YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur #40: Rabbi Sacks and the Dignity of Difference**

Our tour of Jewish thinkers began with Saadya Gaon, from the tenth century, and ends this week with Rabbi Sacks, who passed away in 2020 after many decades of writing, teaching, and leading the Jewish community of his native United Kingdom and beyond.

Clearly, Rabbi Sacks’s teachings have rarely been far away from this series. In lesson 1, I defined the very problem that we seek to address with a quotation from Rabbi Sacks about the peculiar balance that Judaism tries to strike between universalism and particularism. The guiding thought behind lessons 2-6 – namely, that we’re liable to misunderstand the central message of the Hebrew Bible, and its delicate balance between the universal and the particular, if we don’t pay special attention to what I’ve called the *narrative frame* of the Bible – was explicitly indebted to Rabbi Sacks. His reading of the stories of the flood, and of the tower of Babel, informed my understanding of the content of the Bible’s narrative frame.[[1]](#footnote-1) Later on, when we looked at Rabbinic attitudes towards non-Jews, my analysis was illuminated by Rabbi Sacks’s understanding of *darkei shalom* – the ways of peace.[[2]](#footnote-2) But this lesson will be the first time we turn explicitly to Rabbi Sacks’s account of the election.

**Two Tracks and Three Sub-Tracks**

Rabbi Sacks’s account of the election constitutes perhaps the most refined version of a Two-Track Model in the literature to date. Just as we saw with the Tiferet Yisrael and Rabbi Hirsch,[[3]](#footnote-3) Rabbi Sacks thinks that the Jews have been called upon to serve God in a specific way, while gentiles are called upon to serve God in their own ways, often more spontaneous or less tightly specified.

Rabbi Hirsch divided the Jewish track into two sub-tracks: a *pedagogic* track, on which we should seek to set an ethical example to the world – or even actively promote the Noahide code (as the Lubavitcher Rebbe would insist) – and a *historical* track, by virtue of which the very contours of our collective history, whether we live up to the demands of the Torah or not, will constitute powerful evidence for the existence of God and for the notion that all nations should dedicate their efforts to His service.

I would suggest that according to Rabbi Sacks’s account, the Jewish track divides into *three* sub-tracks.

**Sub-track 1: Ethics**

The first of the sub-tracks calls upon us to fight injustice, speak truth to power, and refuse to be satisfied with the status quo of a world in which power and resources are unfairly distributed. This sub-track isn’t exclusive to Jews; gentiles are more than welcome to join the fight and are more than capable of doing so. But as far as Rabbi Sacks is concerned, the laws of the Torah are specially calibrated, when performed correctly, to ensure that Jews remain sensitive to the brokenness of the pre-messianic world. He writes:

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 back 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.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This was Rabbi Sacks’s response to Karl Marx’s claim that religion is the opium of the masses. Some religions might be, but certainly not a halakhic Judaism lived properly. “Opium desensitizes us to pain,”[[5]](#footnote-5) but the idea of Torah Judaism is to sensitize us to it.

Religious ritual, when rightly performed, is to our ethical fiber what regular exercise can be for our physical health.[[6]](#footnote-6) It keeps us sensitive to the needs of the world and keeps us motivated to dedicate ourselves to the causes of kindness and justice. Other religions and cultures might have created their own rituals and religions that may perform the task equally well, so that their adherents remain sensitive to their ethical obligations. But the Torah, as God’s revelation, can be relied upon to be particularly well suited to creating and sustaining the ethical fiber of those who adhere to it. (In fact, the Torah would be *perfectly* well suited to this task, if only we understood and fulfilled its commandments properly. This takes us back to Rabbi Hirsh’s claim that we can trust the tradition to have preserved the letter of the law, but we can’t necessarily trust it to have preserved the right spirit. It might be that we are called upon in our own age to revitalize the spirit of Jewish law.[[7]](#footnote-7))

We can call this the ethical sub-track. It corresponds to Rabbi Hirsch’s pedagogic sub-track, but – though Rabbi Sacks isn’t perfectly consistent on this point – there seems to be a hint of a difference. Rabbi Hirsch’s pedagogic sub-track focused on the Torah’s role in shaping us to be ethically refined, but the key *purpose* of this ethical refinement was to transform us into *ambassadors* for ethical monotheism. The Lubavitcher Rebbe would go further and say that we haven’t lived up to the calling of the Torah until we’ve explicitly *lobbied* the gentile world to obey the seven Noahide commandments.[[8]](#footnote-8) To be sure, there are places where Rabbi Sacks explicitly endorses this attitude. “Israel’s role,” he writes, “is to be an example: no more, no less.”[[9]](#footnote-9) He then approvingly cites Rabbi Abraham, the son of Maimonides, as writing:

The priest of any congregation is its leader, its most honoured individual and the congregation’s role-model through whom they learn to follow in the right path. [In calling on Israel to be “a kingdom of priests” it was as if God said to them], Become leaders of the world through keeping my Torah, so that your relationship to [humanity] becomes that of a priest to his congregation, so that the world follows in your path, imitates your deeds and walks in your ways.[[10]](#footnote-10)

On the one hand, Rabbi Sacks contends that God has challenged the Jews to serve as leaders and role models, to be “different, iconoclasts of the politically correct, to be God’s question-mark against the conventional wisdom of the age.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This implies that, in our stubborn refusal to bend to the passing fads and fashions of the world at large, we will serve as an example to others, or at least as a challenge to them.

