

The 2010 Morris and Manja Leigh Lecture

The challenge of contemporary antisemitism: We must not dwell alone

Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks

June 2010

The Morris and Manja Leigh lecture is an annual JPR event at which leading public figures – politicians, academics, journalists involved in contemporary Jewish affairs – share their thoughts with JPR supporters from across the world about a key issue of the day. Sponsored and hosted by JPR President Lord Leigh of Hurley in memory of his late grandfather and step-grandmother, it is one of the highlights of JPR's annual calendar. The 2010 lecture was delivered by the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, one of the world's leading Jewish thinkers of our time. The text below is a transcript of his remarks.

May I, first of all, just say what a privilege I regard it to be able to meet with the Institute for Jewish Policy Research. Thank you Howard [Leigh], for chairing this evening, and Harold [Paisner] for chairing JPR, and may I wish Jonathan Boyd and the JPR team every success. JPR is a wonderful organisation and very important. It is very important for us to be informed about our present and our future in a rational and research-based way and therefore may I wish you continued success in all JPR's work.

May I also say what an honour, a genuinely humbling honour, it is to be able just to say a few words in memory of the late Morris and Manja Leigh. Morris was such a lovely human being. I didn't know about his business career; I just knew him to be kind, wise, gentle and generous on an immense scale. I always found him to be a true gentleman. You know the Hebrew language has been around for a very long time, 4,000 years, probably the oldest still continuously spoken language anywhere in the world, and yet in all those 4,000 years would it surprise you that there is no Hebrew word that means 'tact'. You tell an Israeli this and they say '*ah, b'lvrit tact ze tact*'. Would it equally surprise you that there is no Hebrew word to this day for 'understatement.' But Morris was tactful and understated. He just was. He did so much but sought so little honour for it, so little attention, he was a wonderful, wonderful man. I dearly loved him. The first time we met he told me how, as a child of eight, he had been in the choir in his shul in Stamford Hill, and how much those memories, that love of Judaism and its traditions and its music, stayed with him. He was just wonderful. Of course, Manja was gracious, warm, incredibly cultured, incredibly human and, at the same time, had a lovely gracious smile that lit up the room whenever she was there. To be able just simply to pay a brief tribute to the memory of two remarkable people, we were so blessed, it is for me a great privilege.

Friends I can't possibly talk about *the* challenges facing the Jewish world but I just want to give you a brief insight into a couple of them. Let me begin with a story which actually happened, and which was very flabbergasting at the time. Around September 1999, our office received a call from a professor of medieval history at Boston University, Professor Richard Landes. He asked whether he could please have an appointment to meet the Chief Rabbi as he had something extremely urgent to tell me. I was so intrigued as to what possibly could be so urgent about medieval Jewish history, so I agreed to meet. We subsequently met up, and the story he had to tell me was just remarkable. It turns out that Professor Landes is a specialist in millenarian movements. Millenarian movements, as you know, are sort of basically Christian '*moshiach now*' type movements,, of which there were many in the middle ages: the Hussites, the Ranters, the Levellers. Of course, with the year 2000 coming up it was a natural time to expect millenarian movements. And his study of millenarian movements had yielded the following law: that before every expected millennium there is a wave of philosemitism and, that after every millennium, there is a wave of antisemitism. He was sure that it was going to happen this time. The only thing he wasn't sure about was how, but this was his guess. If you remember at that time, four or five months before the millennium, there was an enormous worry about the 'millennium bug.' And so his guess was, like everyone else, that come January 1st 2000, all the computers would crash, there would be total chaos especially in the skies and air traffic control, and somehow or other, he wasn't quite sure how, everyone would blame the Jews. That was his best working hypothesis. Well, you know January 1st 2000 came and went, you know we weren't able to do much about it. If you remember it was a Friday night – Shabbos – although, as an aside, that did give us the chance of a wonderful gesture of solidarity. A couple of months beforehand, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, said: "You know, Jonathan, I know it's not your thing, but we would love to share with you the celebration of the millennium. Do you think there is some way we could do this?" He said: "For instance, we are asking all of our members to light a candle for the millennium." I said: "George, you know what? We'll go one better. We'll light two." Anyway, obviously the millennium came and went, and it was *shabbos* so we really didn't know what was going on. But I went out to see the world on 1st January 2000 and the world continued on its accustomed course, the millennium bug, as you know, was a figment of someone's imagination, and the result was that I turned to my wife, Elaine, and I said: "Landes got it wrong."

