



MACHSHAVOT

Parashat Chayei Sarah

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A Prince of God Amongst Us

Reflections on the Life of Rabbi Sacks ZT"L

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Last Motzei Shabbat, after a wonderful 'Shabbaton at Home', we were getting ready for the live 'Shabbaton at Home Quiz' when I received the terrible news. One of the greatest leaders of world Jewry, our former Chief Rabbi, an inspiration to hundreds of thousands of Jews and non-Jews across the world – HaRav Ya'akov Zvi ben David Ariele – Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ZT"L had passed away.

I stepped away from the microphone, I took my headphones out – I was in disbelief. How could this be, I knew he was ill, but we had no indication that this was coming.

Returning to the broadcast, we all decided to postpone the quiz. Instead myself and Rabbi Marc Levene held a memorial service where we tried to come to terms with the terrible news.

Almost a week has now passed, so much has already been written about a most incredible man. It is remarkable how many people have so many personal stories. For a globally known Rabbi, it is stunning how many lives he had a personal impact on – but that was the greatness of Rabbi Sacks, the humility, the care and concern that he had for those he had met.

Personally, that concern was demonstrated in my darkest hour. For both my parents, his was the first call when I returned from the cemetery. I was comforted by those silken tones which have been used to electrify thousands in auditoriums across the world – but for those two separate occasions, they were used for just one.

We read Parashat Chayei Sarah this week, which begins with the death of our matriarch Sarah and her burial. The sons of Chet speak to Avraham as he tries to arrange a burial plot for her. 'Listen to us, my lord; you are a prince of God in our midst' (Bereshit 23:6). That was Rabbi Sacks. We have been honoured, blessed and privileged to have had a 'prince of God in our midst', but I believe for too short a time.

This will not be a regular Machshavot, not only in its length but in its style – but how could it be regular! Rabbi Sacks was the Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch of our generation. Rav Hirsch found himself in a world that was moving away from Orthodoxy and there was a desperate need for a voice to demonstrate that Torah and Orthodoxy was relevant to the rapidly changing world of the 19th

century. Rav Hirsch created 'Torah im Derech Eretz', Torah combined with the ways of the world – and he saved a generation.

Just over 100 years later, the Jewish world of the late 20th century was under attack from secularism, hedonism and radicalism – who could provide a voice to show that Orthodox Judaism could be lived while being a part of the western world. Who could demonstrate that Torah Judaism could speak to the halls of the University as well as the halls of the Yeshiva. Who could speak about Medinat Yisrael with passion, intellect and warmth. Rabbi Sacks was that voice, Rabbi Sacks was the spokesman for the generation, Rabbi Sacks gave us Torah U'Chochmah – Torah and Wisdom.

As he said:

“Chochmah is the truth we discover; Torah is the truth we inherit. Chochmah is the shared heritage of mankind; Torah is the particular heritage of the Jewish people. Chochmah is the world of 'is', of fact; Torah is the world of 'ought', of command. Chochmah is where we encounter God through creation; Torah is how we hear God through revelation. The two are not equal in their significance to Jews – Torah is holy in a way chochmah cannot be – yet both are significant, for if we are to apply Torah to the world, we must understand the world to which it applies. Because the God of creation is also the God of revelation, there is ultimate harmony between them, even though, given the imperfections in our understanding of both, it may not be evident at any given moment. There must, I believe, be an ongoing conversation between them, for otherwise Torah will remain a closed system with no grip, no purchase, no influence, on the world outside its walls.”

Through Rabbi Sacks there was a huge influence on the world outside, his voice was heard by Prime Ministers and princes, by scientists and doctors, by Jews and non-Jews alike.

To me, Rabbi Sacks was simply the reason I became a Rabbi, and in many ways he is the driving force behind Mizrachi UK – but to explain that, I need to take you on a journey back to the very start of his Chief Rabbinate.

It is the spring of 1992, I am a first year student at Leeds University and we have been invited to the Town Hall to hear the new Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, address the Leeds community. I remember the students were invited to sit in the gallery as we watched our new Chief Rabbi address a packed hall.

I can't remember much of what he said that day. However, I can remember two things.

