

REVIEW ESSAY

Windows on the World—Judaism Beyond Ethnicity: A Review of *Abraham's Journey* by Joseph B. Soloveitchik, edited by David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler, and *Future Tense* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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Windows on the World—Judaism Beyond Ethnicity: A Review of *Abraham's Journey* by Joseph B. Soloveitchik, edited by David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City: KTAV, 2008), and *Future Tense* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (New York: Schocken, 2009)

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Not long ago I found myself perusing the books in my shul's *beit midrash*, which doubles as a small sanctuary. I was struck that the *sefarim*—both Hebrew and English—consisted overwhelmingly of volumes dedicated exclusively to *halakhab*, among them *hilkhot tefillah*, *hilkhot tsini`ut*, *hilkhot birkhat bahamah*, as well as handbooks explaining the laws of *kasbrut*, holidays and mourning. In all, there were fifty-one shelves of books related to Talmud and *halakhab*, nine shelves of Bible and biblical commentary, and a mere three shelves devoted to Jewish philosophy, thought or *mahshevet yisrael*.

The shelves mirror where Orthodoxy is today. The trend toward popular publications of halakhic treatises that started with R. Shimon Eider's manual on *hilkhot eruvin* in the 70's has been taken up with gusto by Art Scroll, Israeli rabbis and others. Yet while R. Eider's original manual was a mere eight pages, the recent popular tract on *hilkhot eruvin* by Rabbi Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer spans no less than 152 pages! Today's Orthodoxy is dominated by *heftsab/gavrab*—the *heftsab* of the *Shulhan arukh* and the *gavrab* of the *Ish Halakhab*.

Certainly much of this trend is for the good. One need only observe the tumultuous vicissitudes (and questionable futures) of non-halakhic interpretations of Judaism. *Halakhab* has always been the essential mode of Jewish

religious expression and a necessary stabilizing force for our lives as a people.

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and so it is today.*

Yet it is not enough. Even the consummate halakhic man, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, recognized early in life that an exclusive diet of *halakhab* leads to “a soulless being, dry and insensitive.”¹ In the end, no amount of elaboration on the rules can nurture a spiritual personality or satisfy deep spiritual hunger; and no amount of technical logical analysis can soothe one troubled after a dark night of the soul.

There are also sociological and ideological implications. Like the *eruv*, *halakhab* is meant to fashion a closed communal space that is carefully circumscribed by formidable barriers. In addition to acculturating Jews to the culture of the *beit midrash*, it creates a private, often esoteric, language that undermines shared communication with those outside the halakhic community. This was the real issue at stake in the fierce controversy that raged in the Jewish communities of Provence during the thirteenth century. Should the *beit midrash* encompass Maimonides' broad educational curriculum or be exclusively confined to Talmud? Should

1. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne,” *Tradition* 17:2, Spring 1978 (Rabbinical Council of America, 1978) p. 77. He follows in the tradition of Maimonides on this. See MT, *Hilkhot yedosei ha-torah* 4:13.

medieval Ashkenazi Jewry relate to the wider world or close itself off from that world? The weapons of that war were Jewish books; and so it is today.

Orthodoxy's current pan-halakhism seems to have lost interest in the human condition *per se*, and is rapidly losing the language to discuss universal human concerns like ethics, justice, spirituality and human purpose. It is a joy to note, therefore, two recently published books that reveal the theological reflections of Rav Soloveitchik and Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.

In what sense can Abraham be a paradigm for Orthodox Jews defined by the Sinaitic commandments?

Abraham's Journey, Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarchs is the ninth volume of the *MeOtzar HoRav, Selected Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* series, and it is based on the numerous lectures about Abraham that Rav Soloveitchik delivered in the 1960's and 1970's. The editors deserve credit for synthesizing the disparate material and achieving a near seamless product. They also succeeded in faithfully preserving much of the Rav's eloquence, nobility of thought, broad eclectic vision and lyrical style. The book contains a number of themes that the Rav expressed in his other works, such as the dialectical and antinomial nature of religious experience, human longing for transcendence, spiritual advance and retreat, and unstinting faithfulness to Jewish tradition. But it also offers new glimpses of his personal spiritual life, such as reflections on his feelings about his famous father and grandfather, as well as his university experience in Berlin. The result is a penetrating and compelling religious *Weltanschauung*. In many ways it is an expression of his personal sacred mission built around the

biblical figure of Abraham, one that pulsates with romantic aspiration and philosophic insight.

