

Community of Faith



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Jonathan Sacks

**COMMUNITY
OF FAITH**

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy
Maggid Books

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*In honor of our dear friends
and the wonderful community we live in.*

*We feel so fortunate to have spent the last 20+ years in Teaneck
and its surrounding neighborhoods, which exemplify the ideals
of Torah, chesed, and community.*

*We are blessed to live in an area with many wonderful Rabbis,
educators, yeshivot, shuls, organizations, and lay leaders,
all of which continually strive for excellence to positively impact
the lives of each individual and the community as a whole.*

*We are thankful for the opportunity to be surrounded
with so many inspiring individuals and feel fortunate
to have met and befriended so many outstanding, engaged,
and passionate people. Our friendships have deeply affected
and improved our lives and the lives of our children, hopefully
forging lifelong positive and meaningful relationships.*

*Hashem should continue to bless each of us
with continued health, happiness, and hatzlacha,
and we should continue to share many happy occasions
individually, as friends, and as a community.*

Becky and Avi Katz



The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders and a moral voice.

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Contents

<i>Publisher's Preface</i>	ix
<i>Foreword / Rabbi Dr. Dov Lerner</i>	xi
<i>Author's Preface</i>	xv

PART I: HOUSE OF FAITH

Chapter 1. The Architecture of Community	3
Chapter 2. A Fragment of Jerusalem	13
Chapter 3. The United Synagogue	23
Chapter 4. A Broad Umbrella.....	31

PART II: PEOPLE OF FAITH

Chapter 5. Two Dimensions of Jewish Peoplehood	43
Chapter 6. Paths Not Taken: The Frankfurt Model	53
Chapter 7. Paths Not Taken: The American Model	65
Chapter 8. The Anglo-Jewish Achievement	79
Chapter 9. Belonging and Believing	91
Chapter 10. Community of Faith	101

PART III: THE FUTURE OF FAITH

Chapter 11. Jewish Discontinuity..... 115

Chapter 12. Aspects of Renewal 125

Chapter 13. The Faith of a United Synagogue 133

Chapter 14. A Personal Journey..... 141

About the Author 151

Publisher's Preface

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l* possessed and shared profound learning, moral depth, and sheer eloquence, expressed in his many published works. These made him a leading religious figure not only within contemporary Judaism but among people of all faiths (or none). Each meeting and conversation became a *shiur*, a lesson in how to look at the world and how to experience our relationship with the Creator.

It is a great privilege for us, paraphrasing the talmudic adage, “to return the crown to its former glory” by presenting these new editions of Rabbi Sacks’ earliest publications. The earlier volumes were written by Rabbi Sacks as a professor of philosophy, as a thinker, rabbinic leader, and Principal of Jews’ College, and are truly masterworks of exposition of contemporary Jewish thought. The later volumes represent Rabbi Sacks’ thinking as he became Chief Rabbi, set out his perception of the challenges facing his community of Anglo-Jewry at that time, and articulated his vision for the path ahead. All of these works certainly stand on their own merit today and are as relevant now as they were when first written.

We wish to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to Becky and Avi Katz for their critical support of and partnership in this project. Becky and Avi are longtime communal leaders and supporters of Jewish education in North America and Israel, and on behalf of all of

Community of Faith

us at Koren, together with those who will cherish this new opportunity to be inspired by Rabbi Sacks' writings, thank you.

We wish to add our thanks to our colleagues at Koren who have worked on this series: Ita Olesker, Tani Bayer, Aryeh Grossman, and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler. The proofreading team included Debbie Ismailoff, Ruth Pepperman, Esther Shafier, Marc Sherman, and Nechama Unterman. We would also like to thank Rabbi Dr. Dov Lerner for his personal and insightful foreword to this volume. We extend deep gratitude to our friends at The Rabbi Sacks Legacy for their continued partnership, together with Lady Elaine Sacks and the rest of the Sacks family for their continued support for our work.

May Rabbi Sacks' memory and Torah continue to be a blessing for future generations.

