Abstract

Jonathan Sacks and I had known each other from Cambridge in the 1960s. We maintained a unique working relationship throughout our careers, despite the enflamed intra-communal divide. That enables me to move beyond obituary hyperbole to respectful assessment. This article is framed by a cartoon of two-headed Sacks. He succeeded as none before him in establishing Judaism as a wise and cogent voice in the public square. He was a towering intellectual who contributed as no rabbi before him in the UK to public policy. Sacks was less successful in his equally cherished aim of holding together the mainstream United Synagogue and authoritarian ultra-Orthodoxy. He never gave up, but any softening of the line between Orthodoxy and Reform he may have once wished for was sacrificed to this overriding objective. Sacks only once ventured, unconvincingly, into theology. But his personal relationship with me took precedence over past behaviour when attending my wife’s funeral.

Keywords: cartoon, late wife’s funeral, mainstream and ultra-Orthodox, public square, theology, unique working relationship

Early in his Chief Rabbinate, an editorial in The Times suggested that Jonathan Sacks was a third Moses, following in the steps of Moshe Rabbeinu and Moses Maimonides. That will undoubtedly have served as a considerable spur to Rabbi Sacks and his ambitious agenda. But such lavish praise will also have made the retention of balance and perspective infinitely more difficult.

The editorial in the Jewish Chronicle a few days after Sacks’ death asserted:

Jonathan Sacks was one of the greatest men our community has ever produced. More than that, he was one of the greatest men our nation has ever produced.
And it concluded:

He was not some pallid scholar more concerned with ideas than people . . . His Judaism was firmly rooted in people, in Torah and chesed – what made Jonathan Sacks truly great was that he was a mensch.

Such banal hagiography would do serious disservice to any distinguished public figure today, not least one who pursued a career in the pressured and exposed world of religion.

Jonathan Sacks and I had more in common than one might suppose. And yet, of course, we were profoundly different. Where the imbalance lies is a source of great personal discomfort to me. This article is neither obituary nor dispassionate assessment, but personal memoir and reflection. If it says more about me than Jonathan, that has a lot to do with our respective roles in the British Jewish community.

Jonathan Henry Sacks was born in 1948 into a typical United Synagogue, North West London Jewish family. I had been born two years earlier to a family in North East London which found its Jewish expression from the mid-1950s in the dissent of post-war, prophetically inclined Reform Judaism. We both went to grammar schools and won places at Cambridge – Jonathan at the Jewishly unexceptional Caius where he read the highly suspicious subject of Philosophy; I at the Jewishly unlikely huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’ Magdalene where I studied what every Jewish boy who can’t stand the sight of blood should study: Law.

We first met in my third year, his first. I had been flattered into leading Progressive Jewish services and events by one of my revered mentors, Rabbi John Rayner. Jonathan and I davened together occasionally on Friday nights. I remember a pleasant, reserved, inquiring person but was not then aware of his formidable academic and intellectual ability, far greater than mine and much more focused.

After flirting successively with becoming a solicitor, an academic lawyer and criminologist, I settled for the small pond of Leo Baeck College. My years there, amongst other, more productive experiences, heightened my sense of Jewish insecurity and marginality. It was not just the tiny size and precarious nature of the College but an awareness of a dominant Jewish world which did things differently, in which I would feel utterly exposed and yet with which I had little empathy. Jonathan pursued a very different path but one which also underscored his considerable Jewish insecurities.

I got to know the inside of 85 Hamilton Terrace, the residence of the Chief Rabbi, quite early in my career. I eagerly embraced the opportunity to join the Community Consultative Committee on Jewish Christian
Relations which met under the chairmanship of Lord Jakobovits and acted as a pretext for Orthodox, Reform and Liberal leaders to meet and discuss their frequent intra-communal political crises. I was immediately attracted to the agenda pursued by Rabbis Hugo Gryn and Sidney Brichto, respectively representatives of the Reform and Liberal Jewish movements, of building greater mutual respect or, rather, breaking down the Establishment’s imperious exclusion of non-Orthodox Judaism and denying it authenticity. What I did not understand then was the strength of the insecurity on both sides.

