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ONE GOD, ONE TRUTH, MANY LANGUAGES: RABBI SACKS' PLURALISM REEXAMINED

A puzzle emerges from the teachings of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: How to reconcile two conflicting, seemingly contradictory, themes found throughout his writing. The first is an adamant opposition to relativism, postmodernism, and any other form of attack on the hard and fast dichotomy between truth and falsehood. The second is his brand of religious pluralism, seemingly rooted in a *denial* of objectivity (at least on this side of the eschaton), and a *collapsing* of the dichotomy between truth and falsehood.

I wish to resolve this puzzle by appealing to two further, essential elements of his thought: His attack on aspects of the enlightenment, and his distinction between Torah and *hokhma* (wisdom). In the final analysis, we shall see that for R. Sacks there *is* an objective realm of truth and falsehood; it is vital that we agree to its existence, but also vital that we accept that our access to those facts leaves plenty of room for reasonable disagreement. Finally, if my resolution to this conundrum is correct, we shall also be in a position to understand better why R. Sacks had more of a pluralistic attitude towards non-Jewish religions than he had towards non-Orthodox denominations of Judaism.

On the Importance of Objective Truth

R. Sacks was deeply concerned about the rise of a "post-truth" culture in which "there's no secure way of establishing and checking the facts. We know that on the web, lies can go viral, whereas the corrections very rarely do. Or as they say, 'a lie can travel around the world before truth has had time to put its shoes on.'"[1]

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[1] Jonathan Sacks, "Post-Truth and the Erosion of Trust" (June 12, 2017), www.rabbisacks.org/post-truth-erosion-trust. Here, I am quoting from a video blog

Here, as elsewhere, of course, R. Sacks assumes that there is such a thing as "the facts." There is a way that things are, and there are ways that things are not. There is truth and there are falsehoods. A post-truth world is one that seeks to airbrush over this dichotomy.

To some extent, this lamentable feature of contemporary society, R. Sacks maintains, has roots in "post-modernism." In his words, the post-modernists "cast doubt on the very idea of objective facts, objective truth, scientific method and the rest."[2] But it was, R. Sacks insists, Nietzsche, who first recognized that the belief in the existence of objective truth is something of a religious value. Accordingly, the belief in objectivity, so central to the scientific endeavor—an endeavor that seeks to uncover the underlying facts and the structure of reality—is doomed to collapse in the wake of the so-called "death of God." As Nietzsche put it:

> It is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests—that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year-old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine…. But what if this were to become more and more difficult to believe…?[3]

R. Sacks summarized the point by saying "our belief in truth ultimately goes back to religious and philosophical foundations, which we are rapidly losing."[4] The scientific endeavor presupposes that there is a stable world of facts beyond our creation, awaiting our discovery and explanation. But why suppose that to be the case to begin with? This is no more of a leap of faith than the leap towards faith in the existence of God. Indeed, the claim that God exists can, at least, lend some justification to the hope that His world has been designed according to an order

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rather than from one of his central publications. I do this only because it vividly and concisely gives voice to something that is developed in more sedate and thorough terms in his published writings. See, for example, chapters 9 and 11 of his *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), 127–140 and 159–168.

[2] Sacks, "Post-Truth." Or, as he put elsewhere, "There are many factors at work in the present assault on academic freedom, but undoubtedly one… is the loss of truth as a value. There is no such thing as truth, goes the postmodern mantra; there are only narratives" (*Morality*, 179).

[3] Friedrich *Nietzsche, The Gay Science with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs,* translated by Josefine Nauckhoft (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201. R. Sacks cites this quotation, both in "Post-Truth" and in *Morality*, 168.

[4] Sacks, "Post-Truth."

that science can uncover. But without a faith in God, there is no reason for the faith of the scientist.

R. Sacks argues that absent belief in truth (as a value opposed to falsehood), we cannot make sense of the notion of honesty. Without the notion of honesty, there can be no trust. In such a world, there can be no science, nor can there be any absolute or objective values. This puts freedom itself at risk: "We've forgotten that without a shared moral code to which we are all accountable, into which we are all educated and which we have internalized, we will lose the trust in public life on which our very freedom depends."[5] In a nutshell: "Without moral commitment, the still small voice of truth is inaudible beneath the cacophony of lies, half-truths, obfuscations, and evasions. Without truth, no trust; without trust, no society. Truth and trust create a world we can share."[6]

R. Sacks ends his reflections on post-truth by quoting the words of Bertrand Russell, about the death of civilizations:[7]

> What happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilised than themselves, but not so destitute of social cohesion.[8]

Without a belief in objective truth, and its converse, objective falsehood, moral restraints become mere superstition; or, at best, a socially constructed artifact that a culture can shed. The initial liberation from such fetters may lead to an explosion of creativity, but it eventually ushers in a decadence and collapse that spell the end of a civilization. And this, according to R. Sacks, explains the verses in the book of Jeremiah (9:2–8):

> They make ready their tongues like a bow, to shoot lies…. Don't trust anyone in your clan, for every one of them is a deceiver and every friend, a slanderer…. They have taught their tongues to lie, they weary themselves with sinning…. Their tongue is a deadly arrow, it speaks deceitfully.

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Sacks, *Morality*, 168
[7] He quotes the same passage, to much the same effect, in *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (Continuum, 2007), 157.
[8] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Routledge, 2004), 6.

> With their mouths they all speak cordially to their neighbors, but in their hearts they set traps for them. Should I not punish them for this, says the Lord. Should I not avenge Myself on a nation such as this?

When lies parade as truth, there can be no trust. In such a situation, it was safe to infer, with the prophet Jeremiah, "that the end was nigh. And of course it was," R. Sacks concludes, "because his faithful city, now the faithless city of Jerusalem, was eventually conquered by the Babylonians."[9] What Jeremiah was teaching us, according to R. Sacks, is that no society can survive when the distinction between truth and falsehood evaporates.

"One of the aftermaths of Marxism, persisting in such movements as postmodernism and post-colonialism," R. Sacks elsewhere contends, "is the idea that there is no such thing as truth." Instead, these movements suggest that "reality is 'socially constructed' to advance the interests of one group or another." According to this way of thinking, once you have a narrative, "it does not matter whether it is true or false. All that matters is that people believe it." This dynamic constitutes the underlying similarity between the Korach rebellion in the book of Numbers and

> the campaign against Israel on campuses throughout the world, and in the BDS movement in particular. Like the Korach rebellion it brings together people who have nothing else in common. Some belong to the far left, a few to the far right, some are anti-globalists, while some are genuinely concerned with the plight of the Palestinians…. What they have in common is a refusal to give the supporters of Israel a fair hearing.[10]

The Korach rebellion was a patchwork alliance of convenience between various groups that had nothing in common other than their joint opposition to Moses. The BDS movement is a modern-day echo of the same phenomenon:

> The flagrant falsehoods it sometimes utters – that Israel was not the birthplace of the Jewish people, that there never was a Temple in Jerusalem, that Israel is a "colonial" power, a foreign transplant alien to the Middle East – rival the claims of Datan and Aviram that Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey and that Moses brought the people out solely in order to kill them in the desert. Why bother with truth when all that matters is power [construed as a narrative that people will find compelling]?[11]

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[9] Sacks, "Post-Truth."
[10] Sacks, "When Truth is Sacrificed to Power (Korach 5775)," (June 15, 2015), www.rabbisacks.org/when-truth-is-sacrificed-to-power-korach-5775.
[11] Ibid.

