

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Towering Intellect Of Judaism, Dies At 72¹

[Tom Gjelten](#)



*Religious leader and philosopher Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was the former chief rabbi of the U.K.
BEN STANSALL/AFP via Getty Images*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a celebrated moral thinker and globally renowned intellect of Judaism, died on Saturday after a short bout with cancer. He was 72.

Serving as the chief rabbi in the United Kingdom from 1991 to 2013, Sacks gained fame both in the secular world and in Jewish circles. He was a sought-after voice on issues of war and peace, religious fundamentalism, ethics, and the relationship between science and religion, among other topics. Sacks wrote more than 20 books.

"It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of Rabbi Sacks," says Laurie Zoloth, the Margaret E. Burton Professor of Religion and Ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School. "His books were a model of thoughtful, rational, deeply intellectual reflections on the importance, complexity and power of a life as a religious Jew, and in a broader sense, as a person of faith."

Knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II in 2005, he was awarded a life peerage four years later in the House of Lords.

At the same time, Sacks was deeply rooted in the Hebrew scriptures. A rabbi in the Modern Orthodox tradition, Sacks' commentaries on

Jewish prayer books were widely read and praised.

"For millions of Jews who were not really educated in the complexities of the Torah, he was able to say, 'Look at your tradition and how interesting and intellectually powerful and beautiful it is,'" Zoloth says.

Few if any Jewish leaders in the world were more adept at explaining Judaism to the broader world, always **emphasizing its promotion of justice and tolerance**, a message that on one occasion got him in trouble with some conservative Orthodox rabbis.

In his 2002 book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Sacks wrote, "GOD HAS SPOKEN TO MANKIND IN MANY LANGUAGES: THROUGH JUDAISM TO THE JEWS, CHRISTIANITY TO CHRISTIANS, ISLAM TO MUSLIMS. ... GOD IS THE GOD OF ALL HUMANITY, BUT NO SINGLE FAITH IS OR SHOULD BE THE FAITH OF ALL HUMANITY."

To some, especially in the ultra-Orthodox world, such pronouncements were tantamount to heresy, and in later editions of the book, Sacks softened the language to say, "AS JEWS, WE BELIEVE THAT GOD HAS MADE A COVENANT WITH A SINGULAR PEOPLE, BUT THAT DOES NOT EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY OF OTHER PEOPLES, CULTURES, AND FAITHS FINDING THEIR OWN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD."

Sacks downplayed the significance of the revision in a [2015 interview](#) with NPR's Robert Siegel, saying, "When extremists call you a heretic, that's their way of giving you an honorary doctorate."

Sacks told Siegel he wrote the book in the immediate aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, when the urgency of promoting interfaith understanding was widely recognized.

"I toned down several of the sentences, because the truth is, **if you're going to be a leader, lead at a speed that people can follow**," Sacks said. "And I just think I was trying to do too much too fast."

The connection of religion to war and violence was one of Sacks' great concerns. His book *Not In God's Name* was not only a rebuke to all those who misuse religion to

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/09/933230474/rabbi-jonathan-sacks-towering-intellect-of-judaism-dies-at-72>

promote hatred and war, but also an explanation of how that misuse happens.

"Human beings have both a propensity for altruism and a propensity for violence and evil," Sacks told a group of religion writers in 2015. "They are born at the same time, they derive from the same source, which is that we, in order to survive, both cooperate and compete. We are altruistic towards the members of our group, and that makes us both angels and demons at the same time – angels to the guys like us and demons to the guys not like us."

Sacks' final book, *Morality: Restoring The Common Good In Divided Times*, was published just as the coronavirus pandemic was breaking out around the world. Though written before COVID-19 emerged, the book proved prescient, with its **emphasis on the importance of "Living The We" rather than "Living the I."**

In a Zoom presentation in March to Hillel, the Jewish student organization, Sacks said those people who were hoarding food and medicine and refusing to socially distance exemplified the "Living The I" tendency.

"They're only concerned with their own interests," Sacks said. "That's what happens when you put 'the I' ahead of 'the We.' **When you emphasize 'the We,' something extraordinary happens.** You get the most heroic behavior — from doctors, from nurses, from health care workers, from people who are stacking the shelves in supermarkets. These are people who live 'the We.'"

The pandemic, Sacks said, "showed how terrible 'the I' can be and how elevating and inspiring 'the We' can be. I hope it's the book that charts the way forward for society when all this is over."

Even while writing, Sacks was generous with his time, especially with college students. He traveled almost constantly, speaking to student groups around the world. Part of his appeal was his ability to address tough, profound questions.

