Faith as Protest

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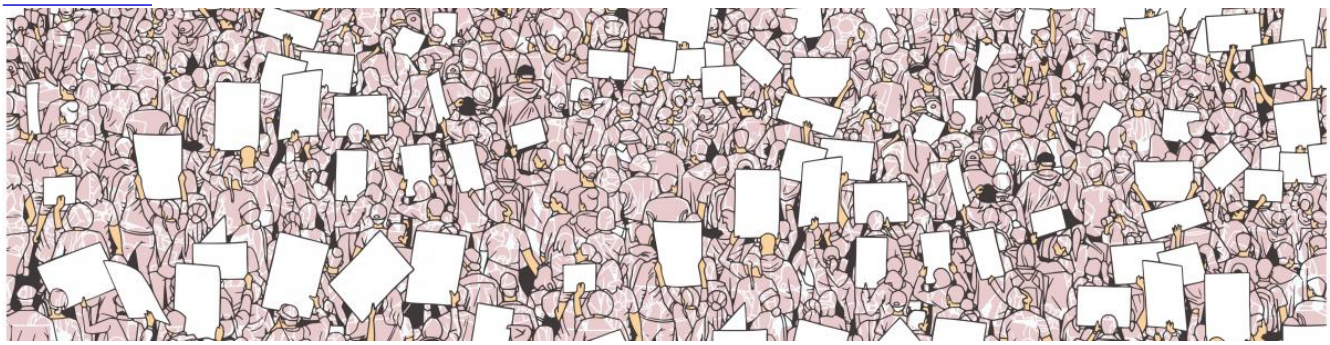

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks was the Chief Rabi of the British Commonwealth.This excerpt is from his book, To Heal the World, and is reprinted by permission of Schocken Books, a division of Random House. This excerpt appeared in issue 2 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Rabbi Sacks passed away in November 2020.

Learn to do good,
Seek justice,
Aid the oppressed.
Uphold the rights of the orphan,
Defend the cause of the widow.
(Isaiah 1:17)

Since this book is about religious ethics, we ought to confront at the outset the most compelling argument that religion is not a force for good. In one of the more famous passages of modern times, Karl Marx in 1844 delivered his verdict. Religion is, he said: 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.' Religious faith, Marx believed, was what reconciled people to their condition their poverty, their disease and death, their 'station in life', their subjection to tyrannical rulers, the sheer bleakness of existence for most people most of the time.

Faith anaesthetized. It made the otherwise unbearable bearable. Things are as they are because that is the will of God. God made some people rich and others poor; some people rulers and the others ruled. Religion was the most powerful means ever devised for keeping people in their place and preserving the status quo. It robed their lives with ritual. It dignified their tears into prayer. It gave the social order metaphysical inevitability. So, if the world is to be changed, Marx concluded, religion must go:

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is at the same time the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusions. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains so that

man may throw off the chains and pluck real flowers. Religion is only the illusory sun around which man revolves so long as he does not revolve around himself.

A century and a half later, we know what Marx himself could not, that the earthly paradise he envisaged turned, under Stalin, into one of the most brutal, repressive regimes in the history of humankind. The dream of utopia ended in a nightmare of hell.
Marx's family background was Jewish: his grandfather had been a rabbi. His relationship tojudaism was, however, hostile, and his descrip tion of religion fails as a description of the Hebrew Bible. Judaism is not a religion that reconciles us to the world. It was born as an act of defiance against the great empires of the ancient world, Mesopotamia and Egypt, which did what he accused all religions of doing— sanctifying hierarchy, justifying the rule of the strong over the weak, glorifying kings and pharaohs and keeping the masses in place. In the Bible God removes the chains of slavery from his people; he does not impose them. The religion of Israel emerged out of the most paradigm-shifting experience of the ancient world: that the supreme power intervened in history to liberate the powerless. It was in and as the voice of social protest that the biblical imagination took shape.

