

Arguments for the Sake of Heaven  
*Emerging Trends in Traditional Judaism*



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Jonathan Sacks

**ARGUMENTS FOR THE  
SAKE OF HEAVEN**

EMERGING TRENDS IN TRADITIONAL JUDAISM

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy  
Maggid Books

*Arguments for the Sake of Heaven*  
*Emerging Trends in Traditional Judaism*

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*To our grandparents*

לעילוי נשמות

יונה בן ר' אריה לייב

שרה בת מרדכי

ר' אברהם אריה בן לוי

הניה אעטה בת זאב ברוך

מנחם מוניש בן יהודה

פראדל בת יהודה לייב

שלמה זאב בן שמואל יהודה

הענטשע רות בת אליעזר

זכרונם לברכה

*We dedicate this book in your memories.*

*Each of you had a unique journey which has impacted and inspired us in different ways. Your commitments to and sacrifices for Israel, your families, Jewish continuity, and halacha continue to influence today.*

*Because each of you held fast to the mesorah, we are blessed to raise our children as frum Jews today. We hope and pray that we can follow in your footsteps and continue the legacy you have left for us.*

*Love,*

*Becky and Avi Katz and Family*

*Author's Original Dedication*

*For Elaine*



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](http://www.rabbisacks.org), and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

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## *Publisher's Preface*

**R**abbi 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

## Preface

**I**n *Pirkei Avot*, that classic tractate of rabbinic ethics, Akavya ben Mehalalel advises Jews to reflect constantly on three questions: Where have you come from? Where are you going? And before Whom will you eventually be accountable? The present book tries to do this from the vantage point of the Jewish people as a whole over the past two centuries.

The idea for the book had its origin in an international symposium convened by Jews' College, London, in May 1989. The title of the gathering was *Traditional Alternatives: Orthodoxy and the Future of the Jewish People*. What lay behind it was an accumulating sense of rift and conflict throughout the Jewish world. I felt then, and still do, that Orthodoxy faces a considerable challenge of leadership in this situation. Our aim in the symposium was to bring into dialogue a whole series of Orthodox voices. For when there is no immediate solution to problems confronting the Jewish people, the most important religious imperative is to engage in what the sages called "argument for the sake of heaven." One of the themes of the present study is a plea for recovery of what I call "tradition as argument."

As I reflected on the controversies we were to confront, it became increasingly clear that they could not be understood without first setting them in context. I decided therefore to sketch the broad historical and

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sociological background against which they had arisen. What emerged was a study of modern Jewish identities, the conflicts among them, and the way these might be minimized if not immediately overcome.

The book was published in England prior to the symposium under the title *Traditional Alternatives*, and I was delighted when Arthur Kurzweil of Jason Aronson Inc. suggested the possibility of an American edition. The themes of the book are as much American as British, and I welcomed the chance of a wider discussion of its ideas. I have made some minor changes, and I hope that American readers will recognize some of the dilemmas faced by the fictional Anglo-Jewish family with which the book begins and ends.

Several debts of gratitude must be recorded: to Lord Jakobovits, the British Chief Rabbi, for his advice in planning the original symposium; to Mr. Stanley Kalms, then chairman of Jews' College, for the restless questioning that was the impetus of this and many other initiatives; to the staff of Jews' College for their support and stimulus; to Ezra Kahn and Marilyn Redstone for help in obtaining the books needed for the research; and to my secretary Adele Lew for deflecting the distractions while the book was being written.

Special thanks are due to Arthur Kurzweil for suggesting this edition and for his help and encouragement throughout. Above all I owe an incalculable debt to my wife Elaine, and our children, Joshua, Dina, and Gila. Without their patience and encouragement, neither this nor any other of my activities would have been possible.

The book touches on sensitive and controversial topics. I therefore end with the prayer of R. Nechuniah ben ha-Kaneh, one that was very much in mind as I was writing: "May it be Your will that I do not err in a matter of halakhah, declaring pure that which is impure, or impure that which is pure."

Jonathan Sacks  
London  
24 Shevat 5750  
19 February 1990

## *Introduction*

**S**ince the early 1980s a series of tensions has been evident throughout the Jewish world.

One, the growing rift between Orthodoxy and Reform, particularly in America. Reuven Bulka, for example, has warned that “if present trends remain unchecked, the policies which prevail within Reform Judaism and the commensurate reactions which they will surely evoke within the Orthodox camp” may well “result in a cataclysmic split within the North American Jewish community.” This could eventuate in “the total renunciation of a significant number within the Jewish community by another group.” America’s Jews might become two distinct and noncommunicating peoples, differing on the most fundamental issues of who and what is a Jew. To some extent this has already occurred.

A second has been the parallel conflict between religious and secular groups in Israel. Some years ago President Chaim Herzog warned that the greatest danger facing the State of Israel was not external but internal, the clash of cultures between secularist Israelis and two kinds of religious Jews, the non- or anti-Zionist *charedim* and the “national religious” Gush Emunim. Tensions reached a height in the summer of 1986, when bus shelters carrying swimwear advertisements were burned by groups of *charedim*, and in retaliation a synagogue was

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set on fire, a yeshivah vandalized, and vehicles attacked by groups of militant secularists. Concern has been voiced on both sides of the divide, by secular analysts like A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, Amnon Rubinstein, and Yehoshafat Harkabi, and by a range of religious thinkers, among them David Hartman, Shlomo Riskin, Yehudah Amital, and Nachum Rabinovitch.

The third has been the increasingly tense relationship between Israel and the diaspora since the 1982 Lebanon War. Prior to that, especially in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel had been a primary focus of diaspora Jewish identity. Jews in the *golah* were internally divided between secular, ethnic, denominational, and Orthodox expressions of identity. They were united by their concern and support for and vicarious pride in the State of Israel. Recently, though, Israel's international isolation and the widespread criticism of her policies in Western media has made at least some sections of diaspora Jewry increasingly uncomfortable, sometimes publicly critical. Attitudes toward Israel – the government, if not the state – have become among the most contentious and divisive issues facing diaspora Jewry.

