

Reversing the Trend

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks on Jewish Identity

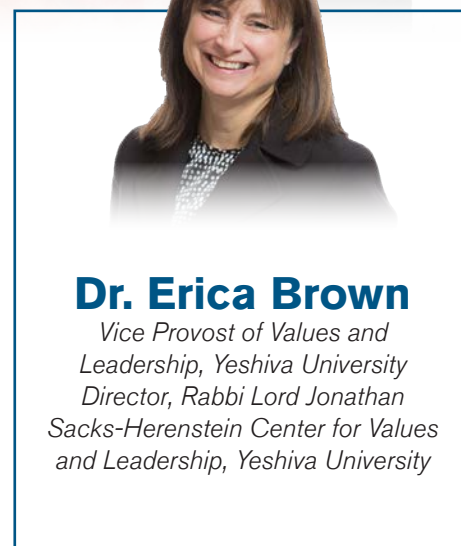
The Seder is our story-telling evening; we sit with family and friends around the table and discuss our ancient salvation and our belief in the Jewish present and future. In his Haggadah, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, zt”l, writes that “Pesach is the festival of Jewish identity. It is the night on which we tell our children who they are” (*The Chief Rabbi’s Haggadah*, p. 15). For so many of us, our children already know who they are. The Seder is a confirmation of a story we are continuously reviewing and telling.

As religiously observant Jews, we center our lives around *tefilla*, *Talmud Torah*, and *halakha*: prayer, Torah study, and Jewish law. We build our distinctiveness through the constancy of synagogue and school attendance. In-marriage is the norm. We are defined and nourished by our relationship to Israel, which does not waver with changing political winds. The current war has only bolstered that commitment.

Jewish identity feels secure across the generations. It is, for us, a thick identity, but one which, nevertheless, we cannot take for granted.

Yet the majority of diaspora Jewry does not share this confidence. In an August 2023 study conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Dr. Daniel Staetsky concludes that nearly 70% of secular Jews in the United States and almost 50% in Europe are married to non-Jews. As these numbers grow, the practical implications for Judaism are staggering and shattering. As a people, we are simply losing too many to attrition. Jewish identity for most is thin, precipitously thin.

The distinction between thick and thin identities was first made by Gilbert Ryle in his 1949 book *The Concept of Mind*. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz used this categorization in his famous work of ethnography, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, and political theorist Michael Walzer used it in *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad*. It is



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instructive when thinking about Jewish identity. Thick identities are generally comprised of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral commitments. We are who we are, and we care what we care about no matter the time or circumstance. Race, religion, gender, and familial relationships usually represent thick identities for most of us.

Thin identities are those we choose to adopt, even take seriously, but are

often temporary or do not involve deep practices or beliefs. They shift, morph, or disappear over time. All of us have aspects of our identities that are more stable and those that are more fluid and malleable.

Unfortunately, we often keep the gift of Jewish belonging, literacy and observance that thickens Orthodox identity to ourselves. Most of us do not share our Judaism broadly enough. If anything, we invest time and resources in protecting our spiritual lives and communities, tightening our hold on tradition, and closing others out, advertently or inadvertently. While the Haggadah opens with an invitation to all those who are hungry, the spiritually starving and those who do not even know how to ask are far away from our tables. The invitation to participate was never issued.

Rabbi Sacks, however, gave Judaism's gifts to the masses, distilling complex ideas into accessible teachings. He dedicated much of his writing and his rabbinate to strengthening those with thin Jewish identities. He understood that engaging and inspiring the community's margins was an act of Jewish leadership and responsibility. His very first book after he became Chief Rabbi was actually devoted to the subject, as is evident from its title: *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?* This is perhaps his shortest book, and since its publication in 1994, almost thirty years ago, we are still asking the same question.

Aware of the statistics, Rabbi Sacks used

his platform to contribute positively to changing the demographics by mining ancient wisdom and using it to address contemporary familial and social problems. He created a broad agenda for Jewish continuity in the United Kingdom and said that the first task is to create "a vision and a sense of urgency" (p. 119). He did not shy away from the truth and the difficult data: "There is nothing inevitable about Jewish identity in the diaspora, and there never was. In Israel one is Jewish by living in a Jewish state, surrounded by a Jewish culture and Jewish institutions. But elsewhere, being Jewish means going against the grain, being counter-cultural" (p. 38). He understood that there was a communal reckoning that needed to take place to reverse the trend and saw other Jewish leaders as accountability partners in the work with him.

Returning to the Passover theme, in *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?*, Rabbi Sacks cites the Gerrer Rebbe that the Four Sons of the Haggadah represent four generations. The wise son represents the traditions of home in the immigrant generation. The rebellious son assimilates. The simple son, the third generation, is confused; he has religious grandparents but not religious parents. The child of the fourth generation does not know how or what to ask. In each generation, there is a dilution of tradition. Rabbi Sacks addresses this directly:

"Our children are children of the fourth generation. Already it is clear that what we took for granted, they do not. They

do not take it for granted that they will belong to an Orthodox synagogue or indeed any synagogue. They do not take it for granted that they will marry, or marry another Jew, or stay married. They do not take it for granted that they will have Jewish children or that it is important to do so. Nothing can be taken for granted in the fourth generation, least of all in the secular, open society in which even a common moral code is lacking." (p. 60)

Rabbi Sacks challenges us to care about the loss of Jewish community and tradition not only through his writings but also, and primarily, through his personal leadership. This is what he paid attention to and asked the same of us: "The secret of Jewish continuity is that no people has ever devoted more of its energies to continuity. The focal point of Jewish life is the transmission of a heritage across the generations" (p. 34). Investing energy in the Jewish continuity of those most at risk was the focus of much of his rabbinate, his writing, and his teaching; he created a communal agenda and brought others into his vision so that he could answer the question that formed the title of the book in the affirmative.

Within our families and enclaves, we, too, can answer affirmatively that we have thick Jewish identities, Jewish grandchildren and students who will share and pass down the story of our people. But can we say that we have done all we can as individuals to strengthen the thin Jewish identity of our neighbors, friends, and colleagues? As Orthodox institutions, is this on our communal agendas? If it is not, then what kind of Jewish future will we have together?

Let all who are hungry, come and partake. There is always room for you at our table.



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