

EULOGY FOR HARAV LORD JONATHAN SACKS (1948-2020)

I would like to share a few words as we all grieve for a very great man, Harav Lord Jonathan Sacks, *zeicher tzadik livracha*.

Many others have spoken and will speak about Rabbi Sacks' great scholarship as well as his inspirational leadership, and I was very moved by the *hespeidim* recorded at the funeral, and particularly by the very special tribute given by Rabbi Sacks' daughter Gila.

In a sense, as a non-family member, I would like to pick up where she left off, and to talk about Rabbi Sacks – the man; and Rabbi Sacks – the mensch. And with your permission, I'm going to do it via the medium that he was a master at – storytelling.

Almost 30 years ago – in fact it was 29 years ago, in 1991 – when Rabbi Sacks started out as the Chief Rabbi of the UK, his first Yom Kippur as Chief Rabbi was at St. Johns Wood Synagogue, in North-West London.

At that time, I was a novice, young, aspiring rabbi, with, I have to admit, a lot more hair – and that year, 1991, I was hired to run the kids program at St. Johns Wood Synagogue for the High Holidays – and so I got to hear Rabbi Sacks give his first Chief Rabbi Kol Nidre *drosho*.

Let me tell you how he began his *drosho* that Yom Kippur night.

“My friends,” he said, “you’ve all heard of lightbulb jokes. You know what I mean, how many of this kind of person or that kind of person does it take to change a lightbulb. And you have all definitely heard this lightbulb joke – how many therapists does it take to change a lightbulb? Come on, you can all recite the answer along with me – one, but the lightbulb has got to want to change!”

Everyone laughed. His message that night was that on Yom Kippur you can change, but you have got to want to change.

Reflecting back all these years later, that very first line of his Kol Nidre sermon was actually a description of Rabbi Sacks himself. He started out life as an ordinary traditional but not particularly orthodox Jewish boy in North London – but after the seminal experience of the Six-Day War in 1967, and after meeting the Lubavitcher Rebbe – he wanted to change. And he did change. Not like us, when we say we want to change, but then we don't really change. He wanted to change, and he did change.

Throughout his rabbinic career, on many occasions, Rabbi Sacks faced public challenges that undermined his ability to navigate the complexities of his job. I particularly remember the dark days of the Hugo Gryn affair of 1996, which I won't go into now. Any lesser man would have given up and thrown in the towel. But that wasn't Rabbi Sacks – he was made of stronger stuff – he drew from an inner strength, found out what changes he needed to make to correct the situation, and he went ahead and made those changes. He rebuilt bridges that had been burnt, and went through the hard slog of making sure that all those changes were done and dusted.

That, my friends, is not because he was a great philosopher, or a great Talmudic scholar, or a great public speaker, or a great writer – all of which he undoubtedly was. No. It was because he knew that when change needed to happen, only he could make it happen – and that kind of human strength, that kind of superlative character, is the product of someone who knows that a therapist can never change a lightbulb if the lightbulb does not want to change itself.

In 2002, Rabbi Sacks wrote a book called ‘The Dignity of Difference’. In the book, he wrote that all faiths have truths, and he seemed to imply that each faith community may actually have truths that other faith communities don’t have.

My late grandfather, Rabbi Joseph Dunner, who was the presiding rabbi of the *Haredi* community in London, along with the rabbi of Gateshead, the yeshiva town in the north of England, publicly decried the implication of his words.

After hearing of their criticism Rabbi Sacks immediately withdrew the initial version of the book and reissued it – at great expense – edited to an acceptable version, one that did not mislead readers into thinking he was heterodox, or fuzzy on the limits of Jewish theology.

But that was not all. He arranged for all the rabbis of London to attend a series of personal meetings so that he could explain to them what he had meant, and why it had been misunderstood.

I was in my early thirties, and a rabbi in London, and I attended one of those meetings at his home at 85 Hamilton Terrace. I remember thinking at the time – Wow! This is amazing! What an incredible person! Rabbi Sacks could have stubbornly and arrogantly sat on his high horse and dismissed any criticism as unworthy of his attention. But he didn’t. Or he could have let others defend him or address those who had criticized him. But he didn’t.