And then came September 29, 2000, the collapse of the peace process in the Middle East and the beginning of the so called 'Al Aqsa Intifada'. And then August 2001, that notorious United Nations conference against racism in Durban which saw the launch of a new virulent form of racism, or at least antisemitism, and then a week later, 9/11. And within two days of that, a *Wall Street Journal* survey of public opinion in Pakistan showed that at least 70% of the Pakistani public was convinced that the Israelis had done it. And I turned to Elaine and I said: "Landes got it right."

That was a long time ago and the last nine years have confirmed all of our fears. The world has changed for Jews. In 2000 you'll remember that Israel launched a peace process and was standing high in the opinion of the world. The Jewish community throughout the world had record levels of achievement, integration and success, antisemitism was at an all-time low. Since then difficult things have happened, and the Jewish world has been transformed by three phenomena in particular. Number one: the return, horrific to say, of a new strain of antisemitism. Number two: the progressive and continuing international isolation of Israel. And number three: our own internal problems within the Jewish community. In Britain, globally in the Diaspora, on average, sometimes a little less, sometimes a lot more, but on average one Jew in every two has decided not to marry another Jew, not to build a Jewish home, not to have Jewish children, not to continue the Jewish story. Those are the three main challenges and obviously I am only going to skim the surface tonight, but I did write a book on all of this, my most recent book *Future Tense*. So the fact is, with all the issues tonight, I only have time to look in any details at one or two of them.

I want to share with you my own concern, having been on the front line of the fight against antisemitism (and it's not just me, we've all been on the front line in the fight against antisemitism), making the case for Israel and the fight for Jewish continuity. As I wander through the Jewish world, I have been very struck by the way that not all Jewish responses have been terribly productive. These have puzzled me, which is why I wrote *Future Tense*. Not only to go through the problems one by one, but also to say that I think that there is something systemic, something which we are getting wrong, something fundamental that generates responses that are not always productive.

How can I possibly explain this to you except by way of a story. This is my favourite Jewish joke of all time. I was recently stuck in New York by the volcanic cloud just a couple of weeks ago, so it all came flooding back. There was this Jewish restaurant on a very humid summer's evening in New York, on the Lower East Side. And one of the diners, a rather loud and not entirely civilised individual, schlepps the waiter over and says: "Waiter, it's too hot in here. Put the air conditioning on." The waiter goes out, and then returns a few moments later. Ten minutes later the same diner turns to the same waiter and says: "Waiter! It's now too cold! Turn the air conditioning off." The waiter goes out, and returns again a few moments later. Another few minutes pass, and the diner calls the waiter over for a third time, and says: "Waiter it's too hot again! Turn the air conditioning back on!" As the waiter is about to go out for the third time, a man just by the door says to him: "Waiter, I feel so sorry for you. This man must be driving you mad." And the waiter says: "Well no, actually. I'm driving him mad. You see, there is no air conditioning."

This joke is enough to tell me that sometimes the climate in your head matters as much as the climate out there. So now I am going to tell you the moment when I suddenly realised that the climate inside our heads was all wrong. The date, Shavous 2001, we were in Jerusalem, the best place by far to celebrate Shavous, and we were having lunch with a former leader of Diaspora Jewry who had made *aliyah*, together with a very fine leader of Canadian Jewry, a former Justice Minister of Canada, Irwin Cotler, one of the world's great fighters against antisemitism, and a very distinguished Israeli diplomat. We were having lunch and Irwin and I were sharing notes about the forthcoming United Nations conference in Durban. Irwin was explaining that Israel had a problem in dealing with events like Durban because whilst Israel had mechanisms for dealing with other governments, it did not have such mechanisms in place for dealing with NGOs, and it had failed to understand how powerful an influence NGOs have, especially on the United Nations. And of course, as it turned out, NGOs were key to the events in Durban. Israel found itself isolated. And then the ambassador, attempting to cheer us up – he's a good man, and he meant nothing wrong, it was a beautiful thing for him to say – said: "Twas ever thus. We are *am levadad yishkon*, a people that dwells alone." That, of course, was his definition of Jewish destiny. Those famous words, taken from the Book of Numbers. We are a people that dwells alone. That was his view.

