

A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO RABBI JONATHAN SACKS



By Dr. Carl Racine

“It is hard to think of Rabbi Sacks in the past tense.” (R. Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of Britain)

Three years ago I stumbled upon a commentary by Rabbi Sacks about the weekly synagogue readings from Genesis. I knew nothing about him and don't remember why I ordered the book. By the time I got to the chapter on Noah, I was hooked. I knew that I needed to engage in a conversation about the Scriptures with this brilliant teacher and with the many other rabbis he cited. I quickly bought a whole bunch of his books and devoured them. Rabbi Sacks opened up to me the world of rabbinic Judaism and became my principal mentor in my ongoing rethinking of how we Christians understand the Bible.

Jonathan Sacks was born in London in 1948 to a family of immigrants. His father was a textile merchant originally from Poland, and his mother worked in her Lithuanian family wine business. He studied economics, and then philosophy, at Cambridge University, planning a career as an economist, lawyer, or professor, when he took a fateful trip to the United States at age 19. There he met with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Schneerson, hoping to discuss intellectual matters of faith and religion. Instead the Rebbe told Sacks that he had a calling, to go back to Britain and become a rabbi in order to train other rabbis and strengthen Judaism in his country. Sacks embraced that prophetic word and dedicated his life to it. He saw his challenge from the Rebbe as reflecting the biblical pattern of God calling people to mission and service.

But Rabbi Sacks did more than teach other rabbis and lead congregations in Britain. His secular education had given him an openness to the larger world around. In his writing and teaching he sought to bring together *Torah*, God's revelation, and *Hochmah*, worldly wisdom, human intellectual pursuits. The Bible itself contains such literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), and Rabbi Sacks was deeply engaged with the vast scope of human learning and scientific studies. “If we are to apply Torah to the world, we must understand the world to which it applies. Because the God of creation is also the God of revelation, there is ultimate harmony between them.” Rabbi Sacks was able to speak not only to Jews but to those of all faiths, and of none, about how the fundamental teachings of Torah have continued relevance for our lives.

The heart of his message is expressed in the title of my favorite book of his, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (2005). He speaks of the Bible's summons to us in partnership with God to bring about a world of compassionate justice. My course “Scriptural Insights from the Rabbis” is a small personal tribute to the lasting power of Rabbi Sacks' ministry and his own faith in the God who has faith in us.

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