



Yeshiva University
THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS–HERENSTEIN
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP

Not in God's Name: Rabbi Sacks and the War in Israel

Dr. Shira Weiss

Hamas' recent surprise attack on Israel has been described as unprecedented in terms of orchestration and scale, yet the tragically familiar conflict has drawn numerous parallels to Israel's previous wars with neighboring enemies. Amidst the confusion, trepidation, and outrage in the aftermath of unimaginable savagery, the leadership, voice, and perspective of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is sorely missed. Though he did not witness the reprehensible events of Oct. 7th, eight years ago, upon the publication of *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, he presciently described what evil could transpire in the name of a sacred cause and the urgent need to combat it.

In his book, Rabbi Sacks warned his readers of dire consequences if they neglected to confront the ideology that caused past barbarism. He cautioned that the world would become more religious in the next generation, with the most extreme movements prevailing; while the West's ideals of reverence, loyalty, human dignity, collective responsibility, and respect for religious values would rapidly dissipate. Moral relativism in the guise of the promotion of freedom would replace such values but would be no defense to oppose those waging war against the West and its liberties.¹ If relativism is true, then nothing can be said absolutely to be wrong since others may see it differently, even the killing of civilians or the use of children as human

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (Schocken Books, 2015), 257.

shields. Such discourse, Rabbi Sacks wrote, would be utterly inadequate to address the contemporary challenge.² This has become all too evident in recent days on college campuses throughout the US, where students and leaders have failed to draw clear moral lines or condemn blatant immorality.

Rabbi Sacks anticipated that what he witnessed in his day would only intensify in the years to come.

There will be more terror, more bloodshed, and more civil war in the Middle East and Africa. Other countries, like Jordan and Lebanon, may be drawn into the abyss. There will be further barbaric new crimes against humanity, broadcast courtesy of the Internet. There will be rising tension in every European country. People will feel that their liberties are being threatened but will have no clear idea of how to respond. Every time a movement like al-Qaeda is defeated, another will arise to take its place. Young people, in search of meaning, identity and community, will continue to be recruited to the cause.³

Rabbi Sacks highlighted the unparalleled nature of this enemy and the unique challenges that it poses. Unlike other nations or coalitions, these groups assemble, dissolve and reform without subscribing to war conventions. No uniforms distinguish combatants from civilians, and no international rules are upheld to protect victims from crimes against humanity. “Indeed, the radicals pride themselves on their inhumanity. They have no qualms against butchering and beheading those with whom they disagree, using civilians as human shields, turning people into slaves.”⁴ Such enemies are not open to compromise or rational exchange, but instead pride themselves on their willingness to die for their cause, pursuing genocide instead of peace.

Citing noted political theorist, Michael Walzer, Rabbi Sacks explained that the victims of terrorists are not limited to the bodies they murder or maim, but extend to

... the very values on which a free society is built: trust, security, civil liberty, tolerance, the willingness of countries to open their doors to asylum seekers, the gracious safety of public places. Religiously motivated terror desecrates and defames religion itself... Terror

² Ibid., 16.

³ Ibid., 258.

⁴ Ibid.

is not a justifiable means to an acceptable end, because it does not end. Terrorists eventually turn against their own people.⁵

Walzer described how terrorists progress from killing or intimidating those who stand in their way to eventually those they claim to represent. Without consent, their people ultimately bear the cost of their tyrannical rule. As if he were viewing the devastation in Gaza today, Rabbi Sacks affirmed, “There is no route from terror to a free society.”⁶ He warned eight years ago, “If we fail to address the issue seriously now, this will be our future. It is not one any of us should wish to bequeath to our grandchildren...”⁷ That which Rabbi Sacks depicted has tragically become a reality. Military and political officials are now calling for responses far different and more extensive than measures which have proven ineffective in the past to sustain lasting security.

This, unfortunately, is not a new battle. Rabbi Sacks traced the progression of hatred for Jews throughout history-- in the Middle Ages when they were hated for religion, in the 19th – 20th centuries for race, and today for their nation-state, Israel, as antisemitism is commonly disguised as anti-Zionism in the West.⁸ He lamented how society has failed to acknowledge the role antisemitism plays in the legitimization of evil.

It is the first warning sign of a culture in a state of cognitive collapse. It gives rise to that complex of psychological regressions that lead to evil on a monumental scale: splitting, projection, pathological dualism, dehumanization, demonisation, a sense of victimhood, and the use of a scapegoat to evade moral responsibility. It allows a culture to blame others for its condition without ever coming to terms with it themselves.⁹

Rabbi Sacks equated the antisemitism pervasive in modern Arab and Islamic lands and broadcasted throughout the world to that in Europe between 1880 – 1945. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the international community undertook efforts to ensure that “the virus of

⁵ Ibid., 265-66.

⁶ Ibid. See Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 65.

⁷ Ibid., 258.

⁸ Ibid., 260.

⁹ Ibid., 259.

antisemitism would never again infect the body politic”¹⁰ and vowed to never forget its casualties, yet some now seem to have selective memory. Even more egregious, the war crimes that the Nazis tried to hide, Hamas publicize on social media, but many throughout the globe still seek to justify their atrocities. The brutality that was exhibited on Oct 7th reminded the world that nearly eighty years after WWII, Jews are still being massacred, within living memory of the Holocaust. At his upcoming bar mitzvah, Ariel Zohar, a 12-year-old boy from Nir Oz, the only survivor of his family of five, will don the *tefillin* of his late father given to him by his 90-year-old grandfather, who similarly at age 14 was the sole survivor of his murdered family in the *Shoah*.¹¹ While Jewish continuity and the unbroken tradition live on, so do the fear and horror.

Reflecting upon religious violence, Rabbi Sacks bemoaned, “Too often in the history of religion, people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love and practised cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.”¹² Most conflicts in reality, however, have nothing to do with religion, but rather revolve around power, territory, and glory. Yet if religion can be enlisted, it will be.¹³ To the contrary, Rabbi Sacks emphasized, “No soul was ever saved by hate. No truth was ever proved by violence. No redemption was ever brought by holy war. No religion won the admiration of the world by its capacity to inflict suffering on its enemies.”¹⁴

Rabbi Sacks called upon humanity to protest such hate, violence and affliction and instead uphold fundamental truths by building up community, democracy, tolerance, respect for each other and for the sanctity of life that the terrorists seek to destroy. The State of Israel

¹⁰ “The Mutating Virus: Understanding Antisemitism,” <https://www.rabbisacks.org/videos/mutating-virus-understanding-antisemitism/>

¹¹ <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3617238>

¹² Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

continues to promote such values in its defense against its neighbors, transforming the existential condition of the Jewish people from perpetual victimhood to pride and self-reliance.¹⁵ In a chapter entitled, “Faith as Protest,” in *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Sacks affirmed the value of human protest against immorality. “He [God] does not want the people of the covenant to be one that accepts the evils and injustices of the world as the will of God... In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be.”¹⁶ The Jewish community in Israel and in the Diaspora, alongside allies throughout the world, has united in protest against the horrific reality that currently is, to fight for the world that is not yet but ought to be. Long-term moral fortitude is needed now to continue the protest on behalf of the murdered, captured, and courageous defenders on the challenging road that lies ahead. Throughout his works, Rabbi Sacks described Judaism as God’s call to human responsibility. It is now left to his readers to heed his charge by contributing to not only the Jewish, but to the human story, to heal the wounds of an injured world with justice, compassion, and dignity.

¹⁵ Daniel Gordis, *Impossible Takes Longer* (Ecco, 2023), 4.

¹⁶ Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Schocken Books, 2007), 25-27.