

Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense - A vision for Jews and Judaism in the global culture*
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Abstract

In this book, Jonathan Sacks, [Chief Rabbi](#) of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth and member of the House of Lords addresses the relationship between Jews and the world. He argues for active engagement involving listening. His book is an intellectual and spiritual search for the answer to the question what the present-day place of the Jews and Judaism is and should be in the global society. It is also a call to action.

Universalism vs. particularism

Jonathan Sacks argues that Jews have a special place in “the global project of mankind”. Their God is a universal God Who entered into a special Covenant with the Jewish people. The first Covenant the Bible tells us about, is between God and all mankind, through Noah. The second Covenant is between God and Abraham and concerns the Jews. Therefore, Jews have a special role to play, namely to teach all humanity the dignity of difference. The first book of the Bible begins with humanity and then narrows the focus on Abraham and his descendants, to end with a vision of all of humanity acknowledging the one God. In this tension between the universal and the particular, it is for the Jews to aspire to a society of Messianic dimensions. Sacks argues that Judaism is a particular monotheism, since it does not claim to be the sole path to salvation. All righteous people, not just Jews, have a share in the world to come, as the Talmudic Rabbis tell us. The key according to Judaism is that we are all different and everyone is endowed with the possibility to pursue the course of one’s own life. There is no need for uniformity but, rather, for particularity. Sacks states that this is also the essence of the Bible which in Genesis starts with the creation of the universe and mankind (universalism) and slowly but surely moves towards the journey of Abraham and the course of a people, namely the Jews and their fate (particularism). Judaism is both particular and universal and the world needs Jews to be both.

It is inherent to Judaism that it has several particularist aspects and, as such, acts as a code of difference at times when all are supposed to be the same. Sacks emphasises that Jews should not assimilate into the society in which they reside but rather should wear their identity with pride. If Jews are not accepted for being different (although actively participating in society) they will not be accepted at all. One of the central tenets is that Jews are to love “otherness”, for they were strangers in the land of Egypt and all the other nations among whom they lived. Jews’ unique contribution relates to their survival amidst empires and other nations: Jews have a vocation as a nation to contribute; it is their contributions that count, not their number.

The two religions that sprang from Judaism can be called universal monotheist as they aspire for all mankind to embrace their faith. Judaism is a particularist form of monotheism. Sacks recalls the enormous impact of the call of Abraham to move from urbanised Mesopotamia to begin a journey: “2.2 billion Christians, 1.3 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews – more than halve the 6 billion people alive today – claim spiritual descent from Abraham.

Place of Jews in society

Throughout history, Jews have participated in the societies in which they have lived while at the same time insisting on the right to be different. In that respect, the Jewish people provide a beautiful example of how a people can form part of a society without losing their identity. The differences with the society in which Jews reside unite them with other Jews around the world who follow the same Judaic traditions and sets of laws. This ensures that Jews will remain one

people although widely dispersed. This also brings great responsibility to all Jews: because Jews are part of a greater Judaic society all are affected by the behaviour of other Jews that are also part of that society. In this respect, all Jews have a responsibility to ensure that their behaviour does not negatively impact the image of Judaism as a society.

Conversation between traditional Jewish learning and academic scholarship

Judaism embraces the idea that there isn't a single truth that all must follow. Even in the Bible one can find passages where prophets and statesmen alike argue with the highest authority, God. Sacks emphasises that this is essential to Judaism and many Jews have forgotten this. He finds that Judaic society is currently subject to alienation between the world of traditional Jewish learning and academic scholarship, which is an impoverishment of a dialogue that has much to offer to each side. Sacks calls for a renewal of the concept of conversation within Judaism through ten principles that have always been there but have been neglected over the last couple of decades. The author believes that in case Judaic society would follow these ten principles, this should ensure an end to the divisiveness in Judaism, thus ensuring the endurance of Judaism. These principles are:

1. God lives in language
2. By discovering the other, we discover ourselves
3. When words end, violence begins
4. Listening is a religious act
5. To hear, you have to listen
6. Without argument, there is no justice
7. Argument for the sake of truth and heaven
8. To reach truth you must listen to the other side
9. The dignity of dissent
10. Argument as a mode of conflict containment.

A nation and a religion

The author seeks to answer who Jews are and why. Taking both a religious and an ethnic view, Sacks explains the continued existence of the Jewish people after thousands of years by being faithful to their God and traditions. Essentially, Judaism is a faith, but it also involves a common fate. The latter is what binds nations together, the former what binds followers of the same religion. So, Jews share a religion and nationhood. Sacks calls upon Jews to define themselves not as a people of either a religion or a nation, but rather as a religion and a nation.

