

# Challenging the Status Quo

Series in the thought of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks זצ"ל

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## A Letter in the Scroll

“A Palace in Flames”



### 1. Bereishis 12:1

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּמִמּוֹלֶדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֵל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶנָּה:

The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

Why? What led him to this?

### 2. Bereishis Rabba 39:1

אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום, וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה זו בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו בעל הבירה, אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה, כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם

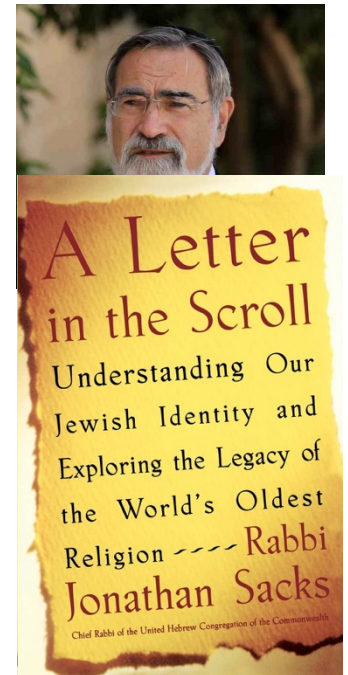
“G-d said to Abraham: Leave your land, your birth place, your father’s house...” Rabbe Yitzchak said: To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in

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."

3. A Letter in the Scroll, page 57

The faith of Abraham begins in the refusal to accept either answer, for both contain a truth, and between them there is a contradiction. The first accepts the reality of evil, the second the reality of God. The first says that if evil exists, God does not exist. The second says that if God exists, evil does not exist. But supposing both exist? Supposing there are both the palace and the flames?

If this is so and I have interpreted the *midrash* correctly, then Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be. It is in that cry, that sacred discontent, that Abraham's journey begins. At the heart of reality is a contradiction between order and chaos, the order of creation and the chaos we create. There is no resolution to this conflict at the level of thought. It can be resolved only at the level of action, only by making the world other than it is. When things are as they ought to be, *then* we have reached our destination. But that is not now: it was not now for Abraham, nor is it yet for us.



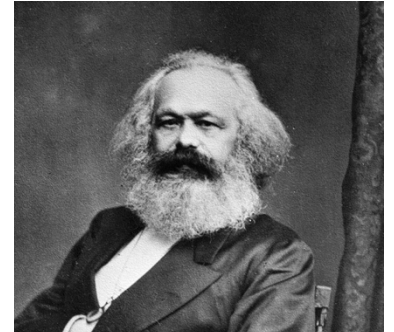
## To Heal a Fractured World

“Faith as Protest”

## The Indictment

4. Marx, K. 1976. Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Collected Works, v. 3. New York.

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.