This too took on a religious dimension when, in the immediate aftermath of Israel's 1988 general election, greatly increased support for religious parties made it seem likely that the Law of Return would be amended to recognize only halakhic conversions to Judaism. Orthodox opinion was divided on the tactical wisdom of insisting on the amendment, which in any case would have had only a marginal impact on Israeli society. Its immediate effect would have been on the diaspora, for it would have implied a formal delegitimation by the Israeli government of the Reform and Conservative rabbinate. The protests, especially in America where these movements constitute a majority of synagogue affiliations, were instant and vociferous.

None of these tensions has as yet proved fatally divisive. They flare sporadically and then die down in a subsiding murmur of diplomacy and reassurance. But for none is a substantive resolution in sight. And there is a disturbing sense of impending crisis, as if they were mere preludes to a volcanic eruption that will shake the Jewish world and irretrievably change its contours.

## ORTHODOXY RESURGENT

At the heart of all of them has been the revival of Orthodoxy. As late as the 1960s, Orthodoxy had been seen by some observers to be on the brink of eclipse. In 1967, the French sociologist Georges Friedmann published a book entitled *The End of the Jewish People?* in which he diagnosed world Jewry as poised between an assimilating diaspora and a secular Israel. The prediction began to prove itself false almost as soon as it had been uttered. Since then, the renaissance of traditional Judaism has been astonishing, evident in the proliferation of Jewish day schools and yeshivot, their success in resisting the forces of secularization and acculturation, and the high birth rates of Orthodox families.

This, though, has taken place against the backdrop of a still deepening secularization of Jewry as a whole, in both Israel and the diaspora. In the diaspora this is relatively easy to monitor. It takes the form of an overall continuing decline in religious observance and synagogue affiliation and an increase in the number of those who receive no Jewish education. It can be measured in terms of low birth rates and high rates of intermarriage.

In Israel the markers are less clear-cut. In several respects the religious factor has become more prominent in Israeli society in recent years. The *charedi* community has grown through its own birth rates. There have been highly publicized cases of *chozrim bi-teshuvah*, alienated Jews returning to their religious heritage. In the political arena, religious groups have adopted a higher profile. In terms of national culture, religious motifs have been increasingly prominent, as against the aggressive secularism of the early years of the state. Nonetheless, as Daniel Elazar has observed, "The rise of a generation of nontraditional Jews whose links with Judaism are tenuous in the extreme has increased the gap between the religious quarter of the population and the other three-quarters."

So the paradox of an Orthodox revival on the one hand and the progressive secularization of Jewry on the other has brought confrontation and conflict. But not only between Orthodoxy and others. The same high levels of tension are palpable within Orthodoxy itself. There have been fierce antagonisms and a growing sense of distance between *charedi* and *dati*, the so-called traditionalist and moderate or centrist

Orthodox. The two major forms of the latter – Modern Orthodoxy in America and Religious Zionism in Israel – have been undergoing a period of demoralization and decline. A cluster of associated attitudes has been in eclipse: the “synthesis” between Judaism and secular culture; a degree of tolerance and pragmatic cooperation between Orthodox and non-Orthodox groups; a positive religious attitude toward the State of Israel; and a tendency toward political moderation and a concern for world opinion. In their place has come an identification of religious authenticity with extremist positions.

Nor is the *charedi* world itself unitary and united. There have been angry, even violent, confrontations between different groups of *chasidim*, divided in their attitudes toward the State of Israel. There has even been a revival of the eighteenth-century hostility between the *chasidim* and their opponents, the *mitnagdim*. This led, in the last Israeli general election and before, to division within the ranks of the major *charedi* political organization, Agudah. One past president of the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Louis Bernstein, has argued that Orthodoxy’s greatest contemporary weakness is its fragmentation. “Minute differences metastasize into insurmountable obstacles. These differences, viewed in retrospect, are almost comical, but they open wide and painful wounds in their contemporary context.”

### **THE UNDERLYING QUESTIONS**

These conflicts, painful in themselves, may nonetheless be a sign of the intense vitality of the contemporary debate about the Jewish identity and destiny. As such, though, they call for serious and sustained reflection rather than sloganizing, confrontation, and mutual delegitimation.

And they point beyond their immediate causes to deeper questions about Jewish continuity and responsibility. Does the growth of the *charedi* community and the relative decline of other groups point to a need for all Jews to reconsider their survival strategies? Is the diaspora destined to self-destruct through assimilation, intermarriage, and a failure to create its own future generations? Does Jewish survival in an open society require a self-imposed segregation from non-Jewish associations and culture? “Modern” Orthodoxy, since the days of Samson Raphael Hirsch, has assumed that a secular-Jewish



synthesis is possible. In the late twentieth century, is this intellectually plausible? Is it pragmatically wise? Does not all secularization threaten the disintegration of Jewish loyalties and the stability of Jewish families? These questions have implications for the future development of Orthodoxy.

Are the social processes at work in Israel and the diaspora likely to generate a general return to tradition or an increasing polarization between a secularizing majority and an intensely religious minority? Can there be dialogue across the divide? Does Orthodoxy carry the responsibility for the religious fate of all Jews, or must it focus on its own survival? These questions have implications for the relationship between Orthodoxy and non-Orthodox Jews.

What is or should be the relationship between Judaism and the development of Israeli society? Should religious groups be represented by parties in the political process? Should they be involved, apolitically, in shaping education, collective sentiment, and national culture? Are the key religious issues “religious” – safeguarding Shabbat, standards of modesty, and the dignity of the dead – or are they social and economic too? Is Israel a place in which Jews can live among Jews or is it the context of a Torah society with specific approaches to social justice, compassion, and minority rights? What is the relationship between the State of Israel and the messianic process? These questions concern the relationship between Orthodoxy and Zionism.

What, too, is the relationship between the Jewish people and humanity as a whole in the wake of the Holocaust and the rising international tide of anti-Zionism? Jewish concerns have turned markedly inward in the last two decades, from universalism to particularism, from “example” to survival. Is concern for world opinion part of Israel’s ethical imperative, or is it instead a failure of moral courage? How far should Jews in the diaspora be involved in the moral and social issues of their wider society? Is this a religious duty or a form of assimilation? What are the contemporary implications of the command of *kiddush ha-Shem*, to “sanctify God’s name” through conduct that inspires admiration? These questions concern the relationship between Judaism and its wider environment.