There is a scene that, in 4,000 years, has not lost its capacity to take us by surprise. God has just sent messengers, in the guise of three strangers passing by, to Abraham and Sarah to give them the news that Sarah will have a child. Sarah, by then ageing and post-menopausal, laughs in dis belief, but God assures her that it is true. The strangers take their leave, and at that point the scene should end. But it does not. What happens next is the birth of a new drama in the relationship between heaven and earth, quite literally a world-changing event:

The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him so that he may instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham, what He has promised him'. Then the Lord said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to Me; and if not, I will know'. (Gen. 18:17—21)

It is a strange passage. Is God speaking to Abraham or not? If so, why? does he expect Abraham to have anything to say about the cities of the plain? Could there be anything Abraham might know that God himself does not know? There cannot be. God knows and sees all, including things we can never know: the private thoughts of others, their intentions and motives, the impact of their actions on the moral ecology of the world. Yet Abraham overhears these words and responds with an astonishing address:

Then Abraham came near and said: 'Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city: will You then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth dojustice?' (Gen. 18:23—5)

God accedes. If there are 50 righteous people in the city, he will not destroy it. Abraham does not let the matter rest. Calling himself 'dust and ashes' he none the less continues the argument relentlessly. What if there are 45, 40, 30, 20? Is there a precise calculus ofjustice? Eventually God and Abraham agree. If there are even ten righteous individuals (ten form a quorum; their virtue is public, not private),

God will save the city. The dialogue ends.
The conversation has a sequel. Two of Abraham's visitors, by now iden tified as angels, arrive at Sodom where they are greeted and given hospitality by Abraham's nephew Lot: 'But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house, and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them"' (Gen. 19:4—5). The text leaves us in no doubt that what they have in mind is a crime. They are intenton homosexual rape. Many evils are implicit in their threat: physical assault, sexual impropriety, an abuse of hospitality and a belief that strangers have no rights and may be mis treated at will. The narrative is pointedly telling us something else as well. The curiously reiterated phrases, 'young and old', 'all the people', 'to the last man', are intended to show us that as a matter of fact Abraham's con jecture was false. There were not ten righteous people in the city. There was not one. So the city and its surrounding towns are destroyed. Lot and his family alone are rescued, evidently by virtue of Abraham's merit. Abraham's prayer failed. Why then did he make it?

The answer is given at the beginning of the story, when God as it were thinks aloud in Abraham's hearing. There can be only one reason. God *wants* Abraham to respond. His very act of communication is an invitation to Abraham to pray. Nor is this all: he gives Abraham guidance as to the terms in which he is to pray. He says, 'For I have chosen him so that he may instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice [mishpat]'. God wants Abraham to live by these values, and it is these two words that form the heart of Abraham's prayer The word tzaddik, 'righteous', appears seven times in the course of Abraham's appeal (a sevenfold repetition is the bible's way of signaling a key theme). The word mishpat forms the beginning and end of the most important sentence: 'Shall not the judge [of all the earth do justice [Abraham has precisely followed God's cues.

But this only deepens the mystery. Why does God invite Abraham to pray? Why does he in effect teach him how to pray? It cannot be that Abraham knows anything that God does not know. Nor can it be that God expects him to raise any moral consideration he has neglected. For God is just and righteous. If he were not, he would not have told Abraham to live by justice and righteousness. Whichever way we look at it, the episode seems unintelligible — not just within our categories but within the narrative logic of the text itself.

Yet it is clearly not intended to be unintelligible. It is written in simple, lucid prose. It does not look or read like a riddle, a metaphysical conundrum. In fact, the story conveys a proposition at once simple yet utterly unexpected. It turns all conventional understandings of religion upside down. In Judaism, faith is a revolutionary gesture—the precise opposite of what Karl Marx took religion to be.

