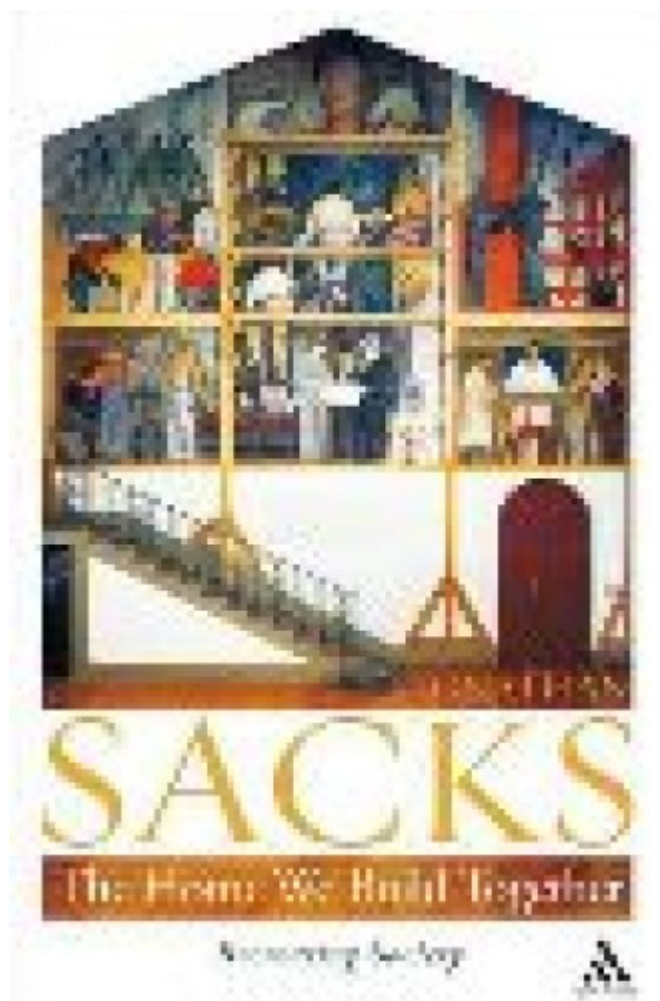


The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

In Review



The Home We Build Together

Jonathan Sacks

Continuum

For the last ten years, I have worked in the same small soup kitchen at a local church. For nearly all this time, those of us who work there have wondered how to become more integrated with our town's immigrant communities. Within the last year, that integration has suddenly occurred, almost without warning. Now there are two cultures very actively at work shaping the soup kitchen, not always with the same motivations, stories, rules or ideas for what should be done. The soup kitchen is receiving an intense renovation from multiple builders, and not everyone is comfortable with the amount of change that is required.

In some ways our shared project is a microcosm of what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about in *The Home We Build Together*. The home that Sacks is talking about is Britain, and the social problems he diagnoses are to some degree specific to the United Kingdom. But the central question is applicable close to home as well as abroad: "How do you construct a society that respects cultural and religious diversity while at the same time promoting civic equality, social cohesion and a sense of the common good?"

For Sacks, the roots of this question are found in the aftermath of the establishment of the British Empire, when thousands of immigrants from all parts of the globe came to Britain. At first they were treated as guests or servants of a country manor. It was clear to whom the house belonged and how the history of the house would be told. The visitors might be welcome, but they would remain guests. Then came the upheaval of the 1960s and the advent of the idea of multiculturalism. Now, Sacks argues, it is as though the manor has been sold to a multinational corporation and has become a hotel. The house doesn't belong to anyone anymore. Everyone is a visitor, and the history of the house is irrelevant to all. The rules are, in essence: pay your bills and don't disturb your neighbor.

But people are not meant to live in hotels. Living forever as though in a hotel creates alienation, unhealthy segregation and a host of social problems. The peace of a hotel can easily become marred by the violent intentions of a few. Humans need homes. Society, Sacks contends, is best understood as a diverse group of people who are building a home together.

In the first half of the book, Sacks diagnoses the problem that contemporary society faces. It is a society in which identity is derived from consumption: "Buy what you want and be what you buy." While the individual has long been the central actor in

British society, the threat that individualism poses—social disintegration—is now nigh. National identity is all but dead except in its most recalcitrant and prejudiced forms. Families are in disarray. Ethnic identities have faded. Human community is, on the whole, fractured.

