

The Eternal Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY



Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

**THE
ETERNAL**
Conversation

OU Press

NCSY

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy

Maggid Books

The original publication of
Letters to the Next Generation was dedicated in memory of

Susi and Fred Bradfield z"l

who, in their lifetime, instilled in their children and grandchildren
a deep love of Judaism and the importance of its values.
Their commitment to Judaism, the Jewish people, and to Israel has
remained an inspiration to their family and to all who knew them.
Their lives were "letters to the next generation."
May their memory always be for a blessing.

The Eternal Conversation

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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.

This book is dedicated in memory of

**Barbara and Richard Rosenfield z”l
 (“Baba and Pops”)**

*who spent their lives serving Hashem with joy
and embracing those around them with love.
Their unwavering commitment to Judaism, Torah study,
and the Land of Israel became a vibrant chapter
in the eternal conversation that binds us across generations.
May their memory always be for a blessing.*

We, the grandchildren of Barbara and Richard Rosenfield, are proud to present this collection of works by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Our grandparents were admirers of Rabbi Sacks and his teachings on Judaism, ethics, and morality. This collection is a tribute to their memory, bringing together pieces that were originally published separately.

Many in our family were first introduced to Rabbi Sacks’ work *Studies in Spirituality* as a gift from our grandfather after the passing of our grandmother. Barbara was a brilliant beacon of love and kindness, a best friend to everyone, and always ready with compliments. Despite growing up in a non-Jewish town, she remained faithful to her religion and would charmingly persuade her non-Jewish friends to walk on Shabbat rather than drive, asking, “Wouldn’t it be such

a nice day to walk instead?” She went on to study at Northwestern University, where she met Richard, who was raised in a more secular atmosphere of 1940s Chicago. He was a true renaissance man, with a talent for quoting Tolstoy and Thoreau, riding horses, and excelling in the film industry. They built a beautiful Jewish life together — raising three children, ten grandchildren, and supporting a myriad of Jewish and philanthropic causes.

In Rabbi Sacks’ work, we get a glimpse of what brought them together and gave their relationship such strength. We see our grandparents in Rabbi Sacks’ balancing of reason and spirituality, in his emphasis on the importance of Jewish law in building community and the power of prayer and gratitude to bring God’s presence into the material world. The rabbi’s references to philosophers and incorporation of politics mirrored Richard’s academic background, while his commentary on the Tanakh echoed Barbara’s kindness and ability to see the good in everyone.

As we reflect on our memories of Barbara and Richard, we hope this anthology serves as a reminder of the values they cherished. The words and works of Rabbi Sacks are their lasting gift to us, one that we believe will continue to impact the Jewish community and the world. May their memory be a blessing.

CONTENTS

<i>Publisher's Preface</i>	xi
<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
Letters	1
Introduction to Letters to the Next Generation	5
The Most Important Legacy.....	7
The Price of Things and the Value of Things	10
Being a Jewish Parent.....	13
Jewish Education	16
On Being Jewish.....	19
Jewish Wisdom.....	23
Living Jewishly	27
Faith.....	31
Making a Blessing over Life	35
Finding Happiness.....	39
Introduction to Letters to the Next Generation 2	45
A Belated Reply.....	49
A Historian's Honour	51

Great Expectations	54
The Pursuit of Happiness	57
A Life That Matters.....	60
The Moral Voice	64
The Greatness of Smallness	68
Faith.....	71
The Dignity of Purpose	74
A Nation of Iconoclasts	78
Faith After the Holocaust.....	81
Sacred Discontent.....	85
Prayer	88
On Ritual	92
Serving God Is Hard Work	96
Antisemitism Returns.....	100
The Assault on Israel	104
God of Life, Book of Life.....	108
Conversation	113
Introduction to Little Books of Big Questions.....	117
Being Jewish in the Twenty-First Century	118
Why the Jews? Confronting Modern Antisemitism..	124
Judaism in a Multifaith Society	131
Israel: In Search of Peace	138
Making a Difference	145
Readings	153
Introduction to Ten Days, Ten Ways:	
Paths to the Divine Presence	157

1. The Way of Identity: On Being a Jew	161
2. The Way of Prayer: Speaking to God	169
3. The Way of Study: Listening to God	177
4. The Way of Mitzvot: Responding to God	185
5. The Way of <i>Tzedaka</i> : Love as Justice.....	192
6. The Way of <i>Hesed</i> : Love as Compassion	200
7. The Way of Faith: Love as Loyalty.....	208
8. The Way of Israel: The Jewish Land	216
9. The Way of <i>Kiddush Hashem</i> :	
The Jewish Task	227
10. The Way of Responsibility:	
The Jewish Future	238
Epilogue: Why I Am a Jew	246
Vision	253
Introduction to A Judaism Engaged with the World –	
The Jewish Journey: The Next Stage	257
The Question	260
The Inward Turn	263
Encounters	266
The Great Divide	269
The Key Idea: <i>Kiddush Hashem</i>	272
Three Models of the Religious Life	276
What If?	279
Akavya ben Mahalalel	284
<i>About the Author</i>	289

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l* possessed and shared profound learning, moral depth, and sheer eloquence, making 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 continuing to perpetuate Rabbi Sacks’ literary legacy.

