



Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks- Seventh Temple Address – 13 November

Joel, they didn't come for me, they didn't come for you, they came for the food. It was absolutely wonderful and we thank you for it.

Friends, it's a real honour and privilege to be with you this evening. Not just an honour, a real pleasure to be able to sit next to and reengage with a beloved old friend, Joel Edwards, who I've known and admired for so many years. Of course more than that—more than the pleasure and the privilege is the sense of moment at how far we have moved in this past half century. Jews and Christians had been estranged for almost 2,000 years and today they meet in friendship and mutual respect. How beautiful also that we have with us, this evening, distinguished representatives of the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities and that is wonderful and this really is our tolerant society.

Friends, you asked me to speak a little about tolerance so let me begin with a Jewish example. You know that in the middle of our synagogue services we have what we call the reading of the Torah- the reading of a scroll- a section of the pentateuch and some Rabbis rule that when this is to be read you stand and others rule that when its read you sit. A stranger came to a new community one year in America and went to the local synagogue that Sabbath. It was wonderful- everyone was welcoming and the praying was wonderful until it came to this bit in the middle of the Torah reading of the scrolls. To his amazement and horror half the congregation stood, half the congregation sat and they started yelling and screaming at each other. The people that were standing were saying, “ignoramuses, don't you know when the Torah is being read you have to stand” and the people who were sitting were saying to the ones who were standing, “Heretics! Don't you know when the Torah is being read you have to sit?” This crazy pandemonium carries on; the reading comes to an end, peace reigns and etc. The same thing happens the next week and the week after. Finally, the stranger cannot stand it any longer. The town is currently without a rabbi so he travels to the nearest town where there is a rabbi, a distinguished rabbinical scholar and he is ushered into his presence. An old, wise, grey bearded scholar surrounded by books.

He says, “Rabbi, I have a question for you. Tell me, when the Torah is being read, do you stand?”

And the sage stroked his beard and said, “No, that is not the tradition.” So he said, “Well tell me Rabbi, in that case, when the Torah is being read, do you sit?” And the sage shook his head and said, “No, that is not the tradition.” And the man said, “Rabbi, you've got to help me here. Because in my Synagogue, half of them stand and half of them sit and they all shout out nasty names to one another.” The Rabbi nodded and he said, “Yeah, that is the tradition.”

That is the tradition friends that you and I have to break. I'm going to start with a personal recollection, a surprising one. And here it is. There's much talk these days about faith schools. I went to faith schools. The interesting thing is they weren't Jewish schools; they were St Mary's Church of England primary school, Christ College Finchley- unusual items on the Chief Rabbi's curriculum vitae. What I want



to tell you this evening is what I experienced in those two schools. Not once, in all those years did I experience a single anti-Semitic incident, hear a single anti-Semitic word, not from the ministers, not from my fellow pupils. On the contrary, we the Jewish boys were treated with the utmost kindness and respect.

I suddenly understood why. I understood that because their Christian faith mattered so much to the masters of the school, they could understand how our very different faith mattered to us. Then I understood what tolerance means in a Christian school and that has affected my life ever since. I got more tolerance in that Christian school than I suspect I might have had if I had gone to a secular school where no faith was taken seriously at all. That was when I discovered religiously based tolerance- the religious roots, the foundations of tolerance.

Many years later when I read some Oxford philosophers I came across the writing of a great Oxford political philosopher called John Plamenatz, who made an important point and one that is very rarely mentioned and that is he asked the question, “When was tolerance born? It’s called toleration or it was actually called “liberty of conscience.” Liberty of conscience was born in Britain in the 17th century. He points out that the time, the age at which tolerance was first formulated, was an age of very strong religious beliefs. Indeed it had been an age of wars of religion. Listen to the words he uses in his book, *Man in society*.

He writes, “Liberty of conscience was born not of indifference, not of scepticism, not of mere open-mindedness but of faith.”

I suddenly realized that was where my tiny experience in a school and the greatness of British political thinkers converged on the idea that tolerance has and must have religious foundations.

Now, I therefore come to the bad news. I believe we have lost or maybe we are in the process of losing those great traditions of tolerance. That’s why I have just published a new book called *The Home we Built Together* which is an extended, sustained plea for tolerance. Again, I want to give you some personal recollections.

My doctoral supervisor at University, the late Bernard Williams was at the time described as the greatest mind in Britain and I believe he was. He was a convinced and principled atheist, a lapsed Catholic. I was in those days, very religious. My beard was a lot bigger than it is now. It was also a lot blacker, you know. When I became Chief Rabbi, by way of sixteen or seventeen years ago, people said to me, “Aren’t you a little young for the job?” I said to them, don’t worry in this job I will age rapidly.

Do you know in all of our many encounters, not once did Sir Bernard challenge or criticize or even question my faith. And I learnt so much for that. I learnt what it means to respect those with whom you disagree and I learned even more importantly what it means to put prejudices aside and engage in the shared pursuit of truth.

Then there was that wonderful man, one of the great sages of the second half of the twentieth century who I came to know as a beloved and cherished friend, the late Sir



Isaiah Berlin. I came to know Isaiah in the last years of his life. In our first conversation he said to me “Chief Rabbi, whatever you do, don’t talk to me about religion. When it comes to God, I’m tone deaf.” Then he said to me, “What I don’t understand about you is you studied philosophy at Oxford and Cambridge and how come you believe?”

I said, “Isaiah, if it helps, think of me as a lapsed heretic.”

“I understand, dear boy,” he said.

Now, in 1997 I published a book called *The Politics of Hope* and I touched on certain themes on which Isaiah Berlin had written and I wanted to know what he thought of the book. He asked me to send it to him and he said he would get back to me. I waited several months and I heard no reply. So I phoned him up, Heddington house, right outside of Oxford. His wife, Lady Eileen answered the phone. This is towards the end of ’97 and she said, “Oh, Chief Rabbi, we’ve just been talking about you!”

Now, I don’t imagine rabbis were a normal subject of conversation in the Berlin household, so I said, “In what context?”

She said, “Isaiah has just asked you to officiate at his funeral.” I said, “Please Lady Eileen don’t think in such terms.”

But Isaiah knew and four days later he died and I officiated at his funeral and his memorial service in the Hampstead Synagogue. Michael Ignatieff his biographer was fascinated by this because he knew Isaiah was a secular Jew and he wondered why he wanted a chief rabbi officiating at his funeral and I said to him “Isaiah may not have been a believing Jew but he was a loyal Jew and that is no small thing.”

Isaiah wrote in a book that has just been republished a couple of months ago called *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* in which Isaiah Berlin says “I am not religious but I place high value on the religious experience of believers. I think that those who do not understand what it is to be religious do not understand what human beings live by” – that was Isaiah.

Now compare the late Sir Bernard Williams and Isaiah Berlin with today’s atheists who are, as Toks Igbokwe did so politely - I kind of missed that aggro there - but otherwise it was absolutely brilliant – but have you read today’s atheists? - I suppose you have really.

I think that it is 6 nil to the atheists at half time so we need religion to score but what I notice is the incivility of today’s atheists the substitution of anger for argument, the misrepresentation of Religious belief, the wilful misinterpretation of religious texts and whose practitioners seem to me to be the intellectual equivalents of road rage.

When you write a really angry book against religion it becomes a best seller and that is only one tiny example of the new intolerance, the new incivility. Just 20 years ago Berlin and Williams would never have done such a thing.



We are witnessing the death of respect and you see it everywhere from road rage itself, to football hooliganism, to street crime, to the fact - I find almost unbelievable - the number of teachers who get assaulted by pupils or nurses by patients. This is an age in which people speak without listening, condemn without understanding and even the media sometimes seem unable to understand anything more complicated than a sound bite.

This new intolerance is threatening Christian societies on campus, people who wear crucifixes and happen to work at airports, there are bans on public displays of Christian symbols and sometimes even Christmas itself is the festival that dare not speak its name.

How did this happen? We were supposed to be so tolerant so open minded, so accepting of diversity. How come we are measurably a less tolerant society than we were 20 years ago? The answer is this: so long as people had and believed in a shared moral code then they could in Isaiah's words - I mean prophet Isaiah not Oxford Isaiah - they could "reason together". But once you begin to believe in moral relativity, that morality is no more than what one of us chooses it to be, then we can't reason together. I have my view you have yours and none of us has any code nor reason for our choice.

What then happens when two views clash? The answer is the loudest or the angriest voice wins. If I can't refute you then I can ridicule you, I can intimidate you and even, if need be, ban you. That is how the old tolerance which made Britain so special and so beloved to all of us has mutated into the new intolerance, or as I called it in my book in one of the chapters, 'the death of freedom in the name of freedom'.

That is why I believe that all of us Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Christians and Sikhs must work together to recreate a tolerant society on the religious base that tolerance was born in this country three and a half centuries ago.

We have to show, as God showed Elijah, that God is not in the whirlwind, earthquake or the fire but the still small voice. We have to show that for us every single human being is in the image and likeness of God.

The Rabbis 2,000 years ago said about that phrase in Genesis when a human being mints many coins in the same mould they all come out exactly alike. God makes all of us in the same image, his image, and we all come out different. To teach to respect difference, what I called in another book the *Dignity of difference*, because what Genesis tells us is that one who is not in my image, not my colour, my culture, my creed is still in God's image. No secular doctrine has that power.

Let us show, as people of faith, the sheer power of civility and respect and forgiveness and reconciliation and yes the power of love. They are not moral relativism the true foundations of a tolerant society.

Friends, I end with another story very similar to the one with which I began but this time from a Jewish source.



When I was a student I went to America and there met one of the most famous Rabbis in the world, one of the most famous Rabbis of the 20th century, wonderful man revered as a guru and a saint by millions. I asked him as a student this question I said: “I am worried about becoming too religious because if I get too religious I might lose my ability to relate to people who are not of my religion or cultures that are not mine.”

And he said to me, “the reverse is true” and he told me this story which I really enjoy retelling. He said “Imagine two people are paid. Their work is to shlep” - do you know what shlep means? It means to carry heavy weights - before Fed-Ex - they carried weight.

“One was employed to carry sacks full of building rubble and the other employed to carry bags of diamonds” and he says “supposing you give each of these people a bag to carry full of emeralds. The person whose job it is to carry the sacks of building rubble thinks ‘ahh another sack, another heavy weight to carry.’ The one who carried diamonds knows that certain stones are precious. When you give him a bag of emeralds he notices instantly, those stones are precious, they are not diamonds but they are precious.”

He said “So it is with faith. If for you faith is just a weight that you have to carry; because you don’t appreciate yours you won’t appreciate anyone else’s. But if for you faith is full of diamonds; then you will understand that somebody else’s faith is emeralds. It may not be the same as yours but they are also precious.”

Then he looked at me, this very great man, and said “the more you value your faith the more you will value other people’s faith and likewise.”

So I believe that for the sake of the future of tolerance, for the future of Britain and for the future of God, whose children we all are; let us have many more evenings like this, many more friendships across faith and let us show that tolerance is indeed the will of God.

Thank You.