



A JUDAISM
ENGAGED
WITH THE WORLD

CHIEF RABBI LORD
JONATHAN SACKS

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The Jewish journey: The next stage

JUDAISM is a journey to the future. It is the only civilization whose golden age, the messianic age, is yet to come. As a result, Jews look forward more than they look back.

When Sarah dies, Abraham – by now an old man – mourns her loss, then turns to buying the first Jewish plot of land in Israel and finding a wife for Isaac, his son. He grieves for the past, then without delay proceeds to build the future.

At the end of his life, Moses gathers the people, briefly reviews the previous forty years, then delivers an extraordinary series of prophecies about the far horizons of the years ahead.

At the Seder table on Pesach we celebrate history, but we begin and end by talking not about last year but about next year: “Next year we will be free,” “Next year in Jerusalem.”

When God appears to Moses at the burning bush, first He calls Himself “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” the Jewish past. But when asked by Moses for His name, He replies, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, “I will be what I will be,” I am God whose name is the future tense.

To be a Jew is to keep faith with the past by building a Jewish future. That is the secret of our unbroken capacity through centuries of suffering to renew ourselves as a people. More than we look back, we look forward. So as Elaine and I come to the end of our time in the Chief Rabbinate I want briefly to look back, and then turn to the next stage of the journey.

In 1991 when we began, British Jewry faced a challenge of renewal. The community was shrinking. Outmarriage rates were rising. Jewish life was becoming weaker. We had been losing ten Jews a day every day for forty years. Several outside observers had written that British Jewry was set on a path of slow but inevitable decline. It had a distinguished past. It was unclear whether it had a future.

The way the community responded over the next two decades was extraordinary. Never before in Anglo-Jewish history have more Jewish day schools been built. There is more adult, informal and family education than ever. Cultural activity has blossomed. There is now a London Jewish Cultural Centre and a Jewish Community Centre is about to open. Synagogues have become centres of community, active throughout the day and week. Services are more informal. Rabbis no longer wear canonicals, or wardens top hats. Outreach groups thrive. There is less “Oy,” more joy.

There has been a revolution in community welfare provision: day centres and sheltered housing for the elderly, and more facilities for children and adults with special needs. On moral and social issues the Jewish voice has become a respected part of the national conversation. And thanks to the growth of the Haredi community, after half-a-century of year-on-year decline, British Jewry is no longer shrinking but growing. There are more Jewish professionals, facilities, programmes, organisations and buildings than ever before. Our Victorian predecessors, were they able to see British Jewry today, would stand amazed.

This has been a genuine communal achievement. Thousands of individuals have played a part. In the case of Jewish schools we stand in the debt of those who built and funded them, the teachers, head teachers and governors who made them centres of excellence, the parents who chose a Jewish education for their children, and the children themselves who have given us pride.

Collectively we owe thanks to the lay leaders, professionals and volunteers in all the many organisations who have made our community creative, caring and admired. Head for head, our community gives to Jewish life and the wider society out of all proportion to its numbers. Everyone has contributed, and every contribution made a difference. So, as we end our period of service Elaine and I want to say *Shehecheyanu*, thanking God for the privilege of living in such a community at such a time.

Now, looking back then forward, I want to tell the story of my own Jewish journey, why it took me in the direction it did and why there is a distance yet to go.

The question

IT began, as Jewish journeys often do, with a question. I had arrived at university, the first member of my family to do so. In my memory I see a blur of impressions: undergraduates cycling to lectures, their gowns trailing in the wind, the long tables and oak-panelled walls of the college hall, the ancient stonework of the buildings, the buzz of conversations, and

the silence in the college library punctuated only by the slow ticking of a grandfather clock.

Tucked away in a side street, almost completely inconspicuous, was the little synagogue built in the 1930s without a single window facing the street in case, in the fraught atmosphere of the time, fascists would smash the glass and desecrate the place where Jews prayed. It was small, modest, but to the Jewish students it was home. It was there that we ate, there that I encountered *cholent* for the first time, and there that in the anxious weeks before the Six Day War we crowded every afternoon to *davven* for the safety of our people and land.

