

Faith in the Future



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Jonathan Sacks

FAITH IN THE
FUTURE

Introduction by
Clifford Longley

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy
Maggid Books

Faith in the Future

First edition, 1995, by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd.
First Maggid Books edition, 2024

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

© Estate of Jonathan Sacks, 2024
Introduction © Clifford Longley, 1995

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case
of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-628-9, *paperback*

Printed and bound in the United States

*In Honor of our Dear Siblings, Cousins, Aunts and Uncles,
Nieces and Nephews, and more.*

*We thank Hashem for our relationship with each of you.
You each bring your unique wisdom and insight to help
us grow into better people. Our parenting, relationships,
hospitality, health, Yiddishkeit, emuna, and more have all been
impacted by what we learn from you,
be it from quick chats, long DMCs, WhatsApp groups,
or just watching you in action.*

*We are grateful that our families have remained close
and connected over the years, even with added numbers
and distance. We have been zoche to spend numerous
meals, Shabbosim, and Chagim with each other – multiple
generations, multiple families, multiple days all under one roof.*

*B"H, collectively we have created incredible and indelible
memories that will continue to shape and guide our families
for generations to come.*

*Hashem should continue to grant us all health, happiness,
hatzlacha, close connections, and opportunities to create
many more memories as we IY"H share many, many more
experiences, both big and small, in the future together.*

*We appreciate and love you,
Becky, Avi, and Family*

Author's Original Dedication

*To the members of the
Council of Christians and Jews*



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.

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at www.rabbisacks.org, and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

Contents

<i>Publisher's Preface</i>	xi
<i>Author's Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction by Clifford Longley</i>	xvii
<i>Prologue: Faith in the Future</i>	xxiii

PART I: THE MORAL COVENANT

Chapter 1. Introduction: Sharing Duties.....	3
Chapter 2. Holes in the Moral Fabric.....	6
Chapter 3. Why Morality Matters.....	9
Chapter 4. The Future of the Family.....	16
Chapter 5. The Moral Context of Crime.....	26
Chapter 6. In Defence of Judgement.....	34
Chapter 7. Law, Morality and the Common Good.....	41
Chapter 8. Faith in the Community.....	55
Chapter 9. Putting Duties to Rights.....	59
Chapter 10. Renewing the Covenant.....	62

PART II: LIVING TOGETHER

Chapter 11. Introduction: Sharing a World.....	73
Chapter 12. The Interfaith Imperative.....	77

Chapter 13. Religious Responsibility at a Time of Ethnic Conflict	86
Chapter 14. Taking Risks for Peace	92
Chapter 15. After Hebron	106
Chapter 16. The Vatican and Israel.....	111
Chapter 17. Democracy and Religious Values.....	114
Chapter 18. Pluralism	127

PART III: HOLY DAYS

Chapter 19. Introduction: Sharing Time	139
Chapter 20. Shabbat/The Sabbath: Day of Delight	145
Chapter 21. Pesach/Passover: Celebrating Freedom	152
Chapter 22. Shavuot/Pentecost: Israel's Wedding.....	160
Chapter 23. Sukkot/Tabernacles: The Canopy of Faith.....	166
Chapter 24. Rosh Hashanah/New Year: The Courtroom of the World	174
Chapter 25. Yom Kippur/The Day of Atonement: Coming Home	182

PART IV: JEWISH ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY

Chapter 26. Introduction: Sharing Fate	193
Chapter 27. Images of Jewish Spirituality.....	196
Chapter 28. Jewish Economic Ethics	222
Chapter 29. Jewish Environmental Ethics	235
Chapter 30. The Jewish Attitude to Handicap.....	244
Chapter 31. Leadership and Crisis	256
Chapter 32. Jewishness and Judaism.....	263
Chapter 33. On God and Auschwitz.....	270

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

Faith in the Future

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 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

Author's Preface

As Chief Rabbi I am usually called on to address Jewish audiences. But there are times when the audience is wider and the message more universal in scope. The chapters gathered here are of the second kind. They form a composite picture of what I have tried to say, these past few years, as a Jew in a society of people of many faiths and some of none.

At first I found this a difficult experience. It is so easy to speak with people who share your faith, and so hard to communicate with those who don't. But slowly I discovered that talking across the fences that divide us is important. Not only because it helps us understand each other and our differences, but also because it helps us understand ourselves. We find out what we share and also what we uniquely own.

I also made a discovery. With the transition of Britain from a strong common culture to a more fragmented, segmented and pluralised one, we suddenly find that we are *all* members of a minority group, practising Christians no less than practising Jews. This is not a bad thing, because it means that paradoxically as we become more diverse we discover more areas of common experience. The problems of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others in trying to preserve their values and hand them on to their children become more, not less, alike. In the contemporary situation, to be particular is to be universal and to be a minority is part of the experience of the majority.

