

Judaism: No Longer Mainstream

R' Mordechai Torczyner – torczyner@torontotorah.com



1. Julia Koschitzky, *Remembering the Great Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks זצ"ל*, UJA Federation of Greater Toronto November 13, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPtL5MFFKIM>

Together, we know we have lost someone who was endowed by our Creator with gifts seldom found in combination. A keen and sharp mind, a nobility of character, a moral visionary, an unparalleled genius, a brilliant orator, and one of Jewry's greatest leaders of our generation. Simply put: we have lost our best, and most beloved, ambassador.

No Longer Mainstream

2. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Shattering the Idols: The Struggle for Holiness in a Secular Age*, Jewish Action Fall '01 <https://rabbisacks.org/shattering-the-idols-the-struggle-for-holiness-in-a-secular-age-published-in-jewish-action/>

We are not living in *atchalta de-ge'ulah* or even *sefah de-galutah*, either the beginning of redemption or the end of exile. Anti-semitism has not disappeared... Global peace has not broken out since the collapse of the Soviet Union... Nor has there been the dawn of a more spiritual age. The culture of the liberal democracies of the West is relentless in its secularity...

There was however another view. This argued that something qualitative had changed in the Jewish situation. With the birth of the State of Israel, the Jewish people had re-entered history. They had acquired, to a degree unknown in 2,000 years, a capacity for collective self-determination...

The Diaspora too had changed, partly because, having a home in the Robert Frost sense ("the place where, when you have to go there, they have to let you in") Jews everywhere had the potential refuge they lacked for so long. Partly too the change lay in the nature of contemporary liberal democracies. No longer driven by the 19th century ideology of the nation-state as a single culture, they became more culturally pluralist and diverse. Jews no longer had to pretend to be other than they were. A pluralist culture gives us the space to be ourselves.

3. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Shattering the Idols: The Struggle for Holiness in a Secular Age*

Post-modernity is marked by an awareness of the limits of reason. It is sceptical of the Enlightenment project of uncovering rational foundations to human knowledge. It is distrustful of morality, meaning and meta-narrative. It finds no sense in the word 'progress,' the certainty that some states of affairs are objectively better than others... We are living, for the first time in two millennia, in an age of radical individualism and libertarianism, the condition that Sefer Shoftim describes as *ish ha-yashar be-einav ya'aseh*, "each doing what is right in his own eyes." This presents Jews with a paradoxical situation. Never have we been freer to be Jews, but rarely have we faced a culture more antithetical to the values of Judaism, not superficially but at its very roots...

The traces of this awareness are visible throughout contemporary Orthodox life. Parents who felt drawn to Modern Orthodoxy or Religious Zionism have begun sending their children to schools and yeshivot of a more segregationist character. The centre no longer holds. Many today rightly feel that the risk of exposing our children to the Madonna-MTV culture is just too great. Nor is it, as it once was, a youth or counter-culture. It pervades everything from the great university campuses to the American and Israeli Supreme Courts. Western civilisation has moved from what was once called the Judeo-Christian ethic to a consumer-driven, choice-fixated culture without norms, ideals or shared values beyond the sovereign self, the freedom to be whatever one chooses, and to do whatever does not immediately harm others. Such a world is not *chol* but *chiloni*, not secular but secularist.

Blowing up the Mainstream

4. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, pg. 49

In the world of ideas, difference is resolved into sameness. Particulars give way to universals. The world we see, in which we move and live, [Plato] argued in *The Republic* in the famous parable of the cave, is a mere play of shadows. The true essence of things is not matter but form, ideas, not their concrete embodiment in the world of the senses. That is where trees become Treeness, where men become Man and apparent truths coalesce into Truth.

It is a wondrous dream, that of Plato, and one that has never ceased to appeal to his philosophical and religious heirs: the dream of reason, a world of order set against the chaos of life, an eternity beyond the here and now. Its single most powerful idea is that truth-reality, the essence of things - is universal...

5. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, pg. 49

We begin, in childhood, by being attached to our immediate family. Then, as our exposure to the world widens, we come successively to embrace friends, neighbours, the community, society and eventually all mankind. So it is with civilization itself. The history of *homo sapiens* is precisely the move from small, roving bands to tribes, city-states, nations and ultimately, if not yet, global governance. Particularity – the world of the senses and the passions – is the source of conflict, prejudice, error and war. Universality is the realm of truth, harmony and peace.

6. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 51-53

Against Plato and his followers, the Bible argues that universalism is the first, not the last, phase in the growth of the moral imagination. The world of the first eleven chapters of Genesis is global, a monoculture ('the whole world had one language and a common speech'). It is to this world that G-d first speaks. He gives Adam a command, Cain a warning, Noah His grace. Yet, one by one these experiments fail. Adam disobeys. Cain becomes a murderer. Noah inhabits a world filled with violence. A poignant verse speaks of God's disappointment: 'The Lord regretted that He had made man on earth and His heart was filled with pain' (6: 6). After the Flood, G-d makes a covenant with all mankind, the first universal moral code. But that is not the end of the story...

The men on the plain at Shinar make a technological discovery. They learn how to make bricks by drying clay. As after so many other technological advances, they immediately conclude that they now have the power of gods. They are no longer subject to nature. They have become its masters. They will storm the heavens. Their man-made environment - the city with its ziggurat or artificial mountain - will replicate the structure of the cosmos, but here they will rule, not G-d. The nineteenth-century commentator, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, interprets Babel as the first totalitarianism. It is a supreme act of hubris, committed time and again in history - from the Sumerian city-states, to Plato's *Republic*, to empires, ancient and modern, to the Soviet Union. It is *the attempt to impose an artificial unity on divinely created diversity*. That is what is wrong with universalism.

Babel - the first global project - is the turning point in the biblical narrative. It ends with the division of mankind into a multiplicity of languages, cultures, nations and civilizations. G-d's covenant with humanity as a whole has not ceased. But from here on he will focus on one family, and eventually one people, to be his witnesses and bearers of his covenant - a people in whose history his presence will be peculiarly transparent...

Judaism has a structural peculiarity so perplexing and profound that though its two daughter monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, took much else from it, they did not adopt this: it is a particularist monotheism. It believes in one G-d but not in one exclusive path to salvation. *The G-d of the Israelites is the G-d of all mankind, but the demands made of the Israelites are not asked of all mankind*. There is no equivalent in Judaism to the doctrine that *extra ecclesiam non est salus*, 'outside the Church there is no salvation'. On the contrary, Judaism's ancient sages maintained that 'the pious of the nations have a share in the world to come'.

7. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 51-53

The late Sir Isaiah Berlin, a man I knew and respected, summed up the liberal creed in a quotation he made famous at the end of his great essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*: 'to realise the relative validity of one's convictions, and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is, what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.'

Expanding on the Promotion of Particularism

8. The roots of religious particularism Genesis 19:18, 31:53, 46:34

9. Is Everyone Jewish in the Time of the Messiah? <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/926739/>

10. Deuteronomy 4:6

וְשִׁמְרֵתֶם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם כִּי הוּא חֻמַּתְכֶם וּבִינְתְּכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּן אֵת כָּל הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמְרוּ בְּקֶדְמֵךָ יְיָ: הַגְדוֹל הַזֶּה:

And you shall guard and you shall do, for this is your wisdom and your understanding before the eyes of the nations, who will hear all of these laws and say, "This could only be a wise and understanding nation, this great nation!"

