

## Judaism's importance

MATTHEW GINDIN



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks speaks at Congregation Schara Tzedeck on April 28.

“There is one thing about Judaism for which we were mocked for centuries, whose wisdom is just becoming clear in the 21st century,” Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks told a packed Schara Tzedeck synagogue on April 28, after describing the world as “a terribly dangerous place” in which religion has “returned in some of its most violent and aggressive forms.”

“We did not try to conquer or convert the world,” he explained. “Why? Because we believe that God made a covenant with Noah before he made a covenant with Abraham and, therefore, you don’t have to be a child of Abraham to be in a relationship with the Holy One, blessed be He.

“We believe that the righteous of every nation have a share in the World to Come and, therefore, we never sought to conquer or convert the world. Christianity and Islam sought to become, and did become, world powers, and they achieved great things, but right now their clash, which is threatening in some ways to take us back into the age of crusades, is so dangerous because our powers of destruction are so great.”

Sacks was introduced to the crowd of approximately 700 people by Schara Tzedeck Rabbi Andrew Rosenblatt, who talked about Sacks’ importance as an embodiment of the ethos of Modern Orthodoxy, which Rosenblatt said combines fidelity to Orthodox tradition with openness to the world. He commented on Sacks’ ability to bring Jews of all kinds together, quipping, “Tonight, we have here rabbis from all stretches of Oak Street.”

That was far from the only joke of the evening. When Sacks, who lives in London, England, took the stage, he asked the audience to forgive him if he rambled a bit, saying, “In my body clock it is now almost two in the morning and I am feeling very much like the man who once dreamt he was giving a speech in the House of Lords and woke up to discover that he was.”

After saluting the relative unity of the Vancouver Jewish commu-

nity, Sacks took up his theme, which was the value of Judaism to both Jews and non-Jews, and the need for Jews to move confidently in the world as ambassadors of Jewish wisdom.

He noted how often it seems that non-Jews appreciate our strengths more than we do, and then he focused on seven things he felt Judaism has to offer the world: a sense of purposeful identity; a strength of community; the centrality of family; the prioritization of the intellect; a belief in the dignity of difference and an acceptance of religious and cultural pluralism; the sacred value of protest; and the importance of hope.

Sacks spoke of the essential human need for identity, pointing out that Moses’ first question to God was, “Who am I?”

Of community, the rabbi cited research showing that “regular attendance at a house of worship extends your lifespan by seven years.” He followed this up with a joke, saying that he told his wife, Elaine, “Maybe it just feels as though your lifespan has been extended by seven years.”

With regards to family, Sacks shared the story of taking Penelope Leech, a childcare expert in the United Kingdom, to a Jewish school in London on a Friday morning. There they watched a mock Shabbat, complete with “5-year-old abba and ima, 5-year-old baba and zaida *shepping naches* [feeling proud].”

Sacks said Leech asked one of the boys, “What do you not like and like about Shabbes the most?” The boy responded, “What I don’t like is not getting to watch TV! What I do like is it’s the only time Daddy doesn’t have to rush off.”

Leech apparently told Sacks, “that Sabbath of yours is saving their parents’ marriages.”

To illustrate Judaism’s appreciation of the intellect, Sacks told the well-known story of Nobel laureate physicist Isidor Isaac Rabi, who said his mother had made him a scientist by asking him every day when he came home from school

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