

Crisis and Covenant
Jewish Thought after the Holocaust



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY



Jonathan Sacks

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COVENANT**

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The Rabbi Sacks Legacy
Maggid Books

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לאבא ולאיתי

אנו מקדישים ספר זה לכבודכם ולהנצחתכם.

אבא, מסירותך ללימוד, ללמידה ולתפילה
השפיעה רבות על עבודת השם שלנו.

אתי, רוחך החיובית, אופיך החזק
וחוכמתך ימשיכו לעורר בנו השראה.

שתזכו לבריאות טובה, אושר,
אריכות ימים, נחת וכל טוב.

אוהבים,

בקי ואבי כץ והמשפחה

To Abba and Etti

*We dedicate this book in your honor
to commemorate both of you.*

*Abba, your dedication to learning, teaching, and davening
has greatly influenced our Avodat Hashem.*

*Etti your positive spirit, strength of character,
and wisdom continue to inspire us.*

*May you continue to be zoche to good health, happiness,
Arichut Yamim, Nachat, and Kol Tuv.*

Love,

Becky and Avi Katz and Family



Author's Original Dedication

To Stanley and Pamela

רעים האהובים



The Rabbi Sacks Legacy perpetuates the timeless and universal wisdom of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks as a teacher of Torah, a leader of leaders and a moral voice.

Explore the digital archive, containing much of Rabbi Sacks' writings, broadcasts and speeches, or support the Legacy's work, at www.rabbisacks.org, and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

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Publisher's Preface

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l* possessed and shared profound learning, moral depth, and sheer eloquence, expressed in his many published works. These made him a leading religious figure not only within contemporary Judaism but among people of all faiths (or none). Each meeting and conversation became a *shiur*, a lesson in how to look at the world and how to experience our relationship with the Creator.

It is a great privilege for us, paraphrasing the talmudic adage, “to return the crown to its former glory” by presenting these new editions of Rabbi Sacks’ earliest publications. The earlier volumes were written by Rabbi Sacks as a professor of philosophy, as a thinker, rabbinic leader, and Principal of Jews’ College, and are truly masterworks of exposition of contemporary Jewish thought. The later volumes represent Rabbi Sacks’ thinking as he became Chief Rabbi, set out his perception of the challenges facing his community of Anglo-Jewry at that time, and articulated his vision for the path ahead. All of these works certainly stand on their own merit today and are as relevant now as they were when first written.

We wish to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to Becky and Avi Katz for their critical support of and partnership in this project. Becky and Avi are longtime communal leaders and supporters of Jewish education in North America and Israel, and on behalf of all of

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us at Koren, together with those who will cherish this new opportunity to be inspired by Rabbi Sacks' writings, thank you.

We wish to add our thanks to our colleagues at Koren who have worked on this series: Ita Olesker, Tani Bayer, Aryeh Grossman, and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler. The proofreading team included Debbie Ismail-off, Ruth Pepperman, Esther Shafier, and Nechama Unterman, and Marc Sherman updated the indexes of the volumes. We extend deep gratitude to our friends at The Rabbi Sacks Legacy for their continued partnership, together with Lady Elaine Sacks and the rest of the Sacks family for their continued support for our work.

May Rabbi Sacks' memory and Torah continue to be a blessing for future generations.

Matthew Miller
Koren Jerusalem

General Editor's Introduction

First Edition

The visit of Jonathan Sacks to the Department of Comparative Religion at Manchester University to deliver the Sherman Lectures in 1989 is vividly remembered, by all who were involved, as a time of particular pleasure and stimulation. These lectures were enjoyed by academics and the public alike, a point evidenced by the fact that although the audience had been large from the beginning, it grew as the series progressed.

This book is an extension of those lectures. It is not simply a survey of modern Jewish thought, but an important contribution to it. The field it encompasses is vast, treating traditional authorities and philosophers, such as Spinoza, and modern history, not least the Holocaust which was, as he points out, as significant a moment as any in the last 2,000 years of Jewish history. He considers the concept of biblical authority in the light of modern thought; the impact on Jewish philosophy of diaspora thinking, notably in America; of modernity; of secularism, and the creation of the State of Israel. His own religious position is not cloaked, but the great diversity of beliefs and philosophies is considered

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with empathy, understanding and insight. It is an analysis both profound and readable. What it highlights is the variety and vigour of recent Jewish philosophies. But, as the author also shows, it is a diversity of thoughts deeply rooted in Jewish history and traditions, even though affected by the turbulent period of history from the 1940s onwards. While taking full account of modern history, thought, and social influences, he argues that the great philosophies which he analyses preceded the Holocaust and were not created by it, as others have said. What emerges above all is the power and vitality of modern Jewish thought.