## THE COVENANTAL CONVERSATION

Currently there is no available consensus on these dilemmas for which different groups and individuals offer different answers. This fact is not significant in itself. Of greater importance is how we approach the conflict of judgment and evaluation.

The classic Jewish response was to seek guidance from the sources, from the canonical texts of revelation and interpretation, the biblical and rabbinic literature. Nor was this an individual and subjective process. It involved finding a teacher, one who was versed and immersed in the tradition and could give an authoritative judgment that carried the weight of many centuries of rabbinic deliberation.

But there was not always a definitive answer. Maimonides distinguished between *halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai*, “a law transmitted [orally] from Moses at Sinai,” and the wider ambit of the Oral Law. The former represented judgments and imperatives on which there was no recorded argument in the tradition. The rest of the Oral Law comprised matters on which there *was* argument. That is one of the great characteristics of the rabbinic tradition. The classic sources of rabbinic thought – Mishnah, Gemara, and Midrash – are essentially collections of arguments. Few religious literatures have so celebrated dialogue, debate, and dialectic. The very process of argument was a central feature of the religious life.

There is a reason for this, and it goes to the heart of Jewish spirituality. Judaism begins with and is constituted by a covenant. And a covenant is a binding relationship which, however unequal the parties, respects the integrity of each. Throughout the biblical period, the mode through which the Divine will was known was *revelation*. But throughout the rabbinic period, it was *interpretation*. Through interpretation the sages applied Torah to their time. And because the entire covenantal community – the congregation of Israel – was involved in this process, argument was of its essence.

In revelation, there is no room for argument. There are true prophets and there are false prophets, but there is neither dialogue nor consensus between them. But in interpretation, there is always room for argument. An application of the sources to the unfolding challenges of history is rarely unchallengeable. There are ways of reading the classic texts differently. There are ways of characterizing the present situation

differently. In the covenantal situation, process may be more important than product. The fact that the entire community of sages is engaged in dialogue with Israel's destiny is itself the ongoing activity called Torah.

To be sure, there were large areas in which the sages insisted on normative rulings. Roughly speaking these make up the entire territory known as *halakhah*, Jewish law, and for the most part they were arrived at through consensus and the rule that "one must follow the majority." But there were equally large areas in which no consensus was sought and in which the argument was allowed to continue open-endedly. These were the domain of, in its broadest sense, *aggadah*: the literature in which the sages explored Jewish values, attitudes, and ideals.

By and large, the issues which have confronted Jews in modernity have been questions of *aggadah*. How shall a Jew live in an open society? How is Jewish identity to be combined with participation in a secular state and its culture? How, in this environment, is a Jew to be educated? Against the backdrop of nineteenth-century emancipation and nationalism, how was the Jewish destiny to be continued? If it meant Jewish nationalism and a return to the land of Israel, how was this to be reconciled with traditional Jewish quietism and a patient waiting for Providence? Where is the State of Israel to be located on the Jewish map of history between exile and redemption? What is the contemporary meaning of *galut*: exile or dispersion?

These are not questions to which a definitive answer can be reached through the classic sources of Jewish tradition. Nor are they the kinds of questions on which we would expect a normative consensus. Yet they fatefully shape the lives Jews lead and the relations that exist among them. Supremely, they are the covenantal questions of the last two centuries, for they raise in the most acute form the question of which route the covenantal people should take through history in response to the mandate of Sinai.

Yet the traditional response of interpretation and argument has broken down. So long as Jews were held together by *halakhah*, there could be disagreement on matters of *aggadah*. Jews were a people, said Saadia Gaon, by virtue of their laws. Those laws constituted Jews as a community, and on that foundation there could be individual differences on larger issues. But the most momentous fact of modernity is

that Jews have ceased to be a people held together by halakhah. Today they are linked, if at all, by more tenuous bonds: a common vigilance toward antisemitism, a sense of shared history and ethnicity, concern for the State of Israel, and a feeling of collective responsibility for the safety and welfare of other Jews.

Whether Jewish peoplehood can survive on so slender a base is an open question. Certainly there is room to doubt whether Jews can chart a common future if they lack a shared language with which to discuss that future. In such a situation there is an overwhelming need to recover as far as possible the tradition of interpretation and argument, in which the covenantal community engages in dialogue on its historical vocation.

The sages called this process *machloket le-shem shamayim*, argument for the sake of heaven. The phrase roughly meant Torah is truth. But at times we must uncover that truth through serious exploration of the Torah's words. This is a collective rather than an individual process, and it calls for a critical listening to a multiplicity of voices. In this way argument, rather than being confrontational and divisive, becomes part of the texture of community and its ongoing covenantal conversation.

#### **ARGUMENT FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN**

In illustrating what they meant by an “argument for the sake of heaven,” the sages contrasted the arguments between Hillel and Shammai, which exemplified it, with the arguments of Korach and his followers, which did not. The difference between them is worth restating in an age in which Jewish argument has often degenerated into controversy and from there to mutual hostility and delegitimation.

R. Menachem Meiri explains the distinction thus. There is a difference between argument for the sake of truth and argument for the sake of victory. Hillel and Shammai argued out of a desire to discover the truth. Korach argued with Moses out of a desire to win a personal victory. Whoever argues for the sake of truth wins a kind of immortality: his words are destined to endure. Whoever argues for the sake of victory merits a kind of oblivion: his words are not destined to endure.

The two kinds of argument are readily distinguishable. The one focuses firmly on the subject itself and avails itself of reason, inference, and the resources of tradition. The participants know themselves to be

engaged – even as they disagree – in a collaborative rather than confrontational enterprise. To lose the argument is as enlightening as to win it, for truth is the outcome, and truth transcends the person who first uttered it. It is said of R. Nachum ha-Amsoni that when he found a counter-example to his theory of biblical interpretation, he retracted his life's work with the words: "Just as I received a reward for the exposition, so I will receive a reward for the retraction." There can be no more inspiring example of the primacy of truth over subjectivity. To be defeated by the truth is to experience the one defeat that is also a victory. This is argument for the sake of heaven.

