



An Unforgiving Age

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks רצ"ל

In 2015, Sir Tim Hunt, a British Nobel Prize-winning scientist, visited South Korea. While speaking there, he made a bad joke about women in laboratories that fell flat. It was a silly joke, which he immediately admitted and apologized for. However, someone tweeted the joke and it went viral. After that, he became the target of an online shaming campaign, which ultimately forced him to resign his positions at University College London, the Royal Society and the European Research Council, and turned him into a pariah. This happened even though he obviously was only making a joke (immediately afterward in his talk, he said, "Science needs women.") It happened even though his wife is a distinguished scientist, even though he apologized time and time again, and even though fellow scientists defended him. Despite it all, he was condemned without trial, without consideration of the evidence, due process, appeal, mercy, regard to his lifetime of service to science, and the simple fact that he was a human being and human beings make mistakes. Ours is an unforgiving age.

Jordan Peterson is a psychologist at the University of Toronto and probably the most followed public intellectual globally. He has a massive following because he's a counter-cultural figure and dares to challenge politically correct positions.

Somebody discovered, somewhere on Facebook, that an unknown person had taken a selfie with Jordan Peterson. The man who took the selfie was wearing a t-shirt with an insulting slogan. Now, hundreds of people on that night took selfies with Jordan Peterson. He had no opportunity to scrutinize what the people were wearing. He had no idea what was written on the t-shirt, and yet he was condemned. Ours is an unforgiving age.

Here is a man condemned because of somebody else's selfie with him, somebody else's t-shirt, with no trial, no evidence, no judicial process, no reflective moral judgment, no "you shall inquire, and research, and ask diligently"(Devarim 13:15), no effort to examine the evidence well and see if the thing is true. Nothing but simple condemnation.

I happen to have the privilege of knowing Jordan Peterson. I went to interview him at his home in Toronto, and we had a long conversation together. Here is a serious human being, a man whose work is intensely moral, profoundly spiritual and intellectually challenging. A person who is focused on taking responsibility for his life. Not blaming other people, but taking responsibility. And yet – nothing was said in his defense.



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Here was a man who made an ill-judged joke, and here was a man who unwittingly took a selfie together with somebody wearing an inappropriate t-shirt. And yet these were the people for whom, in Maimonides words: "The gates of repentance were closed." Nobody gave them a chance to say, "I'm sorry," to explain or to be forgiven.

Now consider two people who *did* commit great wrongs – wrongs so bad we would understand if what they did was unforgivable.

Think of a young man who said: "What profit will we get if we kill our brother? Come, let us sell him to the

Ishmaelites... for he is our brother, our flesh and blood..." (Bereishit 37:26-27)

Yehudah sold his brother as a slave – an actual, *real* sin. And yet Yehudah became the ancestor of Israel's Kings. But he also became much more than that. *We bear his name*. We are called Jews, *Yehudim*, because we are named after Yehudah. Why? Because he was forgiven. And why was he forgiven? Because he owned up and said, "But we were guilty." As we recite in the *Selichot*: "What more can we say to justify ourselves?... G-d has uncovered our guilt." (Bereishit 44:16)

What's more, he changed: From the person who sold his brother as a slave, Yehudah became the person who was willing to spend the rest of his life as a slave so that his brother Benjamin could go free. He became a *Ba'al Teshuvah*. Yosef, his brother, forgave him. G-d forgave him, and it is his name we bear.

Let me give you a second example. Here I speak of a King of Israel whose behavior was... well, how can I put it? In the immortal words of the late Leonard Cohen: "Your faith was strong, but you needed proof. You saw her bathing on the roof; her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you."

King David committed adultery with somebody else's wife and then sent her husband to the army's front-line. This was a horrendous sin, an appalling crime. And yet, he became Israel's greatest King and the most remarkable religious poet the world has ever known. Why? Because he was forgiven. And why was he forgiven? Because he said in the shortest form of *Selichot* ever delivered, "*Chatati*." "I have sinned." But he also said, "*My sin is in front of me all the time*." (Tehillim 51:4) Meaning, I will never, for one minute, forget that I sinned. And so he was forgiven.