Subsequent to delivering the Sherman lectures at Manchester, Jonathan Sacks gave the prestigious Reith Lectures on the BBC, and was then appointed Chief Rabbi in London. The qualities which led to those invitations are evident in this volume: the scholar able to communicate his profound understanding, and the man of faith, able to comprehend the problem that modernity poses for Jewish identity, yet strong in his own sense of being the inheritor of a historical covenant conscious of both the universalism and the particularism inherent in Jewish belief. This book represents an erudite balancing of classical thought and the challenges of contemporary life. The Department of Comparative Religion at Manchester is honoured to have been host to such a lecturer, privileged to be associated with the publication and grateful, as always, to the Sherman Trusts whose endowment facilitated both the lectures and the book.

John R. Hinnells
Professor of Comparative Religion
Manchester University

Introduction

This book had its origins in the 1989 Sherman Lectures given at Manchester University's Department of Comparative Religion. In it I analyse the often bewildering diversity of post-Holocaust Jewish thought on the central terms of Judaic existence: the problem of suffering, the meaning of redemption, the nature of exile, the concept of a covenantal people, the character of Jewish law, the ideas of revelation, tradition and interpretation, and the understanding of providence in relation to covenantal history. This cluster of concepts forms the basis of modern as well as traditional theological reflection on the meaning, substance and direction of Jewish life.

But as will quickly become clear, the second half of the twentieth century has given these subjects direct, even epic, existential relevance. The questions posed by modern Jewish thought do not arise in metaphysical abstraction. The problem of suffering is raised by the Holocaust. The concept of redemption is tested against the modern State of Israel. The meaning of exile is challenged by the contemporary European and American diaspora. Rarely has Jewish thought had such urgent dialogue with Jewish existence.

The present study is not a personal statement. It is a thematic survey of Jewish thought over the past half-century, one of the most

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traumatic and transfigurative periods in the annals of one of the world's most ancient peoples. Such a survey, I believe, is important. Studies of modern Jewish thought hitherto have tended to concentrate on figures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the neglect of the present. In addition they have largely focused on non-Orthodox thinkers, thus obscuring the intense inner dialectic within Orthodoxy itself. Moreover the Holocaust and the State of Israel have changed the direction of Jewish concern. The context of Jewish thought today is not what it was a century ago. Then, thinkers were largely engaged with the question of how to translate a religion of revelation into the Kantian language of rationalism and universalism. Now they ask more direct questions about Jewry as a particular, covenantal people whose recent history has had an almost biblical quality. In the midst of a secular age, the prophetic themes of collective suffering and providence, exodus and homecoming, have for Jews become immediately real.

I have attempted to give the broadest possible picture of contemporary Jewish thought. I have thus set forth, among others, views with which I profoundly disagree. In some cases I have subjected them to a critique, but not in all. In general, I have tried to avoid apologetics and special pleading. One of the undeniable features of modern Jewry has been its deep fragmentation, unprecedented since second Temple times. From the first to the late eighteenth centuries, Jews were subject to internal differences, inevitable in a living tradition sustained by a dispersed people. But one could still speak of a single tradition. For beneath the differences was underlying agreement on the fundamentals of Jewish faith and on Jewish law as the constitution of a holy people. Today that agreement is ostensibly absent. A portrait of the state of Jewish thought that did not do justice to its radical conflicts would be altogether misleading.

On each topic I have set recent Jewish reflection against a dual background, the biblical and rabbinic tradition on the one hand, the sociological realities of contemporary Jewry on the other. In this way I have tried to give full weight to the intense drama of the collision between tradition and modernity, and to focus on what I see as the central theological challenge of Jewish life: the continuation of the covenant through the discontinuities of time.

