

CULTURAL DIVERSITY WITHOUT MORAL RELATIVISM: A REVIEW ESSAY OF THE DIGNITY OF DIFFERENCE: HOW TO AVOID THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS, BY RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

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The great classical historian Arnaldo Momigliano, in his book *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*, meditates on the sense of monolingualism that set Hellenistic culture in isolation from other cultures in the Mediterranean. According to Momigliano:

No Greek read the Upanishads, the Gathas and the Egyptian wisdom books. It was indeed very difficult to find somebody non-Jewish reading the Bible in Greek even when it was made available in that language. Greek remained the only language of civilization for every Greek-speaking man. Even in the first century AD the author of the *Periplus maris Erythraei* cannot find a better accomplishment for a king of Ethiopia — to counterbalance his notorious greed for money — than his knowledge of Greek.¹

Momigliano sees that non-Greeks had to adopt a Greek worldview in order to participate in the "universal" Hellenistic civilization.

The essential challenge of Western civilization has always been framed by this sense of monolingualism; a predication of a deep and rich culture that is utterly insulated and

cut off from other languages and cultures. Jose Faur, in a particularly trenchant analysis of Momigliano's text, writes the following:

Eventually, monolingualism resolves itself into a peculiar form of circular reasoning: Western thought alone is truly "philosophical," that is, it may evaluate all other systems but it cannot be evaluated by any other system.²

Monolingualism is a co-opting of a pluralistic sense of culture and civilization into a hermetically sealed rubric of univocal thought - speech without multiple meanings, thought without divergent opinions.

This concept of absolute truth has permeated Western civilization since the age of Plato.

Rarely has the concept of absolute truth been conceptualized in contradistinction to a religious framework. I can think of few other books than *Golden Doves With Silver Dots*³ that have tried to analyze Western culture outside of its own hermeneutical codes and structures. It is quite true that the movement of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and others to examine and refocus the founda-

¹Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 7-8.

²Jose Faur, *Golden Doves With Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 8

tions of Western civilization has permitted new ways of thinking.³ But these new ways of thinking have only served to rekindle skepticism and forms of nihilism that preclude any possibility of active truths and responsibilities.⁴

Post-modernism has done a tremendous service to breaching the walls of Platonic "truth," but it has not been able to set into place an alternative epistemological system that would account for the manner in which human beings communicate with one another and create a healthy and strong society. By and large, post-modern philosophy with its critique of foundationalism has not been linked to the concepts of modern liberal democracy. This cleavage between Derrida and Berlin, Barthes and Rawls, Foucault and Hayek, has been disastrous for the study of modern political theory.

It is into this void that Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, has published his new and vital work, *The Dignity of Difference: How To Avoid The Clash of Civilizations*.⁵ Rabbi Sacks has read deeply into the sources of modern political thought and has created a work that examines all facets of modern life within the context of religious absolutes.

But rather than merely set religion in opposition to the modern secular world, as has been done countless numbers of times in polemical works, Sacks looks for the ways that religion can complement and extract the positive sense of diversity within the massive changes that have been inflicted upon our world by the traumas of globalism:

Religion can be a source of discord. It can also be a form of conflict resolution. We are familiar with the former; the second is far too little tried. Yet it is here, if anywhere, that hope must lie if we are to create a human solidarity strong enough to bear the strains that lie ahead. The great faiths must now become an active force for peace and for the justice and compassion on which peace ultimately depends. That will require great courage, and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that, more than at any time in the past, we need to search—each faith in its own way—for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of, those who are not of our own faith. Can we make space for difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger?⁶

Thus Sacks does something unique in the way religious thinkers have presented their ideas in modern times: he does not assert the finality of any religious construct, but demands the role of religion in generic terms in our lives. Rather than proclaim the tenets of an impervious Orthodox value-system, Sacks sees that religious orthodoxies can make space for difference and diversity.

This point is a key in the development of a post-9/11 world. Religion, coupled with secular nationalism, has been at the very core of the issues that divide cultures and civilizations. Going a step past Momigliano and Faur, and a quantum leap away from the relativism of Derrida and the deconstructionists, Sacks attempts to

³For a discussion of Post-Modernism in a Jewish framework see Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981). A critique of Faur and Handelman might be found in Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), particularly p. xii.

⁴For instance, the arguments of Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Random House, 1999).

⁵Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum Books, 2002).

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁷Orthodox Judaism has continually had a problem with the term "humanism." Jose Faur has written extensively on the relationship between Sephardic Jewish thought and humanistic ideas, highlighting the relationship between the Maimonidean tradition and the thought of the Italian humanist Giambattista Vico. See his classic formulation of the relationship in "Vico, Religious Humanism and the Sephardic Tradition," *Judaism* 27:1 (Winter, 1978) pp. 63-71.

piece together and articulate a religious humanism⁷ that is predicated upon justice, ethics and conciliation. In his words: "If religion is not part of a solution, it will certainly be part of the problem."

