

One People?  
*Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity*



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY



Jonathan Sacks

# ONE PEOPLE?

TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND JEWISH UNITY

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy  
Maggid Books

*One People?  
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*Mommy, for you, each and every Jewish person is holy.  
You embrace people from all backgrounds unconditionally.  
You are there for people, especially your family, when times  
are tough. You are a role model for living a life with a deep  
and steadfast commitment to Chesed, Torah, and Halacha.*

*Wishing you good health, happiness, Arichut Yamim,  
Nachat, and Kol Tuv.*

*Daddy, a"h, you welcomed our extended family and friends  
as if they were your own. You wanted nothing more  
than to give to those around you and make them happy.*

*Others' joy was yours.*

*יְהִי זְכוֹר בְּרוּךְ*

*Thank you both for raising me in a home with these values.*

*We strive to follow in your footsteps of creating a home  
and raising our children with a focus on*

*תּוֹרָה, עֲבוּדָה וְגְמִילוּת חֶסֶדִים*

*Love,*

*Becky and Avi Katz and Family*



*Author's Original Dedication*

*For Elaine*

אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה מִי יִמְצָא וְדַחַק מִפְּנֵינִים מְכַרָּה:  
בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַּעֲלָהּ וְשָׁלַל לֹא יִחְסֹר:  
גְּמַלְתָּהּ טוֹב וְלֹא־רָע כֹּל יָמֵי חַיֶּיהָ:  
תְּנוּזָלָה מִפְּרֵי יָדֶיהָ וַיְהִלְלוּהָ בְּשִׁעְרֵים מַעֲשֵׂיהָ:



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](http://www.rabbisacks.org), and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.



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## *Publisher's Preface*

**R**abbi 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

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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, Tomi Mager, Aryeh Grossman, and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler. The proofreading team included Debbie Ismailoff, Ruth Pepperman, Esther Shafier, and Nechama Unterman, and Marc Sherman updated the indexes of the volumes. 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

## Preface

**T**his book is about one of the most tantalizing and elusive ideas in contemporary Jewish thought: Jewish unity. The phrase is deceptively simple. It is easier to invoke than to understand, and is beset by irony. The idea that Jews are “one people” has emerged as a, perhaps the, dominant motif of post-Holocaust Jewish reflection. It is a constant presence in the public rhetoric of contemporary Jewry. It evokes passion and conviction, but seldom clarity. Set against the reality it seeks to describe, it is an aspiration, not an achievement; a myth rather than a reality. Not since the first and second centuries CE have Jews been less united. Rarely has it been harder to state what constitutes them as “one people.” That, in itself, should not surprise us, because demands for unity surface only at times of great internal conflict. But it should at least suggest this: that the obstacles that stand in the way of its realization deserve the most careful analysis.

Words have hypnotic power. The existence of a concept leads us to believe that there is a reality that corresponds to it. Jewish unity exists as an *idea*. Why then should it not exist as a *fact*? Unity – at least in the minimalist sense of being able to live together, respect one another’s integrity, and therefore act collectively towards shared objectives – tends to seem at the time, and all the more so in retrospect, to be so eminently

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achievable that we stand aghast at the failure of individuals to do just that. But to think this way is to fail to grasp the deep structures of division that lead human beings to conceive their destinies in incompatible ways. To believe, in particular, that Jewish unity is a simple idea in an age of unprecedented fragmentation is to have yielded to myth. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of a secular age, I do not believe that Jewish faith is the acceptance of myth. It is the constant battle *against* myth in the name of religiously conceived possibility. Faith does not ask us to see the world other than as it is. It does, however, ask us to imagine a world that *could be*, and to work, without illusions, for its realization. Intellectual honesty is a precondition of the religious life.