Introduction

The time I spent in Manchester while delivering the Sherman Lectures was a delight. The members of the University Department of Comparative Religion were warm and welcoming, astute and challenging. The lecture audiences were wonderfully receptive. And the Manchester Jewish community, at events organised to coincide with my visit, was a model of hospitality. My thanks go to Professor John Hinnells, Head of the Department, for extending the invitation to deliver the lectures; to Dr Philip Alexander for acting most graciously as my host; to Professor A. O. Dyson, Dr Alan Unterman and Mr L. S. Cousins of the University faculty; and to Sir Sidney Hamburger on behalf of the Manchester Jewish community. I owe to each of them warm memories of intellectual stimulus and, above all, friendship.

Thanks, too, are due to Dayan Isaac Berger, Dayan Berel Berkovits, Rabbi Ivan Binstock, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu and Mr Bobby Hill, who read the text in manuscript and alerted me to several infelicities of expression and construction. The thoughts expressed in the book and the errors that remain are, of course, my own.

J. S.
(1992)



Chapter 1

Themes of Jewish Modernity

“**T**he Jewish people today,” writes Daniel Elazar, “are in the process of millennial change, the kind of change that has not taken place since the triumph of Pharisaic Judaism eighteen hundred years ago, or the emergence of the diaspora nine hundred years before that.”¹ This book is about the responses of Jewish thought to that change. The situation of Jews had been transformed. How has this affected the relationship between Jews and Judaism?

At the core of Jewish faith is the idea of covenant, the mutual commitment between God and the people Israel. But the covenant embodies a specific tension. On the one hand, it is immune to history. Its text, the Torah, and the way of life it commands, are divine, eternal, immutable, unchanging. On the other hand, the covenant is realized *in* history. Indeed, as Yosef Yerushalmi notes, “the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.”² For the Bible, events in time are neither cyclical nor random but the working out, in human society under the sovereignty of God, of destiny, justice and redemption. The twelfth-century poet and philosopher Judah Halevi drew attention to the fact that the Ten

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Commandments begin with a statement not of metaphysics but of sacred history: not “I am the Lord who created heaven and earth” but “I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt.”³ Judaism is thus a metahistorical and historical faith, peculiarly poised between timelessness and time.

For many centuries, between the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE and the beginnings of Jewish emancipation in Europe, the sense of timelessness prevailed. To be sure, Jews were subject to recurrent persecutions, expulsions and wanderings. But during the whole of that period, their condition was essentially unchanged. They were a holy people, meaning a people set apart. They were a nation in exile, dispersed and without power. History – in the sense of the chronicles of kings, empires, wars and revolutions – was made by others. Jews were suspended between memory and hope, memory of the biblical past, hope of the messianic redemption. Not accidentally, observers spoke of the “eternal Jew.”

Modernity, however, thrust Jews into the vortex of time. By any standards, the metamorphoses within Jewry in the past two centuries have been monumental. In 1840, some 90 percent of Jews lived in Europe. Today barely 20 percent do so. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most Jews still belonged to the enclosed, semi-autonomous environments in which they had lived since their dispersion. Today they are fully part of their larger societies. For 1,800 years they had defined their existence in terms of religion. Today, Jews as a group are measurably more secular than Catholics and Protestants.⁴ Throughout their history they had organised their lives by the edicts of Jewish law. Today perhaps as many as four Jews in five see themselves as Jews without reference to the commands and constraints of religious law.⁵

One example highlights the extent of the transformation. Since the days of Ezra – in a sense, since the time of Abraham – Jews had fought against intermarriage. The integrity of the family was Judaism’s vehicle of continuity. That sensibility endured to the twentieth century. To “marry out” was to have left the faith and deserted one’s people. In America in 1920, for example, the intermarriage rate was estimated at no more than 1 percent.⁶ But an American-Jewish survey published in 1991 revealed that more than 50 percent of young married Jews had chosen a non-Jewish spouse.⁷

These transformations, intellectual, social and geographical, would in themselves compel the most profound reconsideration of the nature of Jewish existence since the destruction of the second Temple. But to them must be added two events of surpassing magnitude: the Holocaust, in which two-thirds of European Jewry perished, and the birth, in 1948, of the State of Israel, marking as it did the return of Jews to the land of the Bible. Between them they raised the most acute questions of Jewish theology: the suffering of the innocent, the nature of redemption and the signs and contours of the messianic age. Above all, they raised the question of the role of God in history. For here were events which it was not easy to assimilate into the paradigm of timelessness. Jews had, so it seemed, re-entered time.