But the emphasis for Rabbi Sacks, at least in some of his writings, is on simply being good people ourselves. God has called upon us “to build, to change, to ‘mend’ the world until it becomes a place worthy of the divine presence.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In these moments of his thinking, Rabbi Sacks highlights acting, and healing, rather than teaching, or leading. Indeed, he would seem to place little emphasis on teaching the actual *content* of the Noahide laws to the gentile world.

The Talmud rules that idol-worshipping gentiles outside of the land of Israel shouldn’t be regarded, by Jews, as if they’re really idol worshippers.[[13]](#footnote-13) As Rabbi Sacks understands it, this ruling seems to apply, *if* we’re talking about a period that lies many years after Biblical times, even to idol worshippers who *do* live in Israel. In his understanding, the Talmud’s reason for the ruling is that gentiles in distant lands didn’t witness the open miracles that befell the Israelites in Biblical times – which should have been enough to cause *anybody* to become a monotheist – and this is the case in our day as well. For these gentiles, clinging to the religions in which they’ve been brought up doesn’t reflect on their ethical standing – so long as they’re not involved in the heinous rituals of ancient Canaanite religion, such as human sacrifice and forced prostitution.[[14]](#footnote-14) People who worship idols without hurting anyone, and who couldn’t be expected to know any better, are not to be treated as idolaters at all.

But what about the Noahide laws, which explicitly *forbid* idol worship? Shouldn’t these people be punished for their recalcitrance, or – at the very least – educated away from their errors? No. The Talmud relates to their idolatry as a consequence of a sort of “cultural duress.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Their idolatry – so long as it isn’t conducted in ways that hurt people or promote social injustice – is more of a cultural *habit* than a real attack on God. Actions committed under duress, even this sort of *cultural duress,* are not considered to be sinful. Following this understanding of the Talmud, it would seem that we are under no special obligation to teach people the seven Noahide laws if they’re not acting culpably in unethical ways. Indeed, there may even be a danger implicit in trying to teach people the specifics of the Noahide laws, because to do so might be to transform an unintentional sinner into an intentional one[[16]](#footnote-16) (i.e., if we fail to convince them to abandon the idolatrous rituals of their ancestors).

So, for Rabbi Sacks – on the first of his three sub-tracks, the *ethical* sub-track – we are called on primarily to be ethically upright. Sometimes, admittedly, he writes as if the *primary* purpose is to be an example to others, but more often than not, his writings imply that setting a good example is merely a wonderful side effect of the *main* goal, which is to be active in healing the world. Indeed, he writes that Judaism is “a refusal… to say, in a world still disfigured by evil, that the Messiah has yet come, and the world is saved.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Judaism is the recognition that “There is still work to be done, and the journey is not yet complete.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Its mission is to heal a fractured world.

Of course, all people are called upon (if only by the voice of God that echoes in their conscience) to do the same, and they may well develop cultures and systems of religious rituals that will help them in this cause. But for Jews, the Torah, kept properly, will ensure that we stay focused on the task.

**Sub-track 2: History**

The second of the Jewish sub-tracks, which is totally unique to the Jewish track, corresponds perfectly to Rabbi Hirsch’s historical track. The idea is that the contours of our history, and our very existence – especially because we are connected, in the public imagination, with God’s Torah and God’s name – will serve as evidence to the world that God really exists. According to Rabbi Sacks, this is part of what the Torah means when it describes us as a holy nation. To be a holy nation, he says, is to “continually point to something beyond itself, something that cannot be explained by the usual laws of history.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

I have argued that to be holy is, metaphorically, to be centrally located in the gaze of God.[[20]](#footnote-20) In a sense, Rabbi Sack’s interpretation of our holiness is the flipside of the same idea. To be at the center of God’s gaze includes somehow pointing back *to* God – the ultimate source of all holiness; the *origin* of the gaze from which holiness stems. And thus, because of our association with the Torah (whether we keep it perfectly or not, but so long as we maintain our association with it), and because of our association with the *name* of God, our continued existence – our miraculous survival against all odds – will point beyond ourselves to the Creator of the world. As Rabbi Sacks writes:

In its collective fate and destiny, Israel will constitute the most compelling evidence of divine involvement in human history. It will reach heights of achievement, and sometimes depths of degradation, that have no counterpart in the fate of other nations.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As we have explored, and indeed, defended, the historical sub-track of Rabbi Hirsch’s model at length,[[22]](#footnote-22) there’s no need to spend more time discussing it here. Rabbi Sacks’s historical sub-track is not different in any substantive way from Rabbi Hirsch’s.

**Sub-track 3: *The Dignity of Difference***

Where Rabbi Sacks’s version of the Two-Track Model is at its most distinctive is in its innovation of a third sub-track – also exclusive to the Jewish track. In addition to the ethical project of the Torah, and the historical function we play (pointing, by virtue of our peculiar history, towards the existence of God), Rabbi Sacks thinks we were chosen to teach the world a very specific lesson.

