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## UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM IN THE JEWISH TRADITION: THE RADICAL THEOLOGY OF RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

### INTRODUCTION

**R**abbi Jonathan Sacks was born in London in 1948 and educated at Gonville and Caius College where he received first-class honors in Philosophy. He then went on to obtain a Ph.D. in 1981 from Kings College London. R. Sacks received rabbinic ordination from Jews' College and Yeshiva Etz Chaim. He has been a visiting professor at several prestigious universities and has been awarded honorary doctorates from the universities of Cambridge, Glasgow, Haifa, Middlesex, Yeshiva, Liverpool and St. Andrews, and a Doctor of Divinity from the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was awarded a Knighthood by the Queen of England in June 2005.

After serving as rabbi of the Golders Green and Marble Arch synagogues in London and as Principal of Jews' College, he was appointed Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth in 1991, and in 2009 was made a life peer and took his seat in the House of Lords.<sup>1</sup>

R. Sacks has been a visible and highly effective spokesman for the Jewish community in Britain. He regularly appears on the BBC (both radio and television) and writes frequently for the popular press. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he is a walking *Kiddush Hashem* for the British and worldwide Jewish communities, as he is probably the world's foremost expositor of Jewish values and ethics. He is very active in inter-faith relations and maintains excellent relationships with many of the world's leading religious figures. Notwithstanding the above, his tenure as Chief Rabbi has been marked with controversy, particularly in his relations with non-Orthodox denominations in England. As a result of these disagreements,

<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.chief Rabbi.org](http://www.chief Rabbi.org), accessed July 21, 2010.

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there have been calls for the dismantling of the position and its replacement with a more inclusive body.<sup>2</sup>

From a theological and intellectual perspective, R. Sacks follows in the footsteps of his illustrious predecessors such as Rabbis Hertz and Jakobovits in being an original and important thinker. In his explanation of the trajectory of his illustrious career, he writes movingly of his encounters with R. Joseph Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. “I had the enormous privilege as a 20 year [old] student in 1968, of having two life-changing meetings, one with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, and one with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of blessed memory. The Lubavitcher Rebbe challenged me to be a leader, and Rav Soloveitchik challenged me to be a thinker. Those two moments, long, long ago, shaped my life.”<sup>3</sup> He has clearly fulfilled those charges. In the course of his eminent career, R. Sacks has developed a Jewish theological response to the impact of globalization and multiculturalism on a religious lifestyle; something few Orthodox thinkers have grappled with.

## A RADICAL ANSWER

I would argue that R. Sacks’ greatest contribution is as an educator and theologian. In books, such as *Crisis and Covenant* and *To Heal a Fractured World*, he has a unique way of explaining modern Jewish thought to Jews and non-Jews alike. However, in addition to his educational efforts, he is one of the preeminent Orthodox Jewish thinkers of his time. His most profound idea, fully developed in his masterpiece, *The Dignity of Difference*, is the relationship between tribalism and universalism in Jewish thought. He writes that,

Truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal. When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true and the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality ... In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Meir Persoff, *Another Way, Another Time*, Academic Studies Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Available at [www.kolhamevaser.com/index.php?paged=2](http://www.kolhamevaser.com/index.php?paged=2), accessed July 21, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, Continuum Press, London 2002, p. 64. In the second edition of the book due to a concern that certain passages in the book were misunderstood, R. Sacks rephrased some passages. For instance, the above quoted paragraph was changed to, “the divine

He develops the radical (as he himself describes it) thesis that the reason the Jewish people were chosen was to teach the world this lesson. In his own words, “God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference.”<sup>5</sup> In comments that caused him great difficulties he writes,

In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. Only such a God is truly transcendental – greater than not only the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe articulated in any single faith, any specific language of human sensibility. How could a sacred text convey such an idea? It would declare that God is God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity.<sup>6</sup>