The fate of religious identity is a little different, if equally dangerous. Religious identity has an option that other identities do not: it can become global. If I identify as a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew, I can become connected to people who share that identity anywhere in the world. Their welfare can become my welfare and their catastrophes mine, at least theoretically.

Sacks points to the reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's speech at the University of Regensburg in 2006, in which he referred to a 14th-century Christian's derogatory comment about Islam. Muslims everywhere, from England to Indonesia, responded angrily. By the time the furor died down, dozens of people were dead and religious tension was heightened all over the world.

This could only have happened in the Internet age, when information is decontextualized and disseminated widely. "Individuals are enlisted in causes they do not understand for reasons that may be spurious," Sacks writes, and soon they are "adding fuel to an argument in a place they have never been, between people they do not know, on a subject they do not understand." The results are disastrous, as passions are heightened and identities crystallized with little hope for mutual understanding between neighbors. Identity is conceived of as a network: you are linked to people far away, but you may share no connection with the person right next to you.

Sacks points to three resources that he believes are crucial to changing society's calamitous path. The first is narrative: we are the stories we tell ourselves. Sacks points, powerfully, to the preservation of Jewish identity over millennia. Jews are bound together by a shared story, and that story has superseded geography, politics and cultural differences.

In this regard, he sees the United States as being in a much better position than Britain. The United States has a tradition of telling a story about unity in diversity. In times of crisis, we can return to this fundamental account of who we are. We are a people who came from all over the world to form a society based on justice and equality. While we may not always live up to the ideals of this story, we can draw on

it for shared resources and a shared understanding. British society's story has often been, "We do things this way because that's the way we've always done them." A society based on hierarchy and tradition is less well equipped to face its multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious realities. Sacks believes that the development of a national story for the United Kingdom is imperative, if difficult.

The second resource to which Sacks points is the concept of covenant. He argues that while covenant has a biblical origin, it has served as a central political concept for thousands of years. He traces its development from ancient Israel to John Milton to Thomas Paine to John F. Kennedy. In a covenant, two parties bind themselves together in mutual responsibility. They each retain their distinctiveness, but they agree to work together in fidelity for mutual benefit. Citizenship in a covenantal society is "co-responsibility for justice, equality, kindness and compassion." A society not based on these principles will fall into either disarray or totalitarianism.

This leads to the third resource for building society, and to Sacks's most practical suggestion. He says that diverse elements of society must work together in tangible efforts for the common good. In the Exodus narrative, Moses' question was not unlike our own. How do we take this diverse group of people and turn them into a nation with a shared sense of purpose? The ancient Hebrews did not have a homeland or a government when they entered the wilderness. They shared only a history of oppression. Their leader was a mix of Egyptian, Midianite and Israelite. He didn't completely belong to any of these groups.

One tangible way Moses helped the Israelites develop a shared identity was to engage all of them in the work of building the Tabernacle. People brought diverse gifts to the building of it, but all work was accepted equally and had to be given voluntarily, without force. Like wise, Sacks says, contemporary society is in desperate need of common purpose and a renewed sense of the common good. Here is where the quality of interfaith work can be decisive. Sacks doesn't encourage people of various faiths to simply engage in dialogue; he urges them to quit talking and start working. "Can we do something . . . *non-utopian*, practical, small-scale, local, nationwide that calls for no exceptional capacities for tolerance and mutual understanding?" In other words, can we work, literally, together?

Identity in a postmulticultural society will have a new foundation, if Sacks has his way. We will be what we do. There will be "an integral connection between giving and belonging." We will focus on responsibilities, not rights. We will retain our

distinctiveness, but shared participation will have nothing to do with race, color, creed, place of origin or length of residence. Instead we will be defined by what we give to the common good.

Sacks is not, by inclination, a liberal in the classic sense. He finds liberalism, taken as a life-guiding set of principles, to be “incoherent.” But he believes that liberal democracy is the best solution that the human race has found to an age-old problem: “how different groups with different beliefs may live graciously together within an overarching political framework that respects the integrity of each and ensures the equal rights of all under the impartial rule of law.” At the same time, a liberal democracy is only as good as what its citizens give to each other with a sense of common purpose.

If Sacks is right, our soup kitchen team has the benefit of already working together daily in a project for the common good. As we continue to work together, we will build a common story. We will cultivate our shared sense of purpose and tell it to each other in more than one language. Over time the physical space in which we work will provide a shared sense of home.