

# *What Gentiles Can Learn From Lord Sacks*

The late British rabbi was the most gifted voice for biblical belief of our time.

By Meir Soloveichik

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Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks at the Vatican, Nov. 17, 2014.

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Lord Jonathan Sacks, a former chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, died Saturday at 72. When I first heard the news, my mind went to one of the least Jewish places in the world: the Vatican.

In 2014 we joined other faith leaders and theologians at a Holy See-sponsored conference on the institution of the family. Sacks's spellbinding speech combined science, sociology and the Bible—all analyzed with the eloquence that made him famous. “The family,” he told the audience, “man, woman, and child, is not one lifestyle choice among many. It is the best means we have yet discovered for nurturing future generations and enabling children to grow in a matrix of stability and love.”

Sacks concluded that when husband and wife turn in faithfulness to one another, “we come as close as we will ever get to God himself, bringing new life into being, turning the prose of biology into the poetry of the human spirit, redeeming the darkness of the world by the radiance of love.” It was the only moment I can recall that the conference's entire audience rose in sustained applause. In the center of what had been called Christendom, a rabbi best expressed what the West had once believed.

The moment reflected what may be Sacks's most important legacy. Tributes to him have described his influence on the Jewish community; his globally popular writings on the Torah; and his many books in which he brilliantly expounded Judaic ideas. But he also was—for Europe in general and the U.K. in particular—the most gifted voice for biblical belief in his time.

There was a certain symmetry there. Britain gave the contemporary world two of its most influential atheists, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. And it was the same nation's chief rabbi who developed the most forceful response to them. Sacks debated Mr. Dawkins directly on television. In one exchange, Sacks said that in attacking Jewish scripture without looking to how religious tradition had interpreted them, Mr. Dawkins imitated anti-Semites. Throughout European history bigots had twisted Hebraic texts to foment hatred of the Jewish faith.

Sacks wrote that for all their fame as critics of traditional religion, the New Atheists lacked “the passion of Spinoza, the wit of Voltaire, the world-shattering profundity of Nietzsche.” One failed, he reflected, to get the slightest sense that they have grappled with the issues that science alone could not address: “the existence or non-existence of an objective moral order, the truth or falsity of the idea of human freedom, and the ability or inability of society to survive without the rituals, narratives and shared practices that

create and sustain the social bond.” To atheists like Mr. Dawkins, Sacks applied a beloved aphorism, adapted from an Oxford don: On the surface he’s profound, but deep down he’s superficial.

Europe’s embrace of secularism, Sacks noted, was followed by a refusal to have children. “Europe is dying,” he bluntly observed in 2009. He said this was an unspeakable truth but he said it all the same. And because he always spoke in a measured manner, without antagonism, his voice reverberated. In the 20th century it was communism that posed the greatest threat to people of faith. Several European leaders capably made the case against it. In 21st-century Europe, contemporary secularism continues its societal march, and it was Sacks who most ably stood atop the rhetorical religious ramparts. Who will take his place?

The tragedy of Sacks’s death was rendered more profound by its timing. His funeral ought to have been attended not only by rabbis but by priests, prime ministers, cardinals, archbishops, and members of the royal family. All of them were inspired by his ideas, and many looked to him as Europe’s defender of faith. But Sacks died during the U.K. Covid-19 lockdown. The mere legal maximum of 30 people took part in paying tribute to this remarkable man.

In her eulogy, Sacks's daughter Gila described how, immediately after her father's death, she turned to his most recently published reflections on the Torah passage read in synagogue that Sabbath. Jews around the world will continue to read his exegetical insights and learn from his remarkable mind. In this we will find consolation. But for other Europeans of faith whose greatest intellectual defender is now gone, what has been lost may well be irreplaceable.

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