In an interview just a few weeks before his death on the podcast [From The Inside Out](#), host Rivkah Krinsky asked Sacks the age-old question, Why does God let bad things happen to good people?

"God does not want us to understand," Sacks said. "Because if we ever understood, we would be forced to accept that bad things

happen to good people, and God does not want us to accept those bad things. He wants us not to understand, so that we will fight against the bad and the injustices of this world, and that is why there is no answer to that question. God has arranged that we shall never have an answer to it."

Sacks, who was born in London in 1948, was the first in his family to attend college. His father, who arrived in England from Poland as a child, quit school at the age of 14 to work selling cloth. Sacks chose to become a rabbi late in his education, having initially studied philosophy. He held a Ph.D. in philosophy from King's College London. He is survived by his wife, three children, and several grandchildren.

Sacks' death over the weekend, announced on his personal Twitter account, brought an outpouring of tributes, from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Prince Charles and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, among many others.

Lord Sacks obituary²

FORMER CHIEF RABBI WHO WAS ADMIRER FAR BEYOND THE JEWISH WORLD FOR HIS INTELLECT AND WARMTH

Jenni Frazer



*Jonathan Sacks was particularly lauded for his ability to explain Jewish philosophy to the wider community.
Photograph: Jeff Morgan/Alamy*

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The former chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, Lord Sacks, who has died of cancer aged 72, was a much admired figure in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. Even though his writ did not run across all of the Orthodox community – and not at all in Progressive

² <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2020/nov/08/lord-jonathan-sacks-obituary>

Judaism – Sacks won high praise and was generally **acknowledged as one of the most brilliant intellects of his generation**. He was particularly lauded for his ability to explain Jewish philosophy to the wider community, which he did with great frequency on BBC Radio 4's Thought for the Day.

But at the same time, Sacks' tenure as chief rabbi, between 1991 and 2013, was controversial, both internally and outside Anglo-Jewry. Some of the furores regarding his decisions left a bitter taste at the time, but have receded into the background, as he embraced a hard-working retirement and a deliberate distancing so as not to overshadow his successor, Ephraim Mirvis.

Sacks came from an entirely different background from Mirvis and from his own predecessor, Lord (Immanuel) Jakobovits: his family, though observant, was not from a long line of rabbis and he had an utterly non-traditional path to the rabbinate, attending the local grammar school, Christ's college, Finchley, in north London, before graduating from Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, with a first-class degree in philosophy.

His rabbinical contemporaries would have received a very different, and much more insular, kind of education. But throughout his career – particularly when he became chief rabbi at the relatively young age of 42 – there was a feeling that **Sacks was in thrall to the strictly Orthodox sages on the right of the religious spectrum**. They were the sons and grandsons of rabbis; he was the son of Louis Sacks, a market trader who had come to Britain from Poland, and his wife, Louisa (nee Frumkin), who had driven ambulances in London during the blitz.

A Greyhound bus tour of the US in the summer of 1967, when he was just 19, enabled him to meet many leading religious figures, including Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Sacks ditched his plans to become an accountant, and decided to become a rabbi instead.

At Cambridge, he met his wife-to-be, Elaine Taylor, who was training to be a hospital radiographer. The couple, who went on to have three children, married when he was 22 and she 21, in 1970, enabling them to mark their golden wedding this year. He decided three weeks after meeting her that she was the one: last year, he told the Sunday Times that he had bought a ring from Woolworth's and

proposed to Elaine, on one knee, in Oxford Circus, determined to seal the deal.

Sacks' rise was rapid. He received his rabbinical ordination in 1976 at Jews' College (now the London School of Jewish Studies), where he later taught and served as principal (1984-90), and spent a short time heading religious teaching to children in Luton before becoming rabbi of Golders Green synagogue in 1978. A move to Marble Arch synagogue in central London – where he was rabbi from 1983 to 1990 – brought him into contact with many of the leading philanthropists of Anglo-Jewry, cementing lifelong friendships.

Throughout this time, Sacks, **who wrote more than 20 books on Judaism**, kept up his academic life, lecturing in moral philosophy at Middlesex Polytechnic, or as a visiting professor at Essex University.

By 1990 it seemed clear that there was no better candidate to succeed Jakobovits as chief rabbi than Sacks. He was a compelling orator who spoke beautiful, declarative English, and he had – as well as a classical British education – a warm and lively approach to the complexity of being a diaspora Jew.

He and the newly-designated archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, became good friends at the same time through a mutual passion for Arsenal football club. Both were invited to Highbury stadium to watch a midweek match, an invitation accepted with alacrity. But, as he recalled, the presence of two men with an assumed hotline to heaven did nothing for Arsenal's chances that night.

