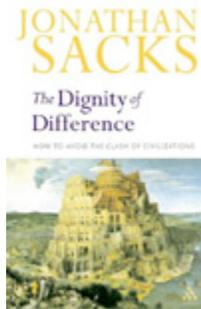




## The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations

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### Introduction

**JOEL ROSENTHAL:** I am delighted to have the honor to introduce Rabbi Sacks.

I teach a course at New York University, called ethics and international politics. All of my students come to the course having read several key articles and books, one of which is the bane of all international relations professors, which is Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. We're always looking for answers to that essay. Jonathan Sacks has written one of the very best, and I thank you and my students thank you. Your book lives in the lives of many students.

In order to give you a proper introduction to the achievements of Rabbi Sacks, let me just read briefly from his biography, then I'll turn it over to him. He will speak for 20 to 25 minutes and then we'll have plenty of time for your questions.

Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks has been Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth since September 1991, the sixth incumbent since 1845. At the time his appointment was announced, he was Principal of Jews' College London, the world's oldest rabbinical seminary, where he has held the Chair of Modern Jewish Thought and instituted novel programs in rabbinic pre- and in-service training. He himself gained his rabbinic ordination from Jews' College as well as from London's Yeshiva Etz Chaim. He has been Rabbi of the Golders Green and Marble Arch synagogues in London.

His secular academic career has also been a distinguished one. Educated at Gonville & Caius College Cambridge, where he obtained first class honors in philosophy and pursued post-graduate studies at New College Oxford and King's College London, in 1990 he delivered the BBC Reith Lectures on "The Persistence of Faith." In September 2001, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Right Honourable George Carey, conferred on the Chief Rabbi a Doctorate of Divinity in recognition of the Chief Rabbi's ten years in the Chief Rabbinate.

We have a very distinguished guest. Thank you, Rabbi Sacks, for taking the time out of your busy schedule to address us.

### Remarks

**RABBI SACKS:** Joel, thank you so much for those words. May I say what a privilege it is to be here, and I thank all of the groups who made this gathering possible.

I must say that, Joel, you have earned my undying admiration because you are the first person I have ever met outside of the world of English academia who knows that the word which is spelled C-a-i-u-s, is actually pronounced "keys." So *kol hakavod* [well done] to you.

Friends, I love a particular story because it touches two things which are very dear to my heart. I was trained as a philosopher, and still teach it, and I am also the Chief Rabbi still of Hong Kong, which when it went back to China in 1997 asked me to stay on. Therefore I love the story about the English philosophy professor who was invited to deliver a philosophy lecture at the University of Beijing. Not being a fluent speaker of Mandarin, he needed a Chinese translator-interpreter, which was duly provided.

Well, they went into the great hall of Beijing University and he began a highly complex lecture on ontology and epistemology. He stopped after the first sentence for the translator to turn that into Chinese. The translator waved him on and said, "Keep going and I'll tell you when I need you to stop."

After 15 minutes, he called a halt and said four words in Chinese. I am not going to hint what they were, but four words. Then he waved him on.

And then, after another 15 minutes, a pause, another four words. Same after forty-five minutes of the lecture. At the end of the lecture, he turned and said three words to the audience, and the academicians duly got up and left the hall.

The philosophy professor went over to the interpreter and said, "I am astonished and full of admiration for you. How did you condense an extremely complex lecture on epistemology into so few words?"

"Very easy," said the translator. "After 15 minutes, I said, 'So far he hasn't said anything new.' After 30 minutes, I said, 'He still hasn't said anything new'; after 45 minutes, I said, 'I don't think he's going to say anything new'; and after an hour, I said, 'I was right, he didn't.'" So it is the most difficult and presumptuous thing to try and say something new about one of the oldest-indeed, *the* oldest-of human problems, which is how to live peaceably together in an age of conflict and how to prevent religious differences from turning into a source of strife.

That's what I tried to do in the book, and I cannot say how moved I have been by the wonderful response it has elicited from Christian and Muslim thinkers and from those of other faiths.

Let me try to explain why I wrote it. Three things happened in the modern world that nobody expected.

Number one, religion didn't die. Now, I don't imagine in the United States people ever thought religion would die, but they did so in Europe, the Europe of the Enlightenment. Voltaire says, "*Ecrasez l'infame.*" Nietzsche says, "God is dead and we have killed him." The Enlightenment thought that religion was a source of prejudice and hate and, therefore, if you substitute reason for religion, you will create a world of tolerance and peace.

