

Influential British rabbi Jonathan Sacks dies at 72

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [December 2, 2020](#) issue



(AP Photo / Andrew Medichini)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, a widely admired teacher and prolific writer who connected Jewish thought with a larger concern for universal human values, died on November 7.

He was 72 and had undergone treatment for several bouts with cancer, which he was first diagnosed with in his thirties.

A proponent of interfaith understanding, Sacks was a Modern Orthodox rabbi with wide crossover appeal to other Jewish groups and to non-Jews. He was easily the best known and most recognizable European rabbinic authority. He was a frequent visitor to the United States, where he taught courses at New York University and Yeshiva University, and to Israel, where he led classes at the Hebrew University.

At 43, Sacks was appointed chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth—a position he held from 1991 to 2013.

He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2005 and awarded a life peerage in the House of Lords in 2009.

But while Sacks spoke eloquently about his responsibility to engage with other faith traditions—and had longstanding friendships with Christians and Buddhists—he did not seek out Muslims. Imam Abudullah Antepi, an associate professor of the practice of interfaith relations at Duke Divinity School, challenged him on this during a three-day visit to Duke in 2017.

Sacks did speak out forcefully about anti-Semitism and was very critical of Britain's former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who he said "defiles our politics and demeans the country we love."

Sacks received numerous honors, including the Templeton Prize in 2016, the Grawemeyer Prize for Religion, and the Abraham Kuyper Prize from Princeton Theological Seminary. —Religion News Service