This, then, has been more than mere transformation. What lies before us is a collision between an unchanging covenant and epoch-making change. What happens to metahistorical Judaism when Jews find themselves, after millennial stasis, caught up in the currents and whirlpools of time? What conflicts, resistances, accommodations and integrations are set in motion? Judaism is the religion of a particular people. For this reason, historical and social developments in Jewry are closely connected with Jewish theology, both as effect and cause. There is an inextricable connection between Jewish life and Jewish thought. After the massive dislocations of modern Jewish history, what remains of the timeless connecting thread of Judaism, the covenant between an eternal God and a “holy nation”?

FROM SECULARISATION TO EMANCIPATION

Our subject is post-Holocaust Jewish thought. But to understand it, we must begin by setting it in context. The story begins a century and a half earlier, with the first encounters between Judaism and a new social reality.

Virtually every theorist of modernisation since the Enlightenment had predicted the eclipse of religion from the civilised world. *Gemeinschaft* was giving way to *gesellschaft*, the small traditional community to urban anonymity. Science was replacing theology as the means of explaining the world. Rational bureaucracy was supplanting traditional authority. The calculation of consequences was replacing the ethics of obligation. Objects no longer had an essence but a function, and persons no longer an identity but a set of roles.

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The name given to this Copernican shift was secularisation, meaning the displacement of religion to the margins of society. It signified a transfer of power from the Church to the neutral state on the one hand, the choosing individual on the other. It heralded, too, a revolution in consciousness, beginning with the intellectuals of Enlightenment and eventually reaching all strata of society. Through it, divine command was transformed into personal autonomy. Meanings once held to be external truths came to be seen as internal, subjective constructs. The concept of a single overarching reality, a “common universe of meanings,”⁸ was gradually replaced by a pluralism of cultures and lifestyles. Revelation was naturalised into history. Tradition itself was disintegrating. Individuals turned towards the future, not the past, for inspiration. The idea of personal identity as something given by birth was on the wane. In its place came a sense of self as something fluid, revisable, consciously chosen.

Jews – at least the Jews of Europe – were thrust precipitately into this process. They were, in John Murray Cuddihy’s phrase, “latecomers to modernity.”⁹ From the destruction of the second Temple to the late eighteenth century, Jews had lived in dispersion, often as minorities in Christian or Islamic cultures. The period of wanderings and powerlessness was often a tragic history punctuated by persecutions, expulsions, inquisitions and pogroms. But Jews and Judaism survived.

That survival not infrequently evoked the wonder of observers. Nietzsche, one of Judaism’s severest critics, was struck by the sheer obstinacy of its endurance. “The Jews” he wrote, “are the most remarkable nation of world history because, faced with the question of being or not being, they preferred, with a perfectly uncanny conviction, being at any price.”¹⁰ Nicholas Berdyaev wrote that

I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint... The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history; all these point to the peculiar and mysterious foundations of their destiny.¹¹

Religious Jews, myself included, would see that survival as evidence of the covenantal dimension of history. For Jews traditionally saw themselves as having been constituted as a people by the covenant at Sinai in which God and the children of Israel pledged themselves to one another, the latter to live a life in accordance with the Torah, the former to protect the people in their land and save them from extinction in exile. The eternity of God meant the eternity of the covenant which in turn meant the eternity of the people Israel. But precisely because at the heart of Judaism is a *relationship*, Jewish history can be understood from two perspectives, natural or supernatural, depending on whether we focus on one or the other partner to the covenant.

Seen historically and naturally, Jewish survival during the long centuries of exile depended on a delicate balance of internal and external forces. Internally Jews were held together by the shared discipline of *halakhah*, Jewish law. Halakhah served to create a community of action. Wherever they were, Jews rested and celebrated in the same ways on the same days. They prayed at the same times using largely the same words. They ate and refrained from eating the same foods. They studied the same canonical texts. Halakhah gave concrete shape – a shape that hardly varied through time and place – to the life of a holy community.

