

At SCA Event, Rabbis Ponder Judaism's Future For A Millennial Audience

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An SCA spokesperson introduces the two influential rabbis



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Attendees at the sold-out event, "Faith in Our Future," that was organized by the Sephardic Community Alliance (SCA)



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Young Jews from New York’s Sephardic community had the chance last week to explore existential questions about Judaism’s future alongside two majorly influential rabbis. The sold-out event, “Faith in Our Future,” was organized by the Sephardic Community Alliance (SCA) and hosted by the Museum of Jewish Heritage. It combined a fundraiser, catered sushi reception and an almost 90 minute moderated conversation between Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Rabbi Joseph Dweck, all targeted directly towards young Jews under 30.

At a pre-event with the organization’s donors, in a glass walled room that provided stunning views of the waterway beside Battery Place, Sacks and Dweck spoke directly to the SCA members.

Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, scholar and author of over thirty books, alluded to the current political turmoil in the U.S. almost right away. “I have to say I think the whole world is going Jewish,” he said in his opening remarks. “It’s so acrimonious, it’s almost reached the level of a shul board meeting.”



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“You’re very special,” he told the SCA. The Brooklyn-based organization works to enhance and support the Sephardic Jewish community both locally and worldwide through multiple programming initiatives.

Rabbi Dweck soon followed with his opening remarks. “Not a corner of Jewish life in Britain is not filled with Rabbi Sacks,” Dweck said almost as soon as he took over the podium. Los Angeles native Dweck, although only 41, has made a name for himself in the Orthodox community as well: he’s currently living in England serving as the Senior Rabbi of the S&P Sephardi

Community.

The main event of the night was a panel discussion housed in the several hundred-capacity theater at the Museum. The young moderator's first question for the rabbis asked whether the Sephardic community can learn from the Ashkenazi model.

Dweck said that no matter how observant someone is, there is always acceptance in the Sephardic community. However, he said, there is a feeling in the community that "we have to hang our reality at the door when we speak to a religious person," referring to divisions in the Jewish community between the modern and the traditional. This shouldn't be the case, in his view.

Sacks took a historical perspective on the issue. He recognized that divisions in the Jewish people began in the 19th century. Now, "American and Israeli Jewry are divided. Hashem wants us to be together." He hopes the Sephardic community will never divide the way Ashkenazi have. He compared the community to Islam's divide into Sunni and Shiite factions, which has led to much bloodshed. "Never go down that road, just forget it," he advised to some laughter from the audience.

The moderator then asked if there should be more dialogue between denominations. "It's difficult," Sacks admitted. He is Orthodox, but has become a major representative of all Jewish people in England. "If you want to receive respect, give respect." He believes the denominations can and should come together on issues like Israel, anti-Semitism, and fighting poverty. But some practices should be respected and kept separate.

Sacks believes there are three ways the Jewish community can heal its rifts: through music, sharing meals together, and striving to empathize with one another's views.

The conversation turned to the ideal role of women in Judaism's future. Both

rabbis advocated for increased education and activity for Jewish women. “The Syrian Jewish community is coming up on this,” Dweck said. However, “It’s a patriarchal society. The Sephardim keep pulling this along.” In equality of the sexes, he said, the Sephardim should learn from the Ashkenazi. “It’s a requirement of Torah to make sure both sons and daughters are educated.”

“Women can bring the chesed back into Torah,” Sacks added. “A woman’s voice has been missing for many centuries, and now it’s coming back.”

The moderator then asked the rabbis about their thoughts on Jewish campus life.

Sacks advised the audience to attend a college where there are other Jewish students. Some universities, he warned, can be especially hostile to Jews and to Israel. “Go to college as an ambassador” for the people.

“It starts before college,” Dweck spoke of the danger of over-assimilation. It is the responsibility of parents to educate their children about their Jewish identities.

Both rabbis were rather vague when asked how young Jewish people can overcome religious doubts. Sacks advised the young audience to travel and learn as much as possible. Dweck turned to a traditionally spiritual answer to this common question. “Although intellectual endeavor is important, at a certain point you realize you cannot hold God in your head.” He told listeners to trust their emotions more. “In today’s world, we’re afraid to feel. We just want to explain things.”

Dweck and Sacks became much firmer on the subject of modern anti-Semitism. “People have always been writing our obituary,” Sacks said. But the Jewish people are older than either Christianity or Islam, and “to deny Eretz Yisrael is crazy beyond crazy,” Sacks said with passion. “Anyone who denies this is either crazy or a tenured professor at an American university.”

Laughter followed from the crowd, many of whom were college-aged. Dweck said he didn't have much to add to Sacks' answer, only that "we shouldn't be here. For centuries people tried to destroy us. You and I are living testament to that miracle, and that brings uneasiness to everyone around us."

After their closing remarks, hundreds of young Jews flooded upstairs to the reception to shmooze and reflect.

"I came here to take action and learn," said Esther Leventier, one of the under-30s in the audience that evening. "The issues were very broad, but they did both say it's very important to connect with our leaders and continue to grow and learn even in our daily education, as opposed to expecting all the answers to come out. Even though it was amazing, those questions will always be on our mind."

Her friend, Joe Betesch, agreed that the general atmosphere and community in the room overshadowed any particular topics the rabbis covered that night. "It's not so much about the specific questions, it's more an inspiration point. You leave an event like this and feel really passionate about your community and inspired. An event like this only happens once a year, and it's really important to sit there and recognize who you're surrounded by and what it means to be the person you are."

The SCA has been actively courting young Jews with their programming for years. A spokesperson said in a speech introducing the Rabbis, "Our primary objective is 18-30 year olds." The SCA organizes shabbatons, meetups for young Jewish people, and is active in college campus organizing. The Tisha B'av program is a highlight – this year, over 2000 people attended. "We've turned a day of sorrow into a day of meaning." Their Sabra Institute is teaching youth to be ambassadors for Israel on campus.

He said, "SCA gives us the opportunity to make sure the ideas of our past are upheld." The organization hopes that young Jewish leaders like those who attended Tuesday's event will continue those traditions.

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