The question that haunted me then, and in one form or another has done so ever since, was: where were the missing Jews? We who frequented the shul estimated that there were in the region of a thousand Jewish students at the university. Of those, a hundred had some contact with the Jewish society, and perhaps another fifty who attended the Israel society. Where were the missing eighty-five per cent? Why weren't they there?

Why was it that, having survived some of the worst tragedies ever to befall a people without abandoning their faith, Jews were doing so now, when there was no serious penalty to be paid for being Jewish? English Jews had waited patiently for almost two hundred years for the right to attend university and obtain a degree. Lionel de Rothschild had been elected four times as Member of Parliament for the City of London from 1847 onward, yet did not take his place in the House of Commons for eleven years until he could do so as a Jew without taking a Christian oath. At any time

Jews could have abandoned their Judaism and become, like Benjamin Disraeli – converted by his father at the age of six – Prime Minister of Britain, yet overwhelmingly they did not. Why then were they doing so now?

That was the question: *Where were the missing Jews?*

I started studying Jewish history and quickly realised that what was happening to my generation was not new. It had happened throughout Europe for the previous two centuries. In the nineteenth century, in Russia, Germany, France and Austria, as the ghetto walls crumbled and Jews entered the wider society, they discovered not a new tolerance but the old prejudice in a new form. In 1879 it was given a new name: antisemitism.

Jews, lacerated by anti-Jewish prejudice, began developing a profound ambivalence about Jewish identity. Mordecai Kaplan best summed it up when he said, “Before the beginning of the nineteenth century all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege; since then most Jews have come to regard it as a burden.”

For more than a century many resolved the conflict by abandoning Judaism. Hundreds of thousands of Jews in central and Eastern Europe converted to Christianity. Heinrich Heine called conversion his entry ticket to European culture. In Vienna as many as eighty per cent of Jews registered themselves as *Konfessionslos*, “of no religion.” Many Jews in flight from Eastern Europe to America in the wake of the pogroms abandoned their Jewishness on the boat carrying them across the Atlantic. A famous play, *The Melting Pot*, by Israel Zangwill, ran on Broadway for several years to great acclaim. Its thesis was that in America the

old tribal identities that had set Cossack against Jew would disappear. No more Cossacks, no more Jews, just Americans.

The missing Jews of my student days were the latest chapter in a story that began long before. Knowing the prejudice that surrounded them, Jews were not sure that they wanted their children or grandchildren to be Jews.

The inward turn

SOMETHING else happened at about this time that left a deep impression on me. In those days we used to take our holidays on the south coast near Margate where there was a little shul. In summer the congregation was a mix of locals and holiday makers much like ourselves. One year, though, a group of Hassidim appeared. They had decided to make it their holiday venue, and they came for many years afterward.

I had never really met Hassidim before, and it was immediately clear that they saw Jewish identity in quite different terms from the rest of British Jewry. They had no intention of acculturating to English norms, and in the days before multiculturalism, this was a bold statement. They were, and saw themselves as, a group apart. They were numerous, had large families, and were bound to grow as a presence in British Jewish life, especially as other parts of the community seemed to be in decline.

A question came unbidden into my mind: “Is this the beginning of the end of the middle of the road?” It was a good question then. Almost half-a-century later it still is.

My studies quickly revealed that this response too was born in the nineteenth century. While other Jews were assimilating, some were declining the whole process of Emancipation and acculturation and instead turning inward. That was the path taken by the Jewish communities, especially in Eastern Europe, centred on the yeshiva or the Hassidic group.

That world, already waning after the First World War, was almost destroyed in the Holocaust. In one of the greatest reversals in Jewish history, it has now become the fastest growing element in Israel and throughout the Diaspora. With an intensity of commitment that is nothing short of awe-inspiring, the survivors married and had children and rebuilt their lost communities, growing from *sheirit ha-peletah*, a tiny remnant, to become a significant presence in contemporary Jewish life.

So the Jewish world today represents the working through of processes begun in mainland Europe long before the Holocaust. Faced with societies that did not accept them as Jews, a fateful choice framed itself in many Jewish minds: either to enter society and abandon their Jewishness, or to preserve their Jewishness at the cost of turning their back on society. There were, it seemed, just two options: to embrace the wider society and abandon Judaism (*assimilation*) or to choose Judaism and disengage from the wider society (*segregation*).

