

Writings of Rabbi Sacks z"l. Torah, Prayer, Leadership

TED TALK

<https://youtu.be/AMVgX8cXsHA> Minute 3:55

1. Education

Orthodoxy Confronts Modernity (1991) pg.144

For the challenge is not about right, left, or center, but about smallness or greatness. Will Orthodoxy see itself forced into defensiveness by assimilation and secularisation? Will it retreat yet further into its protected enclaves, while the rest of the Jewish world disintegrates? Will it build an ark for itself like Noah while the rest of Jewry drowns? Or will it see itself challenged by this unique moment to lead the Jewish world?

For that is the challenge. To make sure that every child has a Jewish education, as intellectually demanding and inspiring as the best secular education. To teach us how to be Jews in our secular involvements as well as in our private lives. To teach us what it is to create a society, in the golah and especially in Eretz Yisrael, based on "compassion, justice and righteousness, because these are what I desire, says God." To teach every Jew, left, right, and center, to find his or her place in Torah. Above all to rise above the smallness and recapture the greatness of Torah that once inspired every Jew by its grandeur, its compassion, its sheer nobility: the Torah written in fire. given in fire, the Torah that set Jewish souls on fire. Because from here on there are no excuses.

Response to Torah U-Madda by Rabbi Norman Lamm (20th Anniversary Edition) pg.218

The failure of Torah Umadda, then, is not something that should be seen within the ambit of Orthodoxy alone. It is, in essence, the Jewish failure to construct a viable cultural continuity in the modern world: a problem that affects Israel no less than the Diaspora. The key to this failure has been the loss of Torah: as text, as tradition, as command, and as summons to build a society that is not yet but might be.

And here is the crux. In this book, Rabbi Lamm has argued the case for madda, a Jewish acquaintance with the best available secular knowledge and culture. Yet that is precisely what the vast majority of today's Jews have in superabundance. What they do not have is Torah. Or even any clear sense of why, without Torah, the Jewish destiny loses all coherence.

Torah and madda are not equal partners. To paraphrase Maimonides, Torah leads to madda but madda does not lead to Torah.

Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? (1994) 35-46

Mark's Twain's question ... remains: "All things are mortal but the Jew ... What is the secret of his immortality?" The answer, I believe is straightforward. *The secret of Jewish continuity is that no people has ever devoted more of its energies to continuity.*

Descartes said: 'I think, therefore I am.' A Jew would have said: '**I learn, therefore I am.**' If there is one leitmotif, one dominant theme linking the various periods of Jewish history it is enthronement of education as the sovereign Jewish value.

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In one of the most famous verses in the Torah, Moses commands: 'You shall teach these things diligently to your children, speaking of them when you stay at home or when you travel on a journey, when you lie down and when you rise up.' The first Psalm describes the happy human being as one who 'studies Torah day and night'. In an astonishing commentary on rabbinic priorities, the fourth-century sage Rava, seeing another scholar prolonging his prayers when he might have been studying, said: 'Such people forsake eternal life and occupy themselves instead with temporal life.' The rabbis said: 'Greater is an illegitimate scholar than an ignorant high priest.'

The central, burning, incandescent passion of Jews was study. Their citadels were schools. Their religious leaders were sages: the word rabbi does not mean priest or holy man but teacher. Even when they were racked by poverty, they ensured that their children were educated. In twelfth-century France a Christian scholar noted:

A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of God's law-and not only his sons but his daughters too.'

The result was that Jews knew. They knew who they were and why. They knew their history. They knew their traditions. They knew where they came from and where their hearts belonged. They had a sense of identity and pride. They knew Abraham and Moses and Isaiah and Hillel and Akiva and Rashi and Maimonides, for they had studied their words and argued over their meaning. The Torah was the portable homeland of the Jew, and they knew its landscape, its mountains and valleys, better than they knew the local scenery outside their windows. Jerusalem lay in ruins, but they were familiar with its streets from the prophets and the Talmud and they walked in the golden city of the mind.