Under these circumstances, as we try to renew our own families, communities and faiths, we find that we are not alone. People quite unlike us face the same difficulties and derive strength from sharing experience and reflection. This book, then, is a Jewish contribution to a conversation in which many voices deserve to be heard. Though some of its sections are more specifically Jewish than others, all ultimately turn on the question of whether, in a complex, rapidly changing and ever more interdependent world we can construct a humane social order which honours human dignity and difference, one in which we can be both true to ourselves and a blessing to others. In the confusing state of post-industrial societies in the post-Cold War situation, can we give those who come after us a coherent map of hope?

I have structured this book in four sections. In the first, “The Moral Covenant,” I touch on the broadest issues of morality, the family and the importance of communities in the life of society. In the second, “Living Together,” I ask how we can co-exist while remaining faithful to our distinctive identities and traditions. In the third, “Holy Days,” I describe how one faith, Judaism, lives out its beliefs. In the fourth, “Jewish Ethics and Spirituality,” I sketch some of Judaism’s leading themes.

Most chapters had their origins in talks, articles or broadcasts. Often, though, I have redrafted them and in some cases I have written a section especially for this book. With a few indicated exceptions, they have not been published before. No collection of this kind can be seamless, but I hope that it carries a consistency of voice and belief.

In bringing this book to publication I owe many thanks. Mr. Colin Shindler, former editor of *The Jewish Quarterly*, first persuaded me that it was worth doing. Working with the publishers, Darton, Longman and Todd, and their editor Morag Reeve, has been a rare and special pleasure. I am particularly honoured that Mr. Clifford Longley, one of the country’s most distinguished religious voices and a journalist from whose columns I never fail to learn, has written an introduction.

As I prepared the text I was conscious of the thanks I and many others owe to those who sustain the traditions of this country’s religious tolerance. As Britons we carry the virtue of self-criticism to a fault, often forgetting the remarkable record of British openness and generosity

towards different ethnic and religious groups. Jews know only too well how unusual this is in world history, and how important. I am grateful for the warm relationship I have been privileged to share with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Basil Hume, and the leaders of many other faith groups. The BBC's Religious Broadcasting department has played a significant role in shaping this climate of tolerance, and I recall with gratitude the times I have spent with Ernest Rea, David Craig, Beverley McAinsh, John Kirby, Norman Ivison and others, coming to understand how communicating faith across boundaries is one of broadcasting's most sacred tasks. Within the Jewish community, the United Synagogue and its President, Mr. Seymour Saideman, have shown how tolerance can be combined with firm religious principle. Sir Sigmund Sternberg has set a striking example of leadership in interfaith relationships.

Above all my thanks are due to my wife Elaine and our children, Joshua, Dina and Gila, whose patience and support have meant everything to me. It is not easy being a religious leader – the great Jewish scholar Jacob Emden used to say in thanksgiving, “Blessed are You, O Lord...who has not made me a rabbi” – and without their faith, mine surely would have had its moments of doubt. The Jewish sages believed that peace in the home brings peace to the world. Certainly it has brought peace and blessing to me.

Jonathan Sacks

Introduction

Clifford Longley

Western civilisation suffers from a strong sense of moral and spiritual exhaustion. Having constructed a society of unprecedented sophistication, convenience and prosperity, nobody can remember what it was supposed to be for. Just enjoying it does not seem to be enough. Indeed, enjoyment as an end in itself quickly turns to ashes in the mouth. Not only is it boringly bland. It is even more boringly purposeless. There is more to human life than comfort, entertainment, and the avoidance of suffering.

Or there ought to be. Increasingly, people of all sorts and conditions – especially young people – are becoming curious about alternatives, asking questions and seeking answers. Most of them are suspicious of panaceas and simplistic solutions, and reluctant therefore to join organisations, such as cults and fundamentalist churches, that offer short cuts. They are eclectic and even sceptical. But they are becoming open to possibilities that their parents and grandparents would have declined. The difference between the generations might be summed up by saying that the older one mutters to itself, “There are no easy answers,” then shrugs its shoulders and turns away; while the younger generation remarks, “There are no easy answers so let us consider more difficult ones.”

This is the ideal climate of opinion in which to introduce to a much wider circle of readers the sharp and unusual insights of Jonathan Sacks. Most of those who already know of him, know him as the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, the head man of the Orthodox Jewish community in Britain. But Orthodox Jews will forgive me for saying, at least in this context, that is by no means the most important thing about him.