Sacks begins his story with the great conundrum inherent in the liberal project: liberal democracies can create free markets and personal freedoms but they cannot instill a sense of moral permanence and obligation within their citizenries. The capitalist free market, perhaps the great innovation of the modern economic system, a system that has triumphed over its socialist and totalitarian foes, permits the individual to exert a good deal of control over his own private world. But capitalism is ill-equipped to redress injustice and inequity; in fact inequity is front-loaded into the system:

The liberal democracies of the West are ill-equipped to deal with such problems. That is not because they are heartless—they are not; they care—but because they have adopted mechanisms that marginalize moral conditions. Western politics have become more procedural and managerial. Not completely: Britain still has a National Health Service, and most Western countries have some form of welfare provision. But increasingly, governments are reluctant to enact a vision of the common good because—so libertarian thinkers argue—there is little substance we can give to the idea of the good we share. We differ too greatly. The best that can be done is to deliver the maximum possible freedom to individuals to make their own choices, and the means best suited to this is the unfettered market where we can buy whatever lifestyle suits us, this year, this month. Beyond the freedom to do what we like and can afford, contemporary politics and economics have little to say about the human condition.⁸

This dilemma has been exacerbated by the seeming lack

⁸*The Dignity of Difference*, p. 11.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 28.

of ethical dimensions in the thought of Derrida. Having eschewed any possibility of moral absolutes, post-modernism has unwittingly linked itself to the intolerance and moral apathy of the marketplace. When there are no "right" ways to live a life, then anything goes – injustice and relativism go hand in hand.

Sacks accepts the salient value of the marketplace and modern capitalism; but he does not accept the totalizing nature of the marketplace. He insists that ethical concerns, truly the provenance of religious thinking, break the monolingual apparatus that has been constructed by the globalist phenomenon: our relations to the environment, to the poor, to the disenfranchised, must rise in import as the imbalances and imperfections of the new global marketplace take root.

To relate the myriad points of his argument, Sacks must first set out the construction of the new market-driven realities. He examines the historical framework of the new capitalism and contrasts it in temporal terms:

In one sense, then, the world we inhabit is a logical outcome of the legacy of our ancestors, the latest stage in a journey begun millennia ago. But there are changes in degree which become changes in kind. The speed and scope of advances in modern communications technology have altered conditions of existence for many, perhaps most, of the world's six billion inhabitants. The power of instantaneous global communication, the sheer volume of international monetary movements, the internationalization of processes and products and the ease with which jobs can be switched from country to country have meant that our interconnectedness has become more immediate, vivid and consequential than before.

What is missing from the new globalism is a **language** that might be able to help us account for the massive dis-

location created by the new technologies; technology is a value-neutral language. Our languages have lagged behind our material abilities to create new and sometimes frightening realities that empower us, but also serve to destabilize our inherited realities.

Sacks presents a list of statistics that lay out the massive inequities that the new global economy has created for us. The rich are richer; the poor, poorer. Medical care and other resources are lavished upon the elites while an ever-growing global underclass seethes with discontent. Inbuilt into the economic system is an apathy towards the moral — we might protect our individual concerns for a personal social ethic, but generally we seek our own good — a new and totalizing universal monolingualism, a monolingualism that has been buttressed by rampant materialism and a malignant political hegemonic system (i.e., the IMF and World Bank).

Not only has the dominance of the market had a corrosive effect on the social landscape. It has also eroded our moral vocabulary, arguably the most important resource in thinking about the future. In one of the most influential books of recent times, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argued that 'We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.' The very concept of ethics (Bernard Williams called it 'that peculiar institution') has become incoherent. Increasingly, we have moved to talking about efficiency (how to get what you want) and therapy (how not to feel bad about what you want). What is common to both is that they have more to do with the mentality of marketing (the stimulation and satisfaction of desire) than of morality (what ought we to desire).¹⁰

In this context morality becomes an adjunct to the marketplace and has affected the way in which we see ourselves and others. Religion becomes an admixture of pro-market forces (what Marx once called the "opiate of the masses") or anti-market atavistic forces; the forces that set into motion the primitivism of Osama Bin Laden and other terrorist cadres. These new cells, created by the failure of ethnic nationalisms to take root in the global marketplace, a world that has rejected the particularist identities of the fundamentalists, utilize the technologies and mechanisms of the new capitalism, are funded by global market enterprises, but link their cosmopolitan materialism to an outmoded religious monolingualism that eliminates pluralism and tolerance.