That choice may have made sense in the fraught atmosphere of a mainland Europe dominated by antisemitism from the nineteenth century to the Holocaust. But in the late 1960s, when the state of Israel had just won a stunning

victory in the Six Day War and Jews in the West were living in the most tolerant of times, it made no sense at all.

So in the summer of 1968 I set out on a real journey, to America, to meet as many distinguished rabbis as I could to hear how they understood the Jewish situation of our time.

Encounters

FOR two months I travelled throughout the United States and Canada, meeting many outstanding Jewish leaders. Wherever I went, two names kept coming up in conversation: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the greatest Orthodox thinker of the time, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I was determined to meet them both, and despite many obstacles, I did.

They were, in their very different ways, extraordinary men, not least in their willingness to spend time with a young student from across the Atlantic with no real claim on their attention. Those two encounters eventually changed my life. The Rebbe was fully aware of the problem of the missing Jews, especially on campus. He had seen it long before. Already in the early 1950s he had sent emissaries out to work with students, inventing the idea, revolutionary in its time, of Jewish outreach. In our meeting, he challenged me to get personally involved and to take responsibility. Years later I summed up that meeting by saying that good leaders create followers. Great leaders create leaders. The Rebbe challenged me to lead.

Rabbi Soloveitchik challenged me to think. At that time I was studying philosophy, and soon discovered that he was a master in the field. His approach to Jewish philosophy was unlike any I had encountered before. Already in that first meeting he outlined for me the method he had made his own. Jewish philosophy, he said, had to emerge from halakhah, Jewish law. Jewish thought and Jewish practice were not two different things but the same thing seen from different perspectives. Halakhah was a way of living a way of thinking about the world – taking abstract ideas and making them real in everyday life.

These were immensely inspiring figures, but what struck me most about them was the depth of their commitment to real engagement with the world. Rabbi Soloveitchik had no fears about the intellectual challenges posed by modern thought. He had studied it widely and deeply and felt no ultimate conflict between the worlds of the yeshiva and the university. The very institution in which he taught – Yeshiva University – defined itself simultaneously as both.

As for the Rebbe, here was a man who had deep relationships with doctors, lawyers, scientists, politicians, academics, writers, people in every sphere of life. His vision was vast, and not only in relation to Jews. He believed that we have a responsibility toward the world as a whole. He often spoke publicly about the *Sheva mitzvot bnei Noach*, the covenant God made through Noah with all humanity, and believed that Jews should be active in promoting religious values and faith in society, not just within the Jewish community.

So already then as an undergraduate student I had encountered two outstanding figures who were strikingly different from others in their world. Rabbi Soloveitchik represented the yeshivah. The Lubavitcher Rebbe came from the Hassidic community. Yet unlike their contemporaries they had turned not inward but outward. They taught that to be good, faithful, practising Jews we needed neither to disengage from society nor fear its challenges.

The great divide

DESPITE their example, the rift I had already glimpsed in the 1960s has become deeper still throughout much of the Jewish world. Today the two most powerful movements in Jewish life are assimilation and segregation. Jews are either engaging with the world at the cost of disengaging from Judaism, or engaging with Judaism at the cost of disengaging from the world.

We are still losing Jews through outmarriage and disaffiliation. Throughout the Diaspora, with minor regional variations, one-half of young Jews is deciding not to have a Jewish marriage, build a Jewish home and have Jewish children. Each such loss is a tragedy. A family tree that had lasted a hundred generations comes to an end with them. A chain of continuity that held strong for a hundred generations has broken.

Meanwhile the world of inward-turning, segregationist Orthodoxy is growing at speed. In the summer of 2012, 70,000 crowded into a baseball stadium to celebrate the completion

of Daf Yomi, the seven-year cycle of daily Talmud study. Never before in all of history have so many Jews studied at yeshivot – not in the great days of Mir and Volozhyn, not even in the academies of Sura and Pumbeditha where the Babylonian Talmud was born.