Even before his name became prominent in his own community, some of us had picked up rumours that there was a fresh face on the block, a new and exciting talent that had attached itself to one of the more conservative religious institutions in Britain, the United Hebrew Congregations. It was his growing reputation for originality and sheer intelligence that quickly took him to the headship of Jews College in London, which is responsible for training Britain's Orthodox rabbis, and eventually brought him to the attention of the BBC. It was by this means that he first became a national figure, when his series of radio Reith Lectures in 1990 captured widespread attention, if a little puzzlement too, for his lucid and thoughtful warnings about the moral and spiritual state of Western society.

This was a voice we had not heard before. We are used to thinkers of past and present speaking from within a culture formed by Christianity, even if their ideas are not specifically theological or religiously orthodox. We are also used to secularised Jews as philosophers, writers and formers of opinion – one only has to think of Marx and Freud. But what we are not used to is someone speaking to us, and managing to address us where we are, from within the conservative and ancient religious tradition of Orthodox Jewry, and without compromising it in the process. Above all, we are not used to this being done in an utterly English way, with a command of English language and conceptual thought, and with a profound understanding – the sort of understanding that only comes from membership – of modern Western society. Jonathan Sacks is a next-door neighbour, a fellow Englishman, one of us. Even when he is boring, which is not very often, he is boring in an English sort of way.

Yet that is still not quite the essential point about him. He has not invented a new message. What he has done is to understand an old one, but to understand it so well that he can see what it has to say to us, even

to non-Jews who inhabit an utterly different world from that in which the message first took shape.

Judaism arose from a very particular experience, the self-reflection and meditation upon God of an ancient Semitic people. Through historical circumstances at the start of the Common Era, most of all because of the way they were deprived of their special homeland for so many centuries, the Jews learnt to detach themselves from one time and place (though they never lost the deep longing for it). Thus they had to learn, as the price of their own survival, how to adapt the principles of their culture and religion to very many different settings, not least to settings which were hostile. Thus did the particular, rooted in one time and place, become the general and transcendent, at home everywhere and nowhere.

The Jews were the first discoverers of a new and radical insight into the nature of reality. They discovered monotheism: that there was but one true God. God was the creator of everything, then and now. God was also personal, able to intervene in human affairs, able even to respond to human pleas for help. Such a God has to be the author of one universal morality, ethical laws which apply everywhere. Monotheism banishes the idea of local moralities, each expressing the will of a domestic deity, where any passing stranger, not a worshipper of that local God, becomes thereby an outlaw and enemy. It is crucial to Jewish mores to acknowledge and welcome the stranger, an ancient way of saluting the fact that strangers are also children of the God of the Jews – for there is only one God.

The notion is so familiar to us we cannot imagine how astonishing it was when first encountered. Even the sophisticated Greeks had to acknowledge that it was a more advanced idea than any they had had. Monotheism is a core idea of Western thought, perhaps even *the* core idea. It makes the world rational, while at the same time enhancing rather than diminishing the importance of mankind in the scheme of things.

Today, Judaism in all its forms is still intensely monotheistic. But the very universality of its creed now commands our attention. Jews do not speak of a Jewish God. He is universal, or else He does not exist. Not the least of the attractions of Orthodox Judaism, many will find, is its extreme disinclination to evangelise. It is not interested in pulling

people into its coils. It can be allowed to be an influence, from outside. For the Jews, that is as it ought to be. They are “to be a light unto the gentiles,” not to turn the gentiles into Jews.

This digression should help to explain why I find Jonathan Sacks so significant, and why I think others will do so too. He is not just a leader and spokesman for his own religious community, which now rightly enjoys so much esteem in Britain. He is also a natural and gifted communicator, who is burning with the desire to convey his ideas to others. He is as Jewish as they come, but also as English as they come, and he has a deep regard for his country and his fellow countrymen whatever their race or faith.

Dr. Sacks shares the widely accepted view that we are a nation living off our moral capital, having abandoned most of the doctrines of our traditional beliefs; but we have not yet been able to replace it with a moral code which relies on science and rationality alone. Fifty years ago it was widely assumed that that time would come. Now we are not so sure. There is a streak of mischief and wickedness in human nature that defies our modern analysis, and which drives us back to shelter behind the religious and moral codes of our ancestors. Dr. Sacks’ own analysis is that the very survival of modern civilisation may ultimately depend upon the survival of three things: faith, the family and the community. And of these, faith is fundamental.

Now this is ancient wisdom, some might say inspired by God, some might say the fruit of 4,000 years of deep reflection on the human condition. Nobody who reads, say, the book of Proverbs or Wisdom or the Psalms, or even Job, can fail to be impressed by the humanity and intelligence of their authors, or the extent to which they seem to have shared many of the experiences and anxieties that we also have undergone. Often they seem wiser than we are. And a religious people which is regularly immersed in that literature is likely to become wiser in turn.