The other kind of argument fails to focus on the subject, for the subject of the controversy is not, so to speak, its agenda. It is marked by rhetoric and abuse. It frequently becomes *ad hominem*. Its aim is to defeat the opponent. Therefore its ends are served as well by attacking the person holding the contrary position as by attacking the position itself. The Korach rebellion – the rabbinic paradigm of argument not for the sake of heaven – is, from one point of view, an obscure narrative. Read the text carefully, and one finds not one but several different and incompatible positions being advanced. From another point of view, though, the rebellion is all too lucid. It aimed not at truth but at victory. Crucial to its strategy was a delegitimation of Moses. In such an argument, victory for either side is defeat for both. Had Korach won, the religion of revelation would have been defeated by the politics of power. Moses won, but only at the cost, uniquely, of invoking a miracle and his opponents were destroyed, and of provoking the subsequent reaction of the people: "You have killed the people of the Lord." In this kind of confrontation there is no benign outcome. One can only aim at minimizing the tragedy.

### **THE HISTORY OF JEWISH IDENTITY**

My aim in the present study is therefore twofold: to explore the "arguments for the sake of heaven" that currently divide the Orthodox world, and to defend the endangered etiquette of "argument for the sake of heaven" itself. The concept does not imply a pluralism that sees all interpretations as legitimate and all truth as relative. The argument between Hillel and Shammai was in fact decided in favor of Hillel. But it does

imply a willingness to engage in reasoned dialogue with views with which one disagrees. It stands alongside another monumental rabbinic conviction, that “scholars increase peace in the world.” Through intellectual conflict comes resolution and, eventually, reconciliation. These are values that need restating in a fragmented Jewish world.

But that task cannot itself be done without also examining the wider issues that led to the collapse of halakhah as the unifying framework of Jewish existence as a whole, and the intractable conflicts to which this has led in the present. Orthodoxy itself needs to be understood in the context of Jewish peoplehood in its widest sense. And that too I have tried to do. The present volume, then, sets the background of current intra-Jewish debates while suggesting how these might be conducted less divisively in the future. It is offered as a personal perspective, from the vantage point of one who sees halakhah as the constitution of the Jewish people and the only viable framework for Jewish unity. It is, too, an informal presentation. I have tried to avoid loading the text with footnotes and academic digressions. Some of the issues touched on are explored in a more scholarly way in my forthcoming books, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age* and *One People? – Tradition, Modernity and Jewish Unity*.

The central questions that currently divide the Jewish world flow from the clash of a series of very different perceptions of what it is to be a Jew. Those perceptions cannot be fully understood without a clear sense of their history. How did it come about that the relatively unified idea of Judaism and Jewish identity that existed prior to the eighteenth century broke apart in modern times? That is the issue explored under the heading “Past.” In “Present” I examine the current state of Jewish identity and the several unexpected developments that have taken place in Jewish consciousness since the 1960s. In “Future” I consider how the currently tense relationship between Orthodoxy and the rest of the Jewish world *might* develop, and how I believe it *should*. The sections headed “Prologue” and “Epilogue” bring the argument from a global perspective to its impact on a single imaginary Anglo-Jewish family.

This then is my attempt to set the scene for the tense and intense drama of Judaism’s contemporary dialogue between its commanding past and its as yet uncharted future.

Crisis and Covenant  
*Jewish Thought after the Holocaust*



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Jonathan Sacks

**CRISIS AND  
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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.

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## *Publisher's Preface*

**R**abbi 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.

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

Matthew Miller  
Koren Jerusalem

## *General Editor's Introduction*

### First Edition

**T**he 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*

**T**his 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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

## *Crisis and Covenant*

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> But an American-Jewish survey published in 1991 revealed that more than 50 percent of young married Jews had chosen a non-Jewish spouse.<sup>7</sup>

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.

## *Crisis and Covenant*

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,”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>



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.”<sup>12</sup> 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

## *Crisis and Covenant*

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"?<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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

Tradition in an Untraditional Age  
*Essays on Modern Jewish Thought*



Jonathan Sacks  
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY



Jonathan Sacks

**TRADITION IN AN  
UNTRADITIONAL AGE**

ESSAYS ON MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy  
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אנו מקדישים לכבודך ספר זה ולכבוד עשרות שנות  
החינוך התורני שהענקת לאינספור תלמידים ותלמידות.  
היצירתיות, המסירות והיכולת לעזור לתלמידים  
למצות את הפוטנציאל שלהם הן השראה לכולנו.

מאחלים לך בריאות טובה, אושר  
אריכות ימים, נחת וכל טוב.

אוהבים,

בקי ואבי כץ והמשפחה

### *To our dear mother*

*We dedicate this book in your honor to commemorate the many decades of Torah education you provided to countless talmidim and talmidot. Your creativity, dedication, and ability to help students reach their potential are an inspiration to us all.*

*Wishing you good health, happiness,  
Arichut Yamim, Nachat, and Kol Tuv.*

*Love,  
Becky and Avi Katz and Family*





*Author's Original Dedication*

Dedicated to the memory of the late  
Louis Mintz (1908–1987)  
*Yehudah Aryeh ben Yisrael Yitzchak*  
philanthropist, friend, and tireless fighter  
for the cause of Jewish unity.  
May his memory be a blessing.



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](http://www.rabbisacks.org), and follow The Rabbi Sacks Legacy on social media @RabbiSacks.

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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.

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

Matthew Miller  
Koren Jerusalem

## *Acknowledgements*

**T**his volume gathers together a number of papers written over a period of some fifteen years on philosophical themes. The process of reading through these and other writings led me to reflect on the progress of Orthodox thought since emancipation. I decided to set out these reflections in a new presentation which forms the first section of the book, “Responses to Modernity.” These chapters have not appeared in print before.