He continues,

[T]he truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God is greater than religion: that he is only partially comprehended by any faith. He is my God, but also your God. He is on my side but also on your side. He exists not only in my faith but also in yours.<sup>7</sup>

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word comes from heaven but it is interpreted on earth. Truth in heaven transcends space and time, but human perception is bounded by space and time. When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true and the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality...Each culture has something to contribute to the totality of human wisdom.” Notwithstanding these changes, R. Sacks maintains that “the dignity of difference remains the most forceful argument for tolerance in an age of extremes. I firmly believe that it represents the right Judaic response to some of the most formidable problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 53. In the revised edition, this is changed to, “God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different, teaching humanity to make space for difference. God may at times be found in the human other, the one not like us.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 55. In the revised edition, this is changed to, “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. These laws constitute, as it were, the depth grammar of the human experience of the divine: of what it is to see the world as God’s work; and humanity as God’s image. God is the God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 65. In the revised edition, this is changed to, “the truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God transcends the particularities of culture and the limits of human understanding. He is my God but also the God of all mankind, even of those whose customs and way of life are unlike mine.”

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According to R. Sacks, what Judaism teaches is the progression from the universal to the particular. The Torah begins with God creating a covenant with all of humanity and then singles out people (the Jews) as different, not because of any notion of moral superiority, but “in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference.” Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one truth, one faith, one way of life. On the contrary – it is the idea that unity creates diversity. These ideas are radical theological statements and relate directly to how one understands the concept of the “Chosen People.” R. Yehuda Halevi in the *Kuzari* advocates for a theory of Jewish exclusivity based on an intrinsic Jewish spiritual superiority. Elements of this philosophy have been adopted by the Maharal of Prague and has found wide adherence among many sects of Hassidim. An opposing view maintains that there exists no inherent difference between Jews and non-Jews. Jewish chosenness is based on the acceptance of the Torah and the 613 commandments. Any person who wishes to obligate themselves in the commandments by converting to Judaism is able to reach a spiritual level equivalent to that of one who is born a Jew. R. Sacks maintains that there is no intrinsic, or even acquired, uniqueness in being a Jew, but rather God singled out the Jews simply as an example for the proposition that each faith should develop their own unique path to God. As he himself writes, there are certainly limits to the direction that a faith can take. Idolatry, paganism, and the religious advocacy of immoral behavior would not be an acceptable means of serving God. Notwithstanding these reservations, R. Sacks is blazing a new trail in Jewish theology, particularly in its relation to other faiths.

This progression of the universal to the particular also characterizes Jewish prayer. For example, the Grace after Meals begins by thanking God for bringing sustenance to the world and then beseeches God to rebuild Jerusalem. Likewise, the blessings preceding the recitation of *Shema* first begin by praising God for creating the world and only then proceed to bless the special relationship between God and the Jewish people.<sup>8</sup>

A direct consequence of this theology of difference is the Jewish attitude toward the stranger. The Torah warns us: “When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The stranger who lives with you shall be treated like the native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (Vayikra 19:33)

<sup>8</sup> *The Koren Sacks Siddur: A US/Canadian Prayer Book with Translation & Commentary* by Chief Rabbi Sacks, Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2009.

R. Sacks maintains: "The supreme religious challenge is to see God's image in one who is not in our image. That is the converse of tribalism. But it is also something other than universalism. It takes difference seriously. It recognizes the integrity of other cultures, other civilizations, other paths to the presence of God."<sup>9</sup>

This thesis of R. Sacks is certainly influenced by certain trends in post-modern thought that do not believe in absolute truth. R. Sacks responds directly to this claim by arguing: "This means that religious truth is not universal. What it does not mean is that it is relative. There is a difference, all too often ignored, between absoluteness and universality. I have an absolute obligation to my child, but it is not a universal one."<sup>10</sup> R. Sacks' thought is also an orthodox Jewish theology removed from the shadow of the Holocaust, which dominated Jewish thought in the second half of the twentieth century. It is hard to imagine a Jewish theology arguing for the dignity of difference in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of European Jewry.