Matthew Miller
Koren Jerusalem

Foreword

Rabbi Dr. Dov Lerner

Jewish tradition is a revolutionary force in the history of human kind – one on which the modern West depends for its very survival. This premise sits at the centre of Rabbi Sacks’ worldview. From his first work to his last, he made the case that we were the first civilisation on Earth to enshrine the idea that every life has sanctity; we were the first civilisation on Earth to promote a vision of providence that embraces human agency; we were the first civilisation on Earth to insist that every person deserves dignity. And – as Rabbi Sacks sees it – the spirit of our creed, starting at Sinai, sowed the seeds that would develop over time into a series of vital political beliefs, including the ideals of peace, a free society, minority rights, a balance of powers, and the rule of law.

Perhaps the major question at the heart of the West right now, however, is how to sustain nation-states made up of distinct communities with highly particularised identities divided along cultural, ethnic, and religious lines. And, for Rabbi Sacks, this is where what he calls “the unique structure of biblical spirituality,” as understood by the rabbinic sages, comes in.

Community of Faith

The Hebrew Bible recognises that human beings are naturally tribal – that we are defined by a drive to identify with those most like us. While it summons us to see every human being as a vessel for divinity, it does not insist that we abandon our more intimate attachments to our immediate and extended family. In fact, the Hebrew Bible consecrates the family and sanctifies the community, and it outlines a series of heightened responsibilities toward members of our tribe. While it is true that, historically speaking, tribalism has dehumanised outsiders and fueled horrifying violence, Rabbi Sacks – in his *The Great Partnership, Not in God's Name, Future Tense, The Home We Build Together*, and beyond – has shown that every attempt to sidestep tribalism has been disastrous as well.

Universalistic movements, both religious and secular, have led to oppression through the elimination of difference; individualistic movements have severed the bonds of connection that prevent a debilitating sense of isolation. The Hebrew Bible, as understood by the sages, offers what Rabbi Sacks calls “the most compelling way I know of giving religious expression to both our common humanity and our religious differences.”

Unlike the other monotheisms, Judaism – across the board – does not seek or aspire to global conquest or mass conversion; while it advocates a basic standard of universal morality, it leaves space for an almost infinite array of collective expressions of monotheistic faith. And that is because, as Rabbi Sacks explains, the Hebrew Bible recognises that feeling a sense of tribal belonging matters to human beings as much as what we believe. This, says Rabbi Sacks, is what the prophets understood when they invented the revolutionary institution that sits at the heart of this book: the synagogue.

Citing the scholars who see the synagogue as marking a radical break from every other ancient conception of sacred space, Rabbi Sacks depicts it as a civic space to perpetuate our collective identity in the absence of a nation-state – what he would later characterise as a kind of extraterritorial embassy. In his words: “The synagogue was Jerusalem in exile, a country of the mind, the place where the prayers of a scattered people met and temporarily reunited them across time and space.”¹ More

1. *A Letter in the Scroll* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 158.

than just a place of prayer, the synagogue is a place of friendship and memory and education that has “sustained us as a nation through the longest exile any people has ever suffered and survived.”²

The central contention of *Community of Faith*, however, is that with the emancipation of Europe’s Jews toward the end of the eighteenth century – and the subsequent changes that upended what had been the relatively stable patterns of Jewish life – different conceptions of what the synagogue ought to look like started to compete. The idea put into practice by the leaders of Anglo-Jewry – in contrast with those of mainland Europe and the United States – is, for Rabbi Sacks, the model to which Jewish communities all over the world ought to turn.

Under the umbrella of an organisation called the United Synagogue – headed by a Chief Rabbi – individual synagogues were intended to be highly standardised but deeply inclusive collective spaces, where strictly traditional modes of practice were performed but every member of the Jewish community was welcome. They were to be places where Jews of all stripes would come together under a single roof as heirs to common memories with a sense of shared destiny so that – as one people – they could preserve the spirit of our revolutionary faith and sustain it for another generation.

For the United Synagogue, this cooperation and respect between members of varying levels of personal observance was not understood as a product of necessity – a banding together of unnatural allies for the sake of communal viability. There were more than enough Jews in the major communities to split into groups of the like-minded and to gather in rooms with a more insular, if more intimate, feel. The big sanctuaries and broad memberships were an active and deliberate choice.