11. Deuteronomy 28:1-13 (adapted from JPS 1985 tr. c/o sefaria.org)

(א) וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָע בְּקוֹל ד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל מִצְוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם וּנְתַנְּךָ ד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עָלֶיךָ עַל כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:
(ב) וּבָאוּ עֲלֶיךָ כָּל הַבְּרָכוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְהַשִּׁיגְךָ כִּי תִשְׁמָע בְּקוֹל ד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ: (ג) בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה בְּעִיר וּבְרוּךְ אַתָּה בְּשׂוּדָה: (ד) בְּרוּךְ פְּרִי בִטְנְךָ וּפְרֵי אֲדָמָתְךָ וּפְרֵי בְהֵמָתְךָ שֶׁגַר אֲלֶפֶיךָ וְעִשְׂתָּרוֹת צֹאנֶךָ: (ה) בְּרוּךְ טִבְאֶךָ וּמִשְׁאַרְתְּךָ: (ו) בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה בְּבֹאֶךָ וּבְרוּךְ אַתָּה בְּצֵאתְךָ: (ז) יָתֵן ד' אֵת אִיבֶיךָ הַקָּמִים עָלֶיךָ נְגָפִים לְפָנֶיךָ בְּדָרֶךְ אֶחָד יֵצְאוּ אֵלֶיךָ וּבִשְׁבָעָה דְרָכִים יָנוּסוּ לְפָנֶיךָ: (ח) יֵצֵא ד' אֵת הַבְּרָכָה בְּאַסְמִיךָ וּבְכֹל מְשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ וּבְרָכָה בְּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ: (ט) יְקִימֶךָ ד' לֹו לְעַם קְדוֹשׁ כְּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָךְ כִּי תִשְׁמָר אֵת מִצְוֹת ד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִלַּכְתָּ בְּדַרְכָּיו: (י) וְרָאוּ כָּל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ כִּי שָׁם ד' נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וְנִרְאוּ מִמֶּךָ: (יא) וְהוֹתֵרֶךָ ד' לְטוֹבָה בְּפִרְי בִטְנְךָ וּבְפִרְי בְהֵמָתְךָ וּבְפִרְי אֲדָמָתְךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ד' לְאַבְתְּיֶךָ לְתֵת לָךְ: (יב) יִפְתַּח ד' לָךְ אֵת אוֹצְרוֹ הַטּוֹב אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם לְתֵת מָטָר אֲרֻצָּה בְּעֵתוֹ וּלְבַרֵךְ אֵת כָּל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדְךָ וְהִלִּיט גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאַתָּה לֹא תִלְוֶה: (יג) וּנְתַנְּךָ ד' לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב וְהָיִיתָ רַק לְמַעְלָה וְלֹא תִהְיֶה לְמִטָּה כִּי תִשְׁמָע אֶל מִצְוֹת ד' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לְשָׁמֵר וּלְעֲשׂוֹת:

Now, if you obey the Lord your G-d, to observe faithfully all His commandments which I enjoin upon you this day, the Lord your G-d will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings shall come upon you and take effect, if you will but heed the word of the Lord your G-d: Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the issue of your womb, the produce of your soil, and the offspring of your cattle, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings. The Lord will put to rout before you the enemies who attack you; they will march out against you by a single road, but flee from you by seven roads. The Lord will ordain blessings for you upon your barns and upon all your undertakings: He will bless you in the land that the Lord your G-d is giving you. The Lord will establish you as His holy people, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your G-d and walk in His ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Lord's name is proclaimed over you, and they shall stand in fear of you. The Lord will give you abounding prosperity in the issue of your womb, the offspring of your cattle, and the produce of your soil in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to assign to you. The Lord will open for you His bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land in season and to bless all your undertakings. You will be creditor to many nations, but debtor to none. The Lord will make you the head, not the tail; you will always be at the top and never at the bottom—if only you obey and faithfully observe the commandments of the Lord your G-d that I enjoin upon you this day.

12. Isaiah 11:8-10 (adapted from JPS 1985 tr. c/o sefaria.org)

(ח) וְשִׁעֲשַׁע יוֹנֵק עַל חַר פִּתּוֹן וְעַל מְאוּרַת צְפָעוֹנֵי גְמוּל יָדוּ הַדָּה: (ט) לֹא יָרְעוּ וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתוּ כִּכְל הַר קָדְשִׁי כִּי מְלֹאָה הָאָרֶץ דַּעַה אֵת ד' כַּמִּים לַיָּם מְכַסִּים: (י) וְהָיָה בַיּוֹם הַהוּא שָׂרָשׁ יְשִׁי אֲשֶׁר עֲמַד לְגַס עַמִּים אֲלֵיו גוֹיִם יְדַרְשׁוּ וְהִזְתָּה מִנְּחֻתוֹ כְּבוֹד:

A babe shall play over a viper's hole, and an infant pass his hand over an adder's den. In all of My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done; for the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord as water covers the sea. In that day, the stock of Jesse that has remained standing shall become a standard to peoples. Nations shall seek his counsel and his abode shall be honored.