Some years earlier, R. Sacks argued that if we reject the existence of objective moral facts, then "we cannot reason together. All truth becomes subjective or relative, no more than a construction, a narrative, one way among many of telling the story."[12] In other words, if morality is relegated from the realm of objective fact to the realm of a mere story or narrative, then society is in trouble. This is not just because trust is undermined in a world without objective facts—which is the argument we've already seen—but because persuasion will have to give way to violence. If truth is no longer a meaningful measure by which to assess a claim, then opinions cannot be ruled out of order for being untrue:

> Instead of being refuted by rational argument, dissenting views are stigmatised as guilty of postmodernism's cardinal sin: racism in any of its myriad, multiplying variants. So moral consensus disappears and moral conversation dies. Opponents are demonised. Ever-new "isms" are invented to exclude ever more opinions. New forms of intimidation begin to appear: protests, threats of violence, sometimes actual violence. For when there are no shared standards, there can be no conversation, and where conversation ends, violence begins.[13]

R. Sacks obviously had no issue with people fighting for their rights, as individuals, and as groups. But he thought that a major problem arises when groups seek to define themselves only in terms of their oppression. A group then claims to be worthy of special consideration not because of the objective demands of justice, but because they are the victims of special oppression. This form of identity politics is

> deeply and inexorably divisive…. The logic is as follows: the group to which I belong is a victim; it has been wronged; therefore we are entitled to special treatment. This gives rise to an endlessly proliferating list of the aggrieved. Each of their claims is surely true, but you cannot build a free society on the basis of these truths, just as you cannot heal trauma by endlessly attending to your wounds. A culture of victimhood sets group against group, each claiming that its pain, injury, oppression, humiliation, is greater than that of others.[14]

Of course, there is a tension between the claim that there are no moral truths, and the morally-charged claim that racism and any other form of oppression is a cardinal sin. But inconsistencies needn't

[12] Sacks, *The Home We Build Together*, 42
[13] Ibid., 47.
[14] Ibid., 61.

worry a person who has given up on objectivity and, its traditional guardian, logic.

R. Sacks was a consistent advocate for the existence of objective facts, including moral facts. He was a wide-eyed and prescient social critic who was quick to recognize the cultural winds that would give rise to our current cancel-culture.[15] Moreover, he saw these phenomena described and condemned in the Bible.

No Truth on Earth

In *The Dignity of Difference*, R. Sacks wrote:

> Men kill because they believe they possess the truth while their opponents are in error. In that case, says God, throwing truth to the ground, let human beings live by a different standard of truth, one that is human and thus conscious of its limitations. Truth on the ground is multiple, partial. Fragments of it lie everywhere. Each person, culture and language has part of it; none has it all. 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.[16]

This quotation seems to carry an allusion to the Lurianic notion of the *Nitzotzot*—the sparks of Divinity hidden even in the very darkest corners of creation. "Fragments of it lie everywhere." And although this quotation maintains a faith in the integrity of truth in some transcendent realm, it also expresses the claim that here on earth, no single position can have a monopoly on truth. Some kernel of truth can be found in every position and perspective.

Objective truth exists only in heaven, or after the coming of the Messiah. The dichotomy between truth and falsehood is deceptive. Indeed, the final eschatological truth, which recombines all of the hidden shards of Divine light that populate our fractured world, actually encompasses both sides of any dichotomy. Moreover, it is the belief in that dichotomy—rather than its erosion—which is presented here by R. Sacks as a contributing factor towards violence.

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[15] R. Sacks' concern that post-modernism leaves us without a shared language with which to reason about morality can be seen as far back as his *Tradition in an Untraditional Age: Essays on Modern Jewish Thought* (Vallentine Mitchell, 1990), 164–165. This concern he articulates in terms drawn from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Duckworth, 1981). See also, Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (Jonathan Cape, 1997), 32.

[16] Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, revised edition (Continuum, 2003), 64.

The belief that there exists some transcendent truth that somehow encompasses and reconciles both sides of any apparent contradiction is perhaps what lies behind the words of R. Reuven, who asks in the midrash, "What is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He?" His answer is *truth*, because "'*emet*' (truth) has three letters: *aleph*, the first of all the letters; *mem*, the middle letter; and *tav*, the final letter. [As if] to say, 'I am first, and I am last, and beside me, there is no God' (Isaiah 44:6)" (Deut. Rabba 1:10). The real metaphysical truth, one that we cannot access—or not yet—somehow includes everything, from *aleph* to *tav*. Or, as R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook was to put it, "[I]n the supernal thinking that probes the depths of all matters, reality knows no opposites."[17]

This does not amount to postmodernism, with its claim that there's no such thing as objective truth, but before the onset of the Messianic age, the position is functionally equivalent to postmodernism. At least in the here and now, there is no objective Truth, but only the partial truths of any given narrative; and there is no dichotomy between truth and falsehood because nobody has a monopoly on truth, and the ultimate Truth will anyway reconcile and encompass all perspectives.[18]

The Dignity of Difference struck some of its readers as a tacit admission that the truths of Judaism are somehow relative, and thus, as a stepping away from the absolutism of mainstream Orthodox Judaism. Leaders of the ultra-Orthodox community, in particular, were outraged. One of the prominent Israeli Rabbinic authorities, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, and the chair of the Council of Sages of the British wing of *Agudas Yisroel*,

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[17] *Iggerot ha-Ra'aya* I (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1962), 133, translation drawn from Avi Sagi, *The Open Cannon: On the Meaning of Halakhic Discourse* (Continuum, 2007), 119.