With monotheism a question was born. Why do the righteous suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Or, as the prophetJeremiah later asked, 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper?' (Jer. 12:1). In polythe istic or secular cultures, the question does not arise. There is no single force governing the universe, Instead there are many conflicting powers. In ancient times, they were the sun, the sea, the storm, the wind, the god of rain and the goddess of the earth, the pantheon of greater and lesser deities. Today we would speak of the global economy, terror, technologi cal progress, the international arena, the media and the biosphere. They control our lives but cannot be controlled. They are not the work of a single mind but the unpredictable outcome of billions of decisions. They clash, sometimes producing order, at others chaos, leaving human beings as victims or spectators of forces at best indifferent, at worst hostile to humankind. In such a world — or rather, in such a way of seeing the world — there is no justice because there is no supreme Judge.

The single greatest protest against such a universe is monotheism. It was born in the faith that the world that gave birth to us is not indifferent to our existence. Nor is it accidental that we alone of all life-forms ask questions There is something at the heart of being — something that is the heart of being — that responds to us as persons and teaches us to ask questions. We are here because someone wanted us to be. Nor are we condemned to ignorance as to who or what that someone is. For in its most radically humanizing gesture, the Hebrew Bible tells us that God speaks. The universe is not silent. And with those words from the One-who-speaks, a question takes shape in the mind of the one-who-listens.

Its classic expression takes the form of an apparent contradiction God is all powerful and all good. But there is injustice in the world. One or other of these statements must, it seems, be false. Either God cannot prevent injustice or he can but chooses not to. If he cannot, he is not all powerful. If he chooses not to, he is not all good. The alternative is that there is no injustice and what seems to be wrong from our limited perspective is in fact right if looked at from a wider or more long-term point of view. These or so it seems — are the only alternatives: to deny the power or goodness of God or to deny the existence of unjustified evil.

The first view, that of Karl Marx, says simply that there is no God. There is therefore no reason to expect that history will be anything other than the tyranny of the strong over the weak, of might over right, of the 'will to power' over the will to good. Justice is (as Plato's Thrasymachus argued in The Republic) whatever serves the interests of the most powerful. This is a world of Darwinian natural selection. The strong survive. The weak perish. Homino homini lupus est, 'Man is wolf to man'. Nietzsche was its greatest exponent. For him, words like kindness, compassion and sympathy were either disingenuous or naive. There is nothing in nature nor in the untutored human heart to lead us to confer on others a moral dignity equal to our own. We do what is in our interest and what we can get away with. All else is an illusion, wishful thinking. There is no justice because there is no Judge.

Against this, the second voice says No. God exists. There is a judge, therefore there is justice and what seems to us injustice is not ultimately so. Those who suffer do so because they are being punished for their sins. In one version, they may be suffering for Adam's sin, which still stains humankind. It may be that suffering is not punishment for past vice but preparation for future virtue. It cures us of our pride. It teaches us strength and courage. It gives us sympathy with those who suffer, a sympathy we could not have, had we not suffered ourselves. The world, said Keats, is a 'vale of soul-making' ('Do you not see', he added, 'how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?'). God exists, therefore injustice does not exist.

These are the conventional alternatives and there seems to be n' other The first is the road taken by all ancient polytheistic and modern secular cultures. The second is most associated with the two great mono theisms that separated from Judaism and went into independent orbit: Christianity and Islam. Judaism rejects both. But there seems to be no logical space for it to occupy, for there is apparently no third option. That is why it is a faith hard to understand and often misunderstood. Its answer is not difficult, but it is revolutionary. It is that in creating humanity, God empowers humanity. He grants dignity — radical, ontological dignity — to the fact that human beings are not gods. Infinity confers a blessing on finitude by recognizing that it is finite, and loving it because it is. God not only speaks, he also listens, and in listening gives humankind a voice — Abraham's voice.

God exists, therefore there isjustice. But it is divinejustice —justice from the perspective of one who knows all, sees all, and considers all: the uni verse as a whole, and time as a whole, which is to say, eternity. But we who live in space and time cannot see from this perspective, and if we did, it would not make us better human beings but worse.