For R. Soloveitchik, Abraham is the paradigmatic Jew, the religious model of what Jews today *ought to* become. (The first chapter is entitled, "Abraham as Personality and Paradigm.") It is more important for us to see Abraham as our spiritual patriarch worthy of emulation than as the genetic father of our people. This actually presents a challenge for Rav Soloveitchik and the Brisker tradition, which so often spoke as if Judaism were synonymous with formal *halakhab*. Abraham lived generations before revelation at Sinai and there is no indication in the Torah text that he observed *Torat Moshe* and its 613 *mitsvot*. If so, in what sense can he be considered a paradigm for Orthodox Jews who stand obligated—and for many, whose Jewish identity is *defined*—by the covenantal obligations accepted at Sinai?

So strong is this conceptual linking of Jewishness with Sinaitic commandments that the *tanna* R. Nahorai and the great *amora* Rav claimed that the Patriarchs observed all Sinaitic and later rabbinic *mitsvot*.² Yet in the tradition of Nahmanides, Ibn Ezra, Radaq, Seforno, Hizquni and Maimonides³, R. Soloveitchik explicitly rejected this thesis⁴ and postulated two distinct sacred Jewish covenants: the Patriarchic Covenant and the later Mosaic Sinai Covenant. The Talmud's ahistorical reconstruction of Abraham entails imputing to him prophetic powers of knowing Sinaitic revelation and future Jewish historical experience, something that the Bible never does. Paying careful attention to biblical grammar, semantics and philology, Rav Soloveitchik committed himself to a close reading of the biblical text and resisted reading into *Bereishit* ideas that are not there. It was also his soberness and fidelity to the text that led him to limn Abraham differently than does Maimonides, who

2. *M. Qiddushin*; end; BT *Yoma* 28b

3. See their respective commentaries on Gen. 26:5. For Maimonides, see *Mishneh torah, Hilkhot melakhim*, 9:1.

4. "Abraham did not have the system of *mitsvot bein adam la-Makom*," p. 58.

portrayed him as a Jewish Socrates, the arch-typical philosopher concerned exclusively with knowing metaphysical truth and dispelling philosophical error.⁵

If Abraham is the pre-halakhic man who lacked the 613 Sinaitic *mitsvot*, his religious greatness emerges from his possession of “an ethical system that had to be carried out and implemented” (p. 58): “He rebelled against paganism...for the sake of substituting an ethical life for an immoral one.” (p. 46) Abraham’s moral system is a universal one whose value is recognizable to all humanity. Abraham’s revolutionary ethics gave him a spiritual charisma that empowered Sarah and him to convert the pagan “souls” around them. The ethic consisted of the seven Noahide commandments and the personal virtues of *hesed* and *tsedaqah*. Indeed, as R. Soloveitchik understands Abraham—and here is where the Rav disagrees with Maimonides—it is Abraham’s kindness and ethical integrity that led others to recognize the Creator of Heaven and Earth, not his faith or his philosophic acumen. Abraham, and by implication all Jews after him, are charged “with keeping the way of the Lord *to do tsedaqah and mishpat*” (Gen. 18:19), a verse that R. Soloveitchik cited numerous times throughout the book and that he interpreted to mean committing oneself to a life of “hospitality, sympathy, compassion and a readiness to fight for justice and defend it.”

Jewish tradition understood Abraham to be the symbol of *hesed*—outward directed action and overflowing kindness to others⁶—and this is clearly Abraham’s primary *persona* for Rav Soloveitchik also. Of course the heroic patriarch’s personality was a multi-faceted combination of commitment to God’s

authority, religious knowledge and ethics. R. Soloveitchik never tried to reduce faith to ethics as so many modern liberal Jewish and Christian theologians did. Yet the virtues of *hesed*, *tsedaqah*, and *mishpat* constitute Abraham’s *kerygma*. His character of ethical excellence appears in every single chapter of the work. In the end, the test of true *emunah* and knowledge of God is the life of moral commitment.

Only people in exile could understand and appreciate a morality of kindness.

