

Class 1: Rabbi Sacks (1948-2020). An Introduction

1. The Tim Ferris Show

August 29, 2020 <https://tim.blog/2020/08/29/rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks-transcript/>

Tim Ferriss: ... I wanted to start with a perhaps unusual starting point, and that is asking about yellow ties. I found, under the category of strange habits, a note from your wife of 50 years in *The Times* UK, "he always wears a yellow tie when he's due to give important speeches or on special occasions." ... is there any truth to that statement? And could you elaborate, if so?

Rabbi Sacks: A hundred percent. Tim, I always used to wear silver ties. This kind of dignified thing that ministers of religion do. And I had a huge, but huge collection of silver ties. Then at a certain point in time, I'm not sure whether it was 2016 or a little earlier than that, the world began to fall apart. And that was when I realized that part of my job was not just to speak or to write, but to cheer people up. And I think Little Miss or Little Mr. Cheerful has to be colored yellow. So I thought, "Wearing a yellow tie cheers people up." And by and large, consciously or subconsciously, it does.

However, I also do something else. I must have about 50 yellow ties. But when I'm doing a really, really difficult speech, I will wear a yellow tie that was given to me by a very close friend. My friends, noticing that I wear yellow ties, tend to make a present of a yellow tie. And when I feel I am wearing something that a friend gave me in love, it just makes the speech so much easier.

2. Avot ch.2 Mishna 8

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ב משנה ח

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five disciples...:

חמשה תלמידים היו לרבן יוחנן בן זכאי ואלו הן רבי

He would recount their praises:

אליעזר בן הורקנוס ורבי יהושע בן חנניה ורבי יוסי

Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkenus is a sealed cistern that loses not a drop;

הכהן ורבי שמעון בן נתנאל ורבי אלעזר בן ערך

הוא היה מונה שבחן:

Rabbi Joshua ben Hananya---fortunate is the woman who gave birth to him;

• רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס בור סיד שאינו מאבד טפה

• רבי יהושע אשרי יולדתו

Rabbi Yossi the Kohen - a *chassid* (pious one);

• רבי יוסי חסיד

Rabbi Shimon ben Nethaniel - God-fearing;

• רבי שמעון בן נתנאל ירא חטא

Rabbi Elazar ben Arach - an ever-increasing wellspring.

• רבי אלעזר בן ערך מעין המתגבר

3. An Act of Civility. To Heal a Fractured World pg 44

In 1966 an 11-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family white neighbourhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but not one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says: 'I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here...'

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children, and with a broad smile said, 'Welcome!' Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and cream cheese and jelly

sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment - the young man later wrote - changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realize, at a time when race relations in the United States were still fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were colour-blind.

The young man, Stephen Carter, is now a law professor at Yale, and he eventually wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it *Civility*. The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and he adds that she was a religious Jew. 'In the Jewish tradition', he notes, such civility is called 'hessed the doing of acts of kindness - which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God.' *Civility*, he adds, 'itself may be seen as part of hessed: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard. (pg.44)

4. Shabbat

I once took Britain's leading child-care expert to a Jewish school where, for the first time, she saw young children rehearsing the Sabbath table-five-year-old parents blessing five-year-old children and welcoming five-year-old guests. She, a non-Jew, was enthralled. She asked the children what they liked most about Shabbat. They replied: "It's the time when mum and dad don't have to rush off." She said to me after wards: "You are giving those children the greatest gift, the gift of a tradition. And it is saving their parents' marriages." (Letter in the Scroll pg.140)

A Tortoise Thinkin' with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4nk_rDFQAw&t=850s

minute 45.44

Lubavitcher Rebbe

https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/1690783/jewish/A-Story-in-Three-Acts.htm

Minute 4:50

Boca Raton Rabbi Efreim Goldberg "Behind the Bima" Podcast

<https://behind-the-bima.simplecast.com/episodes/special-episode-rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks-ztl-0xgOBiRs>

Minute 21:00

What books did Rabbi Sacks write?