We are especially honoured to publish his writings that were not previously published in book form, in a beautiful new volume such as this. The works collected here, originally produced as booklets, have characteristically stood the test of time and are as relevant today as when they were first distributed during his time as chief rabbi. It is our hope that this new volume gives a new generation of young adults a chance to discover these works.

Publisher's Preface

We wish to express our appreciation to the Rosenfield, Friedman, and Lefkovitz families, who have joined together to dedicate this volume in memory of their parents and grandparents, Barbara and Richard Rosenfield. We are also grateful to our friends and partners at NCSY who have joined with us to publish this volume, and in particular Rabbi Gideon Black for his efforts in bringing these works to light and for his insightful foreword. As always, we extend deep gratitude to our friends at The Rabbi Sacks Legacy for their continued partnership, in particular to Joanna Benarroch and Jonny Lipczer, together with Lady Elaine Sacks and the rest of the Sacks family, for their continued support for our work.

Finally, we wish to add our thanks to our colleagues at Koren who have contributed to this work: Tani Bayer, Dr. Yoel Finkelman, Aryeh Grossman, Taly Hahn, Ita Olesker, Rabbi Dr. Daniel Rose, Nechama Unterman, and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler.

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

Matthew Miller
Koren Jerusalem

FOREWORD

The name of this book, *The Eternal Conversation*, may be the most apt description of Jewish learning and education possible. Our Torah is a dialogue that transcends time and space – between God and the Jewish people, between teachers and students, and between parents and children.

Yet not all conversations have everlasting impact. Many conversations are lost to the winds of time, with their ideas fading before taking root. To ensure that wisdom is transmitted in a way that will endure, the terms of transmission need to be set. One of the most fundamental of these is that the student must have a healthy measure of reverence for the teacher. This reverence gives the conversation the necessary vitality to survive the test of time.

In *Pirkei Avot* 1:4 Yose ben Yo'ezer of Tzereda teaches that when studying Torah one should “become dusted by the earth of the Sages’ feet.” This beautiful image is understood literally in the commentary of *Avot DeRabbi Natan*, which instructs a student in the presence of a Torah scholar to “not

Foreword

sit at an even level with him...but to sit *on the ground* in front of him...to receive his teachings with the same reverence and awe with which our ancestors accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai.”

I had the sacred opportunity to learn from my teacher, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt”l*, on hundreds of occasions, but in only three instances do I recall doing so while literally sitting at his feet.

The first was in February 2001 on Bnei Akiva’s National Weekend, which brought together two thousand teens from across the UK for a Shabbaton in Wales, headlined by Rabbi Sacks. While a typical dinner at a Bnei Akiva Shabbaton would be animated by lively singing, it was challenging for us to generate *ruah* with such a large crowd that evening. That was, until I turned to see Rabbi Sacks standing on his chair next to me, singing *zemirot* with all his might. As we looked up at the sight of our revered chief rabbi, in his impeccably tailored suit, jumping up and down on his chair in song, we were left with no choice. Within moments we were all up on our chairs – no one remained seated. Once Rabbi Sacks had the crowd fully engaged, he scanned the room to find that the only people not on their chairs singing were the Welsh policemen serving on his security detail. He promptly insisted that they too find chairs to stand on and clap along with our singing.

Rabbi Sacks may have been best known as a teacher for his erudition and eloquence, but he recognised that for Torah to be transmitted to the next generation it needs to be shared with unbridled passion and vigour.

For a conversation to be eternal, it is not only the content of what is transmitted, but how it is transmitted that matters.