[18] Ultimately, and despite striking appearances to the contrary, as we shall see, I do not think that R. Sacks ever committed to this radical position, although R. Kook almost certainly did. For more on R. Kook's position see Sagi, *The Open Canon*, chapter 8. The irony is that R. Kook caused far less controversy for himself on account of his radical position than R. Sacks did for his much more moderate variety of pluralism—a pluralism which turns out to have been relatively tame, although widely misunderstood. By contrast, people who take seriously the view that there exist partial truths in this world but not Truth (with an upper-case T), and people who take seriously the view that all propositions have a degree of truth, but that the Whole Truth is somehow transcendent, are walking on very thin philosophical ice. G. K. Chesterton and Bertrand Russell demonstrate in devastating fashion how such positions are bound to contradict or undermine themselves. Although it may appear as if R. Sacks was walking on that very ice, I hope to demonstrate that this appearance is deceptive. See Bertrand Russell, "On the Nature of Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 7 (1906), 28–49; and G. K. Chesterton, *The Three Apologies of G. K. Chesterton: Heretics, Orthodoxy & The Everlasting Man* (Mockingbird Press, 2019), 123.

Rabbi Bezalel Rakow of Gateshead, accused R. Sacks of heresy. This controversy resulted in a second, and revised, edition of the book designed to appease his critics. Perhaps the most controversial quotation from the first edition, subsequently expunged, stated that:

> 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.[19]

It is as if the unified truth of a transcendent God refracts through the prism of this world into the various languages of the various faiths. Even though these words were removed from the second edition, R. Sacks was adamant that he wasn't *retracting* his earlier statements so much as seeking to remove any grounds for misinterpretation.[20] To illustrate that the previous quote wasn't a slip of the tongue (or pen), witness that elsewhere he claimed:

> God speaks to mankind in many different languages, and it is our task to respect those differences while being true to our own heritage, our own language, while making space for people who are different, that I think is the idea of particularity. And I think the world needs it now.[21]

Finally, we should consider the following passage, in which he seeks to make a distinction between scientific and moral truth:

> In Judaism, there is a particular kind of *emet* which is moral truth, which is covenantal. It is not ontological. It is not a matter of facts. It's a matter of obligations and commitments. And therefore there are those two kinds of truth… [which] are totally and absolutely different from one another [namely: ontological and covenantal truth]. If other religions could conceive

[19] Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, first edition (Continuum, 2001), 55.

[20] This claim is made adamantly in the preface to the revised edition.

[21] Sacks, "Jewish Identity: The Concept of a Chosen People," *Faith Lectures* (February 8, 2001), www.rabbisacks.org/faith-lectures-jewish-identity-the-concept-of-a-chosen-people. Admittedly, these words do not appear in R. Sacks' published works, but they are cited by Miriam Feldmann-Kaye, as evidence for R. Sacks' allegiance to certain elements of postmodern thought. For that reason, I thought it important to include them here, see her *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Littman, 2019), 132.

[of] their truth covenantally instead of ontologically, then other religions would find it possible to make space for yet other religions.[22]

Miriam Feldmann-Kaye's reading of this passage is perhaps the most straightforward interpretation. She writes that, on this picture, the covenantal truth of Judaism "does not lay claim to an absolute reality or identify its origins in a revealed truth but rather dictates ethical norms which frame the way a Jew relates to the world around her, including her daily interactions with her non-Jewish counterparts."[23] At this point, R. Sacks seems to be at his most postmodern: the truths of Judaism are *not* grounded in some objective realm of facts but emerge from the grammar of a particular culturally-specific language game, which frames the way a Jew relates to the world.

And now the puzzle is in place. On the one hand, R. Sacks presents himself as an opponent of postmodernism. Wearing this hat, he places ultimate importance upon the existence of objective facts, explicitly including moral facts among them. Moreover, he laments the erosion of the hard and fast dichotomy between truth and falsehood, claiming that this erosion will lead to the emergence of political and religious violence. On the other hand, he claims that there is no objective Truth before the coming of the Messiah, and that the belief in the dichotomy between truth and falsehood, rather than its erosion, is what leads to religious and political violence. He asserts that moral codes and religions, like Judaism, cannot be grounded in an objective realm of fact so much as in the conventions of a particular inter-subjective covenant or language.

There are four potential strategies for understanding and contextualizing R. Sacks' varied statements. The first is to say that he buckled under the pressure of his critics. The first edition of *The Dignity of Difference,* on this understanding, represents the sincere post-modernist pluralism of R. Sacks. Then, under the pressure of various forces in the ultra-Orthodox world, and perhaps within his own *Beit Din,* he recanted, or pretended to recant. This most uncharitable understanding is undermined by the fact that, in the preface to his revised edition of *The Dignity of Difference,* R. Sacks seems wholly unrepentant and insists that he's not retracting any of the claims made in the first edition.

Moreover, if he really was a post-modernist in hiding, why did he dedicate so much time to attacking post-modernism in earlier and later work? As a brow-beaten post-modernist, seeking to avoid controversy, he

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[22] Sacks, "Jewish Identity." As we shall see, these words were also cited by Feldmann-Kaye throughout her *Jewish Theology in a Postmodern Age.*
[23] Feldmann-Kaye, *Jewish Theology,* 134.

could simply have kept his silence on these issues in later life, rather than engaging in passionate defenses of objectivity. Are we to believe that all of those passionate interventions were nothing more than a face-saving charade? This strategy is unacceptable, especially to those of us who knew R. Sacks personally and were witness to his intellectual fearlessness and to his remarkable dignity and integrity.

The second strategy is not as cynical as the first. According to this view, R. Sacks quite sincerely changed his mind. He was a postmodern pluralist in *The Dignity of Difference* and soon afterwards, but a vocal opponent of postmodernism thereafter. This change of mind wasn't necessarily the result of political pressure, but a simple case of a thinker coming to a different worldview. Honest thinkers do change their mind. But one might expect him to have announced such a major change of heart, if indeed there was one, and yet R. Sacks never repudiated his earlier work, even as he became a trenchant critic of postmodernism and the post-truth climate. In fact, echoes of the main themes of *The Dignity of Difference* can be found in his work right until the end of his career and, indeed, there are many passages of his earlier work that prefigure the central claims of *The Dignity of Difference*. Therefore, the claims that he made in that book, however they're to be understood, should not be regarded as a passing phase of his thought. Moreover, the roots of his attack on postmodernism go back at least as far as *Tradition in an Untraditional Age* (1990),[24] which predates *The Dignity of Difference*. The first two possible solutions are, therefore, untenable.