To be a parent is to be moved by the cry of a child. But if the child is ill and needs medicine, we administer it, making ourselves temporarily deaf to its cry. A surgeon, to do his job competently and well, must to a certain extent desensitize himself to the patient's fears and pains and regard him, however briefly, as a body rather than as a person. A statesman, to do his best for the country, must weigh long-term consequences and make tough, even brutal decisions: for soldiers to die in war if war is necessary; for people to be thrown out of jobs if economic stringency is needed. Parents, surgeons and politicians have human feelings, but the very roles they occupy mean that at times they must override them if they are to do the best for those for whom they are responsible. To do the best for others needs a measure of detachment, a silencing of sympathy, an anaesthetizing of compassion, for the road to happiness or health or peace sometimes runs through the landscape of pain and suffering and death.

If we were able to see how evil today leads to good tomorrow — if we were able to see from the point of view of God, creator of all — we would understand justice but at the cost of ceasing to be human. We would accept all, vindicate all, and become deaf to the cries of those in pain. God does not want us to cease to be human, for if he did, he would not have created us. We are not God. We will never see things from his perspective. The attempt to do so is an abdication of the human situation. My teacher, Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch, taught me that this is how to understand the moment when Moses first encountered God at the burning bush. 'Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God' (Ex. 3:6). Why was he afraid? Because if he were fully to understand God he would have no choice but to be reconciled to the slavery and oppression of the world. From the vantage point of eternity, he would see that the bad is a necessary stage on the journey to the good. He would understand God but he would cease to be Moses, the fighter against injustice who intervened whenever he saw wrong being done. 'He was afraid' that seeing heaven would desensitize him to earth, that coming close to infinity would mean losing his humanity. That is why God chose Moses, and why he taught Abraham to pray.

A Holocaust historian was once interviewing a survivor of the extermination camps. He was a hassidic rebbe (the name given by hassidim Jewish mystics, to their leader). Astonishingly, he seemed to have passed through the valley of the shadow of death, his faith intact. He could still smile. 'Seeing what you saw, did you have no questions about God?' she asked.

'Yes', he said, 'Of course I had questions. So powerful were those questions, I had no doubt that were I to ask them, God would personally invite me to heaven to tell me the answers. And I prefer to be down here on earth with the questions than up in heaven with the answers'. He too belonged to this ancient Jewish tradition.

There is divine justice, and sometimes, looking back at the past from a distance in time, we can see it. But we do not live by looking back at the past. More than other faiths, the religion of the Hebrew Bible is written in the future tense. Ancient Israel was the only civilization to set its golden age in not-yet-realized time, because a free human being lives toward the future. There is divine justice, but God wants us to strive for human justice — in the short term, not just the long term; in this world, not the next; from the perspective of time and space, not infinity and eternity. God creates divine justice, but only we can create human justice, acting on behalf of God but never aspiring to be other than human. That is why he created us. It is why God not only speaks but listens, why he wants to hear Abraham's voice, not just his own. Creation is empowerment. That is the radical proposition at the heart of the Hebrew Bible. God did not create humankind to demand of it absolute submission to his all-powerful will. In revelation, creation speaks. What it says is a call to responsibility.

There is an aspect of Genesis 18, the text with which I began, which has not been adequately understood, yet it is fundamental not only to the encounter between Abraham and God, but to the whole message of the Hebrew Bible and its distinctive tone of voice.

The conversation about the cities of the plain does not take place in a vacuum. It is preceded by another episode. We recall that the purpose of the three visitors was to tell Abraham and Sarah that they were about to have a child. The two events seem to have nothing to do with one another. What does the prospect of a child have to do with the fate of Sodom or an argument about justice?

