

Aspen Ideas to Go ([00:00](#)):

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Tricia Johnson ([00:43](#)):

It's Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Trisha Johnson ahead of the November election in the U.S. It's easy to hear the candidates' competitive messaging. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks says this battle for power happens outside election season. In general, politics has become too competitive. He says liberal democracy has become about me instead of us. Political leaders nowadays tend to talk about me. They don't tend to talk about huts, which would never have 20 or 40 years ago. They would have spoken on behalf of all of us together. In his new book, Sacks argues for a restoration of the moral dimension in the lives of politicians and everyone in society. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from the Ahmet and Joseph Gildan Horn Book Series, Jonathan Sacks and international religious leader. And prolific writer says we're facing enormous challenges to our wellbeing and sense of community. And it's not just COVID and social unrest that's to blame. It's because in this culture of me, we've lost the moral beauty that develops from lifting up others. In his book, Sacks explains that our loss of a strong, shared moral code has led to crises like toxic public discourse and a breakdown of family life. How can we elevate the common good over self-interest? He speaks with Reverend Serene Jones, the first woman president of the historic theological seminary in New York City here's Jones.

Reverend Serene Jones ([02:18](#)):

I had that unusual experience, at least for me when I read, um, a theological or political theory book of sitting down and not being able to start once I stopped, uh, the book is, uh, compelling. It pulls the reader in. It's easily comprehensible while at the same time, introducing us to a large range of sociological material, philosophical material and historical material that is brought out to make over and over again with nuance and growing power. Uh, the central claim of the book is that the place in which we find ourselves in modern democracies in the West. And, uh, all of the divisions that I know all of us here today, stay awake at night, pondering worrying over that all of these divisions can be traced back to, um, an over-reliance on the market and the state, uh, to define the spear of morality. And that the challenge for us is to go from being a society made up of I to thinking morally in terms of the we, it may sound like a simple move. Um, replace the word me with the word other when I speak about the challenges of our times. So I want to start the conversation today by asking Rabbi Sacks. If you could tell us about the process of, of coming to write this book and of coming to the really pure scene, clarity of the core message of the book, and then share with us something about what that message is.

Rabbi Sacks ([04:25](#)):

Well, thank you, Serene for that lovely, really lovely and undeserved introduction. Thank you. Bless you for that. And what a beautiful name, if I may say so we don't do serene Judaism. We do anger. We do argumentativeness. We do righteous indignation. We're not terribly good on Siri. I'm going to try and learn this from you and what the book was about was really how can we get to be a little more serene? Because the truth is that when we work together for a common cause we actually feel changed. Great

paradox is when we lift others, we ourselves are lifted and I've seen this so so many times, um, you know, we have a, you have a program, very impressive called teach for America, which sends groups of brilliant young graduates to schools in poor districts, where they give a couple of years of their time to help people who need help.

Rabbi Sacks ([05:36](#)):

And that's a really impressive program. And I had the privilege, really the privilege of sitting with Tony Blair when he was first prime minister and getting him to adopt that program in Britain as well. And the thing that's striking about the people who do that, uh, that when it's all over, they want to say you they're the ones who gave they're the ones who want to be thanked, but actually they want to say thank you because working with others for the sake of others does bring a certain serenity, a certain kind of moral beauty into your life, which we have underestimated for a very long time. The market economy is all about competition and about me. It's about self-interest liberal democracy is about the battle for power and it too tends to be about me. The political leaders nowadays tend to talk about me. They don't tend to talk about us, which would never have happened 20 or 40 years ago.

Rabbi Sacks ([06:48](#)):

They would have spoken on behalf of all of us together. And, and that's how they spoke. And today it isn't, it's, I'm better than here and that's not really political leadership. It's a kind of, um, I don't know what it is, but political politics has become too competitive and too little co-operative. So I'm what I've really been arguing is for a restoration of the moral dimension in our lives. And that can happen in all sorts of places, you know, but if you take one obvious one, I don't know if you've come across it recently, but it's got to do with the cancel culture it's got to do with, uh, no platforming on universities and so on and so forth. Um, and we've reached a stage where students, when they feel that somebody really doesn't agree with them, they will try to ban them. This happened to, um, actually a man.

Rabbi Sacks ([07:54](#)):

I know a man with, who helped me on my program on morality. Um, Jordan Peterson, he was banned from having a fellowship at Cambridge university divinity school. Why? Because somebody put on Facebook, a photograph that he hadn't taken of him standing next to somebody with a t-shirt that wasn't terribly nice. And, um, and, uh, then they banned it and I thought, Hey, hang on. This is Cambridge university divinity school. They sort of know about this thing called forgiveness. What doesn't that figure anymore? Is that been abolished? So, um, I think I see a falling apart wherever I look, but you asked what actually started me on this book. Have you ever done Ted? No, I have not. Well, okay. In 2017, Chris Anderson asked me to do Ted in Vancouver. The most scary thing I have ever done, I have to say, I just nerve wracking beyond belief. I Y I don't know. And I thought to myself, what am I going to talk about that? And had a religious leader there for, for nine years. And I'm a rabbi for heaven sake. I mean, what am I going to talk to these guys about? But it was just after the 2016 American presidential election. And if one thing was clear to me, it is this team and the audience at Ted were hurting.

Rabbi Sacks ([09:34](#)):

And when I want to really make it do a speech, I kind of go into a meditation and enter that hurt. And from that deep pit, try and find a way out that I can share with others. And it suddenly occurred to me that incredible line from Psalm 23, though, I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for you are with me. Now, I know that's a capital Y, but you can do it a lowercase, Y as well. I said in my talk, we can face the future without fear. If we know we will not face it alone. And so I gave my

talk about the difference between me and us, I and we, and how important it was to develop that openness to others that allows us to, um, enlarge our lives by people. Not like us.

Rabbi Sacks ([10:50](#)):

I even told the story of how I met my wife, Elaine. We just celebrated a golden wedding in the middle of the lockdown. Um, and I was a student studying philosophy 50 years ago, and I was into Salta and Camou and existential angst, and yeah, totally miserable. And I saw this wonderful young lady beaming, radiant sunshine, and I thought never in my life, have I seen anyone more, unlike me, I must marry her, told me three weeks to ask her, but, but, you know, okay, you're allowed to be slow. Um, and it's been the great thing of our life. And I, I said in Ted, it's the people not like us who make us grow. And once you can construct a moral bond across every dimension, that smallest is marriage, but you've got family, you've got community, you've got all sorts of stuff, academic community. Once you can form a bond that is based on the shared acceptance of ideals, then you find serenity. Otherwise you find conflict.

Reverend Serene Jones ([12:13](#)):

That's a beautiful story about your wife and also a painful story about Jordan, both of which I encourage readers to read the book because, uh, they're, they're very beautifully laid out there. Um, and, and one thing in the book that struck me so powerfully was, um, you show not only the sort of broad social costs of this obsessively, I focused culture and inability to see, um, you and to feel your pain and to understand something about how you view the world and what matters to you is, uh, the isolation, the loneliness, um, but also the, uh, the degree to which, uh, we've become a shaming culture, um, uh, uh, desirous to sort of destroy the other, um, which is the opposite of learning to have empathy and connection. And you just give such a powerful existential account of, of what it means to live in these harshly divided times and isolated within the self, as we sit in this space, um, and in, by doing that, you make the poll of moving out of that space. So appealing, um, that there is hope and the hope lies in us in the week in connections between us,

Rabbi Sacks ([13:43](#)):

You know, to my mind, one of the most beautiful things that United studios and in Christianity is this emphasis on forgiveness. We're just coming up to our new year Rashana and our day of atonement, Yom Kippor and EMT Kippor is the day of forgiveness. We stand in the synagogue pretty much Dan Knight, 25 hour fast. And we go through every conceivable sin in the lexicon, many of which we have neither the time nor the energy to commit, but nevermind, we confessed to them and somehow or other, you know, it's what you would call in Christianity, a baptism, you know, you go through this and you emerge purified and what's happening. And that of course, technically belongs to the logic of a guilt culture, a guilt culture distinguishes between the and the sin. So the sin is bad, but the center is still okay. We are moving.