Religion thus has a tricky role to play in modern societies: it can unleash forces of hate and intolerance as we have seen; but without it, the moral lexicon of globalism is utterly impoverished. This is the paradox of religious fundamentalisms; on the one hand groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and the Protestant Evangelicals provide desperately needed social services and a sense of community in a spiritually impoverished era. They provide food for the hungry, clothes to the needy and medical services to those without insurance. On the other hand, these movements have adopted a hard-line religious intolerance, an intolerance that was supposed to have disappeared since the days of the Enlightenment, a philosophical revolution that envisioned the end of religion as a pillar of civilization.¹¹

Sacks rightly sees a problem in the way that we have blurred the lines between religion and politics and have not understood their role in the post-Enlightenment world:

Religion and politics are different enterprises. They arose in response to different needs: in the one case

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹¹For a critique of Enlightenment philosophy in a Jewish context see Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, originally published in 1982 by New York: Schocken Books), particularly chapters 2 and 3.

to bind people together in their commonality, in the other to mediate peaceably between their differences. The great tragedies of the twentieth century came when politics was turned into a religion, when the nation (in the case of fascism) or system (communism) was absolutized and turned into a god. The single greatest risk of the twenty-first century is that the opposite may occur: not when politics is religionized but when religion is politicized.¹²

There is a dialectical interrelation between the totalizing systems: religion, smarting from its defeat at the hands of the Enlightenment philosophers, began to remodel itself along the contoured lines of the new philosophy; religion sought to make itself that very model of Enlightenment that had previously been rejected by Descartes and Spinoza.¹³ But in this transition, religion absorbed many of the responsibilities of politics and served to sever religious man from the manner in which the new system was able to break man's chains of religious idolatry.

Sacks traces this political and religious fundamentalism back to perhaps the most controversial figure in modern thought: Plato.¹⁴ Plato, along the lines of Momigliano's analysis of Hellenistic monolingualism, created a system that abstracted real life from the ideal life of the philosopher-kings. Platonic philosophy has been the metaphysical and theoretical underpinning of Western culture for thousands of years:

It is a wondrous dream, that of Plato, and one that has never ceased to appeal to his philosophical and religious heirs: the dream of reason, a world of order set against the chaos of life, an eternity beyond the here and now. Its single most powerful

idea is that truth—reality, the essence of things—is universal. How could it be otherwise? What is true is true for everyone at all times, and the more universal a culture is, the closer to truth it comes.¹⁵

It is in Platonic thought that we find the merging of difference into sameness. Once merged with religious thought, most pointedly into the Christian synthesis of Augustine,¹⁶ Platonic universalism mitigates against pluralism and tolerance. The world is one, we must all be of the same mind, thus collapsing the multiple languages and foci of religious truth as a humanism.

It is here that Sacks presents the model of Judaism as a counter to Platonism:

Against Plato and his followers, the Bible argues that universalism is the first, not the last, phase in the growth of the moral imagination. The world of the first eleven chapters of Genesis is global, a monoculture ('the whole world had one language and a common speech'). It is to this world that God first speaks.¹⁷

This world, step-by-step, begins to break down into tribalisms. With the failure of the universal model, Adamic civilization, the Bible fixes its sights on the Israelites, one branch of the human family. God's covenant with the Israelites becomes a new paradigm of civilization:

The essential message of the book of Genesis is that universality—the covenant with Noah—is only the context and prelude to the irreducible multiplicity of cultures, those systems of meaning by which human beings have sought to understand their rela-

¹² *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 42.

¹³ Jose Faur discusses this turn in religion in his book *In the Shadow of History: Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). See pp. 142-175 where Faur discusses Spinoza and modern Jewish thought.

¹⁴ There is the classic study of Plato by Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" included in his *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁵ *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 49.

¹⁶ For a lucid exposition of Augustine and the Platonic context see George Foot Moore, *History of Religions* (New York: Scribner's Publishers, 1941) Volume 2, pp. 194 ff.

¹⁷ *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 51.

tionship to one another, the world and the source of being. Plato's assertion of the universality of truth is valid when applied to science and the description of what is. It is invalid when applied to ethics, spirituality and our sense of what ought to be. There is a difference between physis and nomos, description and prescription, nature and culture, or—to put it in biblical terms—between creation and revelation. Cultures are like languages. The world they describe is the same but the ways they do so are almost infinitely varied.¹⁸

In Sacks' profoundly salient phrase: "This means that religious truth is not universal."¹⁹ As we will see later on, this phrase is not merely a rhetorical challenge to current religious norms, it is a profoundly distressing epistemological blow to orthodoxy.

The breakthrough of this knowledge permits religion to be multilingual as opposed to monolingual. When religion adopts a monolingualism, inherent to the codes of scientific thought—a tree is a tree after all—it predicates its ethics on an morality of **exclusion**; you are either like us or you become an unwanted and unassimilable alien.