Do you know why? Because Rabbi Sacks knew that change was needed, and the change needed to come from him. And that was because he knew that when change needed to happen, only he could make it happen – and that kind of human strength, my friends, that kind of superlative character, is the product of someone who knows that a therapist can never change a lightbulb if the lightbulb does not want to change itself.

My friends, there was another aspect of Rabbi Sacks that you might not see written about in the obituaries. Rabbi Sacks was an absolute mensch. Let me tell how I know.

Soon after I became involved in the creation of the Saatchi Synagogue in London – the Saatchi Synagogue was an experimental community created specifically for young postgraduates in their 20s and 30s – I met the Chief Rabbi at a community function.

“When are you going to invite me to speak to your community?” he asked me. I was shocked. Our shul was independent, not part of the United Synagogue, which is the organization over which he presided.

“Will you really come?” I replied.

“Of course I will,” he answered, “just call my office, and I’ll make sure it happens.”

I called his office the next day, and was totally amazed. Can you believe it? They were expecting my call! He had already told them!

We fixed a Shabbes for him to come to our shul a couple of months later. I agreed with his office that he would speak before *mussaf*, and that after *davening* he would come to our home for lunch. After the basic details of the arrangements were made, the director of his office got on the phone.

There are three things you need to know, Pini, she said. The first is, whatever time *davening* starts, make sure you are at the front entrance of the shul building five minutes earlier, so you can greet the Chief Rabbi and walk him into shul.

“Sure,” I said.

Second, when you introduce the Chief Rabbi to speak make sure that you thank him and Elaine for coming to the shul.

“Of course,” I replied.

And finally, when he comes to you for lunch, you need to make sure that he has vegetarian food – he is a vegetarian.

“No problem,” I said, “that’s totally fine.”

A week before the date of his visit, I got a call from the Chief Rabbi’s office to go over everything, and again the director of his office got on the line – don’t forget the three things, she warned me: meet him at the entrance. Yes, yes. Thank him and Elaine. Yes, I know. Vegetarian food. Of course, we’ve got it covered.

Then on Friday – another call. You’ll remember the three things!!

Yes – meet him, thank them, vegetarian – consider it done.

Shabbat morning arrived. Shul started at 9:30. I was there at 9am. At 9:20 I trotted toward the entrance, well in time for 9:25 to meet the Chief Rabbi. But before I got to the entrance of the shul, there he was walking toward me.

“But Chief Rabbi! I was on my way to meet you at the entrance!!”

He smiled. “Pini! It’s fine! Here I am! We’re going to have a great morning!”

And we went into the shul.

When the time came for the Chief Rabbi to speak, I got up to introduce him.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I began, “the Office of the Chief Rabbi was very insistent that I thank the Chief Rabbi and Elaine for joining us this morning. So you need to know, that had the director of his office not told me to thank him and Elaine, I would not have thanked him and Elaine – and therefore, I’m so grateful that they told me, not once, not twice – but three times, that I need to thank him and Elaine. And that’s why, from the bottom of my heart, Chief Rabbi and Elaine – thank you so much for gracing us with your presence at the Saatchi Synagogue this morning.”

Everyone laughed, and no one laughed more heartily than the Chief Rabbi himself. I winked at him, and he gave me a thumbs up.

After *davening* we all walked back to my house on Abbey Road, and we sat down to lunch. Sabine had carefully prepared vegetarian food, as we had been instructed, and she served it to Rabbi Sacks.

“Is there no *chulent* today?” he asked, looking perplexed.

Sabine hesitated, “but it’s not vegetarian.”

He paused, and then said: “Sabine, Sabine, how could I come to your house and not eat your *chulent*?” And so he ate a bowl of non-vegetarian *chulent*.