Because these essays are coextensive with my involvement with Jews’ College, a number of thanks are in place. Rabbi Dr. Irving Jacobs and Rabbi Dr. Sidney Leperer have been friends and colleagues over the whole of that period and have created a lively atmosphere of academic debate. Frank Levine and more recently Simon Caplan and Simon Goulden have steered the College administratively with great distinction. Adele Lew and Marilyn Redstone have helped this and other projects in countless ways, but in particular through their work on *L’Eylah*, the journal we publish in conjunction with the Office of the Chief Rabbi. Editing *L’Eylah* has been one of my great pleasures over the past few years, not least because of the way we have worked together as a team. Ezra Kahn, senior librarian of the College, has supplied my voracious appetite for books needed for research.



## *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*

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The following chapters have appeared in print before. "The Holocaust in Jewish Theology" was published as part of a booklet, *The Holocaust in History and Today*, by the Yad Vashem Charitable Trust, 1988. "Jewish-Christian Dialogue: The Ethical Dimension" appeared in *L'Eylah* 26 (Autumn 1988), 13–20. "Wealth and Poverty: A Jewish Analysis" was published as a pamphlet by the Social Affairs Unit, London, 1985. "The Word 'Now': Reflections on the Psychology of Teshuvah" appeared in *L'Eylah* 20 (Autumn 1985), 4–9. "Alienation and Faith" was published in *Tradition* 13:4/14:1 (Spring-Summer 1973), 137–162. "Buber's Jewishness and Buber's Judaism" was published in *European Judaism* 12:2 (Winter 1978), 14–19. "The Path of Return" appeared in *European Judaism* 8:1 (Winter 1973), 3–7 and was reprinted in *European Judaism* 20:2 (Winter 1986), 18–22. "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Halakhic Man" appeared in *L'Eylah* 19 (Spring 1985), 36–41. "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Early Epistemology" was published in *Tradition* 23:3 (Spring 1988), 75–87. My thanks to those who have given their permission for these papers to be reprinted.

## Introduction

“K now,” said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, “that a person walks in life on a very narrow bridge. The most important rule is not to be afraid.” Rabbi Nachman, one of the great masters of Chassidic thought, was deeply opposed to philosophy and philosophising, yet his aphorism perfectly describes the situation of the Jewish thinker in modern times.

Modernity for Jews in Europe meant the twin processes of enlightenment and emancipation, the one intellectual, the other social and political. Both threatened Jewish continuity in fundamental ways. Emancipation involved the integration of Jews into theoretically open societies. It spelled the end of the ghetto, symbol of the segregated and partially self-governing communities in which Jews had lived throughout the middle ages. Jews were invited to participate in predominantly non-Jewish and secular society and culture. For the first time in many centuries, a question that had not hitherto needed to be asked became urgent and invited a bewildering variety of answers: what is it to be a Jew?

Emancipation itself proceeded from and was accompanied by the intellectual revolution that was the Enlightenment. Some measure of what was in store for traditional Jewish belief had already been provided by Spinoza, excommunicated by the Amsterdam Jewish community in 1656. Fourteen years later he published his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

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In it he argued for a conception of God according to which revelation, miracles and Providence were impossible. The Torah was a secular and fallible history of the Jewish people. The commandments were a system of national legislation which had ceased to be binding since the collapse of Jewish national autonomy sixteen centuries earlier. Spinoza spoke in the name of rational enquiry, but it was clear that from enquiry conducted on these terms, no item of Jewish faith would survive.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as Jews encountered and internalised Western European culture, it became evident that they faced a language of thought into which Judaism could not be translated without being completely transformed. Kant defined ethics as a set of universal rules. What then became of the covenant of a singular people? He spoke of man as his own moral legislator. What then became of the authority of revelation? Hegelian history relegated Judaism to a slave morality. Nietzsche's polemics portrayed Judaism as the inversion of natural values. Darwin's biology called into question the Genesis account of creation. Wellhausen's biblical criticism attacked the literary unity of the Torah. Modernity was explosively subversive of all traditions. But the Jewish experience of it, combined as it was with the impact of emancipation, was particularly sudden, acute and overwhelming.

A clear choice presented itself: either radical accommodation to new modes of thought and social interaction, or radical segregation. From the first emerged a series of revolutionary new modes of Jewish existence: Liberal, Reform and Conservative Judaisms, Yiddish and Hebrew culturalism, Jewish socialism and secular Zionism. From the second came an intense revival of traditional Jewish life in the yeshivot and Chassidic circles of Eastern Europe. The former drew heavily on the intellectual assumptions of the nineteenth century; the latter fiercely resisted exposure to them. It seemed as if to embrace modernity was to abandon tradition; to preserve tradition was to reject modernity. There were some few thinkers who attempted to mediate between the two. But they walked, in Rabbi Nachman's phrase, across a very narrow bridge.

### **JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AND JEWISH THOUGHT**

And yet that journey must be attempted repeatedly. For many Jews, perhaps most, have resisted the either/or of modernity. Whether in Israel

or the diaspora they inhabit a secular world. But they continue to identify as Jews, and seek to understand that fact by reference to the biblical and rabbinic tradition. They stand on both sides of the divide. Only if there is a bridge between them can Jewish selfhood be made coherent in the modern world.

In such a situation, Jewish thought is not a luxury but a necessity. But what is “Jewish thought,” and how does it differ from that more ambitious phrase “Jewish philosophy”? Jewish philosophy in the middle ages characteristically meant the confrontation between Judaism and philosophy. Both were relatively defined entities. “Philosophy” meant one of the then available systems of conceptualising the world: Kalam or neo-Platonism or Aristotelianism. “Judaism” meant that corpus of beliefs and practices embodied in the biblical and rabbinic literature. Neither term was problematic in itself. What was problematic, and formed the heart of the problem, was the relationship between the two. This was the question that animated the work of Saadia Gaon, Judah Halevi, Maimonides and others. A number of clear options were available: harmonisation, synthesis, or opposition. The agenda of Jewish philosophy was clear.