It was only after Rabbi Sacks succeeded Lord Jakobovits that I was invited into the little room on the ground floor which Jonathan adopted as the place he held private one-to-ones. At the very beginning of his Chief Rabbinate Jonathan invited me to meet and proposed that, because of our shared background and friendship, we could make use of the pretext of having to meet to discuss Jewish-Christian relations and plan how to advance respect and cooperation within the community. I readily agreed: it flattered, soothed my insecurities and played into my own emerging agenda of leading Reform from the margins to the mainstream – of making Reform electable. Then, as on many occasions, I wished Rabbi Sacks would not pepper every conversation with at least one d’var Torah – quoting me texts in Hebrew (then translating them) which I sometimes knew and sometimes did not and reinforcing my paralysing sense of Jewish inadequacy.

My dominant memory of that first meeting, however, was of a cartoon of Sacks, up on the wall to my left. It showed him with two heads, facing in opposite directions. One was Dr Sacks, the urbane pipe-smoking Cambridge philosophy don. The other was Rabbi Sacks in full rabbinic garb, the wide-eyed young man whose encounter with the Lubavitcher rebbe in Crown Heights in 1969 left such a profound impression. I envied him that he should merit a cartoon but couldn’t understand why he would display such a penetrating insight into his duality so publicly.

The duality was on display from the beginning – at his induction as Chief Rabbi – and stayed with him, certainly throughout his Chief Rabbinate. I was invited, which was flattering; but seated in the row in front of the non-Jewish clergy – which was not! At the front of the synagogue, right below Sacks was a sea of black hats – those whose authenticating support he craved so deeply but who proved as unrelenting as the sea in Jonah and who never granted the outstanding graduate from Cambridge who was not a Yeshivah ilui (outstanding traditional scholar) the authority and authenticity he longed for.

I remember standing with Jonathan and the then editor of the Jewish Chronicle Ned Temko, about ten days after his induction at the flagship
United Synagogue in St. John’s Wood in North West London. Temko, a forthright American, told Sacks to stand up for the progress and cooperation he avowed, insisting he would never be in a stronger position, more supported than he was then. But Chief Rabbi Sacks’ mission was always to hold together the comfortable, conservative mainstream of the United Synagogue and the unbending authoritarianism of Stamford Hill – *minhag Anglia* with the ultra-Orthodox Rabbonim, western philosophy with Torah as Law – the two heads of the cartoon in his audience room.

A major issue of the moment was whether dissenting Jews should be regarded as part of the Jewish people or excised as heretics. Courageously, Rabbi Sacks set about writing a book that was to be called *One People?* He sent me the manuscript. With hindsight, I should have read it more thoroughly than I did, sat down with him and gone through it. But I did not have the courage or the time – and doubt whether it would have made any difference. I responded in writing, identifying the cornerstone of the book’s argument – a Talmudic passage regarding *tinok she-nishba*, a Jewish child found and brought up by idolaters. Even though the child, when grown up, becomes an idolater, the Talmud regards him as still being a Jew because he was not responsible for the pernicious beliefs of the environment he had imbibed. This, asserted Sacks, was the situation of Reform Jews who, from childhood, had imbibed the pernicious beliefs of post-Enlightenment culture and, therefore, could not be held responsible for their heretical views.

I wrote, pointing out to Jonathan that while this was extremely clever, it was also deeply offensive. Not to mention the fact that while it permitted him to regard me as a Jew, such regard did not extend to my Judaism. When we next met, he seemed both hurt and puzzled – hurt that I should reject his Talmudic ingenuity and puzzled that I did not appear to be more sympathetic to what he was trying to achieve. As far as I know, *One People?* sank without trace and Rabbi Sacks abandoned hopes for healing the fractured, internal Jewish world. But we pressed ahead with *de facto* collaboration. I became a co-President of the Council of Christians and Jews (along with him, his Sephardi counterpart Rabbi Abraham Levy and representatives of six Christian denominations). And I stood along with him and the representatives of Britain’s faith communities at the Cenotaph – albeit at the tail end of the procession, beside the Head of the Salvation Army.