The second occasion was the following year in January 2002, the Shabbat of *Parashat Shemot*, in Jerusalem. British gap-year students spending the year in Israel convened at the Ramada Hotel for a Shabbaton with the chief rabbi. Rabbi Sacks used his talks during the Shabbat to encourage us to take on positions of communal leadership during our university years, upon returning to the UK following our studies in Israel. He made the case that we had a personal responsibility to use the Torah we were studying in Israel to enrich the broader Jewish community – the majority of whom may not have had the Jewish education we were blessed with. During his keynote talk, we sat in concentric circles on the floor of the hotel ballroom, hanging onto his every word. Rabbi Sacks described Moses stepping out of Pharaoh's palace, seeing the suffering of the Israelite people. Despite having grown up in royal luxury, Moses instinctively identified with his enslaved Jewish brothers and sisters. Rabbi Sacks quoted Exodus 2:11–12:

It was in those days that Moses grew up, and he went out to his brothers and saw their suffering. He saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brothers.

And he turned this way and that, and he saw no one was there, so he struck the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

Foreword

“How could it possibly be that there was no one there?” Rabbi Sacks thundered at us. “Outside the royal palace in the midst of a bustling metropolis?! Of course there were people there! But there were no leaders. There was no one else who had the moral courage to stand up for the weak and oppressed, and so Moses recognised he needed to heed his calling and take responsibility for his people, no matter the consequences.”

Rabbi Sacks quoted Hillel’s charge in *Pirkei Avot* 2:5 that “in a place where there is no leader, strive to be that leader.” Whether we would run a children’s service in synagogue, teach in a Hebrew school, coordinate regular visits to a senior care home for Jewish elders, or share Judaism in any other way with our home communities – we were filling the vacuum of leadership that *Pirkei Avot* demanded of us. He insisted we reject a culture that views undergraduate years simply as a time for self-exploration, and instead asked that we use the time to share our Judaism with others. The sheer intensity with which he charged us to take responsibility for the broader Jewish community left an indelible imprint on me and many of my peers that Shabbat.

For a conversation to be eternal, it must endow the student with the responsibility to continue the conversation with others.

The final time I sat at Rabbi Sacks’ feet was in New York in November 2011 at the International Conference of Chabad *Shluchim*, which brought together nearly five thousand Lubavitch emissaries from around the world. Rather than watching Rabbi Sacks on one of the many screens

positioned throughout the hall, I joined a few *shluchim* who were huddled on the floor in front of the main podium. Rabbi Sacks was mesmerising that evening. His magisterial address lit a fire in the hearts of the selfless *shluchim* to expand their work with increased devotion to the Jewish people. Rabbi Sacks shared with those gathered how the Lubavitcher Rebbe directly influenced his personal journey as a rabbi and leader at critical junctures in his life. Through one-on-one meetings at 770 Eastern Parkway and later through their written correspondence, Rabbi Sacks' life decisions were intimately guided by the Rebbe, just like the Lubavitch emissaries in the room that evening were guided by the Rebbe's legacy. The speech allowed the emissaries to see Rabbi Sacks as one of them, and as a result his words penetrated so deeply.

For a conversation to be eternal, the student needs to know that the teacher understands them and has sat in their place too.

Rabbi Sacks exemplifies for us these three ideas of how to ensure that our Torah conversations are eternal in their nature, that they indeed transcend time and space, and continue to bring meaning and inspiration. With this in mind, it is a profound honour to present *The Eternal Conversation*, which was originally published during Rabbi Sacks' lifetime as *Letters to the Next Generation*; *Little Books of Big Questions*; *Ten Days, Ten Ways*; and *A Judaism Engaged with the World*. These concise writings offered Rabbi Sacks' wisdom in a digestible format that could be enjoyed as a companion to synagogue services, or as an entrée for teens and young adults seeking to access the enchanting world of Rabbi Sacks'

Foreword

thought. Collecting them in this new volume, under this title, reflects our aspiration to perpetuate Rabbi Sacks' teachings and example for future generations.

In recognising the opportunity to bring together these publications into an organic whole as a tribute to the memory of Barbara and Richard Rosenfield, of blessed memory, the Rosenfield, Friedman, and Lefkovitz families are doing a great service to the Jewish people. They are ensuring that Rabbi Sacks' written legacy continues to be codified in a way that will be transmitted for generations to come. Much like students learn at the feet of sages, grandchildren find love and wisdom at the feet of their grandparents. Three of Richard and Barbara's grandsons – Michael Lefkovitz, Jacob Friedman, and Scott Rosenfield – have spearheaded this publication with grace and humility, and in doing so have brought great merit to their grandparents' memory and offered a treasure for the entire Jewish community.

