

## Sermon for the Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Isaiah 9:2–4, 6–7; Psalm 96:1–4, 11–12; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–20*

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is an Orthodox Jewish leader in Great Britain and in the Commonwealth. I read his blog [Covenant and Conversation](#)<sup>1</sup>. He has been writing since October reflections on the Jewish annual cycle of readings from the Torah, the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and our Bible. The readings are called “Parsha,” that is, “portion.” The first of the books in the cycle is, of course, Genesis. His article for December 10 was called, “Does My Father Love Me?”

It was for me a new take on a story I can’t remember not knowing, the story of Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons, the Joseph who had once worn a coat of many colors and who had been sold into slavery by his brothers. It was a story well-known to Jesus and the Hebrew people of his time. It’s one of the stories of the Bible that helped shape the New Testament writers understanding of Jesus’ life and death.

Joseph you may recall was able to interpret Pharaoh’s dream and become minister over all of Egypt. There would be seven years of plenty. In the second year of the seven years of famine that followed, Joseph the ruler will find himself in a room with his brothers. He knows who they are, but they do not know who he is.

Here is a contemporary translation by Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley of the climactic moment of the story:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-homepage/>, Jonathan Sacks, “Does My Father Love Me,” (accessed 23 December 2018).

*And Joseph could no longer hold himself in check before all who stood in attendance upon him, and he cried, "Clear out everyone around me!" And no man stood with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he gave his voice in weeping and the Egyptians heard him and the house of Pharaoh heard him. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"*<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Sacks' remarks follow up on a question I've never really thought about, and that is this: why had Joseph as Pharaoh's minister never tried to contact his father? He notes also that Joseph had already named his first-born son, Manasseh, which means, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house."<sup>3</sup>

Sacks points out that Joseph had angered first his older brothers and then his father by telling them about dreams that prophesied that all of them and his mother would bow down before him. It was his father who sent him alone to the brothers who, Genesis says, "hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him."<sup>4</sup> Joseph was a descendant of the family that produced the first brothers of creation, Cain and Abel. Sacks suggests that he blamed father for sending him alone to brothers who were ready to kill him.

What changed Joseph's mind about his father and about his brothers? One brother, Judah, said, "Your servant my father said to us, "You know that my wife bore me two sons. One of them went away from me, and I said, 'He has surely been torn to pieces.'

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 45:1–3a. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996), 266.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 41:51.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 37:4b.

And I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my grey head down to the grave in misery.”<sup>5</sup> Hearing those words, Joseph knew his father loved him—and he sends all but his brothers away. He cannot speak without “giving his voice in weeping,” to use the Hebrew idiom for “weeping aloud.”

Two days ago, Saturday morning, I found myself reading a review of a new book by an author I did not know, John Nicholas Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*<sup>6</sup>—the perfect gift for Christmas? Gray is British, and now a retired professor of European Thought.<sup>7</sup>

It’s been many, many years since I was an undergraduate philosophy major. We learned the classic arguments for the existence of God and their classic logical refutations. But at the end of the day, I was never satisfied with the idea that creation doesn’t have a creator, that the creator of logic is subject to logic the creator created. I remain a person of faith.

With great respect to the faith of the Hebrews, I believe Jesus Christ is the way God answers the question, “Does my father love me?” The answer is yes. God loves us, and we are made by God to love others and to love God. The story of Joseph suggests to me that some of the hardest burdens—challenges—in our lives may result from things we cannot know.

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<sup>5</sup> Translation, *Covenant and Conversation*.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.wsj.com/articles/seven-types-of-atheism-review-better-off-without-him-11545090731?mod=itp\\_wsj&ru=yahoo](https://www.wsj.com/articles/seven-types-of-atheism-review-better-off-without-him-11545090731?mod=itp_wsj&ru=yahoo), (accessed 18 December 2018).

<sup>7</sup> <https://johnnicholasgray.com/about-samuel-benjamin/>, (accessed 23 December 2018).

For twenty-two years Joseph lived with the beliefs that he had lost his father's love and that he had escaped death at the hands of his brothers only by being sold into slavery. The secret of selling Joseph into slavery bound Joseph in one way. That same secret bound his brothers and their father in other ways. Yet Joseph would rescue his family from famine and welcome them to homes in the best land Egypt offered. But they the brothers have not moved on. When their father dies, they are afraid Joseph will take revenge. They don't realize Joseph's love for them. Joseph weeps again in their presence and explains that God has used his life, and his suffering, to save all of them.<sup>8</sup>

It is in John that Jesus identifies himself as truth and promises that you and I can know the truth, and that the truth will set us free.

And so tonight we gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Mary. There is more to all of our lives than any of us but can know. Does our God love us? The answer is yes. The yes is Jesus, whose name means "You shall call his name 'Savior' because he will save."<sup>9</sup>

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 50:15–21.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 1:21. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Expanded Edition*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1172 n.