The third solution to our puzzle is one to which Feldmann-Kaye seems to hint. Treating his thought together with that of Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, she observes that their writings possess elements of both postmodernism and criticism of postmodernism:

> On the one hand, their positions are culturally particular, and they oppose the grounding of faith in reason. To the extent that neither of them understands religion as dependent on a provable absolute truth, their theological observations do seem postmodern. On the other hand, their resistance to relativism… prevents them from embracing postmodernism unequivocally.[25]

R. Sacks' embrace of postmodernism, on this reading, was not unequivocal. Perhaps this means that he drew from some elements of postmodern thought while rejecting others. That suggestion would be difficult

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[24] See fn. 15, above.
[25] Feldmann-Kaye, *Jewish Theology*, 35.

to maintain because, as we've seen, the elements of postmodernism that he criticizes with one voice, seem to be the very elements that he endorses with his other voice. Perhaps Feldmann-Kaye's suggestion should be read as follows: R. Sacks' attitude towards postmodernism was ambivalent and confused. He embraced it, but *equivocally*. He was of two minds. He had postmodernist moods and anti-postmodernist moods. Ultimately, I cannot countenance this suggestion. It is simply too uncharitable. It makes R. Sacks appear as one deeply torn over the very values that he presents as being most central to his thought. On the other hand, the conflict between the two different voices that we've found in his writing—the voice of the objectivist and the voice of the (functionally) postmodernist—is explicit and jarring enough to give one pause. Accordingly, this third solution—though I cannot endorse it—is certainly more plausible than the first two.

Rather, I offer a fourth solution, which seeks to find some viable interpretation of the various threads of R. Sacks' thought and resolve the tension between them. This can be done only if we factor in two more aspects of his philosophy: His communitarianism, which was based—in large part—upon his critique of the enlightenment, and his distinction between Torah and *hokhma* (wisdom). With this wider context in place, a new light is shone upon his pluralism.

The Enlightenment

In his *Crisis and Covenant,* R. Sacks put forward a strident argument according to which Jewish thought cannot ever be accommodated by the categories of modern or Enlightenment philosophy. In this context, he uses the words "modern" and "enlightenment" interchangeably. Indeed, the very concept of Jewish identity, as the Jewish tradition understands it, "offends against two of the most powerful axioms of modern thought." Namely, "David Hume's insistence that one cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is,' a moral judgement from a descriptive statement," and "Jean-Paul Sartre's declaration that 'existence precedes essence,'" which means that our bare existence as human persons stands apart from any of the various social labels that later get adopted by, or imposed upon, us—even if those labels later become essential to our sense of self. And thus, for Sartre, my humanity (i.e., my existence) stands apart from and precedes my Jewishness (i.e., my essence). On this enlightenment view of the human person, "there is no morally significant role into which we are born."[26]

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[26] Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust* (Manchester University Press, 1992), 266–267.

As far as R. Sacks was concerned, Jewish identity—as that concept has been traditionally understood—manifestly assumes that one *can* derive an ought from an is. The fact that a person *is* born into the Jewish people entails "the 'ought' of commandment," and the fact that a Jew can be born into the obligations of a covenant entails that, in some important sense, the essence of the Jew preceded her very existence.[27]

The second point of conflict, it seems to me, is more significant than the first. One looking to reconcile Jewish and enlightenment thought could argue that it isn't the mere "is" of birth that entails the "ought" of the Jewish commandments. Rather, it is the non-moral facts that (a) a person was born Jewish, and that (b) Jews are commanded by Divine law, in addition to the irreducibly *moral* fact that (c) people ought to follow Divine command, that collectively entail the "ought" in question: that a person born Jewish ought to follow God's command. Accordingly, this element of Jewish identity isn't in tension with Hume's claim that "oughts" cannot be derived from purely non-moral premises. The second point—that Jewish identity conflicts with Sartre's claim about existence and essence—touches on something more profound.

Modern thought in its many guises is ardently committed to the notion that a person exists, and has rights, and duties (if there be such things as rights and duties at all), prior to any choices that he or she makes, and prior to any associations or relationships into which one may fall. John Rawls brings together many strands of enlightenment thought in his monumental *A Theory of Justice* (1971). In that work, he suggests that we arrive at the core principles of justice by imagining what rules we would all accept to govern a society if only we were to stand behind a veil of ignorance. Behind such a veil, legislators and decision-makers would act oblivious to their own gender, religion, racial identity, socio-economic background, and physical abilities. According to Rawls, the principles arrived at from behind such a veil constitute the foundational principles of justice.

Sartre's slogan that "existence precedes essence" manages to capture much of the conception of personhood standing behind Rawls' thinking. This was anathema to R. Sacks. The idea that a person can live, and think, and express herself in a cultural or social vacuum, as would be required behind a veil of ignorance, was, to R. Sacks, "as inconceivable as an art without conventions"—since even a radical artist needs to have conventions to bend, or against which to rebel—"or a thought without

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[27] Ibid.

a language in which it can be expressed."[28] A person without a socio-cultural context is close to a contradiction in terms.[29]

Jewish thought, after all, rejects the notion of mankind in the abstract, shorn of the individual's particular social and cultural context. Jews are born into their obligations in virtue of being born into a network of relationships and into a particular history. As R. Sacks puts the point:

> Enlightenment thought consistently focused on man-as-such, humanity in the abstract, the self divorced from all traditions, particular histories and accidents of birth. Jews were to be accorded rights, but not as Jews; instead as abstract individuals. But Jews testified to the concrete particularism of human identity. They were not atomistic selves. They were, both in their own and others' eyes, members of a people, participants in a history, bearers of a revelation, adherents of a tradition. Neither Jews nor Judaism fitted into the remorseless logic of philosophical abstraction.[30]

This Jewish critique of enlightenment anthropology is also at the heart of communitarianism. That 1980s movement was a critique of liberal political thought. Communitarianism wasn't intended to be anti-liberal, so much as to repair liberalism from the inside by correcting its mistaken conception of human identity. The notion that a person could be born into a network of obligations and responsibilities had been utterly overlooked by the liberal political tradition, to its detriment. As R. Sacks was later to summarize the key insight of communitarian thought:

> We are not mere individuals. We are social animals, embedded in a network of relationships—families, friends, colleagues, neighbors, co-workers, and co-worshippers—and some of these are constitutive of our sense of self. The "I," in and of itself, has no identity. We are who we are because of the groups to which we belong. To be sure, liberalism allows us to enter or leave such groups as we choose: that is what makes it

[28] Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality & Society in a Secular Age* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 44.

[29] R. Sacks did not point to Rawls himself as a key exemplar of the enlightenment anthropology that he so criticized, but it is common for communitarians to do so, as is evidenced by Michael Sandel in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 1982). R. Sacks comes closest to this in his *Morality,* 136, where he juxtaposes Rawls and the communitarians, and in a 2003 lecture, where he critiques the Rawlsian notion of public reason, as reason conducted, *per impossible*, in a cultural vacuum: www.rabbisacks.org/rabbi-sacks-delivers-the-sir-isaiah-berlin-memorial-lecture.