The processes that were set in motion, the secularization first of knowledge, then of politics, were absolutely regarded as irreversible processes. Either religion would die or it would be confined to the private domain, but one way or another it would be mute, marginal, and mild. No one foresaw that religion can also be the earthquake, the fire, the whirlwind. No one, I think, would have guessed in the 18th or 19th, or even early 20th centuries that religion would be at the heart of conflicts throughout the world-between Jew and Muslim in the Middle East; Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland; Muslim and Hindu in Kashmir; Catholic Croats, Serbian Orthodox, and Muslim Albanians and Bosnians in the Balkans.

One way or another, we have arrived at that world which one of your wonderful singers way back when, Tom Lehrer, called "National Brotherhood Week;" or, as Jonathan Swift said so powerfully, "We have just enough religion to make us hate one another and not enough to make us love one another."

Secondly, I don't think anybody saw either that the whole basis of peace since the last great wars of religion, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, would prove quite inadequate, even irrelevant, in a global environment.

I am speaking here on Joel's territory, and I speak here as a total amateur, but it seems to me there were three basic assumptions: (1) that the key agents, the key players in the game, were nation states; (2) that nation states were governed by *raison d'état*, or let's say rational national self-interest; and (3) that

peace would be maintained by the balance of power.

Now, all of those three assumptions are seriously being called into question in the 21st century. As everyone says at any global conference you ever go to, the nation state is too small for the big problems and too big for the small problems.

But, of course, al-Qaeda is only the latest to demonstrate that a group can be quite small, can be in fact a virtual community, located nowhere in space, and yet be a powerful actor on the international stage.

In fact, it is quite clear and self-evident, if you think about it, that the great religions-let's take just the great Abrahamic monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-are much more structurally what you would expect in a global environment in the 21st century than are nation states. What does everyone say in the 21st century? "Think globally, act locally." That is what the great religions do; they think very globally, and all their strength is local-the local mosque, the local church, the local synagogue. They are actually 21st century institutions. Therefore, religions and religious convictions turn out to be rather more salient than the nation state, which has dominated the West for the last three centuries.

Secondly, *raison d'état* looks a pretty slender basis when you find individuals driven so by religious passion that you have this phenomenon of the suicide bomber. Now, that doesn't fit any theory of rational self-interest, at least none known to the secular West.

Thirdly, the balance of power becomes a little nonsensical when you have asymmetric warfare, where even a tiny group with no power can wreak devastation and destruction on a global scale.

Therefore, nobody foresaw that those three elements of international politics might be somewhat dated when we came to the 21st century.

And finally, I don't think anyone foresaw that the great intellectual basis of tolerance in the modern world would itself prove inadequate. We had John Locke, you had Thomas Jefferson, and they came up with two different theories, one that works in England, one that works in America. We can't understand how the American one works. The Americans can't understand how the English one works. How on earth do you build a tolerant society with an established church? That's a good question. But it works. So we do it our way, you do it your way, and-I will not complete that sentence.

Of course, Locke was the doctrine of toleration, Jefferson was the doctrine of separation of church and state. But don't forget, the question they were asking is: how do you get different groups to live peaceably together in one country, in one nation? The short answer is you do so because you've got somebody carrying the big stick-namely, the Leviathan of the state.

What do you do when the question is no longer how do you get different religious groups to live together in one country, but how do you get them to live peaceably together in the world, where you have no Leviathan of international government?

Therefore, it seems to me that we have to think more daringly. You see, tell a religious extremist of any religion that John Locke spoke of toleration, that Thomas Jefferson spoke of separation of church and state. They'll say to you, "Exactly, that's why we disagree with you. That is weak, liberal, wishy-washy, bleeding-heart tolerance, compromise, and coexistence, which may be the lifeblood of liberal politics but is in fact the sign of a decadent culture."

So, therefore, it seems clear to me that for the 21st century we need something stronger. Actually, we need a doctrine of coexistence much stronger than Locke and Jefferson, something more religious, something more far-reaching in its implications, something that we could locate at the heart of the whirlwind itself, which is why in [The Dignity of Difference](#) I look not at secular doctrines but at the origins of Abrahamic monotheism-can we find there a strong doctrine? But, one way or another, we have to recognize, as I put it in the book, that religion is like a fire. Fire warms but it also burns, and we are the guardians of the flame.