Yet this will not do. These are not two episodes but one. The text is explicit on this point. Between the first half and the second we read this verse: 'The men turned away and went towards Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before God' (Gen. 18:22). 'Remained standing' tells us that this is not a new scene but a continuation of what has gone before. The Hebrew Bible always announces a break in the narrative. 'And it came to pass that. . .' which means, in effect, the end of one scene and the beginning of the next. There is no such direction here. To the contrary the text goes out of its way to signal a seamless transition, an unbroken conversation
To make doubly certain we do not miss the point, the narrative explicitly links the two subjects. In the course of disclosing his plans for Sodom, God makes reference to the fact that Abraham is about to have a child: 'For I have chosen him so that he may instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice'. Abraham's role, the task for which he has been chosen, is to be a father. That is what his name means: 'You shall be called Abraham for I will make you the father of many nations'. The second half of the chapter is thus intimately related to the first half. In inviting him to enter into a dialogue about the fate of Sodom, God is about to teach Abraham what it is to be a father.

All talk of God in the Bible is by way of metaphor. God, the prophets tell us, is a king, a judge, a shepherd, a husband, and many other images, each of which captures a fragment of the relationship between heaven and earth while none expresses all. Undoubtedly, though, the most powerful and consistent metaphor in the Bible is of God as a father. 'My child, my firstborn, Israel' (Ex. 4:22), says God when he is about to rescue his people from slavery. Sometimes the prophets, Isaiah especially, speak of God as a mother: 'Like one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you'(Is. 66:13). Either way, however, though it is highly anthropomorphic, the entire biblical tradition tells us that if we seek to understand God — something we can never fully do by any act of the imagination — the best way to do so is to reflect on what it is to be a parent, bringing new life into being through an act of love, caring for it, protecting it while it is young, and then gradually withdrawing so that it can learn to walk, speak and exercise responsibility.

The use of a metaphor, however, may at times change the meaning of the metaphor itself, and that is the case here. Alongside a revolutionary concept of God, Judaism gave rise to an equally revisionary understanding of what it is to be a parent. In the ancient world, children were the property of their parents without an independent dignity of their own. That gave rise to the form of idolatry most repugnant to the Bible, child sacrifice (against which the story of the binding of Isaac is directed: God wants Abraham not to sacrifice his child). It also set in motion the tragic conflict between sons and fathers dramatized in the myth of Oedipus, which Freud, wrongly I believe, saw as endemic to human culture.

The Hebrew Bible tells the long and often tense story of the childhood of humanity under the parenthood of God. But God does not want humankind to remain in childhood. He wants them to become adults, exe responsibility in freedom. In Jewish law, the obligations of children to parents begin only when they cease to be children (at the age of 12 for girls, 13 for boys). Before then they

have no obligations at all. Paradoxically, it is only when we become parents that we understand our parents — which is why the first recorded command in the Bible is that of parenthood (Be fruitful and multiply'). A weak parent seeks to control his children. A true parent seeks to relinquish control, which is why God never intervenes to protect us from ourselves. That means that we will stumble and fall, but only by so doing does a child learn to walk. God does not ask his children not to make mistakes. To the contrary, he accepts that, in the Bible's own words, 'There is none on earth so righteous as to do only good and never to sin' (Eccl. 7:20). God asks us only to acknowledge our mistakes and learn from them. Forgiveness is written into the structure of the universe.

The connection between the two halves of the chapter lies in an utterly new understanding of what it is to be a parent. Abraham, about to become father to the first child of the covenant, is being taught by God what it means to raise a child. To be a father— implies the Bible — is to teach a child to question, challenge, confront, dispute. God invites Abraham to do these things because he wants him to be the parent of a nation that will do these things. He does not want the people of the covenant to be one •that accepts the evils and injustices of the world as the will of God. He wants the people of the covenant to be human, neither more nor less. He wants them to hear the cry of the oppressed, the paln of the afflicted and the plaint of the lonely. He wants them not to accept the world that is, because it is not the world that ought to be. He is giving Abraham a tutorial in what it is to teach a child to grow by challenging the existing scheme of things. Only through such challenges does a child learn to accept responsibility; only by accepting responsibility does a child grow to become an adult; and only an adult can understand the parenthood of God.