## The Unfair Setup

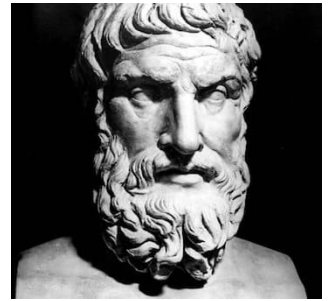
5. Bereishis 18:17-25

יז וה', אָמַר: הַמֶּכְסֶה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם, אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה.	17 And the LORD said: 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing;
יח וְאַבְרָהָם--הֲיִו יְהִיָּה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל, וְעַצּוֹם; וְנִבְרָכוּ-בוֹ--כָּל, גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ.	18 seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?
יט כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו, לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת-בְּנָיו וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו, וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָוֶה ה', לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט--לְמַעַן, הִבִּיא ה' עַל-אַבְרָהָם, אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר, עָלָיו.	19 For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him.'
כ וַיֹּאמֶר ה', וְזַעַקַת סֹדֶם וְעִמֹרָה כִּי-רָבָה; וְחַטָּאתָם--כִּי כְבֹדָה, מְאֹד.	20 And the LORD said: 'Verily, the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and, verily, their sin is exceeding grievous.
כא אֲרֹדֶה-נָא וְאַרְאֶה, הַכְצַעְקָתָהּ הַבְּאֵה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ כָלָה; וְאִם-לֹא, אֲדַעָה.	21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know.'
כב וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים, וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה; וְאַבְרָהָם--עֹדֵנּוּ עִמָּד, לִפְנֵי ה'.	22 And the men turned from thence, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham stood yet before the LORD.
כג וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם, וַיֹּאמֶר: הֲאֵף תִּסְפֶּה, צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע.	23 And Abraham drew near, and said: 'Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?
כד אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים, בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר; הֲאֵף תִּסְפֶּה וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא לְמַקּוֹם, לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְדִּיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ.	24 Peradventure there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?
כה חֲלָלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂת כַּדְּבַר הַזֶּה, לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע, וְהָיָה כַּצְדִּיק, כְּרָשָׁע; חֲלָלָה לְךָ--הַשְׁפֵּט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ, לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט.	25 That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from Thee; shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?'

## The Challenge to Monotheism

### 6. Epicurus

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”



### 7. Yirmiyahu 12:1

צְדִיק אַתָּה ה' כִּי אֶרְיֵב אֶלְיָךְ אֶךְ מִשְׁפָּטִים אֲדַבֵּר אֵתְךָ מִדּוֹעַ דְּרָךְ רָשָׁעִים צְלָחָה שְׁלִי כָּל-בְּגֵדֵי בְּגָד:

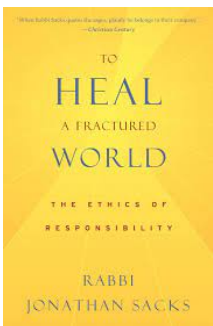
You will win, *Lit.* “be in the right.” O LORD, if I make claim against You,

Yet I shall present charges against You:

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why are the workers of treachery at ease?

### 8. To Heal a Fractured World, page 27

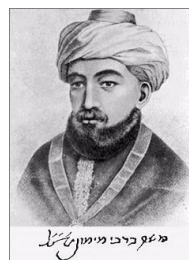


Opium of the people? Nothing was ever less an opiate than this religion of sacred discontent, of dissatisfaction with the status quo. It was Abraham, then Moses, Amos, and Isaiah, who fought on behalf of justice and human dignity – confronting priests and kings, even arguing with God Himself. That note, first sounded by Abraham, never died. It was given its most powerful expression in the book of Job, surely the most dissident book ever to be included in a canon of sacred scriptures. It echoes again and again in rabbinic midrash, in the *kinot* (laments) of the Middle Ages, in hassidic tales and the literature of the Holocaust. In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be. Faith lies not in the answer but the question – and the greater the human being, the more intense the question. The Bible is not metaphysical opium but its opposite. Its aim is not to transport the believer to a private heaven. Instead, its impassioned, sustained desire is to bring heaven down to earth. Until we have done this, there is work still to do.

## The Great Partnership

### “The Problem of Evil”

### 9. Moreh Nevuchim III:12



ובאור זה - שכל רע שימצא האדם ישוב אל אחד משלשה מינים:  
I explain this theory in the following manner. The evils that befall an are of three kinds:--

המין האחד מן הרע הוא מה שיקרה לאדם מצד הטבע ההויה וההפסד - רצוני לומר מאשר הוא בעל חומר - כי מפני זה יארע לקצת בני אדם מומים ובטול אברים בכלל היצירה או מתחדשים משינויים שיארעו ביסודות כהפסד האויר או הברקים העצומים או שקיעת מקומות. וכבר בארנו שהחכמה האלוקית חיבה שלא תהיה הויה כי אם בהפסד ולולא זה ההפסד האישי לא תהיה נמשכת ההויה המינית. ... ותכלית מה שאפשר להתהוות מן הדם והזרע והשלם שיהיה מהם הוא מין האדם כפי מה שנודע מטבעו שהוא חי מדבר מת - ואי אפשר לזה המין מבלתי רע שימצא לו. ואתה תמצא עם זה שהרעות אשר ימצאו בני אדם בזה המין מעטים מאד מאד ולא יהיו אלא לעיתים רחוקות. שאתה תמצא מדינות שיש להם אלפים שנים לא נשקעו ולא נשרפו; וכן יולדו אלפים מבני אדם בתכלית הבריאות ולא יולד בעל מום רק על צד זרות - ואם יתגבר המתגבר ולא יאמר 'על צד זאות' הוא מעט מאד ואינו לא חלק ממאה ולא חלק מאלף מן הנולדים בתכלית השלמות:

