ADDRESSING A packed auditorium of some 900 faculty, administration, and students at Bar-Ilan University on June 7, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks delivered a wide-ranging lecture outlining his view of the contemporary task of Judaism, and addressed some of the most challenging issues on the minds of Jews today.

If one asks people around the globe about the state of the Jewish world and the State of Israel, the answer is that anti-Semitism has returned, Israel is isolated, the Argentinians aren’t willing to play football with Israel, Diaspora Jewry are assimilating, and Israeli Jewry are secularizing, said Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. "I call this the 'oy vey theory of Jewish identity.' I kvetch, therefore I am."

But Sacks proposed an alternative theory of Jewish identity. "I venture to suggest that never before in our history have we had simultaneously independence and sovereignty in the State of Israel, and freedom and equality in the Diaspora. This sovereignty and independence, and the whole miracle of the State of Israel, means that the very context of Jewish thought has changed. This surely calls for a new and confident response by way of Jewish thought. Now is the time for a Renaissance in Jewish thought," he asserted.

"Jewish thought has become practical in a way that it hasn't been for 2,000 years. Jews are now in the game."

Today, continued Sacks, western civilization is in deep crisis. "There is a clear sign all over the intellectual world in the West that the values and thought patterns of the establishment are crumbling. Market economy, liberal democracy, human rights. These are not things that should be taken lightly. They are achievements that must be preserved. Jews have been there. We have lasted. We have survived. We survived the rise and fall of Greece, we survived the rise and fall of Rome. We will survive the rise and possibly the fall of the Enlightenment, and we are still here in full strength. Right now it's not just that we need the world, which we do, but the world needs us. They need us to think deeply and authentically and then share our discoveries with them," he said. "Israel creates some of the most wonderful technological advances in the world. My personal favorite of all is a little app called Waze. Waze has done more for 'shalom bayit' (domestic harmony) than any other invention" because it has eliminated family arguments in the car about directions, he quipped. "We are the world's satellite navigation system."

In conclusion, Rabbi Sacks reiterated that today is a special time for the Jews because "we are in the arena of history," and Jews need not feel inferior to any other western intellectual tradition. "Jewish thought," he said, "must assert its continued contributions to the world -- we no longer need to be a footnote. We are the people whose job it is to be the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind. We are the people who consistently throughout history have fought our way out of tragedy and found through our own internalized ways some new pathway of hope. That has been the Jewish genius throughout. In a world of failed and failing states, of extremism and divisiveness in politics, not only here in the Middle East, but in Europe today and even in the US, we owe humanity the opening of a gateway to hope, and what begins in words and ideas in the mind can become a reality through the State of Israel."

Rabbi Sacks's lecture on The Contemporary Task of Judaism was the inaugural annual lecture of a new Bar-Ilan University forum which will explore issues in contemporary Jewish thought and philosophy. "This new lecture series will feature the finest minds from Israel and around the world who will address questions relating to the role of Judaism in today's world, the place of Jewish thought, ethics and religion, Jewish mysticism, and much more," said Prof. Hanoch Ben-Pazi, of the Department of Jewish Philosophy and Thought, who initiated the forum and moderated the event. Rabbi Sacks's lecture can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOjOlgz02T1.

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