Therefore, I went back and I thought to myself: what do Jews, Christians, Muslims share; what is our

common text? The answer is the history of the world from Adam to Abraham. Once you get to Isaac and Ishmael, you have a problem. But if you confine yourself to the first 12 chapters of Genesis, you are in business, because all three faiths claim descent, literal or biological, from Abraham, and therefore that is common ground between us.

Therefore, how do we understand, how do we listen anew to those most ancient of texts? Can we listen to what God is saying to us now, not then? Let me tell you what I discovered. Of course, I am going to simplify radically.

The world against which monotheism was a protest was a world of what, called at its simplest, we would call tribalism, a world of many nations, many cultures, and many gods. The Mesopotamians had theirs, Marduk and all the rest; the Egyptians had their Sun God and his whole family; Moab had Chemosh; Greeks had Zeus and all those warring deities there. It was a world of "my tribe against your tribe; ergo, my god against your god." I am not an active spectator of baseball, but I imagine tribalism still exists.

So against tribalism the world's first response, monotheism, arises as an extraordinary leap of the imagination. What would it be for there to be not lots of warring gods but just one? That is the revolution of monotheism. Of course, it seems like a logical consequence to say that if there is one God, there is one truth, one path, one way, one religion-what I call in the book universalism. The trouble is that "if there is only one truth, I have it; and if you disagree with me, you are in error."

I was speaking two days ago with Bernard Lewis, the great scholar of Islam, and he told me to read his latest article in *Atlantic Monthly*. I said, "What's it called?" He said, "I'm Right, You're Wrong, Go to Hell," which is an admirable summary of the down-side of monotheism: "If I'm right, you're wrong, and you can go to hell."

How does monotheism deal with a person not like me, whose faith is a different kind of faith-the infidel, the unredeemed, the outsider? The short answer is: "I will convert him; and if I fail to convert him, I may just have to kill him, because better that he lose his life in this world than his soul in the next." From that simple equation flowed the inquisitions, the crusades, the jihads, the forced conversions, which have stained the pages of human history with the blood of human sacrifice.

I would say that there have been five universalist cultures in the history of the world; that is to say, cultures that were not merely empires but sought to impose their cultures on all they conquered: the Alexandrian Empire of ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, Medieval Christianity, Medieval Islam, and European Enlightenment. We are living through the sixth, the global market culture, what Benjamin Barber calls "McWorld." And with 9/11, the sixth and fourth of those cultures collided, and when universal cultures collide the world trembles. I think the price has become just too high.

Therefore, the questions I asked in *The Dignity of Difference*: are those exhaustive alternatives? And is there only tribalism on the one hand, universalism on the other? If so, we are in trouble.

In response, I turn back to Genesis I-XII to see if I could hear that text, without forcing it, say something to me. The answer is that the first 12 chapters of Genesis are utterly fascinating. What is the Hebrew Bible, Tanakh, the Old Testament? It is the story of one family, Abraham and Sarah, who become a tribe, who become a collection of tribes, who become a nation. It is a story about one people, a particular, peculiar people. Just think: God knew in advance what Jews were like and He still chose us. I think that shows He has a sense of humor.

Therefore, it is very strange to realize that though that is what the Bible is about, that is not how the Bible begins. The Bible does not begin with particularism; it begins with humanity as a whole-Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, Babel and its builders. These are universal archetypes. Indeed, the Tower of Babel is the first global project, the whole world having one language and a shared vocabulary, courtesy not of Microsoft but of Babel.

Now, this is extraordinary. What this means is the Bible inverts the structure that we are most familiar with in the West, the Platonic structure. We move from this messy world of particulars to the universal

truth of forms; or, in religious terms, we move from tribalism to one faith shared by everyone in the world.

The Bible inverts that order: it begins with the universal, it then climbs to particularism, which is not the way the West has usually thought about it. It begins by establishing that, firstly, every human being without exception is made in the image of God. Saying that a human being was the image of God was not a radical and revolutionary new idea. It's the oldest of all ideas. Who is the image of God? The Pharaoh is the image of Rah, the Egyptian deity; the king of a Mesopotamian city state is an image of the Mesopotamian god. What's revolutionary about Genesis is not the image of God; it's the fact that each of us is made in the image of God-that is revolutionary.

And then, secondly, Genesis Chapter IX, the Covenant with Noah, which resonates in the first draft of Thomas Jefferson's, "We hold these truths to be self-evident," and in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights-one way or another, the universals are established right at the beginning of the Bible.

