

**Dr Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, calls for faith communities to renew civil society**

June 2000

by Dr Jonathan Sacks

given at Emmanuel Centre

"Imagine you are a passenger in that wonderful Ferris wheel they call the London Eye, and have taken your favourite young niece or nephew up with you. At the top you point out to the child the different kinds of buildings you can see: the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, Whitehall. And you try to explain that there is the home of government, and you say very simply this: government is about the production and distribution of power. And then you look at all the offices and the shops and maybe the Stock Exchange building, and you explain that there is the market, and the market is about the production and distribution of wealth.

"Then you point out the domes, the spires, the steeples, St Paul's and all those places of worship, and your nephew or niece asks you: tell me, what do they produce and distribute? And that's actually quite a good question and it's quite hard to answer. Maybe they don't distribute anything, maybe they are not that kind of thing. Maybe that's why they are sometimes quite a bit empty whereas all the other places are really quite full. But if you were to say that, you would be wrong. You would be making a mistake that is very common today. Indeed, it is the defining, the systemic, error of our culture.

"Let me explain why.

"Imagine that you have total power, and you decide to share it with nine other people. How much do you have left? One tenth of what you began with. Imagine you have a sum of money, and you decide to share it with nine other people. How much do you have left? One tenth of what you began with. Now suppose you have a certain amount of love or friendship or influence or ideals and you decide to share those with nine other people, and you do share them, do you have more or less than you began with? You probably have ten times as much.

"It follows immediately from this little exercise in arithmetic that power and wealth will always generate conflict. The more of them I have, the less of them you have, and the more I give you, the less I have. Therefore governments and markets are mediated arenas of conflict: the one mediated by democratic elections, the other mediated by market and exchange. But those other covenantal areas of love, friendship, trust, marriage, loyalty, faithfulness, they are not arenas of conflict. And now we can say what is created and distributed in our houses of worship, and in communities, neighbourhoods, voluntary organisations, above all in the family: namely, spiritual goods.

"And now we can also say precisely what has gone wrong in our social ecology in the past 50 years. We made a simple, well-intentioned assumption. But a wrong one. Namely, that there are only two institutions that can deal with social problems, either the state or the market. Some on the left prefer the state, some on the right prefer the market, but on the most fundamental point they both agree, and they are both wrong, namely that the state and market are all there is.

"So what else is there? To which the answer is, there are families, congregations, faith communities, fellowships, neighbourhoods, voluntary organisations - all of which are bigger than the individual, but smaller than the state. They operate on a different logic. Families and communities are held together not by the coercive use of power, not by the contractual mechanisms of exchange, but by love, loyalty, faithfulness and mutuality: being there for one another when we need one another. I call them "third-sector" institutions. And without that third sector, there will be problems that neither governments nor markets can solve.

"I now want to get personal. My late father came to Britain at the age of five. He was fleeing from anti-Semitism in Poland, his family were poor, his parents couldn't speak the language, there was only enough money in the family to give one child out of the four - my late uncle - an education. And so at the age of 14 my father had to leave school and support his parents

and his brothers and sisters. He never had any education nor, frankly, did he ever have any success in business. He sold cloth in a little shop in Commercial Road and I remember when I was almost weeping, because I would sit with him in the shop day after day and there were no customers. When he was in his sixties, people used to say to him, "Tell me, Mr Sacks, how come your four boys all went to Cambridge University, all got first-class honours, all developed good careers?" My father, who was a tremendous guy, used to say, "They get it from their mother".

"Our family wasn't exceptional. You could have told the same story about thousands, maybe even millions, of Jewish families who came from Eastern Europe to Britain and the United States, as indeed today you can tell it about many other immigrant groups. Within one or at most two generations those communities broke through the cycle of poverty and deprivation, and achieved success in business, in academic life, in the professions and so on. And as I have tried to understand my late father, it seems to me that he had three things that made all the difference to his life.

"First, he had family. His whole life was doing things for his parents and doing things for his sons. And we, as children, knew that he believed in us, that he cared for us, that he took pride in us. I remember when I was four or five years old and we used to go every Saturday to the synagogue. I would always come back with questions. My father's reply was always the same: "Jonathan, I never had a Jewish education, so I can't answer your questions, but one day you will have the education that I couldn't have and you will teach me the answers to those questions." If you want your child to grow up to be a Chief Rabbi, that's what you do.