1. 1986: Torah Studies, Rabbi Sacks' adaptation of sichot by the Lubavitcher Rebbe
2. 1989 Traditional Alternatives (UK) | 1991 Arguments for the Sake of Heaven (US)
3. 1990: Tradition in an Untraditional Age
4. 1991: The Persistence of Faith, based on the 1990 BBC Reith Lectures
5. 1992: Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust
6. 1993: One People? Tradition, Modernity and Jewish Unity
7. 1994: Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?
8. 1995: Faith in the Future
9. 1996: Community of Faith (for the United Synagogue 125 anniversary)
10. 1997: The Politics of Hope
11. 2000: Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places
12. 2000: A Letter in the Scroll (recipient of a 2000 National Jewish Book Award, USA)
13. 2002: The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations (recipient of the Grawemeyer Prize for Religion (USA) in 2004.)
14. 2003: The Jonathan Sacks Haggada
15. 2004: From Optimism to Hope (A Collection of BBC 'Thoughts for the Day')
16. 2005: To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility
17. 2006: The Authorised Daily Prayer Book.
18. 2007: The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society
19. 2009: Covenant and Conversation: Genesis – The Book of the Beginnings (recipient of 2009 National Jewish Book Award (USA).
20. 2009: Future Tense: A Vision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture
21. 2009: The Koren Sacks Siddur, (a leading prayer book for Jewish communities worldwide).
22. 2010: Covenant and Conversation: Exodus – The Book of Redemption
23. 2011: The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning
24. 2011: The Koren Sacks Rosh Hashana Mahzor
25. 2012: The Koren Sacks Yom Kippur Mahzor
26. 2013 The Koren Sacks Pesach Mahzor, winner of 2014 National Jewish Book Award (USA).
27. 2015: Covenant and Conversation: Leviticus – The Book of Holiness
28. 2015: Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence
29. 2015: Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible
30. 2016: The Koren Sacks Shavuot Mahzor
31. 2016: The Koren Sacks Sukkot Mahzor
32. 2016: Essays in Ethics: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible
33. 2017: Ceremony & Celebration: Introduction to the Holidays (A collated reading of all 5 'Introductions' written for the Koren mahzorim collection)
34. 2017: Covenant & Conversation: Numbers – The Wilderness Years
35. 2019: Covenant & Conversation: Deuteronomy – Renewal of the Sinai Covenant
36. 2020: Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times
37. 2020: Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

1. Understanding the Jewish World in the 20th Century ... Crisis ... Jewish Unity

1. 1989 Traditional Alternatives (UK) | 1991 Arguments for the Sake of Heaven (US)
2. 1990: Tradition in an Untraditional Age
3. 1992: Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust
4. 1993: One People? Tradition, Modernity and Jewish Unity

2. Why be Jewish. The Jewish Future

1. 1994: Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?
2. 2000: A Letter in the Scroll
3. 2009: Future Tense: A Vision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture

3. The place of religion in a world of religious violence

1. 2002: The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations
2. 2015: Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence published

4. Religion and Science. Faith and Atheism

1. 2011: The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning

5. Secular society and Modern morals

1. 1991: The Persistence of Faith, based on the 1990 BBC Reith Lectures
2. 1997: The Politics of Hope
3. 2007: The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society
4. 2020: Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times

6. Hessed

1. 2005: To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility

7. Torah

Humash / Siddur / Hagadda / Chagim



Biographical Notes

Memory 1

My father was a simple man who lived by simple truths. He had a hard life; he came to the West as a child fleeing from persecution, and he had to leave school at the age of fourteen to support his family. When I was young, I used to ask him many questions about Judaism, and his answer was always the same. "Jonathan," he used to say, "I didn't have an education, and so I do not know the answers to your questions. But one day you will have the education missed, and then you will teach me the answers." Could I anyone have been given a greater gift than that? He was a proud Jew, and he wanted his children to go further than he could, along the path of faith.

Memory 2

Once, when I was a child, my family was on holiday in a little coastal town in the south of England. It was Shabbat and we had just left the synagogue and were walking back for lunch. Behind us, another member of the congregation came rushing up and pointed to the yarmulka I was wearing. He said to my father, "Your son has forgotten to take his yarmulka off." This was in the days when it was not done to wear overt signs of your Jewishness in public. The old dictum "Be a Jew at home and a man in the street" was still in force. By walking down the road with my head covering I was committing a solecism, and our friend from the synagogue assumed, not unnaturally, that I was unaware of it. He meant it kindly. He was simply trying to save me from embarrassment, much as if my shirttail had been hanging out. For once my father got angry and replied, "No child of mine will ever be ashamed to be Jewish in public." And we continued on our way. It was not a very tactful response, but it taught me-as perhaps no more formal lesson could never to be ashamed of who I was.