Of all the problems facing modern democracies in the future, morality is going to be the most difficult. Democracy may be the most fair and just system of government yet discovered, in the way it treats all its citizens as equal before the law and before the ballot box. Similarly, attempts to improve on a market-based economic system have not so far unearthed an effective alternative. But neither democracy as

a political system nor the free market as an economic system can fill a moral vacuum. They are both about method rather than content. They put power in the hands of individuals, so that they can live their lives more nearly as they choose, but they offer no guidance as to the choices themselves: which goods and services to buy, which policies to support. This maximisation of personal autonomy could become very dangerous, once it is perceived as an end in itself. The libertarian dream, as Dr. Sacks recognises, could quickly become a nightmare. It is morally bankrupt. Human freedom is only a benefit once we know what freedom is for.

There are moral systems contending to fill this vacuum, of course, and the most useful are likely to be those which rely on ideas of transcendental morality, of universal laws not invented by particular societies – or even worse, by governments – but whose validity is perpetual. Democracy, if it is to have any moral content, will have to learn how to cherish those sources of transcendence in its midst, because in the long term they are its one sure hope.

Democracy will have to outgrow its silly habit of rejecting all that is old and wise simply because it is not new and startling. All those with something to offer to the moral debate will have to be allowed, and if necessary invited, to put their contribution forward. The faith communities in Britain, including the Christian Churches, the Jewish community, and the religions of the Indian sub-continent now amply represented among us, will have to be treated not as anachronisms but as among our most vital national assets. They are our spiritual gold reserves.

But this requires an institutional habit of tolerance that goes beyond peace between factions, and deepens into an ability and willingness to listen and to learn. Faith communities will have their own clear principles, but may find that the uncompromising insistence upon those principles is possible only within their own ranks. They should not for that reason reject the effort to influence the community at large, nor should they give up if they are not totally successful. Faith communities serve the wider needs of society every time they offer moral principles that are out of step with the fashionable morality of the age, even when that offer seems not to have had any effect. In any event, how can they know?

Faith in the Future

These are among the key principles for the conduct of a plural society, of one that no longer holds strongly to any particular creed. It is difficult to overstate the importance to such a society of the contribution of a man like Dr. Jonathan Sacks. It follows that there can be few more important books published this decade than *Faith in the Future*. It is not a religious book in any denominational sense. It is more about us, the majority gentile community, than it is about the Jews. If we neglect it, we shall be passing a vote of no confidence in our own future. For we shall be rejecting the only sort of medicine that can save us. Better by far that we should acquire a taste for it. Thankfully, Dr. Sacks makes it so enjoyable to swallow, we are hardly aware it is doing us good.

Prologue: Faith in the Future

The thought came, as I knew it would, in Jerusalem. I was sitting one Sabbath afternoon in one of the parks of the rebuilt city, watching children playing. I had come with my family to spend a year in the home of the Jewish soul before taking up office as Chief Rabbi. The responsibility I was about to undertake was heavy, and I knew it. Jews love leadership, but not followership, and as a result we are a fractious people. I felt the need of inspiration to sustain me, and I knew it would come in Jerusalem. Though for centuries it had lain in ruins, Jews never stopped praying towards it. In all that time, wrote Maimonides, the divine presence never left the city. Here, as nowhere else, you are brushed by the wings of eternity.

There is a stillness and peace which exists only in Jerusalem on a Sabbath afternoon. Shops are closed. The streets are free of traffic. The morning prayers are over. The Sabbath meal has been eaten. Rest comes over the city and the setting sun turns the houses red and gold. The only sound came from the children and their games. Then I remembered a moving scene described in the Talmud. It was set in the first century of the Common Era. The Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. Jerusalem lay devastated. It was one of the most tragic episodes of Jewish history, the beginning of an exile and dispersion that were to last almost two thousand years.

The Talmud describes how the great sages, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Akiva, looked out upon the ruins. Three of them wept. But Rabbi Akiva gave them a message of consolation. The prophets, he said, foresaw this day and it has come to pass. But they also foresaw a later day when the city would be rebuilt. Since one vision has come true, so will the other. The day will come when Zechariah's prophecy will be fulfilled: "Old men and women will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem ... and the streets of the city will be filled with children playing." Nineteen hundred years later, I had lived to see Rabbi Akiva's hope come true.