What was less clear was its relevance to the majority of Jews. For there were relatively few who had so made themselves at home in the high non-Jewish culture of their day that its tensions with Judaism became, for them, a matter of existential crisis. Maimonides prefaces his *Guide for the Perplexed* with the remark that it is intended for the person “who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy Law, who conscientiously fulfils his religious and moral duties, and at the same time has been successful in his philosophical studies.”<sup>1</sup> He is writing, in his day, for a cultural elite. The majority, he notes elsewhere in the *Guide*, “believe traditionally in true principles of faith, and learn the practical worship of God, but are not trained in philosophical treatment of the principles of the Law.”<sup>2</sup> These were not the “perplexed” for whom he wrote. Not having encountered philosophy in general, they experienced no tensions between it and their Jewish faith. As long as Jews remained exclusively within the Jewish intellectual world – which by and large in the middle ages they did – they felt no need of Jewish philosophy. It remained as a result an impressive but marginal achievement.

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So the subject matter of Jewish philosophy was straightforward, but its relevance to Jewish life was restricted to the few. Modernity has reversed this situation. For it is no longer the few, but the vast majority of Jews, who inhabit two cultures and who experience the tensions between them. In theory, Jewish philosophy should have become a central discipline of Jewish life. But at just this juncture, the terms that comprise it have lost their lucidity. For what is Judaism in the modern age? And what is philosophy? And what is the conceivable relationship between them?

No longer can a Jewish thinker philosophise on the basis of an agreed understanding of the central terms of Judaism: revelation, command, tradition, interpretation, covenant, exile and redemption. These terms have lost their traditional sense for liberal Jews on the one hand, secularists on the other. Even within Orthodoxy there are sharp differences of opinion between modernists and traditionalists, religious Zionists and those who deny religious significance to the state of Israel.

And if the reality designated by the word “Judaism” has become fragmented, so has too the idea of secular culture. R. Soloveitchik, in his early but only recently published work *The Halakhic Mind* was one of the first to address this new reality.<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth century we have lost, he notes, the unified world of Newtonian, Galilean and Cartesian thought. The various disciplines that make up modern mathematics and science cannot themselves be organised into a single interconnecting view of the universe. The enterprise of philosophy has itself become problematic. Robert Bellah, in his recent study of contemporary American culture, notes that in the late twentieth century “the world comes to us in pieces, in fragments, lacking any overall pattern.”<sup>4</sup> Soloveitchik called this “cognitive pluralism” and it means that there is no longer a coherent and identifiable secular culture in relation to which Judaism might define its stance.

This is not to say that Jewish philosophy is impossible in the present intellectual climate. In 1980, to be sure, Menachem Kellner came to just this conclusion: there could be no contemporary Jewish philosophy, he argued, because “Judaism no longer speaks with one voice.”<sup>5</sup> He was wrong, for soon afterward there appeared two of the most ambitious

attempts this century to present a systematic account of the Jewish ideas of God and man, Michael Wyschogrod's *The Body of Faith* (1983)<sup>6</sup> and David Hartman's *A Living Covenant* (1985).<sup>7</sup> "Religious experience is born in crisis," writes R. Soloveitchik,<sup>8</sup> and it is just when Jewish philosophy seems to be impossible that it appears.

What it does mean, though, is that something less ambitious than Jewish philosophy is both urgent and possible. That something is what we have called "Jewish thought." Jewish thought does not aim at embracing the whole of Jewish tradition and the whole of contemporary culture in a comprehensive engagement with one another. But it does aim at a coherent statement of what it means to be a Jew at this particular juncture of history and civilisation. It goes beyond the vague cluster of symbols, motifs and metaphors that constitute the public rhetoric of Jewishness and asks searching questions. What do these symbols mean? Are they compatible with one another and with traditional Jewish self-understanding? Which Jewish values are enhanced, and which endangered, by a particular intellectual environment? Which, if a choice must be made between conflicting values, stands closer to the heart of the Jewish enterprise? It is questions such as these that have become pressing and perplexing in the last two centuries. It is these that, if they do not beget fully fledged philosophical systems, nonetheless give birth to a distinct and fascinating body of Jewish thought.

#### **DIMENSIONS OF EXILE**

Does it have some connecting theme? Though I have not touched on it explicitly in these essays, there is a *leitmotif* that runs through the whole range of Jewish thought since emancipation. It is the idea of *galut*, exile. It was this term, with its many dimensions of meaning, that more than any other had summed up the Jewish condition between the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of modernity. "Because of our sins," went the liturgical phrase, "we were exiled from our land." Exile meant the geographical dispersion of Jews throughout the world. It meant their political powerlessness, their lack of a sovereign state. It meant dislocation, for living outside Israel meant, in a profound sense, not being at home. It meant a kind of spiritual disorder. Outside Israel, argued Nachmanides, Jewish history lost its direct contact with

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Providence. In Jewish mystical thought exile was a cosmic catastrophe, a fracture between the transcendent and immanent aspects of God.

To live in a condition of *galut* is, virtually by definition, to live toward *ge'ulah*, redemption. Here too there was broad consensus on the core of meanings that the term implied. Redemption meant the messianic age. It meant that Jews would one day be gathered back from the ends of the earth to the land of Israel. There they would recover their autonomy. The kingdom of David would be restored. Israel would be ruled over by a messianic king who would fight the battles of the Lord, end Israel's subjection to the nations, establish the sovereignty of Torah, renew the covenant and rebuild the Temple. Beyond this, there were disagreements. Would the messianic age be natural or supernatural? Would it be accompanied by miracles, a new heaven and earth, or would nature pursue its normal course? What was the relationship between the messianic age and such concepts as "the world to come" and the resurrection of the dead? How literally or metaphorically was one to understand the prophetic visions of the end of days? On such questions, argument was fierce but not divisive. One would, in the end, have to wait and see.

But between these two concepts, *galut* and *ge'ulah*, was an eloquent and echoing silence. How was the transition to be effected between the one and the other? This was the question that hovered over the whole of exilic Jewish history. Not accidentally was there no clear answer. For the messianic idea had been consistently the most explosive in Jewish history. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, an identification of Bar Kochba with the messiah had led to a disastrous uprising against the Romans in the first century CE. Thereafter rabbinic thought was politically quietist. Redemption would come not through human means. It would come either at the time appointed by God, or through repentance and good deeds.