Though Rabbi Sacks notes toward the end of this volume that he did not regularly attend a “United Synagogue” until he was employed by one later in life, I grew up – under his Chief Rabbinate – attending both a synagogue and a school under its aegis. As a result, I and my family had friends who were personally observant and others who were not; I had classmates in whose homes I could eat and others in whose homes I could not – but we all prayed the same prayers, heard the same words,

2. Ibid., 159.

Community of Faith

faced in the same direction, embraced each other, and belonged to a single community of faith.

Now I serve as a rabbi in the United States where, in the wake of Jewish emancipation, a completely different model of the synagogue emerged, defined almost entirely along ideological lines. And while it is true that such a division means that each community tends to possess a more potent energy and exhibit higher levels of religious literacy compared with their counterparts in Anglo-Jewry, it is not without a cost to the sense of collective belonging. And in the three decades since this volume was first published, the need for collective belonging has only become more pronounced.

As Rabbi Sacks' final work – *Morality* – shows, the deepening polarisation of contemporary politics, combined with the highly contrived algorithms of online technologies, has sparked an epidemic of loneliness and a looming sense of disintegration and decline. It is precisely at such a time that a study of the revolutionary institution of the synagogue – and its particular manifestation in the United Synagogue – might inspire the kind of ideas that we need, both as Jews and as members of Western societies.

In truth, I not only grew up in the United Synagogue – I grew up as the grandchild of one of its presidents, Sidney Frosh, whom Rabbi Sacks thanks in his preface to this book. From my youngest years I watched in awe as my grandfather, despite a lack of higher Jewish education, devoted his life to investing and strengthening inclusive Jewish communities, driven by a conviction that we, as a people, share more than memories; he was propelled by the belief that we each play a part in fostering Jewish continuity and a model of belonging that can heal the world.

May Rabbi Sacks' memory be a blessing, and may his ever-resonant wisdom continue to enlighten us all.

Author's Preface

This book is my tribute to the United Synagogue on its 125th anniversary, in return for the many delights it has given me and the thousands of others who have been its members. In it I describe not its outward history but its spiritual foundations. Pascal once said, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.” The same is often true of institutions. They have a dynamic of their own, an inner pulse and power, rarely formally articulated, but which needs to be understood if they are to be renewed. My subject is the synagogue as a living embodiment of the Jewish concept of community, in particular as it developed in Anglo-Jewry.

I have written it as a way of expressing my thanks to the many communities I have come to know since becoming Chief Rabbi four years ago. In my travels throughout Anglo-Jewry and the Commonwealth I have been moved, time and again, by their vigour, energy and warmth. This is due not only to their leaders, rabbinic and lay, whose dedication to the task of sustaining synagogue life is often tireless and sometimes thankless. It is also the achievement of countless men, women and young people who by quiet acts of kindness or hospitality give Jewish life its humanity and grace. In the words of one of our prayers, I offer thanks to “those who unite to form synagogues for prayer, and those

who come there to pray; those who provide lamps for lighting, wine for *kiddush* and *havdalah*, food for wayfarers and charity for the poor, and all who faithfully occupy themselves with the needs of the community.”

Special mention is owed to the Honorary Officers of the United Synagogue, Anthony Ansell, Anthony Cowen, Maurice De Vries, Leslie Elstein, Stephen Forman, Alan Kennard and Elkan Levy, and its Chief Executive, Jonathan Lew. As I argue in this book, the heritage of which they are the custodians is rare in the contemporary Jewish world, and they have guarded it with dedication. I have had the privilege of working with two distinguished Presidents. Sidney Frosh, who led the United Synagogue when I came into office, is one of Anglo-Jewry’s most beloved figures. It was with immense sadness that, as I was preparing this work, we mourned the loss of his beloved wife Ruth whose kindness we will long remember. Seymour Saideman, its current President, has steered it boldly through difficult times and hard decisions, taking it from financial crisis to recovery. With Seymour and his wife Shirley I cherish not only a partnership but also a much valued friendship.

