Summary:

- Jonathan Sacks was born into a non-religious Jewish family in 1948 and spent his early school years in Christian schools.
- From 1991 to 2013, he was Chief Rabbi of the Jewish communities in England.
- He has also worked as a professor of Jewish Thought, Law and Ethics at various universities in the UK, the USA and Israel.
- Jonathan Sacks has written more than 20 books on these topics and has also been a regular guest on BBC programs.
- In 2005, Queen Elizabeth II honored him for his services to the community and interfaith dialogue.
- In 2009, he was appointed a member of the House of Lords.
- Jonathan Sacks received numerous honors worldwide and is considered one of the great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. He died in 2020.
- In this interview, conducted with the help of the AI assistant Grok, he talks about general social issues, anti-Semitism, God in the Shoah, religious radicalization and the question of whether Judaism still makes sense today.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, what do you see as the great social challenge of our time?

Jonathan Sacks: The big challenge is the loss of the common good in a highly individualized, technologically accelerated world. We have markets and states, but too little morality. We need a renewal of shared values, responsibility and the ability to live with differences in dignity, otherwise society will disintegrate.

In a nutshell: What does Judaism mean to you?

Rabbi Sacks: “For me, Judaism means living in an eternal partnership with God: sanctifying His presence in time, blessing life, practicing justice, loving the stranger and leaving the world a little better than we found it through moral responsibility.

What is specifically Jewish about it? A Christian priest or an imam would answer the same.

Jonathan Sacks: That’s right, we do indeed share the universal – God, justice and compassion – with Christianity and Islam. However, the *eternal covenant* (Brit) at Sinai is specifically Jewish. There, God called not only individuals, but an entire people to bring the sacred into everyday life through 613 mitzvot (commandments and prohibitions, ed.), to sanctify time (through the Shabbat, festivals) and to bear witness to God’s presence in history.”

You didn’t grow up religious. How did you actually come to become more involved with your Judaism?

Jonathan Sacks: I grew up in a traditional but not particularly religious Jewish home. During my studies at Cambridge, I experienced a deep spiritual crisis. Trips to New York and encounters with Rabbi Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe opened my eyes. Judaism was not just an identity, but a calling. I became a rabbi to make this voice of God heard in a secular world).

Do we still need this “Jewishness” today?

Jonathan Sacks: To be Jewish is to be part of the most remarkable story ever lived – full of trials, triumphs and a never-ending journey. In a world of impermanence, Judaism gives meaning, gratitude and the strength to choose hope through suffering. Yes, Judaism is needed today more than ever.

Have you yourself been a victim of anti-Semitism? How did you deal with it?

Jonathan Sacks: Yes, as Chief Rabbi (of England, editor’s note) and before that, I experienced anti-Semitism in various forms. I never took it personally, but saw it as a warning signal for society. You deal with it by not becoming a victim, but by responding with dignity, education and moral clarity. Above all, hate destroys the hater. We respond with life, with hope and with the testimony of our values.

How do you explain anti-Semitism? What can we do about it?

Jonathan Saks: Anti-Semitism is the oldest hatred, a virus that mutates: from religious to racist to anti-Zionist. It is hatred of otherness – Jews as a symbol of the “other”. It begins with Jews, but never ends with them. What we can do about it: Clearly define it and orient ourselves about it, form alliances with others and never allow it to move from the margins to the center of society, and fight it with our humanity.

For us Jews today, there is one central question that we ask ourselves again and again: Where was God in the Shoah? How could he allow the murder of six million Jews if he existed?

Jonathan Sacks: Where was God is the wrong question. The right one is: Where was man? God was in the commandments “Thou shalt not kill” and “Do not oppress the stranger”. These commandments were cruelly ignored in the Shoah. God was also in the hearts of many survivors who found the strength to go on living. God does not force us to do anything, he teaches us to save ourselves. We must never go down the path of hatred again.

Many who do not believe in God justify this by saying that he has not been scientifically proven, Is there an inherent conflict between religion and science?

Jonathan Sacks: No. Religion asks “why”: about meaning and morality. Science asks “how”: about mechanisms. Religion and science are partners, not rivals. Judaism has always embraced both. Conflict only arises when one side colonizes the other. Both together make us fully human.

Today, we experience religious radicalization and extremism on a daily basis. What can we do about it?

Jonathan Sacks: Extremism abuses faith as a weapon. Against this, education in the true sources of our traditions – the sanctity of life, love for the stranger and the way of peace – helps. Religious leaders must speak loudly for compassion. We must fight hate by taking responsibility and not blaming God for human sins.

Keyword: radicalization. One of your best-known books about Judaism is called “Radical Then, Radical Now – radical then, radical now”. What do you mean by that?

Jonathan Sacks: What I mean by “Radical Then, Radical Now” is that Judaism was radical from the very beginning. At Sinai, an entire people chose not power, but

morality; not domination, but responsibility; not idols, but the invisible God. It was a revolution of freedom and holiness. Today we need exactly this spirit again: to be courageously different, to live the sacred in a world of selfishness and materialism and to actively pursue tikkun olam (the improvement of the world).

Tell us 10 pieces of moral wisdom from Judaism that apply to all people and are still relevant today.

Jonathan Sacks: 1. every life is sacred – act accordingly. 2. gratitude transforms the ordinary into a blessing. 3. justice and compassion belong together. 4 Education is the highest form of freedom. 5. the stranger deserves love, because we were strangers. 6. words create worlds – speak with responsibility. 7 Hope triumphs over fear. 8 Freedom demands moral discipline. 9 We are our brothers’ keepers. 10. repair the world (Tikkun Olam) – and start with yourself.

Note: This interview was conducted with the help of the AI assistant Grok. It is based on the writings, videos, and other statements by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. In the coming weeks, we will conduct AI-assisted conversations with other prominent figures from a wide variety of fields—politics, religion, science, and culture—who have been significant to Judaism and Israel, in order to introduce them and their ideas to today’s audience. The The first such interview took place with Theodor Herzl the founder of modern Zionism, the second with Chaim WeizmannIsrael’s first president, the third with David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israelthe fourth with Israel’s only female prime minister to date Prime Minister, Golda Meir, the fifth with Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian presidentwho traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, the sixth with Moses, who led the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery to freedom, and the seventh with the great Jewish scholar Maimonides, who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries.