

U.K. Chief Rabbi Hits Israeli Occupation

by Dean Andromidas

On Aug. 27, in an interview with the London *Guardian*, Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, Dr. Jonathan Sacks, made hard-hitting comments on the "morally corrupting" effect of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Despite the fact that he is a fervent supporter of Israel, so much so that he has alienated many of the pro-peace elements within the Jewish community, he came under sharp attack by the right-wing Zionists and the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. His statements have initiated a strong moral debate throughout the Jewish community in the Diaspora as well as in Israel.

While denouncing Palestinian suicide attacks as being morally beyond the pale, and asserting that Israel finds itself under attack, he nonetheless strongly criticized the idea of Israel ruling over another people. "You cannot ignore a command that is repeated 36 times in the Mosaic books: 'You were exiled in order to know what it feels like to be an exile,' " Rabbi Sacks said. "I regard that as one of the core projects of a state that is true to Judaic principle. And therefore I regard the current situation as nothing less than tragic, because it is forcing Israel into postures that are incompatible in the long run with our deepest ideals."

Rabbi Sacks said, "There are things that are happening on a daily basis which make me feel very uncomfortable as a Jew." He said that he was "profoundly shocked" by reports of smiling soldiers posing for a photograph with the corpse of a slain Palestinian. "There is no question that this kind of prolonged conflict, together with the absence of hope, generates hatreds and insensitivities that in a long run are corrupting to a culture."

These statements came in the context of the Bush Administration's international mobilization for a war on Iraq, and the widespread fear that Sharon will use this war to transfer the Palestinian population into Jordan.

As a prominent moral and religious figure, Rabbi Sacks put forth a clear position. On Iraq, he said he would support a war only under three conditions: if there is a clear objective and end-game, a broad coalition of support, and very strict safeguards against civilian casualties. He also supported the right of the Archbishop of Canterbury to speak out against the war.

As Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, Dr. Sacks is a member of the political establishment. Shortly before the interview, he

had met with Prime Minister Tony Blair and with Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, with whom he says he has one of his “loveliest friendships.” Brown is said to be against the Iraq war.

‘Avoid the Clash of Civilizations’

Rabbi Sacks also commented on his new book, *The Dignity of Difference*, subtitled, “How To Avoid the Clash of Civilizations,” which is a moral critique of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, and of the policy of globalization. “I’m issuing a call in a number of languages,” Rabbi Sacks said, “and to a number of different constituencies, to say: Guys, we have to begin to conceptualize our world in a different way if we are to survive the 21st Century.” The book offers a new “mode of coexistence for the whole planet.” Now, Rabbi Sacks asserts, we need “a doctrine strong enough to allow different groups to live together without an overarching political structure.”

Rabbi Sacks’ criticism of globalization begins from the standpoint of human dignity. He wrote, “The concentration of the world’s wealth into relatively few hands while millions of children live in poverty, ignorance and disease, is a scandal that is no longer sustainable. . . . My own view—it is a religious one, but one does not have to be religious to share it—is that economic systems are to be judged by their impact on human dignity. An order that systematically deprives a significant proportion of mankind of fundamental dignities is indefensible. That does not mean abandoning the global market, but it does mean taking seriously a set of non-market values which must be factored into our decisions about the future.”

The way to overcome the so-called “Clash of Civilizations,” he said, is through understanding that the unifying element in the multiplicity of the world’s cultures, and particularly the three Abrahamic religions, is the development of “human dignity.” He quoted the Book of Genesis, the sacred texts shared by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and pointed to the moment that Isaac and Ishmael part, representing the moment when Judaism and Islam begin their separate ways. Sacks told the *Guardian*, “The key narrative is the Tower of Babel. God splits up humanity into a multiplicity of cultures and a diversity of languages. God’s message to Abraham is: Be different, so as to teach humanity the dignity of difference.”

Rabbi Sacks revealed that he has had several, previously undisclosed meetings with a variety of radical Muslims, including Ayatollah Abdullah Javadi-Amoli, one of Iran’s highest-ranking clerics. They met during a UN conference of religious leaders in 2000; the Iranian requested the meeting, and the British Foreign Office arranged it. “We established within minutes a common language, because we take certain things very seriously: We take faith seriously, we take texts seriously. It’s a particular language that believers share.’ A language, says Sacks, which most Muslims feel is not under-



The Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, has set off wide debate in Europe and Israel by stating his view that Israel’s occupation policies in Palestine violate Judaism’s moral principles. He has been Chief Rabbi since 1991.

stood in the West,” the *Guardian* commented. The *Guardian* also quoted Sacks saying, “Can I, a Jew, hear the echoes of God’s voice in that of a Hindu, or a Sikh, or a Muslim?”

Firestorm Erupts

Guardian correspondent Jonathan Freedland, who interviewed the Chief Rabbi, warned that his comments would create a “firestorm” among the right wing. It was not long in coming.

Eric Graus, president of Likud-Herut and the British National Zionist Council, said, “It is unfortunate that the Chief Rabbi allowed himself to be used by people who, at best, cannot be described as friends of Israel. Some of his comments as reported in the media can only act as an encouragement to our enemies to further intransigence and violence against Israel and the Jewish people.” He outrageously accused Rabbi Sacks of “displaying moral blindness.”

