



FREEDOM AND THE FLAMES OF FAITH: A TRIBUTE TO RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS, ZT”L

In the year that I was born, a man named Manfred Anson molded and then modeled an exquisite piece of Judaica, replicas of which now sit in exhibitions in the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the National Museum of American History: the Liberty Menorah.¹

This brass-cast nine-branched candelabra is a blend of two distinct objects, both a century old but of disparate provenance — a traditional Polish menorah and a souvenir model of the Statue of Liberty. Atop each arm of Anson’s creation stands a figure of Lady Liberty holding a miniature scone aloft while resting on a base upon which is engraved milestone moments of Jewish history — from the Exodus to exile and the founding of the State of Israel.

And while the eagle that hovers over the composite menorah is an emblem that is indigenous to both Jewish and American traditions, one wonders whether this aesthetic blend is an indulgence of the artist’s idiosyncrasies rather than a synthesis of common creeds — whether this hybrid entity is an alliance of concordant civic spirits or a conglomeration of two inconsistent, even incompatible cultures.

On its face, the fusion of these two objects could not be more incongruous. Lady Liberty was gifted to the former British colonies in celebration of their rebellion against King George and their declaration of a new democratic republic committed to the separation of church and state. On the other hand, the menorah is an

object that celebrates the successful rebellion against the inventors of democracy and the establishment of a dynasty of priests who were to administer a theocratic monarchy. While the respective rebellions resemble a common denominator, there seems to be a deep disconnect in the details.

So this is our question: must we see the Liberty Menorah and feel a sense of manifest discrepancy? Put another way: can a single set of flames celebrate the reinstatement of an ancient monarchy while concurrently lionizing the world’s most prominent democracy? And to answer a question of this magnitude, we turn to the quintessential synthesizer — a man whose eloquence, gentility, and wisdom have steered us all, and whose

recent departure has left us all bereft — the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory.

Freedom as Creed

In a short essay written more than twenty-five years ago, “Democracy and Religious values,”² Rabbi Sacks makes the clear case that monarchy has never been at the center of the Jewish political spirit.

It is true that the first five books of the Bible present Moses as a model of authority, which — for all his humility — is as near absolute power as a person can come; other than his brother’s ultimate control over the sacramental rites of national life, Moses manages the military and heads the executive and judicial branches of Jewish governance. And it is true that as a result of Mosaic absolutism the Jews conquer their enemies, both foreign and domestic; are blessed with celestial amenities, both mundane and majestic; and acquire their cultural identity, unyielding and invested in healing the world.

But other than Moses, and a couple of model monarchs, Scripture is saturated with cases of kings failing to shield the nation, and our prophets offer more than their share of repudiation. Gideon — judge and consummate strategist — resists popular calls for him to serve as king, seeing the very request as near seditious, as an attempt to replace God with a human being. And when his prophetic successor, Samuel, faces a nation that again craves a king, his response is unequivocal: **וַיֹּרֶע הַדְּבָר** “**וַיִּבְעֵי יְיָ שְׁמוֹאֵל**” “The matter was evil in Samuel’s eyes.”³

In the words of Rabbi Sacks, Moses and David are exceptions to the rule, where absolute monarchs can be

reliable models of piety and agents of liberty only when informed by God — “without prophecy a society can become corrupt at the top.”⁴ What then, until a time when prophecy reigns again, is the truest expression of the Jewish political spirit?



The Liberty Menorah

For Rabbi Sacks, “There is a route to be charted from biblical principles to democratic government.”⁵ In fact, he claims, that is precisely the route that pre-modern, non-Jewish scholars took to fashion the West as we know it today: “It was from the Hebrew Bible that the great architects of British and American democracy drew their inspiration.”⁶ And since Rabbi Sacks penned those words twenty-five years ago, Eric Nelson, in *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*, and *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States*, published by YU’s Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, have filled in the picture to make that thesis self-evident and incontrovertible. In the wake of

Rabbi Sacks’ essay, they substantiate the claim that “Judaism has always seen authoritarianism ... as an assault on the essential dignity of the individual.”⁷

It is true that beyond the models of Moses and a collection of moral monarchs, the biblical text says, ostensibly quite positively, that the king is to sit at the center of an autonomous Jewish state — “You shall surely appoint a king over you”⁸ — but that positivity is far from conclusive. Though some of the sages, and several commentators in the Middle Ages,⁹ do see this directive as inflexible and as an expression of theo-political perfection, many disagree. As Rabbi Sacks notes, Don Isaac Abravanel reviews the Judaic political tradition and concludes that “monarchy was not so much commanded by the Bible as temporarily conceded.”¹⁰

And since Rabbi Sacks penned those words twenty-five years ago, Joshua Berman — in his *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* — makes Abravanel’s case even more compelling. For him, the biblical imperative to appoint a king is in fact the opening gambit of a faith seeking to change the world over time, by unleashing a slow-release antidote to executive vice and the widespread venom of tyranny. The directive to install a monarch is less about insisting on kings than resisting despots. And beyond the specifics of Berman’s intricate thesis, Lenn Goodman — historian and philosopher — has pithily written, “... the roots of democracy and of the institutions that ground its legitimacy, its moral strength and beauty ... are anchored in the ideals and institutions of the Torah.”¹¹

Faith as Need

So it seems that there is more in common between the Jewish and American ideals than we might imagine — but, for Rabbi Sacks, it goes even deeper. For though it is true that we have seen a route charted “from biblical principles to democratic government,” for Rabbi Sacks democracy does not sit at the center of the Jewish political spirit either. In his words, “... neither the Hebrew Bible nor the rabbinic tradition idealize any specific political order.”¹² Political structures, for him, are a means not an ends — for without the personal moral responsibility of committed citizens, a vacuum emerges and every single political system, no matter how noble, will wither and fail.

And this theme, that personal moral responsibility is the key to healing the world, has been a professional obsession of Rabbi Sacks from that day to his last, from that essay to his masterful finale, published in September 2020 — *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*. In it he outlines what has become unmistakable in our age of polarization and militant skepticism — that for all democracy’s greatness, a profound danger remains at its core.

In the introduction he points to a slew of new books devoted to an impending crisis — *The Strange Death of Europe, How Democracies Die, The Retreat of Western Liberalism, The Suicide of the West* — and cites Bill Emmet, veteran journalist, who describes the current state of democratic nations as “demoralized, decadent, deflating, demographically challenged, divided, disintegrating, dysfunctional, declining.”¹³ And in one of his installments of *Covenant and Conversation*, Rabbi Sacks makes his

claim as plainly as possible:

*The Greeks were fascinated by structures. Virtually all the terms we use today — democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny — are Greek in origin. The message of Deuteronomy is, yes, create structures — courts, judges, officers, priests, kings — but what really matters is how each of you behaves ... A free society is made less by structures than by personal responsibility for the moral-spiritual order.*¹⁴

In the end, nations can thrive under the gentle reign of a benevolent king and people can die under the tyranny of a ruthless majority — and the transition from liberty to autocracy is deviously sly. What lies at the core of biblical and rabbinic thought and at the center of the Jewish political spirit is belief that we the people — not institutional structures — are ultimately responsible for civic virtue.

And while the founders and framers of the United States of America understood democracy to be the only equitable form of administrative government, they too saw the dangers. Rabbi Sacks cites George Washington as having said that, “human rights can only be assured among a virtuous people,”¹⁵ and he hints at the words etched in stone outside the National Archives in Washington DC: “Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty.”¹⁶ James Madison, at the Virginia Ratifying Convention of June 20, 1788, said quite clearly: “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”

Despite their confidence in the administrative systems devised at the hands of the Greeks, the American framers — in the wake of their biblical sensibilities — believed that the

freedoms preserved by democracy do not in and of themselves assure the moral state of the nation. And that sentiment has been cemented in the speeches of successive American presidents who have said: “America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.” American greatness, for these figures, lies not simply in its administrative systems but in the character of the citizenry — and if it grows apathetic or indifferent or worse, democracy can turn into a machine for perpetuating malice.