While the two extremes are growing, the centre is shrinking. Jews are either drifting away from mainstream synagogues or starting small, new, breakaway communities. Shuls that once brought together Jews from a wide range of commitment are declining. A certain kind of Jewish identity – proud to be Jewish, proud equally to be an active citizen of the wider society – is waning. In Israel, the split between *Haredi* and *Chiloni*, religious and secular, grows ever deeper. One telling sign is that the sale of ordinary matzot for Pesach is declining. More people are either simply not observing Pesach or are insisting on *matzah shemurah*. The Jewish world is spinning apart.

As strategies, assimilation and segregation are both dangerous. Throughout history, assimilationists believed that they had solved antisemitism by disappearing. But they hadn't disappeared. They were still recognised and reviled. It happened in Spain in the fifteenth century. It happened in Europe in the nineteenth. Assimilation, the wish to be *ke-chol ha-goyim*, "like all the nations," is risk-laden because it convinces only Jews, not the people they need to convince, that they have become invisible.

Segregation is also dangerous. When you have little to do with the world, you fail to understand it and leave yourself defenceless against it.

Assimilation and segregation may work for individuals, even large numbers of them, but they cannot be the way for the Jewish people as a whole. Not only are they dangerous: they are a failure of nerve in the Judaic project. Can it really be that Judaism has nothing to contribute to society and to the world? Can it be that when Jews engage with the world they have to hide their identity, acting as if they were twenty-first century equivalents of the marranos of Spain, Jews in secret but not in public? Are Jewish faith and practice so fragile that they can only be sustained by being screened from all contact with other cultures?

It was once so but it is not so today. The Jewish situation has changed decisively. Israel exists. Jews have a home. In most countries in the Diaspora, Jews are no longer even the most conspicuous minority. *For the first time in four thousand years, Jews have sovereignty and independence in Israel, freedom and equality in the Diaspora.* Shall we act as if we were still in the nineteenth century, not the twenty-first?

The world needs the Jews and Jews need the world. Today for the first time we have the opportunity to live the double truth of that sentence. We must stop feeling defensive about being Jewish and engage with the world with humility but without fear.

The key idea: Kiddush haShem

THE key concept that has driven me since my encounter with Rabbi Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe has been *Kiddush haShem*, sanctification of God's name.

Tragically, often in the past this referred to Jews who died because of their faith. We say they died *al Kiddush haShem*. But what it primarily means is to live in such a way as to inspire respect for God.

When the prophet Isaiah said, in God's name, "You are My witnesses," what he meant was that we have been cast in the role of God's ambassadors to the world. We are commanded to lead our lives so that we become living tutorials in the values Jews first taught the world: the sanctity of life, the dignity of the human person, the twin imperatives of justice and compassion, marriage as a covenant and the home as a sanctuary, community as collective responsibility, the importance of lifelong education, respect for the elderly, and many other ideals that Jews were the first to embrace and of which they are still the great exemplars.

When Dr Ludwig Guttmann revolutionised the care of paraplegics and created the Paralympics, that was a *Kiddush haShem*. When Viktor Frankl in Auschwitz gave his fellow prisoners the will to live, creating a new psychotherapy based on "man's search for meaning," that was a *Kiddush haShem*. When Jewish economists develop ways of alleviating poverty throughout the developing world, that is a *Kiddush haShem*. When Jewish businesses set new standards in respecting employees, that is a *Kiddush haShem*. When Jews worked with Nelson Mandela to end apartheid or marched with Martin Luther King in the battle for civil rights, that was a *Kiddush haShem*.

The reason is that each of these is a way of showing what God wants from us in this world. He wants us to become His "partners in the work of creation." He wants us to fight the

evil men do to one another. He wants us to use our freedom responsibly. He wants us to use our God-given powers to enhance the lives of others.

Judaism was the world's first religion of protest. The exodus in the days of Moses was an unprecedented event: the supreme Power intervening to liberate the supremely powerless. Elsewhere, religion in ancient times was a conservative force. The gods were on the side of the established power. They legitimated hierarchy. They reconciled the masses to a life of ignorance and servitude. How could you challenge the status quo? It was the will of the gods, the structure of the cosmos, on earth as it was in heaven. That is what Karl Marx meant when he called religion the opium of the people.

