

Three Parables for Integration

Directions: Read the three parables for integration outlined by Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, in his book *The Home We Build Together*¹ and then answer the connection questions that follow.

One. A hundred strangers have been wandering around the countryside in search of a place to stay. Eventually they arrive at the gate of a large country house. The owner comes to the gate, sees the strangers and asks them who they are. They tell him their story. He gives them a warm smile. “How good to see you,” he says. “As you can see, I have an enormous home. Far too big for me, actually. There are hundreds of empty rooms. Please feel free to stay here as long as you like. I look forward to your company. From now on, consider yourself my guests.”

A lovely story. But not entirely so for the strangers in the long run. They have a place to live, and yes, their host is exactly as he seemed at first, welcoming, hospitable. [...] However, there is only one thing wrong as far as they are concerned. However generous their host, he remains the host and they are his guests. The place belongs to someone else. That is society as a country house.

Two. A hundred strangers in search of a home find themselves in the middle of a big city. They are there to find a hotel. It is large, comfortable, and has every amenity. The visitors have money enough to pay the hotel bills. They book their rooms, unpack, and stay.

The rules are simple. They are free to do what they like, so long as they don't disturb the other guests. Their relationship with the hotel is purely contractual. They pay money in return for certain services. [...]

The hotel offers the newcomers a freedom and equality they did not have in the first model. They are guests, but so is everyone else. There is only one problem. A hotel is where you stay, not where you belong. You feel no loyalty to a hotel. You don't put down roots there. It doesn't become part of your identity. [. . .] Yes, after a while you recognize your fellow guests. You bid them good morning. You discuss the weather and football. But it remains a place where everyone is, in the biblical phrase, “a stranger and sojourner.” That is society as a hotel.

Three. A hundred strangers arrive at a town. They are met by the mayor, councilors and local residents. The mayor says: “Friends, we welcome you. It is good to have you among us. Sadly, as you can see, there is no country house where we might accommodate you. There is, though, something we can offer you.

“We have a patch of empty land: large enough to accommodate homes for all of you. We have bricks and materials. We have experts who can help you design your homes, and we will help you build them. [...] Let us do this together.”

So it happens. Unlike the country house, the newcomers have to build their own long-term accommodation. Unlike the hotel, they do not merely pay. They invest their energies in what they build. [...] They helped build it.

Sacks explains that it won't always be easy.

The newcomers still occasionally seem strange. They speak and act and dress differently than the locals. But those long sessions of working together have had their effect. The locals know the newcomers are serious, committed, dedicated. They have their own ways, but they have also learned the ways of the people of the town, and they have worked out [...] a rough and ready friendship. [...] Making something together breaks down walls of suspicion and misunderstanding. [. . .] That is society as the home we build together.

¹ From Facing History and Ourselves' publication, *Stories of Identity: Religion, Migration, and Belonging in a Changing World* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc., 2008).

Connection Questions

1. Sacks offers three parables as metaphors for types of integration. What is the moral he is trying to teach?
2. Have you been a guest at someone's home? At a hotel?
 - a. What is the difference between being a guest at someone's home and a guest at a hotel?
 - b. Do any of these models of integration represent how Muslims are treated in your community?
3. Why do you think Sacks advocates for the third parable, the home we build together?
 - a. What does he see as the advantages of that model?
4. Why does Sacks believe the third model 'won't always be easy'?
 - a. Do you agree?
 - b. What can be done either by host communities or newcomers to foster integration?
5. How do these parables relate to what you have learnt about Islamophobia?
6. What do you think can be done to foster community cohesion, often seen as being rooted in a common sense of belonging and shared values?
 - a. Whose responsibility is this?
 - b. What role can your school play?
 - c. What role can you play?