

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Maximum of choices, a minimum of meaning



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A recent conversation between David Brooks and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks caught my attention because I frequently find insight from each of them, and to hear them together was a true opportunity. It prompted me to think about the barrage of our modern-day communication and the unfortunate shortage of meaning.

Their fascinating discussion took place at New York University, where Sacks has an appointment as a professor of Judaic studies following more than 20 years as the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. Brooks, columnist for *The New York Times*, said being a conservative columnist at the liberal *Times* is like being the chief rabbi in Mecca. Sacks, in return, said that being a member of the House of Lords is not as important as attending the House of the Lord. Furthermore, you only listen to one speaker at the House of the Lord, while everyone wants to talk in that other House.

The conversation, while very playful at times, dealt with some very important issues. They included why, despite all the advantages gained through science and technology, there seems to be a crisis of meaning.

We face a maximum of choices but a minimum of meaning. Could it be that our technology, which allows us to communicate across the globe, has robbed us of the ability to communicate with our neighbor next door? With maximum choice regarding the messages we receive from hundreds of cable stations, thousands of blogs and millions of

websites, have we created echo chambers that prevent us from real relationships? It is easy to take sides, but can we find what holds us together? We hear plenty of angry voices, but where are the voices of healing?

When asked where we find meaning, Sacks said you have to go to the groups that preserve meaning. For him, that means the religious traditions. He laments the secularization that drives out talk of morality, sin and the acknowledgment of the religious story.

Recounting a discussion at the BBC leading up to the new millennium, Sacks told how he got into an on-the-air discussion between a bishop and a politician about whether the archbishop of Canterbury should be allowed to give a prayer to mark the occasion. The request had been turned down repeatedly by both the BBC and government offices. Sacks said this is crazy. After all, the millennium is the celebration of the 2,000-year anniversary of Christianity.

"I as a Jew am free to pray in Britain, this Christian country," Sacks said. "Should I not fight for the right of Christians to have a prayer?" The issue was resolved in the archbishop's favor, for which he called Sacks the next day to thank him. Sacks concluded, "It took a rabbi to get a Christian prayer" included in the commemoration of this milestone in the Christian calendar.

"We are not just forgetting the narratives," Sacks went on. "We are actively jettisoning and abandoning the narratives in our traditions that brought meaning."

He and Brooks then talked of people who found meaning in desperate settings: Victor Frankel, who spent years in a

Nazi concentration camp, and Nelson Mandela, who was held nearly three decades in a South African prison. When everything is taken away, they get down to a basic spirituality and dignity of the soul that keeps them going and gives ultimate meaning.

The religious narratives giving meaning include what Sacks calls the "poetry of redemption" as found in the Psalms. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me" says the psalmist in chapter 23.

The faith narrative also enables us to see the person who doesn't look like us, or worship like us, or have the same politics as my group, still as a child of God. Sacks finds in Genesis the most important statement ever uttered: "Let us make man in our image." Thus, "every single human being, regardless of class, culture, color or creed, is holy, life is sacred. God's image is implanted in every single one of us."

During these anxious times, let us look beyond our differences, beyond our myriad of choices and beyond our own self-interests, and seek those narratives that bring hope, faith, love and forgiveness that, in the final analysis, do bring meaning.

## Online

The writings of Rabbi Sacks as well as references to his discussion with Brooks can be found at his website, [rabbisacks.org](http://rabbisacks.org).

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