



## **More Than Our Situation**

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When Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks passed away earlier this month, he was arguably the most impactful English-speaking rabbi in the modern world: prolific, profound, patient, persuasive, powerful. His words of Torah touched and transformed countless lives.

If anyone was born to be a rabbi, it was Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks – though to hear him tell it, becoming a rabbi, let alone the spiritual guide of a generation, was not his plan.

In an interview this past summer with Tim Ferriss, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks tells a story about himself as a young 20-something. Young Jonathan thought he would grow up to be an accountant or a lawyer. The year, he says, was “1968, when Simon & Garfunkel were counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike and they’ve all come to look for America. In 1968,” he shared, “the end of my second year at university, at 20 years old, I thought to myself, ‘I don’t know much about Judaism, about religion, but I do know there are lots of distinguished, distinguished rabbis.’ And so I decided...to take a plane to the States and buy a Greyhound bus ticket — a hundred dollars, unlimited travel...I went around looking for America and counting the rabbis. Not the cars. And I met lots and lots of terrific rabbis.”

As it turns out, although he had grown up in an observant family, Rabbi Sacks’ family were not so steeped in Jewish education. His parents were practical folks, his father a businessman, and his mother drove ambulances in London during the blitz. He attended schools with names like St. Mary’s Primary School and Christ’s College.

But something possessed him to make a modern pilgrimage, collecting conversations with rabbis all over America. “The extraordinary thing,” he said, “was that almost all of them mentioned a name to me, which I hadn’t heard of before. And the name was Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson...And they said, ‘You must meet him because he is the great leader of our time.’”

So, one day young Jonathan shows up at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. “I’ve come 3,000 miles to meet the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” he says, “Could I please have an appointment?”

He was laughed out of the room. “Do you know how many thousands, tens of thousands, of people are waiting to have a meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe?” the scheduler said. “He’s got ... hundreds of thousands of followers. And they all want to see him...so come back next year or 10 years’ time and forget it.”

But young Jonathan was not to be deterred. “Well, look,” he said, “I’m traveling around on this Greyhound bus. I don’t know where I’m going to be when, but I do know that I am going to be in Los Angeles because I have an aunt there... So here is the phone number of my aunt. And if the Lubavitcher Rebbe finds that he can see me, please give me a call and let me know. And I’ll come back to New York.”

Would you believe it but a few weeks later, he got a call in Los Angeles on a Sunday night that the Rebbe would see him on Thursday? Amazingly, young Jonathan hopped back on a Greyhound bus for 72 hours of non-stop travel back to New York for a 25-minute appointment with the Rebbe. It is an appointment he credits with changing his life. And, I’d add, the lives of so many of us who have been touched in the years since by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks’ brilliant Torah taught with his trademark gentle tone.

What happened in the Rebbe’s office? Rabbi Sacks shares, “The interesting thing was that he did not really let me ask him questions, he asked me questions. He was interviewing me. And he said to me... ‘How many Jewish students at Cambridge University?’ I said, ‘I don’t know, but around 1,000.’

“[The Rebbe asked], ‘How many Jewish students ...get involved in Jewish life?’ I said, ‘About 100.’” [The Rebbe replied,] ‘You mean 90 percent are just completely disengaged? ...What are you doing about it?’” Jonathan began to reply, “In the situation in which I find myself...”

The Rebbe interrupted, “You don’t find yourself in a situation. You put yourself in a situation. And thereby, I think you should put yourself in a different situation.”

That was it. Rabbi Sacks reflected, “[W]hen you are told by one of the greatest spiritual leaders of the 20th century you are going to have to lead...because you are in that situation where you can do something, that did actually change my life.” He concludes, “Good leaders create followers. Great leaders create leaders.”

That’s what the Rebbe did to transform Jonathan Sacks, a wandering Jew, a stranger in a strange land, into Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Jonathan Sacks was seen, and he made it his lifetime mission to see others. Jonathan Sacks was inspired, and he made it his lifetime mission to inspire others. Jonathan Sacks was charged, and he made it his lifetime mission to charge others.

Listening to him throughout his interview with Tim Ferriss, it is clear that he felt that was against his natural grain. He did not naturally gravitate toward leadership. But the charge he received is one he paid forward with every one of his days. And so can we.

Now, you may say, haven’t you heard we are in the middle of a pandemic, specifically a Thanksgiving that is not Thanksgiving, a simcha that would have filled our Sanctuary to the brim now remote? We cannot even see each other, let alone hop on a Greyhound travelling the country to seek our truth. You may say, he was the great Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, and I am just me. But back then, he was just Jonathan, a vulnerable young man facing an uncertain world, laughed out of the office. Yes, you may say, but he spoke directly with the Rebbe and received a personal charge. Yet each of us who hears Rabbi Sacks’ story or learns his Torah is now part of the ripple of that sacred charge that “the situation in which we find ourselves” – even, or perhaps especially, now – is ours to shape.

How? There is another young man who finds a calling in our parasha today. He finds it not in the best of times, but in the worst of times. Jacob is alone, afraid, and anxious about what the future will bring. He lays his head down on a stone and has a dream that shakes his soul. He lies down, afflicted by the situation in which he finds himself, on the run from his brother Esau for a stolen blessing he always felt frustrated should have been his. He awakens to begin to own what the blessing he received actually means – not just the rights he had imagined, but the responsibilities – in a way that will lead him to become Israel and enable his own impact to ripple through time to every one of us today.

Jacob asks for God to be with him, to guard him on his way into an uncertain future, to have enough food to eat, and someday return to his father's house again in peace. His prayer feels tailor-made for a pandemic. May God guard us all, bless us with physical health, keep us from hardship and hunger, and one day soon may we hug our parents, grandparents, and grandchildren again.

But those are not just wishes and worries. They are charges to us to act right now – to pay forward the legacy we have received. To lift up the loneliness of distance, seeing sanctity in our separation as a promise to protect each other. To lift up the loss of this profoundly broken season, the anxiety of uncertainty, with the question, “What is asked of me now?”

Jacob's dream charges him with a mission. Jonathan Sacks' legacy charges us with an example. They both take a negative energy zone and flip it, to give them the courage to rise up to shape our world.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks passed away on Shabbat, November 7th. But he has left a charge for us. Before he died, he wrote two books with big asks – “Morality,” in which he asks us to, as the subtitle says, “Restore the common good in divided times,” and “Judaism's Life Changing Ideas,” which invites us to make our own the most powerful and transformative lessons of our tradition. Today we receive that charge – no Greyhound bus ticket required.

We are more than “the situation in which we find ourselves.” Today, may we take hold of our charge to lift up the blessings we find ourselves in possession of now and pay them forward.

Shabbat Shalom.