If only he had known, I thought. If only Rabbi Akiva had known how long it would take, how many exiles, expulsions, persecutions, pogroms, blood libels, Inquisitions and Crusades Jews would first have to endure. If only he had known of the Holocaust and its millions of innocent victims gassed and turned to ashes. Would he not have wept? Would he still have kept his faith? In that moment of truth I knew the answer. Yes, *all the more would he have held to his faith*, knowing that God could not have led this people so long through the valley of the shadow of death without one day bringing them to the city of peace.

Peter Berger once called hope a "signal of transcendence," an intrusion of God into our lives. For Jews hope was more than that. It was life itself. Without it our ancestors could not have stayed Jews, devoting their best energies to passing on their heritage to successive generations. Much of the time they lived in poverty, but even when they knew better days their lives were etched with insecurity, never sure when their buildings would be burned, their property seized, and they themselves sent into exile or worse. But something of Rabbi Akiva's faith in the future lived on in them. Next year, they said, we will be in Jerusalem; and the next year they said the same.

It sometimes seems as if faith is an empty gesture and prayer a mere striving after wind. It was then in Jerusalem that I knew otherwise. Faith had kept the dream intact across the centuries and had led Jews from seventy countries to come together here in the land of their origins to rebuild themselves as a sovereign State. It had touched the hearts of even assimilated Jews – Moses Hess, Leon Pinsker, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, the early protagonists of secular Zionism – as it had touched

my great-grandfather, a Lithuanian rabbi, and led him to Jerusalem as one of the early religious advocates of the return to Zion. It had led the Jewish people to begin again after the Holocaust, bringing to pass the most haunting of all biblical prophecies, Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of a nation, the valley of dry bones which came together and grew flesh and lived. And it had led me here in the still of a Sabbath afternoon to see Zechariah's prophecy and Rabbi Akiva's hope fulfilled: the streets of Jerusalem filled with children playing.

Faith is the space where God and humanity touch. For Jews it has always been symbolised by a journey, the journey begun by Abraham when he left his country and his father's house to travel to an unknown land, the journey taken by the Israelites as they left Egypt for the promised land, the journey each of us could trace if we could follow our grandparents and theirs back through the generations as they wandered from country to country in search of refuge. The way is always further than we thought, the route more complicated and beset with obstacles. But we continue it knowing, sometimes obscurely, sometimes with blazing clarity, that this is what God wants us to do. For we know that so long as the way the world is, is not the way it ought to be, we have not yet reached our destination.

The path we have travelled since the biblical exodus is not just to a land but to a society built on human dignity and compassion and law-governed liberty and justice. The Jewish journey is not just a physical one but a spiritual, moral and political one as well. That is what has long given it a significance beyond itself. It is not just a Jewish journey, but the human journey in a particularly vivid form. It has inspired not only Jews, but all those who, having read the Hebrew Bible, have come to the conclusion that our lives have a moral purpose, that redemption can be sought in this world with all its imperfections, and that by our efforts we can leave society better than we found it. The Mosaic books and those of the prophets have echoed throughout human history, moving men and women to dedicate their lives to the uncertain proposition that by constant struggle we can reduce suffering and enhance dignity not for ourselves alone but for all those amongst whom we live; that we can, in William Blake's phrase, "build Jerusalem." Whenever that journey is undertaken it testifies to faith: faith that our hopes are not illusions, that

something beyond us answers to our trust, that as we reach out our hand to God, His reaches out to us, giving us the strength to continue though the way is dark. To a Jew in this strange century, surveying the collapse of fascism in Germany and communism in Eastern Europe, the rebirth of Israel as a nation in its own land and its steps towards peace, faith in the future can sometimes seem the strongest thing there is.



We undervalue faith. My grandparents arrived in this country as refugees. On my father's side they came from Poland, part of the vast migration of Jews in flight from the pogroms and antisemitism of Eastern Europe at the turn of the century. My mother's family came from what was then Palestine. My maternal great-grandfather had gone there in the 1870s and eventually founded an agricultural settlement, *Petach Tikvah*, "the gate of hope." After some years he encountered hostility from the local Arabs and was forced to flee, arriving in England in 1894. I was born in the East End of London, the point of arrival for many Anglo-Jews and for other immigrant groups since. By the time I made my appearance most Jews had already left on their slow journey outward toward the suburbs. But there were still enough of them there to give me a sense of what had once been a busy centre of Jewish life.

Judaism is a future-oriented religion, and Jews are not prone to nostalgia. But I am surely not alone in thinking that our grandparents had something that we have lost. No one who has even the vaguest memories of the East End would wish to return there. Accounts of it in Victorian times portray it as a festering inner-city ghetto rife with poverty, illiteracy and crime. Nonetheless the Jews who arrived there, though they lacked all else, had three extraordinarily powerful assets: a sense of community, of family and of religious tradition. Together, these helped them to preserve their dignity and sense of hope under what might otherwise have been hopeless conditions.