In this sense, the concept of the alien and its biblical resonance becomes a major factor in God's teaching to the Israelites:

Indeed, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is precisely the reason why the Israelites have to undergo exile and slavery prior to their birth as a nation. They have to learn from the inside and never lose the memory of what it feels like to be an outsider, an alien, a stranger. It is their formative experience, re-enacted every year in the drama of

Passover—as if to say that only those who know what it is to be slaves, understand at the core of their being why it is wrong to enslave others. Only those who have felt the loneliness of being a stranger find it natural to identify with strangers.²⁰

The concept of the Other, one who is at the periphery of things, translates into the philosophical concept of **difference**, a concept which does not have to be divorced from the certainty of the religious moment (as deconstruction does), but can be elevated into a religious value in itself.²¹

This concept of difference is hard-wired into our post-modern existence. The idea of a central philosophical authority that controls the world and its sub-systems has been rejected. The factors that once anchored our lives have become unhinged in a maelstrom of market choices—a seemingly endless barrage of information and technologies. This frightening emergence of multiplicity has not been matched by a concomitant updating of our social network of civic institutions:

In the past, people were able to cope with change because they had what Alvin Toffler calls 'personal stability zones.' There were aspects of lives that did not change. Of these, the most important were a job for life, a marriage for life and a place for life. Not everyone had them, but they were not rare. They gave people a sense of economic, personal and geographical continuity. They were the familiar that gave individuals strength to cope with the unfamiliar. Today these things are becoming ever harder to find.²²

Modern man has gained the opportunity to be ever freer

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²¹ The concept of the Other in Jewish thought has been masterfully explored in the many works of Emmanuel Levinas. See his book of essays *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) and his classic essay "Toward the Other" in *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 12-29.

²² *The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 70-71.

and make opportunity for himself. But the things that made life rich and worth living, the things that once made us happy and secure, the certainties of God and country, are fast disappearing.

What once made relationships constitutive of personal identity and self-respect is precisely the fact that they stood outside the world of contracts and market exchange. Family, friends, neighbors, mentors, were people to whom you were bound by moral reciprocity. What was important is that they were there in bad times as well as good; when you needed them, not when you could pay for them.²³

It is Sacks' contention that we are reliving the terrors of an ancient time, a time prior to the discovery that we can transcend the ills of nature by creating communities and institutions that can permit individuals to work together and maintain their hope and dignity in the face of the horrors of this world:

Against just such a backdrop, some 4,000 years ago, there emerged a different conception of human life. It suggested that individuals are not powerless in the face of the impersonal. We can create families, communities, even societies, around the ideals of love and fellowship and trust. In such societies, individuals are valued not for what they own or the power they wield, but for what they are. They are not immune to conflict or tragedy, but when these strike, the individual is not alone.²⁴

It was religion and not the marketplace that created these structures of feeling. It is therefore the job of religion to inculcate into us a sense of what is just as opposed to what is right. Justice, a key term in the religious lexicon, is one step above right or truth, but is beneath yet another term, compassion, which elevates our morality another step.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 79.

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 94-95.

Compassion links members of a society to one another in a pact of grace. There is a layer of responsibility in this covenant that forces us to see that human beings, with their vast differences of culture, are linked by a higher truth, the truth of God (not that of Plato), that helps us to establish networks of interdependence – this in spite of our lack of similarity to one another.

If religion is to succeed it must transcend what separates us rather than force all of humanity to be cast into a single mold.

This is the logic of our first social relationship: the inter-relatedness of our economic system. Sacks devotes a chapter showing how Judaism developed its notion of freedom as freedom from want and need. Objecting to other systems of thought, particularly the Christian monastic ideal, which deny the work ethic, Sacks sees that Judaism bequeathed to the world the sanctity of work:

Labor elevates man, for by it he earns his food. What concerned the rabbis was the self-respect that came from work as against unearned income. To eat without working was not a boon but an escape from the human condition. Animals find sustenance; only mankind creates it. As the thirteenth-century commentator Rabbenu Bachya put it, 'The active participation of man in the creation of his own wealth is a sign of his spiritual greatness.' Jewish law invalidates gamblers from serving as witnesses since they are not members of the productive economy. They do not 'contribute to the settlement of the world.'²⁵

This Jewish respect for free markets and the dignity of labor further instills the concept of the "dignity of difference." While Greek philosophy disdained the sanctity of work and the commonplace life of the laborer, elevating the life of the philosopher, a man who did not productively contribute to society, but lived off of the labor

of others (thus linking Marx's *Das Kapital* to the parasitic culture of the modern speculator and the Judaic underpinnings of Marx's thought), Jewish sages continued to work in trades and professions, forcing themselves to become at one with the demands and the conflicts of the marketplace.

But the advantage of the Jewish economic ideal over its Western counterpart is that it was embedded within a larger system of ethical morality. The cornerstone of Jewish ethics is the value of *tsedaqah*, a conception of charity that is unique to Judaism:

The two words, *tsedaqah* and *mishpat*, signify different forms of justice. *Mishpat* means retributive justice or the rule of law. A free society must be governed by law, impartially administered, through which the guilty are punished, the innocent acquitted and human rights secured. *Tsedaqah*, by contrast, refers to distributive justice, a less procedural and more substantive idea.²⁶

Sacks then attempts to translate and explain the idea of charity in the Jewish tradition:

It is difficult to translate *tsedaqah* because it combines in a single word two notions normally opposed to one another, namely charity and justice. Suppose, for example, that I give someone \$100. Either he is entitled to it, or he is not. If he is, then my act is a form of justice. If he is not, it is an act of charity. In English (as with the Latin terms *caritas* and *iustitia*) a gesture of charity cannot be an act of justice, nor can an act of justice be described as charity. *Tsedaqah* is therefore an unusual term, because it means both.²⁷

The Jewish concept of charity is therefore alien to modern Western civilization in the age of globalism. Western culture has, as we have indicated before, drawn rather stark lines between the public and the private. Privacy is

seen as a cardinal right of Western man. Public morality is seen as a private option. We can choose to give charity but we are not obligated to do so.