DEFYING DEATH

The rabbis of the Talmud had a way of communicating deep truths in the most simple language. They told the following story about King David. David, they said, was once overcome by thoughts of his own mortality and prayed to God to know how long he had to live. God replied that no one is allowed to know when he or she will die. Then let me know,' said David, 'on what day of the week I will die.' 'You will die,' said God, 'on Shabbat.' As soon as he heard this, King David resolved to spend every Shabbat in uninterrupted study.

The appointed day eventually came and the angel of death was sent to bring David to heaven. But learning did not cease from the mouth of the king, and the angel was unable to lay hold of him. The angel knew it could not return to heaven empty-handed, so it devised a stratagem. It made a rustling noise in a tree in David's garden. The king went out to investigate, and started climbing a ladder. The ladder broke, and as David was falling, he paused for a moment from his learning. At that moment, the angel laid hold of him and King David died.

It is a subtle story. On the surface it is a simple example of midrash aggadah, one of those legends by which the sages fleshed out the bare bones of biblical narrative and made them come vividly alive. It is, however, much more than that. The sages, with their unique combination of simplicity and depth, were talking not just about King David but about themselves and the fate of the Jewish people.

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TESTING THE HYPOTHESIS

The Jewish people has survived. But at significant moments that survival lay in doubt. Catastrophe struck and there was no obvious route to a secure future. The prophets had declared that Israel would be an eternal people. But there ...were moments when it might have been otherwise. These critical junctures repay close attention. What saved the people and faith of Israel from the might-have-been of oblivion? Consider three such turning points.

The first came in the fifth century BCE. Several centuries earlier, the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians. Its population was dispersed and rapidly assimilated into the neighbouring cultures. Ten of the twelve Israelite tribes disappeared from history. In 586 BCE the southern kingdom of Judah, comprising the two remaining tribes, was also overcome, this time by the Babylonians. The Temple was destroyed and the elite of the people taken into captivity.

...Under Cyrus, king of Persia, a new and more benign regime took shape and some of the exiles were allowed to return. Eventually, under the leadership of Nehemiah, the statesman-governor, and Ezra, the priestly scribe, a Jewish renaissance began. It faced formidable difficulties. On their arrival in Israel, the two leaders found chaos. Those Jews who had remained had lost their identity. They had intermarried. The Sabbath was publicly desecrated. Religious laws had fallen into disuse.

The book of Nehemiah describes the event which was to prove the turning point. The people gathered in Jerusalem where Ezra, standing on a wooden platform, read to the assembled crowd from the Torah. A group of Levites acted as instructors to the people, 'reading from the A Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that people could understand what was being read'. The population entered into a binding agreement to keep the Torah. The covenant, which had been in danger of being forgotten, was renewed. A new era of Jewish history began....

Ezra represented a new kind of Jew, one who was to shape the character of the Jewish people from that time to this. Not a law-giver or a prophet, a king or a judge, neither a political nor a military leader, Ezra was the prototype of the teacher as hero. Under his influence, the ancient ideal of the people of the Torah became institutionalised. Public readings and explanations of the sacred texts became more widespread. By the second century BCE a system of community funded schools had developed. Mass education, the first of its kind in the world, had begun.

The might-have-been is clear. The two tribes might have gone the way of the other ten... Judaism discovered a fundamental truth, one that has remained its unique characteristic among religious civilisations. *The best, indeed the only, defence of an identity is not military or political but educational.*

...In the first century CE a **second crisis** struck with devastating force ...the second Temple destroyed ... Bar Kochba rebellion ...The Talmud relates how the sage Johanan ben Zakkai stood out against the Jews of his day. During the siege of Jerusalem, leaders within the city believed that they could prevail against Rome. Johanan knew that they were mistaken and argued unsuccessfully for surrender. Others believed that they would be saved by Divine intervention. The Messiah was about to come. Against them Johanan taught: 'If you have a sapling in your hand, and people say to you, "Behold, there is the Messiah" go on with your planting and only then go out and receive him.' Johanan was a religious realist in an age of dangerous military and apocalyptic dreams.

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Johanan, according to the Talmud, had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem and was taken to Vespasian. He made a simple request: 'Give me [the academy at] Yavneh and its sages.' Johanan predicated Jewish survival not on military victory or on the messianic age but on a house of study and a group of teachers...

