

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## ‘Never define yourself as a victim.’ Instead, choose to act



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“Never define yourself as a victim. You cannot change your past, but you can change your future. There is always a choice, and by exercising the strength to choose, we can rise above fate.”

So wrote Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, in a recent blog post. He told of traveling to Toronto to meet the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, whose podcasts have recently become very popular with young people. Sacks wanted to better understand what he was saying that was influencing so many people.

At one point in the conversation, Peterson told him about his daughter, who, at the age of 6, was suffering from a rare juvenile arthritis that affected 37 of her joints. As a child and teen, she had hip and ankle replacements and was in constant acute pain.

As he described her, he was on the verge of tears, but then said, “One of the things we were very careful about and talked with her a lot about, was to not allow herself to regard herself as a victim. And man, she had reason to regard herself as a victim ... (but) as soon as you see yourself as a victim ... that breeds thoughts of anger and revenge — and that takes you to a place that’s psychologically as terrible as the physiological place.”

She finally was able to emerge from her condition and is now about 90 percent cured because she didn’t allow herself to become a victim, even though she might have had plenty of reason to feel that way, her father said.



**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks met with Jordan Peterson to better understand his message, and what he found resonated with his own experiences.**

other leads to challenge, courage, strength of will and self-control.”

Sacks calls this “the triumph of choice over fate.” He refers to Moses, who challenged the Hebrew people not to think of their future as being determined by forces outside their control. Sacks continues: “You are indeed surrounded by forces outside your control, but what matters is how you choose. Everything else will follow from that.”

Sacks also cites the prophet Jeremiah who, after the destruction of the Temple, called the Israelites not to consider themselves as victims of the Babylonians, but rather to see themselves as free moral agents and return to God — and thereby choose a better future.

The Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said even when he was in Auschwitz and all of his freedoms were taken away, there was one freedom that they could not take away, “the freedom to choose how to respond.” Victimhood throws that freedom away and chooses to live in a past that cannot be changed.

Frankl was a prominent Jewish psychiatrist in Vienna when, in 1942, he was arrested and taken to a Nazi concentration camp. While he survived, his parents and pregnant wife were killed. He went on to write a bestselling book, “Man’s Search

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*Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*

Sacks related to that story in light of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust. He writes of the survivors he knew that “were victims of one of the worst crimes against humanity in all history. Yet they did not see themselves as victims. The survivors I knew, with almost superhuman courage, looked forward, built a new life for themselves, supported one another emotionally, and then, many years later, told their story, not for the sake of revisiting the past, but for the sake of educating today’s young people on the importance of taking responsibility for a more human and humane future.”

He asks, “How is this possible? How can you be a victim and yet not see yourself as a victim without being guilty of denial, or deliberate forgetfulness or wishful thinking?” Sacks responds that humans have the ability to look back or to choose to look forward. One can ask, “Why did this happen?” and look for some cause or someone to blame. One is also free to ask instead, “What then shall I do?” This means looking forward from that point to seek a future destination, given the current situation.

The big difference is, of course, that one cannot change the past, but it is possible to change the future. Sacks continues, “Looking back, I see myself as an object acted on by forces largely beyond my control. Looking forward, I see myself as a subject, a choosing moral agent, deciding which path to take from here to where I want eventually to be. Both are legitimate ways of thinking, but one leads to resentment, bitterness, rage and a desire for revenge. The

for Meaning.” He observed that those in the camp who knew they had a task waiting for them to complete had a better chance to survive.

In his own case, he had a manuscript ready for publication that was confiscated. When he fell ill, he would make notes on little scraps of paper with the hopes of rewriting the manuscript should he survive. Frankl concludes: “I am sure that this reconstruction of my lost manuscript in the dark barracks of a Bavarian concentration camp assisted me in overcoming the danger of collapse.”

Sacks and Frankl recognize the difficulty in making the right choice.

Sacks concludes: “There really are victims in this world, and none of us should minimize their experiences. But in most cases ... the most important thing we can do is help them recover their sense of agency. This is never easy, but is essential if they are not to drown in their own learned helplessness. No one should ever blame a victim. But neither should any of us encourage a victim to stay a victim. It took immense courage for ... the Holocaust survivors to rise above their victimhood, but what a victory they won for human freedom, dignity and responsibility.”

The temptation to blame events or actions of the past is there for each of us. But that is precisely what cannot be changed. We can choose instead to take action to help create a future that has meaning. It is our choice: being a victim or choosing to act with hope and faith.

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