Accordingly, we could call the third of Rabbi Sacks’s sub-tracks the *pedagogic* sub-track, but the idea is very different from anything we find in Rabbi Hirsch. The idea here isn’t to teach the world about being ethical, in general. Indeed, the nations of the world can work that out for themselves. Rather, on the third of Rabbi Sacks’s sub-tracks – *his* pedagogic sub-track – the Jewish people must teach the world, both by their existence and by their example, about the *dignity of difference*. In his words:

God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity [in the covenant with Noah], then turns to one people and commands it to be different *in order to teach humanity the* *dignity of difference*.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This is something that Rabbi Sacks would often reiterate in person and in interviews:[[24]](#footnote-24) we were chosen to be different and to teach the world about the *dignity of difference*. But in order to understand this distinctive contribution, we have to take a detour through one of the most controversial elements of Rabbi Sacks’s thought.

**The Puzzle of *The Dignity of Difference***

In 2001, Rabbi Sacks published a book, *The Dignity of Difference*, that was supposed to be a response to the atrocities of the September 11th terrorist attacks. In the face of violent religious extremism, he wanted to showcase to the world a monotheism capable of living peacefully in a pluralistic society. But in writing this book, he coined a number of phrases that ended up embroiling him in a heated dispute. One of the most incendiary of these statements was Rabbi Sacks’s claim that:

In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. Only such a God is truly transcendental – greater than not only the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe articulated in any single faith, any specific language of human sensibility.[[25]](#footnote-25)

He seems to be saying that all of the Abrahamic religions, and perhaps many other religions too, are equally holy, equally divine, equally the word of God, and therefore, equally *true*. Leaders of the ultra-Orthodox community, in particular, were outraged.  One of the most prominent Israeli rabbinic authorities of the day, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, as well as the chair of the Council of Sages of the British wing of *Agudas Yisroel*, RabbiBezalel Rakow, accused Rabbi Sacks of heresy. This controversy resulted in a second, and revised, edition of the book, designed to appease his critics. The most “scandalous” passages, including the one above, were redacted or amended. In the preface to the second edition, he insists that he hasn’t changed his mind about anything he had written in the first edition. He was merely attempting, in his second edition, to find more appropriate formulations of some of his most contentious claims. But, if we focus our attention on the first, unrevised, edition, knowing that Rabbi Sacks never rejected what he wrote there, we must ask, what did he mean?

Here are some options. He might have meant that all (or many) religions are wholly true – even if none of them encompass the whole of the truth, each grasps some aspect of a transcendent reality. But that would lumber Rabbi Sacks with a very peculiar metaphysics that allows for it to be the case that, for example, Jesus was all of the following: (1) the messiah, and God incarnate, as Christians insist; and (2) not exactly the messiah, nor God incarnate, but rather a prophet of God, as Muslims insists; and also (3) neither the messiah, nor God incarnate, nor even a prophet, as Jews insist. But how can all three of those things be simultaneously true? How can they even be three distinct, but wholly true, aspects of a transcendent truth towards which they point? Each one of these claims is strictly and logically incompatible with any of the others.

Perhaps, instead, he was saying that no religions are true at all. They are all literally false. At the same time, they all, in their own ways, point to aspects of a transcendent reality; their literal falsehoods fail to represent this reality, but they somehow orient us towards it. That reading would contradict Rabbi Sacks’s insistence that, even if the whole of the Truth isn’t to be found on earth, fragments of it are to be found in pretty much every culture and religion.[[26]](#footnote-26)

You might think that Rabbi Sacks was echoing the view of Rabbi Natanel Al-Fayumi, which seems to have allowed that God might, indeed, send multiple conflicting prophecies to multiple cultures and nations. Our role isn’t to try to reconcile the conflicts but to follow the teaching of the prophet that was sent specifically to us.[[27]](#footnote-27) But Rabbi Sacks doesn’t say that God *sent* Jesus and Mohammed. The idea isn’t that God sends prophets to multiple nations, but that, somehow, over the course of time, God speaks *through* Islam, and *through* Christianity, to the adherents of those religions (and through other religions, to their adherents, as well).

Finally, you might think that Rabbi Sacks adopted some sort of post-modernism. Post-modernism claims that the notion of an absolute truth is somehow incoherent. There are narratives and cultural perspectives, but there is no one *grand* narrative, and no one great *view from nowhere* that establishes how the world really is beyond those narratives and cultural perspectives. Truth may well be one, cohesive, and coherent, in the heavens above, but:

Truth on the ground is multiple, partial. Fragments of it lie everywhere. Each person, culture and language has part of it; none has it all. Truth on earth is not, and nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal. When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true and the other false.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In other words, it sounds as if he’s saying that postmodernism has things right, down here on earth, even if things are different for God on high.

But however post-modern the controversial passages of this book might have sounded, once one places the book into the context of Rabbi Sacks’s writings, both before and after *The Dignity of Difference*, it becomes very hard to maintain the claim that he was ever attracted to any view that leaned in the direction of post-modernism, or any view that was suggestive of any sort of cultural, religious, or ethical relativism. From his earliest books, such as *Tradition in An Untraditional Age,* to his very last publication, *Morality,* Rabbi Sacks repeatedly lamented the loss of a common language in which to reason, the rise of multiple forms of relativism, and the loss of the notion of objective truth. In fact, we can say with some justification that Rabbi Sacks was one of the first social commentators to predict the rise of, and to criticize and lament, our current post-truth culture.[[29]](#footnote-29) So, how should we interpret the passages in the *Dignity of Difference* that seem to fly in the face of his own consistent views about objectivity and truth?

To resolve this puzzle, we need to delve into some of Rabbi Sacks’s other philosophical commitments.