He remembered: "That night Arsenal went down to their worst home defeat in 63 years, losing 6-2 to Manchester United. The next day a national paper carried the story in its diary column, and concluded: 'If the archbishop of Canterbury and the chief rabbi between them cannot bring about a win for Arsenal, does this not finally prove that God does not exist!' The day after, I sent them the following reply: 'To the contrary, what it proves is that God exists. It's just that He supports Manchester United.'"

His assumption of the role of chief rabbi was greeted with something like rock-star rapture. But it was not long before he ran into controversy: having proposed a communal charity walkabout, open to all, he then refused to allow people from the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Helpline to take part. It was, perhaps, a calculation designed to mollify the strictly

Orthodox – and, sadly, it was only the first example of Sacks’ problem with the religious right wing of the community.

For every kind and inclusive thing he did – and there were many, such as private, encouraging phone calls to those who needed metaphorical hand-holding – there were other occasions in which his decisions seemed inexplicable to centrist Jews. Why, they wondered, was it fine to be friends with an archbishop but not to sit with a Progressive Jew?

The problem, **in hindsight, was Sacks’ inability to stamp his religious authority on the rebellious right.** Whereas Jakobovits and, today, Mirvis, were able to say “I am chief rabbi, and this or that will happen because I say so”, **Sacks appeared to concede on too many occasions.** The two most controversial clashes were what have been termed the Hugo Gryn affair and the Dignity of Difference row.

When Rabbi Hugo Gryn, then both Britain’s best-known Holocaust survivor and the leading figure in Reform Judaism, died in 1996, Sacks did not attend his funeral lest that be seen as countenancing non-Orthodoxy. A massive row erupted, not least after the Jewish Chronicle published a leaked letter which Sacks had written, in Hebrew, which described Gryn as “among those who destroy the faith”. Both the newspaper and Sacks were attacked; and Sacks’ subsequent decision to attend a memorial service for Gryn did not appease communal anger.

In 2002 another row erupted, seemingly arcane on the surface but pointing to deep divisions in the community. Sacks published a new book, [The Dignity of Difference](#), whose central message was that each religious community had parity in its attempt to find God. He had written: “God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims ... No one creed has a monopoly on spiritual truth; no one civilization encompasses all the spiritual, ethical and artistic expressions of mankind ... In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths ... God is greater than religion. He is only partially comprehended by any faith.”

But despite his initial protestations that the book was intended for a wider, non-Jewish audience, Sacks was forced into an embarrassing climbdown. He was summoned to explain himself before a group of rabbis, one of whom accused him of “heresy”; and in

the second edition of the book, he rewrote several passages, acknowledging that “one or two sentences might be misunderstood”.

If his relations with the religious right wing were difficult and complicated, those with the Progressive side of Judaism were scarcely less so. Ironically, one of his relations by marriage was the leading Liberal Judaism rabbi, David Goldberg, who took a mischievous delight in reminding people of the link.

The Reform rabbi Jonathan Romain, meanwhile, while admiring Sacks’ intellectual brilliance, called for him to be the last such holder of the post. Britain did not need a chief rabbi, he argued, not least because “although Sacks entered office in 1991 with great hopes for his ability to unify the Jewish community, he has proved unable to do so, and many would say that he has become a highly divisive figure”.

Knighted in 2005 and made a life peer in 2009, Sacks became a “must-hear” guest around the world as he spoke to many communities, as often in Hebrew as in English. He won many awards and distinctions, including the interfaith Templeton prize in 2016; and his translations of religious books to accompany services in the Jewish calendar became standard works in many homes. As a world-renowned scholar, he became professor of Jewish thought at Yeshiva University, New York, in 2013.

For much of his life – starting in 1967 with the outbreak of the six-day war – **Sacks was both an outspoken and trenchant defender of Israel, and a fierce opponent of antisemitism.** He made frequent radio and TV appearances, and in the last few years he used his place in the House of Lords to denounce the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. He described Corbyn’s reported comments that Zionists had no sense of “English irony” as among “the most offensive comments since Enoch Powell’s rivers of blood speech”.

He is survived by Elaine, their children, Joshua, Dina and Gila, and three brothers.

- Jonathan Sacks, Lord Sacks, rabbi, born 8 March 1948; died 7 November 2020

- This article was amended on 9 November 2020. It was not George Carey’s box at Highbury stadium where he and Jonathan Sacks watched a midweek Arsenal match, as an earlier version said, but that of a third party.

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