"Secondly, the Jews in the East End had community. A quarter of a mile down the Commercial Road was my late grandmother's wine shop. She was an incredible woman. She came from Russia, she could not read or write but she used to do something very interesting in the wine shop. Whenever anyone came in to buy something, first she would sit them down, then she would ask them what they wanted and she would get an open bottle of whatever it was and pour it out so they could taste it beforehand, drink a little toast. Then she would start asking them, "How's the family, how's life" and so on, and as soon as she discovered a person with a problem she would fix it. She was the great fixer of East End Jewry.

"If someone was in trouble with the police, she would speak to the policeman or, dare I say this, give him a bottle of whisky, which always helps understanding. If someone was in trouble with the Home Office, she would get her son, my late uncle, to go and make representations on their behalf. If somebody was homeless, she would put them up in our home, that great big extended family we had in that huge house in Seven Sisters Road, which was always providing shelter for immigrants and people making a new start in life. And she would always somewhere discover somebody who could find them a job. She was a social worker, networker and community activist combined, but to everyone we knew, she was simply Mrs Frumkin who ran the wine shop in Commercial Road.

"The third thing Jews had was faith. My late father may not have known as much about Judaism as he would have wished, but his faith was like a rock. Every morning he would put on his prayer shawl and phylacteries and say his prayers. At difficult times he would read the Book of Psalms, and somehow he knew that God was with him and things would be all right.

"As a result he never once in his whole life internalised a picture of himself as somebody who was a failure, somebody without money. He knew he had a family, he had a community, he had a faith. He was a Jew and therefore he was heir to 4,000 years of history. He gloried in our traditions and, as a result, he walked tall. And he taught all of us, his boys, to walk tall. And it was those three things - family, community and faith - which constituted his and our personal world and allowed us, like so many others, to break free from the prisons of deprivation, dependency and despair.

"Because in those environments people weren't alone. There were always others to help out and they would help others out in turn. The Jews in the East End two generations ago may have been poor in everything else, but in one thing they were rich, indeed with an embarrass

de richesse: they had social capital. They had the things which allow a person to break free of crisis and come out as a survivor. And it turned out to be those things that were the critical variables in solving problems of poverty and social disadvantage. I say this of course as a Jew, but this is what Christianity did for so many millions of families, and still does; and the same is true of so many other great faith traditions.

"So how could any of us, if we belong to a faith community, not understand that there are some problems that cannot be solved by the state or by the market? The state and the market are procedural. Their great glory is that they are impersonal: if the state, if politics, if the market, if business ever became personal, it would become corrupt. Those problems that really are personal belong primarily to third-sector institutions, such as the family and the faith communities which honour, strengthen and sustain the personal, give us the courage to change and a helping hand when we fall.

"By contrast, we have focused on institutions which reinforce behaviour rather than change it: government which reflects votes, politics which follow opinion polls, therapies that tell us that we are OK as we are, markets that mirror our choices. Where in our culture will we find something that gives us the power to change? In these covenantal institutions of families and communities.

"Yet, with a few honourable exceptions, our culture and our media have nothing but contempt for, or at best indifference to, those great human and humanising covenantal institutions: the stable family sanctified by the bonds of marriage and the faith community with its glorious vision of human possibility. This is what distresses me beyond measure in our contemporary culture. When I visit run-down neighbourhoods today, I see the same poverty that my parents and grandparents knew, but with one important, even momentous, difference.

"Today I see a poverty of hope, a circling wall of despair whose symptoms we know only too well, from crime to drug and alcohol abuse, to depressive illness, to violent anger. So I believe the time has now come for our faith communities to become a counter-cultural presence, a force to challenge the tin gods of fame and power and success which are great for those who win, but hell for those who lose; and to protest against a world, a society, that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, as it travels the road of economic affluence and spiritual poverty, of ever stronger governments and markets and ever weaker families and communities. That is a road that cannot but end in tragedy.

"And what will renew our faith communities is the knowledge that in our homes, our denominational schools, our congregations, our places of worship, values are kept alive that are dying elsewhere: fidelity, altruism, decency, civility, reverence, restraint. Without those values and virtues, human dignity cannot survive. Without them, liberal democracies will discover that they face social pathologies that they are impotent to solve.

"When religion tries to explain the world, it fails. When religion tries to control the world, it fails. But when religion tries to change a life, then it succeeds.

"The time has come for us to work together as faith communities in genuine partnerships with governments on the one hand and businesses on the other, to create local welfare initiatives based not simply on the power of the state, nor simply on the wealth of the market, but on our faith in human beings. Because it is that faith which changes lives and rebuilds the landscape of hope."