

---

# DIGNITY OF DIFFERENCE

---

*A Jewish Perspective on Other Religions*

The Weekly  
**TORAH**  
C?NTR?VERSITY

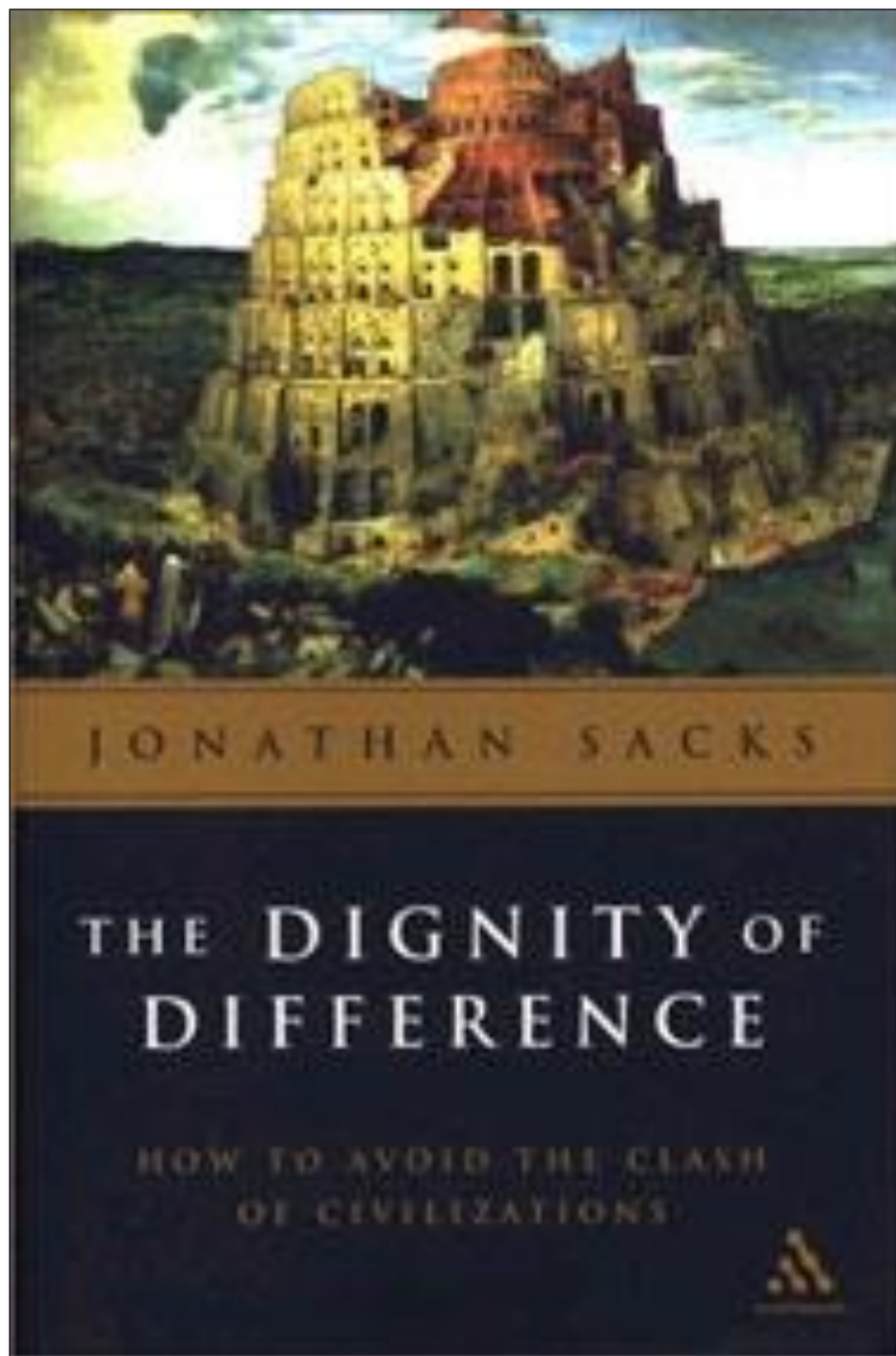


NOVEMBER 14, 2021  
YU TORAH MITZION KOLLEL  
פי' וישלח תשפ"ב

## THE BOOK

---

(1) *Original edition – August 2002*



(2) RABBI SACKS ZT"L

# Preface to the Second Edition

*The Dignity of Difference* is a plea – the most forceful I could make – for tolerance in an age of extremism. I see in the rising crescendo of ethnic tensions, civilizational clashes and the use of religious justification for acts of terror, a clear and present danger to humanity. For too long, the pages of history have been stained by blood shed in the name of God. Allied to weapons of mass destruction, extremist religious attitudes threaten the very security of life on earth. In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference. That is what I have argued here.