We know from Josephus and other sources that there were other tendencies in the late Second Commonwealth period. Johanan represented the group known as the Pharisees, who gave rise to the of the Mishnah and Talmud... **For the Sadducees**, the central dimension of Jewish life was the state and its institutions: the Sanhedrin and the Temple. **For the Essenes** it was the messianic age: they lived in imminent expectation an apocalypse which would shake the foundations of the world. For the of Pharisees, as we have seen, it was education. Their key institution was the school. Their figure of authority was the scholar. Their touchstone of Jewish identity was individual learning and observance of the Torah. Neither Sadducees nor Essenes survived. ... Once again, education proved the only route to continuity.

The **third crisis** brings us to the present century and to what, in human terms, is the greatest tragedy ever to have struck the people of the covenant. The Holocaust. At the beginning of the twentieth century, four out of every five Jews lived in Europe. By the end of the Second World War the vast heartlands of European Jewry had been destroyed. The powerhouses of rabbinic learning - Vilna, Volozhyn, Ponevets, Mir were gone.

...What happened next will one day be told as one of the great acts of reconstruction in the religious history of mankind. A handful of Holocaust survivors and refugees set about rebuilding on new soil the world they had seen go up in flames. Rabbis Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, Aharon Kotler, Jacob Kamenetzky, Shragai Mendlowitz, Joseph Soloveitchik and others like them refused to yield to despair. While others responded to the Holocaust by building memorials, endowing lectureships, convening conferences and writing books, they built schools and communities and yeshivot. They urged their followers to marry and have children. They said: 'Our world has been shattered but not destroyed.' They said: " Hitler brought death into the world, therefore let us bring life.' Within a generation Mir and Ponevets, Lubavitch and Belz lived again, no longer in Europe, but in Israel and America.

Within a half-century, traditional Jewry has risen from the ashes to become the fastest growing and most influential force in Jewish life... It has demonstrated in our time that the classic Jewish response to crisis remains the most powerful.

...So long as 'their mouths did not desist from study' the angel of death has no power over the Jewish people.

2. PRAYER

THE KOREN-SACKS SIDUR (2009). INTRODUCTION

F. PRIVATE, PUBLIC, PRIVATE

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The Amida itself-especially on weekday mornings and afternoons - is constructed on a triadic pattern. First it is said silently by the members of the congregation as individuals. Next it is repeated publicly out loud by the Leader. This is then usually followed by private supplications (Tahanun), also said quietly. As I have suggested above, this is a way of reenacting the two modes of spirituality from which prayer derives. **The silent Amida** recalls the intensely personal prayers of the patriarchs and prophets. **The public repetition** represents the daily sacrifices offered by the priests in the Temple on behalf of all Israel (there is no repetition of the evening Amida because there were no sacrifices at night). Thus the prayers weave priestly and prophetic, individual and collective voices, into a single three-movement sonata of great depth and resonance.

G. FRACTALS

We owe to the scientist Benoit Mandelbrot the concept of fractals; the discovery that phenomena in nature often display the same pattern at different levels of magnitude. A single rock looks like a mountain. Crystals, snowflakes and ferns are made up of elements that have the same shape as the whole. Fractal geometry is the scientific equivalent of the mystical ability to sense the great in the small: "To see a world in a grain of sand / And a Heaven in a wild flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an hour" (William Blake).

The first of the "request" prayers in the daily Amida is a fractal. It replicates in miniature the structure of the Amida as a whole (Praise-Request-Thanks). It begins with praise: "You favor man with knowledge and teach humanity understanding," moves to request: "Favor us with knowledge, understanding and insight," and ends with thanksgiving: "Blessed are You, O LORD, the gracious Giver of knowledge." You will find many other fractals in the Siddur.

The existence of fractals in the Siddur shows us how profoundly the structures of Jewish spirituality feedback repeatedly into the architectonics of prayer.

11. JACOB'S LADDER

Prayer is a journey that has been described in many ways. According to the mystics, it is a journey through the four levels of being - Action, Formation, Creation and Emanation. Rabbi Jacob Emden worked out an elaborate scheme in which the prayers represent a movement from the outer courtyards to the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem. According to everyone, the stages of prayer constitute an ascent and descent, reaching their highest level in the middle, in the Shema and Amida.