Several years into the collaboration, I made a significant error of judgement. Cardinal Hume had died and Jonathan was invited to the funeral mass at Westminster Cathedral. He felt unable to be physically present at the service but asked me if I would sit with him in a room at the Cathedral and watch with him from there. It is not just that Progressive
rabbis like me have no qualms about attending such services but that we feel it is not within the spirit of Judaism and positively insulting to refuse to enter a church. However, I supported Jonathan, incurring a significant level of disapproval from colleagues who had an interest in such matters: I did the wrong thing, perhaps for the right, or at least understandable, reasons.

For Sacks, however, it was a significant step along the road to establishing Judaism as a major faith in Britain’s public square and making a statement – highly problematic as far as the ultra-Orthodox were concerned – acknowledging the panoply of world religions. As recently as 1988, his predecessor Rabbi Lord Jakobovits was still insisting that ‘Judaism is the one true faith’.²

Perhaps because Jonathan Sacks was so formidably intelligent, a remarkable thinker for whom the head was dominant, his initial strategy for solving the United Synagogues/black hat, Norrice Lea/Munk’s Shul³ chasm/schism was a disaster. Jonathan told me several times that the key was to speak to each group in their own language – to speak about the late Rabbi Hugo Gryn, for instance, at a memorial service in the language of the urbane, worldly rabbi of today. And to write in their very different terms, in unrestrained Rabbinic Hebrew, to the G’dolim (the authority figures) of the ultra-Orthodox world. I think it genuinely did not occur to Jonathan that each would overhear what he was saying to the other. I am even more sure that it didn’t raise in his own mind issues of personal integrity.

Years later, he published The Dignity of Difference⁴ and the fundamentalists of N16 and NW11 objected to his evident acceptance of the theory of evolution and acknowledgement of the multiplicity of religious truths. He was forced to withdraw the first edition with a number of offending passages expunged. In explanation, he told me: ‘They weren’t ready, and I wouldn’t want to prejudice the book as a whole for a few passages that, in time, they’ll come to accept anyway’.

The genuinely noble aim of holding together both parts of British Orthodoxy was one which not only proved a challenge to Jonathan – it was one recognisable to, for instance, Archbishop Rowan Williams, also an outstanding academic, brilliant writer and thinker of great stature. That must have played a significant part in their sense of mutuality, respect and sympathy. Both men were determined their respective faith traditions should be major contributors to public policy, voices to be listened to and to prove influential in the public square. All of Sacks’ books, published by prestigious, mainstream Bloomsbury Continuum – including The Dignity of Difference and To Heal a Fractured World⁵ – are masterpieces of eloquent, principled, applied ethics. They illuminated the outward-turned
head, sparking the brilliance of his broadcasts, and established him as the outstanding rabbinic public intellectual of the late twentieth, early twenty-first century. Ironically, his remarkable publisher at Bloomsbury, Robin Baird-Smith, had, with a previous publishing house, discovered Lionel Blue and published Louis Jacobs’ *A Jewish Theology*.6

I emphasise the contribution to public policy, the application of Jewish ethics, because Sacks avoided theology with painfully learned tactical wisdom. On several occasions he said to me that the problem with ‘your people’ was that they did not engage in real scholarly debate. This was patently untrue – one thinks of Rabbis John Rayner, Dow Marmur, Jonathan Magonet and others on the faculty of Leo Baeck College. But the comment was actually directed at me – and valid. I never challenged him on his own ground. First, I was utterly intimidated. Second, I was less driven. And third, I was trying to do a job for people who would not have felt that it was part of my role to engage at a ‘scholarly’ level on behalf of Reform Judaism. That would have been ‘in your own time, Bayfield’. And I did not make the time until very recently.

*Being Jewish Today: Confronting the Real Issues*7 is an attempt to write a systematic theology within the Rabbinic tradition for those Jews who cannot accept certain long-held theological tenets of Rabbinic Judaism. It is not a polemical book but I could not avoid addressing the subject of ‘the inerrancy of Torah’ and the theologico-political definition of Torah *min ha-Shamyim* held since Samson Raphael Hirsch in the middle of the nineteenth century.

One of Jonathan’s earliest books is *Crisis and Covenant*.8 At the beginning of his Chief Rabbinate, Sacks chose to use his house journal Le’ela to re-publish an amalgam of two major chapters from *Crisis and Covenant*. He comes down fairly and squarely in support of Samson Raphael Hirsch in saying that the Torah is an extra-historical document. By this he means that the text itself is not that of human hands and has not been influenced by the unfolding of historical events. In so far as post-Enlightenment scholarship challenges this view, it is Enlightenment scholarship that must be rejected. For Sacks, the breakthrough work of the greatest Jewish contributor to modern western philosophy Baruch Spinoza continues to be heretical, beyond the pale as far as the Torah-true Jew is concerned.

When I confronted this while writing *Being Jewish Today*, I discovered not only that Sacks was resistant to modernity when it came to theology, despite his background as an urbane philosophy don, but also that the arguments he deployed are uncharacteristically flawed. He insists that there are only two possible views: the traditional view of an extra-historical Torah or, to him, the extreme and wilfully malicious views of
non-Jewish German Bible scholars who regard the Torah as no different from any other work of literature.

Like Hirsch, Sacks insists that in so far as the Enlightenment conflicts with Rabbinic Judaism, the Enlightenment is wrong, to be rejected. He even nods to the hideous view expressed within certain ultra-Orthodox circles that it was embracing the Enlightenment that led European Jewry to catastrophe. At no point does Rabbi Sacks acknowledge that there is another, well-trodden road between the extremes of traditional doctrine and complete rejection of Torah.

Apart from that single venture with which, in one of the two heads at least he must have felt intellectual discomfort, Jonathan Sacks, outstanding Jewish ethicist and pre-eminent contributor to public policy, never entered the field of Jewish theology.

Rabbi Lord Sacks and I occupied that fluid and uncertain place between acquaintance and true friendship. With hindsight, that it could have been as much was entirely of his doing, and how, given the rigid political constraints of the British Jewish world, could it have been more? We lost touch when he stepped down as Chief Rabbi, which suggests that the relationship was mutually advantageous as long as he was Chief Rabbi and I was Chief Executive and then Head of the Movement for Reform Judaism.

But it was more. In 2000, my late wife Linda was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Jonathan and his wife Elaine came to visit us at our home and had tea with us. Later, he came to her funeral and publicly embraced me by the graveside. I will never forget that. Nor the seminal public thinker who achieved so much in articulating Judaism to wider society. Nor the man with awe-inspiring intellectual abilities who nevertheless found he could not hold the worlds of mainstream and ultra-Orthodoxy together but, while in office, never gave up trying.

Rabbi Tony Bayfield CBE, DD (Cantuar) was professional head of the British Reform Movement 1995–2011. He is currently Professor of Jewish Theology and Thought, Leo Baeck College. He has published four books on the theology of dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths. His most recent book, a contemporary Jewish theology, is Being Jewish Today: Confronting the Real Issues (Bloomsbury, 2019; paperback 2020).
Notes

3. Norrice Lea is an integrated, middle-class constituent of the United Synagogue in quintessentially English Hampstead Garden Suburb, NW11. Though within the same London postcode, the Golders Green Beth Hamedrash, known as Munk’s Shul after Rabbi Dr Eliahu Munk, is at the heart of a high-visibility ultra-Orthodox area. Sacks inherited from Jakobovits, as Head of the London Beth Din, Rabbi Chanoch Ehrentreu who davened at Munk’s Shul not Norrice Lea.
6. Rabbi Lionel Blue was a radical Reform rabbi, liturgist, writer and broadcaster. Rabbi Louis Jacobs, author of *We Have Reason to Believe*, was a distinguished Orthodox scholar, cast out of the Orthodox world in the 1960s for affirming historical criticism. Sacks did not regard Blue’s teaching as Judaism and maintained the bitter opposition of the United Synagogue to Jacobs.