Jonathan Sacks: Universalizing Particularity

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Jonathan Sacks
Universalizing Particularity
Edited by Havah Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes
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Jonathan Sacks, who bears the somewhat cumbersome but well-earned title Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks (to which could be added “Doctor”), is surely one of our most accomplished and thoughtful rabbis. He is a prolific author, including the current bestseller Not in God’s Name. He’s a much sought-after lecturer, a columnist, currently professor at New York University, Yeshiva University and King’s College, London. In addition to having held the aforementioned position of Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (1991-2003), as his title further indicates, he is a member of the House of Lords.

Rabbi Doctor Lord Sacks has long been one of the Jewish world’s most prominent public intellectuals. He resides intellectually and spiritually in a particular corner of the Orthodox world which has over the course of his career compelled him to become increasingly open to speaking of religious and moral matters to the world.

He is innately open to dialogue with a vast plurality of religious communities within and beyond the Jewish world, enabling him to interact with and write about a number of important universal spiritual concerns, though from his

understanding of the particularity of his Jewish self. This is visible in the titles of his books, such as, To Heal a Fractured World, The Dignity of Difference: How to avoid a clash of civilizations, and Celebrating Life: Finding happiness in unexpected places.

His openness comes in part from the general education he received from childhood on, including a Ph.D. in philosophy under the well-known British philosopher, the ethicist Bernard Williams (1929-2003), a degree he received before his semicha. For his writing, Rabbi Sacks has won innumerable awards, including three American National Book Awards.

Published in 2013, one of his most recent publications is Jonathan Sacks: Universalizing Particularity. This book is part of a twenty volume series, the Library of Contemporary Philosophers, conceived by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Director of Jewish Studies and Irving and Miriam Lowe Professor of Modern Judaism and Professor of History at Arizona State University, and Aaron W. Hughes, Philip S. Bernstein Chair of Jewish Studies in the Department of Religion and Classics at the University of Rochester. The book begins with a brief biography, written by Professor Hughes. This is followed by a representative selection of four articles chosen in concert with the author, “Finding God”, “An Agenda for Future Jewish Thought”, “The Dignity of Difference: Exorcising Plato’s Ghost”, and “Future Tense: The Voice of Hope in the Conversation”. This is followed by a substantive interview conducted by Professor Tirosh-Samuelson, and concludes with a select bibliography of 120 pieces. As with every book in this series, the volume devoted to Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks intends to make accessible to the broad audience of intelligent non-professionals the thought of a highly philosophical mind.

Sacks tells an autobiographical story that serves to frame the rest of his life. While working on his undergraduate degree, he took himself on a bus tour of North America with the goal of visiting rabbis. He only tells of his visit with two, whose names kept coming up while in conversation with other rabbis: Joseph Soloveitchik, the scion of Modern Orthodoxy the Rav, and Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher rebbe. Rabbi Soloveitchik challenged Sacks to think deeply about the connections between philosophy and halakah, and Rabbi Schneerson challenged him to lead, to understand the need for leaders. In the character of these two men, he says, “there was something…that was more than them, as if an entire tradition spoke through their lips…In their presence you could feel the divine presence.” (p.32)

Sacks carried away from these two encounters a sense of purpose, a growing understanding of what would become his life's mission: to be loyal to Orthodoxy, to pursue philosophy, and to speak intelligently and with deep spiritual emotion to the Jewish people and to the world about things that matter.

The biography by Aaron Hughes places Sack's intellectual career in context, and explicates the impressive claims about him Hughes makes in his opening paragraph:

"Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks represents one of the most important voices in current discussions that concern the plight of Judaism—and indeed of religion more generally—in the modern world. While his vision emerges out of the sources of Judaism, Sack's inclusive and highly accessible approach ensures that his writings reach a large audience within the general reading public. Although his earliest work dealt specifically with the problems besetting Judaism in its confrontation with modernity beginning in the nineteenth century, his more recent writings examine the importance of cultivating a culture of civility based on the twin notions of the dignity of difference and the ethic of responsibility. Rabbi Sacks writes…as a rabbi, a social philosopher, a proponent of interfaith dialogue, and a public intellectual. In so doing, his vision—informed as it is by the concerns of modern Orthodoxy—is paradoxically one of the most universalizing voices within contemporary Judaism." (p.1)

Hughes's "paradoxically" comment at the end of the paragraph above appears to speak to the manner in which Orthodox Jews are often viewed as relatively closed intellectually and socially. Though one can easily point to corners of the Jewish world where Orthodox Jews do cordon themselves off from the rest of the Jewish community, surely this implied claim is significantly untrue. In our day a considerable number of Orthodox Jews have spoken to, served, and led the non-Orthodox community in many capacities. David Hartman, Yitz Greenberg, Avi Weiss, Richard Joel (who revitalized Hillel before becoming president of Yeshiva University), and Barry Shrage, to name only a few, come readily to mind. To these names we must add Jonathan Sacks whose work is by its nature philosophically inclusive.

We gain insight into Sacks's personality and concerns in the interview conducted by Prof. Tirosh-Samuleson, which stands as the heart of this volume. It is from the interview that the ostensibly paradoxical subtitle of the book, Universalizing Particularity, emerges. Though focused on one specific intellectual problem, the term in a sense is the substrate for the entire interview, as well as much of Sack's thought broadly speaking.