Above all, I was mindful of the immense contribution of my colleagues in the rabbinate. Their work is often sadly under-appreciated. Expected to combine the insight of Moses, the wisdom of Solomon, the eloquence of Isaiah and the patience of Job, they are sometimes subjected to the treatment of Balaam’s ass. Watching them in action I have often marvelled at how, day after day, they have brought comfort to the afflicted, inspiration to the weary and guidance to those who search. A synagogue without a rabbi is like a body without a soul, and they more than anyone else are the builders of our community. Like them I owe much to the advice and encouragement of my predecessor, Lord Jakobovits, Rosh Beth Din Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu, and Dayanim Ivan Binstock and Menachem Gelley of the London Beth Din.

Special thanks are due to Peter Halban for the speed and professionalism with which he has brought this work into print; to Beverley-Jane Stewart for her cover illustration, painted especially for the United Synagogue’s anniversary and showing aspects of its work; and to my superb office team, led by my Executive Director Jonathan Kestenbaum, for their unfailing good humour and support. I am particularly grateful to the incorporated trustees of the Jewish community of Hong Kong

for their assistance with this publication. Their new community centre is a model of its kind, and what I have written in this essay will, I hope, guide them in their ambitious plans for developing Jewish life.

It is not easy for a Chief Rabbi to find the time to write. The historian Shlomo Dov Goitein writes that it was Maimonides' great fortune, having been appointed as *Rosh haYehudim* (head of the Jewish community) in Egypt, to be deposed after five years, in 1176. This gave him a twenty-year interlude in which he was able to write the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide for the Perplexed*. His son Rabbi Abraham was appointed *Nagid* (Chief Rabbi) as a young man, and he occupied the position throughout his life. This, says Goitein, was why his literary output was so limited and his place in Jewish history so relatively small.

The present study is therefore a sketch rather than a finished portrait, and any errors of detail will I hope be balanced by the broad strokes of the argument. The reason I have taken the trouble to write it is that like so many organisations that have been in existence for a long time, the United Synagogue runs the risk of being taken for granted. No institution can survive without being constantly renewed, least of all at times of change of which this is one. I have tried to set out, in a way I have not seen done before, the singularity of its achievement and the vital importance of continuing it into the future. I hope it will stimulate thought not only amongst its members but also in those outside who wish to understand why it is what it is, and why Anglo-Jewry did not develop along different lines. At the heart of the United Synagogue is an idea, one which governed and inspired Jewish communities for many centuries but which has proved difficult to sustain in the modern world. I have tried in this book to describe the history and theology of this idea and to show why its importance extends far beyond the boundaries of Anglo-Jewry.

While working on it I made a belated and serendipitous discovery. I had not previously realised that the day I was married, 14 July 1970, exactly coincided with the centenary of the United Synagogue. Its 125th anniversary was therefore our silver wedding, and this made me more than usually conscious of the debt I owe my wife Elaine, who throughout those years has been a never-failing source of encouragement and love. To her, and to our children Joshua, Dina and Gila, go my deepest

Community of Faith

thanks for helping me discover what it is for the *Shekhinah*, the Divine presence, to live in the midst of human relationships. That is the ultimate blessing of a community of faith.

Jonathan Sacks
London
Rosh Chodesh Ellul 5755

Part I

House of Faith

Chapter 1

The Architecture of Community

Walk around the Old City of Jerusalem and you will come to a strange realisation. The Christian quarter is full of fine churches. On the Temple Mount stand two magnificent mosques, El Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. But the Jewish quarter contains no synagogues of comparable grandeur. Those that were there were destroyed by the Jordanians in 1949. Most have since been rebuilt though some, like the Hurvah, have been preserved as ruins. The largest place of prayer is not a synagogue at all. It is the open space in front of the *Kotel Hamaaravi*, the Western Wall, symbol and vestige of the Temple that twice stood and was twice destroyed. Since then, for the most part, Jews have not tried to rival its splendour. They built synagogues, *battei kneset*, houses of worship. But often they were small, modest and unspectacular.