Rabbi Sacks was also attacked by Rabbi David Rosen, a former Chief Rabbi of Ireland and now international director for inter-religious affairs of the American Jewish Committee, and by Eric Moonman, president of the Zionist Foundation.

In Israel, right-wing rabbis lined up to level abuse at him, with one having the temerity to say that his comments have rendered him “irrelevant” in the world Jewish community. The right-wing *Jerusalem Post* ran an editorial with the de-

manding headline, "Resign Rabbi Sacks," and the *Post* proceeded to demonstrate the problem the rabbi was addressing: "Rather than 'corrupting' us, this war of self-defense has brought out some of our finer qualities such as patriotism, national pride, and a willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the common good."

Support Runs High as Well

By contrast, Rabbi Sacks' comments were welcomed by the liberal Jewish community. Rabbi Dr. Charles Middleburgh, executive director of the Union of Progressive and Liberal Synagogues, said, "The Chief Rabbi has been very courageous in speaking out. He has not said anything that progressive rabbis have not been saying for ages. But the point is that he has said it. There are now deep levels of concern throughout the Jewish community about the effect that the current situation is having, not just on the political and military realities but actually on the soul of Israel."

Labour Party member of the House of Commons, Gerald Kaufman, who is Jewish and has attacked Sharon publicly, said, "I have a very high respect for the Chief Rabbi and I am pleased that he has come 'round to the kind of thing I have been saying for many, many months now. I think the impact will be considerable. Of course it will arouse hostility among those people who believe that there is absolutely nothing the Israeli government does that should be criticized. But it will not have any impact in Israel. Sharon will not pay any attention to comments from an enlightened cleric in the Diaspora."

However, several English-speaking rabbis and others in Jerusalem did come out in strong support of Rabbi Sacks, deepening the debate he has initiated.

Rabbi Dr. Michael Rosen said, "Rabbi Sacks is to be commended for being courageous. It is not always easy to draw the line between loyalty and criticism. . . . The challenge to religion is whether it can be a force to understand and include the other or reject and exclude the other. Self-criticism is one of the elements required to help religion heal society."

Rabbi Isaac Newman came to Rabbi Sacks' defense with a most beautiful quote from Scripture: "I would support his general contention on the uniqueness of human diversity with the Mishneh Sanhedrin 4:5, 'Therefore was Adam (man) created single to teach you that one who destroys a single life destroys a whole world and one who preserves a single life preserves a whole world.' I wonder whether we as a people are not too self-centered to be capable of ruling another people fairly. Should we not rather rid ourselves of military dictatorship and seek the self-expression of their uniqueness and their freedom, just as we, as a people, emerged free from the beginning of our history."

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, a noted theology professor, said, "The use of paradox is often maddening to those seeking unambiguous positions. Jonathan Sacks belongs to the tradition of thinkers who seek to keep sensitivity, alive under the harshest of conditions. Jewish sensitivity extended to all vic-

tims of this tragic conflict, requires careful nurturing even, or especially, when the moral balance sheet seems unequivocal."

Rabbi Yehoshua Engelman cast Sacks in the mold of the Prophet Ezekiel, who warned, that "one who sees an injustice and does not protest against it, is a collaborator with that misdeed, and, if he is able to raise his voice and keeps silent, he is doubly culpable. What could he do but speak up?"

Writing in the Sept. 6 *Guardian*, Raman Bronfman, member of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) and leader of the Democratic Choice party, endorsed Rabbi Sacks' remarks, contrasting his statements to those of Israel's Chief of Staff, Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, who spoke recently to a group of Israel's leading rabbis and described the Palestine threat as a "cancer." Because such comparison "will be interpreted by some in Israel as legitimation for the transfer or severe repression of Palestinians," statements such as Rabbi Sacks' correctly define the moral limits of the Diaspora support for Israel, Bronfman said.

The Problem Is in Washington

On Sept. 5, as the drums of a new Middle East war sounded ever louder, British MP Kaufman called on Rabbi Sacks to stand firm behind his statements. Kaufman wrote of his fears that a major terror attack could take place over the Rosh Hashanah new year holiday (Sept. 6-7) and lead to a brutal response by Sharon. But Kaufman identifies the real problem as being in Washington, because the Bush Administration is on a war drive and refuses to initiate a peace process.

Kaufman said, "Today there is a complete power vacuum in Washington over the Middle East, with fundamental disagreement at the highest level. President Bush and his National Security Adviser, the ineffable Ms. [Condoleezza] Rice, are too dim to understand the issues. Vice-President [Richard] Cheney and the historically myopic Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld are so gung-ho, to make the bellicose John Foster Dulles seem a peacenik. To make the prospect even glummer, with the Republicans falling behind in the opinion polls as the United States approaches mid-term elections two months from now, Bush will doubtless be looking for Jewish votes and not caring what it takes to get them.

"The British government therefore has not just an opportunity, but a duty to use the special relationship first to explain to Bush the indispensability to Western security and Western economic equilibrium of a Middle East peace process. Otherwise I shudder at the thought of the kind of sermon Jonathan Sacks may have to deliver at Rosh Hashanah, 2003."

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