

Many thanks to Jonathan and Ora Ziring, who on Tuesday night hosted an oral version of the following dvar Torah, and to the alumni who attended – it was great to see you, and thank you very much especially for your challenging questions! That event marked the official opening of recruitment for SBM 2013, which will address the case of someone who knows for certain that they are halakhically Jewish, but has no way to demonstrate their Jewishness to others. If you think yourself a strong candidate for SBM, or wish to recommend others, please be in touch with us as soon as possible.

I also want to thank all those of you who have contributed financially to CMTL's past successes, and to ask all of you to consider making a significant donation this year. The largest SBM class ever and the release of Acharayut Ketubah have left us with tremendous potential for growth and yet with difficulty sustaining what we already have. If you believe that Torah can and must be humane, compassionate, responsive, and yet profoundly rigorous; if you believe that Modern Orthodox Jews can and must live integrated religious lives that infuse the entirety of their being and incorporate everything they value, without surrendering their capacity to offer authentic Torah critiques of all the societies in which they participate; then I believe CMTL is a wise investment for you, and welcome your partnership. Please ask us about naming opportunities as well.

Unexpected kindness can be as challenging to a worldview as unexpected cruelty. The Jewish experience of America is accordingly a profound challenge to any theology grounded on the inevitability of Christian anti-Semitism – הלכה עשו שונא את יעקב – and challenges us to consider, perhaps more deeply than ever before, the moral challenges of sharing power with, and therefore having genuine power over, people and communities whose characters and social behavior we respect and admire, but whose religious lives and beliefs contrast sharply with our halakhic and theological standards. In addition to our sense that they inherently deserve our human engagement, we feel basely hypocritical for demanding that they respect our religious commitments if we are unwilling to reciprocate.

At the same time, reciprocity is not a reliable conduit to truth, and it would be ironic if our response to religious respect was to make our religion unworthy of respect by reducing its commitments and sensibilities to politico/theological bargaining chips.

At the same time that America challenges us with kindness, Islamism challenges us – as Westerners and as Jews - the old-fashioned way, with murder and bloodshed. But the example of the Christian West prevents us from seeing the gap as inevitable and irreparable. There is no Rabbinic tradition, to the best of my knowledge, that Yishmael hated Esav, and so 9/11 spurred a deep interest in interfaith dialogue.

Chief Rabbi Sacks wrote [The Dignity of Difference](#) to respond to these challenges. The book has weaknesses, but I nonetheless place it in the very top echelon of contributions to Jewish thought since WWII.

Rabbi Sacks' organizing metaphor is the narrative of the Tower of Babel. He argues that G-d wanted the people to scatter so as to generate multiplicity and diversity. A love of diversity entails a love of particularity, and Hashem drummed home that message by specifically revealing Himself to one human being, Avraham, and establishing a special relationship with his family. Judaism therefore from its

inception argued that we must make space for those who are different from us. Here are excerpts from the book:

There are indeed moral universals – the Hebrew Bible calls them “the Covenant with Noah” and they form the basis of modern codes of human rights. But they exist to create space for cultural and religious difference; the sanctity of human life, the dignity of the human person, and the freedom we need to be true to ourselves while being a blessing to others. I will argue that the proposition at the heart of monotheism is not what it has traditionally been taken to be: one G-d, therefore one faith, one truth, one way. To the contrary, it is that *unity creates diversity*. The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity; the thousands of languages spoken by mankind, the hundreds of faiths, the proliferation of cultures, the sheer variety of the imaginative expressions of the human spirit, in most of which, if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of G-d telling us something we need to know. That is what I mean by *the dignity of difference*.

Against Plato and his followers, the Bible argues that universalism is the first, not the last, phase in the growth of the moral imagination . . . Babel - the first global project – is the turning point in the biblical narrative. From then on, God will not attempt a universal order again until the end of days. Babel ends with the division of humanity into a multiplicity of languages, cultures, nations, and civilizations . . . God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different *in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference*. Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one truth, one faith, one way of life. On the contrary, it is the idea that *unity creates diversity* . . .

Tribalism denies rights to the outsider. Universalism grants rights if and only if the outsider conforms, assimilates, and thus ceases to be an outsider. Tribalism turns the concept of a chosen people into that of a master-race. Universalism turns the truth of a single culture into the measure of humanity . . . The critical test of any order is: Does it make space for otherness? Does it acknowledge the dignity of difference?

Rabbi Sacks here tries very hard to steer a middle path between a theological Scylla-and-Charybdis.

Scylla -

If we ground pluralism in a recognition of our commonality with others – “what unites us is more than what divides us” – we end up judging every person and every religion by our own standards, which cannot be correct. It is fundamentally egotistical to say “You have value insofar, and only insofar, as you resemble me”. This model will result in the exclusion of those we truly understand and the failure to truly understand those whom we include. It is more useful for the creation of alliances than for deep human engagement.

Charybdis –

Following (perhaps) Levinas, we ground pluralism in our recognition of human uniqueness, and therefore value others precisely for that which makes them unlike us and unlike each other. The challenge here is that when difference per se is valued, the specific contributions of each difference are devalued – no snowflake is prettier than any other. More sharply, the Jewish

notion that each soul has a unique understanding of Torah emphasizes that the key axis of difference among humans is our differing perceptions of value, but in the moral and ethical realms, mutually exclusive positions should not be smoothed over, and the more stark the division, the more important it is that we fight for our own position rather than succumbing to relativism.

Rabbi Sacks argues that the Noachide Commandments are the standard for admission to Jewish Universalism; we can say about everyone who accepts them that “what unites us is more than what divides us”. Thereafter, we can celebrate diversity and have no real need for competition, although he presumably has a mechanism for requiring individual Jews to maintain their particularist identity and practice.

This approach may give us the worst rather than the best of both worlds. I’m not convinced that the boundaries of deep engagement in our day should be set by whether one eats the flesh of live animals, or even whether one worships images – assuming that there should be such boundaries in the first place. Likely we will end up engaging regardless with politically sympathetic Hindus, for example, but only by developing convoluted presumptive understandings of their authority that they would not recognize. And do we see political opponents as murderers or not? If as murderers, as I think is often the case, then we will engage only with our friends, and religion can only intensify conflict.

I suggest as an alternative a dialectical model of pluralism, modeled on many of the Rav’s theological moves. We may need most to engage precisely with those whom we disagree with most sharply, even to the point of violence. So we need to find a model of engagement that does not inhibit our capacity to oppose, and assure our engagees that we recognize and legitimate the possibility that engagement will only intensify our disagreement.

If we value difference, it follows that the greater the difference, the more value. But the greatest differences are those that we must also most strongly oppose. What I suggest is that we should be hesitant about winning, that we should recognize that something of irretrievable value is lost whenever a position triumphs absolutely. This may be the rationale behind the rabbinic construction of a death penalty (absolute victory over conflicting visions of value) that is never enforced (recognition of the value of conflicting visions of value.)

Sometimes absolute victory is necessary – “the one who comes to kill you, arise and kill him first”. Chanukah is an excellent reminder of that. Within the Jewish world, we must work with full vigor toward the spread of practical observance and the theoretical recognition that Halakhah is binding. Within the American polity as well, we have the obligation to advocate as strongly as we can for our vision of moral truth. But the American experience of intertwined fate can teach us that victory always has a price, and therefore encourage us to defer that gratification, perhaps infinitely. Perhaps the ironic but irenic result of engagement will be that those we most disagree with will learn that as well.

Shabbat shalom, chodesh tov, veChanukkah sameiach

Aryeh Klapper