Go to Prague and you discover the same thing. There, close to the centre of this majestic city of castles and spires, you come across one of the most famous and oldest of Europe's synagogues, the Altneushul, where the great Rabbi Judah Loewe, the Maharal, lived and where, so legend has it, he created the golem, the artificial being who defended

Community of Faith

Jews against their enemies. Perhaps its protection continued into the twentieth century, because while other Jewish buildings were systematically destroyed by the Nazis, the Altneushul survived. Entering it you are struck by its tiny dimensions. It is a deeply atmospheric place, and has the feel of the Middle Ages about it. The seat where the Maharal sat is still there, and you can imagine yourself back in the sixteenth century when Jewish life was still lit by the flame of a faith not yet blown by the winds of modernity. But there is nothing lavish or spacious about it. By the standards of Prague the Altneushul is the humblest of public places.

The Jewish contribution to civilisation did not lie in architecture. There were exceptions. But at most times, Jews built relatively modest places of worship, and one is led to wonder why. Was it that often they were simply poor and few in number? Or that neither Christians nor Muslims allowed them to build houses of worship that might rival their own? Was it simply that experience had taught them that, during the long night of exile, no place of residence was secure? Had they been expelled too often from too many countries to seek permanence in stone? There is a measure of truth in each of these suggestions, but I cannot help feeling that the larger truth lies elsewhere.

After the destruction of the Second Temple Jews lived by an ancient and fundamental insight, that God does not live in buildings but in the human heart. When He commanded the Israelites to construct the tabernacle, He said, “They shall make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst” (Exodus 25:8) – in their midst, not its midst. The *Shekhinah*, God’s indwelling presence, was in a people not a place. The traces of His spirit are to be found in human lives. What in other faiths was achieved through architecture – visible symbols of the order and majesty of creation – was achieved in Judaism through the life of the holy community, constructed according to the plans of the Torah. The rabbis carved, polished and engraved its teachings as if they were the stones of a great edifice, and so they were, but it was a living one built out of words and deeds. A Jewish legend says that when the Temple was destroyed splinters from its stones entered the hearts of the Jewish people. When they gathered as *Knesset Yisrael*, the congregation of Israel united across space and time in the collective service of God, they became a kind of human Temple and in their lives the Divine presence found its earthly

home. So, when they were not trying to imitate their neighbours, Jews rarely put their energies into buildings. They put them into study and worship and acts of social welfare. They constructed synagogues, but what they built was communities of faith.

This book is about one such community, the group of London congregations known as the United Synagogue. As I write, it is in the midst of its 125th anniversary, and it has much to celebrate. Throughout its existence it has attracted the allegiance of the majority of London's Jews and has had an influence over the rest of Anglo-Jewry and beyond. When it came into being the British Empire was at its height, so that the Anglo-Jewish example set a pattern for other Jewries as distant as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada. Even today these communities are significantly different from Jewries elsewhere.

But my subject goes beyond a conventional history of one particular organisation. Instead I have attempted an intellectual journey into what it is to form a Jewish community and to become part of one. Along the way, we will encounter many of the dilemmas confronted by Jews in the modern world, and the decisions they made by way of response. We will reflect on the concept of *kehillah*, community as the framework of Jewish belonging, and on the role of the synagogue as a collective expression of Jewish identity. We will be led to think about *emunah* – the Hebrew word usually translated as “faith” but which more properly means “fidelity” or “faithfulness” – and how we translate that faithfulness to God, the Jewish people and the covenant between them into the institutions of our shared life. And we will discover that in modern times Jews found themselves reconsidering the relationship between “congregation” and “people” and asking fundamental questions about the nature of the community for whom the synagogue is a spiritual home.

Jews cared about institutions. They rather than the buildings in which they are housed are the true vehicles of the Divine presence, and they have an architecture – a shape, balance and structure – of their own. Institutions are more than meets the eye. They embody values, principles and ways of life. Their day to day functioning can often be depressingly routine. But beneath the surface, they are our most powerful way of turning abstract ideals into tangible and living relationships. Through families, associations and communities, a civilisation passes on its values

Community of Faith

from one generation to the next in the most vivid and comprehensible way, through patterns of behaviour learned and internalised until they become, in Alexis de Tocqueville's phrase, "habits of the heart." If we seek to understand a faith or culture, it is to these institutions that we must turn, listening attentively to their spoken and unspoken language, their distinctive rhythms and nuances. It is here that we will learn what makes a group something more than the individuals who comprise it at any given moment – what makes it a community of memory and character, or in Hebrew a *kehillah*.