To be a Jewish child is to learn how to question. Four times the Mosaic books refer to children asking questions (the 'four sons' of the Haggadah) 8 The most significant family ritual, the seder service of Passover, begins with the questions asked by a child. Against cultures that see unquestioning obedience as the ideal behaviour of a child, Jewish tradition, in the Haggadah, regards the 'child who has not learned to ask' as the lowest, not the highest, stage of development (Solomon ibn Gabirol said, 'A wise question already contains half the answer'). A famous verse in Judaism's holiest prayer, the Shema, is usually translated as 'You shall teach these things diligently to your children' (Deut. 6:7). The great eleventh-century commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki), however, translates the verb not as 'you shall teach diligently' but as 'you shall sharpen'. Education, in Judaism, is active, not passive. It is about honing the mind, sharpening the intellect, through question and answer, challenge and response.

Judaism is God's perennial question-mark against the condition of the world. That things are as they are is a fact, not a value. Should it be so? Why should it be so? Only one who asks whether the world should be as it is, is capable of changing what it is. That is why Marx was wrong. Biblical faith is not a conservative force. It does not conceal the scars of the human condition under the robes of sanctity and inevitability. There may be — there is — divine justice in or beyond history, but God does not ask us to live by the standards of divine justice for if we could understand divine justice we would no longer be human. We are God's children, not God. By teaching Abraham how to be a child, challenging, questioning, defending even the wicked in the name of human solidarity, God was instructing him in what it is to be human, keeping 'the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice'.

God exists, therefore the universe is just. But we are merely human, and God has empowered us to seek the justice that is human — not justice from the point of view of the universe and eternity but from the point of view of the fallible, frail, ephemeral, vulnerable beings that we are. We who live in space and time cannot but see injustice. We cannot know the rewards of a life beyond the grave. We cannot judge the remote consequences of an event all too vividly present in the here and now. Our pain is not made less by the belief that it is necessary for the good of the whole. Still less is it made bearable

by the belief that it is justified as punishment for sin. That — as Job's comforters belatedly discovered — is not a form of comfort but a double affliction. In the book ofJob, the comforters who defend the justice of God are condemned by God himself, because He asks of us not to take his part but to be human, the essence of which is acknowledging that we are not God.

God in making humanity conferred on us the right and duty to see things from a human point of view. If evil exists within our horizons, then it is real no matter how limited those horizons are. Making us human, not divine, God calls on us to judge and act within the terms of our humanity. 'The Torah was not given to ministering angels', said the sages. It was given to human beings, and the justice it asks us to fight for is human justice. That is why God empowered Abraham to challenge him on the fate of Sodom and the cities of the plain.

God knew that there were no righteous in the city. But Abraham did not and could not know. Had he said nothing — had he accepted the divine decree —justice would have been done, but not seen to be done, not at any rate in a way intelligible to us on earth. There had to be a fair trial, an advocate for the defence, a plea in mitigation. That was
Abraham's role and his courage — the courage God invited him to show. For the faith Abraham was being asked to initiate would be one that in every generation strove for justice in human terms. It is not a faith that accepts the status quo as God's will. On the contrary, it is a faith in which God invites human beings to become his partners in the work of redemption; to build a society on the basis of a justice that people understand as such; a human world, without hubris (the attempt to be more than human) or nemesis (a descent into the less-than-human).

'The Torah speaks in the language of human beings', said Rabbi Ishmael, meaning, it is addressed to us within the parameters of our understanding. 'It is not in heaven', said Moses at the end of his life, 'nor is it beyond the sea' (Deut. 30:12—13). There is plenary truth in heaven; on earth, we live among its reflections and refractions. We could not understand God's justice without being gods ourselves. God does not ask
us to be anything other than we are, finite beings whose knowledge is limited, whose life-span is all too short, and whose horizons are circumscribed. It is within those limits that God asks us to create a justice we can understand: a human justice that may and must fall short of the divine but which is no less significant for that. For God, in creating us, gave our lives significance. We may be no more than an image, a faint reflection, of God himself, but we are no less.