This thesis of R. Sacks, while fully developed in *The Dignity of Difference*, has been a constant in his thought almost from the beginning of his career. In one of his earliest books, *Crisis and Covenant*, published in 1992 but based on lectures he gave in Manchester in 1989, he writes:

The challenge of unredeemed time, one that has lost none of its force in an age of mass destruction, is to work through the religious and moral implications of differentness: of the fact that one God has created one world in which many faiths, cultures and languages must live together. Judaism stakes its being on faith in the religious integrity of difference.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned above, the primary source of R. Sacks' thesis is a careful reading of the opening chapters of Bereshit. The bible begins with the story of the birth of the world and humanity. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, and Noah and the flood are all narratives that are universal in nature without relation to any specific people. The story of the Tower of Babel is a key turning point in history according to R. Sacks. Unified man, full of misplaced arrogance after spectacular technological achievements, thought he could take the place of God. God responded by dividing man into a multiplicity of languages and cultures. Only at this point does the Torah focus exclusively on the story of Abraham and the Jews in order to teach the dignity of difference.

<sup>9</sup> *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 150.

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A similar idea has been expressed by the Dalai Lama who recently wrote:

When I was a boy in Tibet, I felt my own Buddhist religion must be the best and that other faiths were somehow inferior. Now I see how naïve I was, and how dangerous the extremes of religious intolerance can be today...Granted every religion has a sense of exclusivity as part of its own identity. Even so, I believe there is genuine potential for mutual understanding. While preserving faith towards one's own tradition, one can respect, admire and appreciate other traditions.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding the attractiveness of R. Sacks' and the Dalai Lama's thesis, it runs into trouble when confronted by religions whose theology depends heavily on the salvation of others by their acceptance of one true faith. R. Sacks attempts to counteract this claim by invoking Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty. Berlin famously advocates for negative liberty, which is essentially the freedom to do as one pleases, but not for positive liberty, freedom built on a utopian vision of the perfect life, which, in Berlin's words, "is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals ... This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution."<sup>13</sup> R. Sacks is essentially arguing that other religions should adopt his model, which he believes is the authentic Jewish model, for relations between the faiths.

Many of R. Sacks' ideas are reminiscent of the thought of R. Irving Greenberg. It would be unfair, however, to suggest that R. Sacks would necessarily agree with all that R. Greenberg proposes.

Basing himself on a close reading of the biblical narrative, R. Greenberg writes:

The covenantal process starts with the affirmation that God loves us in our particularity, in our distinctiveness, in our body odor, in our pettiness, in our greatness, and of course, in our historical existence as Jews or Christians or Muslims or Buddhists or whatever we are. ... The triumphalism, the rejections, the cruelty, and the mutual defamation all came out of the human need for reassurance that 'Indeed, I am the favorite

<sup>12</sup> Available at [www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25gyatso.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25gyatso.html), accessed July 21, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Four essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1969.

child.' The favoritism would make the travail of the faithful worthwhile. Somehow, if I suffered, it was not so bad, as long as I was assured that I had the right religion and the others had nothing. These deviations reflected the self-aggrandizement of communities that forgot that the ultimate prayer is that God's will be done, not that my agenda will win out. Fratricide reflects the failure of imagination to conceive that the parent – in this case the infinite divine love – is not exhausted by one people's redemption. There is enough love in God to choose again and again.<sup>14</sup>

R. Greenberg's thought, particularly in its exploration of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and the notion of a voluntary covenant, is clearly charting new directions in Jewish theology, which are not indebted to prior rabbinical thinking and not necessarily in full conformity with it. In addition, he has, admittedly, been heavily influenced by the inexplicable horror of the Holocaust and the Christian response to it. R. Greenberg is candid in his call for the necessity of a new theology, but R. Sacks has been less so. It is not clear if R. Sacks is developing a new philosophy or rather an innovative interpretation of traditional rabbinic thinking. From an Orthodox Jewish perspective this is not simply a question of semantics but a major theological issue. Interpretations are always legitimate, but new approaches not rooted in traditional rabbinic sources can be theologically problematic.