It is in its institutions – the Jewish home, the house of study and place of prayer – that Judaism's unique religious genius is best expressed. The Torah is a code of great ideals: freedom, responsibility, justice, compassion, family, community and the fellowship of man. But it is in everyday life that the dry bones of abstract ideas take on flesh and begin to live and breathe. In Judaism *emunah* is not faith contemplated but faith lived, in specific ways and particular relationships. It exists not in books of theology but in the deeds we do and the words we say, in actions, transactions and conversations. It is easy to find God in heaven, harder to make a space for Him on earth, but that is what Jews have been summoned to do, and our institutions are of the essence of that project.

Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the case of the synagogue. Robert Trevors Hertford, the English theologian, once wrote that "In all their long history, the Jewish people have done scarcely anything more wonderful than to create the synagogue. No human institution has a longer continuous history, and none has done more for the uplifting of the human race." More than any other framework, the synagogue has served Diaspora Jewry through the centuries as the home of its collective existence, the place in which it rehearses and lives out its aspirations as a people dedicated to the ultimate values set forth in the Torah.

The history of the synagogue is therefore one of the best guides to the journey of the Jewish spirit through time, and the United Synagogue is no exception. What makes it worthy of particular attention is the fact that from the very outset it was built on a momentous if never explicitly stated proposition, namely that it is possible, even in the modern world, in a secular and open society, to continue the classic terms of Jewish

existence. This was so, despite the fact that in many other places, modernity was experienced as a traumatic assault on Jewish tradition. How so?

For centuries Jews built communities. As soon as they had arrived in a country in sufficient numbers, they built synagogues, established burial societies, constructed *mikvaot*, ritual baths, and made provisions for *shehitah* and circumcision. They employed rabbis, arranged for religious instruction, and built Jewish schools. Later, as they became more organised, they developed welfare and philanthropic enterprises. So they had done from ancient times until the nineteenth century, continuing the faith of their ancestors and giving it practical expression wherever they went.

But in 1870, when the United Synagogue came into being, the Jewish world was being shaken by a series of monumental changes, and more were to come. The corporate state of the Middle Ages in which Jews lived in autonomous communities was giving way to the new nation-state in which all groups, at least in theory, had equal rights. Jews fought for emancipation, which meant in practice the right to attend university, join professions, enter the civil service and gain admission to the Houses of Parliament. Throughout Europe and America this carried a price even if it was never formally spelled out. John Murray Cuddihy has called it the “ordeal of civility.” Jews had to acquire the culture and manners of the wider society, and in many countries and individuals the experience of living in “two worlds” produced a crisis of identity.

More ominously, in 1879 a new word entered the vocabulary of Europe: antisemitism. It was coined by a German journalist, Wilhelm Marr, to describe an old phenomenon that was mutating into a new and virulent disease. Jews had been disliked and persecuted in the past because they practised a different religion. In the new civil order, however, religion was no longer an adequate ground for discrimination. Jews were still disliked, and if this could not be justified in terms of faith it would find expression in terms of race. Within two years the word had become a frightening reality. Pogroms broke out in more than a hundred Russian towns, killing Jews and convincing many more that they had no place in Eastern Europe. Over the next thirty years some two and a half million of them emigrated to the West, radically changing the character of communities in Britain, America and elsewhere.

Community of Faith

The cumulative impact of these developments led to a breakdown in the structures of Jewish life for which, even in our diverse and often troubled history, it is hard to find a parallel. Until the nineteenth century there were Jews and there was Judaism, or more simply, there was Torah. There were different communities and customs. There were Ashkenazim and Sephardim. There were Hasidim and their opponents, the Mitnagdim. But the differences between them were small even if, as Freud reminded us, small differences often generate large passions. By the end of the nineteenth century there were Orthodox, Positive-Historical (later Conservative) and Reform Jews. There were secular, cultural and religious Zionists and there were anti-Zionists of various shades. There were Jews who expressed their identity through Yiddish or Hebrew culture. And there were Jews whose deepest wish was to forget that they were Jews. The differences between them were not small but fundamental. It was as if a hammer blow had struck the rock of Israel, breaking it into a hundred fragments.

