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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Difference and Human Dignity

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was undoubtedly one of the greatest Jewish leaders and thinkers of the last generation. Born in London in 1948, Rabbi Sacks studied philosophy at Cambridge and Oxford and was awarded a PhD in philosophy from King's College London in 1981. In 1976, Rabbi Sacks received rabbinic ordination from Jews' College and Yeshiva Etz Chaim, London. Rabbi Sacks went on to serve as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth from 1991 until 2013. Throughout his illustrious career, Sacks wrote elegantly and compellingly on all manner of Jewish topics, including the relationship between science and religion, religious violence, morality, and much more.

I want to discuss Rabbi Sacks' emphasis on what he called "the dignity of difference." In response to increasing tribalism and parochialism, Rabbi Sacks warned against the other extreme: universalism. Articulated brilliantly in his book *The Dignity of Difference*, which was written in the wake of 9/11, Rabbi Sacks makes the case for a model of engagement with others that both recognizes and prioritizes the shared humanity across difference, without simultaneously insisting on a hegemonic sameness that, just like tribalism, easily shifts into violence and conflict. It is worth noting in passing the extent to which this view of Sacks' parallels that of Bernard Williams, one of his teachers at Cambridge.

One of the preeminent moral philosophers of the twentieth century, Williams harbored a deep skepticism toward moral theories that claimed to provide a comprehensive and universal account of how all people ought to live. In a famous 1979 essay, “Internal and External Reasons,” Williams challenged the assumption that there are reasons for action that apply to all rational people regardless of their particular desires, commitments, and projects. Philosophers often speak as though moral obligations are simply there to be recognized, and that anyone who fails to recognize them is not merely mistaken, but irrational. Williams argued that this picture obscures an important truth: human beings act on the basis of particular histories, motivations, and ways of seeing the world. Appeals to supposedly universal reasons can therefore become a kind of moral bluff, allowing us to express disapproval of other’s actions while presenting that disapproval as if it were simply the necessary conclusion of “rational thinking.” The idea is that there is something wrong with *you* if you do not see the world as I do.

Rabbi Sacks, like Williams, recognized that appeals to universality can easily become dehumanizing, particularly toward those whose identity and way of life differ from that of the dominant culture. If failure to respond to the “truth” of some claim indicates a fundamental deficiency—or worse, wickedness—then it is perhaps unsurprising that Jews, among others, have so often been persecuted for refusing to conform to a supposedly universal truth.

Rabbi Sacks argues that is precisely the genius of our tradition. The Torah, he points out, moves in a counterintuitive direction. In considering the evolution of a society we tend to move from part to whole: we consider isolated man and his needs, on the basis of which he forms a family, which, in order to coordinate its thriving, joins with other families to form a town, and so on. We assume that the direction of development is ever extending outwards. But Genesis does the opposite. It proceeds from God’s creation of the cosmos to the creation of man, the world-wide catastrophe of the flood and then to the dispersing at Babel, all of which builds up to God’s covenantal relationship with one particular person, Abraham, and his family. While we must not forget the unity of God, and therefore the commonality of our origins, we learn how to live not through the contemplation of humanity in the abstract, but through the narrative of a particular family. It is precisely the transcendent unity of God, argues Rabbi Sacks, that sets God beyond any way of describing or being in the world. The

difference manifest in the world reflects, perhaps paradoxically, the unity of the divine.

The perspective of unified truth is limited to God, and any appeal to it from *within* God's world fails to recognize the manifest particularity of God's creations. As Rabbi Sacks puts it, "There is no universal language. There is no way we can speak, communicate, or even think without placing ourselves within the constraints of a particular language whose contours were shaped by hundreds of generations of speakers, storytellers, artists and visionaries who came before us, whose legacy we inherit and of whose story we become a part" (*The Dignity of Difference*, 54). We do not transcend our particularity in order to understand others; rather, it is through inhabiting a particular tradition that we become capable of appreciating those of our neighbors.

For Rabbi Sacks, then, the alternative to tribalism is not universalism but covenantal particularity. The universality of moral concern emerges not from abstracting our concrete commitments but from them. As Rabbi Sacks explains, "The universality of moral concerns is not something we learn by being universal but by being particular. Because we know what it is to be a parent, loving our children, not children in general, we understand what it is for someone else, somewhere else, to be a parent, loving his or her children, not ours" (*The Dignity of Difference,* 55). We come to recognize the humanity of others not by denying the significance of family, community, and tradition, but by understanding that others are attached to their own families, communities, and traditions in much the same way that we are attached to ours.

In light of this argument, it is notable that Rabbi Sacks, in his reflections on "the other" and how Jews ought to relate to non-Jews, turns first inward, back to the texts that comprise our language. In *Not in God's Name*, Sacks argues that the book of Genesis repeatedly returns to the theme of sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. These narratives, he contends, are not merely family dramas, but meditations on the rivalry that naturally arises between siblings when paternal love (from their fathers or from God) is perceived to be scarce.

The story of Isaac and Ishmael occupies a central place in this argument. The Torah is unequivocal about Isaac's status as heir to the Abrahamic covenant. Yet, Sacks observes, this does not mean that Ishmael is rejected. God hears Ishmael's cries in the wilderness, promises that he too will become a great nation, and remains present in his life. Sacks notes that Ishmael is portrayed with remarkable sympathy. His near-death scene in the wilderness is narrated with considerably

more pathos than Isaac's binding, inviting readers to identify with his suffering. While it is often overlooked, the biblical text actually hints at a relationship between Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac, we know from the biblical text, lives at *beer lahai roi* after the Akedah (Gen. 24:62, 25:11), which is precisely the location at which God intervened to save Ishmael and Hagar earlier in the narrative (Gen. 16:13-14). To Sacks, this hints at a reconciliation between Isaac and Hagar and Ishmael. In fact, there is a midrash, quoted by Sacks, which not only identifies Hagar with Keturah, Abraham’s second wife, but has Isaac act as their go-between. Finally, Isaac and Ishmael bury their father together.

These narrative clues (among others, not recounted here) indicate that, despite its central importance to the Torah, election is not the same thing as exclusion. To choose one path is not to condemn all others. The God who enters into covenant with Isaac is also the God who saves and blesses Ishmael. God's love exceeds the zero-sum calculations that characterize human rivalry. The covenant with one family does not imply the abandonment of all others.

This reading exemplifies the larger argument of *The Dignity of Difference*. Judaism does not ask us to abandon our particular commitments in the name of a universal humanity. Rather, it teaches us to see that the God who calls us into covenant is also the creator of those who stand outside that covenant. In recognizing the limits of universality, we return to our own language and our own texts. There we discover not a mandate to erase difference, but a model for honoring it—a way of engaging others that preserves the dignity of other ways of life without compromising our own covenantal commitments.