

Prof. Alex Green Interviews Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, was at the Chautauqua Institution this past July to give a morning lecture during a week which explores “a crisis of faith.” The Institution reached out to the Buffalo Jewish Federation for an interview with Rabbi Sacks. Dr. Alex Green of the UB Department of Jewish Thought conducted the interview with the man who was acquainted with his parents. Karen Green assisted with the interview.

An international religious leader, philosopher, award-winning author and respected moral voice, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the (British) Commonwealth for 22 years, from 1991 to 2013. Since 2013, he has held a number of professorships at several academic institutions, including Yeshiva University and Kings College London. He currently serves as a Distinguished Professor at New York University. Sacks is the author of more than 30 books, including his most recent, *Not in God's Name*, which was awarded a 2015 National Jewish Book Award. Sacks is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Jerusalem Prize in 1995 for his contribution to diaspora Jewish life. He was knighted by Her Majesty The Queen in 2005, and made a Life Peer, taking his seat in the House of Lords in 2009.

AG: In your newly acclaimed book, *Not in God's Name*, you suggest that the justifications of violence from religious texts are a misreading and abuse of our holy scriptures. You argue that “the use of religion for political ends is not righteousness, but idolatry.” In America, Israel and around

the world, we have seen religion used for purposes of exclusion and often violence. How can Judaism, Christianity and Islam be a force for good in a liberal and diverse society, or does openness and tolerance require banishing religion from the public sphere?

JS: My view is that all three faiths have both hard texts and histories of violence with peoples of other faiths, often histories of violence towards members of their own faith whether dissident or schismatic. Faiths are learning organizations and they do this through successive interpretations of their own texts. I have tried to show in the book how they did so, how Judaism rewrote its texts after the catastrophe of the first century and Christianity did so in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries after the catastrophe of the wars of religion. Clearly Islam will have to do so in the twenty first century. The thing that really makes religions wake up to the danger and harm to their own faith is when there is conflict within the faith itself. When you are killing your enemies, you can say this is God's work. But when you are killing your



Professor Alex Green

own, it becomes much harder. I think that is the basic and major challenge facing all the faiths in the twenty-first century. Most people at most times have been surrounded by people who are like them. Today we are in a world of inescapable interconnectedness with people who are very unlike us and it seems to me that is God's challenge to us in the twenty-first century. If Jews, Christians and Muslims can put their historic animosities behind them, it can be seen in the full retrospect of history to answer the challenge of today.

AG: You have been Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom from 1991-2013 and have recently been teaching at New York University as the Ingeborg and Ira Rennert Global Distinguished Professor of Judaic Thought. Having spent more time in America recently after having finished your tenure as Chief Rabbi, what do you like about America and American Jewish life?

JS: American Jewish life has two things that are really remarkable. First, it has critical mass. It can do things on a scale that we can't do anywhere else in the diaspora. There is nothing quite like AIPAC, there is nothing quite like the General Assembly, there is nothing like the number of Jewish students at universities like NYU, University of Pennsylvania or SUNY. You go to one university in the States and there are more Jewish students than all the universities in the UK! That critical mass makes a huge difference. Second, it's very decentralized, which creates creativeness. Sometimes it looks a little chaotic to a guy from Britain, but it's creative chaos. I thought chaos theory was a description of the Jewish people!



Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

AG: You have been involved in communal leadership for the last 30 years. What advice do you have for those considering taking on positions of leadership? How can Jews and Judaism uniquely contribute to diverse communities like Buffalo?

JS: It's hard to be Jewish, so if you can do that, you can handle any challenge life throws at you. We say “the Lord is my Shepherd” but no Jew is ever a sheep! It's difficult. It's really challenging. It's thrilling. We are great at leadership. We are terrible at followership. And that makes it very challenging. You are tested in the Jewish community. That is enormous source of strength if you can come through it. Of course, in order to come through it you need: one, a very supportive family. Two, you've got to have wise friends who will say to you the most important word in any language, “no.” You need to have people who will stop you from making the big mistakes. And then the people who believe in you who will take you through the difficult moments. I was always blessed to have two or three people who always believed in me more than I believed in myself. That helped me through the difficult time. There will be difficult times, whoever you are, whatever your leadership position. Also, a good sense of humor. Make sure you stay faithful to your ideals. Make sure you have good friends.