In England, however, a significantly different pattern emerged. Elsewhere Jews saw themselves as being faced with an inescapable choice. Either they held firm to heritage of the past, in which case they had to place a distance between themselves and those who were integrated into contemporary culture, or they became part of that culture, in which case they felt bound to reject or reform aspects of Jewish life. The alternatives were the ghetto and the melting pot. Jews were being called on to segregate or assimilate, and there seemed to be no third option.

The Jews of Victorian England, however, held an altogether more robust optimism about the possibilities of modern society. They knew that there were risks. It is said that when Baron Nathaniel Rothschild won his long battle to allow Jews to be admitted to the House of Lords, he made his excuses to those who were congratulating him and made his way to a small synagogue in Whitechapel where he was found praying: "Would that this freedom shall not mean the diminution of our faith." Religion has always prospered in adversity, and when we have most to thank God for we tend to think of Him least. But the great figures of Anglo-Jewry – men like Chief Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler and Sir Moses Montefiore – believed that it was possible to guide Anglo-Jewry in such a way as to preserve the great principles of Jewish life without at

the same time closing oneself off from the unfolding possibilities of an open society, and without separating oneself from the majority of the Jewish people. To a remarkable degree, they were proved right.

The values for which they fought – the unity of the Jewish people and its continuity with the principles of the past – found institutional expression in many ways, one of which (though not for Sir Moses Montefiore, who belonged to the Sephardic tradition) was the United Synagogue. Its history has been written. But surprisingly, very little has been written about its philosophy, its driving vision of Jewish life. Perhaps until now it was not necessary to do so. Its aims were self-understood, and respected not only by those who were its members, but by others also. But there comes a time in the life of any institution when it is necessary to take stock, to reflect on why it exists and what values it embodies. Unless this is done, the organisation and the people who belong to it lose a sense of purpose and can fail to adjust to changing times.

Let me therefore say why I think the United Synagogue and its many kindred congregations represent something unusual and of enduring value. Some see its significance in a particular style of Judaism sometimes described as *minhag Anglia*, or as a teacher of mine once called it, “Anglican Judaism.” I do not. Style is not the essence of Judaism. Fashions change. The United Synagogue came into existence in Victorian England, and mirrored its aesthetics. The great challenge to Jews in those days was social integration, and at times they emphasised their Englishness at the expense of their Jewishness. They built large and imposing synagogues and conducted services of fastidious decorum. They were magnificent, but have since somewhat lost their appeal for a generation more interested in compelling centres of community, places of personal spiritual growth. Synagogue styles have changed, and that is a sign not of decay but of vitality.

Others think of the United Synagogue in terms of a specific philosophy of Judaism, variously termed “neo-” or “modern” or “centrist” Orthodoxy, whose great exponent in the nineteenth century was Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. This is in fact a misconception. Jewry in Germany and the United States did give rise to a self-defined neo-Orthodoxy. Anglo-Jewry did not. The United Synagogue was not the projection of a particular school of thought. Instead it drew its inspiration from all

aspects of Jewish tradition. It was neither forced by Jewish dissent, nor prompted by inclination, to create an ideology. It stood quite simply for Judaism and Jews, wherever possible without qualifying adjectives.

The United Synagogue's great achievement lay in neither style nor ideology but in the undertaking it set itself in its Hebrew name, *Knesset Yisrael*, "the congregation of Israel." As we will see, this was a bold and by no means inevitable choice. It meant in effect that it set itself as far as possible to sustain the traditional nature of the Jewish community as a collective body dedicated to the service of God and the continuation of the covenant. Before the nineteenth century, no Jewish community would have contemplated doing otherwise. But by 1870, this was already a brave undertaking, calling for responsive leadership of a high order. It meant declining two alternatives: turning Judaism into a sect self-consciously separated from the rest of the Jewish world, or breaking continuity with the past and ultimately seeing Jewry as an ethnic group which wrote the rules of its own civilisation. Anglo-Jews have reason to be grateful that their predecessors for the most part refused these options.

As a result, the synagogues that predominated in Britain and throughout the Commonwealth remained open to the whole of Jewish tradition and not just part of it, and to the whole of the Jewish people and not just part of it. The individuals who made up these communities were not more observant, or more Jewishly learned, in their private lives than Jews elsewhere. But in their public expressions and institutional forms they preserved the great Judaic heritage more widely and successfully than communities in many other countries.