Rabbi Sacks ([14:58](#)):

We have moved from a guilt culture to a shame culture and shame cultures have no space for forgiveness because they didn't make that distinction between the sinner and the sin. So in the end, there's no way out. I gave an example in the book, a professor, Ian hunt, a Nobel prize winning physicist, who happened to be a little, little conference for physicists in South Korea and was asked to give an after dinner talk. And in the course of that talk, he gave a Meda joke, which was in bad taste. Um, but that's all, it was, it was a joke. It was implying the women aren't such good scientists as men, but later on in the talk, he said, they are just as good. And what is more, his wife is a distinguished scientist, just

between good as he is, but somebody picked it up somewhere and it went viral. And in the end, he was stripped of everything of his professorship at university college, London, his position on endless numbers of honorary bodies and Ceylon.

Rabbi Sacks ([16:15](#)):

And he was turned into a pariah. And of course he apologized many, many times. He didn't mean to upset anyone, but he became a pariah and he never found his way back. That was essentially the end of his life. Hannah Arendt was right when she said in the human condition, that forgiveness is what allows us to break free of the hold of the past, because without forgiveness, we would never, ever, um, escape from, from a consciousness of what we did. So I think forgiveness is an absolute essential of a good society, and we seem to be losing.

Reverend Serene Jones ([17:03](#)):

And you so rightly point out that, that, uh, the inability to forgive, um, in prisons, the person who cannot forgive, we too rarely talk about the, the kind of, um, emotional and intellectual shutdown that the inability to forgive creates within us. It holds us, um, um, you know, in Christianity, a similar version is, um, that very basic, um, in my Protestant tradition claim, um, you can't say it enough that all of us equally are saints and sinners. And that, that the sort of fundamental foundation of that is, is where forgiveness comes from. Um, we can't divide the world up into the good and the bad. Um, it's much more complicated and we are much more fragile and yet miraculous creatures than that. Um,

Rabbi Sacks ([18:02](#)):

Yeah, the, the, the nature of this theology is almost mind boggling here. We read in chapter one already that every one of us is in the image and likeness of God. And then chapter two, we discover that every one of us is his Senator, and we all get expelled from the garden of Eden.

Reverend Serene Jones ([18:23](#)):

We mess it up,

Rabbi Sacks ([18:25](#)):

Love it, you know, because when you know that we are loved that we are special, that we are, uh, beloved in the eyes of God, and we can admit that we're not perfect. And it's that honesty. I mean, my goodness, me, what the Bible has to say about King David, for instance, or King Solomon, would any public figure, allow that to be said about them today? You know, these are people who the Bible just, just tells us the truth about these people, and yet despite all their failings, um, King David still wrote the most beautiful religious poetry. I know book of Psalms and King Solomon was a very, very wise man, even if he didn't always listen to himself.

Reverend Serene Jones ([19:21](#)):

Yes, no. The Bible is a series of stories about very flawed, um, very human and, and beloved, uh, people. Um, you know, the word for that, uh, that I use out of my tradition is that that recognition that we're all equally beloved by God is that's the reality of grace. And once one understands and accepts that reality, then forgiveness, uh, uh, the ability to forgive shifts within, inside you and you are able to, um, it's, uh, it's, uh, it's the great freeing moment and the great equalizing moment. And, um, uh, it is something that, um, while our religious communities are struggling to hold onto as a society as a whole,

Speaker 5 ([20:12](#)):

Um, need lost a sense for this podcast is supported by Allstate. When someone poses the question, do you see where I'm coming from? Are they checking to see if you actually saw where they were a few moments ago? Of course not. They're checking to make sure you understand their point of view, that you are aware of their background, their history, and the things that they've experienced. These things shape, how we view the engage with others and expect to be treated. And most importantly, they give us the context necessary to understand one another and appreciate other perspectives. That's why Allstate along with the Aspen Institute and facing history in ourselves created the better arguments, project and initiative that teaches people, the importance of listening to understand context and how to have constructive disagreements after all part of protecting a community is bringing it together, learn more@betterarguments.org.