Association with life and hope in spite of persecution and genocide

Sacks thinks Jews have lost their way and “need to recover the classic terms of the Jewish story”. Because of the many tragic things that have happened to Jews over the past 4,000 years (Exodus of Egypt, persecution by Herodotus, the Crusades and the Holocaust) Jews often have a negative self image of Judaism, which resonates in the often used phrase to identify the Jews as a “people who dwells alone”, a curse rather than a blessing in the opinion of Sacks. Jews are not alone in the world and, moreover, cannot survive as a people who dwells alone in this world. Instead of associating themselves with tragedy and death, Jews should associate themselves with life and hope. Although Jews have faced persecution and genocide many times over the course of their history, they are still here, which in itself provides a story of the resilience of life and hope. Once Jews let go of the association with hope and life and substitute it for an image of tragedy and death, this will turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy heralding the final decline of the Jewish people.

Anti-Semitism

Throughout history, Jews have faced many forms of anti-Semitism. The author describes the fourth mutations of anti-Semitism, which he considers to be a virus. Jews are facing a new form of anti-Semitism today, directed against Jews as a nation with their own state in their own land. This new form of anti-Semitism is not aimed at Jews as individuals, but rather targets Jews as being part of a Jewish nation. According to Sacks, Jews must ensure that they do not stand alone in fighting this new form of anti-Semitism, since Jews represent only 0.02% of humankind, a figure so small that it has been likened to an error in the Chinese census. Jews should instead try to fight anti-Semitism together with allies. Sacks emphasises that Jews are not the only people in the world who face prejudice and hate. Therefore, Jews must stand together with these other peoples in order for these other people to stand with them

Reading the Bible differently

In his Biblical interpretations, a central place is reserved for the story of the burning thorn bush (Exodus [*Shemot*] 3:14). Sacks's reading of the expression God used when Moses asked the name of God is different from traditional Christian translations: "Ehyeh asher ehyeh [ה' יהי אשכנח]" means: "I will be what I will be". This contrasts with "I am who I am" as the words are often rendered. Sacks sees in God's revelation to Moses an indication of His evolving nature, a reference to the future tense. He is unknowable beforehand. Even though God keeps His promises, reflecting His faithfulness, He is not predictable: He awaits us in the future. This is exactly what Judaism is about according to Sacks. Hence the title of his book. In essence, Judaism is a religion of what will come to be, a religion that promises the world a better future. And although at times it may seem that to fight for a better future is like fighting a losing battle, it is always better to fight such a losing battle than to submit to a cynical world that tells you that all things are as they are and nothing can be changed. Judaism refuses to accept this cynical view and provides a vision of hope for Jews and the rest of mankind alike which encourages people to pursue a vision of a better future. Judaism is the only civilisation whose golden age is the future and whose best times have not yet come to pass.

Tragedy vs. life and hope

Sacks compares the contributions of Judaism to the contribution of Ancient Greece to the world. According to Sacks, the contribution of Ancient Greece to the world has been the concept of tragedy, which involves a golden age that lies in the past and a fate that cannot be changed no matter how hard you try. By way of contrast, Judaism provided the world with a conception of the world of life and hope. This is best indicated by the Book of Job which, although resembling a tragic (Greek) story, is in fact a book of hope. Job refuses to lose faith in God no matter the atrocities he must endure, and *vice versa*, God refuses to lose faith in Job. Judaism is the principled defeat of tragedy in the name of hope. Jews never accepted that tragedy (war, diseases, injustice, poverty) is written into the structure of the universe, but instead tells us that one can be what one wants to be. This message needs to be shared with the rest of humanity and therefore Jews should refute their current inward inclination and reach out to the rest of the world and tell their message.

Israel and a Jewish society – social covenant vs. social contract

Jonathan Sacks indicates that although Israel has managed to establish a Jewish state, it hasn't succeeded (yet) in establishing a Jewish society. He argues that in order to establish a Jewish society, Israel should take notice of the covenant. It is argued that the essence of the relationship of the Jews with God lies in the covenant. Under the concept of the *social contract*, which was invented by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century, the people transfer certain freedoms to the state in order for the people to live a safer life in comparison with the

natural state. God's covenant with the people of Israel which was established through Moses at Mount Sinai was no such contract, but rather established a relationship between the Jews and God. In this respect, the Jewish God is not an overwhelming sovereign but rather a constitutional sovereign who has been chosen by the people. In the opinion of Sacks, the *social contract* creates a state, whereas the *social covenant* creates a society. Sacks points out that the true heroes in the Bible are not kings or other statesmen, but the prophets who represent the voice of conscience and emphasise the importance of society. Jews were a society for many thousands of years before they eventually established the state of Israel. Therefore, Judaism places the covenant over the contract and the society over the state. The state is merely a necessary evil that is required to establish a good functioning society.

Sacks' other writings

What Sacks sees as the kernel of the Jewish faith can best be summarised by quoting from another of Sacks' many writings, his [*Letters to the Next Generation - Reflections on Yom Kippur*](#): "Judaism sets the bar high. It's a demanding, challenging religion, but that is its greatness. If I were to define what it is to be a Jew, I would say it is to be an ambassador for God." Also from the same booklet: "The keyword in Judaism is *Shema*, which simply means "Listen"."

The book here summarised is based on Sacks' Future Tense lectures published in *The Jewish Chronicle* from December 2007 until April 2008.

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