[30] Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant,* 269.

liberal. It turns potentially coercive groups into voluntary associations. But community is essential to identity, so these thinkers argued, and they became known collectively as "communitarians."[31]

By relating to human beings only in the abstract, R. Sacks argues, enlightenment thought had crucially misunderstood the nature of moral obligation. In a lightning tour of ethical philosophy from the eighteenth century onwards, he documents various attempts to ground the norms of human behavior

> in reason (Kant), emotion (Hume), social contract (Hobbes, Rousseau), the consequences of action (Bentham, Mill), the structure of history (Hegel), human will (Nietzsche) and existential decision (Sartre). Not all of these were rationalist approaches, but what they have in common is that their subject matter is man-as-such, not particular human beings set in specific traditions, each with its own integrity. There is a vast chasm separating those like Kant and Mill who believed that there are universal principles of ethics, and those like Nietzsche and Sartre who argued that there is nothing beyond individual decision and will. But despite this, they share the same fundamental either/or: either there is ethical truth, in which case it applies to all men equally, or there are only the private decisions of individuals, in which case there is no objective ethical truth. Ethical principle is universal or it is private: such is the axiom of the Enlightenment's heirs.[32]

Echoing Bernard Williams, one of his university instructors, R. Sacks argues that this enlightenment approach towards ethics fundamentally misfires in the face of various duties of partiality.[33] For example, he shares a story, gleaned from Michael Wyschogrod, in which a Chinese communist was praised by the State media for saving a party official, rather than saving his own son, in the wake of an earthquake. Both Kantian and utilitarian ethics could plausibly defend this father's actions. "None the less," R. Sacks demurs, "one might legitimately feel that the father was deficient in some important moral sense," a moral sense that Judaism (and communitarianism) easily understands, and which enlightenment thought struggles to accommodate.[34]

So what, exactly, is the Jewish account of ethics that makes room for the partiality of parents towards their children? The basic feature of this

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[31] Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), 136.

[32] Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 254.

[33] See, for example, Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality" in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19.

[34] Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 264.

account of ethics is that obligation emerges on the basis of relationships, "within the family, for example." These obligations then "gradually extended to the community as a whole and beyond that, to those who lie outside the community. On this view," in contrast with enlightenment thought, "it is perfectly intelligible that members of a covenantal community might owe special duties to one another."[35]

At times, R. Sacks characterizes this view as one according to which "Values are… not facts," and yet, in the same breath, he asserts, "But neither are they private or subjective."[36] I think this was an unfortunate turn of phrase. Rather than deny that values are facts, I think he would have been truer to his position to say that values are a special *category* of fact; a fact that is grounded in interpersonal relations. That is to say, borrowing the terminology of John Searle, moral facts are not *brute* facts that exist independently of human society, but that doesn't mean that they're not facts. They are, instead, *institutional* facts.[37] That is to say they are facts that objectively hold, and truly exist, with their own irreducible (or even brute) moral force, but these facts, along with their objective moral force, exist only in virtue of various agreements, relationships, and/or institutions that underlie them. To use Rabbi Sacks' own words, "They are created by covenant… and by an agreement on the part of a community."[38]

Some moral facts will bind all humanity, perhaps in virtue of those relationships that hold between us simply because we are all part of the same species in the same natural environment. Other moral facts will only take hold within very specific cultural and social contexts. That doesn't make them subjective or private.

As far as I'm aware, R. Sacks never argues at length (or particularly explicitly) for the following point, but it seems to me to follow directly from his communitarian ethics that we should also adopt something that might be called a communitarian epistemology (epistemology being the study of belief and rationality). I have argued elsewhere that the Rabbis had a profound understanding that what's rational for one person, given her own social context, might not be rational for another person, in a relevantly different social context.[39]

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 267.

[37] See, John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (Penguin Books, 1996).

[38] Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 267.

[39] Samuel Lebens, "Pascal, Pascalberg, and Friends," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 87 (2020), 109–130; and "Proselytism as Epistemic Violence: A Jewish Approach to the Ethics of Religious Persuasion," *The Monist* 104:3 (2021), 376–392.

Allow me explain how I think R. Sacks' communitarianism might help shape this epistemology. I call a thought "unthinkable" for you if you cannot bring yourself to factor it into your practical reasoning. For example, you might be waiting for a heart transplant for your loved one. You know that one way to save them would be to find a healthy match and drug them to cause brain-stem death, giving the doctors time to salvage the heart for your beloved. This strategy might work, but it is unthinkable, and rightly so!

It is understandable that membership in a community will render some thoughts unthinkable, depending on one's identification with that community's mores and values. I call this inability to think certain things, in these contexts, a function of one's "epistemic rootedness."

Being epistemically rooted needn't make a person culpably closed-minded. If provided with an overwhelming amount of evidence that my wife is plotting to kill me, this evidence will almost certainly impact my feelings toward her. It will uproot me. Once the relationship is undermined, what was once unthinkable (that she's homicidal) might become eminently thinkable. But, short of overwhelming evidence, the fact that her plotting to kill me is unthinkable to me—the fact that without an overwhelming amount of evidence to back you up, I will totally discount your claims to the contrary—is no indictment on my rationality. I was acting rationally when I put down these roots. How could I flourish as a human being outside of any deep and meaningful human relationships?

I teach philosophy for a living. In the seminar room, all intellectual options should be on the table. Solipsism—the view that only you exist— is a good example and should be seriously entertained when doing philosophy. In fact, it's not easy to construct decisive arguments *against* solipsism. But outside the seminar room, I don't so much as consider the possibility that I'm the only real person affected by my actions. It would be illogical and immoral to do so.

If, in the seminar room, I come across *overwhelming* reason to adopt a theory that I wouldn't have entertained outside, then I must take that theory back with me into the world at large. If I didn't revise my beliefs in the face of overwhelming evidence, then my closed-mindedness would become culpable.

But, so long as: (1) we're all encouraged to spend some time (so to speak) in the philosophy seminar room; (2) we're willing to listen to other opinions and to gather contrary evidence while there; and (3) our rootedness has a threshold beyond which the evidence would make inroads and compel us to bring new beliefs from the metaphorical seminar room into our actual lives—we can't say that fidelity to epistemic roots is straightforwardly (or irredeemably, or culpably) closed-minded.

So now, imagine an agnostic Jew, deeply integrated into the Jewish community. She sometimes attends synagogue, for cultural reasons. She had a Jewish wedding to a spouse with a similar identity to her. They have children to whom they pass on their identity. If what we've said so far is true, then despite her lack of belief in God, and her lack of belief in the authority of the halakhic system, belief in other religions will be unthinkable to her. In the terminology of William James, those other religions are not, for her, *live* options.[40] To adopt another religion would sever her connection to her community, history, and family. It's not that she's culpably closed-minded. She spends time, so to speak, in the philosophy seminar room. She'd just need an awful lot of evidence to make the unthinkable thinkable. Moreover, given a general commitment to communitarianism, a person cannot be criticized for the desire to want to remain faithful to the network of communal obligations into which she was born.