Within the space of a generation, those families had broken free of the chains of deprivation. Their mobility, physical, social and intellectual, was little short of astonishing. Search back into the history of today's Jewish academics, professionals and businesspeople and, as

likely as not, you will find a family story not unlike mine, of immigrant grandparents barely able to speak the language or make a living. Their faith, solidarity and pride were all they could confer on their children. But it was enough. It made the difference between hopelessness and hope. And that, in the human situation, is the greatest difference there is.

There is a truth here which touches on the future of Britain and the liberal democracies of the West. The vast increase of wealth in the past century has not made us overwhelmingly happier, nor has it solved society's ills and discontents. Walk through the scarred inner-city areas of Liverpool, Manchester or Newcastle, or return to the East End of London itself, and you will today discover a far more hopeless environment than the one my grandparents inhabited. Poverty, under-education and crime exist now as they did then, but they are set against a background of despair that is both new and chilling. The American writer Charles Murray has introduced into our vocabulary the provocative word "underclass" to characterise the new groups of urban poor whom every political experiment, from the maximalist to the minimalist state, has failed to help. None of us can be comfortable with such a situation. Whatever our political stance, the sight of today's homeless, and the blighted lives of too many of our children, must move us no less than Dickens' portraits of another age and its heartlessness moved a generation more than a century ago.

I am no less troubled by another kind of poverty which affects even children from relatively affluent homes: a poverty of moral imagination. Many of the young people I meet – advantaged, articulate and well-educated, apparently with everything to look forward to – face the future with surprising apprehension. They are fearful about the erosion of the environment. They are anxious about their careers, knowing how unpredictably markets, technology, industries, exchange-rates and the economy can change, leaving people stranded and their life's work gone. They are uncertain about personal relationships, reluctant to commit themselves to marriage, seeing around them the human wreckage of discord and divorce.

This new fearfulness was brought home to me in an unexpected way. In September 1993, Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn signalling the fateful decision of Israelis and

Palestinians to embark on a process of peace. Just before and after that day, I had occasion to visit a number of schools and I was taken aback by the response of the children to the initiative. They were convinced it would not work. They were full of foreboding. Hatred and violence had scarred the relationship between Jews and Arabs for so long that they were convinced that nothing would change. The peace process was doomed to failure.

They may have been right: it is still too early to say. Certainly most of us witnessing the handshake knew the risks both sides were taking. We knew that hostility takes generations to heal, and that there would be attempts by extremists on both sides to sabotage any proposals for co-existence. The schoolchildren were not naive. To the contrary, they were formidably well informed. But they lacked one thing, without which no great initiative can be undertaken. They lacked hope. They were world-weary before their time. They had seen too many political ventures fail, too many expectations dashed. It was as if, to protect themselves against disappointment, they had grown a carapace of pessimism. They had formulated an unspoken rule: Nothing works. They had lost faith in the future.

This loss of faith has been much commented on. One politician recently called it the “new British disease: the self-destructive sickness of national cynicism.” Merely calling for confidence and a willingness to trust, though, does not bring them about. There is such a thing as an ecology of hope. There are environments in which it flourishes and others in which it dies. Hope is born and has its being in the context of family, community and religious faith.

In stable families, nurtured by those who brought us into existence, we learn to give and receive love. There is no greater crucible of trust than the family bond, for it is here in early infancy that we learn to risk our human vulnerability on the answering affection of others. We find, if we are lucky, that love given is not given in vain, and on this much else in later life depends.

In communities we receive our most practical tuition in the concept of the common good. They are our closest approximation to the extended families of the Bible or the small city-states of ancient Greece, where the concept of virtue was born and our ethical tradition had its

origins. Communities are where we acquire a sense of place and belonging. They are usually small enough to allow us to recognise one another, to value the contribution of each to the welfare of all, to bring comfort and support to those who need it, and to extend our horizons from private to collective gain. The local synagogue or church, the parent-teacher association and neighbourhood watch scheme are powerful schools of virtue precisely because they are personal and face-to-face. They are not remote and abstract like the modern state. They are where we speak of duty, not rights; where we focus on what we can give, not claim. As a result they are the best antidote there is to the disillusion that always follows the politics of self-interest.

Families and communities are in turn undergirded by religious faith. In Judaism, at least, the three go hand in hand. Religious faith suggests that our commitments to fidelity and interdependence are not arbitrary, a matter of passing moral fashion. They mirror the deep structure of reality. The bonds between husband and wife, parent and child, and us and our neighbours partake of the covenantal bond between God and humanity. The moral rules and virtues which constrain and enlarge our aspirations are not mere subjective devices and desires. They are “out there” as well as “in here.” They represent objective truths about the human situation, refracted through the prisms of revelation and tradition.