And while we cited Rabbi Sacks as having written that “without prophecy a society can become corrupt at the top,” his very next sentence says that “without priesthood, it can erode from below.”¹⁷ Without a culture of committed citizens who nurture individual duty and the moral senses, he says, “no freedoms are secure for long.” And perhaps charging us to be a nation of these kind of priests is precisely what Chanukah is all about.

A Nation of Priests

It is true that Maimonides, the committed monarchist,¹⁸ touts the coronation of the Hasmonean dynasty as part and parcel of the miracle that Chanukah marks.¹⁹ But the administrative elements of the Maccabean achievements are treated as less than incidental in the Talmud, where the focus is squarely on the supernatural staying power of the High Priest’s oil.²⁰ And the way in which our sages prescribe for us to recognize that miracle is not incidental in the slightest — it is to light flames, not in public squares or even the synagogue, but in our private homes for those on the street to see.

The basic obligation of the festival is to light “*ner ish u-veito*,” as a household, but even better, the sages say, is for each of us to light a candle of our own — “*ner le-khol echad ve-echad*.”²¹ And perhaps the sages prefer us to light on our own, in our own homes, not merely as a miniature commemoration of what took place in the Temple, but as an intentional manifestation of the spirit of the festival — exhibiting the truth that our triumph over our enemies only carries meaning if we see that *our freedom places a responsibility on each of us to fill the streets with light*.

Perhaps what the Jewish triumph over the Greeks crystalized — and what is captured in the eight nights of ritual lights — is less a system of government than a national spirit that sees committed citizens at the center of public life. Perhaps Chanukah’s celebration is the refutation of a civilization blinkered by a vernacular fascinated with structures to the point of infatuation — where government systems are deified and responsible citizens are denied reverence and their due in the reckoning of a society’s ultimate virtue.

The legacy of Chanukah is, seen through this lens, not a long-lost dynasty, but a recognition that the freedom to practice our faith in our own homes bestows a responsibility on each of us to light a candle and fight to keep that faith alive. In many ways then, lighting the wicks of a Liberty Menorah manifests the very essence of the Chanukah lesson — showing us

that the gift of liberty cannot be simply frozen in effigy, but we the people must keep the torch alight.

Passing the Torch

Over the course of the decades of his public service, Rabbi Sacks was an unparalleled ambassador for Jewish values and a leading moral voice, inspiring thousands to live lives of faith and moral responsibility — as the unceasing waves of grief and praise streaming on social media attest. He has charged us all to be a letter in the scroll and has taught us all, by both his words and his example, to celebrate life and never stop fighting for a better future — he has called us all to, in his words, “take the flames of our faith and help set other souls on fire.”²²

When Rabbi Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, his chosen motto was borrowed from the Ethics of the Fathers: “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”²³ In many ways, Rabbi Sacks’ legacy is the calling that he has left us to continue his work — to reach out and teach the world the deep truths that live at the heart of the Jewish spirit, which seek, through fostering civic freedom and private faith, to heal the world.

Endnotes

1. https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1391530.
2. *Faith in the Future*, Chapter 17.
3. Shmuel I 8:6

4. *Faith in the Future*, 113.
5. *Ibid.* 107.
6. *Ibid.* 106.
7. *Ibid.* 112.
8. Devarim 17:15.
9. Maimonides, *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Aseh #173; *Sefer HaChinukh*, Mitzvah #71.
10. *Faith in the Future*, 111. See Abravanel on Devarim 17:14 and beyond. Avraham Ibn Ezra agrees that monarchies are optional, following the view of R’ Nehorai on *Sanhedrin* 20b.
11. *Is Judaism Democratic?: Reflections from Theory and Practice Throughout the Ages*, 142.
12. *Faith in the Future*, 107.
13. *Morality*, 5.
14. *Covenant and Conversation*, *Re’eh* 5780 [<https://rabbisacks.org/reeh-5780/>].
15. *Morality*, 12.
16. *Faith in the Future*, 113.
17. *Ibid.*, 113.
18. See note 9.
19. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Scroll of Esther and Chanukah, 3:1.
20. *Shabbat* 21b.
21. *Ibid.*
22. <https://rabbisacks.org/8-thoughts-8-nights/>.
23. *Pirkei Avot* 2:16.



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