And I have heard that many, many times recently. In fact, on my way here this evening, I was reading a provincial Jewish newspaper from this Friday, and a front-page article highlighted how isolated Israel is, which again, instantly brought to mind those famous words. And it was at that moment that a light exploded in my brain. First of all, remember who said them. It was the prophet Balaam, who was not entirely a friend of the Jews. Second, remember what the *Talmud* in tractate *Sanhedrin* says about precisely that passage. "Every single blessing that Balaam gave eventually turned into a curse, with the one exception of "*ma tovu ohaleha yaacov miskonotecha yisrael*." As the *Talmud* says, this refers to *shuls* and houses of study. And think finally of the word *levad* or *levadad*. Is that a good thing to be in biblical terms? God creates the world and seven times pronounces it good: "*v'haya Elokim ki tov*." What is the first occasion the words 'not good' appear in the Bible? "*Lo tov lehiyot ha'adam l'vado*" – "it is not good for man to be alone." Secondly, what does it say about a leper – a *metzarah*? "*Badad yoshev mechutz lamachane moshav*." He shall dwell alone outside the camp. Most famously of all, on the saddest day of the year, on *Tisha b'Av* when we read the saddest book of the Bible – *sefer Eichah*,

the book of Lamentations – how does it begin? “*Eichah yashva vadad ha’ir rabati am*” - “How is the city once so full of people sitting in solitude!” My core argument of *Future Tense* is that if you define yourself as a people that dwells alone, there is every danger that you may find that that you become a people that dwells alone. And that is not a good way to solve the problems the Jewish people currently face. So let me relate that to just two major challenges that we are facing as the Jewish people: antisemitism and Jewish continuity.

Antisemitism. We are going through what has emerged in recent years as what I would call a new strain of antisemitism. What is antisemitism if you try and define it? Every time you try and define it, you result in a series of contradictions. In the 19th century, Jews were hated because they were capitalists and because they were communists, because they were rich and because they were poor, because they kept to themselves and because they infiltrated everywhere. Because, said Voltaire, they are a superstitious people with a primitive religious faith, and because, said Lenin, they are rootless cosmopolitan civilians. Wherever you look you find yourself faced with a contradiction, and therefore I argue the only way really to understand antisemitism is to see it as a virus.

Now the body has this most sophisticated of all mechanisms called the immune system, and the immune system is very good at dealing with viruses. So how does the virus beat the immune system? The answer is by mutating, and that is how antisemitism always defeats every attempt to end it. It mutates, and there have been, in broad terms, three mutations in the last two thousand years, and we are living through the fourth. What do I mean? Number one: If you look into the history of antisemitism you will see that it begins with the Hellenistic period, with the Greeks and the Romans, many of whom had quite negative things to say about Jews. Now I don’t see that as antisemitism at all. In fact, the Greeks especially attempted to say that about anyone who wasn’t Greek. They regarded them as merely a flock of sheep, so they called them barbarians. That’s the sound that sheep make. If you’re not Greek, you’re a Barbarian. So they said unpleasant things about Jews, but they said that about everyone. It was like when the mafia shoot you in ‘The Godfather Part Two.’ Just before you ‘sleep with the fishes,’ they say: “Nothing personal. Strictly business.” So I don’t call the anti-Judaic sentiment that you find in a number of Greek and Roman writers, antisemitism. I call it xenophobia, which is different.