Because despite all the pomp and ceremony associated with his role as chief rabbi, Rabbi Sacks was a fantastic mensch. He didn’t want to project his position onto others, even if those around him insisted that he did. No. He wanted anyone and everyone to feel comfortable around him. And he knew that he needed to make a conscious effort so that he didn’t intimidate, despite his position, and despite his towering intellect.

What an amazing trait – rather than reveling in the spotlight of his fame, he wanted to make others feel totally comfortable in his presence.

Which brings me to the subject of his *drosho* that Shabbat morning at the Saatchi Synagogue. Actually, the story did not begin that morning in 1999, it began many years before. Allow me to explain.

For those of you who were not born in Great Britain, let me tell you about Desert Island Discs. Desert Island Discs is a weekly radio program on BBC Radio 4 that was first broadcast in 1942. For each broadcast, a celebrity guest, who is always referred to as a ‘castaway’ during the program, is asked to choose eight pieces of music, a book and a luxury item that they would take with them if they were to be cast away on a desert island. And in between each choice they talk about their lives and the reasons for their choices.

Very soon after he was appointed to be the Chief Rabbi in 1991, Rabbi Sacks was invited to be a castaway on desert island discs. One of the things that really stuck out during the interview was when he told Sue Lawley, the interviewer: “My great ambition in life was to become an accountant.”

Of course, the irony was completely lost on the largely gentile audience – but we Jews all knew what he was saying – “which Jewish parent wants their son to become a rabbi?” They don’t. They want them to become doctors, lawyers, and accountants! But he became a rabbi!

For his musical pieces on desert island discs, Rabbi Sacks chose Mahler and Beethoven and Brahms. He also chose ‘*Kol Nidre*’, in a version sung by Naftali Herstik – and he also chose the Lubavitcher classic ‘*Tzomo Lecho Nafshi*’ – no doubt quite a culture shock for listeners in places like Scunthorpe and Swansea.

One of the 8 songs he chose for his desert island discs particularly caught my attention – it was “*Od Avinu Chai, Am Yisrael Chai*” – a song composed and sung by the great Jewish singer, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

I was lucky enough to be very friendly with Rabbi Carlebach. I called him up in New York, and asked him if he had ever heard of a man called Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “No,” he said. So I told him that Rabbi Sacks was the UK’s new chief rabbi, and that he had chosen one of Reb Shlomo’s songs for Desert Island Discs on the BBC, and that it had been broadcast to millions of listeners across the UK.

“Next time you come to London,” I told Rabbi Carlebach, very confidently, “I’ll introduce you to Rabbi Sacks!” – thinking that it would be no problem for me to arrange a meeting. After all, I had known Rabbi Sacks since childhood, when our families were neighbors in Golders Green.

But little did I know about the layer upon layer of bureaucracy and minders that made arranging meetings with the Chief Rabbi very difficult. I began trying to arrange a meeting between Reb Shlomo and the Chief Rabbi when Reb Shlomo was going to be in London the following year, and I soon discovered that this was a promise that I find very hard for me to fulfil.

I called this one and that one – no one seemed to be able to help me – or was even vaguely interested in helping me – arrange the meeting. But I was young and full of chutzpa, so I decided to take the law into my own hands. I knew that Rabbi Sacks davened every morning at the 7:30am minyan in the *Beit Midrash* at St. John’s Wood Synagogue. On the second morning of Reb Shlomo’s visit I picked him up from his hotel and drove him to St. John’s Wood Synagogue – after all, anyone can pray at a synagogue, and then they can talk to anyone that’s there – right?

I must confess that Rabbi Carlebach had no idea this was an ambush; if he would have known, he’d never have agreed to go. But there we were, and after the prayers were over, I strode up to the front of the shul with Reb Shlomo traipsing behind me, to the place where the Chief Rabbi was standing.

“Good morning, Chief Rabbi!” I said loudly. He looked up, “oh, hello, Pini.” He looked a bit surprised to see me. I smiled gingerly. “Er, Chief Rabbi, I’ve brought someone to meet you.” He looked over my shoulder and bunched up his eyebrows as he always did – and then, suddenly, his eyes lit up. “Gosh, it’s Shlomo Carlebach! How amazing to meet you! We sing your songs all the time. I love your music!”