R. Soloveitchik interpreted most of *Sefer Bereishit*’s narrative about Abraham through this ethical lens: In pleading to God to spare Sodom, Abraham announced “the morality of suffering.” It was “a great moral gesture related to kindness, to the involvement of the I to the distress of the thou.” His prayer for the people of Sodom indicated his faith in God and in the repentance of every human being. Following Rashi’s interpretation that the argument between Abraham and Lot was over theft, R. Soloveitchik understood that Abraham separated from his nephew because Lot “no longer cared about the first and most important prohibition in Abraham’s code, the one against stealing.” Here the Rav made a point of insisting that the *halakbah* prohibits theft from gentiles: “Whether the gentile is my friend or my enemy, stealing is prohibited.” (p. 124)

Abraham’s descent to Egypt illustrated Abraham’s moral and human integrity. The community of Abraham considered Sarai a full individual, “a person in her own right, a spiritual figure with a name and on par with Abraham himself”; but the Egyptian community saw her

5. *Mishneh torah, Hilkhot avodat kokhavim*, 1:3-4.

6. Maimonides defines *hesed* as “overflow” (“*haflagah*” in the Hebrew translation of the original Arabic) in *Guide of the Perplexed* III:53, having both ethical and metaphysical connotations. Rav Soloveitchik clearly uses *hesed* in both these senses when he portrays Abraham as a paradigm of *hesed*. Also significant is the association in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature of *hesed* with “*lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*” and often contrasted with “*genurah*” restraint and strict *din*. This fits well with R. Soloveitchik’s understanding of Abraham as a pre-halakhic Jew.

only as “the woman who was very beautiful” i.e., an aesthetic object to be enjoyed and exploited. (pp. 114-115) On a grander scale, our later Jewish bondage in Egypt served a moral *telos*: Slavery was necessary so the covenantal people would know the *experience* of suffering. “Only people in exile could understand and appreciate a morality of kindness.” (p. 197)

The biblical narratives about Abraham set before us the first *shulhan arukh*, “a table of moral virtues” in R. Soloveitchik’s language. Well before the post-moderns philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida wrote about hospitality as a central ethical act, R. Soloveitchik argued that hospitality lay at the head of Abraham’s religious table. The Torah emphasizes *hesed* as Abraham’s characteristic trait because *hakbnasat orehim* has greater moral value than does *tsedaqah*. It requires personal time and involvement with the other; checkbook Judaism does not suffice for the covenantal man. Significantly, R. Soloveitchik saw Abraham as the paradigm of *hesed* and morality not solely for his Jewish descendants, but for all humanity: central to R. Soloveitchik’s conception of the *berit* is that Abraham’s community is “the universal community.”

“Our task is to teach the Torah to mankind, to influence the non-Jewish world, to redeem it from cruelty and insensitivity, to arouse in mankind a sense of justice and fairness.”

The primacy of ethics in the patriarchal covenant led R. Soloveitchik to disagree fundamentally with Soren Kierkegaard and other Christian theologians in their interpretations of *Akeidat Yitshak*. R. Soloveitchik was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard’s famous understanding of that episode found in his *Fear and Trembling*. The Rav was moved by Kierkegaard’s portrayal of Abraham’s absolute romantic and non-cognitive surrender to God. Existential surrender to God was a major *motif* of the religious life for R.

Soloveitchik, and in other works he used Kierkegaard’s phraseology of being “insanely committed to” and “madly in love with” God.⁷ Yet he could not accept Kierkegaard’s conclusion that God asked Abraham to prove his faith by rejecting morality. Given his understanding of God’s covenant with Abraham as being a moral exemplar and his reading of “to keep the way of the Lord, that is to do righteousness and justice,” it was impossible for R. Soloveitchik to accept Kierkegaard’s assertion that God requires faith to trump the moral law.

On a practical level R. Soloveitchik understood morality to be the primary expression of faith in the God of Israel, both for the biblical Abraham and for today’s halakhic Jew. Hence he explicitly denied in the name of *halakbah* that faith requires us to deny any true moral norm of action.⁸ In this volume R. Soloveitchik repeatedly refers to “Abraham’s sacrifice” in dramatic fashion, learning lessons from it and enshrining it as a model for Jewish piety and spiritual “service awareness.” The *aqeidah* teaches that “Man belongs completely to God—body and soul. God owns human existence at every level, physical, spiritual and social.” As he did in Abraham’s case, “God demands that man bring the supreme sacrifice.” (pp. 10-11) Yet here R. Soloveitchik expressed the classic rabbinic worldview in dramatic fashion, and followed the predominant Jewish interpretation expressed in the *midrashim* that God tested Abraham by forcing him to choose between his love for God and his love for his son.⁸ R. Soloveitchik and Jewish tradition understood that Abraham experienced the *aqeidah* as a dilemma between piety and possession, not *mitsvah* and morality.

