

Rabbi Sacks and the Challenges of Contemporary Jewish Identity

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1. Introduction

I am a Jew because, knowing the story of my people, I hear their call to write the next chapter. I did not come from nowhere, I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I continue their journey because, having come thus far, I may not let it and them fail. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll. I can give no simpler answer, nor do I know of a more powerful one. Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now* (Harper Collins: London, 2000), 45-6

2. A Dilemma

George, who has just taken his Ph.D. in chemistry, finds it extremely difficult to get a job. He is not very robust in health, which cuts down the number of jobs he might be able to do satisfactorily. His wife has to go out to work to keep them, which itself causes a great deal of strain, since they have small children and there are severe problems about looking after them. The results of all this, especially on the children, are damaging. An older chemist, who knows about this situation, says that he can get George a decently paid job in a certain laboratory, which pursues research into chemical and biological warfare. George says that he cannot accept this, since he is opposed to chemical and biological warfare. The older man replies that he is not too keen on it himself, come to that, but after all George's refusal is not going to make the job or the laboratory go away; what is more, he happens to know that if George refuses the job, it will certainly go to a contemporary of George's who is not inhibited by any such scruples and is likely if appointed to push along the research with greater zeal than George would. Indeed, it is not merely concern for George and his family, but (to speak frankly and in confidence) some alarm about this other man's excess of zeal, which has led the older man to offer to use his influence to get George the job . . . George's wife, to whom he is deeply attached, has views (the details of which need not concern us) from which it follows that at least there is nothing particularly wrong with research into CBW. What should he do? Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 84

3. The Politics of Hope

My argument in this book can be stated simply. There are two concepts of a free society, one liberal, the other libertarian. For the past fifty years the libertarian view has prevailed. Shared by British and American politicians on the left and right, it maintains that a free society is ideally one in which individuals are left free to make their own choices. The central question of politics is whether this is best achieved by governments doing as much as possible or as little. . . . But both sides share an ideal, however deeply they differ in the means they adopt to achieve it: namely, of an arena in which the state guarantees the freedom of the individual to realize his or her own choices. . . . On both views the key players – the only players – are the state and the individual. . . . This is a tenable view, and there is only one thing to be said against it. It has been tried and it has failed.

Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* 2nd edn. (Vintage: London, 2000), 1

Society . . . is something other than political and market institutions on the one hand, and the disconnected, self-interested decisions of individuals on the other. (*Ibid*, 50)

Hakhel has a significance that goes far beyond its specific details. It belongs to a unique form of politics – covenantal politics. Philip Selznick, in his *The Moral Commonwealth*, explains: “The compact creates a self-conscious moral order. Most vividly at Sinai, the agreement with G-d is an agreement to uphold a code of responsible conduct. G-d’s commands are obeyed by fulfilling obligations to family and community; a social ethic is the linchpin of the covenant” (*ibid.*, 478-9). Covenantal politics are moral politics; they involve ideas of duty and obligation. They are also interwoven with a particular view of the history of the nation, whose fate is seen as a reflection of its success or failure in honouring the terms laid down by its founders.

Only one nation in modern times has constructed its politics in terms of a covenant, namely the United States, whose Puritan founding fathers were saturated by the ideas of Deuteronomy, and which has continued, to the present day, to see itself in these terms. Some years ago, writing my *Commentary to the Haggadah*, I made a remarkable discovery. . . . Something like Hakhel still exists. It is called an American Presidential Inaugural Address.

What an American President does in an Inaugural Address is recognizably in the tradition of Josiah and Ezra in biblical times. He recapitulates the nation’s history. He speaks of the principles and ideals on which it is based. . . . He reviews the challenges the nation faces if it is to stay faithful to those ideals. And regardless of whether the President is personally religious or not, the speech will be religious in tone, biblical in language, and include, explicitly or implicitly, reference to G-d. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation*, Nitzavim-Vayeilekh, 5770

[A] free society cannot be created by political or economic structures alone. It requires virtues, or what Tocqueville himself termed “habits of the heart.” Nor do these exist in a vacuum. They are born and sustained in particular institutions, the family, the congregation, the neighborhood, the voluntary organization, which give shape to our individuality and moral substance to our sociability. (Sacks, *The Politics of Hope*, 169)

ויאמר ה' אל אברהם לך לך מארצך וגו' (בראשית יב, א), רבי יצחק פתח (תהלים מה, יא): שְׁמַעֵי בַת וְרֵאֵי וְהִטִּי אָזְנוֹךָ וְשִׁכְחִי עֲמֻדָּה וּבֵית אָבִיךָ, אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק מְשָׁל לְאַחַד שְׁהֵיָה עוֹבֵר מִמְּקוֹם לְמְקוֹם, וְרָאָה בִּירְהָ אַחַת דּוֹלְקָתָ, אָמַר תֵּאמַר שְׁהִבְיָהּ הִזּוּ בְּלֹא מְנַהִיג, הַצִּיץ עָלָיו בַּעַל הַבִּירְהָ, אָמַר לוֹ אֲנִי הוּא בַּעַל הַבִּירְהָ.

Bereshit Rabbah, 39:1, as quoted by Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, 53:

[The Lord said to Abraham: “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house . . .” To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. He wondered, “Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?” The owner of the palace looked out and said “I am the owner of the palace.” So Abraham our father said “Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?” The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him “I am the ruler, the sovereign of the universe.”