But halakhah was also a barrier against the thing Jews feared most, namely assimilation, their disappearance as a distinctive people. It had a powerful sociological dimension. The dietary laws prevented extensive social interaction with the surrounding peoples. The prohibition of work on the Sabbath stood in the way of complete integration into the local economy. The distinctive Jewish legal system, which adjudicated disputes and matters of personal status, led Jews to seek and usually acquire a measure of self-government. There were extensive safeguards against intermarriage. There were pressures against residential dispersion. Jews were, in the words of that paradigm of diaspora existence, the book of Esther, “a certain people, dispersed and scattered among the other peoples ... whose laws are different from those of all other people.”¹² Jews preserved the halakhah. But halakhah also preserved the Jews.

Jewish law was itself only part of a wider vision which helped Jews understand their situation and endure it. Since the destruction of the second Temple, they were in exile because of their sins. But the divine

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presence was with them, even in their suffering, and would eventually lead them to return to their land. This too prevented Jews from staking their identity on a particular environment or culture. It allowed them to keep a mental distance from their immediate circumstance, which they understood as merely temporary. It gave them hope that their history had meaning. It might have tangled, even tortuous, diversions but it was leading towards a known destination. Besides which, as Judah Halevi noted in the twelfth century, their very sufferings confirmed the covenant and its promised consolation. Had not Amos said, "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins"?¹³ The inquisitions, expulsions and pogroms with which medieval Jewish history was punctuated were themselves evidence of the covenantal nature of fate.

To others, the Jewish insistence on chosenness was a sign of the obstinacy of this strange people. But external pressures only served to reinforce it. Jews were confined within particular occupations. They had little access to the main avenues of political power or cultural life. At times they were forced to wear distinctive clothing, at others to live in enclosed locations. They were subjected to discriminatory legislation. They were often regarded, in Max Weber's phrase, as a pariah people. Their residential rights were subject to arbitrary review and curtailment. It was, at times, an unenviable fate. But it precisely and repeatedly confirmed Jewish self-understanding. Here was a people in exile awaiting redemption. Reality matched theology.

Spinoza, the grandfather of Jewish secularism, was the first to see the symbiotic relationship between an inner sense of chosenness and the outward experience of hostility. The survival of Jews in dispersion, he argued, was fully comprehensible since "they so separated themselves from every other nation as to draw down upon themselves universal hate... That they have been preserved in great measure by gentile hatred, experience demonstrates."¹⁴ That mutual distance between Jews and their neighbours, however interpreted, was sustained throughout the Middle Ages.

All of this was radically transformed by the process known as emancipation. Starting with the French Revolution in 1789, Jews were invited to become equal citizens of the modern secular state. The course

of this development varied from country to country throughout Europe. In some it occurred naturally and gradually, in others it occasioned fierce debates and resistances. But it shattered the delicate ecological balance which had been at the heart of Jewish existence for centuries and it was to have consequences that have lasted to the present day.

EMANCIPATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

To Jews the benefits of emancipation were obvious. It augured entry into the professions, universities, the political process and the full range of social, cultural and civic life. It ended the Jew's status as an outsider. But to some at least, the threat was equally apparent. It meant a possibly fateful compromise of Jewish identity. Jews would no longer simply be Jews, members of a dispersed but covenantal people. They would be Englishmen, Germans or Italians of the Jewish persuasion. Their language, education, culture, occupation and place of residence would no longer be distinctively Jewish. The first impact of secularisation on Jews was less intellectual than sociological. What space existed in the modern state for the structures and solidarities of collective Jewish life? Could there be social integration without assimilation and shortly thereafter the complete disappearance of that "certain people"?

The sudden change in the social situation of the Jew occasioned, throughout the nineteenth century, a deep internal debate about the terms and meaning of Jewish existence in the modern world. The old certainties, set forth in the Bible and refined by almost two millennia of rabbinic Judaism, were shaken. A single century gave birth to more dissension on how to define Jewish identity than the whole of the preceding seventeen centuries combined.

There were those who, following in the footsteps of Spinoza, saw the whole Jewish destiny as reaching to its end. Heinrich Heine once complained that Judaism was not a religion but a misfortune. Those who felt like him now availed themselves of the opportunity to convert, assimilate or otherwise lose themselves in the anonymity of a growingly universalist and secular culture. Nor was this a solely passive process. A number of thinkers, themselves of Jewish birth or background, constructed new maps of reality in which the hold of religion over identity was to be overcome. Marx and Freud are perhaps the most famous