Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks represents one of the most important voices in current discussions that concern the plight of Judaism—and, indeed, of religion more generally—in the modern world. While his vision emerges out of the sources of Judaism, Sacks's inclusive and highly accessible approach ensures that his writings reach a large audience within the general reading public. Although his earliest work dealt specifically with the problems besetting Judaism and its confrontation with modernity beginning in the nineteenth century, his more recent writings examine the importance of cultivating a culture of civility based on the twin notions of the dignity of difference and the ethic of responsibility. Responding to all of these issues, Sacks writes, simultaneously, as a rabbi, a social philosopher, a proponent of interfaith dialogue, and a public intellectual. In so doing, his vision—informed as it is by the concerns of modern Orthodoxy—is paradoxically one of the most universalizing voices within contemporary Judaism.

Sacks possesses a rare ability to hold in delicate balance the universal demands of the modern, multicultural world with the particularism associated with Judaism. It is certainly no coincidence that Maimonides, the twelfth-century philosopher and halakhist, and Samson Raphael Hirsch, the nineteenth century “founder” of modern Orthodoxy, both figure highly in his writings. Equally at home in the world of philosophy and the Jewish tradition, thinkers as diverse as Plato, Judah Halevi, Friedrich Nietzsche, Menachem Schneerson, and Alasdair MacIntyre inhabit his intellectual world. Such diverse figures effectively become his conversation partners as he confronts both the promises and fractures inherent to philosophy. While drawn to the rationalism of philosophy, Sacks—having grown up in post–World War II Britain—is also highly critical that its universalism threatens the very existence of the particular and the diversity that informs it. If universalism represents one such threat to potential coexistence, its handmaiden is the cult of the individual, wherein the rights of the latter trumps those of the collective. In response to such threats, he argues that only an ethic that demands mutual responsibility that is connected to the idea of giving and belonging can confront that which threatens contemporary society. Although critical of secularism, Sacks is
equally critical of religious extremism or radicalism, which represents no less of a roadblock to human diversity.

What role does Judaism play in all of this? An examination of Sacks’s diverse oeuvre quickly reveals that he conceives of Judaism as a response, both intellectually and religiously, to the universalizing tendencies inherent to the West. This universalism incorrectly assumes that everyone, all of humanity, is essentially the same. Judaism, perhaps more than any other tradition, has paid the price for this universalism over the centuries because it has consistently been perceived to undermine the West’s values. The result, as should be evident to even the most passive observer, is that Jews and Judaism have been made to conform, often violently, to the parameters that the West sets for itself in the name of universalism. As a Jew and as someone critical of the unchecked philosophical enterprise, Sacks resists such view. Although he will subsequently argue that, even though there may exist only one truth for all of humanity, the only way to access it is through the particularity of one’s own tradition. Whereas God exists for all of humanity, Sacks is fond of saying, only Judaism exists for Jews. Or, as he himself eloquently puts it, “The God of the Israelites is the God of all mankind, but the demands made of the Israelites are not asked of all mankind.”

Far from offering an insular philosophy of the tradition, Sacks conceives of Judaism as the intersection of the universal and the particular. Although he speaks to Judaism in all of its particularity, he is still able to articulate how this tradition is nevertheless able to speak to humanity in all of its universality. His is a Judaism that does not exist alone, but becomes a partner with God and other religions in the never-ending struggle for human dignity and social justice.

Biography

Jonathan Sacks was born on March 8, 1948, to a traditional Orthodox family in London, England. Educated at Saint Mary’s Primary School and Christ’s College School in London, he then went to Cambridge where, at Gonville and Caius College, he read Philosophy. From a young age, then, Sacks has been firmly embedded in the customs and habits of post-WWII England. His education did not take place in isolation, solely the product

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