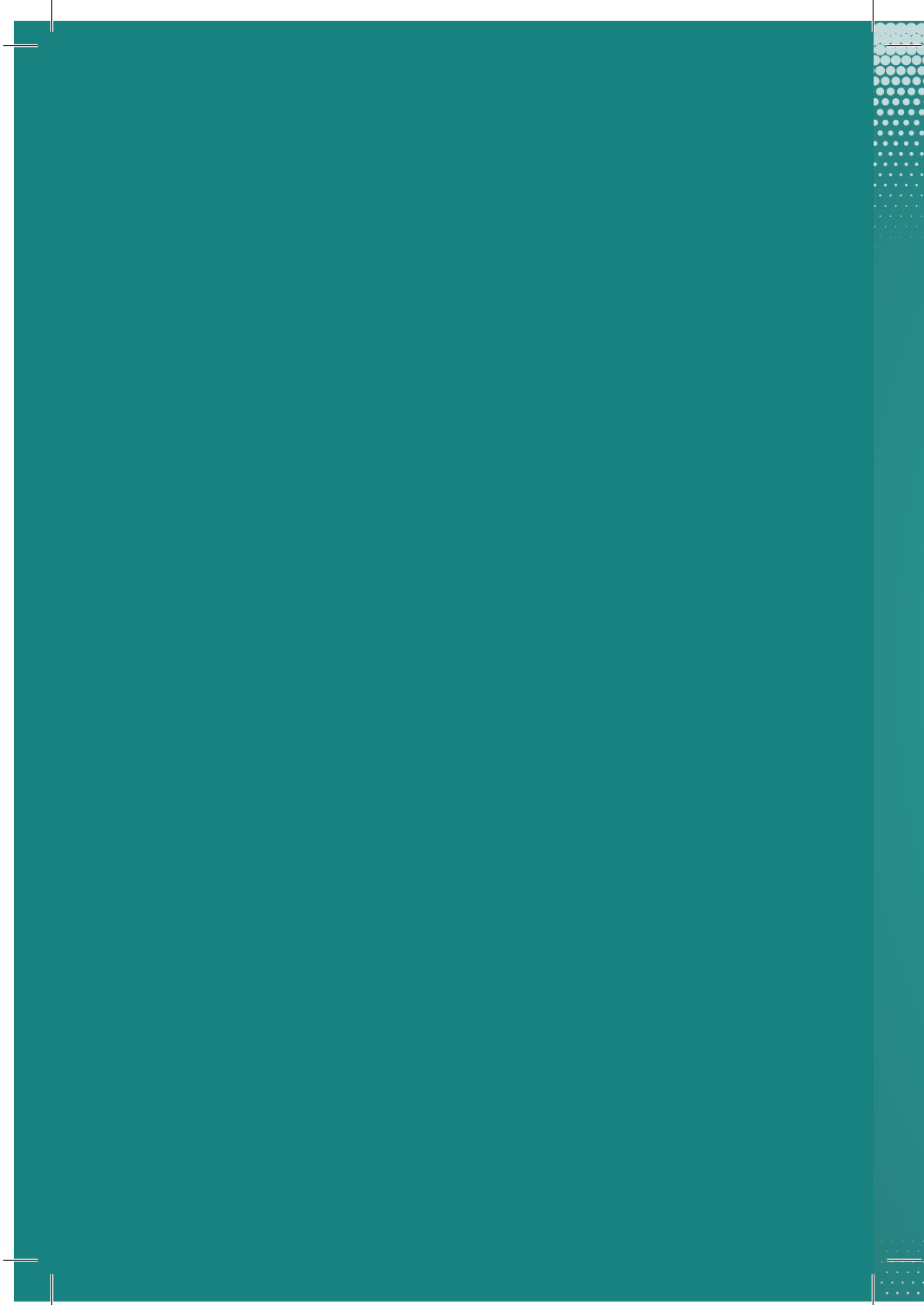
This book is being published while the dark cloud of October 7th, 2023, continues to hang over the Jewish people around the world. Rabbi Sacks' voice is sorely missed at this challenging time. With Israel facing continuous physical threats from its neighbours, and antisemitism raging around the world, we may be tempted to perceive only our vulnerabilities. However, since the outbreak of the war, it is abundantly clear that the Jewish people worldwide stand strong and resolute and are connecting more to Jewish identity and Israel than ever before. Fundamentally, our strength has always been sustained by our commitment to our Torah and

The Eternal Conversation

tradition, and there is therefore no better time to be bringing to light works of Jewish learning and wisdom.

Since its founding in 1954, NCSY has carried the mission of inspiring the Jewish future. Given this surge of Jewish identity since October 7th, it may well be that at no time in the seventy years since NCSY's founding has its work been more important. Books like this are critical assets in engaging teens and young adults in their Jewish journey. We are therefore particularly grateful to the Rosenfield, Lefkowitz, and Friedman families for bringing to a broad audience these writings of Rabbi Sacks. We are confident this new volume will further inspire the Jewish future, while adding a precious contribution to our people's eternal conversation.