For this reason, I have argued that had the Biblical Ruth experienced an epiphany leading her to want to convert to Judaism, Naomi might have been skeptical. One day she has a mystical vision driving her towards Judaism; perhaps the next day she'll have a different vision pushing her in a different direction.[41] Instead, Ruth's primary commitment (both in the Biblical text, and especially in the most central Rabbinic readings of the text) was to Naomi and to her people, and only secondarily to Naomi's religion.[42] In the long term, this made it more likely that if and when Ruth did embrace the theology of Judaism, she'd do so with a steadfast resilience. If a person is epistemically rooted in their religious community, then their commitment to that religion is likely to be more stable. Other religions will become unthinkable.

But, if what I've said is true, then—by parity of reason—there will be Christians, Muslims, and others who—by dint of the communal commitments in which they were raised, are similarly closed off from evaluating evidence to embrace any other religion but the one into which they were born (unless provided with overwhelming evidence that another religion is true). This is an epistemology that I've defended. Was it endorsed by R. Sacks?

There's strong evidence to suggest that it was. In fact, R. Sacks goes so far as to say that idolaters—whose worship of other gods transgresses

[40] William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1979), 14.

[41] See Lebens, "Proselytism as Epistemic Violence."

[42] See, for example, the reconstruction of Ruth's discussion with Naomi in *Yevamot* 47b and Ruth Rabba 2:22.

the Noahide laws—so long as they don't live in the Land of Israel, such that they would have been exposed to other cultural influences, are not held responsible, by Jewish law, for their idolatry. He bases this claim upon a reading of *Hullin* 13b and says that such people are considered to suffer from "cultural duress."[43] What's rational for a person to believe depends, in part, upon their cultural context. If a good and reasonable God placed us into the social contexts into which we were born, then He can't very well be angry with us for following the path of reasonability and rationality as those paths are shaped by those contexts. This seems to be a consequence of the communitarianism to which R. Sacks was committed.

Torah and Hokhma

Before we return to the puzzle at the heart of this paper, there's one more ingredient of R. Sacks' thought that requires examination. In numerous works, R. Sacks was keen to draw a distinction between Torah and *hokhma* (worldly wisdom). What is the difference? Here is a characteristic example of his answer to that question:

> *Hokhma* is the truth we discover; Torah is the truth we inherit. *Hokhma* is the universal heritage of mankind, by virtue of the fact that we are created in God's "image and likeness" (Rashi translates "in our likeness" as "with the capacity to understand and discern"). Torah is the specific heritage of Israel ("He has revealed His word to Jacob, His laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation" [Psalms 147:19]). *Hokhma* discovers God in creation. Torah is the word of God in revelation. *Hokhma* is ontological truth (how things are); Torah is covenantal truth (how things ought to be). *Hokhma* can be defined as anything that allows us to see the universe as the world of God, and humanity as the image of God. Torah is God's covenant with the Jewish people, the architecture of holiness and Israel's written constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God.[44]

Wisdom, it seems, is a faculty that allows human beings, in common, to unveil *brute* facts. Torah, by contrast, is a particular cultural heritage that creates and sustains relationships of particular obligation. Those obligations are equally objective. They too are *facts*—but not *brute* facts. They are *institutional* facts. They are covenantal.

[43] Sacks, *One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 119.
[44] Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis—The Book of Beginnings* (Maggid Books, 2009), 290.

Throughout his reflections on this distinction, R. Sacks placed a great deal of weight upon a particular midrash which reads: "If someone says to you that there is wisdom among the gentiles, believe it… [but if they say that] there is Torah among the gentiles, don't believe it" (Eikha Rabba 2:13). But why? Why can't a non-Jew, by dint of spending many years learning the relevant texts, become an expert in the Torah? I think a deeper appreciation of R. Sacks' distinction can help us to answer that question.

The Torah itself contains passages that we would classify as wisdom. Indeed, there are entire books of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible (such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and parts of Psalms). Moreover, each and every verse of the Bible, and each and every sentence of the Talmud, is used to express a proposition.[45] A proposition is the parcel of meaning that a sentence expresses and that two sentences in different languages have in common. So, for example, the sentence "snow is white" and the sentence "*la neige est blanche*" are two sentences that express the same proposition. No reasonable person would deny that the propositional content of every verse of the Bible and Talmud are open for a gentile to grasp.

What we have to recognize is that not every truth can be conveyed by a proposition. There is often much lost in translation between two languages, even if the translation preserves the propositional content. Some would say that what's lost is mere color, or tone. But that is incorrect. A world of associations and sensibilities are encoded in the non-propositional elements of a language. According to R. Sacks, Torah is a language. Only if you are immersed in its culture can you have access to its non-propositional content. The propositional content of the Torah can, to some extent, be understood by the faculty of wisdom, even if it only binds the people who stand in the right relationship to it. It is the non-propositional content of the Jewish language, by contrast, that is "Torah" in the sense of the word used by the midrash.

Indeed, R. Sacks writes:

> Implicit in Judaism is a deep analogy between faith and language. A language is spoken by a people; there is no such thing as a private language or a universal language. We are born into a linguistic community; we do not choose to be born to English- as against French-speaking parents, and yet that fact has the greatest significance in shaping our sensibilities.

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[45] There may be some exceptions to this generalization, since only declarative sentences can be said, uncontrovertibly, to express a proposition. The general point I'm making here holds true notwithstanding.

By speaking any natural language we are participants in the history of a civilisation: its nuances of meaning and associations were shaped by the past and yet persist into the present. And to speak a language is to internalise its rules of grammar and semantics; without these rules we cannot express ourselves articulately.[46]

It is these two elements of R. Sacks' thought—his communitarianism, and his distinction between Torah and wisdom—that will allow us to resolve the puzzle of this paper.

Resolving the Puzzle

With our broader understanding of some of R. Sacks' central commitments, let us return to the quotations that led to our initial challenge; the quotations in which he seems to embrace the very elements of postmodern thought that, elsewhere, he condemned.

"Men kill because they believe they possess the truth while their opponents are in error."[47] Here, what's causing the violence isn't the belief in the dichotomy between truth and falsehood. Indeed, if that were R. Sacks' point, he'd be contradicting what he says elsewhere. He believes that the erosion of that dichotomy leads to violence. Surely then, belief in that dichotomy is not the problem. The problem is the belief that you possess the truth—a belief held with such certainty, with such hubris, with such surety in your epistemic infallibility, that you can be certain enough to kill in its name.

