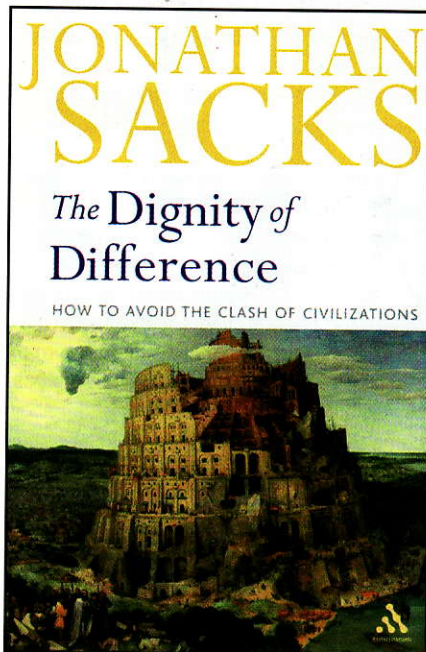


Reviews

The Dignity of Difference by Jonathan Sacks

A Review by Berl Osbourne



This scholarly book is not for the faint-hearted; after a few dozen pages I began to regret the lack of a degree in either Rabbinics or PPE. However, diligent application will reap its reward in the later chapters, where the Chief Rabbi gives a penetrating and informative analysis of the human condition as we enter the 21st Century. The impact of globalisation and information technology is examined, particularly with regard to their interface with Jewish religion and philosophy.

Unfortunately this aspect of the book has been overshadowed by the furore that has arisen as a result of his rather unfortunate use of words and phrases that could be open to misinterpretation, and which have evoked sometimes intemperate accusation of heresy. The Chief Rabbi accepts this and has undertaken to rectify and clarify the situation in future editions. Apparently, however, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashev, the leading Torah sage has stated that it is forbidden to have the book in the home. I fear that I shall have to answer for this transgression, at the appropriate time before the great sage above. One of the passages that has given rise to the turmoil is 'Judaism, Christianity and Islam are religions of revelation; faiths in which G-d speaks and

we attempt to listen'.

The Chief Rabbi's critics - and it seems to me they have a point - find that this is incompatible with the notion of 'a Chosen People'. The first blessing that a bar mitzvah boy utters, contains the words 'who has chosen us from all peoples and has given us thy law'. This is surely a claim to exclusivity; we are not always completely comfortable with this. It will be recalled that in Fiddler on the Roof in the aftermath of a pogrom, Tevyah addresses G-d and says 'Dear G-d, we are your Chosen People; please, next time around, choose someone else'. Nevertheless, however we may feel about it, this claim to exclusivity is at the core of orthodox Judaism. This does not mean that we are intolerant of other faiths. We may not accept their beliefs, but as long as they are tolerant we respect them.

He goes on to discuss globalisation and to postulate that its relentless spread affords no hiding place. It means that more than ever, in the words of John Donne four hundred years ago, 'No man is an Island, intire of it selfe; any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; and therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee'.

Whatever we do, it affects our non-Jewish neighbours. For example, when we seek to erect an eruv (for reasons that will not be immediately apparent to others) we must be prepared to explain and minimise the impact. Similarly many of our neighbours are genuinely troubled by shechita (though in this area we are cushioned by the fact that the country's very large Muslim population has a similar practice). Once again we have to explain.

A by-product of globalisation has been the resurgence of religion as a significant factor in many parts of the world - why has this happened? Jonathan Sacks' view is that because globalisation is profoundly disturbing many have sought in religion a source of stability - an expression of the things that do not change 'I will fear no evil; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me'. He views the great faiths as providing meaning and purpose for their adherents. The question is, can they make space for

those who are not its adherents, who sing a different song, hear a different music, tell a different story. In my humble view as far as Judaism is concerned the answer is 'yes'. We may not accept, but we respect. If we do not, if we say that those who do not share our faith do not share our humanity, then we are subscribing to the equation from which flowed the Crusades, the Inquisitions the Jihads, the Pogroms and ultimately, substituting race for faith, the Holocaust.

He examines the feeling of insecurity that threatens the tranquillity and serenity for which mankind is searching, because it is this insecurity that favours the spread of political and religious extremism and the kind of authoritarian populism that threatens free societies.