The reason why Jewish unity has come to seem so urgent and self-evident while at the same time so difficult to achieve is explored in detail in this book. To put it at its simplest, from the late eighteenth century onward, European emancipation presented Jewry with its most serious crisis of definition since the birth of rabbinic Judaism. Traditional Jewish belief and the mode of life it dictated were challenged at the most fundamental levels intellectually, socially, and politically. The nineteenth century was, for European Jewry, a time of momentous upheaval, against the backdrop of growing and racial antisemitism and vast Jewish migrations, mainly from the East to the West. A succession of revolutionary new interpretations of Jewish existence emerged, some predicating Jewish identity on a reformed version of Judaism as a religion, others on political autonomy, others again on culture and ethnicity, yet others on nationalism and a Zion reborn.

What separates contemporary Jewry from that age are the two framing events of the present century, the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. The one represented the tragic end of European Jewry and the once bright hopes of emancipation. The other inaugurated the return of Jewry to the history of politics and power after an absence of almost two thousand years. No one could doubt that they were, respectively, the end of one chapter and the beginning of another in the long chronicles of the covenantal people. But, to a degree that is quite striking, Jews remain heirs to the nineteenth century. The disintegration that took place then still haunts Jewish existence today. The ideological battle-lines are the same. The same questions are asked and receive the

same conflicting answers. Much has changed in the Jewish world, but our habits of thinking have not. The stage of world Jewry has moved from Central and Eastern Europe to Israel and America. What was, in the nineteenth century, a set of aspirations has today become a series of achievements: freedom, equality, and integration in the diaspora, and Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. But the fundamental divisions that were born in another age, another place, remain, though they are by now damaging and dysfunctional.

Recent history – the Holocaust, and the sense of involvement that most Jews throughout the world feel in the fate of Israel – has convinced us that the Jewish destiny is indivisible. We are implicated each in the fate of one another. That is the substantive content of our current sense of unity. But it is a unity imposed, as it were, from outside. Neither antisemitism nor anti-Zionism, we believe, makes distinctions between Jews. Hence our collective vigilance, activity, and concern. But from within, in terms of its own self-understanding, the Jewish people evinces no answering solidarity. External crisis unites Jews; internal belief divides. But that cannot be the basis of an enduring sense of peoplehood. Whether we understand Jewish existence as a religious or a secular phenomenon, if unity is to be a value it cannot be one that is sustained by the hostility of others alone. For a people as for an individual, authenticity requires that the terms of identity proceed from within, not from outside.

There are three primary fault-lines along which the Jewish people currently threatens to split apart: between secular and religious Jews, between Orthodoxy and liberal Judaisms, and between Israel and the diaspora. At times one, at times another, seems to be the most susceptible to seismic eruptions. In this book I have concentrated on one axis only, the religious divisions within Judaism, within Orthodoxy itself and between Orthodoxy and religious liberalism. That is not to say that I regard the others as of lesser importance; merely that I preferred to treat one subject in depth rather than several superficially.

But the analysis, if correct, has wider implications. For at its heart is what I have called a *collision of consciousness* between traditional and modern ways of understanding. The mutual incomprehensions to which this gives rise are not limited to this context. They are duplicated

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elsewhere. If we can understand this set of conflicts, I suspect we will better understand others as well, and not only within Jewry. The problem I explore is in its way a paradigm of what happens when any traditional religious culture enters the atmosphere of secular modernity and begins to fragment. The particular discovery to which the analysis leads is that both tradition and modernity have adequate ways of resolving conflict, but *that they systematically exclude one another*. This is the conceptual impasse that makes the very pursuit of unity inherently divisive. The more closely we pursue it, the further away it recedes. Finding a way out of this labyrinth is a primary task of Jewish thought in our time, and I have suggested ways in which it might be done.

Two points should be made clear at the outset if the book is not to be misunderstood. The first is that though the vantage-point from which I write is that of Orthodoxy, the argument of the book in no way depends on that fact. In the past two decades Orthodoxy has risen to great prominence within most Jewish communities throughout the world, most strikingly within Israel and the United States, two communities where it had previously seemed a marginal presence destined for eclipse. In part this has been due to demographic factors, in part to the clarity of Orthodoxy's beliefs and the high levels of commitment it evokes from its adherents.

Its influence has grown rapidly and is certain to increase yet further.