Reverend Serene Jones ([21:23](#)):

I know we don't have a lot of time today. I have so many questions I want to ask you, but at the, at the very end of your book in its us publication, you take all of the work that you've done in the mini chapters of the book covering this wide range of topics. And you say, look, I finished this right before the COVID 19 pandemic began. And, uh, you rightly say, um, through the pandemic, it's only intensified our sense of the very troubles that you identify, but also it is a moment at which we could hope for and work towards because of the collapse we've seen real change, deep change. So I wonder if I'm speaking to an audience here in the U S today, if you could say something about that epilogue, because I think it's so immediately present to us.

Rabbi Sacks ([22:25](#)):

Okay. Let, let, let me say something in general. And somebody in particular, I wanted to know when, uh, the pandemic began to societies change through an experience like this. So I did a tiny bit of research and I realized that we had two precedents. Number one was 1918 world war one, and the Spanish flu pandemic, and the other one was 1945 world war two. Both of those were, you know, world defining moments. And, uh, the question is, did people change as a result? The answer is that often eight, 1918, they did not change. Um, they stayed an ice society. We had the roaring twenties, we had the great Gatsby. We had, you know, wild dances and even while the parties and the end result of this continued is' society was the great crash of 29. The great depression of the 1930s, the rise of Nazi-ism and fascism in mainland Europe and a mere 21 years after the war to end all Wars yet another world war that was 1918, 1914, exact opposite people moved Britain and America, certainly from an ice society to a we society Britain passed the 1944 education act that opened up secondary education to every single person in Britain.

Rabbi Sacks ([24:12](#)):

It created the national health service. It created the welfare state. America did the GI bill and various other things that to help people who had served in the war. But in addition, it did probably the most inspired piece of foreign policy ever undertaken. Namely, the Marshall plan whereby the United States funded Europe, including Germany itself, to rebuild itself the exact opposite of the punitive conditions of the treaty of Versailles of 1919. So 1945 shows it can be done. We can move from I to wait, what would I do now? I think there are lots of things I would do now, but the one thing that is so possible right now that people have been dreaming about for years, but was never possible until now is national service. Because you've got all these young people who are not going to get jobs until the economy recovers itself, where, and you have always needs in society right now, not least, uh, test and trace, uh, which

we'll need in America, 300,000 people to administer it. And you could actually take that cohort of young people and put them in really helping positions, altruistic ones, and they will be changed forever, and they will learn change American society. And that is what I would do because lots of people who've spoken about it before, but this is an opportunity that will never come again, quite like this. And it has to be seized. Now,

Reverend Serene Jones ([26:09](#)):

I just could not agree with you more. Um, it is, uh, it, it not only has all of the advantages that you just named, but, um, so much of moving from an eye to a weak culture involves stepping over these divides that separate us, and imagine having all of the young people out of high school mixed up together, um, across lines that they would never simply in the course of a regular day step across, and just think that the sheer familiarity and friendships that could come out of a national service where, um, we didn't respect those boundaries and require people to work together for the good, I think that it's an exciting realm in that regard. Yeah. I think you're right. We're at a moment where we could go the way of, um, 1918, um, or the way of post-World war II, um, and all of us together for the good, um, need to hope that we choose that second path.