The first is that he told us the difference between a Rabbi and a Rebbe. 'When a Rabbi speaks, you think he is speaking to the person next to you, when a Rebbe speak, you think he is speaking to you'. I remember sitting up in my chair to listen more after that! His fondness for the idea of a Rebbe came from his famous meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe ZT"l who challenged him to become a Jewish leader, who asked him what he was doing for the Jewish students at Cambridge? The Rebbe inspired him to change career path, to step up to lead and thankfully for the world he did and became Rabbi Sacks.

Similar to the Rebbe, the second thing I remember is that he challenged us, the students, to step up and lead. His famous line, not sure if he said it that day to us but I heard it from him so many times, 'Good leaders create followers. Great leaders create leaders'. Rabbi Sacks therefore was the greatest leader.

That Sunday in Leeds has stayed with me, as it has with the chaplain at the time, Rabbi Jonathan Dove. We both spoke this week that it was no coincidence that a couple of months after that meeting, something remarkable started. The religious students supported by Rabbi Jonathan and Joanne Dove began to create a myriad of student led initiatives which transformed the campus. It became a grass roots movement that led many students to pursue careers in education – remarkably six of us became Rabbanim who are now working all across the Jewish world. There is no question that the beginning of Rabbi Sacks' tenure with his emphasis of leadership, outreach and education awakened in religious Jewish students a sense of responsibility.

When Rabbi Sacks published his book 'Will we have Jewish Grandchildren' in May 1994, I was just finishing university and thanks to my involvement there, I had decided to work for a year for The Union of Jewish Students (UJS) as the head of education. I read the book as required reading for the year and the messages throughout were all about our future – and how that future depended on Jewish leaders. During that year, and plenty of conversations with Rabbi Sacks and the launch of '50 days for 50 years' – inspired by him as well – my decision to pursue a rabbinical career was concretised.

'Jewish Continuity', which was created by Rabbi Sacks in 1994, began to look to invest in future rabbinic leaders for the UK community following on from the 'Kalms' Fellowship' previously. After my year in UJS, with encouragement, I applied and was accepted for five years of funding on condition I returned to the UK for a minimum of five years. Several other current Rabbanim were part of this scheme which eventually provided the UK Rabbinat with Religious Zionist and Modern Orthodox Rabbanim – some of whom are still in the UK Rabbinat today.

All of the students who became Rabbanim have a similar story to tell – there was JSOC involvement, they were engaged in student leadership and they felt that they should dedicate their career to the Jewish people. What was their drive to step up and lead? Rabbi Sacks. Either him personally or the speeches and writings at the time, we all wanted to be a part of this new mission.

Just as the Lubavitcher Rebbe had convinced a Cambridge student - Jonathan Sacks, to change course and pursue a rabbinic career, now his drive and vision was creating and supporting the next generation of Rabbanim.

The 'Jewish Continuity' (and later the UJIA) programme for sponsoring Semicha in Israel eventually stopped in the early 2000's for various reasons, one of which was because the throughput from campuses had dwindled. One of the explanations was the appearance of a new strategy on campus which focussed on Rabbinic leadership of outreach organisations to run the educational programmes. This was rather than it being student led with Rabbinic support, which had proven such a successful way to inspire the religious students themselves and others.

However, Rabbi Sacks' idea of developing leadership, remained with me throughout my time completing Semicha in both Jerusalem and New York. The idea was that we had to step up and lead in whatever situation we found ourselves. Whether I was conscious of it or not, it drove whatever I was doing.

It was not surprising therefore, that when I took on the role of Assistant Rabbi at Stanmore Shul, I noticed some amazingly talented home grown leaders in the shul, all from 'Bnei Akiva homes' and encouraged them to lead. So they began leading programmes and trips to huge beneficial effect for themselves and the teens they inspired. Five of them eventually became youth directors and four of those became Rabbis and educators! Not only did they step up to lead, but they created initiatives so that the teens themselves could eventually become leaders with them on certain programmes. Many of those teens went on to leadership roles in Bnei Akiva, JSOC and with Tribe.

When I reflect on it, it is not such a surprise that it occurred. As Rabbi Sacks explained, give young people the ability to lead and they will inspire others and motivate themselves to continue in their leadership roles. That is what happened to me and others at Leeds and that is what happened to those leaders and teenagers in Stanmore.