AG: In Buffalo, we have a program called Nickel City Jews, which is a community platform for bringing together the people and events that make up Jewish Life in Buffalo for young adults in their 20s, 30s and early 40s. Nickel City Jews' mission is to create ongoing and varied programs that facilitate engagement of Jewish young adults

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with each other and with Jewish experiences. It has been very successful! What advice do you have engaging Millennials to be proud of their Jewish identity?

JS: Wow, big question! I think the twenty-first century is going to throw Millennials a lot of challenges. I don't mean specifically Jewish millennials or specifically Jewish challenges. I think we are heading to a period of great instability in every level of life. Jews are the world's experts in surviving instability and doing so while thriving personally and collectively and experiencing joy while so doing. Jews have this written into their DNA. I would make the whole world Jewish. It's the best thing for the universe. Look at what this lady from Silicon Valley said to me. Rabbi Sacks: the smartphones and tablets are doing terrible things for our kids. They are degrading their social skills, their attention spans, their ability to make eye contact. When we have family meals, they have their phone under the table and they are texting their friends. It was bad for them and bad for the family. You'll love what we decided to do: we decided to take one day a week and make it a screen-free day, no smartphones, no tablets. We've called it Shabbat. That is one more instance of when I tell non-Jews what Jews do to keep their values intact in an age of turbulent change, the non-Jews love it. One of the most powerful devices is Shabbat itself. It's terrific for family, community and for giving gratitude.

AG: Over the last few years, we have seen the resurgence of anti-Semitism. You spoke powerfully on this topic at the The Future of the Jewish Communities in Europe Conference at The European Parliament on September 27, 2016 in Brussels. What is anti-Semitism and where does it come from? How do we explain its persistence and mutation? What advice do you have to combat anti-Semitism?

JS: Anti-Semitism is a phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, when the way the world is, is just not the way you expected it to be. This happens when people feel left behind by the pace of events, the way Germany did after the first world war with the Treaty of Versailles and then hyperinflation. The mass of people feel that history has been unfair to them and the history that is not the way it ought to be. As I explain in my YouTube video "The Mutation of Anti-Semitism," there are two questions any culture can ask: either "what did we do wrong?" or

"who did this to us?" Whenever a culture asks the second question "who did this to us?" it looks for someone to blame. Usually Jews were the most convenient people to blame because a) they were around, b) there were enough of them to be a threat and they weren't going to retaliate if you blame them and c) there has been a pretty long tradition written into Christian and Muslim texts from the beginning. That's what anti-Semitism is. What you do about it, certainly in Europe. The first thing you need to do is to stop defining it as a Jewish problem. I always say is that the hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews. The only way to defeat anti-Semitism is to get the public to realize that it's aimed at all of us. Britain was the first country, where we insisted on principle, that the fight against anti-Semitism is led by non-Jews. This was extremely well lead by the four prime ministers that I had the privilege of working with: John Major, Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and David Cameron.

AG: The recent decision in the Knesset to cancel the agreed upon compromise to negotiate and rebuild the egalitarian section of the Western Wall at Robinson's Arch has caused tension between Israeli and Diaspora Jewish leaders. What do you see as the proper role for the Kotel? How can Israelis and Diaspora Jews learn from each other?

JS: I sat with Natan Sharansky about four years ago and we solved the problem in two minutes. The problem is not the solution. The solution has been there for years. The problem is nobody wants the solution, they want the argument! You know Jews love arguing. If we keep talking to one another, we'll get closer to one another. There is a place in the Kotel for everyone. The solution was there from day one. There is a solution that is good for everyone. But first we need to make space in our hearts in a way that draws people together and not drives them apart.

Alexander Green is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Jewish Thought at the State University at Buffalo, and is director of Undergraduate Studies for the Department. He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto in the Department for the Study of Religion and his MA in Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research focuses on medieval Jewish philosophy, ethics, and the history of biblical interpretation. His first book is The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides.



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