Rabbi Sacks
delivering the
pre-Selichot address
at Hampstead
Synagogue in 2019.



Yehudah and King David were *Ba'alei Teshuvah* who confessed and apologized and changed, and they were forgiven. They committed severe wrongs, not jokes in bad taste or selfies with inappropriate t-shirts, and yet they were forgiven. Imagine if they hadn't been forgiven. If Yehudah hadn't been forgiven, there would be no Jews today, for it was Yehudah who survived when the 10 tribes in the North disappeared from history. If King David had not been forgiven, there would be no book of Psalms today, leaving the whole world impoverished.

At the heart of our faith is a G-d who forgives. "And Hashem said, I have forgiven according to your words." (Bamidbar 14:20) G-d says to us, "Be honest with Me and then I will forgive you." Then He says to us, as we say over and over again throughout *Selichot*, "*Hashem Hashem, Kel rachum v'chanun.*" "G-d is a G-d of mercy and compassion." And when did He say those words? After the worst sin of all, the Golden Calf. Without G-d's forgiveness, we could not survive our mistakes.

What happens when an entire culture loses faith in G-d? All that's left is an unconscious universe of impersonal forces that doesn't care if we exist or not, a world of Facebook and Twitter and viral videos in which anyone can pass judgment on anyone without regard to the facts or truth or reflective moral judgment, where, by the time the person accused has had the chance to explain or the truth has emerged, the crowd has already moved on. They're not interested anymore.

And what happens in an unforgiving culture? Have a look at who is influential in the world today. In an intolerant culture, the people who survive and thrive are the people without shame because those are the only people who survive in a world without forgiveness.

But we believe that G-d gives us a chance to acknowledge our mistakes. We believe that if we are honest about the wrong we have done, if we stand before G-d with a broken heart, if we have the guts to say, "but we are guilty," if like King David we can say, "*Chatati*," "I sinned," then G-d will give us a second chance.

This is what *Selichot* are all about. About being honest, about saying, "Master of the Universe, I know I let You down. I know I let others down. I know I let myself down, but *shema koli*, Hashem, Hear my cry! Help me become the person You created me to be!"

Years ago, I was about to lecture 1,000 people in a big shul in America. Now, getting 1,000 Jews to sit down is as hard as splitting the Red Sea. And so the Rabbi of the shul said to me, "Rabbi Sacks, we've got 10 minutes before we begin. Every week I do the local Jewish radio program. Would you do a quick interview with me?" I said, "Fine!" We went into his study, just the two of us, and this is what he asked me.

"Rabbi Sacks, I look at your CV, I look at your career... tell me, Rabbi Sacks, did you ever fail at anything?" I almost fell out of my chair laughing. I said, "I have failed at almost everything." My favorite sentence in the English language is Winston Churchill's definition of success: "Going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm."

I tried to explain to the Rabbi that the real difference is not between failure and success. The real difference is between failing and giving up and failing and keeping on going. That's the real difference in life. And what keeps me going, I explained, is the simple knowledge that G-d lifts us up when we fall and forgives us when we fail.

I have one request. Forget the public persona of perfection that people post on their social media and know that in the inner reaches of our soul we can be honest with ourselves. We can acknowledge the ways in which we've failed because we know that G-d forgives. And in that forgiveness, G-d gives us the strength to heal what we have harmed, to mend what we have broken, and to become the people He wants us to be.

● Adapted from Rabbi Sacks' pre-Selichot address at Hampstead Synagogue, London, September 21, 2019.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 until his retirement in 2013. He spent decades bringing spiritual insight to the public conversation through mass media, popular lectures, and more than 30 books. Rabbi Sacks passed away in 2020, leaving behind a legacy as one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of our generation, one who bridged the religious and secular world through his remarkable and ground-breaking canon of work.