

Communications

TO THE EDITOR:

I believe that a point on rhetorical and pedagogical strategy resolves, in one fell swoop, nearly all the questions Dr. Alan Jotkowitz poses to R. Jonathan Sacks' theology ("Universalism and Particularism in the Jewish Tradition: The Radical Theology of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks" in *Tradition*, Fall 2011).

Dr. Jotkowitz raises four main difficulties:

1. R. Sacks claims that all religions are equally true, which is difficult to uphold within Orthodox Jewish tradition.
2. R. Sacks' writings overly rely on Scripture, with explanations that contradict rabbinic interpretations.
3. R. Sacks explicitly rejects pluralism within Judaism. If all religions are equally true, why not all Jewish denominations?
4. R. Sacks opposes multiculturalism's equality of culture but favors equality of religions.

I submit that the key to understanding R. Sacks' theology is recognizing that he is a global religious figure who addresses multiple audiences. He speaks not only internally, inspiring and instructing Jews, but also to the broader public. To maximize his impact on listeners, he speaks differently to different audiences. When speaking to Orthodox Jews, he invokes Talmud, commentaries and codes. However, when addressing gentiles, particularly Christians, he primarily utilizes common language — the Hebrew Bible and philosophy — and avoids legal niceties that outsiders to Orthodox Judaism would find foreign to theology.

When speaking to gentiles, he mentions the Noahide code but only briefly (e.g. *The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 20, 54, 57). Of course, as an Orthodox rabbi, he believes that all humanity is bound by it, including its prohibition against idolatry, but his goals in this book are not furthered by overemphasizing it. He is speaking to the nations of the world and using Christian terms like "faith" (meaning religion, not specific beliefs) and telling them that they can follow their own tribal paths to God (as long as they fall within the boundaries of the Noahide covenant).

All of those religions contain some truth and, figuratively, God speaks to all people. R. Sacks is not, to my reading, saying that every truth claim of every religion is true or that every (or any) sacred religious text is divinely revealed. He is merely saying that God cares about every human

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being and manifests Himself in their lives. When they feel God's presence, they are genuinely experiencing a religious moment. And, perhaps, even stronger and following the Rambam's view in *Mishne Torah* (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4), God providentially directs the founding and spreading of those religions.

A book guiding gentiles in resolving differences among themselves is not the place to assert the unique place of Judaism and its sacred texts. R. Sacks is speaking to the vast majority of the world about the vast majority of people and their relationships with God. He is telling them that all religions within the Noahide covenant that uphold universal values are equally true, but those that contravene the Noahide covenant and universal values are invalid. This is entirely consistent with the idea that within the Mosaic covenant only one religion — Judaism — can be true. Pluralism is an aspect of the Noahide covenant. Within the Mosaic covenant, however, "Orthodoxy is defined in terms of truth and authority, not interpretation and option. This fact cannot be translated into pluralism." (*One People*, p. 151)

And even within the Noahide covenant, beliefs that undermine universal values of community and family or that otherwise endanger society are invalid. "There are indeed moral universals — the Hebrew Bible calls them 'the covenant with Noah' and they form the basis of modern codes of human rights. But they exist to create space for cultural and religious difference..." (*The Dignity of Difference*, p. 20) Failing to recognize this, and thereby risking society's collapse, is multiculturalism's fatal error. "[L]iberalism in its modern guises, and still more in its postmodern one, denies that there is such a thing as a shared moral code." (*The Home We Build Together*, p. 5)

While I already explained why, in certain books, R. Sacks portrays his religious thought almost exclusively through Scripture, I'd like to address an important example that Dr. Jotkowitz raises. Over many books, R. Sacks develops a theology of the stranger. He returns again and again to this theme, which he argues is essential to the Jewish outlook. Dr. Jotkowitz correctly points out that "[t]he verses he quotes, according to the Oral Torah, refer exclusively to a stranger who is a full convert to Judaism (*ger tsedek*) or at the very least some[one] who agrees to follow the seven Noahide laws and live peacefully under Jewish sovereignty (*ger toshav*)." (p. 61)

R. Sacks is well aware of this and, in a text directed toward Jews that Dr. Jotkowitz overlooks, explains his approach within the traditional framework of Talmud and commentaries. In *Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Exodus, 179-186), R. Sacks quotes two passages from *Bava Metsia* and from Ramban and *Or Ha-Hayyim* in his analysis of

the moral obligation toward strangers. If I understand correctly, his main basis for generalizing these commandments is that the Torah is commanding Jews how to properly treat strangers who live among them. In a settled land of Israel, the only strangers who may live among us are converts and *geri toshav*. However, the lessons from these commandments refer, at the very least in spirit, to the way any native population should treat strangers living in its midst.

R. Sacks is only human and may be guilty of inconsistencies and errors. However, I fail to see how Dr. Jotkowitz and Dr. Marc Shapiro, whom Jotkowitz quotes, have successfully critiqued R. Sacks' theology.

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ALAN JOTKOWITZ RESPONDS:

I want to thank Rabbi Student for his careful reading of my article, but I fail to see how his contention that "recognition that he is a global religious figure who addresses multiple audiences" solves the difficulties that I raised. Regardless of the audience addressed, the theology presented needs to be consistent with Rabbinic thought in order to be considered an authentic Orthodox Jewish perspective. I will now address each of the four points in which R. Student summarized my article:

1. R. Student comments that Rabbi Sacks "is merely saying that God cares about every human being and manifests Himself in their lives." I wholly agree with those sentiments, but maintain that Rabbi Sacks is saying much more than that. R. Sacks writes, "As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures, and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws."¹ Notwithstanding the eloquence of the statement, most of the world's religions do not faithfully follow the Noahide laws. Many of the Eastern religions do not believe in traditional monotheism and neither does Catholicism according to many authorities. Furthermore, I maintain that it is none of my business what other people believe and, instead of advocating a theology based on the "dignity of difference," would rather accept the position of the Rav that, while maintaining mutual respect between religions, prefers to limit theological discussion between faith communities.

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum Press, 2003), 55.

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2. The fact that R. Sacks is speaking to Gentiles and that's why he bases his theology on biblical passages is irrelevant if his theology is not grounded in Rabbinic teachings. As I pointed out in my article, there are multiple possible readings of the Bible, and from an Orthodox perspective theological readings must be consistent with traditional Rabbinic thought.
3. I am not sure how the fact that R. Sacks is speaking to a global audience explains why according to his theology of the "dignity of difference" Judaism should not welcome other denominations (which according to my understanding R. Sacks is not willing to do) as long as they abide by the Noahide laws.
4. I argued the inconsistency of R. Sacks' thought in endorsing universal moral principles but accepting the validity of other religions. As I emphasized in my article, there are times that these two assumptions are contradictory and his theology needs to address this difficulty.

I want to thank Rabbi Student for the respectful tone of his letter, which is in the spirit of my original article. As I mention in the paper, I hold Rabbi Sacks in the highest regard and feel that *Tradition* is the appropriate forum for discussion and debate of these important issues.

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