In his final message before stepping down after more than two decades in office in 2013, Rabbi Sacks wrote a booklet entitled, 'A Judaism Engaged with the World'. In it, he warned that a Judaism divorced from society will be a Judaism unable to influence society or inspire young Jews. Rabbi Sacks argued that in the twenty-first century, Jews will need the world, and the world will need the Jews. What we need, is a Judaism unafraid to engage with the intellectual, ethical, political and personal challenges of our time.

I read that pamphlet eagerly, it reminded me of the programmes we had created at University, run by mostly Bnei Akiva students that inspired so many across campus who were not religious. It reminded me of the young leaders at Stanmore who had connected with the teenagers of the shul, the majority of whom were not religious, and made Judaism and Israel speak to them.

Both of those groups in Leeds and in Stanmore were living 'A Judaism Engaged with the World' – and as role models, were making an impact.

In early 2016, when I started at Mizrachi, I went to see Rabbi Sacks, and we spoke about the need to recreate the early days of 'Jewish Continuity', to create the leaders of the future who were engaged with the world. To empower and inspire the religious students on Campus to learn and to lead, that we need to invest in our graduates to become teachers and Rabbis.

I listened in 1992, I also listened in 2016.

Our 'Student Bet Midrash', a joint initiative with Bnei Akiva and the United Synagogue is working with the religious students on campus, encouraging them to learn and to lead. To try and recreate on campus what was the norm just 20 years ago, grass roots leadership, allowing students to lead.

We held a Shabbaton last year, gathering students from Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and London, it was wonderful to see. Covid has obviously slowed the momentum but it must continue. There is so much talent in our Religious Zionist community, we must nurture that talent, invest in it and watch it inspire others while also inspiring themselves.

And then of course there are the 'Mizrachi Rabbinic Fellowships'. In September 2016, just over twenty years since the 'Jewish Continuity' cohort began, the first modern Orthodox couples began the journey to become the rabbinic leaders of the future. We now have seven couples in the programme, with more to come. When I visit them in Israel, I see in them the same passion and drive that I and my colleagues had back in the mid to late nineties.

Why have these couples decided to pursue a career in the Rabbinate? Firstly, because there is once again the financial support but mainly because they became youth leaders at schools, shuls or youth movements – and realised that this was what they wanted to do.

It doesn't change – whether the 1970s with Rabbi Sacks, the 1990s with my peer group or the 2010s with the current crop, the same rule runs throughout – you provide opportunities for Jewish leadership, you will create Jewish leaders.

Please God soon, we will be launching a major initiative to allow our young people to lead and inspire, to be the role models that the children and teenagers of British Jewry desperately need.

There is a long way to go, but I believe we can transform British Jewry and continue the legacy of Rabbi Sacks to create leaders engaged with the world who will in turn create leaders of their own.

Let us follow the words of Rabbi Sacks which closed his inaugural address in 1991 – they were relevant then, they are even more relevant now.

'Together we have great things to do. For this is a rare and special moment in the history of the Jewish people. Only twice before in our long life as a people have we had the chance to practise Judaism in freedom and against the backdrop of a sovereign State of Israel. For two thousand years we prayed for it to come again, and now that it has, we must not fail the challenge of this et ratzon, this window of opportunity. We will not fail. Because haba letaher mesayin oso – because God helps those who turn towards Him; and never does He allow those who seek Him to fail. We will succeed because ein berrerah: this time there is no choice but to succeed.'

As his team wrote so beautifully in this week's Jewish News:

'He was a leader who saw the destination and began the journey. It is now up to all of us to continue it.'

Amen.

May his memory be a blessing.

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Eternal Life

Matt Marks

Participant on the Mizrahi UK Fellowship Programme

If you were to tell me that one of the defining verses for the Jewish approach to marriage is taken from this week's Torah reading, I might have guessed 24:67, which describes Isaac's love for Rebecca, and the great comfort he felt in her presence.

I would not have expected it to be 23:13, in which Abraham begs Efron to take his money so that he can buy a burial plot for Sarah, his wife. However, the Talmud in Tractate Kiddushin (2a), explains that the metaphysical process that occurs through marriage is defined by connecting the verses that discuss 'marriage' with this verse, detailing Abraham's acquisition of the field.