(1) The first kind of evil is that which is caused to man by the circumstance that he is subject to genesis and destruction, or that he possesses a body. It is on account of the body that some persons happen to have great deformities or paralysis of some of the organs. This evil may be part of the natural constitution of these persons, or may have developed subsequently in consequence of changes in the elements, e.g., through bad air, or thunderstorms or landslips. We have already shown that, in accordance with the divine wisdom, genesis can only take place through destruction, and without the destruction of the individual members of the species the species themselves would not exist permanently. Thus the true kindness, and beneficence, and goodness of God is clear. He who thinks that he can have flesh and bones without being subject to any external influence, or any of the accidents of matter, unconsciously wishes to reconcile two opposites, viz., to be at the same time subject and not subject to change. If man were never subject to change there could be no generation: there would be one single being, but no individuals forming a species. ...

The best and most perfect being that can be formed of the blood and the semen is the species of man, for as far as man's nature is known, he is living, reasonable, and mortal. It is therefore impossible that man should be free from this species of evil. You will, nevertheless, find that the evils of the above kind which befall man are very few and rare: for you find countries that have not been flooded or burned for thousands of years: there are thousands of men in perfect health, deformed individuals are a strange and exceptional occurrence, or say few in number if you object to the term exceptional,--they are not one-hundredth, not even one-thousandth part of those that are perfectly normal.

והמין השני מן הרעות הוא מה שיארע לבני אדם מקצתם לקצתם כהתגבר קצתם על קצתם. ואלה הרעות יותר מרעות המין הראשון וסיבותם רבות וידועות והם גם כן ממנו אלא שאין לעשוק בהם תחבולה. ועם זה אי זו מדינה שתמצא בעולם כולו לא ימצא בין אנשי המדינה ההיא זה המין מן הרע מתפשט - מאודי כלל אבל מציאותו גם כן מעט - כאיש שיתנכל אל איש להרגו או לגנוב ממונו בלילה - ואמנם יכלול זה המין מן הרע אנשים רבים במלחמות הגדולות - וזה גם כן אינו ברב מה שבישוב :

(2) The second class of evils comprises such evils as people cause to each other, when, e.g., some of them use their strength against others. These evils are more numerous than those of the first kind: their causes are numerous and known; they likewise originate in ourselves, though the sufferer himself cannot avert them. This kind of evil is nevertheless not widespread in any country of the whole world. It is of rare occurrence that a man plans to kill his neighbour or to rob him of his property by night. Many persons are, however, afflicted with this kind of evil in great wars: but these are not frequent, if the whole inhabited part of the earth is taken into consideration.

והמין השלישי מן הרעות הוא מה שימצא כל אחד מבני אדם מפעולתו בעצמו - וזהו הרוב. ואלה הרעות יותר מרעות המין השני הרבה ומרעות זה המין יצקו בני אדם כולם. וזהו אשר לא תמצא מי שלא יחטא על עצמו בו אלא מעט וזהו שראוי לגנות את בעל המאורע על מה שיארע לו באמת ויאמר לו כמה שנאמר "מידכם היתה זאת לכם" ונאמר "משחית נפשו הוא יעשנה" - ועל זה המין מן הרעות אמר שלמה "אולת אדם תסלף דרכו וגו'" וכבר באר גם כן בזה המין מן הרעות שהוא פועל האדם בעצמו והוא אמרו "ראה זה מצאתי אשר עשה האלוקים את האדם ישר והמה בקשו חשבונות רבים" - והחשבונות ההם הם אשר הביאו עליהם אלה הרעות;