And then, only then, we get Genesis XII: God says to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace, your father's house, and travel to a land which I will show you." At that point the Bible shifts its tonality altogether from the universal, humanity as a whole, to one specific family.

Now, that is very odd because, let's remind ourselves, those first 11 chapters of the Bible are the West's most famous text of monotheism. The God we meet in Genesis is not the God of this people or that place, but the God of all peoples in every place. So how come he focuses on this one family, having an established ecumenicum with all mankind? To put it very simply, the God of Abraham is the God of all humanity.

But the religion of Abraham is not the religion of all humanity. Or to put it specifically, the Bible is one of those strangest of phenomena, a particularist monotheism. So, for instance, in the Bible do you have to be Jewish to be a Cohen? No, absolutely not. What about Abraham's contemporary, Melchizedek, about whom the Bible says, "He is the priest of the most high God." He isn't Jewish, but he's a priest of the most high God. What about the man who gives Israel its first structure of government, Jethro, another high priest, Cohen Midian-not Jewish but Midianite?

Or what about the hero of the Exodus? You've all seen Dreamworks' "Prince of Egypt." You think it's Moses. Forget it. The hero of the Exodus is a heroine. She is called "Pharaoh's daughter," without whom no Moses could have existed.

Now, I want you to understand what the Bible is telling us here-it's as if Hitler had a daughter, and she in 1939 adopted a Jewish child. I would regard as fairly courageous-wouldn't you?

That's what Pharaoh's daughter does. Pharaoh has just decreed all male Israelite children be drowned in the Nile. She sees a child; she says, "This is a Jewish child," she adopts him, she brings him up, and she even gives him his name. Moses is only referred to as Moses, the name given by Pharaoh's daughter.

Incidentally, does anyone know the name of Pharaoh's daughter? In fact, no one does. But following a hint in the Book of Chronicles, which mentions a daughter of Pharaoh called Bityah, the rabbi said, "She was Bityah." You know what the word "bityah" means? "Daughter of God."

And here is the rabbinic comment 2,000 years ago: "God said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Moses was not your child but you cared for him as if he were your child. You are not my child but I will care for you as if you are my child.'" The Pharaoh's daughter adopts Moses. God adopts Pharaoh's daughter. And again, not she was not Jewish.

So you do not have to be Jewish to be a hero or a heroine in the Bible, a knight of faith. In other words, when the rabbis come along in the first century and say, "The righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come," they are not making up something new; they are saying something embedded in the text and texture of the Bible itself. And there it is: there is one God, but there is not one path, one religion, one religious group you have to belong to, in order to reach that one God.

Therefore, the question is: Why? Why does God not say, "There is only one God; therefore, there is only one path to my presence?"

Here I want to make a radical suggestion. It is an interpretation which, when the book first appeared in the U.K., caused controversy among some of my rabbinical colleagues who had not read the commentaries on which I base my comment-impeccable commentators like Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th century German rabbi, and Rabbi Naftali Yehuda Tzvi Berlin of Volozhin Yeshiva-so they thought I was making it up. (Since the first edition of the book came out, I have put all the sources in a 100-page footnote to this highly controversial paragraph in *The Dignity of Difference* on our Web site, [www.chief Rabbi.org](http://www.chief Rabbi.org)).

Why? The answer I hazard is: God saw that Babel was, for Hirsch and for Naftali Yehuda Tzvi Berlin, the first totalitarianism, the first imperialism, the first attempt at fundamentalism. How am I defining fundamentalism here? I would say it is an attempt to impose a single truth on a plural world. And having seen the building of the Tower as attempted fundamentalism, God confused the languages of humanity at Babel and said, "From here on there will be many languages, many cultures, many civilizations, and I want you to live together in peace."

Thus God calls on one man, one nation, to be different in order to teach all humanity the dignity of difference. God lives in difference, and the proof is that his people are given that mission to be different.

So, as the rabbis put it so beautifully almost 2,000 years ago in the Mishna, when a human being mints many coins in the same mint, they all come out the same. God makes every human being in the same image, His image, and we all come out different, and it is that difference which is the basis of the sanctity of life, because every life is unlike any other life-incidentally, even genetically identical twins are not identical. Therefore no life is substitutable, no life can be made good by any other life, and therein lies the sanctity of life.

So the rabbis said God made everyone in his image and each one is different, and I ask: can we find God's image in one who is not in my image, in one whose color is different from mine, whose culture is different from mine, who tells different stories to mine, who responds to a different music from mine, who worships God in a different way? That is the challenge God sent us at the very beginning of the Bible.

