Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks, thank you for agreeing to participate in the Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers. You are a remarkable, versatile person. As Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth you command the entire Jewish religious tradition and work within the traditional framework of the Jewish community, but you are also a public intellectual, a social theorist, a political commentator, a historian, a philosopher, an ethicist and, of course, a best-selling author. How did it all come about? What was your intellectual trajectory that allowed you to integrate these diverse activities?

I began from a secular academic background. I studied philosophy at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and then continued as a postgraduate at New College, Oxford. I had some wonderful tutors, among them in my undergraduate years, Roger Scruton in philosophy, who was certainly one of the great polymaths of our time, and my doctoral supervisor was the late Sir Bernard Williams, who was described as “the cleverest man in England” and was indeed a brilliant philosopher. So that was stage one, secular philosophy, and that was my first career. The events of the Six-Day War of 1967 and the weeks leading up to it, while I was just in my first year at university, had a huge impact on me. In 1968, I spent the summer in America traveling around on a Greyhound bus ticket, meeting every distinguished rabbinical thinker I could meet.

I met all sorts of people on the way, among them, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein, Rabbi Norman Lamm, Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman, and many others. But there were two key encounters, two people that everyone was telling me to meet. One was Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Chabad-Lubavitch, and the other was Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, both of blessed memory. They really awoke in me a spiritual response and challenged me to think anew: Rabbi Schneerson posed the challenge of leadership and Rabbi Soloveitchik sent me the challenge of thinking Jewishly. I didn’t really address these challenges until 1973 when I’d already taught secular philosophy and I began my rabbinic studies. So that was stage two.

Stage three was when I began my Jewish studies. I was extraordinarily blessed to have one of the greatest minds in the Jewish world that I have
ever met, who was at that time head of Jews’ College, London, which is our rabbinical seminary. I refer to Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, with whom I lived and worked for ten years. I eventually became his successor. He was an extraordinary combination of talents and skills: he was a great halakhist, a great, in fact, one of the greatest commentators on the Ram-bam (Maimonides), and he was also a scientist, since he had a distin-guished career at the University of Toronto as a professor of mathematics. Additionally, he had a very clear grasp of virtually every secular discipline, from philosophy, to astronomy, to medicine, and intellectually he had the highest conceivable standards. So he made me for the first time work hard as a scholar; he taught me how to produce scholarship.

Stage four was when I was completing my doctorate. I started my studies with Bernard Williams with a focus on a secular theme, but I finished it on a religious theme on the concept of community and kol yisrael arivim zeh lazeh and hokheiakh tokhiakh. At that time, 1973, I basically had given up philosophy, because British philosophy had reached a dead end. It was linguistic, it was dry, it was an extremely esoteric branch of lexicography, which didn’t tell you anything about the substantive questions of human existence. All it told you was what words meant. And it was also tone deaf to the history of what words mean. In the course of doing the doctorate, I came across the book that reignited my interest in philosophy: it was Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. He did it for me, and I think he did it for others as well; he gave philosophy back its history, and that was tremendously liberating. The return to history gave philosophy its cred-ibility, its depth, and its substance. MacIntyre told us that philosophy is a series of traditions which allowed me instantly to see where this applied to Judaism as well. So, he showed me how philosophy could be done and that was stage four.

Stage five was a matter of sheer necessity. We had had in 1993 an extraordinary crime that sent shockwaves through Britain, a four-year-old boy, called Jamie Bulger, was murdered by two ten-year-old boys. This crime led us all to ask what does this say about us, about British society? I wrote an op-ed in *The Times* and John Major, who was then Prime Minister, phoned up the next day, asking whether I could come and see him. I suddenly found in this extraordinary way having a relation-ship with senior politicians, including three consecutive prime ministers: John Major, Tony Blair, and Gordon Brown. I suddenly realized that the one thing one could do for them was to think things through. This is indeed the purpose of philosophy: to think things through. So that is how I began the public philosophy that I have been writing ever since.