

## INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

# Great ideas have the power to change lives and our society



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What is a religion? Is it a set of beliefs? A faith? A set of practices? A collection of commandments? A culture?

Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, responds that Judaism is all of these, but something more. "It is a way of thinking ... a way of understanding the world and our place within it. Judaism contains life-changing ideas."

In a recent post in his online series "Covenant and Conversation," he compares it to the life-changing idea expressed in the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Sacks suggests that this may be the most important sentence in modern politics. For much of history going back to the Greek philosophers this was, in fact, not "self-evident." Certainly Jefferson himself, as a slave holder, did not act on this principle. Nearly 90 years later, Lincoln would recall this idea in his Gettysburg Address saying, "Four-score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

But for Rabbi Sacks, this is not a strange idea for those who took seriously the first chapter of Genesis, which declared that all are made in "the image and likeness of God." He calls it one of "Judaism's world-changing ideas." Having the idea and even formulating the words is only the beginning. There is still a struggle to make them real, as reflected in Lincoln's reference to make such equality apply to the slaves at the time of the Civil War.

Sacks continues by giving some personal examples of the power of ideas to bring about change.

He relates an early experience of starting an organization committed to transforming the Jewish community through some significant educational changes. An important leader in this effort was Dr. Michael Sinclair, who had not only brought "thinking outside the box" to the effort, but also his time, energy and money. It had not gone well at a meeting of rabbis organized by Sacks, but through it all Dr. Sinclair had remained calm. As they walked out of the meeting, Rabbi Sacks apologized to Sinclair for the way the group had treated him. Sinclair just smiled and said, "This was a character-forming experience."

Sacks recounts how it affected him: "For me, at that moment, the impact of his response was electrifying, and it changed my life. Here was a man who had voluntarily given so much to our community, and all he had received in return was criticism. Throughout it all, though, he had remained serene because he had been able to step back from the immediacy of the moment, reframe it as an ordeal he had to go through to reach his destination, and one that would ultimately make him stronger. Ever since, whenever I faced controversy or crisis, I said to myself, 'This is a character-forming experience.' And because I thought it, it was."

Such an experience and insight has led him to respond, when the unexpected occurs, "What is Heaven trying to tell me? How does it want me to respond? Given that this has

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*Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*



**Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, argues that Judaism is a way of thinking and understanding the world in addition to being a religion.**

happened, how shall I turn this moment into a blessing?"

He went on to study the writings of Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz and then turned that terrible experience into a new form of psychotherapy and wrote the book "Man's Search for Meaning." Frankl's view was never to ask, "What do I want from life?" but always, "What does life want from me?"

The impact of ideas is on individual lives as well as the course of culture and history. Sacks recounts many of the ideas that have come from Judaism that have influenced the world. He quotes the testimony of non-Jewish writers such as Catholic historian Paul Johnson: "To the Jews we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind."

Even Judaism's most vocal critic, Friedrich Nietzsche, showed respect for Jewish scholars who "have a high regard for logic, that is, for compelling agreement by force of reason. ... Wherever Jews have won influence they have taught men to make finer distinctions, more rigorous inferences, and to write in a more luminous and cleanly fashion; their task was ever to bring a people to listen to (reason)."

It was Nietzsche who urged that we abandon the Judeo-Christian ethic in favor what he called "the will to power." Sacks calls this "a disastrous mistake. There is nothing original in the will to power. It has existed since the days of Cain, and its price is perennial bloodshed." He recognizes that Nietzsche was correct in seeing power as an alternative to Judaism. "The choice humankind faces in every age is between the idea of power and the power of ideas."

In our world today, we must affirm again this commitment to the power of life-changing ideas. The temptation to power leads only to violence.

Sacks concludes: "Some ideas really are life-changing. If we change the way we think, we can change the way we feel, which changes the way we act, which changes the person we become. Ideas change lives, and great ideas help us to courage, to happiness and to lives filled with blessing."

Let this be our goal and commitment.

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