Now you will see how I have tried to address Huntington's warning of a clash of civilizations from the very heart of the monotheistic imagination itself.

The thing that led to holy wars, crusades, and jihad was the principle called in Christianity *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, that there is no other way than ours to salvation. But I believe that we can hear God whispering to us from those early pages that maybe there are other ways, maybe God is just too big to be compassed by any religion. Or maybe it is because God is the absolute Other, he wants us to see his image in the human Other.

*The Dignity of Difference* is a book of ideas. I have only given you the ideas from chapter three, so I hope you'll find some other ideas as well in the rest of the book.

And perhaps you are thinking to yourselves: "put an idea against a laser guided missile or a suicide bomber; that's a pretty uneven fight." My answer is that there are two different ways of confronting conflict. One is through the instrumentalities of power-economic power, political power, military power. The other is through something that is utterly not power, called influence, which, because it shapes human decisions, shapes how we use the technology and the wealth of this world. That is the power of ideas. I think Kierkegaard, to strike a Christian note, was entirely right when he said, "When a king dies his power ends, but when a prophet dies his influence begins."

Even though *Dignity of Difference* is just a book of ideas, I think we need ideas in our arsenal as well as high-precision weaponry. I believe that it is possible to be true to your faith without ever, ever denigrating the faith of others.

Let me just end with a nice little story because it's a nice little story. You all know what an English winter is like. It's cold, it's wet, it's miserable. Many years ago, long before I became Chief Rabbi, I said to my wife on one particular miserable winter day, "Let's get away." We had never been anywhere to winter sun before, so we said, "Let's go away." We had heard it was pretty hot in Eilat, so we said, "We're going to Eilat."

When I told the members of my synagogue that we were going to Eliat, they said, "Rabbi Sacks, not a good idea, not a smart move." How could I put it? They said, "It's not appropriate for a rabbi." That is, in Eilat you will not find the standards of modesty and decorous dress that you are accustomed to in the heart of Jewish London.

They were quite right. I spent the whole week with my glasses off, bumping into trees, and so on and so forth.

And what do you do in a topless sort of town like Eilat that is vaguely rabbinically respectable? Well, we finally found something. In Eilat they have glass-bottomed boats where you can see the colored fish. Now, that looked pretty innocent to us, so we went on the boat. It was lovely. The fish were beautiful. We were discussing this and that, we were talking in English. We were almost the only passengers on the boat.

The boat captain rushed up, having heard us talk, and he asked in Hebrew, "Are you from England?" We said, "Why?" He said, "I've just been there for a holiday."

Now, you all know what Eliat is. It's barren desert with some fairly modern hotels. We asked him how did he like England, because it's so much unlike Eilat. He said, "Wonderful! The grass so green, the buildings so old, the people so polite."

And then he thought for a moment, and he looked around him at these desert hills, and an enormous smile came on his face. He said, "But this is ours."

Friends, you don't have to denigrate any culture. You can admire the fact that there are wonderful other cultures, other civilizations, other faiths, but this is ours. Each one of us can say that. And if that is enough for us, we will bring peace to the world.

Thank you.

### **Question & Answer**

**QUESTION:** It occurs to me that the great arguments about religion are taking place these days within each religion as well as between them. I have to say that the form of Christianity represented by the President of the United States at the moment is not the form that I especially sympathize with, but I am a Christian.

Is there anything from your experience which can help us to set some ground rules for the disputes that go on with our fellow religionists? How do we carry on that argument in such a way that we don't denigrate them?

**RABBI SACKS:** Your question is deeply relevant and very powerful. You all know of those differences within Christianity; you will know that we are no slouches at internal arguments ourselves, and we all know about the fault lines within Islam.

All I can tell you is the working rules that I established. The position of a Chief Rabbi is exceptionally fraught. I don't particularly worry about that because if you look in the Bible you will see the first recorded words ever said to Moses were by the two Israelites whom he tried to stop fighting with one another. One of them said, "Who appointed you as leader and judge over us?" Now, he had never even thought of leadership, and already they were telling him to resign. So I know that arguments within the family can sometimes be even worse than those outside.

However, being Chief Rabbi is really fraught because I am an Orthodox Jew, and when I speak in public in Britain I am taken to represent the whole Jewish community, a significant number of whom are not Orthodox Jews. So I live with that tension every single day.