13. Rabbi Moses Maimonides (12th century Egypt), Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 12:5

ובאותו הזמן לא יהיה שם לא רעב ולא מלחמה, ולא קנאה ותחרות, שהטובה תהיה מושפעת הרבה, וכל המעדנים מצויין כעפר, ולא יהיה עסק כל העולם אלא לדעת את ד' בלבד, ולפיכך יהיו ישראל חכמים גדולים ויודעים דברים הסתומים וישיגו דעת בוראם כפי כח האדם, שנאמר כי מלאה הארץ דעה את ד' כמים לים מכסים.

And at that time there will be neither famine nor war, neither *kinah* nor competition, for benefit will flow greatly and all delicacies will be as common as dust, and the world will only pursue knowledge of Gd. Therefore, all Israel will be great sages, knowing that which is hidden and comprehending the Creator as much as humans can, as it is written, "For the world will be full of knowledge of Gd, like water covers the sea."

14. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (20th century Israel), Orot haMilchamah 4

לולא חטא העגל היו האומות יושבות ארץ ישראל משלימות עם ישראל ומודות להם, כי שם ד' הנקרא עליהם היה מעורר בהן יראת הרוממות, ולא היתה שום שיטת מלחמה נוהגת, וההשפעה היתה הולכת בדרכי שלום כבימות המשיח.

Were it not for the sin of the Golden Calf, the inhabitants of the Land of Israel would have been reconciled with the People of Israel, for the name of G-d called upon them would have aroused awe. No war would have been necessary, and the [Divine] influence would have proceeded peacefully as in the Days of Messiah...

15. It happened!

Kings I 10, Chronicles II 17, Chronicles II 32:20-23

16. Menachem Begin, *Basic Outlines of our Life-Worldview and National Outlook*

Israel's prophets and seers, from whom we have inherited the aspiration for justice that guide our repose, elevated visions that are very difficult to realize... Their vision is a vision of truth, because even beyond the historical horizon, beyond "the end of days", they did not promise to abolish any difference. Indeed, "at the end of days" nation will not raise sword against nation, but even then there will be many "nations"; and while "at the end of days" devouring hatred will disappear for "the wolf will lie down with the lamb", but even then the differences between one species and another will not be eliminated. In other words - if one expands the symbolic meaning of the metaphor – the differences between a person and his fellow will not disappear with the desired disappearance of the hatred between them.

Our Task

17. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Shattering the Idols: The Struggle for Holiness in a Secular Age*

Such an age needs a Jewish voice. I do not believe that Judaism contains a message for Jews alone...

Above all, we must make the case time and again for what ancient Israel heard and what ancient Greece, despite its myriad accomplishments, failed to understand, namely the personal reality of the universe as the work of G-d in dialogue with His image, the human person. No civilisation has insisted more powerfully on the dignity of human life and the meaningfulness of history as the arena of redemption. We must become what we were called on to be, G-d's perennial question-mark against the conventional certainties of the secular mind...

[O]ur particularism is our universalism. Only by creating strong marriages can we argue the case for marriage. Only by sustaining strong communities can we speak with authority about community. Only by intense dedication to Torah study can we talk compellingly about education and the spiritual significance of the life of the mind. Only by being different can we offer an alternative to the prevailing cultural paradigms. Only by being true to what we are uniquely called on to be, can we give humanity what only we can give...

We may succeed, we may fail, but let it not be said that we were silent when the West needed to hear our voice. "Whether they listen or fail to listen . . . they will know that a prophet has been among them." (Ezekiel 2:5). A holy people does not fear to bring its holiness to the broad shared spaces of mankind.