Hence, our freedom includes the freedom to live without – there is no exclusively moral guarantee that we be allowed to have the basic elements to subsist physically—food, clothing, shelter, medical care and the like.

It is here that the object lesson of Judaism and other religions comes into play:

Tzedakah is a concept for our times. The retreat, set in motion by Reaganomics and Thatcherism, from a welfare state, together with the deregulation of financial markets throughout the world, has led to increased and increasing inequalities both in developed countries and the developing world. The importance of tzedakah is that it does not mean 'charity.' It is not optional, nor does it depend on the goodwill of those who give it to others. It is a legally enforceable obligation.²⁸

It is this counterbalance that makes Sacks' argument so compelling: On the one hand, he affirms his belief in the bugaboo of the organized Left, the free market. Yet on the other hand, he affirms the primacy of a welfare system that makes sure that the wealthy elite has an **obligatory** stance towards the underprivileged. This obligation is not the disinterestedness of the welfare state as practiced in Western democracies, but is the sense of compassionate interconnectedness of the Jewish system whereby elites are able to integrate the have-nots into the system and prevent them from drowning in debt and need.

This sense of public welfare is linked to providing not merely for material needs, but to ensure that the individual has access to the market through compulsory education and the acquisition of skills basic to economic inde-

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

pendence.

It is here that Sacks examines the various technological revolutions that have undergirded the march of civilization. We are led through the advances in communication that have allowed man to develop his culture and civilization.

These advances are the following:

1. The development of writing
2. The development of the alphabet
3. The development of the printing press
4. The development of the global exchange of information

Writing first began back in the ancient Near East when the modes of inscription, cave drawings and the like, became incapable of representing more complex phenomena. Sacks sees in the development of writing, an urbanizing tendency:

The settlement of populations, the development of agriculture and the birth of complex economies with their division of labor and growth of exchange, gave writing its earliest and most immediately practical use, namely to record transactions. But the power of the system was soon apparent. It could do more than keep a note of who owed what to whom. It could capture for posterity the great narratives— myths, cosmologies and epic histories—that explained the present in terms of the past, and whose telling in oral form had been a central feature of ancient religious rituals.²⁹

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰ The most insightful discussion of writing in current philosophical thought comes from Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). See especially "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," pp. 3-26. See also the work of the Egyptian-Jewish poet Edmond Jabes; Jabes speaks extensively about his poetics of writing in *From the Desert to the Book: Conversations with Marcel Cohen* (Tarrytown: Station Hill Press, 1990).

³¹ *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 132.

Writing was far more than an abstraction; it created a sense of time and history that permitted its exponents to understand and internalize more clearly a sense of their own humanity; it created a new sense of consciousness that permitted man to be reflective, to look at himself in a new manner.³⁰

But the invention of the alphabet took this consciousness to a new level:

The alphabet created the possibility of profound social and political change. As already noted, the pre-alphabetical world was, and could not be other than, hierarchical. At the apex of Mesopotamian or Egyptian society was a ruler, king or pharaoh, seen as a god, or child of the gods, or the prime intermediary between the people and the gods. Below him and holding much of the day-to-day power was the cognitive elite, the administrative class. Below them was the mass of people, conceived as a vast work- or military force. The cultures of the ancient world were mythological, or what Eric Voegelin called 'cosmological.' What this meant was that the divisions in society were seen as mirroring the hierarchy of the gods or planets or elemental forces. They were written into the structure of the universe itself.³¹

Along the lines that he has continued to trace throughout the book, Sacks sees history as an ongoing process of forces, created by man, that lead us to breakthroughs and usher us into a greater insight into who we are and a more precise knowledge of the world we live in.

The role of Judaism and the Bible is central to the argument. Judaism is not represented as the initiator of the discoveries, but is shown to have made some startling

uses of them:

The politics of ancient Israel begins with an act inconceivable to the cosmological mind, namely that God, creator of the universe, intervenes in history to liberate slaves. It reaches a climax in the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus with an event unique in religious history, in which God reveals Himself to an entire people at Mount Sinai and enters into a covenant with them.³²

Sacks thus links the technology of writing and book production with the history of ancient Israel, the first real history inscribed in a book. With the technological ability to **write down** what has happened to them, creating an everlasting trace of this experience, the Israelites are able to inscribe the fact of their encounter with the Divine — a Divine presented as absolutely Other — and allow the meeting its role in the development of Man's own self-image; the idea that God and Man form a covenantal bond that grounds the development of science and culture.