Another approach to interfaith relations is advocated by R. Soloveitchik. In a letter discussing the proper dispensation of abandoned infants in New York, R. Soloveitchik writes:

[The Jewish religion] never maintained that our faith is destined to become universal in order to save mankind from damnation. Our prophets and scholars have taught that all men who live in accordance with Divine moral standards will share in the transcendental summum bonum which was promised to God-fearing and God-loving people...However, this tolerant philosophy of transcendental universalism does not exclude the specific awareness of the Jews of the supremacy of their faith over all others. As a matter of fact, the act of appraising the worth of one's particular religious experience on the highest axiological level constitutes the very essence of the transcendental performance. The feeling of axiological equality of all faiths as a component of their individual religious experience

<sup>14</sup> Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, JPS Philadelphia, 2004 p. 195.

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is a *contradicto in objecto*. Religious tolerance asserts itself in the knowledge of the existence of the variety and plurality of God-experiences and in the recognition that each individual is entitled to evaluate his great unique performance as the most redeeming and uplifting one.<sup>15</sup>

In his seminal essay on interfaith relations, “Confrontation”, R. Soloveitchik maintains:

Only a candid, frank and unequivocal policy reflecting unconditional commitment to our God, a sense of dignity, pride and inner joy in being what we are, believing in great passion in the ultimate truthfulness of our views, praying fervently for and expecting confidently the fulfillment of our eschatological vision when our faith will rise from particularity to universality, will impress the peers of the other faith community among whom we have both adversaries and friends.<sup>16</sup>

While referring specifically to the theological relationship between Judaism and Christianity, R. Soloveitchik makes it clear that a Jew has to believe that his or her faith is supreme and there is an absolute truth to that faith, even at the expense of the beliefs of other religions. For this reason he does not endorse interfaith dialogue on theological issues or the thesis that the Jewish religion is only a partial truth.

## CRITIQUE

Notwithstanding the power of R. Sacks’ ideas, to the best of my knowledge there has been little serious critique of them in both the religious and academic worlds, and by doing so I explicitly recognize their importance and lasting value. The leader of Ultra-Orthodox Jewry in Israel, R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, condemned *The Dignity of Difference* for “containing heresy and matters that are against our faith in the holy Torah.”<sup>17</sup> Presumably, however, he relied on what others told him about the English language book.

The primary source for R. Sacks’ radical ideas is the Written Torah, but throughout history Jewish thought has been primarily viewed from

<sup>15</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, edited by Nathaniel Helfgot, Ktav Publishing House, New Jersey, 2005, pgs. 21-22.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 1964 6:4, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Marc B. Shapiro, “Of Books and Bans,” *The Edah Journal*, 2003 3:2, p. 9. Another negative review of the book was written by the Haredi columnist Jonathan Rosenbloom.



the perspective of the Oral Torah. Prof. Marvin Fox has written: "Religious and philosophical accounts of Jewish spirituality are sound and meaningful only to the extent that they derive from the Halakha. The deepest religious emotion, the subtlest theological understanding can only be Jewishly authentic to the extent that they arise from reflections on matters of Halakha."<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that R. Sacks quotes the Talmudic statement "The pious of the nations have a share in the world to come," the main thrust of his theology is biblical in nature. This methodology has much in common with the renewed emphasis on the learning of Tanakh and its use as a source of theology found in many Dati-Leumi *yeshivot* and *ulpanot* in Israel. This brings us to a second problem; a careful reading of Tanakh can just as easily bring one to the opposite conclusion of R. Sacks and argue for a religious and moral superiority of the Jewish people. It is hard to see how reading the story of the divine sanctioned conquest of the land of Israel in Joshua and Judges can lead one to a theology of the "dignity of difference." One can just as easily conclude that the mission of the Jewish People is to destroy those who differ from them. That this is obviously not the case is demonstrated by reading these narratives through the spectacles of the Oral Law. In addition, Jewish thought relies heavily on *mesorah*, tradition, and there is simply no *mesorah* for such statements as "In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims." Jews have always believed in a unique revelation to Moshe on Mount Sinai which was never duplicated for other religions.