The metaphor that, to me, captures the spirit of prayer more than any other is Jacob's dream in which, alone at night, fleeing danger and far from home, he saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending. He woke and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God; this is the gate to heaven" (Gen. 28:10-17).

Our Sages said that "this place" was Jerusalem. That is midrashic truth. But there is another meaning, the plain one, no less transfiguring. The verb the Torah uses, *vayifga*, means "to happen upon, as if by chance." "This place" was any place. Any place, any time, even the dark of a lonely night, can be a place and time for prayer. If we have the strength to dream and then, awakening, refuse to let go of the dream, then here, now, where I stand, can be the gate to heaven.

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Prayer is a ladder and we are the angels. If there is one theme sounded throughout the prayers, it is ... ascent summit-descent. In the Verses of Praise, we climb from earth to heaven by meditating on creation. Like a Turner or Monet landscape, the psalms let us see the universe bathed in light, but this light is not the light of beauty but of holiness; the light the Sages say God made on the first day and "hid for the righteous in the life to come." Through some of the most magnificent poetry ever written, we see the world as God's masterpiece, suffused with His radiance, until we reach a crescendo in Psalm 150 with its thirteen-fold repetition of "Praise" in a mere thirty-seven words.

By the time we reach Berekhu and the blessings of the Shema we have neared the summit. Now we are in heaven with the angels. We have reached revelation. The Divine Presence is close, almost tangible. We speak of love in one of the most hauntingly beautiful of blessings, "Great love" with its striking phrase: "Our Father, merciful Father, the Merciful, have mercy on us." Now comes the great declaration of faith at the heart of prayer, the Shema with its passionate profession of the unity of God and the highest of all expressions of love...

Then comes the Amida, the supreme height of prayer...and then the Kedusha, prayer as a mystical experience.

From here, prayer begins its descent. First comes Tahanun in which we speak privately and intimately to the King. At this point, with a mixture of anguish and plea, we speak not of God's love for Israel but of Israel's defiant love of God: "Yet despite all this we did not forget You; please do not forget us." There is a direct reference back to the Shema: "Guardian of Israel, guard the remnant of Israel, and let not Israel perish who declare: Shema Yisrael."

Then comes Ashrei and the subsequent passages, similar to the Verses of Praise but this time with redemption, not creation, as their theme. The key verse is "A redeemer will come to Zion." The section closes with a prayer that we may become agents of redemption as we reengage with the world ("May it be Your will... that we keep Your laws in this world"). We are now back on earth, the service complete except for Aleinu, Kaddish and the Psalm of the Day. We are ready to reenter life and its challenges.

What has prayer achieved? If we have truly prayed, we now know that the world did not materialize by chance. A single, guiding will directed its apparent randomness. We know too that this will did not end there, but remains intimately involved with the universe, which He renews daily, and with humanity, over whose destinies He presides. We have climbed the high ladder and have seen, if only dimly, how small some of our worries are. Our emotional landscape has been expanded. We have given voice to a whole range of emotions: thanks, praise, love, awe, guilt, repentance, remembrance, hope. As we leave the synagogue for the world outside, we now know that we are not alone; that God is with us; that we need not fear failure, for God forgives; that our hopes are not vain; that we are here for a purpose and there is work to do. We are not the same after we have stood in the Divine Presence as we were before. We have been transformed... We have become, in Lurianic terminology, vessels for God's blessing. We are changed by prayer.

Behind the Bima Podcast minute 09:00 <https://behind-the-bima.simplecast.com/episodes/special-episode-rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks-ztl-0xg0BiRs>

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3. PARASHAT HASHAVUA – REEH speaks about Slavery.

Rabbi Sacks. C&C 5772 Mishpatim

The Slow End of Slavery

It doesn't say: abolish slavery. Surely it should have done. Is that not the whole point of the story thus far? Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. He, as the Egyptian viceroy Tzofenat Paneach, threatens them with slavery. Generations later, when a pharaoh arises who "knew not Joseph," the entire Israelite people become Egypt's slaves. Slavery, like vengeance, is a vicious circle that has no natural end. Why not, then, give it a supernatural end? Why did God not say: There shall be no more slavery?