When does it become personal? The short answer is that that happens pretty soon in the second generation of Christianity. All of a sudden, the Jews were the people who didn’t accept their own messiah. A friend of mine who is a wonderful literary guy in Washington is writing a book on why Jews never accept the messiah. You know the answer to the question ‘has the messiah come?’ is always: not yet. And he’s writing this brilliant book, and whenever his publisher asks if it’s ready, his answer is always ‘not yet.’ So, with the birth of Christianity, suddenly a theological anti-Judaism appears. Here you’ll find anti-Jewish sentiment already in the gospels, getting progressively worse from Matthew to Luke and then to John, and you’ll find it in the Church Fathers, where the literature becomes virulently antisemitic in the end of the first and then the second and third centuries. So that is mutation one.

Mutation two – difficult to give it a date but let’s fix on 1096, when on their way to liberate Jerusalem, the Crusaders massacred Jewish communities in the north of Europe, and all of a sudden, Christian anti-Judaism becomes a kind of demonic anti-Judaism. Jews are no longer merely the people who reject Christianity. They become the people who spread the plague and poison wells, desecrate the hosts, and who kill Christian children to use their blood to make matzas. They become Satan, the anti-Christ, the agents of evil in some way, and that spreads its ripples throughout the Middle Ages. That moves from simple anti-Judaism to demonic anti-Judaism, what one Christian historian calls the beginning of a persecution society.

We know mutation three. You can date that to 1879 when the new word antisemitism was coined for the first time by a German journalist called Wilhelm Marr. It's fascinating that the word 'antisemitism' did not exist before 1879, when all of a sudden, Christian anti-Judaism mutates into racial antisemitism. And, of course, at that moment already in 1879, it moves into an altogether darker movement, because whilst you can change your faith, you cannot change your race. Whereas Christians would work for the conversion of Jews, racial antisemitism could only work for the extermination of the Jews.

We are now living through the fourth mutation. It differs from the others in various respects. Number one: the new antisemitism, unlike the old, is not directed against Jews as individuals, but rather at Jews as a nation with their own state. It is directed primarily against the State of Israel, but it gets all Jews as presumptively Zionist, hence imperialistic, usurpers and all the rest of it. And all the medieval myths have been recycled. It was Jews who were responsible for 9/11. It was Israel that was responsible for the tsunami – prompted by nuclear underwater testing by Israel. What?! You didn't know this?! I always wonder, have they blamed us for the oil spill yet? Just wait. Be patient. You know they're working on it. And so on. So that is the first characteristic which didn't exist before, because Jews as a nation state in their own land didn't exist before. In other words, we have at least 82 Christian nations as part of the United Nations, there are 56 Islamic states, and there is only one Jewish state, but that, for many people, is one too many. It is far too big. What do the Jews need all that land for? You know there's a lovely park in South Africa, with all the lions and giraffes and things, called Kruger National Park. It's a really lovely park. The State of Israel is smaller than the Kruger National Park. But it's too big. So we now have this new form of anti-Zionism about which I think the sharpest comment was made by Amos Oz. He said: in the 1930s, antisemites stood up and said 'Jews – get out and go to Palestine!' Today they stand up and say 'Jews out of Palestine!' They don't want us to be here, they don't want us to be there, they don't want us to be.

That is the first difference. The second difference is that other forms of antisemitism, especially racial antisemitism, were carried by national cultures, so that you could ask at the time of the Dreyfus trial: is France an antisemitic country? Or you could ask whether 'Germany' is antisemitic, or whether Austria is, or whether Italy is, or whether Britain is an antisemitic country? In those days, antisemitism was carried by national cultures, so there were some antisemitic nations and there were some nations that were distinctly not. But today, there is no such thing as a national culture. Today, antisemitism, as well as hate and paranoia in general, but antisemitism in particular, is carried by the new global media which are extremely focused and extremely targeted, so you can get major incidents of antisemitism in a country that is not antisemitic at all. *L'havdil*, on the contrary, if we take a slightly different look at it, the suicide bombers of 7/7 were, after all, born in Britain, they lived in Britain, they were educated in Britain, and their own friends and neighbours thought that they were perfectly nice people. They didn't know until after 7/7, and after those video testimonies were shown, what deep hatred they had conceived of Britain. So it is very hard to identify, and it is very easy to become very paranoid. So there is no such thing anymore of antisemitism as a phenomenon of national cultures, unless a politician decides to make that part of the public discourse of politics – and when that happens, as it has happened very recently in the case of Turkey, we're in a very dangerous situation. But the new antisemitism by and large is not conveyed like the old.