Here are my working rules. On those matters that affect us regardless of our religious differences, we will work together regardless of our religious differences. On matters which touch our religious differences, we will agree to differ, but with respect. Those two rules are actually quite practical rules of thumb.

So we work together across the community on fighting anti-Semitism, on defending Israel, on welfare matters, on interfaith and so on, and those are the contexts in which we work together. That means that almost every Orthodox Jew in Britain finds himself or herself sitting around a table with, working together with, a non-Orthodox Jew on those specific matters.

On other matters, like who is a rabbi or who is a convert, et cetera, we agree to differ with mutual respect.

There is one final provision that has to be added. On his deathbed, Heinrich Heine said, "God will forgive me. *C'est son métier*-it's what he's good at."

There are some matters which are best left to God. You all know the famous footnote in one of Robert Nozick's books. I imagine it's a standard joke in this particular building. Robert Nozick, as you know, says, "When the Messiah comes he will be greeted by a delegation of Jews and Christians who will say, 'Messiah, how wonderful to see you. Tell us, is this your first coming or your second?'" And Nozick adds, "I advise him not to answer the question."

So who is right and who is wrong in this particular internal theological argument I leave to the Almighty. *C'est son métier*.

**QUESTION:** I want to ask you a question that I struggle with as an academic and as an observant Jew who tries to work from within the tradition. What do we do with the parts of our tradition that directly contradict the message that you are trying to strengthen, like this week's Torah portion? There are texts upon texts within our tradition, within the Christian tradition, within Islam, that speak about hatred, about violence, about abjuration of the Other. I find myself in a situation of facing people of my own faith or of different faiths. What do I do? I hold up my text. They hold up their text.

**RABBI SACKS:** You ask a very good question. I do address it in the book, though, right at the end, and very briefly.

One of the things that is central to Judaism-and of course it has its analogues in Christianity, depending on which bit of Christianity you come from, and equally in Islam-is the division that we make between what we call the written law and the oral law; that is, between sacred text and interpretation. The rabbis went to great lengths, great extremes, to discuss the power of interpretation.

The schools of Hillel and Shammai in the late Second Temple period argued about most things. They also argued, incidentally, on theological fundamentals. In the Talmud, it says they argued for three and a half years on whether it was better to be born or not. But as the Yiddish saying has it: "Maybe after all, it would be better not to have been born. But how many are so lucky? Not one in a thousand."

Therefore, we have a tradition which is generically known in the tradition as Midrash, which means, what does the text mean to me, here and now; not, what did the text mean to them, there and then? Let me give you some examples.

There was a critical moment in the first century when the head of the Jewish community, Raban Gamliel, was deposed because he was too authoritarian. In that day they raised a number of questions, which included the following: "The Bible says that certain nations-Ammonites, Moabites, etc.-may not enter the congregation of the Lord"-in other words, certain people come under the most-hated-nation status and we don't want anything to do with them. The question was: "How do we interpret it at this time, in the first century?"

Of course, the Rabbi simply said: "Syria came and moved populations and confused all languages, so we don't have Ammonites and Moabites anymore. They may be there but we can't identify them. Therefore, the text as it stands is inoperable today."

Number two, you have 31 military campaigns in the Book of Joshua. If any text is tough for us here and now, it's the Book of Joshua. However, Maimonides ruled on this in the 12th century, based on a very sophisticated reading of a passage in Deuteronomy. These are his words in the part of his Law Code called "Laws of Kings:" "It is forbidden to wage war with any person in the world without first offering peace. If that peace offer is refused, then you must open a way for that person or that population to be able to escape. If they are neither willing to make peace nor escape, then you may fight war."

Now, I don't know. Is that a revisionary reading? Is it not a revisionary reading? I don't know. Well, I do, but it would take too long.

So we have to realize that at any given moment some texts of our tradition will be hard and some will speak to us with great power. We have with integrity to let those that speak to us with great power shape our interpretation of difficult passages. Therefore, without fragmenting or compromising our belief, we have to engage in what one would call contemporary Midrash. *The Dignity of Difference* is in fact a work of contemporary Midrash.

**JOEL ROSENTHAL:** If I could actually interject a question here: most of us know a little bit about the Jewish tradition and the Christian tradition, but based on what have you seen within Islam in terms of reinterpretation of a Midrash style and thinking about this issue of tolerance within Islam today, where would those sources of tolerance be?