Judaism opposed this entire constellation of values. It laid the foundations for an egalitarian society based not on equality of wealth or power but on equal access to education, welfare and human dignity. The prophets never argued that there is injustice, poverty, disease and violence in the world because that is how God wants it to be. Judaism is God's call to human responsibility, to bring the world that is closer to the world that ought to be.

That is why Jews are to be found disproportionately as doctors fighting disease, lawyers fighting injustice, educators fighting ignorance, economists fighting poverty, and scientists extending the frontiers of human knowledge. The Greeks believed in fate and gave the world masterpieces of tragedy. Jews believed there is no fate that cannot be averted by penitence, prayer and charity. Judaism is the principled rejection of tragedy in the name of hope.

Jewish history bears witness to the world that a nation need not be large to be great, nor powerful to be influential. The Jewish people is proof that you can suffer centuries of persecution and exile and still survive and flourish, recovering from every defeat and turning every setback into a matrix of renewal. You can be written off by the world and prove time and again that the world was wrong. Inspired by high ideals and a respect for human dignity, you can outlast any empire. You can suffer and yet sing, walk through the valley of the shadow of death and emerge, limping but undefeated, into the light of new life. Time and again Jews have shown how you can defeat probability by the power of possibility.

The impact of *Kiddush haShem* was always limited in the past because of two factors. For seventeen centuries after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews lived at the margins of society without full civil rights. Then in the nineteenth century they acquired those rights but found themselves in the midst of a vast wave of antisemitism from the Russian pogroms of the 1880s to France of the Dreyfus Affair. Few were the places – Britain and America were among the exceptions – where Jews could make their contribution to society as Jews, which is what figures like Sir Moses Montefiore in Britain and Louis Brandeis in America did.

Now it is no longer limited. Israel exists. Jews have equality and respect in most countries of the Diaspora. There is no reason to abandon our Judaism, nor is there reason to turn our back to the world.

Three models of the religious life

IN place of assimilation and segregation we need to argue the case for a Judaism that engages with the world. The case is not new. It is set out at the dawn of our history in three striking biblical portraits of Noah, Abraham and his nephew Lot.

Noah is the only person in Tanakh called a *tzaddik*, “righteous.” Yet Noah’s righteousness was turned inward. He had no influence on his contemporaries. His was the way of segregation. Hassidim used to call Noah a *tzaddik im peltz*, “a righteous man in a fur coat.” There are two ways of keeping warm on a cold day. You can wear a fur coat or light a fire. Wear a fur coat and you warm only yourself. Light a fire and you warm others. Jews are supposed to light a fire.

Lot chose the way of assimilation. He tried to merge into the society, Sodom, in which he had chosen to live. His daughters married local men. We see Lot at the beginning of Genesis 19 sitting at the city gate, implying as Rashi says that he had been appointed a judge. Superficially he seemed to have been accepted. He was soon to discover otherwise. Having welcomed strangers into his house, he found himself surrounded by an angry mob demanding that he hand them over. When he refuses, the mob say, “This one came here as an immigrant, and now all of a sudden, he has set himself up as a judge!” – perhaps the first antisemitic remark in history. When the angels urge him to leave, he delays, fatefully trapped by his own ambivalence as to his real identity. Only

when the angels drag him and his daughters out are their lives saved.

Noah and Lot, the exemplars respectively of segregation and assimilation, are not happy precedents. Abraham is different. In Genesis 14 he fights a battle on behalf of the cities of the plain and liberates the people taken hostage. In Genesis 18 he mounts one of the most audacious prayers in history on behalf of the people of Sodom (“Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?”). He fights for his neighbours and prays for them but he does not become like them. He lives out the principle that has been the Jewish imperative ever since: Be true to your faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith.

What is the result? When Abraham comes before the Hittites to buy a plot of land in which to bury Sarah, they say to him: “You are a prince of God in our midst.” That is the first instance, and the classic example, of *Kiddush haShem* in the Torah.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch drew attention to the phrase Abraham used in his prayer to God to save the city. Perhaps, says Abraham, there are fifty, even ten, *tzaddikim betoch ha-ir*, “righteous people within the city.” There is a difference, says Hirsch, between a *tzaddik* and a *tzaddik-in-the-city*. Those who are righteous by separating themselves from the city can save themselves but not others. The challenge is to be righteous within the city, involved in the life of one’s contemporaries, working for the good of all. That is the way of Abraham, to live one’s faith while engaging with the world.