It is the emergence of education as an ultimate value that destroys the pagan culture of old; a culture that is marked by its fear of nature and its mythologization of natural phenomena. Under the covenantal system, Man develops his rational sense, a sense that is tied to concepts of stewardship and interpersonal obligation.

Thus:

Education – the ability not merely to read and write but to master and apply information and have open access to knowledge – is essential to human dignity. I have suggested that it is the basis of a free society. Because knowledge is power, equal access to knowledge is a precondition of equal access to power. It is also the key to creativity, and creativity is itself one of the most important gifts with which any

³² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 137

socioeconomic group can be endowed.³³

Once human consciousness took this quantum leap, the idea that interpersonal obligations, obligations that would in effect mirror the Divine-Human encounter, led men to create unions that would allow them to share power for the greater good that the collective could provide over and above the individual.

And it is here that we run into the paradox that drives the modern economic system: man must have an internal impetus, be it greed or something else, that spurs him onto his economic and social activity. This impetus is encapsulated in the concept of competition – a world where one man puts his own interests ahead of others. The paradox is that human progress and creativity are linked to mankind's selfish impulses. We have seen the positive aspect of this in our discussion of labor and work.

How then to create a counterbalance to the forces of greed and selfishness?

According to Sacks, the market and its impulses are a necessary good/evil that drives the engine of progress and creativity, something that Judaism is wholly supportive of, but how do we evade the brutal circularity of a world in which difference is obliterated and support networks eviscerated by an economy of greed and brutality?

Sacks again goes back to the model of Covenant:

It is this conception of personal identity that lies behind the concept of covenant. Covenant is a bond, not of interest or advantage, but of belonging. Covenants are made when two or more people come together to create a 'We.' They differ from contracts in that they tend to be open-ended and enduring. They involve the commitment of a person to another, or to several others. They involve a

substantive notion of loyalty – of staying together even in difficult times. They may call, at times, for self-sacrifice. People bound by a covenant are 'obligated to respond to one another beyond the letter of the law rather than to limit their obligations to the narrowest contractual requirements.'³⁴

The realization that we are all in the same boat, the boat of the universe, forces us to come to terms with the fact that no man can live alone and that no man can be his own universe.

The destruction of civil society in the wake of material and technological advances is thus a disaster of the highest order. This collapse circumscribes the biblical ethos of altruism, an altruism that is, again, not an absolutism. It is a carefully calibrated balance of selfish and altruistic tendencies that man must integrate, tendencies that are leavened by our sense of difference and multivalence.

We have seen no greater need for this counterbalancing of human impulses than in the realm of the environment. Sacks recounts a number of rabbinical statements that relate to environmental concerns:

One day Honi [ha-Me'aggel] was journeying on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, 'How long does it take for a carob tree to bear fruit?' the man replied, 'Seventy years.' Honi asked, 'Are you sure that you will live another seventy years?' The man answered, 'I found carob trees in the world. As my forefathers planted them for me, so I too will plant them for my children.'³⁵

This Jewish sensitivity to the ecological balance of the world is represented by the startling fact that it was a Jew, Lewis Gomerz, who founded the RSPCA, the first world organization to protect the rights of animals.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170, after Maimonides, *Hilkhot De'ot* 6:6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Religion has a significant and decisive role to play in this regard:

Every technological civilization faces two opposing dangers. One is the hubris that says: we have god-like powers, therefore let us take the place of God. The other is the fear that says: in the name of God, let us not use these godlike powers at all. Each technological advance carries with it the possibility of diminishing or enhancing human dignity. What matters is how we use it. The way to use it is in covenant with God, honoring His image that is mankind.³⁶

It is this theme that runs as a constant throughout this most unique of books: the constant interweaving of difference(s) to create a plural and variegated – and enriched – reality. The apotheosis of such a pluralistic reality is the overarching concept of forgiveness-conciliation.

At the heart of the concept of forgiveness is the idea of love– not abstract [i.e. Platonic — D.S.] love but the real, concrete attachment of one being for another. Love distinguishes between the person and the deed. An act may be evil, but since the person is free, he or she is not inseparably joined to that evil. Wrongdoing damages the structures of our world. It creates an injustice. It damages a relationship. But these things are not beyond repair. Wrongs can be rectified and harms healed.³⁷

It is this sense of forgiveness and conciliation that ultimately recognizes the importance of religion in our lives:

Forgiveness is, in origin, a religious virtue. There is no such thing as forgiveness in nature. The elements are blind, and the laws of nature inexorable. Famine, drought, disease, starvation, make no

exceptions for the virtuous or the penitent.³⁸

The ultimate success or failure of humanity is dependent upon the interaction of forces both secular and sacred. Modern Western culture, increasingly becoming a monolingualism, an array of elite forces arrayed against the concepts of pluralism and tolerance, against the weak who cannot bridge the material and scientific advances of a progressively alienated elite, needs to rediscover the power of God and of the salient aspects of religion.

