



TABLE TALK:

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the Blessings & Challenges of Unity

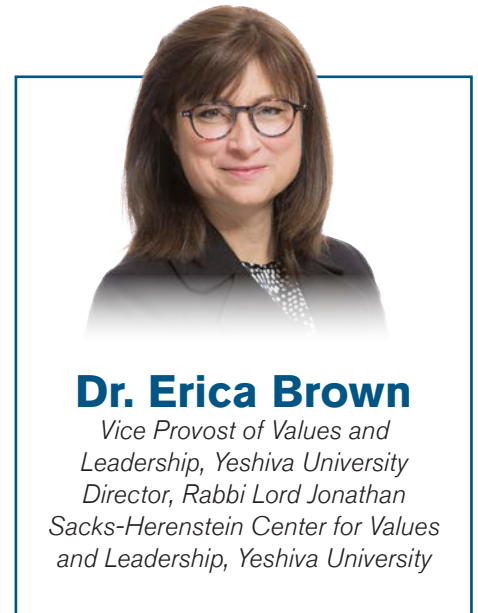
The word unity – *achdut* - communicates spiritual harmony, togetherness, shared values, a commitment to collective history, and a promising future together. Unity imparts feelings of belonging to a community of hope and a society joined by fate and faith.

This past year, we witnessed a tidal wave of Jewish unity in response to the terrors of October 7th and global antisemitism. Jews across the religious and political spectrum dropped their differences in Israel to grieve, to volunteer, to protect each other, and to rebuild from the ashes of that day.

But the emotional strength of unity post-October 7th has begun to unravel as the war continues. Political disagreements in Israel about security, the hostage situation, and the direction of the war chipped away at

the compassion and closeness in the immediate aftermath of October 7th. Progressive attacks on Israel in the Diaspora met with right-wing anger. Right-wing violence has produced new, unprecedented levels of anxiety. Service in the IDF pitted religious Zionists and secular Israelis against the Ultra-Orthodox with alarming levels of polarization. The noise about judicial reform that fired up protests in the summer of 2023 has returned. The public mechtza crisis in Tel Aviv of 2023 that some said would precipitate a civil war has resurfaced. A looming presidential election in the United States is splintering the Jewish community once again.

This fragmentation makes us wonder if unity is an impossible aspiration or a comfortable patina that masks true ideological divisions that make it hard to live together peaceably. Perhaps unity is



Dr. Erica Brown

*Vice Provost of Values and Leadership, Yeshiva University
Director, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership, Yeshiva University*

hard to sustain long-term. Since October 7th, many wonder what guidance and hope Rabbi Sacks would have offered to help us navigate these difficult issues. In this “Table Talk” we present some of his thinking on unity in general, with questions for further thought.

Unity Without Uniformity

“The proposition at the heart of monotheism is not what it has traditionally been taken to be: one God, therefore one faith, one truth, one way. To the contrary, it is that unity creates diversity. The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity: the thousands of different languages spoken by mankind, the hundreds of faiths, the proliferation of cultures, the sheer variety of the imaginative expressions of the human spirit, in most of which, if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of God telling us something we need to know. That is what I mean by the dignity of difference.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2003), p. 2.

Questions for Discussion:

- What do you think Rabbi Sacks meant by a unity that creates diversity?
- How would glorifying difference change our approach to unity?
- Within the parameters of a halakhic life, how can we practically encourage, inspire, and protect more singularity and less uniformity?

Unity at What Cost?

“Unity is undeniably a Jewish value, but not necessarily and in all circumstances a supreme and overriding one.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *One People* (Maggid, 2024), p. 39.

“...the division of the Jewish people into Orthodoxy and others, deeply tragic though it is, does not sanction the pursuit of unity at the cost of other values. Creating unity in the short term, if it involved abandoning covenantal imperatives that traditionally constituted Jewish peoplehood, would be both impossible and undesirable: impossible because it would mean abandoning values that are non-negotiable, undesirable because pluralism might result in greater disunity in the long term.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *One People* (Maggid, 2024), p. 39.

“Jewish unity is a cause that is not advanced by the advocacy of one point of view over another. It demands the difficult but not impossible exercise of thinking non-adjectivally as a Jew: not as a member of this or that group, but as a member of an indivisible people.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *One People* (Maggid, 2024), p. x.

Questions for Discussion:

- Is Jewish unity a cause?
- What can you do personally to break down divisions and labels within the Jewish community?

The Impact of Politics on Jewish Unity

“Politics and religion do not mix. They are inherently different activities. Religion seeks salvation, politics seeks power. Religion aims at unity, politics lives with diversity. Religion refuses to compromise, politics depends on compromise. Religion aspires to the ideal, politics lives in the real, the less-than-ideal. Religion is about the truths that do not change, politics is about the challenges that constantly change. Harold Wilson said, ‘A week is a long time in politics.’ The book of Psalms says, ‘A thousand years are in your sight as yesterday when it is gone’ (Psalm 90:4). When religion becomes political or politics becomes religious, the result is disastrous to religion and politics alike.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (Schocken, 2014), p. 228.

“To be sure, many elections in the past have been raw, rude and raucous in their rhetoric. That is part of the competitive spirit of electoral politics. But something new is happening: the sense that the other side is less than fully human, that its supporters are not part of the same moral community as us, that somehow their sensibilities are alien and threatening, as if they were not the opposition within a political arena, but the enemy full stop.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Basic Books, 2020), p. 222.

“When religion becomes politicised, or politics becomes religionized, bad things happen, and we must avoid that if we can. Politics speaks to our conflicting interests. Religion should speak to our shared responsibilities.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “*Religion Should Speak to Our Shared Responsibilities*,” (Feb. 1, 2008). <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/religion-should-speak-to-our-shared-responsibilities/>

Questions for Discussion:

- In what ways have you seen religion become politicized?
- In what ways have you seen politics become influenced by religion?
- Why does Rabbi Sacks strongly advocate a separation of these two domains?
- As we approach another heated presidential election in America, how can you model unity in place of the divisions that politics cast on our community today?