No analysis of the Jewish future can ignore it. Yet most do just that. Surveys of contemporary Jewry tend in the main to dismiss Orthodoxy in a throw-away sentence to the effect that it constitutes an exception to the trends under review, but one that affects only an insignificant minority of Jews. No one writing in Britain – where Orthodoxy is still the affiliation of three-quarters of the identifying Jewish community – could make that mistake. But no one writing elsewhere should make it either. A reading of the history of the Jews at times of crisis – the Babylonian exile, the Maccabean revolt, the destruction of the Second Temple, fifteenth-century Spain – suggests that the pattern of Jewry's continuity is determined at such moments by its most intensely religious members. I have devoted much of my analysis to Orthodoxy not because that is my own commitment, but quite simply because an honest confrontation



with the facts demands it. It is within Orthodoxy and between Orthodoxy and others that the clash of tradition and modernity – the *leitmotiv* of modern Jewish life – is most starkly revealed.

At the same time, I have tried to do justice to non-Orthodox perspectives. This is not a polemical work. It is an honest attempt to step back and view with detachment the processes that have shaped Jewish responses to modernity. Jewish unity is a cause that is not advanced by the advocacy of one point of view over another. It demands the difficult but not impossible exercise of thinking *non-adjectivally* as a Jew: not as a member of this or that group, but as a member of an indivisible people. Since this is not often done, it is likely to be misunderstood. In writing about Liberal, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism I have tried to come to terms with positions that are fundamentally not my own. If I have done them an injustice, I would accept that as a legitimate critique of my case.

Which brings me to the second point. For the most part I have focused on American Reform rather than its British counterpart. The reason is simple. The lines of the argument between Orthodoxy and religious liberalism in the twentieth century have been determined in America, much as they were in the nineteenth century in Germany. There were and are other Jewries elsewhere where the conflict between tradition and modernity took quite different forms. But just as no one could do justice to Jewish thought a century ago without referring to German thinkers, so no one can do so today without reference to America. The issues in Israel are different, and are of less relevance to the diaspora situation. Those in Britain are different again, but are subsumed within the American case as the lesser problem is included in the greater.

British Reform is both smaller and more traditional than its trans-Atlantic namesake. If anything, it is closer to American Conservative Judaism than to American Reform. It has rejected patrilineality as a determinant of Jewish status. It insists on *milah* (circumcision), *tevilah* (ritual immersion), and observance of at least some of the commandments as a precondition of conversion. It does not regard civil divorce as adequate for the termination of a Jewish marriage. It gives less weight to individual autonomy and more to the halakhic tradition than American Reform theologians would allow. The closest British counterpart to

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American Reform is Liberal Judaism. These differences do not affect the substance of the argument, but it is important to spell them out.

I wrote this book in the closing months of 1988. At that time, the climate of Israeli politics seemed to herald a massive split within Jewry. The issue that then came to the fore was “Who is a Jew?” This single question – specifically, what constituted a valid conversion for the purposes of Israel’s Law of Return – exposed some of the most sensitive tensions between Israel and the diaspora and between Orthodoxy and others. The book addresses that question only obliquely, because I believed then and still do that it is itself a symptom, not a cause, of the underlying problem, and that more fundamental analysis is necessary. For a variety of reasons, four years passed before I was able to make the final corrections before sending the book to the printers. But though that particular controversy has momentarily subsided, the issues discussed in the following pages are undiminished in their explosive potential and are likely to remain so for many years to come.

Confirmation of this belief came in the form of a recent book whose diagnosis neatly complemented my own: David Vital’s *The Future of the Jews* (Harvard University Press, 1990). Our points of departure and working assumptions could not have been more different. Vital is a historian of Zionism, and a scholar who understands contemporary Jewry in secular and political terms. His concern in the book is the relationship between Israel and the diaspora. None the less, working independently along separate axes and from quite different intellectual perspectives, we had arrived at the same conclusion. “Today,” he writes, “at the end of the unspeakable twentieth century, it is not too much to say that the survival of Jewry as a discrete people, its various branches bound to each other by common ties of culture, responsibility and loyalty, is entirely in doubt.” The Jewish world “is now coming apart” and “the old unity of Israel...lies shattered today, almost beyond repair.”