Abraham's always was the road less travelled. The sages say that he was called *ha-Ivri*, "the Hebrew," because "he was on one side (*ever echad*) while the rest of the world was on the other." Judaism is a countercultural faith, and Jews have often been iconoclasts, willing to challenge the idols of the age.

The assimilationist-segregationist divide in Jewish life today looks less like the way of Abraham, more like the ways respectively of Lot and Noah. There is another way.

What if?

IMAGINE the following wholly fanciful scenario: that Spinoza, Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss, Durkheim, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Proust and Gustav Mahler had all been Jews of faith, comfortable in their identity, speaking in the voice of Jewish tradition, showing the world what it is to engage as a believer-in-God-who-believes-in-us, exemplifying the Jewish values of study, intellect, independence, iconoclasm, *tzedek*, *mishpat*, *chesed* and *rachamim*. They would have been different. The world would have been different. Judaism would have retained its energies instead of losing them to the entropy of an undifferentiated world.

That is what philosophy calls a counterfactual conditional. In Hebrew we say *Halevai*. Would that it were, but it wasn't. What I am arguing, though, is something else. *The two dominant strands in the Jewish world today are fighting the battles of the past, not those of the future.*

Assimilation made sense in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in a Jewish world traumatised by antisemitism. It makes no sense at all today, either in Israel or in the multicultural democracies of the West. In the United States, where outmarriage continues at the rate of one-in-two, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has shown that Jews are the group more respected and admired than any other.

Segregation made immense sense after the Holocaust, when the heartlands of tradition in Eastern Europe had been almost entirely obliterated. But today, by a miracle of rebirth, the Haredi community is stronger than it was before the start of the Second World War. It has won the battle. We are in its debt. By sheer commitment and dedication it has brought the worlds of Jewish learning and practice back to life. Now is the time to turn outward and share its energies with the rest of the Jewish world.

The battle of the twenty-first century is the one Jews have been waiting for, for at least two thousand years. What if we had a Jewish state and could do what Jews have been commanded to do since the days of Moses: build a society based on Torah values of righteousness, justice, kindness and compassion, the great prophetic virtues?

What if non-Jews no longer looked down on Judaism as inferior to Christianity, Islam or enlightenment universalism? What if they actually respected it as a source of wisdom and inspiration?

These are no longer “What if?” They are the actuality within which we live. Sometimes the Jewish world can seem like a group of passengers on a train who are arguing with such passion that they entirely fail to notice that the train

has reached its destination and it is time to get out. That is what happens when we forget that Judaism does not mean living in the past. It means living with the past, but with eyes firmly turned toward the future.

Imagine a Judaism that engaged our greatest minds, our top professionals, our leading business people, our most creative artists, musicians and film-producers, encouraging them to go out into the world making a Jewish contribution as role models and exemplars of faith – the faith in God that leads us to have faith in the possibility of defeating the reign of violence, terror, injustice and oppression – a Judaism that might have led the missing eighty-five per cent of my contemporaries to be proud to be Jews.

This is not mere imagining. One of the privileges of being a Chief Rabbi is that you get the chance to road-test ideas in the real world. For more than two decades I tried to see whether it was possible to bring a Jewish voice to the public conversation, showing that Judaism has insights, compelling not just to Jews but non-Jews also, into politics, economics, civil society, philosophy, psychology and global ethics. Could we take the best scientific and philosophical wisdom of our time and use it to develop new insights into Torah? Could a religious figure engage in public dialogue with leading intellectuals of the age without being defensive on the one hand, or dismissive on the other? Could you connect leaders of the modern world who happen to be Jews, with their Judaism, getting them to see that their commitments are, whether they know it or not, part of our collective heritage? I tried these things and found that the answer in each case was Yes.