R. Soloveitchik’s Abraham intended to convert the whole world to monotheism and the morality of *hesed*. And understanding Abraham as the paradigm for his descendants, R. Soloveitchik insisted that “our task is to teach the Torah to mankind, to influence the non-Jewish world, to redeem it from an orgiastic way

7. “The Lonely Man of Faith,” *Tradition*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (Summer 1965) pp. 60-61

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62

of living, from cruelty and insensitivity and to arouse in mankind a sense of justice and fairness. In a word, we are to teach the world the seven *mitzvot* that are binding on every human being.” This was Abraham’s spiritual calling and the role Jews are to play throughout human history. Our covenant with God is more than ethnic survival and celebration, obedience to the Divine, or inner spirituality. For R. Soloveitchik, Torah is a universal—even a cosmic—mission achieved through a life of active *qedushah* and ethical modeling. This is the opposite of Jewish ethno-centrism. He believed that the Jewish people were created for mankind, not mankind for the Jews.⁹

Many of the themes that R. Soloveitchik articulated in *Abraham’s Journey* are taken up by R. Jonathan Sacks, who has clearly established himself as today’s most eloquent spokesperson of Centrist Orthodoxy. *Future Tense* is audacious in its scope, deftly taking on nearly every one of the burning issues the Jewish people today: anti-Semitism, Zionism, Jewish continuity and survival, Biblical theology, messianism, Jewish particularism and the meaning of Jewish tradition. Above all, Sacks struggles with the central questions of, “What role does God want His chosen people to play in sacred history?” and “What is Israel’s story?” The book’s title is an intentional *double entendre*, connoting a program for the Jewish future as well as the deep anxiety Jews have regarding what lies ahead for our people.

Sacks confesses a problem: Most Jews—and particularly the Orthodox Jews he lives with and loves—have lost their way and forgotten our people’s story and Judaism’s vision. Historically, Jews lived through repeated catastrophes, yet they never defined themselves as victims and never saw anti-Semitism as written into the fabric of the universe. But paradoxically, many do so today despite our

freedom and ready access to gentile cultures. The Jewish people has turned inward, sustained by neither hope nor purpose, but by the common cause of defending ourselves against perceived anti-Semitism. The Other is hostile and ubiquitous, be he the Christian, the secular liberal or the Middle East Muslim.¹⁰ Jewish politics has become the politics of fear. Contrary to our rabbinic tradition¹¹, the pagan Balaam’s observation that Jews are “a people that dwells alone” (Num. 23:9) has become an ideal: We are a people that *ought to dwell alone*.

What role does God want His chosen people to play in sacred history? What is Israel’s story?

After Auschwitz and Israel’s wars, we are indeed a nervous people feeling that Jewish destiny is determined by fate, not faith. To use R. Soloveitchik’s dichotomy, *berit goral* (the covenant of fate) has overwhelmed *berit yi’ud*, our covenantal destiny of sacred purpose. Fate has seduced us into seeing ourselves as objects, robbing us of moral agency and our covenantal calling. This is spiritually deflating as well as existentially self-defeating, for in the open and autonomy oriented cultures in which most Jews live today, a Jewish identity built on fear and the specter of persecution will convince few Jews to cast their lot with Jewish destiny. Committed Orthodox Jews may do so, but if it is only Orthodox Jews who remain Jewish, we will cease to be a people and become a sect—much to the dismay of God, who demands in His Torah that we be “a kingdom of priests and a holy *people*.” Sacks is convinced that King Solomon was correct: “Without a vision, a people perish.” (Proverbs 29:18)

Sacks is no Pollyanna underestimating the reality of today’s or tomorrow’s anti-Semitism. He

9. This principle was also articulated by R. Naftali Tsvi Yehuda Berlin (Netsiv). See *Ha-ameq davar*, introduction to Exodus.

10. Sometimes the threatening Other is not a person but a movement or new ideology. During the trauma of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in America, one Yeshiva College professor asked his students to write essays on what they fear the most personally. A number of students identified “feminism.” as the most threatening force on their lives.

11. Sacks cites BT *Ta’anit* 20a: “Better the curses with which Abijah the Shilonit cursed Israel than the blessings with which Balaam blessed them.” (p. 115)

publically fights anti-Semites and anti-Zionists in England, now the European center of the disease. However, unlike John Paul Sartre, he just refuses to allow anti-Semites to define who we are or control Jewish destiny. In fact, the reality and power of anti-Semitism is essential to his understanding of God's covenantal plan for sacred history, the Jewish people and Judaism.

