12. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*

Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, London: Continuum, Second Edition, 2003

Rabbi Dr. Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948–) was Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. Since stepping down from this position, Rabbi Sacks has served as Professor of Law, Ethics, and the Bible at King's College in London, the Kressel and Ephrat Family University Professor of Jewish Thought at Yeshiva University, and the Ingeborg and Ira Rennert Global Distinguished Professor at New York University.

Religion can be a source of discord. It can also be a form of conflict resolution. We are familiar with the former; the second is far too little tried. Yet it is here, if anywhere, that hope must lie if we are to create a human solidarity strong enough to bear the strains that lie ahead. The great faiths must now become an active force for peace and for the justice and compassion on which peace ultimately depends. That will require great courage, and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that, more than at any time in the past, we need to search—each faith in its own way—for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of, those who are not of our faith. Can we make space for difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger? Religion is no longer marginal to international politics. After a long period of eclipse, it has emerged with immense and sometimes destructive force. That is what lay behind an unusual assembly—and my first encounter with globalization—as the new millenium began. ... (4–5)

COMMENTARY BY MICHAL RAUCHER

In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, Jonathan Sacks's *Dignity of Difference* argues that the predominant approach to differences of any kind (religious, ethnic, national, or economic, for example) is flawed. He notes that the United States in particular has approached differences through pluralism, a concept that acknowledges and accepts but does not celebrate distinctions

between and among people. Instead, Sacks suggests looking at differences as dignified, indeed, even as originating with God. He writes, "God creates difference; therefore it is in one-who-is-different that we meet God" (59). In this way, Sacks provides an approach to diversity that is both celebratory and theological.

Therefore, instead of trying to find similarities between world religions, an approach that has left interfaith dialogue lacking in the wake of fundamentalist religious violence, Sacks argues that scholars and activists should be emphasizing the differences. Praising differences in this way will help us avoid a clash of civilizations. He explains that fundamentalism is the Tower of Babel of our times, attempting to build one language, one truth, and one faith. In contrast, focusing on differences will lead to a kind of universal morality, because when we notice differences in other people, we come to see them as individuals who are like us in important ways. Sacks explains,

> 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. There is no road to human solidarity that does not begin with moral particularity—by coming to know what it means to be a child, a parent, a neighbor, a friend. We learn to love humanity by loving specific human beings. (58)

These particularities and differences are lost not only due to the rise of fundamentalisms but also the spread of globalization. Despite our increased interconnectedness, we have a harder time, Sacks argues, seeing the value of the particular individual swimming in a sea of Others.

Religions tend toward tribalism because they emphasize the identity of the group, insisting that everyone within the group is the same and everyone outside the group is different and therefore excluded. The globalization of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, stresses universalism. Its processes claim that we are all essentially the same, thus erasing any differences and leaving no place for religious tribalism. That being said, Sacks explains that these two approaches are mistaken because monotheistic religions actually embrace diversity on a global scale. Sacks suggests that monotheistic religions offer guidance in a variety of ethically challenging situations that arise from globalization, as we see in the passage excerpted.

The language of biblical monotheism shapes Sacks's philosophy here in a critical way. In contrast to the popular understanding of monotheism as

promoting one faith, one truth, and one god, Sacks insists, "The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity" (20).

Sacks tackles a few issues facing globalization and demonstrates how Judaism in particular offers remedies. First, Sacks considers the seeming amorality of the market economy. Through an analysis of biblical, Talmudic, medieval, and contemporary Jewish economic ethics, Sacks argues that Judaism appreciates wealth and commercial activity. From this perspective, the global markets provide opportunities to capitalize on the differences between us. Next, Sacks suggests that *tzedaka* and justice can correct global wealth inequality. Although the problem is caused by billions of transactions, many of them distant from us, citing Heschel's injunction that few are guilty but all are responsible, Sacks maintains, "The scope of our interconnectedness defines the radius of our responsibility and concern" (121).

Globalization also highlights gaps in education and access to knowledge across the world. Sacks states that education is the "basis of a free society. Because knowledge is power, equal access to knowledge is a precondition of equal access to power" (137). Judaism, from Ezra, the biblical scribe who was heroic as a teacher, to the importance of education in contemporary Jewish communities, shows us the imperative of equal access to education. Last, Sacks emphasizes the importance of cooperation over competition in our global economy. He suggests that the concept of cooperation is best understood through the language of covenant, which binds people together through their shared belonging and intertwined identities. Individuals do not stand alone but rather always within reciprocal relationships.