This does not mean, in Sacks' account, that religion is to become a part of that sense of elitism – as it seems to have become in much of Western religion – particularly that of exclusionary Christianity.³⁹ Religion must hear that faint voice, *qol demamha daqqah*, the voice of the poor, hurt and oppressed.

Sacks ends the book with an examination of one moment of conciliation, a moment that has great import for Jews and for others who look to solve some of the more intractable conflicts that we face in these troubled and troubling times. The story is that of Laura Blumenfeld, whose father was shot and seriously injured by Palestinian terrorists in 1986 while he was visiting Jerusalem.

Encapsulated in the story of Rabbi Blumenfeld and his daughter's search for justice is a detail as ennobling as it is compelling:

She attends the trial [of the suspects] and persuades counsel – still without revealing who she is – to let her give testimony. On the witness stand she finally discloses the fact that she is the victim's daughter and that she has come to know the gunman and his family so that they can put a personal face to the family of the injured man and understand that there is no such thing as an impersonal victim of violence. In the middle of her cross-examination, she is interrupted by another voice:

A woman stood up at the back of the courtroom. She blurted out in English, in a loud, shaking voice, 'I forgive Omar for what he did.'

Forgive? It was my mother. This was not about forgiveness; didn't she understand? This was my revenge.

*'And if the Blumenfeld family can forgive Omar,' my mother continued, 'it's time for the State of Israel to forgive him.'*⁴⁰

This extraordinary story ties together the main themes of The Dignity of Difference and provides a coda that is as rare as it is enlightening: The ultimate fate of mankind will not be provided by our sense of revenge and its entitlements; our ultimate fate will be in our ability to distinguish that we are all different, members of different nations and languages, members of different classes and socio-economic groupings, members of different religions.

As Sacks finally puts it:

The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image; whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his. Can Israeli make space for Palestinian, and Palestinian for Israeli? Can Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Confucians, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants make space for one another in India, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Kosovo and dozens of other places in which different ethnic and religious groups exist in close proximity? Can we create a paradigm shift through which we come to recognize that we are enlarged, not diminished, by the 6,000 languages that exist today, each with its unique sensibilities, art forms and literary expres-

³⁹For a brilliant discussion of the Catholic Church's legacy of anti-Semitism see James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), particularly his appendix, pp. 547-604, a call for a "Vatican III."

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

sions? This is not the cosmopolitanism of those who belong nowhere, but the deep human understanding that passes between people who, knowing how important their attachments are to them, understand how deeply someone else's different attachments matter to them also.⁴¹

The Dignity of Difference is a landmark of the first order in modern humanistic studies. There have been other works that have treated individual points discussed in the book, but I cannot think of another book that has brought together the moral tenets of religious humanism while keeping at its fingertips the vast and complex literature of the modern social and biological sciences.

The Dignity of Difference is a masterpiece that teaches us not only who we are, but how we got here and where we should be going. It is unafraid to cobble together the pieces of its highly sophisticated yet elegantly stated argument from varying and not ordinarily mutually sympathetic philosophies.

As an Orthodox Jew Rabbi Sacks has taken many chances by appealing to science and history as authoritative

sources. The malignant impulses that have overtaken Orthodox Judaism at present, be it in its Zionist or fundamentalist variant, have eschewed the literary and scientific arts — or, worse, have forced those arts to fit into an Orthodox Jewish mold, abusing them in the process.⁴²

Rabbi Sacks constructs his argument proudly utilizing the humanistic disciplines: evolutionary biology, historicism and the social sciences — disciplines anathema to others in his position as an Orthodox Jew. And, most significantly, he has courageously articulated his deeply felt Zionism by defending the rights of the Palestinian Arabs who too have suffered in this brutally violent century; a stand that someone such as Elie Wiesel, a man has espoused the values of humanism, has yet to really come to terms with.⁴³

For this he has borne the scorn and ire of Jews in England, America and Israel. Rabbi Sacks has been the object of a hate campaign that has become all-too-common in the extremist wing of the Jewish community, but has rarely been aimed at a fellow Orthodox figure — especially one as prominent as the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.⁴⁴

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

⁴²It is crucial to understand that in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the religious significance of the modern State of Israel has metamorphosed into an activist and exclusivist ideology that has penetrated the ranks of Modern Orthodox Judaism. This notion, signified by the Talmudic term *athalta di-ge'ulah* would have it that Jews are now in the throes of the Messianic era. This ideology, promoted by the late Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook and articulated by a militant political movement following in his wake, the *Gush Emunim*, has permeated the precincts of Modern Orthodox Jewish life the world over. For an incisive examination of this religious phenomenon see Aviezer Ravitzky's *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) where he states: "The nationalist ideology of Rabbi Kook and his followers views the history of Zionism as an inevitable and decidedly messianic process, leading to the realization of prophetic predictions: 'the State of Israel as the fulfillment of the biblical vision of redemption.'" (p. 80). In Ravitzky's trenchant and singular analysis, the Zionist movement has become linked to a fundamentalist messianism that presents itself in modern guise in counterdistinction to the more conservative messianism of the *haredim*. For a discussion of the Haredi approach see Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer, 1993), pp. 693-726. For an earlier critique of nationalist Zionism from a Diasporist point of view see Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism* (Philadelphia: Meridian Books/The Jewish Publication Society, 1958), especially the letter "Reality and Fantasy in Zionism," pp. 155-166. For a Sephardic point of view see Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19-20, 1988, pp. 1-34 and Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) along with the argument in Laurence J. Silberstein, *The Post-Zionism Debates: Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture* (London: Routledge Press, 1999), pp. 47-66.