**Communitarianism**

John Rawls brings together many strands of Enlightenment thought in his monumental work, *A* *Theory of Justice.* In that work, he suggests that we arrive at the core principles of justice by imagining what rules we would all accept to govern a society if we were to stand, temporarily, behind a veil of ignorance. Behind such a veil, actions would be taken by legislators and decision-makers who remain oblivious to their own gender, religion, racial identity, socio-economic background, and physical abilities. According to Rawls, the principles arrived at from behind such a veil would correspond to the true principles of justice.

But what sort of person would you be, if you were standing behind a veil of ignorance? The idea that a person can live, and think, and express herself, in a cultural or social vacuum, as would be required behind a veil of ignorance, was, to Rabbi Sacks, “as inconceivable as an art without conventions” – since even a radical artist needs to have conventions to bend, or against which to rebel – “or a thought without a language in which it can be expressed.”[[30]](#footnote-30) A person without a socio-cultural context, that is to say, a person behind a veil of ignorance, is close to a contradiction in terms. As Rabbi Sacks puts the point:

Enlightenment thought consistently focused on man-as-such, humanity in the abstract, the self divorced from all traditions, particular histories and accidents of birth. Jews were to be accorded rights, but not as Jews; instead as abstract individuals. But Jews testified to the concrete particularism of human identity. They were not atomistic selves. They were, both in their own and others’ eyes, members of a people, participants in a history, bearers of a revelation, adherents of a tradition. Neither Jews nor Judaism fitted into the remorseless logic of philosophical abstraction.[[31]](#footnote-31)

This Jewish critique of enlightenment anthropology is also at the heart of communitarianism, a political philosophy that emerged in the 1980s that sought to place community at the heart of its understanding of personal identity. Communitarianism wasn’t intended to be anti-liberal, so much as to repair classical liberalism from the inside by correcting its mistaken conception of personal identity. The notion that a person could be born into a network of obligations and responsibilities, which then shape that person’s very identity, had been utterly overlooked by the liberal political tradition, to its detriment.

By relating to human beings only in the abstract, Rabbi Sacks argues, enlightenment thought crucially misunderstood the nature of moral obligation. In a lightning tour of ethical philosophy, from the eighteenth century onwards, he documents various attempts to ground the norms of human behavior in:

reason (Kant), emotion (Hume), social contract (Hobbes, Rousseau), the consequences of action (Bentham, Mill), the structure of history (Hegel), human will (Nietzsche) and existential decision (Sartre). Not all of these were rationalist approaches, but what they have in common is that their subject matter is man-as-such, not particular human beings set in specific traditions, each with its own integrity. There is a vast chasm separating those like Kant and Mill who believed that there are universal principles of ethics, and those like Nietzsche and Sartre who argued that there is nothing beyond individual decision and will. But despite this, they share the same fundamental either/or: either there is ethical truth, in which case it applies to all men equally, or there are only the private decisions of individuals, in which case there is no objective ethical truth. Ethical principle is universal or it is private: such is the axiom of Enlightenment’s heirs.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Echoing Bernard Williams, one of his university instructors, Rabbi Sacks argues that this enlightenment approach fails to do justice to the existence of duties of partiality.[[33]](#footnote-33) For example, he shares a story, gleaned from Michael Wyschogrod, in which a Chinese communist was praised by State media for saving a party official in the wake of an earthquake, rather than saving his own son. Both Kantian and utilitarian ethics could plausibly defend this father’s actions. “None the less,” Rabbi Sacks demurs, “one might legitimately feel that the father was deficient in some important moral sense,” a moral sense that Judaism (and communitarianism) easily understands, and which enlightenment thought struggles to accommodate.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The basic feature of the moral life that enlightenment thought misses is that obligations emerge on the basis of *relationships*, “within the family, for example,” and then “gradually extended to the community as a whole and beyond that, to those who lie outside the community. On this view,” in contrast with enlightenment thought, “it is perfectly intelligible that members of a covenantal community might owe special duties to one another.”[[35]](#footnote-35) This is precisely the idea of expanding concentric circles of obligation that I defended in lesson 3.

At times, Rabbi Sacks characterizes his communitarian ethic as one according to which “Values are… not facts,” and yet, in the same breath, he asserts, “But neither are they private or subjective.”[[36]](#footnote-36) I think this was an unfortunate turn of phrase. Rather than deny that values are facts, I think he would have been truer to his position – given his aversion to moral relativism – to say that values are a special *category* of fact; a fact that is grounded in interpersonal relations. That is to say, borrowing the terminology of John Searle, moral facts are not *brute facts* that exist independently of human society, but that doesn’t mean that they’re not *facts*. They are, instead, *institutional* facts.[[37]](#footnote-37) In other words, they are facts that objectively hold, and truly exist, with their own irreducible (or even brute) moral force, but these facts, along with their objective moral force, exist only by virtue of various agreements, relationships, and/or institutions that underlie them. To use Rabbi Sacks’s own words, “They are created by covenant… and by an agreement on the part of a community.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Some moral facts will bind all of humanity, perhaps by virtue of those relationships that hold between us simply because we’re all part of the same species in the same natural environment. Other moral facts will only take hold within very specific cultural and social contexts. That doesn’t make them subjective or private. Their existence is an objective fact. They emerge in the space between an I and a Thou.