I discovered how much non-Jews admire Judaism and are lifted by it. We are admired by others for the strength of our families and the support of our communities; for our love of education and the life of the mind; for our commitment to philanthropy and social responsibility; and for our ability to combine reverence for the past with sensitivity to the present and responsibility to the future. *I discovered that non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. Non-Jews are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism.*

I also discovered how enthusiastically young Jews resonate to this message. They want to contribute to the wider society and to humanity as a whole. They are not inspired by a Judaism that speaks constantly of antisemitism, the Holocaust, the isolation of Israel and the politics of fear. Nor are they inspired by a Judaism that asks them to look down on, and sever all contacts with, the world. Jews are in the forefront of almost every endeavour today. How transformative it would be if they did so as Jews, ambassadors of the Divine presence, living Jewish lives, energised by Jewish texts, sustained by Jewish prayers, driven to share our legacy of hope. It would be the greatest *Kiddush haShem* in history.

Likewise in Israel. I am repeatedly astonished by how warmly secular Jews – self-defined *chilonim* – respond to a Judaism that speaks in the language of prophetic ideals, not that of politics and power; that relates to them with non-judgmental love; that values their contributions to the Jewish world; that lifts them instead of putting them down. I travel the world, speaking to many groups of many faiths in many countries, and among the most responsive audiences

of all are secular Israelis. This led me to conclude that secular Israelis are wrong in thinking that secular Israelis are secular. They are *maaminim bnei maaminim*, “believers, the children of believers,” who have simply not yet encountered a Judaism that speaks to them.

The challenge of our time is to go out to Jews with a Judaism that relates to the world – their world – with intellectual integrity, ethical passion and spiritual power, a Judaism neither intimidated by the world nor dismissive of it, a Judaism fully expressive of the broad horizons and high ideals of our heritage. There is no contradiction, not even a conflict, between contributing to humanity and affirming our distinctive identity. *To the contrary: by being what only we are, we contribute to the world what only we can give.*

We have much to teach the world – and the world has much to teach us. It is essential that we do so with generosity and humility. I have called Judaism the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind. Our ability to survive some of the worst tragedies any people has known without losing our faith in life itself; to suffer and yet rebuild; to lose and yet recreate; to honour the past without being held captive by the past – all of which are embodied today in the State of Israel, living symbol of the power of hope – are vitally important not just to ourselves but to the world.

In the twenty-first century, Jews will need the world, and the world will need the Jews. We will not win the respect of the world if we ourselves do not respect the world: if we look down on non-Jews and on Jews less religious than ourselves. Nor will we win the respect of the world if we do not respect ourselves and our own distinctive identity. Now more than

ever the time has come for us to engage with the world as Jews, and we will find that our own world of mind and spirit will be enlarged.

Akabia ben Mahalalel

TWENTY-TWO years ago, on a stiflingly hot day, I stood in the St John's Wood synagogue to be inducted by my predecessor Lord Jakobovits as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. Many thoughts went through my mind: thanks to God for the privilege of serving so distinguished a community of communities, to my parents for the love of Judaism and the Jewish people they had taught me, and to Elaine for accompanying me on this new and challenging stage of our journey together.

I spoke, that day, about Jewish renewal and creativity and much else beside. But one sentence kept running through my mind and became the underlying theme of my speech – the remark of the second century teacher Rabbi Akabia ben Mahalalel who taught his disciples never to forget three things: “Where you are coming from, where you are going to, and before whom you are accountable.”

It seems like a trite remark, hardly worth saying, let alone repeating. But Akabia ben Mahalalel was anything but a conventional teacher. The Mishnah (Eduyot 5: 6) tells us that he held tenaciously to his own interpretation of the tradition even though he was opposed by the majority of his colleagues. Having failed to get him to change his views

by conventional means, they tried to persuade him by the promise of promotion. They would appoint him Av Bet Din, head of the rabbinic court, they said, if only he would retract. His reply was magnificent: "I would rather be called a fool all my lifetime than a sinner (who compromised his views for the sake of personal advancement) for one moment."

One tradition says that he was excommunicated. Despite this the Mishnah says that "the Temple gates never closed behind a man in Israel as great in wisdom and fear of sin as Akabia ben Mahalalel." Whether it was the Lubavitcher Rebbe or Rabbi Soloveitchik or, *lehavdil ben chayim lechayim*, my own teacher Rabbi Dr Nachum Rabinovitch, I have always been drawn to rabbis like Akabia who stood out against the consensus of their contemporaries.

