

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Are you OK? An important question for today.



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Last week we all found ways to celebrate Thanksgiving, either by staying home seeking to avoid further COVID-19 spread, or taking the chance of travel in spite of the warnings of rapidly increasing cases and deaths. Lately, my influences have come from “across the pond,” the term often used to discuss matters between the United Kingdom and the United States. The recent obituary for Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the British journal, *The Economist*, reminded me again of his powerful voice as we seek to respond to the question for our society, “Are we OK?”

The obituary described Rabbi Sacks’ growing concern about our culture’s climate shift from a “we” to the “I,” as follows: “Every year the voices became more strident and extreme. Consumerism cried ‘I want! I want!’ Individualism cried ‘Me! Me! My choices, my feelings!’ until even the iPhone and iPad he used all the time vexed him with their ‘I, I, I.’ Society had become a cacophony of competing claims. The world gave every sign of falling apart. Even religion, his business, could be a megaphone of hate.”

The *Economist* noted that he was much more than an Orthodox rabbi; he was also a moral philosopher who through his three dozen books, many lectures, and radio and video messages had a much wider audience both among the various religions as well as the secular community.

“A rabbi was, after all, a teacher,” the obit reminded us. As he spoke to this broad audience, it noted, “He wanted to leave his mostly secular listeners in no doubt that things were good or evil, true or false, absolutely, and that moral relativism was the scourge of the age.” The *Economist* concluded, “The world could be changed not by force, but by ideas. ... Every man and woman had a duty to care for others, and thus to recreate the bonds that held society together. ‘I’ had to give way to ‘we’. Out of great crises — climate change, coronavirus — that chance might come. Ideally religion could drive this change, with the world’s faiths uniting. ... In his last book, he called for a shared morality: agreed norms of behaviour, mutual trust, altruism and a sense of ‘all-of-us-together.’ The liberty craved by ‘me’ could be sustained only by ‘us.’”

Another voice asking the important question is actually an American, but now with British credentials: the Duchess of Sussex, better known on this side as Meghan Markle, wife of Prince Harry. In a very moving essay in last week’s *New York Times* titled, “The Losses We Share,” she asks the question in the subtitle, “Perhaps the path to healing begins with the three simple words: Are you OK?”

She discloses for the first time the loss she and Prince Harry suffered from her miscarriage last summer. She also connected it to the losses and pain that we have all felt this past year. She writes about a journalist who, while she and Prince Harry were on tour in South Africa the previous year, asked her, “Are you OK?” Markle notes that she is rarely asked that question, but realized that the first step in healing is to ask clearly, “Are you OK?”

Given the challenges of this year, she suggests it is the question for us all, “Are we OK?” We have been brought to the breaking point, she continues: “Loss and pain have plagued every one of us in 2020, in moments both fraught and debilitating. We’ve heard all the stories: A woman starts her day, as normal as any other, but then receives a call that she’s lost her elderly mother to COVID-19. A man wakes feeling fine, maybe a little sluggish, but nothing out of the ordinary. He tests positive for the coronavirus and within weeks, he — like hundreds of thousands of others — has died.”

Markle continues her litany of loss and pain by revisiting recent tragedies. “A young woman named Breonna Taylor goes to sleep, just as she’s done every night before, but she doesn’t live to see the morning because a police



In this 2019 file photo, Meghan the Duchess of Sussex stands at the annual Field of Remembrance at Westminster Abbey in London. The duchess recently revealed she had a miscarriage in July. Meghan described the experience in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* last week and said we must seek to understand one another despite our disagreements. AP files

raid turns horribly wrong. George Floyd leaves a convenience store, not realizing he will take his last breath under the weight of someone’s knee, and in his final moments, calls out for his mom.”

But it is more than these vivid events that have filled our news feeds; it is also the attack on truth itself. Yes, we have differing opinions, but now we can’t even agree on what is true. “We aren’t just fighting over our opinions of facts,” she writes, “we are polarized over whether the fact is, in fact, a fact.” We refuse to accept science and the hard facts of the pandemic and what we must collectively do to slow its spread. Markle connects her grieving the loss of a child to now grieving the loss of our country’s shared belief in what is true.

When asking that simple question, “Are you OK?” are we prepared to actually listen to the person who is willing to share, to hear with an open heart? This is the first step in the healing process for individual grief as well as for our attempt to understand the divisions in our society.

Going through this very different Thanksgiving season, Markle urged that while “many of us separated from our loved ones, alone, sick, scared, divided and perhaps struggling to find something, anything, to be grateful for — let us commit to asking others, ‘Are you OK?’ As much as we may disagree, as physically distanced as we may be, the truth is that we are more connected than ever because of all we have individually and collectively endured this year.”

I conclude by returning to another voice from the United Kingdom, Rabbi Sacks, who has had great impact on my thinking. Just a few weeks before his untimely death from cancer, his latest book, “Morality,” was released in the United States. In the epilogue he wrote for this edition he asks, “What will be the shape of a post-COVID-19 world? Will we use this unparalleled moment to reevaluate our priorities, or will we strive to get back as quickly as possible to business as usual? Will we have changed or merely endured?”

This can be a crisis that need not be wasted if it helps each of us, as well as our collective democracy, rediscover the truths that we are not alone, we need each other, and we must care for each other. If we do we will be able to answer the question, “Are we OK?”

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