Even R. Sacks' example of loving the stranger as a model for the acceptance of diversity is problematic. The 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 who agrees to follow the seven Noahide laws and live peacefully under Jewish sovereignty (*ger toshav*).

In other contexts, R. Sacks argues strenuously for the primacy of Orthodoxy over other denominations in Judaism. For example, he writes,

An internal Jewish pluralism that would de jure acknowledge different religious denominations is ruled out by the classic terms of Judaism. Precisely because Judaism is the religion of a nation, one of its central terms is halakhah...A pluralism that would formally recognize the obsolescence

<sup>18</sup> Marvin Fox, "The Unity and Structure of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Thought," *Tradition* 24:2, p. 49.

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of halakhah (Jewish secularism) or its subjection to the autonomous self (Reform) or the local ethic of time and place (Conservative) would not be a proposal to unite Jewry but, instead to announce its dissolution.<sup>19</sup>

R. Sacks argues for a policy of inclusivism when dealing with other Jewish denominations. This approach advocates using maximal halakhic flexibility in order to preserve the unity of the Jewish people without conferring any theological legitimacy on non-Orthodox denominations. A classic example of this approach is R. Moshe Feinstein's response regarding the validity of marriages performed by non-Orthodox clergy.<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Feinstein addressed the problem of children born to a Jewish mother who was originally married by a non-Orthodox rabbi and then subsequently remarried without obtaining a proper divorce. One might think that the children born from the second marriage would be considered illegitimate according to Jewish Law and therefore not allowed to marry Jews. In a bold example of halakhic decision making, R. Feinstein ruled that the children were not illegitimate because the first marriage had no halakhic validity since it was not performed under Orthodox auspices. This reasoning enabled the children to remain part of the Jewish people but undermined the legitimacy of all non-Orthodox marriages. Interestingly, R. Feinstein's approach was applauded by R. Eugene Borowitz, one of the leading theologians of Reform Judaism, who wrote that as a Reform rabbi he had no intention of creating an halakhic marriage. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the positive motivations of those who argue for an inclusive approach, it is not clear to me why the "dignity of difference" would not also apply to other denominations in Judaism. Why couldn't God speak differently to a Reform Jew in New York than an Orthodox Jew in Jerusalem? And shouldn't we then celebrate this difference, something that R. Sacks is not willing to do?

R. Sacks' thesis also presents difficulties from an educational perspective. It is praiseworthy to preach tolerance of other traditions and cultures, but how then does one pass on to the next generation the uniqueness of one's own religion, particularly one as demanding as Judaism? In an age of assimilation and multiculturalism this is a pressing issue for many faiths.

Professor Marc Shapiro attempts to defend some of R. Sacks' more radical positions. He begins by asserting "If we are to conclude, as Sacks

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity*, London, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> R. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe*, Vol I., no. 76.

himself seems to, that while his position has biblical roots, it is absent from the rabbinic tradition, then we would be forced to agree with the haredi critique.”<sup>21</sup> He proves that there is a minority opinion which believes that idolatry is not prohibited for non-Jews and quotes the medieval R. Netanel ben al-Fayyumi, who maintains that “God sent different prophets to the various nations of the world with legislations suited to the particular temperament of each individual nation.”<sup>22</sup> R. Netanel’s position is consistent with the Talmudic contention that God sent prophets to the nations of the world. But nowhere in the Jewish tradition do we find statements attesting to the inherent equality of all religions, which contradicts the traditional Jewish belief in a Chosen People.

## THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY AND COVENANT

R. Sacks’ second major idea is the responsibility of mankind to change and improve the world. In recent years he has been particularly bothered by the breakdown of civil society in Britain and other Western countries. Once again, his thesis is rooted in a close reading of the opening chapters of Bereishit; however, he also brings much Talmudic and Rabbinic support for his ideas. In his own words:

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are not a mere series of historical narratives. They are a highly structured exploration of responsibility. They begin with two stories about individuals, Adam and Eve, then Cain, followed by two stories about societies, the generation of the Flood and the builders of Babel. The first and last – the tree of knowledge, the tower – are about the failure to honor boundaries: between permitted and forbidden, heaven and earth. The inner two are about violence, individual then collective. They constitute developmental psychology of the moral sense. First we discover personal responsibility, our freedom to choose. Then we acquire moral responsibility, the knowledge that choice has limits: not everything we can do, may we do. Later we learn collective responsibility: we are part of a family, a community and society and we have a share in its innocence or guilt. Later still, we realize that society itself is subject to a higher law: there are oral limits to power.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> “Of Books and Bans,” p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, Continuum Press, London, 2005, pgs. 144-145.

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This all is a prologue to the narratives of Abraham, whose life is a lesson in personal responsibility. He leaves everything that is known to him to heed God's call to travel to the Land of Israel and then is willing to sacrifice his son in response to a divine command. He is willing to enter into battle in order to save his brother's son, Lot, and pleads with God to save the lives of the wicked inhabitants of Sodom.

This call to personal responsibility is not only to individuals, but also extends to communities. In Shemot we read of the birth of the Jewish People and their maturation is marked by a progression from a reliance on God to self-initiative. In their battle with the Egyptians at the Red Sea, their actions were minimal; God miraculously saved them by splitting the sea. In their first battle with Amalek they learned to fight for themselves and God's miracle was done through human beings, not independent of them. The end of Shemot tells the story of the construction of the Tabernacle and there are many parallels with the creation of the world. The parallels are not accidental and emphasize the point that just as God created the world, man has a responsibility to create a home for the divine presence in that world. The responsibility is man's and not God's.

It is not difficult to see the influence of R. Soloveitchik on this theology of human initiative and personal development. R. Soloveitchik, whom R. Sacks holds in the highest regard, writes:

Man of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques, and saves lives is blessed with dignity ... In doing all this, Adam the first is trying to carry out the mandate entrusted to him by his Maker who, at dawn of the sixth mysterious day of creation, addressed Himself to man and summoned him to 'fill the earth and subdue it.'<sup>24</sup>

This emphasis on human initiative is reflected in the sages' understanding of the relationship between the Written and Oral Torah. The Torah was given by God at Sinai but the power to interpret it was given to the human scholars. A famous Talmudic story teaches us that the Rabbis can even rule against the opinion of God because the Torah is "not in Heaven."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Aaronson Pub. 1997.

<sup>25</sup> *Bava Metsia* 59b.

The defining moment of Shemot is the giving of the Torah at Sinai; however, what is most revealing is the narrative beforehand. Before the Decalogue was revealed, the people had to assent to the rule of God. The lesson that R. Sacks learns is that no form of government is legitimate without the assent of the governed, even one between God and man. This is the essence of a government based on covenant. He contrasts that with a government based on social contract:

Social contract creates a state; social covenant creates a society. Social contract is about power and how it is to be handled within a political framework. Social covenant is about how people live together despite their differences. Social contract is about government. Social covenant is about coexistence. Social contract is about laws and their enforcement. Social covenant is about the values we share. Social contract is about the use of potentially coercive force. Social covenant is about moral commitments, the values we share and the ideals that inspire us to work together for the sake of the common good.<sup>26</sup>

Political covenants are almost always tied up with a grand narrative of their formation. One example is the Passover Seder, which tells the story of the exodus from Egypt and the subsequent covenant at Sinai. Another is the narrative of American Independence as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Covenantal politics is built on the idea that people can join to form a society of shared ideals and values. It is based on ethics of responsibility and the belief that humans can create a better future working together. Binding together individuals through a common narrative serves to create a greater whole with covenantal responsibilities to each other. Societies based on covenant are not bound by the letter of the law in their interpersonal relationships, but strive to go beyond them to build a moral, just, and compassionate society.

