Review of Book by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

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Rabbi Dr. Drazin served for 31 years as a chaplain in the US Army and attained the rank of brigadier general. He has a PhD in Judaic studies, as well as master's degrees in psychology and Hebrew literature. He is the author of many books and articles.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks' Legacy

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who was born in 1948 and died on November 7, 2020, was a British Orthodox rabbi, philosopher, theologian, award-winning author, an international religious leader, respected moral voice, and public figure. He served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. He held a number of professorships at several academic institutions including Yeshiva University, in New York, and King's College in London. He was a frequent contributor to radio, television and the press around the world. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair called him "an intellectual giant." He was awarded the 2016 Templeton Prize for his "exceptional contributions to affirming life's spiritual dimension." He received 18 honorary doctorates. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, conferred him a Doctor of Divinity for his remarkable work. But it was not only politicians and intellectuals who read his brilliant writings. Average Jews and non-Jews read what he wrote and found them enjoyable, eye-opening, and inspiring. Therefore the 2021 publication of his book "Studies in Spirituality: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible" by Maggid Books and OU Press will please many audiences.

Rabbi Sacks tells us that there is in Judaism an authoritative code of Jewish law, but no single spiritual dimension. Every individual can follow his and her own path to God. Maimonides says this in Mishna, Sanhedrin 10:3. There have been and

always will be many Jewish philosophers with different views as to what is important in life. There have been Jewish rationalists in the past who disagreed strongly with fellow Jewish mystics, and vice versa, and this continues today. This is fine. Rabbi Sacks writes about his book: “I hope the very personal nature of these essays helps you find your own way to the Divine Presence, which is always there: the music beneath the noise, the call beneath the clamour, the voice of God within the human soul.”

There is much in Rabbi Sacks' essays to make us think. He tells us in his introduction that spirituality is not the same as religion, though the two are related. Spirituality happens when we open ourselves to something greater than ourselves. Different people find it in different places, the beauty of nature, art, music, prayer, doing a good deed, learning a sacred text, in helping people, in friendship, in love. He says that he decided to write about spirituality because he saw that so many people search for it but are unable to find it.

In his first essay he asks, what was the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Why was it forbidden? Don’t people need to know the difference between good and evil? Didn’t Adam have this knowledge before he ate the fruit of the tree since he was created in the image and likeness of God? He explains that the tale is about the kind of morality we are called upon to live, and he explains that it has to do with the requirement to learn to listen. He tells us that there is much in this world we must listen to.

In his second essay he speaks about Judaism’s teaching that we must exercise the power to pioneer, to do something new, to take the road less travelled, to venture out into the unknown.

Later he speaks about not crying out to God in anger or anguish, but, instead, hearing the still small voice saying, “The next step depends on you.”

When he spoke about the patriarch Isaac, he asked, didn’t he see that his son Esau was not a man of God? And he replies, “A father must love his son because he is his son…. Unconditional love is not uncritical, but it is unbreakable. This is how we should love our children – for it is how God loves us.”

He raises many other questions in other essays and answers them, many. Why are Jews defined as the descendants of Jacob, the children of Israel? Jacob is the man who has the deepest spiritual experiences alone, at night, in the face of danger and far from home. He gives us the remarkable, indeed brilliant, interpretation of Rashi’s grandson Rashbam about Jacob wrestling with a

stranger. About having fear and overcoming it.

He advises us to have the courage to admit mistakes while telling us the observation of a politician who told him that politicians never admit their mistakes.

He repeats his lesson about listening near the end of his excellent book. The most important word in Judaism is shema, “hear,” “listen,” “pay attention.” It is the motif-word of the book of Deuteronomy. Time and time again in the last month of his life, Moses told his people shema. It appears in the book 92 times.

We will gain much by listening to Rabbi Sacks.