Reverend Serene Jones ([27:15](#)):

Um, I also just wanted to ask you, um, you know, the other, um, in, in the United States right now, um, we have this confluence of the pandemic, um, and, uh, the, you can see, so clearly the, I, we, um, conflict bearing itself out over the question, or, you know, whether or not you should wear a mask. Um, I mean, if, if there was ever an example to make crystal clear the points of your book, it is this, this for depots, it's it. And it's almost, um, it's mind boggling, uh, when you think about the loss of a sense of a common good. Um, but we also have having simultaneously, uh, this powerful, um, uh, peaceful protest movement for black lives matters, uh, which is, is sort of bringing up in the midst of COVID, um, the, the long history of, um, anti-black violence. Um, and these two pandemics are unfolding before us simultaneously. Um, I wonder if you had any thoughts to share with us from across the pond, um, on, uh, that piece of the struggle that, that this nation is in the grips of right now,

Rabbi Sacks ([28:40](#)):

Actually, I don't, because we don't have a similar kind of tension that doesn't mean to say that we don't have racial prejudice. I'm sure we do, but somehow in America it is bound up with that long, long, long history of slavery and, um, with so much else that goes with it. And, um, you know, that there comes a time when you have to say, you know, I'm from Britain, I do not necessarily understand a political problem. That's not a British problem. A lot of political problems are, uh, culturally and historically determined. Um, but I will, if I may just explain to you one thing that I tried for so many years to do, I used to discuss the whole issue of social cohesion, tolerance, racial tensions, and British identity with the four prime ministers under whom I served as chief rabbi in particular, uh, John major and Gordon Brown, both of whom were where I'm really interested in. They really, really wanted to talk about it.

Rabbi Sacks ([30:16](#)):

And I, I felt that there has to be actually quite some quite significant moment in the life fishing. We make a clear statement and I suggested the following because it was minimalist. We have in Britain, something in November called remembrance Sunday, where we remember the people who fought in the world Wars and who died in them, the queen is there all the Royal families there, the prime minister and all previous prime ministers, all the heads of everything you can think of of there, it's a big, big

televised event. And I said to both John Major and Gordon Brown, why don't we take Remembrance Sunday and simply divide it and let the morning be about war and the past and the afternoon be about peace and the future. And at midday, the older generation takes the flame and hands it down the generations until it reaches the young generation.

Rabbi Sacks ([31:40](#)):

And then they, the young people from every ethnic group, from every religious group, do something to tell us about what their dream of Britain is. This would be a huge, huge televised event. And it would be so simple, a way of showing that we are as proud of a black nation. Now Muslims et cetera, as all the others. It's very simple. Um, and somehow or other, um, you could do that in America, perhaps on Martin Luther King day. I've no idea when exactly you would have to, um, utilize a little bit of Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton, because he has a very inclusive way and an unusual way of telling the American story. You have to do this, then you have to give, you know, it's almost a photo opportunity, but you have to take an image that is burned on everyone's consciousness. Does that make sense to you?

Reverend Serene Jones ([32:54](#)):

Oh, absolutely. And, um, it is the work of the moral imagination. Um, and, uh, how does, how do we shift and change that history and how it's burned into the consciousness of, of our nation and, uh, and begin to, to redefine that in, in, in profound ways.

Rabbi Sacks ([33:16](#)):

Yeah. So you got to go back to, um, to the friendship of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy and see whether there's something there that can give you some new starting point. I think you've got to identify some new leaders and, um, you know, the younger, the better actually, um, you know, the people who still have hope and I,

Reverend Serene Jones ([33:44](#)):

There are many of those. And so many of them are in the streets. It's so many of them are first responders. So many of them are now sitting in their bedrooms with their laptops, doing calls

Tricia Johnson ([33:57](#)):

College and trying to figure out how to finish my school. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was knighted by Her Majesty the Queen in 2005 and took a seat in the House of Lords in 2009. He's the author of more than three dozen books. Serene Jones is past president of the American Academy of Religion and was a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School. Their conversation was part of the Ahmet and Joseph Gildan Horn's book series at the Aspen Institute. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas, to go wherever you listen to podcasts, follow us on social media at Aspen Ideas. Listen on our website, AspenIdeas.org, and sign up for our newsletter. Today's show was produced by Marcy Criminals. It was programmed by Linda Layer, Libby Franklin, Kristin Cromer, and Azalea Milan. Our music is by Wanderly. I am Trisha Johnson. Thanks for joining me.

Aspen Ideas to Go ([34:54](#)):

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