**Communitarian Epistemology**

As far as I’m aware, Rabbi Sacks never argues at length (or particularly explicitly) for the following point, but it seems to me to follow directly from his communitarian ethics that we should also adopt something that might be called a communitarian epistemology (epistemology being the study of belief and rationality). I have argued elsewhere that the Rabbis had a profound understanding that what’s rational for one person, given her own social context, might not be rational for another person who exists in a relevantly different social context.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Allow me to explain how I think Rabbi Sacks’s communitarianism might inform this epistemology. I call a thought “unthinkable,” for you, if you cannot bring yourself to factor it into your practical reasoning. For example, you might be waiting for a heart transplant for your loved one. You know that one way to save them would be to find a healthy match and drug them so as to cause brain-stem death, giving the doctors time to salvage the heart for your beloved. This strategy might work, but it is unthinkable, and rightly so!

Thinkability is often a consequence of one’s location in a network of relationships and associations. The more you associate with a certain group of people, for example, the more you will find that certain thoughts about them become unthinkable to you. The less you associate with them, the more thinkable those thoughts will become. I call this inability to think certain things, in these contexts, a function of one’s “epistemic rootedness.”

Being epistemically rooted needn’t make a person culpably closed-minded. As a philosopher, I would argue that all intellectual options should be on the table when we enter the philosophy seminar room. Solipsism, for instance – the view that only you exist – is a good example. It should be seriously entertained, when doing philosophy. In fact, it’s not easy to construct decisive arguments *against* solipsism. But *outside* of the seminar room, I don’t so much as consider the possibility that I’m the only real person affected by my actions. It would be illogical and immoral to do so.

If, in the seminar room, I come across *overwhelming* reason to adopt a theory that I wouldn’t have entertained outside, then I must take that theory back with me into the world at large. If I didn’t revise my beliefs in the face of *overwhelming* evidence, then my closed-mindedness would render me culpable.

But, so long as: (1) we’re all encouraged to spend some time in the philosophy seminar room (so to speak); (2) we’re willing to listen to other opinions and to gather contrary evidence while there; and (3) our rootedness has a threshold beyond which compelling evidence could uproot us – then we can’t say that fidelity to epistemic roots is straightforwardly (or irredeemably, or culpably) closed-minded.

So now, imagine an agnostic Jew, deeply integrated into the Jewish community. She sometimes attends synagogue, for cultural reasons. She had a Jewish wedding to a spouse with a similar identity to her. They have children to whom they pass on their identity. If what we’ve said so far is true, then despite her lack of belief in God, and her lack of belief in the authority of the halakhic system, belief in other religions will be unthinkable to her. In the terminology of William James, those other religions are not, for her, *live* options.[[40]](#footnote-40)

To adopt another religion would sever her connection to her community, history, and family. It’s not that she’s culpably closed-minded. She spends time, so to speak, in the philosophy seminar room. She’d just need an awful lot of evidence to make the unthinkable thinkable. Moreover, given a general commitment to communitarianism, a person shouldn’t be *criticized* for the desire to want to remain faithful to some network or other, such as the network of communal obligations into which she was born. Without such networks, our very identities are undermined.

For this reason, I have argued that had the Biblical Ruth experienced an epiphany leading her to want to convert to Judaism, Naomi might have been skeptical. One day she has a mystical vision driving her towards Judaism; perhaps the next day she’ll have a different vision pushing her in a different direction.[[41]](#footnote-41) Instead, Ruth’s primary commitment (both in the Biblical text, and especially in the most central Rabbinic readings of the text) was to *Naomi* and to her people, and only secondarily to Naomi’s religion.[[42]](#footnote-42) In the long term, this made it more likely that if and when Ruth did embrace the theology of Judaism, she’d do so with a steadfast resilience. If a person is epistemically rooted in their religious *community*, then their commitment to that religion is likely to be more stable. Other religions will become unthinkable.

But, if what I’ve said is true, then – by parity of reason – there will be Christians, Muslims, and others who, by dint of the communal commitments with which they were raised, are similarly closed off from evaluating evidence to embrace any other religion but the one into which they were born (except in the face of *overwhelming* evidence). The idea that we should be moved more easily by the religions that are culturally closest to us is an epistemology that I’ve defended.[[43]](#footnote-43) Was it endorsed by Rabbi Sacks?

There’s strong evidence to suggest that it was. Remember, Rabbi Sacks goes so far as to say that idolaters – whose worship of other gods transgresses the Noahide laws – are no longer held responsible by Jewish law, for the most part, for their idolatry.[[44]](#footnote-44) What’s rational for a person to believe seems to depend, in part, upon their cultural context. If a good and reasonable God placed us into the social contexts into which we were born, then He can’t very well be angry with us for following the paths of reasonability and rationality that are shaped by those contexts. This seems to be a consequence of the communitarianism to which Rabbi Sacks was committed.