**RABBI SACKS:** I am simply not an expert on Islam, and I think I better go and learn a bit about Islam. I have read the secondary sources, not the primary sources.

But anyone who has encountered Islam will know that the key texts of Islam, the Koran, the Hadith, and so on and so forth, are full of apparently quite contradictory propositions. They are as complex as the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is full of contradictory propositions. Therefore, the possible scope of reinterpretation in Islam is quite real.

The proof of it is the Wahhabi strand, which today dominates Islamic extremism. The Wahhabi school of Islam is a radical reinterpretation. In classic Islam the idea that you are permitted to be a suicide bomber would be heretical. So if a tradition can be reinterpreted in a destructive way, I am sure it can also be reinterpreted in a constructive way.

Now, let me just say what might lead to such an interpretation. I asked Prince Hassan of Jordan, the brother of the later King Hussein, after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, "What could bring us together, Israeli and Arab, Jew and Muslim?" He said two things to me, and because these were a Muslim's answer, I give them to you.

Number one, the Andalusian experience—in other words, there were times, in 11th to 12th century Spain, where Islam was a culture of great breadth and by the standards of its time, great tolerance, and Judaism flourished. It was medieval Jewry's golden age. And of course from it we got Maimonides, and from Maimonides Christianity got Aquinas, and from the Arabic neo-Aristotelians we got neo-Platonists. So the Andalusian experience is something we have done before and could do again.

Number two, our shared tears. We are both people who have suffered much and shed many tears, and tears are a language that is truly universal.

So if the knowledge that it happened before and the sheer accumulated tears, the inspiration to look for a new way, can create a reinterpretation within Islam, I have no doubt that Islamic scholars will find the resources. We can hope and work towards that end.

**QUESTION:** Initially this was not to be my question, but in your answer you referred to contemporary Midrash. How does your concept of contemporary Midrash differ from conservative Judaism and its

interpretation of Halacha?

When is it proper or when is it right to want to die for one's religion when confronted with a challenge from another religion?

**RABBI SACKS:** I'm sure you know of the great paradox, and here it is: the great paradox is that the last defenders of Jewry, the last outpost after Vespasian and the destruction of the Second Temple, were the defenders of Masada, who committed collective suicide rather than be taken captive. Of course, Masada became a symbol of modern Israel, based on the concept of "never again". After Yigael Yadin's archaeological excavations, the graduating classes in Israel's army always went to Masada. Is Masada mentioned in the extraordinarily voluminous rabbinic literature? Not once.

Why? Because the rabbis intuitively understood that there is a different message in Judaism: these are the commands that a person will do and live by. Moses says, "I have set before you this day the blessing and the curse, life and death; therefore choose life." And, therefore, the rabbis refused to make heroes of Masada. Now, that is a very striking statement.

Secondly, in the late first century, the rabbis sat and ordained a principle: there are three commands which one should die rather than transgress: idolatry; murder; and forbidden sexual relations.

Now, let me make it absolutely clear. This was an attempt to limit Jewish martyrdom. They were not saying, "Go and be a martyr." They were saying the opposite, "It is forbidden to be a martyr except in these three cases."

Read the Book of Maccabees. The First Book of Maccabees tells the story about how the original fighters refused to wage war on Shabbat, on the Sabbath, and they were completely wiped out. So the rabbis sat down and ordained it is permitted to wage war on Shabbat. In other words, there were mass martyrdoms; lots and lots of people wanted to be martyrs.

There are unbelievable stories at the end of the Tractate Brachot about how Rabbi Akiva becomes a martyr. There is a passage in Tractate Aboda Zara, page 18a, about how Rabbi Hananiah ben Tradyon is sitting, teaching to his disciplines in defiance of the Hadrianic decrees and Rabbi Yose ben Kisma says, "I won't be surprised if the Romans come and sentence you to death," and Rabbi Hananiah ben Tradyon says, "God will have mercy on me." And Rabbi Yose ben Kisma, who is recorded as saying, "I would live only in a place of terror," says to somebody who is living by that principle, "I'm telling you facts and you're telling me God will have mercy on you."

The Talmud says they took Hananiah ben Tradyon and wrapped him in the Safer Torah and set fire to both of them—a famous passage. His disciples saw him as he was dying and they said, "What do you see?" "I see the parchment burning but the letters flying up to heaven."