Messianic thought turned from the natural to the mystical, but it continued to erupt from time to time like a volcano. A series of false messiahs surfaced regularly throughout the middle ages, as Maimonides testifies in his *Epistle to Yemen*, wreaking havoc wherever they appeared. The most serious of these by far was Shabbetai Zevi in the seventeenth century, whose redemptive claims and subsequent apostasy traumatised Jewish communities throughout the world. The neutralisation of the

messianic idea had been a constant necessity of Jewish thought, and it became all the more so in the eighteenth century in the wake of the Shabbatean heresy. Cultivating a sense of ahistorical stasis – of patience and waiting – seemed necessary to Jewish self-preservation. But it left Jewish thought with few resources to handle, and a great many to oppose, the idea of historical change. For if the only significant terms to describe history are exile and redemption, then all change is messianic, and all messianism is premature.

It was this fact that was to become crucial in the nineteenth century. For emancipation *was* historical change. It meant the end, in social-structural terms, of the ways in which Jewish life had been organised since the days of the Babylonian Talmud. How, then, was this fact to be interpreted? Did it mean the end or the intensification of *galut*? Virtually all Jewish thought, revolutionary or traditional, since then has been an implicit answer to this question. Modern Jewish thought could be described as an extended midrash on, or a series of interpretations of, the idea of exile.

The two major breaks with tradition that have persisted to the present – Reform Judaism and secular Zionism – were both revolutionary transformations of the messianic idea. Radical Reform, which reached its heights in Germany in the 1840s and America in the 1880s, saw emancipation as messianic. Jews should abandon all thoughts of a return to Israel. Instead their mission lay in the diaspora, where through social integration they would be “a light unto the nations,” projecting a set of prophetic ethical ideals. The messianic age would be an era of tolerance and freedom for all mankind.

Secular Zionism, which reached mature expression in the closing decades of the century, took the opposite path. The rising tide of nationalism on the one hand, racial antisemitism on the other, pointed toward a relocation of Jewish life from Europe to Israel. Exile had come to an end; it was no longer tenable. Instead Jews had to become active shapers of their own history. They should create a society in the land of their national past. There and there alone would they find redemption, variously conceived as safety from persecution, cultural renaissance, or a new society of equality, the dignity of labour and military pride. The messianic age would be the reconstitution of Jews as a people in their own land.



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The same idea led, in other words, to a conception of Judaism as a religion without nationalism, and as a nationalism without a religion. But what the two had in common was their sense of nearing the end of *galut*. Jews were in sight, at last, of home. For Reform it was a home in a newly open diaspora. For secular Zionism it was a home in Israel. But each testified in its own way to the passion with which Jews sought an end to their long social, political and metaphysical homelessness and to what Gershom Scholem has called “a life lived in deferment.”<sup>9</sup> Necessarily, the defenders of tradition saw both as new variations on an old theme: a premature, destructive and heretical messianism. But they could not leave the matter there, without giving their own interpretation to the revolutionary change in the conditions of *galut*. Orthodoxy, as the defence of tradition in an untraditional age, grew to self-consciousness in the wake of these two confrontations, with Reform in Germany and Hungary, and with secular Zionism in Eastern Europe.

In the first section of the book, “Responses to Modernity,” I trace the history of this response through the four archetypal figures of R. Moses Sofer, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, R. Abraham Kook and R. Joseph Soloveitchik. There have been other great figures in traditional Jewish thought in the last two centuries but these four more than any others set out the great alternatives. For Hirsch emancipation held out new possibilities for the Jewish mission in *galut*. For R. Kook, it did the opposite. *Galut* had run its course. Jewish life in the diaspora was atrophying beyond recovery. The future lay in Israel where a messianic process beckoned. But unlike the secular Zionists, R. Kook envisaged that Jewish national revival would be, inevitably, a religious revival also. R. Sofer, who preceded both, disagreed with both. Emancipation neither enhanced *galut* nor ended it. It deepened it. Judaism would survive only to the extent that Jews resisted its embrace. Living through a period of revolutionary change, Jews were commanded to reject all change.

The most striking feature of Jewish life in the last two decades has been the re-emergence of the views of R. Moses Sofer – represented by the yeshivah and Chassidic communities – as the most powerful voice in Orthodoxy, both in Israel and the diaspora. In the chapters “Tradition as Resistance” and “Dilemmas of Modern Orthodoxy” I analyse some of the factors behind this phenomenon. Though it is one I respect and admire,

in “An Agenda of Future Jewish Thought” I argue against drawing from it unwarranted conclusions. The challenges to Judaism of an open society in the diaspora and a secular society in Israel remain as urgent as they were in the days of Hirsch and R. Kook. The bridges they built – *Torah im Derekh Eretz* and religious Zionism respectively – remain as narrow as ever and are in constant danger of being swept away. There is, I believe, no alternative but to keep rebuilding them. As Rabbi Nachman said: “The most important rule is not to be afraid.”

### RELIGIOUS FEAR

And yet fear afflicts the greatest. We recall the words in which the Torah describes Jacob, anticipating his meeting with Esau. “Jacob was very afraid and distressed.”<sup>10</sup> Rabbinic interpretation caught the fateful dilemma that lay behind these words. “*He was very afraid*, that he might be killed. *He was distressed*, that he might have to kill.”<sup>11</sup> Jacob experienced physical fear that he might be overcome by Esau. But he experienced ethical fear also: that in overcoming Esau he might be forced to act like Esau. There are some victories that, in a spiritual sense, are a defeat.

For Esau read secular culture, and we have the dilemma that haunts the work of R. Joseph Soloveitchik. It is no accident that four of the essays in this book concern his work. It would be hard to find, in the history of Jewish thought, a figure who has brought inner conflict so near to the centre of his intellectual universe. “Alienation and Faith,” my first published essay on Jewish thought, written just before I became a student at Jews’ College, reflects both my fascination and difficulty with this idea. It arose out of my first reading of his classic essay, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” surely one of the seminal documents of twentieth-century Jewish religious thought. Though it is written in terms of the two biblical accounts of the creation of man, it could equally well have been written as a midrashic reconstruction of the thoughts of Jacob prior to his meeting with Esau. Jacob, “covenantal man,” is about to confront Esau, “majestic” or secular man. He fears defeat, but more than defeat he fears victory. For in fighting Esau he will become like Esau. In conquering the secular world he will become secularised. What does Jacob do in such a situation?

