

To Speak in Harmony with your Heart and Mind

by [Petr Chylek](#) (July 2025)



Figures on a Park Bench (Yossi Stern)

In last month's [essay](#) (*New English Review*, June 2025), we examined the differences between Orthodox and Reform Judaism. How distinct are their teachings and practices regarding beliefs and political engagement? While we discussed the Orthodox and Reform movements in the United States, a similar distinction exists in the United Kingdom. Now, I would like to share a story about the late Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, of

the United Kingdom, who strove to represent all Jews, including Orthodox and Reform, and the challenges he faced in pursuing this goal.



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

In the 19th century, Rabbinic Judaism split into several Jewish streams or denominations. A pivotal event occurred in 1885 when several former European Rabbis gathered in Pittsburgh to officially establish Reform Judaism. While the differences between Reform and Orthodox Judaism are many, the most significant distinctions are as follows: Orthodox Jews view the Torah as God's instruction for all times and places, whereas Reform Jews acknowledge the necessity of reinterpreting the Torah's meaning in each new generation. Orthodox Jews believe in the physical resurrection of the dead at the time of the Messiah and in the obligation of all Jews to follow all commandments of the Torah, as well as the rules set out by Rabbis in the Talmud. In contrast, Reform Jews are not required to believe in resurrection and can choose which commandments to observe or not observe.

The current Jewish population is approximately 8,000,000 in Israel and 7,500,000 in the U.S., [\[1\]](#) with much smaller groups in France and the UK. In the U.S., about 37% of Jews are Reform, while approximately 9% are Orthodox. About 75% of Reform Jews in the U.S. vote for Democrats, whereas around 80% of Orthodox Jews support the Republican Party. In Israel, only 3.5% identify as Reform, and 27% identify as Orthodox.

The freedom to express oneself in alignment with one's heart and mind is a fundamental human right. It sometimes diminishes even in so-called free countries, not due to governmental regulation, but because of the circumstances surrounding people's employment or the significance of their social status. Consider, for example, the recent UK Rabbi Sacks (1948-2020). Although he was often referred to as the Chief Rabbi of the UK, he was officially the Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox congregations, holding the title of Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. He became well-known for his efforts in promoting inter-religious dialogue, fighting against discrimination, and advocating for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. He was granted the title of Lord and became the most recognized spokesperson for the Jews in the UK.

Rabbi Gryn [\[2\]](#) was a leader of the UK Reform Movement, recognized by many as an outstanding figure supported by a significant portion of the Jewish population in the UK. He was referred to as "The most beloved rabbi in Great Britain." [\[3\]](#) When Rabbi Gryn (1930-1996) died, the Orthodox rabbis requested that Rabbi Sacks not attend Rabbi Gryn's funeral. Rabbi Sacks complied; however, he sent his wife to attend, which lessened the impact of his absence. His absence still shocked many Jews in the UK, as many considered Rabbi Sacks to be their chief rabbi, even if they were not Orthodox.

Some time after the funeral, however, Rabbi Sacks attended a memorial service for Rabbi Gryn. This drew disapproval from the rabbis in his Orthodox circles. To clarify his actions, he

wrote a personal letter to Orthodox rabbis explaining his attendance. He claimed that the main reason for attending the memorial service was to prevent the Reform movement from appointing its own Reform Chief Rabbi.[\[4\]](#) He also accused the Reform of being a “false grouping” and one of “those who destroy the faith.” The letter, written in Hebrew, was leaked to the press.

Another situation in which Rabbi Sacks had difficulty harmonizing his opinion with the expectations of the Orthodox Chief Rabbi occurred when his book, *Dignity of Difference*,[\[5\]](#) was published. In the book, Rabbi Sacks wrote:

God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to the Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims ... God is the God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity.

This statement might imply that Judaism doesn't include all truth and that other religions could also hold some truths. While many of us may agree with Rabbi Sacks' claim, he faced accusations of heresy from fellow Orthodox rabbis. In the later edition of the book, the controversial passages were removed. Rabbi Sacks acknowledged that there is a difference between his personal beliefs and what the Chief Rabbi is supposed to communicate.