The difference between us is simply this: that where Vital’s book ends, mine begins. Unlike him, I am not a pessimist. Pessimism is a prerogative denied to a religious believer, at least within Judaism. I believe that to make the effort to understand our conflicts is to take the first step to their resolution. More than this, I believe with the biblical prophets, the rabbinic sages, and the medieval philosophers that Jewish unity is

in the end an irreducibly religious concept. There is no coherent secular equivalent. Indeed it is precisely the secularization of Jewish life that has made unity so problematic an idea. Nor do I believe that the continued secularization of Jewry is irreversible and inevitable. That thesis belongs to the now discredited sociological wisdom of the pre-1960s. Jewish unity, precisely because it is a religious idea, is a perennial possibility, however much history suggests otherwise. Too much of the Jewish story has been a sustained defiance of history for the Jewish people now to become its victims. The Torah which once shaped us into “one people” still and with undiminished force issues that challenge. To that vision this book is dedicated.

Many people helped me with the final drafting of the text, and to them I owe my thanks. They were drawn from the entire range of the religious spectrum, and what most heartened me was that each commented favourably on the work, including those whose positions were furthest from my own. In particular I would like to thank Professor J. David Bleich, Professor Judith Bleich, Dayan Chanokh Ehrentreu, Judge Israel Finestein, and the editors of the Littman Library for their detailed comments, and Lord Jakobovits and Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch for their encouragement.

I cannot, though, avoid a note of profound sadness that three of the people to whom the work owes its genesis have since died: Dr. David Goldstein and Dr. Vivian Lipman, two editors of the Littman Library, and Mr. Louis Littman, its founder and benefactor. David and Vivian graced Anglo-Jewry by their scholarship, and Louis by his sustained and sustaining support. These were men who in their lives earned a special kind of immortality, and Jewry is bereaved by their loss. Each held the belief that scholarship has the power to bring together minds that would otherwise be divided, and I offer this book as my personal tribute to their memory.

J. S.  
London  
1992



## Chapter 1

# The Crisis of Contemporary Jewish Thought

**A**lasdair MacIntyre begins his revolutionary diagnosis of contemporary moral theory, *After Virtue*,<sup>1</sup> with a chilling parable. Imagine, he says, that there is a widespread revolution against science. There is a series of ecological disasters. Science and technology are blamed. There is public panic. There are riots. Laboratories are burned down. A new political party comes to power on a wave of anti-scientific feeling and eliminates all science teaching and scientific activity. A century later, the mood subsides. People begin to try to reconstruct what was destroyed. But all they have is fragments of what was once a coherent scientific culture: odd pages from old books, scientific instruments whose use has been forgotten, bits and pieces of information about theories and experiments without the background knowledge of their context.

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1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

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These pieces are reassembled into a discipline called science. Its terminology and some of its practices resemble science. But the systematic corpus of beliefs which once underlay them has gone. There would be no unitary conception of what science was about, what its practices were for, or what its key terms signified. The illusion would persist that science had been recovered; but it would have been lost, and there would be no way of discovering that it had been lost.

What is conjectured in this parable is, MacIntyre argues, what has actually happened to moral thinking. The Enlightenment and the social processes which accompanied it succeeded in destroying the traditions to which the key terms of morality belonged and within which they had lucidity and coherence. The words survived – good, right, duty, obligation, virtue – but were now severed from the context which gave them sense. For they had belonged to coherent social orders in which people were shaped by a collective vision, in which there were social roles not chosen but given by birth and tradition, and in which there was a narrative continuity between generations and within individual lives. Those socially given shared meanings have now gone, to be replaced by a Kantian conception of morality as autonomous choice or a Nietzschean world constructed by individual will. The language of morality survives, but without the systematic corpus of beliefs which underlay them. “What we possess,” says MacIntyre, “are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts of which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.”<sup>2</sup>

For morality, read Judaism, and we have before us a precise description of the problem confronting contemporary Jewish thought. The momentous dislocations of modernity – social, intellectual, and geographical – have proved in retrospect and were indeed recognized at the time to be as disruptive of Jewish continuity as the series of catastrophes that forced rabbinic Judaism into being: the cessation of prophecy, the collapse of national autonomy, the destruction of the Second Temple,

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2. Ibid., 2.

the end of the sacrificial system, the loss of priesthood, the termination of collective national history, and the beginning of a long, seemingly open-ended exile; in short, the “hiding of the face” of God.