The medieval commentator, Rashbam, suggested that Jacob tried to run away. “The Lonely Man of Faith” ends with the same conclusion.

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“When the hour of estrangement strikes, the ordeal of the man of faith begins and he starts his withdrawal from society... to his solitary hiding and his abode of loneliness.” He retreats from the encounter. To be sure, he returns to society in a prophetic role, but only to find “triumph in defeat, hope in failure.” Such is the contemporary man of faith’s “exact-ing and sacrificial role.”<sup>12</sup>

I found almost sixteen years ago, as I still find today, those words to be among the most profound written about the Jewish condition in modernity, and at the same time the most despairing. Jewish thought must confront them constantly and constantly fight against them. For the biblical narrative simply does not say what R. Soloveitchik has it say. Elsewhere, in an essay entitled “Catharsis,”<sup>13</sup> he gives his own interpretation of Jacob’s inner struggle, his great wrestling match with an unnamed adversary in the loneliness of night. The reading is utterly characteristic. Jacob, at the point of victory, lets his opponent go. “The Torah,” concludes R. Soloveitchik, “wants man ... to act heroically, and at the final moment, when it appears to him that victory is within reach, to stop short, turn around, and retreat.” But this is Kierkegaard, not Torah. The biblical Jacob does not retreat. He tells his opponent, “I will not let you leave until you bless me.”<sup>14</sup> This sentence, crucial to the Jewish destiny, in reply to which the name Israel is first pronounced, is wholly absent from R. Soloveitchik’s account.

In R. Soloveitchik’s work, halakhic Judaism comes as close as it will ever get to the spiritual world of Kierkegaard: a religion of subjectivity, loneliness, paradox and conflict. In *The Halakhic Mind*, Judaism loses its ability to communicate with science and philosophy. In *Halakhic Man*,<sup>15</sup> halakhah becomes a theoretical world akin to modern mathematics, not a code of law that creates communities. The tragic hero of “The Lonely Man of Faith” was already present in these works written twenty years before. Halakhic Man lives in the company of Hillel and R. Akiva, not in the real world of the contemporary Jewish community. He sees halakhah not as the discipline of resolving conflicts but as the celebration of conflicts to which, if there is a resolution at all, it lies in the mystical depths of the soul, not in the world of action, human relationship and society. This is not halakhah as the premodern Jew understood it.

It is not surprising that R. Soloveitchik's work, with its deep ambivalences, has given rise to two conflicting tendencies: one, a radicalism, evident in the work of such figures as Emanuel Rackman, David Hartman and Irving Greenberg, that pushes halakhic Judaism to its liberal limits and possibly beyond; the other, an ultra-conservatism that is deeply distrustful of contemporary culture. Both elements are present in his work, but the second is decisive. Implicit in my chapter "An Agenda of Future Jewish Thought" is that R. Soloveitchik's work, unique though it is, is not an isolated statement in the history of Orthodoxy. It embodies a mood of premature despair that has been Orthodoxy's constant temptation in modern times. That despair leads directly to R. Moses Sofer's interpretation of history and to his strategy of disengagement from it. For R. Sofer, emancipation deepened the condition of *galut*. For R. Soloveitchik, secularisation has carried it into the Jewish soul.

Against this we must argue that premature despair is as much to be resisted as its opposite, premature messianism. Jewish thought must continue to wrestle with contemporary culture, the problems of diaspora and the project of a Jewish state, and with the Jewish people as a whole in its many shades of alienation. In this struggle it must say, "I will not let you leave until you bless me."

### THE BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS

The other essays in this book are self-explanatory. One, "Wealth and Poverty," attracted attention in the national press when it was first published. The *Times* and *Daily Telegraph* published articles praising it; the *Guardian* implicitly criticised it as a Jewish statement of the politics of the "new right." A careful reading will make it clear, however, that my concern was not to advocate a political position. It was instead to examine the nature of the interpretive and halakhic processes when biblical verses are applied to economic problems. It was a response to a certain kind of Christian politics – exemplified in David Sheppard's *Bias to the Poor*<sup>16</sup> – which assumed that a specific political programme could be extracted from the biblical text: in this case socialism. Christian interpretation of this kind – and this is true equally of Liberation Theology<sup>17</sup> – tends to treat the whole rabbinic tradition as non-existent. One contribution Jews can make to political debate in a pluralist society is to point out that rabbinic

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Judaism exists and that problems not identical with, but not totally dissimilar to, those faced today were constructively debated by the sages.

As to the relationship between Judaism and politics generally, I would suggest that neither halakhah nor aggadah dictate a particular political stance, but that they constitute a language of values and concerns within which policies can be argued and evaluated. That is what a living tradition is: not a series of answers but a framework of thought. To expect Judaism to provide a single, uncontested answer to a question, say, of economic or social policy, is already to have yielded to a kind of fundamentalism, whether of the left or of the right. It is to ignore the entire tradition of argument which is rabbinic Judaism's singular and striking glory. There are many issues on which the halakhic system has already reached an authoritative consensus; but contemporary questions of economic and social policy are not among them. But to suggest, in the opposite direction, that Judaism has nothing of relevance to say to these questions is to have yielded to compartmentalisation. It is to have restricted Torah to the private domain, and to have conceded that Judaism has no part to play in the shaping of a pre-messianic society.

The bridge between these two positions, like every other bridge in contemporary Jewish thought, is very narrow. But the task of Jewish thought remains: to build a bridge between *galut* and *ge'ulah*, exile and redemption, the real and the ideal, a rope at a time and a plank at a time. Below are the deep waters of secularisation. Behind is the safety of never having attempted the journey. The way is narrow. The risks are great. But the challenge cannot be declined. For Judaism invites us to change, not accept, ourselves and the world. Rabbi Nachman's words remain true: "The most important rule is not to be afraid."

### NOTES

1. *Guide for the Perplexed*, introduction.
2. *Ibid.*, 3, 51.
3. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind*, London: Seth Press, 1986.
4. Robert Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, London: Hutchinson, 1988, 277.