***Torah and Chokhma***

Before we return to *The* *Dignity of Difference*, there’s one more ingredient of Rabbi Sacks’s thought that needs to be put in place. In numerous works, Rabbi Sacks was keen to draw a distinction between Torah and *chokhma* (worldly wisdom). What is the difference? Here is a characteristic example of his answer to that question:

The difference between them is this: *chokhma* is the truth we discover; Torah is the truth we inherit. *Chokhma* is the universal heritage of mankind, by virtue of the fact that we are created in God’s “image and likeness” (Rashi translates “in our likeness” as “with the capacity to understand and discern”). Torah is the specific heritage of Israel (“He has revealed His word to Jacob, His laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation” [Psalm 147:19]). *Chokhma* discovers God in creation. Torah is the word of God in revelation. *Chokhma* is ontological truth (how things are); Torah is covenantal truth (how things ought to be). *Chokhma* can be defined as anything that allows us to see the universe as the world of God, and humanity as the image of God. Torah is God’s covenant with the Jewish people, the architecture of holiness and Israel’s written constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Throughout his reflections on this distinction, Rabbi Sacks placed a great deal of weight upon a particular *midrash* : “If someone says to you that there is wisdom among the gentiles, believe it… [but if they say that] there is Torah among the gentiles, don’t believe it.”[[46]](#footnote-46) But why not? Why can’t a non-Jew, by dint of spending many years learning the relevant texts, become an expert in the Torah? I think a deeper appreciation of Rabbi Sacks’s distinction can help us to answer that question.

The Torah itself contains passages that we would classify as wisdom. Indeed, there are entire books of the Hebrew Bible that we explicitly classify as the Bible’s *wisdom literature* (including Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes,and parts of Psalms). Moreover, consider that each verse of the Bible, and sentence of the Talmud, is used to express a proposition.[[47]](#footnote-47) A proposition is the parcel of meaning that a sentence expresses, and that two sentences in different languages have in common. So, for example, the sentence “snow is white” and the sentence “*la neige est blanche*” are two sentences that express the same proposition. No reasonable person would deny that the propositional content (and thus, the *wisdom*) of every line of the Bible and Talmud is open for a gentile to grasp.

What we have to recognize is that not *every* truth can be conveyed by a proposition. There is often much lost in translation between two languages, even if the translation preserves the propositional content. Some would say that what’s lost is mere color, or tone. But Rabbi Sacks and I would urge otherwise. A world of associations and sensibilities are encoded in the non-propositional elements of a language. Languages communicate much more than what a proposition can contain. According to Rabbi Sacks, Torah itself is a sort of language. Only if you are immersed in its culture can you have access to its non-propositional content. The propositional content of the Torah can, to some extent, be understood by the faculty of wisdom. In other words: the propositional content of the Torah isn’t lost in translation. In that sense, gentiles can indeed learn Torah and can even teach us a great deal about it. It is the *non*-propositional content of the Jewish language, by contrast, that is “Torah” in the sense of the word used by the *midrash*, and in Rabbi Sacks’s distinction between Torah and wisdom. That content cannot be translated into any other language. It can only be grasped via absorption into a Jewish way of life.

Indeed, R. Sacks writes:

Implicit in Judaism is a deep analogy between faith and language. A language is spoken by a people; there is no such thing as a private language or a universal language. We are born into a linguistic community; we do not choose to be born to English- as against French-speaking parents, and yet that fact has the greatest significance in shaping our sensibilities. By speaking any natural language we are participants in the history of a civilisation: its nuances of meaning and associations were shaped by the past and yet persist into the present. And to speak a language is to internalise its rules of grammar and semantics; without these rules we cannot express ourselves articulately.[[48]](#footnote-48)

It is these two elements of Rabbi Sacks’s thought – his communitarianism, and his distinction between Torah and wisdom – that will allow us to resolve our puzzle regarding *The* *Dignity of Difference*.

**Resolving the Puzzle**

We should recognize that God has situated different people in very different epistemic situations. Even if there’s only one truth, by giving each person different epistemic roots – placing them in different communities – He has given each of us very different access to the facts. Accordingly, we have to be aware that what’s currently rational for us to believe might notbe the final word on any given issue, and certainly won’t be rational for all other people to believe.

Furthermore, in addition to the truths that can be stated in propositional form, and therefore in any language with a sufficiently rich vocabulary, there are also non-propositional truths that are inevitably lost in translation from one language to another, and some perhaps even from one speaker to another. These non-propositional truths are the truths, I would suggest, whose fragments “lie everywhere. Each person, culture and language has part of it; none has it all.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Indeed, for various reasons, when “two propositions conflict, it is not necessarily because one is true and the other false.”[[50]](#footnote-50) It could be that in fact, one is true, and the other (strictly speaking) false, yet the false proposition, when clothed in a particular language, might be the best vehicle for expressing an additional non-propositional truth – making it a deceptive simplification to call it false without qualification. Jesus isn’t the Messiah. But the falsehood of his being the Messiah, when couched in the deeply lived and embodied language of Christianity, might collectively give rise to a form of life that expresses all sorts of non-propositional truths that are lost in translation.

Additionally, when two propositions conflict, it could be because the moral facts, grounded as they are in relationships, can tug us in more than one direction. A person might have an obligation that is grounded in his role as a father, and another obligation that is grounded in his role as a doctor, or as a citizen of China, and those obligations – though not sufficient to give rise to a logical contradiction – give rise to a real tension, a real conflict that’s quite orthogonal to the dichotomy between truth and falsehood. Perhaps that’s why Rabbi Sacks talks here of “conflict” and not “contradiction.” A person cannot be in two places at once. That would be a contradiction. But a person can feel tugged, so to speak, in both of two directions at once, and thereby feel torn by a real tension. That’s not a contradiction but a conflict. It’s simply a consequence of the messy webs of obligations that our relationships create.

“God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to the Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims...”[[51]](#footnote-51) Does this mean that the mutually incompatible propositions expressed in those languages are all true? That would make no sense. Rather, Rabbi Sacks’s most controversial words express two related facts.