In the tradition of the physician and Zionist ideologue Leon Pinsker, Sacks diagnoses anti-Semitism as a pathology, a virus that has mutated into different forms throughout history. Its course runs from ancient xenophobia, to early Christian theological anti-Judaism, to full-fledged medieval Christian demonization of Jews, to Enlightenment rationality's denial of Jewish peoplehood to the current mutation, anti-Zionism. Yet for Sacks, this pathology is derivative of the Jewish people's positive religious mission, not something immutably built into the nature of the universe or gentile culture. "Anti-Semitism is the paradigm case of dislike of the unlike, the fear of the stranger, the outsider, the one not like us. It is the hatred of difference."¹² (p. 111) Anti-Semitism is an assault on all humanity and the human condition. It centers intensively on Jews because we are the paradigmatic Other in

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history. We have been the bone in the throat of all universalist schemes and movements. Jew hatred is prevalent because as outsiders, Jews always fight the complacency of the established order, covenantally questing for improvement. Yet anti-Semitism only begins with Jews, it never ends with them.

Sacks believes that the only adequate response to the fear and hatred of difference is to honor the dignity of difference. That is one of the Jewish messages to the world, an essential part

of our covenantal teaching for humanity. The message is engraved in both the Torah ("Do not oppress the stranger," "Remember the exodus from the slavery of Egypt," the Bible's proclamation that all people are created in God's image and *Hazal's* insistence that all creatures are owed *kevod ha-beriyot*—human dignity) and in the flesh of all Jews who suffered persecutions throughout the ages.

Rabbi Sacks also draws on Abraham as a Jewish paradigm. Our forefather struggled with the dialectic of his particularism—his difference—and his universal religious outlook and moral values. He was committed to teaching a social and moral code to all, a code built around the values of righteousness, justice, *hesed*, compassion and outreach to hospitable relations with others. Abraham was an individual; he had to live in a particular place and fashion a particular society. His covenantal calling that became the Judaism we know today is a code for a self-governing ethically ordered society. It is animated by a vision of moral redemption rather than theological salvation. (p. 135). As an experienced interfaith worker and public figure, Sacks has learned that if Jews have the courage to engage others, they will discover friends and allies in Christian, secular and even Muslim communities around the world. Real faith begets confidence, and confidence begets more courage.

Judaism is thus about society, not the state. It is a set of universal moral values lived in a particular place by a particular people meant to be a model for universal redemption and morality. This is the import of God's repeated charge in Genesis to all the Patriarchs, "Through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." Hence the Bible's sacred paradox: Israel must be particular, be different if it is to fulfill its religious mission to teach and bless universally.

This challenge sheds light on the current dilemma of Judaism in the State of Israel.

12. This is also how the Bible understands the hatred of the prototypical anti-Semite, Haman: "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from all other people." (Esth. 3:8)

When Judaism is a function of state politics and party policies, it becomes divisive, coercive and unpopular. Judaism's religious role is to help Israel survive as a model for the humanization and moral progress of Jewish society, the Middle East and the world. A secure Israel that is just another amoral philistine country in the Middle East would betray the deeper Jewish religious significance. And for Jews everywhere, a philosophy of isolation from, apathy toward, and demonization of gentiles violates in a fundamental way the purpose of the Jewish covenant.

Sacks is most creative in his treatment of the concepts of Torah and human wisdom (*hokhmah*) and their relationship (chapter 10), but these also flow from his understanding of the Jewish people's proper relationship to the world. He asserts a proposition that is both devilishly simple and vast in its logical reach: "To change the world, we must understand the world." Understanding the world is the province of universal human *hokhmah*—the disciplines of science, philosophy, art, literature and history. He sees Torah identified with the moral ideals gained from revelation at Sinai and later Jewish tradition. This is the meaning of the rabbinic maxim, "Believe in the wisdom (*hokhmah*) of gentiles; do not believe in the Torah of gentiles." (*Eikhab rabbah* 2:13)

Sacks' dichotomy is actually the old philosophical distinction between 'is' and 'ought,' between facts and norms. David Hume observed in the eighteenth century that these are two different domains, and one may not validly derive what ought to be from what is. Philosophers ever since have been flummoxed by trying to connect 'is' to 'ought.' Sacks achieves this spiritually, if not logically. The covenantal task of Judaism is to teach and apply moral ideals (Torah) to human culture and the nations. Yet for Jews to succeed in redeeming the world with Jewish values, they must

understand the world through *hokhmah*. Without human knowledge, Torah becomes trivial, obscurantist and esoteric—in other words, a flight from life and the drama of human history. Unlike Maimonides, who saw metaphysical knowledge as a spiritual end in itself, Sacks values knowledge for its instrumental effectiveness in achieving moral and human progress. Valuing human knowledge is basic talmudic tradition, for according to Rabbis Shim bar Pazzi, Yehoshua ben Levi and Bar Kappara, ignorance of *hokhmah* is blasphemy.¹³ Willy-nilly, then, the Jewish religious calling includes knowing God's universe—*is* and *ought* alike.