Rabbi Gideon Black
CEO, Tri-State NCSY
June 2024 / Sivan 5784



LETTERS



This section comprises two booklets published by Rabbi Sacks to provide inspirational readings during the climax of the Days of Awe, the Day of Atonement itself - Yom Kippur.

The first, *Letters to the Next Generation: Reflections for Yom Kippur*, was published in September 2009 to coincide with Yom Kippur 5770, and offers reflections on key themes of Jewish identity, culture, and values. These reflections take the form of letters written by a father to his children who have just become parents. The characters are fictional, but the issues they raise are real.

The second booklet, *Letters to the Next Generation 2: Reflections on Jewish Life*, was published two years later in September 2011, coinciding with Yom Kippur 5772. These further reflections are also written in the form of letters, this time to two fictional Jewish university students. They explore themes of Jewish faith, values, and identity.

INTRODUCTION TO LETTERS TO THE NEXT GENERATION

Yom Kippur is the day of days, when we give an account of our lives. We reflect on what has happened to us and what we plan to do in the coming year. To help this process I've written some thoughts that may evoke reflections of your own, for each of us must make his or her own decisions and no one can make them for us.

I've cast them in the form of letters written by a father to his children who've just become parents in their own right. I've done so because it's a way of discussing the big decisions that shape the rest of our life for us and those close to us. They are fictional letters, but the issues they raise are real.

Not all of us are married; not all are blessed with children; yet we can each make a unique contribution to the Jewish people by the life we lead and the kindness we show to

Introduction to Letters to the Next Generation

others. Rashi wrote: “The main descendants of the righteous are their good deeds.” Every good deed is like a child.

The single most important lesson of Yom Kippur is that it’s never too late to change, start again, and live differently from the way we’ve done in the past. God forgives every mistake we’ve made so long as we are honest in regretting it and doing our best to put it right. Even if there’s nothing we regret, Yom Kippur makes us think about how to use the coming year in such a way as to bring blessings into the lives of others by way of thanking God for all He has given us.

May God bless all of us for the coming year. May He hear and heed our prayers. May He forgive us and help us forgive others. May He grant you, your family, and the Jewish people throughout the world a year of health and peace and life.

Jonathan Sacks
Tishrei 5770

LETTER 1:

The Most Important Legacy

DEAR SARA, DEAR DAVID, I am writing these letters to you as Yom Kippur approaches, because it's the day when we ask the deepest questions about our lives. Who are we? How shall we live? What chapter will we write in the Book of Life?

It's also a time to say the things we've left unsaid. The most important thing your mother and I want to say is that you are our beloved children. You have given us more joy than you can ever know. In all of life, you were God's most precious gift to us.

What inspired me to write these letters is the old Jewish custom that parents write their children *tzavaot*, "ethical wills." It's based on the idea that the most important legacy we can give our children is not money or possessions, but spiritual ideals.

Letter 1: The Most Important Legacy

I truly believe that. Give your children too much money or material gifts and you will spoil them. They will grow up unhappy and unfulfilled, and in the long run they won't thank you. It will damage them and your relationship with them. Tradition was right. The best things any of us can give our children are values to live by, ideals to aspire to, an identity so that they know who they are, and a religious and moral heritage to guide them through the wilderness of time.

Children grow to fill the space we create for them, and if it's big, they will walk tall. Ideals are big; material possessions are small. Ideals are what make life meaningful. People may *envy* others for what they earn or own, but they *admire* others for what they are and what principles they live by – and it's better to be admired than to be envied.

That is what Yom Kippur is about. Judaism sets the bar high. It's a demanding, challenging religion, but that is its greatness. If I were to define what it is to be a Jew, I would say it is to be an ambassador for God.

We were never asked to convert the world, but we were asked to be living role models of justice, compassion, *hesed*, and *tzedaka*. We are the people of the book, who put learning and study at the pinnacle of our values, to show that faith is neither ignorant nor blind. We were asked to live our faith, day by day, act by act, through the complex choreography we call halakha, the intricate beauty of Jewish law. Judaism is a religion of high ideals translated into simple daily deeds.

That's what we received from our parents. It's what we have tried to give you. It's what we hope you will give your children. Not expensive clothes or holidays or the latest

mobile phone. These are distractions from life, not life itself. Life is made by what you live for.

I say this to you at this holy time because I've seen too many people make the same mistake. Their marriages fail or they have a breakdown in relationship with their children and they ask, "What did I do wrong? I gave them everything." True, but not true. They gave them everything *except* what mattered: time, attention, selfless respect, and genuine, ethically demanding, spiritually challenging values.

Ideals will bring happiness to you and your children.