## THE PARADOX

According to R. Sacks, modern Western liberal democracies need to create societies based on shared values and covenantal relationships. Multiculturalism has failed in this regard. He believes that certain values are universal and has a disdain for moral relativism. He reminds us that he

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Home we Build Together*, Continuum Press London 2007, p. 110.

believes in the dignity of difference but writes in one place that, “When you declare all cultures equally valid, and say that to judge one better than another is judgmental, and condescending, you destroy the possibility, the very language of shared belonging. That cannot be right. There are universals.”<sup>27</sup> Is this the Jonathan Sacks that coined the term “dignity of difference” and believes in the equally valid revelation of each religion? He seems to be claiming that there are different ways of serving God, but there has to be universal moral standards. But why should this be true? Different religions can and do have different and sometimes conflicting moral visions. In a world of multiple revelations, why is mine more right than yours? Some traditions maintain that a fetus has rights, others do not. Some accept homosexuality as a valid expression of human sexuality, others do not. Why should we accept one vision and not the other, why is my message from God more right than yours?

The Modern Orthodox thinker who confronts this paradox head-on is the relatively unknown but profound thinker, R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, commonly referred to as Rav Shagar. He writes,

One could ask, what is our position in regard to the self-immolation of an Indian widow? From our perspective it is without a doubt a completely immoral act, but for the believing Indian it is an act of great kindness for the widow. The post-modernist will protest the phenomenon but is also able to see the perspective of the Indian. The opinion that morality is a universal imperative, divorced from cultural influences, is not tenable.<sup>28</sup>

Rav Shagar, basing himself on the thought of R. Nachman of Breslov, maintains that there is simply no answer to this question, and the proper response is acquiescence and acceptance of the paradox. God’s refusal to answer Moshe on why R. Akiva had to suffer is where one learns the response of silence.<sup>29</sup> The acceptance of the problem of theodicy serves as a paradigm for other inexplicable paradoxes that modern man faces. And it is in this acceptance where faith begins.

R. Sacks’ call for liberal democracies to create covenants based on shared narratives stands in direct conflict with one of the basic tenets of post-modern thought. According to Lyotard, to create this order, enlightened societies create grand narratives, which are stories a culture creates

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>28</sup> Shalom Gershon Rosenberg [Shagar], *Broken Vessels*, Yeshivat Siah Yitchak, Efrat 2004 p.15. [Hebrew]

<sup>29</sup> *Menahot* 29b.

about itself in order to justify its beliefs and cultural norms.<sup>30</sup> Postmodernism is a critique of these “grand narratives” and prefers mini-narratives that “explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Post-modern mini-narratives are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.” Grand narratives of the kind favored by R. Sacks are increasingly difficult to defend from both historical and philosophical perspectives in a post-modern age.

## CONCLUSIONS

As opposed to R. Soloveitchik’s emphasis on the individual’s inner spiritual development and relationship to God, the thought of R. Sacks is focused on the nature of the Jewish People, its mission and relationship to other denominations. R. Sacks argues for a particularistic mode of religious expression while maintaining universal moral standards. While highly praiseworthy, I have argued that this approach is theologically problematic from a Jewish perspective and philosophically challenged by post-modernism. The values which R. Sacks espouses, of tolerance and religious pluralism on the one hand and covenantal responsibility on the other, are indeed of particular importance in today’s highly fractured world, but they need to be placed in a traditional Jewish framework. One hopes that R. Sacks will do so in future installments of his stimulating thought, in addition to developing educational initiatives and social action programs to further his ambitious agenda.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press, 1984.