So, Question 1:

What is the connection between Abraham's purchase of the burial plot and our conception of marriage?

Question 2:

Sometimes, when trying to plumb the depth of meaning, hidden in the layers of a particular story in the Torah, it is useful to look for certain literary devices. One such device is the leitwort, or 'mila mancha'.

Martin Buber explains this as: 'A word or linguistic root, which recurs within a text, a series of texts or a set of texts in an extremely meaningful manner...'

In our story - regarding Abraham's purchase of the burial plot, the leading word seems to be 'K-V-R' (Burial). In chapter 23, which details our story, this word appears 13 times and then twice, 76 verses later in chapter 25 verses 9 and 10, which describe Abraham's burial in the very same plot he bought for Sarah.

This is unusual as although the Torah often details genealogies that list the deaths of various personalities, it does not often feel the need to clarify that they were buried or detail where. Seemingly, one could suggest that this a continuation, a conclusion, of our original story. The story of Abraham purchasing a burial plot for Sarah doesn't end until he is also buried there himself.

If this is true, what is the contribution of the concluding section to the meaning of the story, as a whole?

It is in light of these questions that I would like to turn to the inexhaustible insight of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l. Rabbi Sacks explains that throughout the course of the biblical narrative of Abraham and Sarah, God promises them two things: children and a land, on multiple occasions. However, *'when Sarah dies, Abraham has not a single inch of the land that he can call his own and has only one child who will continue the covenant: Isaac, currently unmarried. Neither promise has been fulfilled.'* It is this fact, that for Rabbi Sacks, justifies the inordinate detail given to the stories of Abraham's purchase of the burial plot and his subsequent seeking of a wife for his son. He is trying to ensure the fulfilment of the commitments that were made to them. Abraham and Sarah, upon their marriage, dedicated themselves to a mission, a journey, a vision. To seeing the promises God made them fulfilled.

I would like to tentatively suggest that the implied message here is that a relationship, does not end when one partner dies. This week's Torah portion, called 'The life of Sarah', does not end with her death, but with Abraham's. The verse of Mary Fry, that exclaims 'do not stand by my grave and weep, I am not there I do not sleep' is not mere lip service to the notion of a soul departed, but a ringing testimony to the presence of those we love in every fibre of our own existence. Abraham, at the age of 137 works tirelessly to ensure that the promises that **they** were made would be fulfilled. He purchases **them** a plot of land. He finds a wife for **their** son. Their relationship survives, Sarah's life continues for as long as Abraham remains committed to their shared hopes and dreams.

We often speak of a marriage between the Jewish people and God. The prophet Hosea describes this relationship, stating 'I will betroth you to me forever' (2:19). Forever. A relationship is not severed completely by loss, it remains for as long as there are those that are willing to carry the mantle of shared ambition that the relationship was founded upon.

Abraham's purchase of the burial plot was not a mere attempt at dignity for his wife, but an attempt at continuing their unified pursuit of the promises God made them. An attempt to immortalise their bond. That is marriage. That is a relationship. Shared love, shared dreams and shared ambition. A unified vision for how things should be and a determination to work together to realise that goal. Sarah did not die, Abraham did not let her.

On this idea, Rabbi Sacks writes: *Leaders see the destination, begin the journey, and leave behind them those who will continue it. That is enough to endow a life with immortality.*

May Rabbi Sacks's soul be elevated, and may his life remain, forever immortalised, through the actions of his students.

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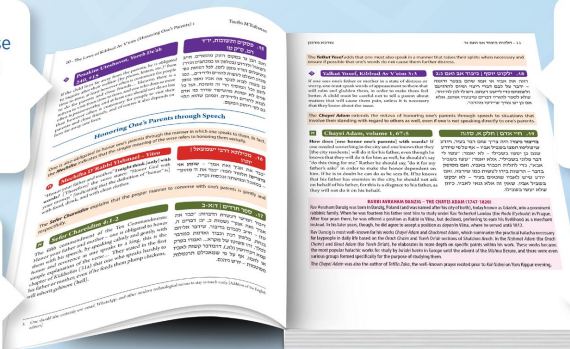
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