"To change the world, we must the understand world."

R. Sacks interprets the biblical narrative as a counter-lesson to Western culture. Plato and the Greeks were hypnotized by universals, and this is why most great Western literature proceeds from the particular to the universal. But the Torah starts from the universal (Genesis chapters 1-11) and proceeds to the particular story of Abraham and his descendants. The unique Jewish message is that the human condition and morality must always be primarily located in the individual, never the universal.

We are most human, feel most profoundly, love most deeply and attach ourselves most securely to particulars—our family, our homes, our countries. The Greek focus on universals cannot produce a morality to which people are passionately committed. (This insight reminds me of the frequently cited statement attributed to the cosmopolitan Jewish intellectual, Rosa Luxemburg: "Do not bother me about Jewish suffering. I am busy saving humanity.") The universal gains significance only when it takes

13. BT *Shabbat* 75a.

seriously the individual and his particular experience. This also extends to God, who has two names: “*Elokim*” the universal God of Nature, which is actually a description not a name, and “*Adonaï*” (the Tetragrammaton), a personal name used by Israel in its particular relationship with the Divine.

In the end, Sack’s Judaism is future oriented, “the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.” It is about the uncompromising belief in the possibility of human redemption and the eternal Jewish task to use Torah and God’s *mitsvot* to bring the world to the messianic age. Sacks echoes the essayist Matthew Arnold¹⁴ and the political philosopher Leo Strauss¹⁵ in claiming that Judaism differed from Greek philosophy by believing that human moral and social progress were possible. The Greeks did not share that belief, and thus produced only the stoic acceptance of injustice and evil; Jewish belief led to ethical activism. Judaism differs from Christianity in maintaining that the messianic coming is a future event,

For piety to be objectively significant it must connect to the world outside.

not one that has already occurred.¹⁶ This is the correct biblical understanding of God, who defines Himself in futuristic terms: “*Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*”—“I will be what I will Be.” Only a Greek mind complacent about the imperfect present could mistranslate the Hebrew into, “I am that I am.”

More than a mere hope for a better future, Judaism is also a set of values and program for

realizing that hope, and faith in this substantive vision is desperately needed to reinvigorate Jewish continuity and commitment. But Judaism extends beyond our people. Torah values are necessary for the world to believe that it can defeat extremism, tragedy and violence—beliefs that are essential if our century is to retain its commitment to humanity’s future. While not always precise in his details, Jonathan Sacks is certainly accurate and breathtaking in his global vision of Judaism and Jewish destiny.

There is an often overlooked *halakhab* that the room in which one prays must contain a window. This requirement is not the result of imitating the stained-glass window décor of grand cathedrals, but reflects the healthy spiritual outlook of *Hazzal*. For prayer and piety to be something significant they must connect to the world outside. They must transcend technicalities and provide a view to culture and its enduring human issues. If that is true about the single *mitsvah* of *tefillah*, it is all the more so about the entire enterprise of *shemirat ha-mitsvot* and our covenantal commitment to a life of Torah.

Throughout these two books, Rav Soloveitchik and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teach us that while Torah and the holy Jewish covenant may be nurtured in the *beit midrash*, they must be windows to the world beyond that is both God’s and ours. Even more, these two rabbis challenge us to engage that world, reminding us that that the Bible’s prophecy of isolation for the Jewish people was indeed a curse uttered by our enemy, while the challenge to “be a blessing to all the nations of the earth” was given to us by The Holy One Himself.

14. “Hebraism and Hellenism,” in *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* [1869] (Yale University Press, 1994) ch. 4.

15. “Jerusalem and Athens” reprinted in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (SUNY: Albany 1997) pp. 377-405.

16. This explains a paradox observed by Gershom Scholem. While traditional rabbis always insisted in the belief of the coming of the messiah, actual appearances of people claiming to be the messiah and ushering in the messianic era in the here and now invariably elicited rabbinic opposition and censure. See “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays* (New York: Schocken, 1971).