Faith, family and community are, I suspect, mutually linked. When one breaks down, the others are weakened. When families disintegrate, so too does the sense of neighbourhood and the continuity of our great religious traditions. When localities become anonymous, families lose the support of neighbours, and congregations are no longer centres of community. When religious belief begins to wane, the moral bonds of marriage and neighbourly duty lose their transcendental base and begin to shift and crumble in the high winds of change. That is precisely what has happened in our time and the loss, though subtle, is immense.

For these are more than just three aspects of our busy and varied lives. They are the matrix of all else. Without them we will find, like the author of Ecclesiastes, that the more we pursue pleasure the less we find happiness. Our relationships will become more fractured. We will retreat into private worlds of solace: the Walkman, the television screen and the computer terminal, the icons of our time. We will build a world

Faith in the Future

of private affluence and public squalor. And we will fail to give our children what they most deserve: a map of meaning by which to chart their way through a confusing and chaotic world.

There is such a thing as an ecology of hope, and it lies in restoring to our culture a sense of family, community and religious faith. The great question facing the liberal democracies of the West is whether it can be done. I believe it can, and that is the theme of many of the chapters in this book. These values never die, though occasionally – as now – they suffer an eclipse. If Judaism and the history of the Jewish people have a message for our time, it is surely this. Faith in the future changes lives and rebuilds the ruins of Jerusalem.

xxx

Part I

The Moral Covenant

Chapter 1

Introduction: Sharing Duties

For Jews, and not only Jews, the religious voice is above all a moral voice. Abraham is chosen so that he will instruct his children “to do righteousness and justice.” Moses tells the Israelites, “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Isaiah begins his prophetic mission with the most powerful speech ever made against the idea that you can serve God in the house of prayer while ignoring Him in the market place. Micah sums up the religious quest in three imperatives: “To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

No idea in the Hebrew Bible has been more influential than this, that society is founded on a moral covenant between its members, vested in an authority that transcends all earthly powers, and whose most famous symbol is the Ten Commandments engraved in stone. Underlying it is a proposition which even today has not lost its power to surprise and inspire. *In the beginning God created the world as a home for humanity. Since then He has challenged humanity to create a world that will be a home for Him.* God lives wherever we treat one another as beings in His image.

That vision inspired the great champions of liberal democracy from Locke to Jefferson and beyond. But today, though vestiges remain,

it is in eclipse and a quite different set of values prevails. It owes its inspiration morally to Nietzsche and politically to John Stuart Mill. On this view, society is not a collaborative enterprise framed by a shared covenant. Instead it is an aggregate of individuals pursuing private interests, coming together temporarily and contractually, and leaving the State to resolve their conflicts on value-neutral grounds. The key words in this new scheme are not moral rules and duty but *autonomy* and *rights*. The key principle of both morality and politics is that we should be free to act as we please so long as we do not harm others.

On the face of it, nothing could be more desirable. In practice, though, the human cost of this new dispensation has proved very high indeed in terms of fragile relationships, broken marriages, confused and uncared-for children, growing inequalities, rising crime, self-reinforcing circles of deprivation, a decline in civility and a weakening of the civic bond. The strong survive, as they always did. But that was not the prophetic test of a just and compassionate society, nor can it be ours if anything of that older morality persists, if we are moved by the plight of poverty in the midst of affluence, if we see too many wasted lives and wonder what kind of world we are creating for our children.

Worse still, the new individualism narrows the horizons of human happiness. I called one of my 1990 Reith Lectures “Demoralisation,” and I deliberately chose that ambiguous word. There is a deep connection between ethics and the human spirit, between *morality* and *morale*. If we lose the former, the latter begins to fail. It was Emile Durkheim in his classic study of suicide who coined the word *anomie* to describe a situation in which the individual loses his moorings in a shared moral order and becomes prone to a sense of meaninglessness and drift. A straight road leads from individualism to cynicism and despair.

Society *is* a moral enterprise. That crucial insight of the Hebrew Bible remains as powerful now as it ever was. We cannot live alone. But we cannot live together without conflicts. How we resolve those conflicts determines the quality of our lives as members of families and as citizens. It was Judaism’s great contribution to see the human arena as something other than a state of ongoing war in which power reigned supreme. A society could be constructed on the rule of law and justice, its rougher edges smoothed by an active sense of kinship and compassion.

Introduction: Sharing Duties

At the heart of such a society is a concept of the common good, meaning not that there is some ultimate good on which we all agree, but simply that we must learn to live together if we are to pursue any good at all, and that means at least some shared morality.