ועל זה המין נאמר "כי לא יצא מעפר און ומאדמה לא יצמח עמל" ואחר כך באר מיד שהאדם הוא אשר ימצא זה המין מן הרע ואמר "כי אדם לעמל יולד וגו'". וזה המין הוא הנמשך אחר המדות המגונות כולם -

רצוני לומר רוב התאוה במאכל ובמשתה ובמשגל ולקיחתם ביתרון כמות או בהפסד סדר או בהפסד איכות המזונות - ויהיה זה סיבה לכל החליים והמכות הגשמיות והנפשיות. אמנם חליי הגוף הם מבוארים אבל חליי הנפש מרע זה הסדר

(3) The third class of evils comprises those which every one causes to himself by his own action. This is the largest class, and is far more numerous than the second class. It is especially of these evils that all men complain, only few men are found that do not sin against themselves by this kind of evil. Those that are afflicted with it are therefore justly blamed in the words of the prophet, "This hath been by your means" ([Mal. 1:9](#)); the same is expressed in the following passage, "He that doeth it destroyeth his own soul" ([Prov. 6:32](#)). In reference to this kind of evil, Solomon says, "The foolishness of man perverteth his way" (*ibid.* 19:3). In the following passage he explains also that this kind of evil is man's own work, "Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright, but they have thought out many inventions" ([Eccles. 7:29](#)), and these inventions bring the evils upon him. The same subject is referred to in Job (v. 6), "For affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground." These words are immediately followed by the explanation that man himself is the author of this class of evils, "But man is born unto trouble." This class of evils originates in man's vices, such as excessive desire for eating, drinking, and love; indulgence in these things in undue measure, or in improper manner, or partaking of bad food. This course brings diseases and afflictions upon body and soul alike.

#### 10. The Meaning Of History, Nicolas Berdyaev

The Jewish people in their primitive conception of life were obsessed by the passionate idea of justice and its terrestrial fulfilment. I believe that this other specific idea of the Jewish people, this demand for justice to be realized on earth together with this aspiration towards the future, predetermined the whole complexity of Jewish historical destiny. The Greeks, who were typical Aryans, had never been obsessed by the idea of justice. If it was not absolutely foreign to the Hellenic spirit, at least it was never more than a minor preoccupation.



Christian history attempts to solve. At the same time we may observe, along with a religiously justifiable principle animating this intense Jewish striving after truth, justice and happiness on earth, an unwarrantable principle of conflict with

God, an unwillingness to accept the Will of God. There is a resistance to God, an arbitrary assertion of a purely human justice and truth and their fulfilment on earth against that destiny of all mankind revealed in the life and history of the world according to God's inscrutable will and design. And there is a tendency to transfer the vital principle to the surface of our planet in the apparent absence of a life that is eternal and immortal. This is equivalent to denying man's immortality and the everlasting life which contains and fulfils the meaning of human destiny.

11. The Great Partnership, pages 245-246

My own view is that if God did *not* want us to seek justice in this world, why did he create it and why did he pronounce it good? If he did not believe that physical existence is a blessing, why are we here? As punishment? For what crime? Berdyaev wrote in 1923. Would he still have maintained his thesis once the full extent of the Final Solution had become clear: that suffering is to be accepted as 'God's inscrutable will and design'? There are such views in Judaism as well as Christianity, but I, for one, prefer the theology of protest. We must accept only that which we cannot change.



So evil exists because we exist as free beings in a physical world with all the accidents of matter and the pain of mortality. What difference, then, does it make whether our attitude to evil is one of acceptance or of protest?

It makes all the difference. Abraham's protest, and Moses' and Jeremiah's, were not mere cries wasted in the wind. They were cries born in the cognitive dissonance between the world that is and the world that ought to be. The only way of resolving this dissonance is a deed. That is the difference between faith-as-acceptance and faith-as-protest. The only way to deal with slavery is to lead the people to freedom. The only way to confront the evils of the *polis* is to build a more just social order, with special emphasis on loving the stranger.