As well as attracting widespread interest, the first edition generated controversy within the Jewish community, some maintaining that certain passages could be understood in ways incompatible with Jewish belief. I believed I had guarded against this possibility by making it clear in the Prologue that I was writing as an orthodox Jew, implying that any interpretation incompatible with the classic tenets of Jewish faith was a misinterpretation.

In the event, the caveat proved insufficient. Certain passages, especially in Chapter 3, were misunderstood. I therefore decided to restate them in less problematic terms. Since the core argument of the book is simple and, in Jewish terms, uncontroversial, I have redrafted it in such a way as to circumnavigate all debated issues unrelated to its main thesis. For those wishing to study the theological background to Chapter 3, I have prepared a digest of biblical and rabbinic sources, available at our office website ([www.chiefrabbi.org](http://www.chiefrabbi.org)).



The question addressed in that chapter – a fateful one in an age threatened by the clash of civilizations – is whether religions can become a force for peace rather than a source of conflict. That depends in turn on how different faiths and cultures make space for ‘the other’, the one who is not like us, whose race, colour or creed is different from ours. Do we see the other as a threat to our beliefs and way of life, or as an enrichment of the collective heritage of mankind? I have tried to show how one faith – Judaism – answers this question: how, through its concept of dual covenant (with humanity after the flood, and with one people at Mount Sinai), it attempts to balance concern with the universal (the duties and rights we share as human beings) and respect for the particular (the codes, customs, narratives and traditions that make us *this* rather than *that*, giving us our singular, non-universal identity).

What makes Judaism significant in a global context is that it was the world’s first monotheism, giving rise not only to its own faith but also to the environment from which Christianity and Islam both emerged. Jews, Christians and Muslims disagree on many things, but they also agree on some, not least in tracing their descent, spiritual or biological, from Abraham. My argument has therefore been that by going back to the roots of biblical monotheism we may find, to our surprise, a theological basis for respect for difference, based not on relativism but on the concept of covenant.

At the end of his life Moses, who had led his people from slavery and brought them to the brink of the promised land, assembled them and gave them a fateful choice: ‘See I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life so that you and your children may live.’ That is still the choice facing mankind. Will we endlessly replay the hatreds of the past? Or will we choose differently this time, for the sake of the world’s children and their future? As our capacity for destruction grows, so too must the generosity of our moral and spiritual imagination. I pray that this affirmation will be echoed by many voices from many faiths.

### (3) TORAH MUSINGS BY RABBI GIL STUDENT

---

P. 55: (The same applies to religion. The radical transcendence of God in the Hebrew Bible means nothing more or less than that *there is a difference between God and religion*. God is universal, religions are particular. Religion is the translation of God into a particular language and thus into the life of a group, nation, a community of faith. In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims.

Only such a God is truly transcendental – greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe articulated in any single faith, any specific language of human sensibility. How could a sacred text convey such an idea? It would declare that *God is God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity*. Only such a narrative would lead us to see the presence of God in people of other faiths. Only such a worldview could reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition.)

[So too in the case of religion. The radical transcendence of God in the Hebrew Bible means that the Infinite lies beyond our finite understanding. God communicates in human language, but there are dimensions of the divine that must forever elude us. As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws. These laws constitute, as it were, the depth grammar of the human experience of the divine: of what it is to see the world as God's work, and humanity as God's image. *God is God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity*. Such a narrative would lead us to respect the search for God in people of other faiths and reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition.]

### (4) TEMPLETON PRIZE LECTURE, RABBI SACKS

---

What would such a faith be like? It would be like being secure in my own home and yet moved by the beauty of foreign places — of a city like Philadelphia — knowing that it is your home, not mine, but still part of the glory of the world that is ours. It would be like being fluent in English and yet thrilled by the rhythms and resonances of an Italian sonnet I only partially understand. It would be to know that I am a sentence in the story of my people but that there are other stories, each written by God out of the letters of lives bound together in community, each bearing the unmistakable trace of His handwriting. Those who are confident of their faith are not threatened but enlarged by the different faith of others. In the midst of our multiple insecurities, that is what we need now: the confidence and generosity to recognize the irreducible, glorious dignity of difference.