The Torah has already given us an implicit answer. Change is possible in human nature but it takes time: time on a vast scale, centuries, even millennia.

There is little doubt that in terms of the Torah's value system the exercise of power by one person over another, without their consent, is a fundamental assault against human dignity. This is not just true of the relationship between master and slave. It is even true, according to many classic Jewish commentators, of the relationship between king and subjects, rulers and ruled. According to the sages it is even true of the relationship between God and human beings. The Talmud says that if God really did coerce the Jewish people to accept the Torah by "suspending the mountain over their heads" ([Shabbat 88a](#)) that would constitute an objection to the very terms of the covenant itself. We are God's avadim, servants, only because our ancestors freely chose to be (see [Joshua 24](#), where Joshua offers the people freedom, if they so chose, to walk away from the covenant then and there).

So slavery is to be abolished, but it is a fundamental principle of God's relationship with us that he does not force us to change faster than we are able to do so of our own free will. So Mishpatim does not abolish slavery but it sets in motion a series of fundamental laws that will lead people, albeit at their own pace, to abolish it of their own accord. Here are the laws:

"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything . . . But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life. ([Ex. 21: 2-6](#))

What is being done in these laws? **First**, a fundamental change is taking place in the nature of slavery. No longer is it a permanent status; it is a temporary condition. A Hebrew slave goes free after seven years. He or she knows this. Liberty awaits the slave not at the whim of the master but by divine command. When you know that within a fixed time you are going to be free, you may be a slave in body but in your own mind you are a free human being who has temporarily lost his or her liberty. That in itself is revolutionary.

This alone, though, was not enough. Six years are a long time. Hence **the institution of Shabbat**, ordained so that one day in seven a slave could breathe free air: no one could command him to work:

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...But the Torah is acutely aware that not every slave wants liberty. This too emerges out of Israelite history. More than once in the wilderness the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt. ... Freedom carries a highest price, namely, moral responsibility. Many people have shown what Erich Fromm called "fear of freedom." Rousseau spoke of "forcing people to be free" – a view that led in time to the reign of terror following the French revolution.

The Torah does not force people to be free but it does insist on a ritual of stigmatization. If a slave refuses to go free, his master "shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl." Rashi explains:

Why was the ear chosen to be pierced rather than all the other limbs of the body? Said Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai: ...The ear that heard on Mount Sinai: "For to Me are the children of Israel servants" and he, nevertheless, went ahead and acquired a master for himself, should [have his ear] pierced! Rabbi Shimon expounded this verse in a beautiful manner: Why are the door and the doorpost different from other objects of the house? G-d, in effect, said: "The door and doorpost were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintel and the two doorposts, and I said: 'For to me are the children of Israel servants' " —they are My servants, not servants of servants, and this person went ahead and acquired a master for himself, he shall [have his ear] pierced in their presence.

A slave may stay a slave but not without being reminded that this is not what God wants for His people. The result of these laws was to create a dynamic that would in the end lead to an abolition of slavery, at a time of free human choosing.

And so it happened. The Quakers, Methodists and Evangelicals, most famous among them William Wilberforce, who led the campaign in Britain to abolish the slave trade were driven by religious conviction, inspired not least by the biblical narrative of the Exodus, and by the challenge of Isaiah "to proclaim freedom for captives and for prisoners, release from darkness" ([Is. 61: 1](#)).

Slavery was abolished in the United States only after a civil war, and there were those who cited the Bible in defence of slavery. As Abraham Lincoln put it in his second Inaugural: **"Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged."**

Yet slavery was abolished in the United States, not least because of the affirmation in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," and are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights, among them "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson, who wrote those words, was himself a slave-owner. Yet such is the latent power of ideals that eventually people see that by insisting on their right to freedom and dignity while denying it to others, they are living a contradiction. That is when change takes place, and it takes time.

If history tells us anything it is that God has patience, though it is often sorely tried. He wanted slavery abolished but he wanted it to be done by free human beings coming to see of their own accord the evil it is and the evil it does. The God of history, who taught us to study history, had faith that eventually we would learn the lesson of history: that freedom is indivisible. We must grant freedom to others if we truly seek it for ourselves.