Jewish peoplehood. As Shimon bar Yochai said, “When one Jew is injured, all Jews feel the pain.” So that is why we must strive to remember rule seven. Ultimately, I don’t need you to agree with me, I just need you to care about me.

Tool 8: God loves us all/Peace. The Sages said a very striking thing. They said, “Great is peace, because even if Israel is worshipping idols and there is peace among them, God will never allow harm to happen to them.” That is a powerful idea to reflect upon. So the next time you are tempted to walk away from some group of Jews that you think has offended you, make that extra effort, that gesture to stay together, to forgive, to listen, to try and unite because if God loves each of us, can we justify failing to strive to do this too?



Questions to Consider

1. Which of these eight tools appeals to you?
2. Which tool is difficult for you?
3. Discuss in your group which of these tools could be used to further your community or institution. If you were to write a charter of how these tools could be implemented, what would it say?

CONCLUSION: This learning resource has suggested two roads to address our challenge of generating harmony in a world of multiple and clashing identities:

- **Action:** A joint project in which each person and group can channel their individual skills and gifts to build something together.
- **Speech:** A culture of speaking with one another.

How will you implement this toolbox in your environment; at home, at school, in the community and the workplace?



The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders, and a moral voice.

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts, and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at www.rabbisacks.org, and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.