And finally, the legitimation of it. We often fail to realise that it is not easy to justify hating people. It really isn't. It is very easy to move people to hate, but it is very hard to make them feel that they are justified in hating. And therefore, antisemitism has always had to be legitimated by the supreme source of moral authority in a culture at any given time. What was the supreme source of moral authority in Europe in the Middle Ages? The church, religion. And therefore, antisemitism in the Middle Ages was religious. But you could not justify hatred on religious grounds in post-enlightenment emancipated Europe of the 19th century. So what was the highest authority in Europe in the 19th

century? The answer was science. Science was the new glittering paradigm, and therefore you will find that 19th and early 20th century antisemitism was legitimated by two of what we now know to be pseudo sciences. Number one was the so-called scientific study of race, and number two the so-called science known as social Darwinism: the idea that just as in nature, so in society, the strong survive by eliminating the weak. Today, science is no longer the highest authority because although it has given us unprecedented powers, among those powers are the power to destroy life on earth. So what is the supreme moral authority today? Moral authority, the supreme moral authority since the Holocaust, since the United Nations universal declaration in 1948, is human rights. Today the supreme moral authority is human rights, so if you are going to justify antisemitism today, it will have to be by reference to human rights. And that is why in Durban in 2001 Israel was accused by the human rights NGOs of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, attempted genocide and crimes against humanity. Those are the things that make the new antisemitism different from the old.

Now let me tell you what I wonder. In 2003 – I think I have the date right – a conference of European Rabbis and the European Jewish Commission (EJC) persuaded the European Union to hold an international conference on antisemitism in its Brussels headquarters. What did I see when we got there, to my horror? The conference hall was full, but at least 95% of those present were Jews, maybe even 99%. And I thought, *Ribbono shel olam*, is this how you fight antisemitism? By telling a whole hall full of Jews that *goyim* don't like us? And that was when I got up and said to Mr Prodi, who was then head of the EU, and the other European leaders who were there, that Jews cannot fight antisemitism alone. The victim cannot cure the crime. The hated cannot cure the hate. I will stand up for the right of any Christian anywhere in the world to live his or her faith without fear, but I need you, Christians, to stand up for my right as a Jew to live anywhere in the world without fear. I led in 2003, it is fair to say, that we led the campaign against Islamophobia in Britain, and I was, and am, always willing to lead that campaign, but I need you to stand up and oppose Judeophobia. And, *baruch Hashem*, our community really listened and shared that view, and as a result we are perhaps the only country in the world at this point where the fight against antisemitism is led by non-Jews: by the parliamentary enquiry into antisemitism headed up by Denis MacShane; by the all-party parliamentary committee against antisemitism still headed by John Mann; by the interdepartmental government committee covering nine departments set up by Gordon Brown and continued by David Cameron, which is monitoring antisemitism in so far as it touches on every aspect of national life. This is a wonderful thing and is something that must be continued. In February 2009 the British Foreign Office and Home Office hosted an international conference of parliamentarians against antisemitism that was hosted by the government, not by the Jewish community, and parliamentarians came from forty different countries, almost all of whom were not Jewish. Britain is the first country – Canada will shortly become the same – and you listen to the difference it makes. Do you remember that Ken Livingstone invited a certain Imam to Britain – someone we wouldn't think very highly of – on two occasions. If you remember, on the first occasion the Jewish community protested, but we had zero impact. Livingstone simply ignored the community and went ahead. But on the second occasion, who opposed the visit? Not just Jews. It was a combination of Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, moderate Muslims, gays and women's rights activists, and the second time Livingstone just backed down without a fight. That is the power of not seeking to be alone.