One is that God has deliberately placed human beings in different social and cultural contexts, such that it is rational and reasonable for some of them to be Muslim, for others to be Christian, and for us, to be Jewish. This, despite the fact that no more than one of those religions can be wholly true. To recognize that God has placed us in this situation can explain why we’re not obliged, as Jews, to convert those people to Judaism, and moreover, to see it as part of God’s plan that different worldviews are explored for the value they may bring to the world, even in and amidst the things that they get wrong.[[52]](#footnote-52) I don’t know exactly why God has put humanity in this situation, but it seems that He has. It is clear that part of the answer to that question concerns the inherent value of diversity, and part of the answer has to do with the fact that human intellects are finite, such that multiple perspectives on fundamental questions might be more useful to humanity as a whole, in the long run.

The second fact is that at the level of its non-propositional content, Judaism is a language that only people immersed in the Jewish culture are well-placed to understand. The same can be said for Christians and Muslims regarding their Christianity and their Islam, and – at the level of these non-propositional truths, which cannot be translated from faith to faith – there’s no reason to think that the faiths are in conflict at all, despite the fact that, at the propositional level, at most one of these faiths can be onto the truth. Even so, they might each be expressing, in their own “specific language of human sensibility,”[[53]](#footnote-53) various non-propositional truths that don’t contradict any of the truths of Judaism, but which can only be expressed in its own language and cultural context. No culture has the ability, on its own, to express the whole truth, even if Judaism is, as Rabbi Sacks surely believed it to be, wholly true.[[54]](#footnote-54) And let us not forget that, according to the Bible itself, God has explicitly and intentionally cultivated this diversity.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Rabbi Sacks was not a postmodernist, nor did he seek to undermine the Orthodox commitment to the inerrant truth of the Torah. Indeed, he came to realize that the wording of his ideas in the first edition of *The Dignity of Difference* was too easy to misunderstand. But now we’re in a position to appreciate what he really had in mind. He sought to demonstrate how a person can believe in the distinction between truth and falsehood, and believe, for good reason, that his religion is wholly true, while (1) recognizing that other religions can be vehicles for the expression of important non-propositional truths that their adherents could not otherwise access, (2) valuing those faith traditions for the wisdom they contribute to the human conversation, and (3) recognizing that God has placed people in cultural contexts that make their own religions rationally compelling to them, and that He must have done so for a reason.

**Chosenness**

Like the Tiferet Yisrael and Rabbi Hirsch before him, Rabbi Sacks advocated a Two-Track Model of the election. Gentiles are called upon to develop their own cultures, and sensibilities, within the broad moral parameters expressed by the Noahide laws (even if the Noahide stricture against idolatry can be ignored, for purposes of Jewish law, when their violation is a product of cultural duress that does no harm to others). God values this diversity, since no human culture or language can express all truth (even if they could all, conceivably, express all *propositional* truths). Jews, by contrast, are called upon to serve God upon a different track, that contains three sub-tracks:

1. The ethical track: this sub-track appears on both the gentile and Jewish tracks, even if the Jewish version has its own Torah imposed specifications. The basic idea of this track is to remain profoundly sensitive to, and to fight against, injustice and suffering, and to spread kindness and justice. The next two sub-tracks, by contrast, are entirely exclusive to the Jews.
2. The historical track: this sub-track guarantees that our national history will be guided by the hand of providence in ways that don’t conform to the natural laws of history, such that – together with our inbuilt cultural association with God – our history will point beyond itself to the existence of God.
3. The pedagogic track: the election of Israel will serve to teach the world about the dignity of difference.[[56]](#footnote-56)

This three-sub-track version of the Two-Track Model is superior to its ancestors. Traditionally, the Two-Track Model has faced two major objections. The first is that it can appear offensively arrogant, and over-confident, in its suggestion that we have been chosen to teach the world how to be good. This would appear to imply that other cultures are in desperate need of our ethical leadership, and that we are specially qualified to offer that leadership. Rabbi Sacks’s version moves away from casting the Jews as the world’s single and most authoritative moral conscience, thus helping the Two-Track Model to escape from that concern.

The second concern often raised against the Two-Track Model is that – in casting us as ambassadors for ethical monotheism – it doesn’t give the Jews a particularly distinctive role to play in contemporary times, when many other peoples could equally well claim to be ambassadors of ethical monotheism, and to have a much greater reach than the Jews. Rabbi Sacks’s version of the Two-Track Model escapes this worry because, with its third sub-track, it focuses on one message that the Jews have to teach to the world that really is quite peculiar and is rarely stated with any force by other world religions.

The message is that there is one God who creates all of humanity, and whom all of humanity should worship; one God who calls upon us all to respect the image of God in our neighbors; one God who calls upon us all to be sensitive to the brokenness of the world that we’re collectively called upon to heal – but, despite the oneness of this God, our message states that we are *not* expected to rally around just one religion, or one culture, or one language.

As long as polytheism, or atheism, or unjust forms of monotheism, exist, on the one hand, and as long as totalizing cultures continue to exist that would seek to bulldoze over cultural diversity and refuse to recognize the diverse and authentic relationship that multiple peoples can have with one God, on the other hand – the election of the Jews will still have a distinctive role to play.