Defining Jewish philosophy, Sacks argues that the Jewish view of the world is one of intersubjectivity, of one in relation to another, moving toward a future that we bring into existence through our own actions. The way we know God and the way we know each other is through engagement (p.116) God engages humanity through revelation, and Jews talk back to God through prayer, to each other through endless conversations, “arguments made for the sake of heaven.” (p.117)

This is a never-ending process, the unfolding on both the human and divine side of God’s self-identification to Moses as “Ehyeh asher Ehyeh.” Not only does God continue growing and changing in the human mind, but humans, too, in a lesser but nonetheless profound way are in a liquid process of change. We constantly face an endless set of choices we have to make, and out of those choices we become who we become. From this grows what Sacks says are concepts Judaism understands better than “any secular philosophy with which I am familiar: human freedom, human dignity, and hope.” (p.117)

Sacks is asked how to speak philosophically about “difference,” a term referring to the diversity of human thinking and identity and the attempt to grant theological space for all streams of thought. He uses the term “difference” as a means of countering the Greek philosophical preference for universalism. Universalism absorbs the particularity of a thing by understanding what properties all things in a class possess. Greek philosophy prefers universals in thought—all good things must be like all other good things, no difference.

Sacks sees in Judaism the reversal of that value, the preference for the particular, for meaning is expressed in the particular. (p.26)

In that vein, in defining Judaism, Sacks wished that he could argue the importance of being Jewish out of the matrix of chosenness, but initially found chosenness a difficult topic to broach in our age. Chosenness indicates difference, particularity. In an age in which everything worth discussing must be seen as universal, “the concept of a chosen people sounds racist.” (p.122) This led to a problem: He could not discuss the meaning of Judaism without chosenness, but could not “use the idea of chosenness without sounding racist and supremacist.” (p.122)

Sacks resolves this intellectual conundrum by a move he calls universalizing particularity (the book’s subtitle), incorporating the notion of “the dignity of difference,” the title of one of the articles in this book (and, as well, of one of his books). Jewish chosenness, Sacks realized, did not actually marginalize others, since God is the God of all humanity. The God of the Jews enters the world at the

conclusion of the Flood by making a covenant with all people. Thus, “The God of Israel is the God of all humanity, but the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humanity; it is something unique to the Jews.” (p124)

This realization is liberating. It allows for the particularity of the Jews, their teachings, chosenness, their covenant, while granting others significant theological space in this world through their own difference. It means that Jews can understand their existence among many peoples as sharing a home (Sack’s word), in which all people seek common good, everyone contributing, but from within the matrix of their own particular religious identity. We can see God in the face of the other without either individual in the dyad required to surrender their religious individuality. “Universalizing particularity”, then, is the view that bundles all particularist thinking into one sphere, honoring their separateness by not placing any one outside the sphere, and not obliterating the collective into one amorphous whole.

In the essay “The Dignity of Difference,” Sacks clarifies this point. Jewish particularity exists, he says, to teach the meaning of difference. The unity of God, refracted through Jewish existence, does not shut out everyone else. The Jewish covenant does not transcend the Noahide covenant. Rather, unlike Christianity and Islam, which teach that salvation comes only from within their group, the Jewish covenant acknowledges the universal covenant, teaching that all peoples share in divinity and hence the possibility of redemption. God, Sacks says, “turns to one people [the Jews] and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference.” (p.46) The twin notions of the dignity of difference and the interplay of universalism and particularism means that Judaism can both possess its own domain, but at the same time can teach to the world, and learn from it. This twin concept informs much of Sack’s work both as a thinker and a leader. Understanding and formulating a means of working with the bifurcations in our world provides Sacks with a method of both seeing these bifurcations, but also knowing how to bridge them in intellectual and spiritual conversation.

This thinking arrives at an interesting juncture when asked about applying the notion of the dignity of difference within Judaism. As an Orthodox, Jew Sacks cannot surrender Orthodoxy’s halakhic worldview. Sacks cannot write off the non-halakhic community. Jews are bound together by fate, he says, regardless of belief. Yet philosophy of Jewish unity, he says, cannot be constructed in the current state of the Jewish community; too many variables divide it. The best we can do is address the current Jewish condition with two principles. 1) Jews ought

to work together on issues that do not concern religion. 2) When religion enters the conversation and threatens to become divisive, Jews must respectfully understand the differences between them. Given Sacks's presence in the world, these two principles appear sufficient at least to him.

Another area of Sacks's interest is the unnecessary separation of religion and science, a phenomenon over which he grieves. The rise of the impressive Jewish participation in the sciences parallels the decline of Jewish interest the Talmudic tradition. Presuming that religion and science ought to be partners, Sacks refers to the thinking that stipulates either Talmud or science as a cerebral lesion, "where the two hemispheres of the brain are in perfect working order but they're not connected." (p.128) This creates a disjunction that constitutes a "massive problem" (p.129) among Jews. In the interview, he is unable to prescribe how to bridge this particular gap. He is asked, "Is it [the disjunction between Judaism and science] treatable?" To this all he says is, "I think it is." (p.129)

Toward the conclusion of the interview, Sacks admits the Jews face a surfeit of serious issues all requiring our attention. The primary challenge facing the Jewish people, the one transcending all others is whether we can "develop that…sense of self-confidence that comes from faith." (p.133). To Sacks faith is the idea that God believes in the Jewish people, even if the Jewish people lack sufficient belief in themselves.

Faith of course is that place where living Judaism begins. In our time accepting the existence of a God with whom the Jews have a relationship, indeed are group chosen from among all of humanity, is a much battered concept, among the Jews and non-Jews as well. Sacks's thought makes room for a chosenness not radically exclusive of others. But the challenge to Jews to accept what underlies chosenness, a Living God who chooses, who cares for and believes in the Jewish people, is difficult.

This is the faith that undergirds all of Sacks's work. Beginning with his youthful encounters with the Rav and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he has spent his life pursuing this faith and articulating its meaning. Though difficult for many to accept as their own faith, Sacks has shown formidable intelligence and creativity to speak about it in ways that are exceptionally noteworthy and which have drawn the attention of the world.