

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
Maggid Books

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לאמא היקרה שלנו

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, 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 Ismailoff, 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

Acknowledgements

This 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.

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My thanks, too, go to Rabbi Norman Lamm and Rabbi Maurice Untermyer for encouraging me in the first instance to write; to Rabbi Ivan Binstock, Rabbi Fyvish Vogel and Mr. Bobby Hill for their helpful criticism over the years; and especially to the Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits, President of Jews' College and Mr. Stanley Kalms, its Chairman, for their friendship, advice and help. Above all I am indebted to my predecessor and teacher, Rabbi Dr. Nachum Rabinovitch, currently head of Yeshivat Birkat Mosheh in Ma'aleh Adumim, who inspired all those who had the privilege of studying with him by his vast and courageous vision of the power and relevance of Torah.

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.”¹ 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.”² 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.³ 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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)⁶ and David Hartman's *A Living Covenant* (1985).⁷ "Religious experience is born in crisis," writes R. Soloveitchik,⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹²

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,”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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*,¹⁵ 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*¹⁶ – 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 Theology¹⁷ – 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

Tradition in an Untraditional Age

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.