While Sacks's language of covenant and the theological significance of difference echo certain concepts raised by Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, they differ in ways that connect back to the larger purpose of *The Dignity of Difference*. In Sacks's chapter on ethics, in discussing the relationship between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he references Buber's I-Thou philosophy: "Adam must pronounce the name of his wife before he can pronounce his own. He must say 'Thou' before he can say 'I'" (151). For Sacks, personal identity is found within the covenant of one to another. For Buber, this relationship is intimately also about God. In attempting to make this message more palatable to a wider audience, Sacks removes this theological language from the covenant between individuals. This secularization of Jewish religious concepts occurs throughout the later chapters of Sacks's work, as he uses Jewish concepts to correct the ills of globalization. It is notable that he doesn't stop with Jewish concepts. One will also find the words of Adam Smith and Amartya Sen, for

instance, or examples from education schemes in Brazil to support the Jewish concepts that Sacks proposes.

The dialogue that Sacks creates between Jewish and non-Jewish ideas and language is one he has mastered in other work as well. This tactic creates rich conversation about concepts many people might think do not relate. It is difficult, though, to identify Sacks's main audience. Is *The Dignity of Difference* aimed at a traditional Jewish audience whose familiarity with the Jewish stories, history, and language will make his ideas seem authentic to Jewish tradition? In this way, is Sacks trying to appeal to members of his own community to take more responsibility in the globalized world in which they live? Or is he speaking to a non-Jewish audience and writing an apology for Judaism, attempting to explain that although religious fundamentalism is a problem in today's world, Judaism is not at fault?

Because Sacks has become such an important leader for the Orthodox Jewish community worldwide, I prefer to think that his work is meant to introduce the Orthodox community to concepts in philosophy and ethics that they otherwise might not encounter. To do this, he frames these ideas in language that they already use—the language of Jewish history, Jewish religion, and Jewish law.

In this, though, I want to suggest that perhaps Sacks's allusions to Levinas's concept of responsibility to the Other have missed the mark in an important way. Early on, Sacks beautifully captures Levinas's ideas of radical difference between individuals as something that is essential to human dignity. This is an important correction to the attempt to always try to find similarities with others. People demand our respect, Sacks says and Levinas would agree, because they are nothing like us. However, in his chapter on covenantal responsibility, Sacks talks at length about the reciprocal responsibilities between individuals in the covenant. It is here that his philosophy diverges greatly from Levinas. For Levinas, I am obligated to the Other not because of what he might do for me, but because the Other demanded something of me before I was even born. The Other demands our attention *because* she is Other and not ourselves. My obligation to the Other has nothing to do with what I might get in return. The relationship is not reciprocal but rather one of vulnerability and obligation.

This kind of responsibility, is, as I'm sure Sacks knows, difficult for most individuals to adopt. It is why, when Sacks demands a universal morality, he recognizes that although differences are what make us dignified, for us to feel morally obligated to one another, we have to find similarities. Those similarities mean that when I see another child suffering, I think of my own child and that

drives me to moral action. But there is more that Sacks omitted. The implication, of course, is that I think of my own child and hope that if someone saw her suffering, they would take action as well. Reciprocity is how we imagine moral responsibility these days, and reciprocity involves similarities. Therefore, although differences are dignified, Sacks seems to be saying that we need to identify similarities to feel morally obligated.

Interestingly, Sacks stops short of explaining how his philosophy might affect our daily action. He insists on a reformulating of global challenges using the language of Jewish ethics, but it is not clear what the individual is supposed to take from his guidance. In the Prologue, Sacks suggests that religious leaders, business leaders, and politicians should be in conversation in the wake of the threat of religious fundamentalism and the dangers of globalization. He wants religions to take a stand, and it is in these conversations that he insists Judaism should be part of the solution. However, Sacks also maintains that a lot of this work resides within religious communities. Perhaps, in this way, Sacks's work is meant to spark important conversations within Jewish communities, and between Jewish and non-Jewish religious communities, in order to address the crises facing us all.