3. Alan Sacks. Interview. Tzvika Klein Mekor Rishon. 2020

In the living room, Alan shows me a family holiday picture at the seaside. Jonathan, age 16, is dressed in formal attire. "He wasn't like our friends or our other siblings. He never played cricket or football, but was occupied in debating and politics. From a young age, he saw himself as an intellectual, and would wear a suit for school. These were the '60's in Britain but Jonathan didn't grow his hair long like other teenagers, although he did listen to the Beatles!

כעת בסלון הוא מראה לי תמונה של ארבעת האחים בחופשה משפחתית על חוף הים, ויונתן בן ה־16 אכן מופיע בה בלבוש פורמלי ביותר. "הוא לא היה כמו האחים האחרים או כמו חברים שלנו. הוא לא שיחק קריקט או כדורגל, אלא התעמק בעולם הדיבייט והפוליטיקה. מגיל צעיר הוא ראה עצמו כאינטלקטואל, והיה הולך לבית הספר בחליפה. אלה היו שנות השישים בבריטניה, אבל יונתן לא גידל שיער ארוך כמו בני נוער אחרים – אם כי הוא הקשיב לביטלס."

3b Margaret Thatcher

As the funeral service for Margaret Thatcher takes place today, I will be thinking not of the public person but of the private one. I knew her when I was a child at school. She was my local MP, and when I had an essay to write about politics, I used to go and see her in her constituency office, to hear what she had to say.

I remember once mentioning the words, “proportional representation,” and she glared at me as if I had committed a cardinal sin. “You’re not a liberal, are you?” she said. And I had hurriedly to say that I wasn’t advocating it, just writing an essay about it.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/baroness-thatcher-was-a-parliamentary-boadicea/>

4. University

IT HAPPENED IN THE never-to-be-forgotten summer of 1967. I had just gone to university, leaving home for the first time. Until then I had been a Jew because—well, because that is what my parents were. I did what I did without asking why. I had my bar mitzvah, I went to Hebrew classes, and every Saturday I went to synagogue with my father. There was no reason not to, no reason to rebel.

Cambridge was like a revelation. Here for the first time I could feel the lure of another history, the siren call of a different culture. Everything about it was dazzling ... What mattered was critical intelligence, the ability to question everything, accepting no answer on the basis of authority or age or tradition or revelation. Reality was confined to facts and inferences. Everything else was choice. You could be anything, do anything, intellectually and existentially. My parents' world seemed long ago and far away. These were heady days, and I was at the heart of it.

Then, in May, we began to hear disturbing news from the Middle East. It was then that an extraordinary thing began. Throughout the university, Jews suddenly became visible. Day after day they crowded into the little synagogue in the centre of town. Students and dons who had never before publicly identified as Jews could be found there praying. Others began collecting money. Everyone wanted to help in some way, to express their solidarity, their identification with Israel's fate... Jews were riveted to their television screens or radios, anxious to hear the latest news, involved, on edge, as if it were their own lives that were at stake. The rest is history. The war was fought and won. It lasted a mere six days, one of the most spectacular victories in modern history. We could celebrate and breathe safely again.

I had witnessed something in those days and weeks that didn't make sense in the rest of my world. It had nothing to do with politics or war or even prayer. It had to do with Jewish identity. Collectively the Jewish people had looked in the mirror and said, We are still Jews....

How can anyone truly be born into specific obligations and responsibilities without their consent? Logically it didn't add up. Yet psychologically it did. Without any conscious decision I was reminded that merely by being born into the Jewish people I was enmeshed in a network of relationships that connected me to other people, other places, other times. I belonged to a people. And being part of a people, I belonged. It didn't make sense in terms of twentieth-century thought. Yet it made eminent sense in the language of Jewish Tradition. (Letter in the Scroll)

5. Marriage (TED Talk)

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, I was a 20-year-old undergraduate studying philosophy. I was into Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and Sartre and Camus. I was full of ontological uncertainty and existential angst. It was terrific! I was self-obsessed and thoroughly unpleasant to know, until one day I saw across the courtyard a girl who was everything that I wasn't. She radiated sunshine. She emanated joy. I found out her name was Elaine. We met. We talked. We married. And 47 years, three children and eight grandchildren later, I can safely say it was the best decision I ever

took in my life, because it's the people not like us that make us grow. And that is why I think we have to do just that.