We should recognize that God has situated different people in very different epistemic situations. Even if there's only one truth, by giving each person different epistemic roots—placing them in different communities—we each have very different access to the facts. Accordingly, we have to be aware that what's currently rational for us to believe might not be the final word on any given issue, and certainly won't be rational for other people to believe. Our opponents may have a false belief, while we might hold the truth. Does that mean that they're in error? Not necessarily. Not if their roots have rendered a falsehood rational for them to believe. And if it turns out that we're the ones in error, we can at least tell God that we did our very best from the context into which He placed us. There is no culpability for believing false things if you arrived at those falsehoods through the impeccable use of rationality.

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[46] Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 252–253.
[47] Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, revised edition, 64.

Furthermore, in addition to the truths that can be stated in propositional form, and therefore in any language with a sufficiently rich vocabulary, there are also non-propositional truths that are inevitably lost in translation from one language to another, and perhaps even from one speaker to another. These non-propositional truths are the truths, fragments of which "lie everywhere. Each person, culture and language has part of it; none has it all."[48]

Indeed, for various reasons, when "two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true and the other false."[49] This could be because, even though one is true, and the other (strictly speaking) false, the false proposition, when clothed in a particular language, might be the best vehicle for expressing an additional non-propositional truth. Alternatively, it could be because moral facts, grounded as they are in relationships, can tug in more than one direction. A person might have an obligation that is grounded in his role as a father, and another obligation that is grounded in his role as a doctor, and those obligations—though not sufficient to give rise to a logical contradiction—give rise to a real tension; a real conflict that's quite orthogonal to the dichotomy between truth and falsehood. Perhaps that's why R. Sacks talks here of "conflict" and not "contradiction." A person cannot be in two places at once. That would be a contradiction. But a person can feel tugged, so to speak, in two directions at once, and thereby feel torn by a tension. That's not a contradiction but a conflict. It's simply a consequence of the messy webs of obligations that our relationships create.

"God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to the Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims...."[50] Does this mean that the mutually incompatible propositions expressed in those languages are all true? That would make no sense. That would mean that Jesus was both the messiah, and a mere prophet, whilst also being neither of the two, all at once.

Rather, R. Sacks' most controversial words express two related facts. One is that God has deliberately placed human beings in different social and cultural contexts, such that, for some of them, it is rational and reasonable to be Muslim, for others to be Christian, and for us, to be Jewish. This, despite the fact that no more than one of those religions can be wholly true. To recognize that God has placed us in this situation can explain why we're not obliged, as Jews, to convert those people to

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, first edition, 55.

Judaism, and moreover, to see it as part of God's plan that different worldviews are explored for the value they may bring to the world, even in and amidst the things that they get wrong.[51]

The second fact is that at the level of its non-propositional content, Judaism is a language that only people immersed in the Jewish culture are well-placed to understand. The same can be said for Christians and Muslims regarding their Christianity and their Islam, and—at the level of these non-propositional truths; truths that cannot be translated from faith to faith—there's no reason to think that the faiths are in conflict at all, despite the fact that, at the propositional level, only one of these faiths can be onto the truth. Even so, they might each be expressing, in their own "specific language of human sensibility,"[52] various non-propositional truths that don't contradict any of the truths of Judaism, but which can only be expressed in its own language and cultural context. No culture has the ability, on its own, to express the whole truth, even if Judaism is, as R. Sacks surely believed it to be, wholly true.[53]

"God speaks to mankind in many different languages, and it is our task to respect those differences,"[54] especially when we recognize that their religions are as rational for them, given their cultural starting points, as ours is for us; and that there may be non-propositional truths grasped by those religions, which do not conflict with the teachings of Judaism, but which can only be expressed in a foreign language. Furthermore, we must respect those differences "while being true to our own heritage,"[55] because we were born into a situation that makes Judaism overwhelmingly the most reasonable religion for *us* to believe,[56] and because our birth came about with particular obligations.

[51] This fact was of course acknowledged by Maimonides, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4.

[52] Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, first edition, 55.

[53] Of course, one might worry, at this point, that R. Sacks' thought has been brought into conflict with the famous statement of Ben Bag Bag (*Avot* 5:22), according to which the Torah contains "everything." But I am not convinced that the tension runs very deep. In the introduction to his commentary of the Pentateuch, Nahmanides implies that the Torah already somehow contains all of the truths that scientists would later discover. He clearly adopted a maximalist reading of Ben Bag Bag's claim. Nevertheless, it's quite possible to understand Ben Bag Bag's claim as being tacitly limited in scope, such that he's telling us that the Torah contains everything necessary for living one's life ethically and well, but not everything unconditionally. Moreover, even within Nahmanides' maximalist reading of Ben Bag Bag's claim, it is possible that all of the *propositional* truths are somewhere alluded to in the Torah, while leaving room for certain non-propositional truths to lie elsewhere.

[54] Sacks, "Jewish Identity."

[55] Ibid.

[56] See Lebens, "Pascal, Pascalberg, and Friends."

When R. Sacks says that moral truth "is not ontological. It is not a matter of facts. It's a matter of obligations and commitments."[57] He can only be saying that obligations and commitments—objective though they are—are a different kind of fact from brute facts. After all, he is explicitly not denying their objectivity.

According to Feldmann-Kaye, R. Sacks thought that "the concept of truth has been misapplied to religion."[58] To prove her point she quotes the following: "Almost none of the truths by which we live are provable, and the desire to prove them is based on a monumental confusion between explanation and interpretation. Explanations can be proved, interpretations cannot."[59] But this does not at all demonstrate that, for R. Sacks, the concept of truth is misapplied to religion. On the contrary, the quotation itself unabashedly does just that: it applies the concept of truth to religion—"the truths by which we live." Rather, what R. Sacks is saying is that, as Feldmann-Kaye indeed points out elsewhere,[60] the concept of *proof* has been misapplied to religion, but that doesn't imply any sympathy at all for postmodernists.

It is quite compatible with a belief in the existence of objective truths to claim that there are certain truths that we cannot prove. Moreover, given a broadly communitarian epistemology, the claim that the religious truths by which we live are beyond the power of proof makes perfect sense. What will be rationally compelling for one person, situated in one cultural context, fluent in one particular language, will not necessarily be compelling for somebody else. This has no bearing on what's true or false, but merely on what happens to be rational for a given person in a given context. We can have good reason to believe that we have access to important truths while recognizing that other people might have equally good reason to disagree.

At no point did R. Sacks give up on the notion of an objective realm of truth and falsehood; a realm that includes objective *moral* facts. According to R. Sacks it is vital that we all agree to the existence of this realm, but it's also vital that we accept that our epistemically rooted access to those facts leaves plenty of room for reasonable disagreement, given our different roots. We must also recognize that much of what a culture, narrative, or set of beliefs contributes to the world is not the revelation of true propositions that we could not have come to know without them,

[57] Sacks, "Jewish Identity."
[58] Feldmann-Kaye, *Jewish Theology*, 38.
[59] Sacks, *The Great Partnership*: *Science, Religion and the Search for Meaning* (Schocken, 2012), 32.
[60] Feldmann-Kaye, *Jewish Theology*, 35.

but come packaged as non-propositional insights and sensibilities that its language encodes.