Although millions admired Lord Sacks and he was held in high esteem in the UK and abroad, not all Jews in the UK were convinced. He was not recognized as a religious authority by Reform, Conservative, and Liberal Judaism, nor by the Haredi Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. Senior Reform Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner commented that Rabbi Sacks articulated the position of Orthodox Judaism. However, it was incorrect to assume that he reflected the views of the

majority of Jews in the UK. Some voices accused Rabbi Sacks of trying to please various audiences simultaneously without upsetting his Orthodox colleagues. Others called for Rabbi Sacks's resignation. [\[6\]](#)

Throughout his life, Rabbi Sacks challenged the views held by other rabbis. A few months before his death and shortly after the 2020 US election, he criticized American Jews for their support or opposition to the election of President Donald Trump. He said: [\[7\]](#)

I'm afraid American Jewry is making a big, big, big mistake. This is not a small thing. It's a very, very big thing. You mix religion and politics; you get terrible politics and even worse religion. I'm afraid I have absolutely not the slightest shred of sympathy for anyone who, as a rabbi, tells people how to vote.

This criticism was aimed at both Orthodox and Reform Rabbis involved in the US presidential election. For over a century, Jewish voters have consistently supported Democratic presidential candidates. There was no notable change in 2024 regarding this trend. Between 63% and 71% of American Jews voted for Kamala Harris. [\[8\]](#) The support reached approximately 81% among non-religious Jews who did not identify with major Jewish denominations.

On the day I learned about Rabbi Sacks' death, I visited his website and searched for his last essay. I found an essay written just a few days before his passing. I do not remember the title, but it addressed the riots in UK cities. Rabbi Sacks analyzed the causes of these riots and concluded that they were not due to British racism. Instead, he argued that about half of the children in the UK were born into single-parent families. Without proper collaboration and guidance

from both parents, these youths grew up like trees in a forest, which ultimately led to fires in the cities.

A few weeks later, I revisited the website to reread the essay, but I could no longer find it. It probably did not align with the progressive mood of the time. The guardians who protected the Rabbi's progressive reputation likely removed it from public view. Perhaps the essay will reappear someday.

I have enjoyed reading Rabbi Sacks' essays. In some cases, however, I felt he addressed the target audience superficially, without entirely investing his heart into his writing. That happens when someone tries to please multiple audiences with diverse interests simultaneously.

Rabbi Sacks attempted to address a challenging task: bridging the divide between Orthodox Judaism and Reform Judaism. Orthodoxy asserts that the literal interpretation of the Torah and Talmud serves as God's guidance for all times and places, and it is obligatory for all Jews. However, this is precisely what Reform opposes. Consequently, the tent meant to accommodate all Jews appears to be currently too small.

[1] Pew Research Center Report, May 11, 2021. 'Jewish Americans in 2020.'

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/the-size-of-the-u-s-jewish-population/>.

[2] Rabbi Hugo Gryn was born in Berehovo, which was then situated in the eastern part of Czechoslovakia. During the German occupation in 1938, the area was annexed by Hungary. After World War II, it was incorporated into the USSR, and it currently belongs to Ukraine.

[3] A. Friedlander, 'Obituary: Rabbi Hugo Gryn'. Independent, August 19, 1996.

[4] B. Elton, 'Rabbi Sacks: From Anglo-Jewry to Chief Rabbi of the World', Lehrhaus, January 11, 2021. <https://thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/rabbi-sacks-from-anglo>

[-jewry-to-chief-rabbi-of-the-world/.](#)

[5] J. Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2003.

[6] N. Teller, 'Reform Judaism in Britain'. The Jerusalem Post, September 17, 2020.

[7] P. Cramer, 'Rabbi Sacks on politics from the pulpit: US Jewry is making a mistake'. The Jerusalem Post, August 28, 2020.

[8] The Jerusalem Post, 'Almost one month after Election Day, here's what we know about how Jews voted'. [https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-832086.](https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-832086)

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