The Two-Track Model emerged as a humanistic construal of the election that sought to escape even the *appearance* of racial supremacy. Having ushered the Two-Track Model away from its last vestige of cultural imperialism or arrogance, Rabbi Sacks can claim to have led the doctrine of the election – in deep conversation with the narrative arch of the Hebrew Bible – away from any residual taint of racial supremacism. Accordingly, he writes:

A chosen people is the opposite of a master race, first, because it is not a race but a [multi-racial] covenant; second, because it exists to serve God, not to master others. A master race worships itself; a chosen people worships something beyond itself. A master race values power; a chosen people cares for the powerless. A master race believes it has rights; a chosen people knows only that it has responsibilities. The key virtues of a master race are pride, honour and fame. The key virtue of a chosen people is humility. A master race produces monumental buildings, triumphal inscriptions and a literature of self-congratulation. Israel, to a degree unique in history, produced a literature of almost uninterrupted self-criticism… A chosen people is not a master race but its opposite: a servant community. That is why Jewry has always been attacked by – because its existence is an affront to – those who see themselves as a master race, an imperial power, or sole guardians of God’s truth.[[57]](#footnote-57)

In fact, Rabbi Sacks is loath to think that the election of the Jews rules out the simultaneous election of other peoples too. He writes:

There are other cultures, other civilisations, other peoples, other faiths. Each has contributed something unique to the total experience of humankind. Each, from its own vantage point, has been chosen. But this is ours. This is our faith, our people, our heritage.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Whether this extra flourish, according to which all people can or should be considered, or should consider themselves, to be in some sense chosen, is something to which we’ll return later in this series. We shall also have to better understand the way the Two-Track Model, as adapted by Rabbi Sacks, fits with the Biblical and Rabbinical literature. We shall do all of this as we move beyond our historical survey and attempt to articulate a contemporary take on the doctrine of the election – one that’s informed by the entire gamut of the tradition and that resolves the various tensions, and avoids the various pitfalls, that we’ve discovered along the way.

1. See lessons 2 and 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See lesson 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See lessons 32-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rabbi Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See lesson 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See lesson 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., citing *Peirush Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam* on Exodus 19:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tractate *Chullin* 13b. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rabbi Sacks, *One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2024 – first published by Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in 1993), p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, e.g., *Shabbat* 148b. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rabbi Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rabbi Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible; Exodus: The Book of Redemption* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See lesson 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Covenant & Conversation; Exodus: The Book of Redemption*,p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See lesson 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Rabbi Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum 2001, first edition), p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. https://rabbisacks.org/videos/rabbi-sacks-on-the-chosen-people-jinsider/. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See lesson 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Rabbi Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age: Essays on Modern Jewish Thought* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1990), pp. 164-165; *The Politics of Hope* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), p. 32; *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 42; “When Truth is Sacrificed to Power (Korach 5775),” from the 2015 cycle of his weekly Torah commentary, [www.rabbisacks.org/when-truth-is-sacrificed-to-power-korach-5775](http://www.rabbisacks.org/when-truth-is-sacrificed-to-power-korach-5775); *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), chapters 9 and 10. See also his video blog, “Post-Truth and the Erosion of Trust” (June 12, 2017), www.rabbisacks.org/post-truth-erosion-trust. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rabbi Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality & Society in a Secular Age* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Rabbi Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1992)*,* p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Crisis and Covenant*, p. 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See, for example, Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality” in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Crisis and Covenant,* p.264. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., p. 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Crisis and Covenant*, p. 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Samuel Lebens, “Pascal, Pascalberg, and Friends,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 87 (2020), 109–130; and “Proselytism as Epistemic Violence: A Jewish Approach to the Ethics of Religious Persuasion,” *The Monist* 104:3 (2021), 376–392. These threads are brought together in my book: *A Guide for the Jewish Undecided* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Lebens, “Proselytism as Epistemic Violence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See, for example, the reconstruction of Ruth’s discussion with Naomi in *Yevamot* 47b and Ruth Rabba 2:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See footnote 38 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *One People?* p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Rabbi Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible; Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Maggid Books and the Orthodox Union, 2009), p. 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Eikha Rabba* 2:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. There may be some exceptions to this generalization, since only declarative sentences can be said, incontrovertibly, to express a proposition. But other types of sentences, even if they don’t express propositions, tend to derive their meanings from some less direct relationship to a proposition. Accordingly, the general point I’m making here holds true notwithstanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Crisis and Covenant*, pp. 252-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. This fact was of course acknowledged (even if somewhat begrudgingly) by Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *The Dignity of Difference,* p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Of course, one might worry, at this point, that Rabbi Sacks’s thought has been brought into conflict with the famous statement of Ben Bag Bag (*Avot* 5:22), according to which the Torah contains “everything.” But I am not convinced that the tension runs very deep. In the introduction to his commentary to the Pentateuch, Nachmanides implies that the Torah already somehow contains all the truths that scientists would later discover. He clearly adopted a maximalist reading of Ben Bag Bag’s claim. Nevertheless, it’s quite possible to understand Ben Bag Bag’s claim as being tacitly limited in scope, such that he’s telling us the Torah contains everything necessary for living one’s life ethically and well, but not *everything*, unconditionally. Moreover, even within Nachmanides’s maximalist reading of Ben Bag Bag’s claim, it is possible that all of the *propositional* truths are somewhere alluded to in the Torah, while leaving room for certain *non*-propositional truths to lie elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See lessons 2 and 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. It will become progressively clear in the weeks ahead, how this is supposed to work. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Rabbi Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2017), p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Radical Then, Radical Now: The Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion* (New York: Harper Collins) p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)