R. Sacks was not a postmodernist. Indeed, he was a strident opponent of postmodernism. Moreover, it is this fact that makes his inter-religious pluralism all the more astounding. What he sought to demonstrate was that it was possible for a person to believe in the distinction between truth and falsehood, and to believe, for good reason, that his religion is wholly true, while recognizing that other religions can be vehicles for the expression of important non-propositional truths that only they can express; valuing those faith traditions for the wisdom that they contribute to the human conversation; and recognizing that God has placed people in cultural contexts that make their own religions rationally compelling to them, and that He must have done so for a reason. It is the compatibility of this form of pluralism within a perfectly Orthodox framework that makes it so noteworthy. It is unfortunate that his Orthodox critics misunderstood the first edition of *The Dignity of Difference*, but it is also now quite clear why he should have wanted to issue a revised edition. He wanted to do so because he had been misunderstood.

Finally, we are now positioned to better understand why R. Sacks had a more pluralistic attitude toward non-Jewish religions than he had to non-Orthodox denominations of Judaism. Ultimately, R. Sacks was committed to the doctrine that across all denominational divides, the Jewish people are one people. He had harsh criticism for those that sought to secede. They unwittingly undermine a key teaching of the Torah, which R. Sacks dubs "the rejection of rejection." This doctrine is the culmination of the book of Genesis, after a series of choices and rejections—Abraham is chosen, while others are rejected; Isaac is chosen, and Ishmael is rejected; Jacob is chosen, and Esau is rejected—all of Jacob's sons are included in the collective. This, according to R. Sacks, is the conclusion of the book of Genesis.

> There will be no more dramas of chosen sons. When, at the time of the golden calf, and again after the episode of the spies, God threatens to destroy the people, leaving only Moses, Moses reminds him of his covenant with the patriarchs. For now there is a chosen family, none of whose members may be unchosen. God and Israel have entered a binding covenant. The choice, once made, cannot be unmade. God has joined His destiny with all of Israel. All of Israel has pledged itself to God. The concluding thesis to which the whole of the book of Genesis is the argument is the *rejection of rejection*. Here is the origin of Jewish inclusivism.

Israel is henceforth to be one indivisible people, the collective firstborn child of the One God.[61]

But, insofar as the Jewish people *are* one people, their cultural heritage, language, and history will not make one religious denomination rational for one Jew, and another religious denomination rational for another Jew. The disagreements among Jews are in-house and intra-linguistic. And, since he believed in objective facts, and the dichotomy between truth and falsehood, and since our common peoplehood meant that we were too culturally close to be speaking past one another, or living in distinct epistemic bubbles, there was much less room for pluralism.

Within the Jewish world, R. Sacks was willing to countenance, and even celebrate, a degree of pluralism—what he called "Aggadic Pluralism," which operates at the level of those conflicting values and insights that find expression in the canon of Jewish literature and thought, but over which the halakhic processes of decision-making take no decisive stance—either because they needn't, or because there are insufficient grounds for making a decision one way or the other, or because the conflict is a conflict between equally real values rather than an outright contradiction.[62]

But, insofar as the Jewish people remain one people, bound by the same covenant, Jews have an obligation to persuade one another, in our shared language, of the truths that our commonly rooted rationality allows us to see, and to argue against those positions which our shared cultural perspective suggest to us to be false.

One could well resist this line of thought and suggest that Reform and Conservative Jews have their own distinct communities of discourse in the same way that Christianity and Islam have.[63] I think this is a legitimate place upon which to press the thought of R. Sacks, but it seems to me that he'd have an equally compelling reply. In much of his early work, R. Sacks was fascinated by the notion, put forward by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, that the people of Israel were bound, at Sinai, by two covenants. One was a covenant of fate, and the other was a covenant of destiny.[64]

[61] Sacks, *One People?*, 203.

[62] Ibid., 92–100.

[63] This point was put to me by an anonymous reviewer and was also raised by students to whom I had the pleasure of presenting this paper, at the Oxford University Jewish Society.

[64] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen—My Beloved Knocks* (Ktav, 2005).

The covenant of fate is manifest in the fact that, like it or not, we Jews are subject to the same slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. In the Middle Ages, and later, Jews that converted to Christianity to avoid the fate of their brethren were invariably cast under a cloud of suspicion by the Gentile communities they sought, or were forced, to join. Later, the Holocaust made no distinction whatsoever between Jews of different beliefs or convictions. These facts serve as stark reminders that the Jewish people, even against their will, are bound by the bonds of a shared fate.

A covenant of destiny, by contrast, is manifest in the sense that a people are trying to shape their community and their lives around shared values and vision. The crisis of Jewish modernity, as R. Sacks saw it, was that our fragmentation had shattered the bonds of the covenant of destiny, like at no time in history, save perhaps from the sectarianism that flourished at the time of the destruction of the Temple. And yet, the twentieth-century phenomena of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel had served to make the shared covenant of fate especially salient to Jews across the entire religious and social spectrum.

I believe R. Sacks denied that the Jewish people have splintered into their own communities of discourse, rendering Reform and Conservative Judaism into their own distinct languages, because of the sheer force of the covenant of fate that we continue to share. It is on the basis of this foundation that he believed it might be possible to recover, in the fullness of time, the covenant of destiny. And thus, in his eyes, and despite the great fractures that divide us, the Jewish people remain one people, leaving little room for any radical form of pluralism which would operatively sweep away our very real disagreements.

Accordingly, R. Sacks could say, "The notion of dignity of difference was formulated as an expression of what I would suppose you would call religious pluralism. I am even ready to call this *cultural* pluralism; I have no problem with this phrase either. But *within* Judaism, pluralism has limits."[65] It has limits because we remain, despite our very real differences, one people. As we say in our Sabbath prayers: "You are one and Your name is one, and who is like Your people, Israel, one nation in the land."

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[65] "Interview with Jonathan Sacks" in *Jonathan Sacks: Universalizing Particularity*, ed. H. Tirsoh-Samuelson and A. Hughes (Brill, 2013), 125 – emphasis added. It should now be clear that R. Sacks' talk of "pluralism" refers to a form of epistemic pluralism (i.e., a recognition that what is reasonable for a person to believe is affected by his or her different social and linguistic contexts) and not to any sort of metaphysical pluralism that seeks to water down the hard and fast dichotomy between truth and falsehood.