The sheer pace of technological, cultural and economic transformation through which we are living, contributes to this insecurity which provides a fertile soil for the growth of authoritarian claims for a political and/or political panacea that has a monopoly of truth. As Isaiah Berlin said, 'it is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right; that you have a magical eye which sees THE TRUTH and that others cannot be right if they disagree. This makes one certain that there is one goal and only one for one's nation or Church or the whole of humanity. From this it follows that it is worth any amount of suffering (particularly on the part of other people) if only this goal is attained. Robespierre said 'Through an ocean of blood to the Kingdom of love'.

This cry was taken up by Hitler, Stalin, Lenin and, I dare say, by leaders in the religious wars of Christian v Muslim, Catholics v Protestants. They were sincere in their belief that there is one, and only one, true answer to the central questions which have agonised Mankind and that they had it. This belief has been responsible for oceans of blood. But no Kingdom of love has sprung from it.'

The Chief Rabbi draws on his experience as a practising Rabbi to give him insight into what makes a life worth living. When officiating at a funeral he had to paint a portrait of the deceased whom he may not

have known personally. He would then speak to family and friends to try to understand what he or she meant to them. They almost always spoke of similar things - the person who had died had been a caring parent, a supportive partner, a loyal friend ready to help when help was needed. No-one ever mentioned what they earned or what they bought, what car they drove or where they spent their holidays. The people most mourned were not the most rich or the most successful - rather were they those who enhanced the lives of others. They were kind and reliable and had a sense of communal responsibility. This, he says, was me being educated into what makes a life well lived.

In one of the most fascinating and original sections of the book he examines the concept of compassion and the idea of tzedakah particularly in relation to the inequalities and injustices of the present world order. He describes the gross disparities between the enormously wealthy and those who have a struggle (not always successful) to survive: between those who have champagne for breakfast and those

(1.5 billion in the developing world) who have never had a clean glass of water. G-d has given us the world but not on a freehold - rather on a full-repairing lease. Television has brought the world of the rich and famous into the most remote villages, while bringing images of hunger, famine war and disease into our living rooms. We can no longer claim that we did not know.

What then is the moral basis of global economic responsibility?

The concept of tzedakah is a difficult one to translate because it combines in a single word two notions normally opposed to one another, namely charity and justice. What tzedakah signifies therefore is what is often called 'social justice' which implies that no one should be without the basic requirements of existence and that those who have more than they need must share some of that surplus with those who have less. The fifteenth chapter of Deuteronomy and the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus lay down in considerable detail how this was to be achieved in a predominantly agrarian

society. They were elements in an unashamedly 'redistributive budget'. In our present world no religion can propose precise policies for the alleviation of hunger and disease. What it can do is to inspire us collectively with a vision of human solidarity. The concept of tzedakah within the Jewish tradition can serve as a broad moral template for what constitutes a fair and decent world.

It is a pity that these lofty and challenging thoughts have been subsumed in a vociferous clamour from those who perceived a possible departure from fundamental Jewish belief. The points could have been raised and the arguments discussed in a civilised manner without resorting to terms such as 'banning and heresy'. In the words of Isaiah, 'Take council together and it shall come to naught'.

I most certainly recommend this book. Not perhaps as a Bar mitzvah present, nor yet for light reading on the beach at Eilat. It might however be a useful component of a Yom Kippur survival kit.



How much Inheritance Tax can you save?

Inheritance Tax takes a bite out of many Estates, but it can be easy to avoid. Through wise planning and drafting, some or all of that tax can be saved.

Harvey Bratt of KKL Executors and Trustees is recognised throughout the community as being an expert in this area. He is a solicitor with a difference. For a start, he'll come to you if you prefer. For another thing, he won't charge a fee, because KKL's services are free if JNF benefits from a legacy.

For over 50 years, KKL has helped thousands of people to write their Will and keep it up to date, minimising Inheritance Tax.

Your Will is more than just a legal document. We offer a professional legal service, with a deep understanding of Jewish concerns and a human face.

Call to arrange a confidential meeting or request a free booklet.

Harvey

**Freephone
0800 358 3587**

A subsidiary of JNF Charitable Trust Reg. No. 225910 PE02

KKL Executors
and Trustees