The following chapters are about family, community and the health, or otherwise, of our moral environment. They begin with a brief article I wrote at the time of the James Bulger case, the tragic murder of a two-year-old child which evoked a rare mood of national introspection. In it I set out what I thought had gone wrong with British society. The subsequent lectures and articles develop the argument in greater depth. In each case I have tried to evoke sentiments that reach beyond the Jewish community or even the community of religious believers, for these are issues which affect us all. The language I use is not theological, but moral. Beneath it, though, is a simple religious conviction, that God is to be found less in the “I” than in the “We,” in the relationships we make, the institutions we fashion, the duties we share, and the moral lives we lead.

Chapter 2

Holes in the Moral Fabric*

Jamie Bulger is dead, but the debate his murder has provoked refuses to die. No candle we could light to his memory is more important than this.

Moral reflection needs time the way the human body needs oxygen. But time is the one thing of which we starve the great moral issues of our age. When James died the thing I most feared was a surge of attention – massive media coverage – followed by silence as the spotlight shifted and the next crisis filled the front pages. Our ethical seriousness is measured by our attention span, and ours has grown dangerously short.

Blessedly, this has not happened. That is perhaps the best news to have emerged from this bleak and hellish tragedy. We rightly sensed that something more was at stake than the murder of a two-year-old child by ten-year-old children, a freak outbreak of unrestrained evil. There were larger issues, and we who had no part in the act nonetheless felt implicated.

That is not moral panic but an honest recognition of the threads of collective responsibility that make society more than an aggregate of individuals. Together we form a moral entity. “Any man’s death diminishes

* *The Times*, 3 December 1993.

me,” wrote John Donne. The fact that we felt personally diminished by James’s death tells us that we are still morally alive.

Morality begins with law, and law is predicated on individual responsibility. But morality does not end there. Nor does James’s death end with the trial and sentencing of his murderers. Though the murder itself was a cruel aberration, it had a social context. It was this. The moral fabric with which we clothe our children has grown threadbare. The holes have begun to show.

We have bestowed on our children a culture of violence, ritually celebrated at football grounds and on films and videos. Our children experience violence as street culture, as male initiation, even as quasi-religious catharsis. No society can allow this and survive. Violence has victims, and they are usually the most vulnerable and innocent.

We have systematically dismantled our structures of authority. Who, today, has survived our relentless iconoclasm? Politicians, religious leaders, the royal family, have been mercilessly savaged until there is no one left whose word carries moral force. We recognise public faces by their caricatures on *Spitting Image*. They have become figures of fun. In the process, we have robbed our children of any credible model of who we would wish them to be.

We have tolerated the collapse of the family. We have done so in the name of personal fulfilment, sexual liberty and the inalienable right to follow our desires. No abdication has had more fateful consequences. We have allowed the social stigma attaching to absconding fathers to disappear, assuming that their place could be taken by the State. But the State is not a person, and it is from persons – especially parents – that we learn what it is to be moral. The result is lawless children who have to be restrained because they have not learned restraint.

We have dissolved the bonds of community. The most piercing fact about James’s death was the number of people who saw him being abducted and did not come to his rescue. We cannot blame them. The privatisation of morality has taught us not to interfere. This too cannot continue. We need the support of neighbours, friends and an active community, none more so than mothers struggling to bring up children alone.

In teaching our children moral relativism we have placed them in the world without a moral compass, even hinting that there is no such

thing. In the name of tolerance we have taught that every alternative lifestyle is legitimate and that moral judgement is taboo, even “judgemental.” What is right becomes what does not harm others, and in time degenerates to what I feel like doing and can get away with.

We have given children no framework within which to learn civic virtue and responsibility. We must devise ways by which service to the community becomes part of every child’s experience of the growth to adulthood. Morality is taught by being lived. It is learned by doing. Community service is more powerful than any formal moral instruction, even supposing an agreed curriculum could be devised. Nothing would more dramatically change our children’s world. It will cost much to do it. But *not* to do it will ultimately cost more.

These are starting points for a debate that must continue until it reaches practical conclusions. The most important thing the government can now do is to establish a formal framework to take the argument further before interest dies. It should be non-political, and should acknowledge frankly that *governments alone cannot change people*. There are other agents of change in society. They include religious leaders and educators. If they are denigrated, moral renewal will fail. If they are enlisted, it may succeed.

We have reached a critical juncture in our social evolution. A political order based on liberty and tolerance has yielded a Britain significantly less tolerant and more violent, harsh and abrasive than the one my grandparents knew. A single, unspeakable tragedy has made us look at ourselves in the moral mirror, and what we have seen looks dishevelled and tired. A child has died. Our national soul must not die with him.