So the rabbis knew of the great, heroic martyrs, we tell of them on the ninth of Av, we tell of them on Yom Kippur; and yet they said: "No! If we have a religion of martyrs, we are not sanctifying life, we are sanctifying death." That's why they formally ruled that only under extreme circumstances was one permitted to die rather than transgress.

And Maimonides ruled that anyone who serves idols or commits incest rather than be killed, that person is not regarded as a sinner because he or she acted under coercion and that, therefore, that was not a free or culpable act.

So Judaism acted to minimize and limit martyrdom to the absolute minimum.

This will have to be the last question.

**QUESTION:** I am a student of Professor Rosenthal's. In your approach in the book you talk about an end-of-days approach and a peace at the end of the days. It seemed to me that besides Judaism-I don't know about the polytheistic religions-Christianity and Islam seem to have a different approach. So my question is: are the non-Jewish traditions excluded from this enterprise of the end-of-days peace?

**RABBI SACKS:** Let me explain quite clearly: in this book I am not arguing for an end-of-days peace, because the end of history will be the end of history, and I would rather that didn't happen just now. As Woody Allen says, "I don't mind dying; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

What I wanted to explain is how come here we were at the United Nations, August 29-30, 2000, at that modestly entitled Millennium Peace Summit, with 2,000 religious leaders. How was it that world religious leaders from 70 different religious/faith families got up and said, "Peace is great, let's have peace," and yet we never have peace?

I say in the book, because it is quite simple, that that kind of peace is actually the biggest obstacle to peace, because that kind of peace says, "Our religion values peace; therefore, all that has to happen is everyone become a member of our religion and that will bring peace."

I'm sorry, but I'm not willing to say that that is a recipe for peace. That is a recipe for world war. Therefore, what I tried to do was to articulate a different idea, a non-end-of-days peace, a peace for an unredeemed world, a peace for Israel, for Iraq, for America, in the here and now, without any prophetic transformation.

The prophets developed a concept of peace. I call it the "end-of-days peace." The rabbis in the second century developed a different concept of peace, a non-end-of-days peace, which they called "*Darkhei Shalom*," the ways of peace, and the ways of peace are quite different from prophetic peace. I will explain to you how I was able to implement that rabbinic idea in Britain in the context of religious conflict.

We initiated it last year and it is still going on. We did it under Prince Charles' auspices as our present to the Queen for her Jubilee. The initiative was called "Respect," and it's based on the rabbinic principle of *Darkhei Shalom*, the ways of peace: The nine major faith traditions in Britain-Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Zoroastrians, Jain, and Baha'i-all came together with Prince Charles to ask the local congregations and the members of their faith to do one act of kindness to someone who is not a member of their faith.

That is a non-utopian recipe for peace, because the utopian recipe for peace will mean that, rather than peace, we will have the war to end all wars. So let us realize that although the conceptual argument here is a little bit difficult, the actual practice of it is really quite easy.

Let me tell you one little story, and with this I end. There is a man I have never met. I would love to meet him. His name is Stephen Carter. He is an African-American law professor at Yale. He has written a lot of books about what he calls the "pre-political virtues."

He wrote a little book, called *Civility*, in which he told the following story. When he was 11, his family moved as the first black family into a white district in Washington. He and his brothers and sisters were sitting on what I think in America you call the stoop, waiting for somebody to say hello. He describes how all the people were coming and going, nobody making eye contact, as if they were invisible, as if they didn't exist.

He said, "I knew at that moment we should never have come here, we would never belong here, we would never be accepted here. I was thinking these thoughts when across the road I caught sight of a lady coming back from the shops, her hands laden with shopping, and she looked at us, and she gave us a cheery smile, and she said, 'Welcome.' And then she disappeared into her house, then five minutes later came out with a tray of drinks and cookies and came over to us and made us feel welcome. At that moment I realized I was wrong, maybe I do belong, maybe there is a place for me here. It may not be coincidental that that lady was very religious too. Her name was Sarah Kestenbaum [phonetic]. I told this story for the first time in America and people remembered her. She had died 20 years ago. That made me change my mind."

Jews have a Hebrew word for this, which essentially means civility. What do I learn from this? One act of kindness can change a person's world. You can say that to people of many different faiths, and it isn't

controversial, and it does change the world.

Thank you.

**JOEL ROSENTHAL:** Thank you, Rabbi Sacks. On our best days we like to think of this place, this Council, as a place of learning, but learning that will lead to good actions, and your last story there was exactly what we were looking for.

Thank you so much. It has really been an honor to have you here and I hope you will come back.

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