Elsewhere Orthodoxy was reduced to a small and until recently embattled minority in communities in which the majority of the Jewish population were estranged from tradition. In Anglo-Jewry and the Commonwealth Jewries over which it had an influence, this did not happen. Despite all the pressures of more than a century of stress and change, they have held together as communities. A relatively high percentage of their population are members of synagogues, and the majority – in Britain between two-thirds and four-fifths – of Orthodox congregations. This means that in them Orthodoxy has remained more tolerant, open and inclusive than elsewhere. It has developed a stance of responsibility towards the community as a whole, and not merely towards its own

members. It has ensured that certain norms and standards – those which link us to the Jewish past and to Jews worldwide – have stood unshaken at the centre of our communal life. This means that, by and large, Jews in Britain can talk to one another in the shared language of our faith, and at a time when Jewish unity and continuity are at risk, this is an achievement as precious as it is rare. Like the *Altneushul* in Prague, Anglo-Jewry survives intact where so many other communities have fragmented.

Today there are intense pressures for it to go the way of the world's two largest Jewries, those of Israel and the United States. This would mean a minority Orthodoxy, divided within itself, and a large majority for whom the Jewish past is a foreign country and Jewish faith as it has been lived through the generations something alien and strange. Were Anglo-Jewry to follow this road it would be a grave error. Individuals would be alienated. The community would be split. Orthodoxy itself would lose its breadth, its engagement with the wider world and its sense of kinship with other Jews. The public life of Jewry would be secularised, because the only ground on which Jews could meet would be religiously neutral: defence, welfare and Israel shorn of their spiritual dimensions. Jewry here would be embarked on a course it has already taken elsewhere with deeply damaging consequences. It would be on its way to becoming a secular entity rather than a community of faith.

Against this, I believe that it matters that there are Jews who, faithful to the Judaism of the millennia, construct communities in which that faith lives and changes the lives of those who become part of them. It matters that those communities are built around the life of Torah, forming an axis of continuity between ourselves and the generations that preceded us. A Jewish community should build its standards around its aspirations, holding out to its members the challenge of eternal ideals rather than an ever-changing set of accommodations to passing fashion, moral, spiritual or intellectual. It therefore matters that it embodies an institutional expression of humility in the face of God and reverence for the traditions of its ancestors, never losing its sense of infinity in the midst of space or of eternity in the flux of time.

It matters that there is a living example of Orthodoxy that is tolerant, accessible and open to all, with no other precondition than that in its public expressions it respects the faith and way of life that has been

Community of Faith

passed on by Jews from parents to children throughout the centuries. It matters that there be a Judaism which, without compromising its commitments, is fully open to the time, the culture and the society in which Jews live, and which has the courage to wrestle with contemporary life rather than avoid the confrontation. It matters that Jewish communities feel themselves part of, and accept responsibilities towards, *Knesset Yisrael*, the extended “congregation of Israel” which encompasses Jews of all times and places, overcoming the perennial temptations of parochialism, sectarianism and narrow loyalties.

These values are not peculiar to any one community of Jews. But wherever they are taken seriously, they will lead to something like the United Synagogue. If it did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. But it would prove extraordinarily difficult to reinvent it, such are the powerful pressures in today’s Jewish world to fragment communities into separate and competing sects, each going its own way. What has made the United Synagogue so important a model of Jewish life is that it has resisted these centrifugal pressures and will continue to do so, because they do justice neither to the Jewish past nor to our collective future.

The United Synagogue has been much criticised in recent years. But the time has come to reflect on its specific virtues, the attributes which make it, despite its many faults, one of the more remarkable religious institutions modern Jewry has created. Its ideals are still compelling. If anything they are more important now than they were a century and a quarter ago. Its synagogues are impressive, but their significance lies in their inner life, not their outer form. They are a brave translation into the contemporary world of the revolutionary ideal which Jews have pursued for most of their recorded history: *Knesset Yisrael*, the Jewish people as a living community of faith. It is this ideal whose history I now want to trace.