The processes that have shaken Jewry from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries have been no less revolutionary: emancipation, the belated confrontation with enlightenment, acculturation, assimilation, the metamorphosis of religious anti-Judaism into racial antisemitism, the transformation of Jewish existence into “the Jewish problem,” and the attendant crises of Jewish self-definition. From these traumas emerged a bewildering variety of ideologies: religious reform, from Conservative to Liberal to Reconstructionist; Zionism in its various constructions, secular, religious, utopian, pragmatic, restorative, or revolutionary, each with its own inner diversity of shadings; secular Jewish identities, intellectually, culturally, politically, or ethnically conceived; and the various Jewish exorcisms of Judaism, neo-Spinozist, Marxist, or Freudian.

It is neither necessary nor appropriate to wax nostalgic about the premodern Jewish past, with its partially enclosed culture, autonomous community governance, its ghettos and *Gemeinschaft*. None the less, and without yearning for *temps perdu*, we recognize to our disquiet that questions that have become unanswerable now were unaskable then. Who and what is a Jew? What is Torah? What is *galut* (exile), and what is the Jewish hope that lies beyond exile? The substantive daily content, metaphysical significance, and historical context of a Jewish life were bedrock data. They were given, not chosen. They were part of the world into which one was born. They carried meanings which every social interaction, whether with Jews or non-Jews, tended to confirm. There may have been fierce argument over the details of Jewish life but not over the framing fundamentals. Within this context the language of Judaism was coherent, consistent, and designated a palpable objective reality.

The language has survived but its context has not. The key words remain – terms such as *Torah*, *mitzvah* (commandment), *galut* (exile), *ge'ulah* (redemption), *am Yisrael* (the people of Israel), *eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel). But the meanings attached to them differ systematically from group to group within the Jewish world. What is a *mitzvah*? Is it an act performed in response to the divine command? Or from loyalty to

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historical tradition? Or as an act of group participation? Or as a blend of ethnicity and nostalgia? Or as a freely chosen act of autonomous Jewish self-expression? What is *galut*? Is it a geographical term meaning “outside Israel”? Or a cultural term meaning “a sense of not-at-homeness”? Or a religious term meaning “a time not yet redeemed”? Is America *galut*? Is Israel?

### BABEL INVERTED

The problem that threatens to render all contemporary Jewish thought systematically divisive is not the *absence*, but paradoxically the *presence*, of a shared language. Jews use the same words but mean profoundly different things by them. The point was dramatically illustrated by an utterance delivered at a, perhaps the, key moment in modern Jewish history.

The issue was the State of Israel’s Declaration of Independence. The moment was fraught with meaning. But which meaning? Conceived *religiously*, the people of Israel were returning to their land after an exile of almost two thousand years. The hand of God was once again manifest in history. The period of the “hiding of the face” of God was, said Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,<sup>3</sup> at an end. The biblical resonance of the ingathering of exiles was unmistakable. “Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it.”<sup>4</sup> It was the fulfilment of a prophecy, the consummation of an ancient religious hope.

Even that father of modern Jewish heresies, Baruch Spinoza, had predicated his abandonment of Judaism on the fact of exile, and had envisaged a possibility that would overturn his analysis. “I would go so far as to believe,” he wrote of the Jews, “that if the foundations of their religion have not so emasculated their minds they may even, if occasion offers, so changeable are human affairs, raise up their empire afresh, and that God may a second time elect them.”<sup>5</sup> Even for Spinoza, then,

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3. Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought Adapted from the Lectures of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: WZO, 1979), 34–39.

4. Deut. 30:4–5.

5. Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [1670], trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), 56.