Opium of the people? Nothing was ever less an opiate than this religion of sacred discontent, of dissatisfaction with the status quo. It was Abraham, then Moses, Amos, and Isaiah, who fought on behalf of justice and human dignity — confronting priests and kings, even arguing with God Himself. That note, first sounded by Abraham, never died. It was given its most powerful expression in the book of Job, surely the most dissident book ever to be included in a canon of sacred scriptures. It echoes again and again in rabbinic midrash, in the kinot (laments) of the Middle Ages, in hassidic tales and the literature of the Holocaust. In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be. Faith lies not in the answer but the question — and the greater the human being, the more intense the question. The Bible is not metaphysical opium but its opposite. Its aim is not to transport the believer to a private heaven. Instead, its impassioned, sustained desire is to bring heaven down to earth. Until we have done this, there is work still to do.

There are cultures that relieve humankind of responsibility, lifting us beyond the world of pain to bliss, ecstasy, meditative rapture. They teach us to accept the world as it is and ourselves as we are. They bring peace of mind, and that is no small thing. Judaism is not peace of mind. 'The righteous have no rest, neither in this world nor the next', says the Talmud.' I remain in awe at the challenge God has set

us: to be different, iconoclasts of the politically correct, to be God's question-mark against the conventional wisdom of the age, to build, to change, to 'mend' the world until it becomes a place worthy of the divine presence because we have learned to honour the image of God that is humankind.

Biblical faith demands courage. It is not for the faint-hearted. Its vision of the universe is anything but comfortable. However free or affluent we are, on Passover we eat the bread of the affliction and taste the bitter herbs of slavery. On Sukkot (Tabernacles) we sit in shacks and know what it is to be homeless. On the Sabbath we make our living protest against a society driven by ceaseless production and consumption. Every day in our prayers (Psalm 146) we speak of God who 'brings justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry, who sets captives free and opens the eyes of the blind, who straightens the backs of those who are bent down . . . who watches over the stranger and gives heart to the orphan and the widow'. To imitate God is to be alert to the poverty suffering and loneliness of others. Opium desensitizes us to pain. The Bible sensitizes us to it.

It is impossible to be moved by the prophets and not have a social con science. Their message, delivered in the name of God, is: accept responsibility. The world will not get better of its own accord. Nor will we make it a more human place by leaving it to others — politicians, columnists, protestors, campaigners — making them our agents to bring redemption on our behalf. The Hebrew Bible begins not with man's cry to God, but with God's cry to us, each of us, here where we are. 'If you are silent at this time', says Mordekhai to Esther, 'relief and deliverance will come from elsewhere . . . but who knows whether it was not for such a time as this that you have attained royalty?' (Esth. 4:14). That is the question God poses to us. Yes, if we do not do it, someone else may. But we will then have failed to understand why we are here and what we are summoned to do. The Bible is God's call to human responsibility.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx, 'Towards a critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: introduction'. Quoted in Don Cupitt, The Sea of Faith (London: BBC, 1984), p.
2. Ibid.
3. George Steiner, in his In Bluebeard's Castle: some notes towards the redefinition of culture (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), pp. 29—48, argues that the socialism of Marx, Trotsky and Ernst Bloch has its roots in biblical messianism. There is, however, a difference in kind between religious and secular On the latter, see J. L. Talmon, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy (London: Penguin, 1986).
4. See Sander L. Gilman, Jewish Self-Hatred: anti-Semitism and the hidden language of the Jews (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp.
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5. The Republi6 338c; C. R. E Ferrari (ed.), trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 15.
6. John Keats, 'Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February—3 May, 1819', in The Letters of John Keats, 1814—1821, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
7. Nahum Rabinovitch, Darkah shel Torah [(Jerusalem: Maaliyot,1999), pp. 185—91.
8. Ex. 12:26; 13:8, 14; Deut. 6:20.
9. Rashi, Commentary to Deut. 6:7. to. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 25b.
11. Ibid., 31b.
12. Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 29a.