What Akabia was saying, I think, is that though the Torah is timeless, we live in time. To be a Jew is to be part of a journey begun four thousand years ago when Abraham and Sarah, responding to a heavenly call, left their land, birthplace and family to travel to an unknown destination, there to begin an experiment in living that has summoned us ever since. That journey defines Jewish time. We do not simply live in the present. We are guardians of our people's past and shapers of its future, and both are essential. It is not enough to remember "where you are coming from." We have also to remember "where you are going to." Yesterday's battles are not today's, and we fight today's for the sake of tomorrow. As I put it in the course of one of the most important battles we fought in British Jewry, the key question we had to ask was not, "Did we have Jewish grandparents?" but "Will we have Jewish grandchildren?"

British Jewry has responded magnificently to the challenge. The new schools we have built, the cultural creativity British Jewry now shows, and the higher profile we have in the public square, will, I believe, mean that we will have more Jewish grandchildren than might otherwise have been the case. But I could not live with myself, however, if I did not continue to do everything in my power to continue to try to make Judaism more compelling for the next generation, intellectually, ethically and spiritually. We must be prepared to engage with the world, unashamedly and uncompromisingly as Jews. Otherwise we will find yet again that the choice will be either to assimilate or segregate, leaving no one left to challenge the world or make a contribution to it as a Jew.

The world is now global and we need to act globally, because what is happening in Britain and the Commonwealth is happening elsewhere as well. So I have decided to go back to where I began, teaching, writing, broadcasting and using new media, trying to inspire Jews of all ages and backgrounds to engage with the world as Jews, abandoning neither their Jewishness nor the world. Judaism is more than equal to all the challenges of the contemporary world and it is an essential voice in the human conversation.

The question I asked forty-five years ago – *Where are the missing Jews?* – still moves me to remind others what centuries of antisemitism made us forget, that we are bearers of the Divine presence, witnesses in ourselves to something far greater than ourselves, living proof of the dignity of difference and of the power of faith to heal a fractured world. *The world needs the Jews, and Jews need the world.* That

is the *tzav ha-sha'ah*, the imperative of our time, and there is much for us to do.

It has been a huge privilege, these past twenty-two years, to serve British and Commonwealth Jewry, as well as engaging with Israel, American Jewry and other communities around the world. During that time Elaine and I have been humbled by the talent, energy, drive and dedication that exist throughout this great community of communities. It is as if Jews know intuitively that to live is to give. We are the people whose numbers are small but whose contributions are vast, and that is what makes us agents of hope, each in our own way.

I was blessed by having a distinguished predecessor, Lord Jakobovits of blessed memory, and I feel equally blessed to have a fine successor, Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis. Elaine and I now begin the next stage of our journey. May God continue to bless our community and people, and may we continue collectively to be a source of blessing to the world.


I end twenty-two years of service to British Jewry feeling younger and more energized than I was when I began. Now I begin the next challenge: to try to inspire a new generation of Jewish leaders, to deepen the conversation between Torah and the wisdom of the world, and to do so globally. Where it will lead, I do not know. But to be a Jew is to continue the journey, honouring the past by building the future for which they prayed.

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In his final message before stepping down after more than two decades in office, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan

Sacks recounts his personal journey of discovery and faith. Through a compelling analysis of recent Jewish history, 'A Judaism Engaged with the World' warns that a Judaism divorced from society will be a Judaism unable to influence society or inspire young Jews. Calling Judaism "the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind", Rabbi Sacks argues that in the twenty-first century, Jews will need the world, and the world will need the Jews. What we need, he argues, is a Judaism unafraid to engage with the intellectual, ethical, political and personal challenges of our time. As one chapter in his own life comes to a close, Rabbi Sacks invites you to join him in his mission to inspire a new generation of Jewish leaders with the confidence to address the challenges that face Jews, Judaism and Israel today.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. He is due to step down from this role in September 2013 after twenty-two years in office. Internationally acknowledged as one of the leading contemporary exponents of Judaism, Rabbi Sacks is a highly respected writer, the author of twenty-four books and a frequent contributor to radio, television and the press both in Britain and internationally.

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