September 2011 marks the twentieth anniversary of Jonathan Sacks's appointment as Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, during which time he has written more than fifteen books, as well as a haggadah and an English-Hebrew annotated edition of the Orthodox-affiliated Koren Siddur. *Genesis: A Book of Beginnings* represents the first in a series of texts exploring the weekly parasha, or section of the Torah, through short essays on various themes evoked by the *parasha* in question. (The second installment, on Exodus, was published in 2010).

The book consists of a collection of short essays – most no longer than four or five pages – on each of the twelve *parashot* of Genesis. Sacks opens each *parasha* with a brief discussion of the major themes of the text, and sketches out the topics of his essays. The essays themselves are clearly and succinctly written, and widely accessible; while Sacks makes frequent reference to philosophical, theological, and literary sources, he does so only in very basic terms, making the book well suited for a literate general audience. Given the clarity of the book, some essays might also serve as a means of sparking discussion in upper-level Hebrew School classes. In all cases, I would advise the reader to have a Hebrew Bible nearby, in order to look up the verses in question or to compare translations.

Despite its billing as “a weekly reading of the Jewish Bible,” Sacks's essays are not close textual readings per se; rather, the *parashot* seem to provide a means for Sacks to explore religious or ethical themes which he finds suggested in the biblical passages. Thus, for instance, an essay on *Parashat Toledot*, coupled with the rabbinic suggestion that Abraham and Isaac closely resembled one another, introduces a discussion of the ethics of human cloning. Another essay, “On Judaism and Islam,” employs the fraught relationship between Isaac and Ishmael in *Parashat Hayei Sara* to discuss the question of how contemporary Jews ought to approach their Muslim neighbors. Nearly all the essays end with some words about the relevance of the biblical text for modern Jews and a pithily phrased closing sentence. In the latter essay, Sacks concludes by saying, “There is hope for the future in this story of the past.” (144)
This emphasis on contemporary questions seems to stem from Sacks's repeated assertion that, as he says, “The Torah is not just a book to read; it is a book to live by.” (229) In a similar vein, he writes that the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all prominently featured in Genesis, “were more than just founders of a new faith. They were also role models.” (224) Given this point of view, it stands to reason that Sacks would attempt to make explicit the connections between the biblical world of the patriarchs and the world of contemporary Jewish readers. Occasionally, this method is quite successful, as in Sacks's essay “Prayer and Conversation,” inspired by Genesis 24:63, in which we are told that Isaac had “gone out into the field towards evening to meditate.” Drawing upon the rabbinic claim that Isaac's meditation was in fact the first instance of mincha, the mandatory Jewish afternoon prayer, Sacks goes on to discuss the significance of all three liturgical prayer times, as well as the meaning of prayer in general. Regarding the Amida, for instance, he argues that its dual recitation in the liturgy (once silently, and then another time collectively) underscores the fact that Jewish prayer is both a private act and an act of collective worship. For those readers who have struggled to find meaning in the traditional liturgy, Sacks's insight and his ability to draw connections between the patriarchs' prayers and ours, is sure to stay with many readers long after they finish reading.

Yet examples like this notwithstanding, I found his most compelling essays — both philosophically and ethically — to be those in which he engages primarily in close textual analysis, limiting the contemporary connections to a few sentences at the end. Some of Sacks's multiple essays on Joseph (whose story spans three parashot) are by far the strongest in the book; perhaps because of the multitude of characters and twists in the story, a close reading is required simply in order to make the narrative clear to readers. In “In search of Repentance,” for instance, Sacks wrestles with the question of how to understand Joseph's actions when he re-encounters his brothers in Egypt, where he is now the highest official in the land. How to understand Joseph's strange behavior toward his brothers in Genesis 42-44? Sacks's innovative interpretation proposes to read Joseph's actions through Maimonides' definition of teshuva – when an opportunity to re-commit a sin presents itself but the offender refrains from doing so – and concludes that Joseph is attempting to recreate the circumstances which lead to his own abduction, in order to “test” his brothers' moral development. To make this argument, Sacks must attend primarily to textual details, eschewing the broad conclusions, which characterize most of his other essays. The result is a rich, exciting, and challenging look at the motif of forgiveness in one biblical story.
The strength of this essay is, I think, due to the textual care required to make a coherent argument about the passage, and the relative subtlety with which Sacks delivers the “message” of the text for his contemporary readers. But this essay's success may also illuminate why so many of the others ultimately seem to fall flat. Sacks's preoccupation with the question of the Bible's contemporary “relevance” and his insistence that the characters of Genesis must serve as role models too often lead him to eschew the many difficult questions – ethical and hermeneutical – raised by the texts. From the opening essays, Sacks seems driven to reassure his readers that the questions they might have are more easily answered than they might think. Even standard textual dilemmas – such as, for instance, the question of why God accepted the offering of Abel while rejecting his brother Cain's (Gen. 4:3-5) - are immediately answered with utter confidence that there is really no problem. In another essay, Sacks takes up the question of the matriarch Sarah, who abuses Hagar after she conceives a child, and Abraham, who stands by and watches, but says merely that the protagonists behave in a “less-than-good” manner in that moment. In his drive to maintain the characters' status as perennial role models, he then drops the question, quickly moving on to a simpler, more digestible take-home point. As for one of the most notorious episodes of Genesis, when Shechem took Leah and Jacob's daughter and “lay with her by force,” after which Jacob's sons slaughter all the men of the city (Gen. 34), Sacks makes no mention at all.

Despite the notable strengths of this first volume, then, it also has a significant weakness. Sacks's desire to draw clear religious or ethical directives directly from the text and his resulting attempts to remain outside the realm of controversy ultimately renders many of the essays less than compelling. One consequence of his approach is that by often ignoring or quickly answering the hard questions of the Bible, Sacks leaves his reader with little to do, morally or exegetically. That is, while a more open-ended approach might leave the reader with more questions than answers, it could also leave more space for readers to do their own “work” with the questions, thus leading to a more productive and thoughtful engagement between reader and Torah. Nevertheless, the volume certainly serves as a means of introducing people to the book of Genesis, as well as biblical interpretation more generally – and some of his essays, particularly those on prayer and on the Joseph cycle, are fresh and evocative. If this book is used primarily as a means of opening conversation about the strange and fascinating world of the Bible, it will assuredly contribute to that conversation.