So don't think we are *am levadad yishkon* – a people that dwells alone. I am tremendously sorry because I have taken up all my allotted time talking about one problem, but I hope you will see how it affects other problems at the forefront of Jewish life. If we think of ourselves as being completely alone, we turn inwards, we talk to ourselves, and the end result is that we don't affect the world and we make ourselves really miserable. I think there are enough people making us miserable that we don't have to do that ourselves. A good bit of Jewish misery never did anyone any harm, but the truth is that this is not the best way forward. It is also not the best message to give to our children and

grandchildren if we want them to continue the struggle. Because the truth is that if we are people who are destined to dwell alone, do we want our children or grandchildren to carry that burden? I don't think so. They need a compelling answer to the question of what makes Jews Jewish. The answer cannot be the one that came out of American Jewry for twenty years: the Holocaust, and Fackenheim's 614th commandment to not hand Hitler a posthumous victory. When a whole community spends its major efforts building Holocaust museums, Holocaust memorials, Holocaust seminars, Holocaust conferences, Holocaust courses at university, Holocaust books. In the 1980s, one in every four books published on a Jewish theme was about the Holocaust! Believe you me, we need to remember, but I hope we have also decided collectively in Britain to be upfront about our Judaism, to let the broadcasters into our lives as Jews, to talk out there. What do we discover when we do that? We discover that non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. That I have always found. Non-Jews tend to be embarrassed by Jews who tend to be embarrassed about Judaism. When we all talk, we find that, yes, we may have enemies, but we also have friends. Many real, good and true friends, and we will have more if we make the effort. Therefore, my argument is that as the Jewish world worldwide is turning inwards, that is precisely the wrong way to go. Let us turn outwards. Let us share our faith with people, especially when you can do so as sadistically as I can every time I do 'Thought for the Day.' There they are – all those people listening, about to enjoy their day and, lo and behold, just as they're full of cheer and the joys of spring, there's the Chief Rabbi giving a sermon. All I can say in my defence is I try and make it short and clear. So friends, my argument is don't define ourselves as the people that dwells alone. Define ourselves, as I do in the last chapter in my book, as the voice of hope and the conversation of humankind. Jews, by surviving against all the odds, by believing in God who acts in history, by returning to their homeland after 2,000 years, by actually surviving as the State of Israel in a very difficult and hostile Middle East and, in doing so, becoming world leaders in medical, agricultural and computer information technology. We are a people that represents the power of hope. If we define ourselves in that way, we will have many more friends, many more Jewish grandchildren, and altogether a safer and brighter future.

/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The **Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)** is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life. It has undertaken numerous studies of antisemitism over many years including the two European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights surveys of Jewish people's perceptions and experiences of antisemitism in multiple EU Member States (2013 and 2018), and *Antisemitism in contemporary Great Britain* (2017), the most extensive assessment of attitudes towards Jews and Israel ever undertaken in the UK.

/ About Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks

Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks is the author of over thirty books, including *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*; *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning*; *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, which was the winner of the Grawemeyer Prize for Religion in 2004 for its success in defining a framework for interfaith dialogue between people of all faith and of none; *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*; and *A Letter in the Scroll: On Being Jewish*, winner of a National Jewish Book Award in 2000.

As a biblical scholar, Chief Rabbi Sacks has published a new English translation and commentary for the *Koren Sacks Siddur*, the first new Orthodox siddur in a generation, as well as powerful commentaries for the Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot Machzorim. His *Covenant & Conversation* commentaries on the weekly Torah portion are read in Jewish communities around the world.

A renowned public speaker, Chief Rabbi Sacks has been invited to deliver lectures and talks at prestigious academic institutions and venues around the world. In recognition of his work, he has received many awards including the Jerusalem Prize in 1995 for his contribution to diaspora Jewish life.

Rabbi Sacks was knighted by Her Majesty the Queen in 2005 and made a Life Peer, taking his seat in the House of Lords in October 2009.

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