6. Honeymoon

happened on our honeymoon. We had hitchhiked from the Swiss mountains to the Italian coast, finding ourselves at a little town called Paestum, an ancient place with fine Roman ruins. But it was the beach that drew us to it, and the sea. Rarely had the sea seemed more inviting than just then. There was just one problem. The Talmud tells us that one of the duties of a parent to a child is to teach it how to swim. Unfortunately, my parents never learned that page, and I never learned how to swim.

But as we sat on the beach and looked out across the water I realised that the shore must be sloping very gently indeed. People were far out into the sea and yet the water was only coming up to their knees. It looked safe just to walk out. And so it was. I walked out to where I had seen people standing just a few minutes before, and the water gently lapped against my knees. Then I started walking back to the shore. That's when it happened. Within a minute I found myself out of my depth.

How it happened, I'm not sure. There must have been a dip in the sand. I had missed it on my way out but on my way back I had walked straight into it. I tried to swim. I failed. I kept going under. I looked around for some possible source of rescue. The other people bathing were a long way away - too far to reach me, I thought; too far even to hear. Besides which, we were in Italy, I didn't speak the language and didn't know how to make myself understood. I was sure this was the end. As I went under for the fifth time, I remember thinking two thoughts. 'What a way to begin a honeymoon.' And, 'What is the Italian for "Help"?"

It's difficult to recapture the panic I felt. Clearly someone rescued me, or I wouldn't be writing now. But it did, at the time, seem like the end. As far as I can reconstruct that moment in my memory, I had already reconciled myself to drowning when some one, seeing me thrashing about, swam over, took hold of me, and brought me to the shore. He deposited me, almost unconscious, at the feet of my wife. I was too shocked to do or say anything. I never found out his name. Somewhere out there is a man to whom I owe my life.

It changed my life. For years afterwards, I would wake in the morning conscious of the fact that but for a miracle, I would not be here. Somehow that made everything easier to bear. Our life has had difficult times. It has had moments of crisis. Public life is full of stress and not everyone who lives it has a thick skin. People often ask me, 'How do you bear it?' The answer is simple. That day, on an Italian beach, I learned that life, which I so nearly lost, had been given back to me. It is difficult to feel depressed when you remember fairly constantly that life is a gift. (Celebrating Life)

6. Fear of Death <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/jonathan-sacks-goes-global>

"Though he seldom mentions it, Sacks battled cancer twice, once in his 30s, and later in his 50s. Yet unlike many other rabbis and scholars of religion, from Rabbi David Wolpe to James Kugel, who incorporated their bouts with cancer into their theological reflections, Sacks makes no reference to it in his voluminous output. I asked why.

“It’s very simple,” he said. “I saw my late father in his 80s go through four, five major operations. This was not cancer, it was hip replacements and those things. And when you have operations in your 80s, they sap your strength. He got weaker and weaker as the decade passed. He was walking on crutches at my induction—he was alive for my induction, and that was very important to me.”

“Now, my late father, alav ha-shalom, didn’t have much Jewish education, but he had enormous emunah [faith],” Sacks continued. “I used to watch him saying Tehillim in the hospital, and I could see him getting stronger. It seemed to me that his mental attitude was ‘I’m leaving this to Hashem. If he sees that it’s time for me to go, then it’s time for me to go. And if he still needs me to do things here, he’ll look after me.’”

“And I adopted exactly that attitude. So on both occasions I felt, if this is the time Hashem needs me up there, thank you very much indeed for my time down here; I’ve enjoyed every day and feel very blessed. And if he wants me to stay and there’s still work for me to do, then he is going to be part of the refu’ah [healing] and I put my trust in him. So there was no test of faith at any point—just these simple moments at which to say, *‘b’yado afkid ruchi’* [‘In his hand, I place my soul’]. That was my thought. And since we say that every day in Adon Olam, I didn’t feel the need to write a book about it. It was for me not a theological dilemma at all.”

“I had faith,” said Sacks, “full stop.”