⁴³See Norman G. Finkelstein's incisive discussion of Wiesel's approbation of Joan Peters' vicious work against the Palestinians *From Time Immemorial in his Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (London: Verso Books, 1995), p. 48. Wiesel has consistently maintained his ambivalence towards the Palestine issue within his larger mission regarding global human rights.

⁴⁴Prior to the publication of *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Sacks conducted an interview with *The Guardian of London* and allowed the paper to excerpt portions of the book. The article appeared written by Jonathan Freedman entitled "The Prophet of Hope" August 27, 2002. The controversy has been addressed in two articles, David Landau, "Will Sacks Stand by his Statements

But, contrary to the warped visions of religious fundamentalists of all stripes, the principal argument of *The Dignity of Difference*, a book that should become mandatory reading for everyone is that we all have a moral obligation to protect one another and in so doing will bring peace and prosperity to our universe.

Such a universal message, leavened by the religious foundationalism that is so crucial to Sacks' prophetic message, is a radical reconstruction of the way in which we have, since Platonic essentialism, been taught to think of the state of humanity. This radical reconstruction is an assemblage of ideas – from the Bible to Maimonides to Karl Marx to Isaiah Berlin to Robert Reich and Francis Fukuyama – that focuses on the essential dissimilarity between human beings and the need for us to bridge these differences with respect and tolerance.

The final word must come from Rabbi Sacks himself:

We encounter God in the face of a stranger. That, I believe, is the Hebrew Bible's single greatest and counterintuitive contribution to ethics. God creates difference; therefore it is in one-who-is-different that we meet God. Abraham encounters God when he invites three strangers into his tent. Jacob meets God when he wrestles with an unnamed adversary alone at night. The Book of Ruth, which tells the prehistory of David, Israel's greatest king, reaches

its climax when Ruth says to Boaz (her 'redeemer') 'Why have I found favor in your eyes such that you recognize me though I am a stranger?' The human other is a trace of the Divine Other. As an ancient Jewish teaching puts it: 'When a human being makes many coins in the same mint, they all come out the same. God makes every person in the same image— His image — and each is different.' The supreme religious challenge is to see God's image in one who is not in our image. That is the converse of tribalism. But it is also something other than universalism. It takes difference seriously. It recognizes the integrity of other cultures, other civilizations, other paths to the presence of God.⁴⁵

Elegantly written for the common reader, *The Dignity of Difference* will proudly take its place in the rich library of Hebrew humanism. This library has been made relevant for our own times by Primo Levi,⁴⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel,⁴⁷ Leo Baeck,⁴⁸ Edmond Jabes;⁴⁹ writers who so deeply understood and internalized the dignity of difference. It is in this spirit that I publicly endorse the central ethos of this brilliant work and recommend it to anyone who respects their place in the circle of life, a circle that is maintained by the interaction of all living forms and which has been bequeathed to us by our Father in heaven.

on Israel?" *Ha'aretz*, September 2, 2002 and Gerald Kaufman, "The Chief Rabbi Must Not Back Down on Israel," *The Independent* (UK), September 3, 2002. The controversy centered around Rabbi Sacks' critical remarks concerning the IDF's occupation forces on the West Bank and Gaza. He states: "You cannot ignore a command that is repeated 36 times in the Mosaic books: 'You were exiled in order to know what it feels like to be an exile.' I regard that as one of the core projects of a state that is true to Judaic principle. And therefore I regard the current situation as nothing less than tragic, because it is forcing Israel into postures that are incompatible in the long-run with our deepest ideals." Sadly, Rabbi Sacks wrote a letter to Israel's Chief Rabbi Meir Lau rescinding the comments and defusing the controversy. But in the opinion of this writer, the statements originally made in *The Guardian* are in perfect consonance with Rabbi Sacks' ideas of pluralism and diversity. It is thus lamentable that the monolingualism that we have discussed in this essay has been carried out with a vengeance in the Modern Orthodox Jewish world by its vicious behavior toward Rabbi Sacks.

⁴⁵ *The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁶ *The Periodic Table*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1984).

⁴⁷ *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1951) and *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1955).

⁴⁸ *The Essence of Judaism*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1941)

⁴⁹ *The Book of Questions* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1976-1984), Seven Volumes.