He shook Reb Shlomo's hand, and Reb Shlomo beamed at him. They chatted for two or three minutes, and then we left. My friends, would you believe it – this was the only time these two inspirational great Jewish heroes ever met?!

But now let me come back to that Shabbat morning at Saatchi Synagogue seven years later, when Rabbi Sacks came to speak to my community. Guess what Rabbi Sacks did when he began his speech? He told the story that I just told you, but from his perspective. How, one random morning, after *davening* – there was Shlomo Carlebach, and that it had been me who had facilitated the meeting.

And then he added something – and I will never forget it for the rest of my life.

“Pini,” he said, “I never thanked you for what you did, for making sure I met one of my heroes. Boy, did I get it in the neck when I got to my office that day – ‘what a chutzpa, that Dunner boy ambushed you in shul.’ But I told them, ‘nonsense, in fact – why didn’t you arrange the meeting?’”

“Pini – I really must apologize to you. Because I never thanked you for doing what you did. It must have been a bit daunting to do that, but you went with your heart, and you did the right thing. So, here I am today, to say thank you.”

And everyone applauded. And I felt like a million dollars.

My friends, that was Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. That was a side of him that the obituaries won't even mention. Not the philosopher side, or the scholar side. Not the great speaker side, or the fantastic writer side. It was the side of Rabbi Sacks that encouraged the next generation of rabbis – and not only rabbis – not just with his scholarship and his brilliance, but with a kind word to help them feel good about themselves, and to inspire them to be the best that they could be.

And thinking about that story these past few days since he passed away, I have realized something very important – I have realized that perhaps we all should have thanked Rabbi Sacks more than we ever did when we had the chance – not a *'yasher koach'* thank you for one of his *droshos*, but a thank you for his kindness, for being a mensch, for being a human face, even though he was this elevated celebrated personality.

Truthfully, I know what he would have said. He would have said: “Don't be silly, that's just me being me!” – and it would have been absolutely true. In any event, perhaps the biggest thank you we can give him, and all the ‘thank you’ he ever really wanted, is that we read his many brilliant books and his countless incredible articles, and that we listen to his thought-provoking podcasts and watch his inspirational videos.

How lucky we are that he left behind such an astounding collection of his sensible yet wise view of life in general, and of Judaism in particular. It is his legacy, and the biggest ‘thank you’ we could ever give him is to make sure that even though he may have died, and that is so tragic – not to have him with us anymore, his legacy and message **will – never – die**. That is up to us. We must all thank him in the only way we still can.

Before I end, I want to say something personal to the Sacks family. It was obvious to anyone who had anything to do with Rabbi Sacks how much he loved you. Elaine, notwithstanding any instructions to say thank you, and we can all chortle about that, in truth no thanks would or could ever do justice to the incredible support you gave him, and I know, I absolutely know, that he truly appreciated it. Josh and Eve, Dina, Gila and Elliot, and all the grandchildren – you were beyond special to him – you were the blood coursing through his veins, and the oxygen that gave him life.

We are grateful to you all, because without you we would never have had the him that was him. No doubt – and I'm a rabbi, so I know – it took its toll. But you need to know that we who were on the outside saw the love that he had for you, and how much his loss, far too early, must be so painful for you. May the Almighty comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

Finally, in the words of the prophet Isaiah (25:8): "*Bila hamavet lanetzach*" – may the Almighty destroy death forevermore; "*Umacha hashem dima me'al kol panim*" – and may the Almighty wipe away the tears from every face.

This week all our faces are wet with tears, at the loss of Rabbi Sacks. But may the sadness caused by the passing of Moreinu Harav Yaakov Tzvi ben Dovid Aryeh, Harav Lord Jonathan Sacks, *zeicher tzaddik livracha*, soon be replaced by the joy of '*tehiyat hameitim*', the resurrection of the dead – and may we all merit '*biat goel tzedek*', the coming of Moshiach, '*bimehera beyameinu*', speedily in our days – Amen ve'Amen.