## SOURCES

### (5) RAMBAM MELACHIM 11:4

ואם לא הצליח עד כה, או נהרג, בידוע שאינו זה שהבטיחה עליו תורה, והרי הוא ככל מלכי בית דוד השלמים הכשרים שמתו. ולא העמידו הקדוש ברוך הוא אלא לנסות בו רבים, שנאמר "ומן המשפילים יקשלו לצרור בהן ולברר וללבו עד ית קץ כי עוד למועד".

אף ישוע הנוצרי שדימה שיהיה משיח, ונהרג בבית דין, כבר נתנבא בו דניאל, שנאמר "ובני פריצי עמד ינשאו להעמיד חזון ונקשלו" (דניאל יא, יד). וכי יש מכשול גדול מזה, שכל הנביאים דברו שהמשיח הוא ישראל ומושיעם, ומקבץ נדחיהם ומחזק מצותו, וזה גרם לאבד ישראל בחרב, ולפזר שאריתם ולהשפילם, ולהחליף התורה, ולהטעות רוב העולם לעבד אלוה מבלעדי ה'.

אבל מחשבות בורא עולם אין כוח באדם להשיגם, כי לא דרכינו דרכיו ולא מחשבותינו מחשבותיו. וכל הדברים האלו של ישוע הנוצרי, ושל זה הישמעאלי שעמד אחריו, אינו אלא לישר דרך למלך המשיח, ולתקן את העולם פלו לעבד את ביחד: שנאמר "כי אז אהפך אל עמים שפה ברורה לקרא כלם בשם ה' ולעבדו שכם אחד" (ראה צפניה ג, ט) ה'

ומדברי התורה ומדברי המצוות, ופשוטו דברים אלו באיים רחוקים, כיצד: כבר נתמלא העולם פלו מדברי המשיח ובעמים רבים ערלי לב; והם נושאים ונותנים בדברים אלו ובמצוות התורה, אלו אומרים מצוות אלו אמת היו, וכבר וגלה, בטלו בזמן הזה, ולא היו נוהגות לדורות. ואלו אומרים דברים נסתרות יש בהם, ואינו כפשוטו, וכבר בא משיח נסתריהם.

וכשיעמוד המלך המשיח באמת, ויצליח יורים וינישא, מיד הם כולו חוזרין ויודעים ששקר נחלו אבותיהם, ושנביאיהם ואבותיהם הטעים.

If he did not succeed to this degree or was killed, he surely is not the redeemer promised by the Torah. Rather, he should be considered as all the other proper and complete kings of the Davidic dynasty who died. God caused him to arise only to test the many, as [Daniel 11:35](#) states: 'And some of the wise men will stumble, to try them, to refine, and to clarify until the appointed time, because the set time is in the future.'

Jesus of Nazareth who aspired to be the Mashiah and was executed by the court was also alluded to in Daniel's prophecies, as *ibid.* 11:14 states: 'The vulgar among your people shall exalt themselves in an attempt to fulfill the vision, but they shall stumble.'

Can there be a greater stumbling block than Christianity? All the prophets spoke of Mashiah as the redeemer of Israel and their savior who would gather their dispersed and strengthen their observance of the [mitzvot](#). In contrast, Christianity caused the Jews to be slain by the sword, their remnants to be scattered and humbled, the Torah to be altered, and the majority of the world to err and serve a god other than the Lord.

Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts, our thoughts. Ultimately, all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for Mashiah's coming and the improvement of the entire world, motivating the nations to serve God together as [Tzeplaniah 3:9](#) states: 'I will transform the peoples to a purer language that they all will call upon the name of God and serve Him with one purpose.'

How will this come about? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of Mashiah, Torah, and mitzvot. These matters have been spread to the furthestmost islands to many stubborn-hearted nations. They discuss these matters and

the mitzvot of the Torah, saying: 'These mitzvot were true, but were already negated in the present age and are not applicable for all time.'

Others say: 'Implied in the mitzvot are hidden concepts that can not be understood simply. The Mashiach has already come and revealed those hidden truths.'

When the true Messianic king will arise and prove successful, his position becoming exalted and uplifted, they will all return and realize that their ancestors endowed them with a false heritage and their prophets and ancestors caused them to err.

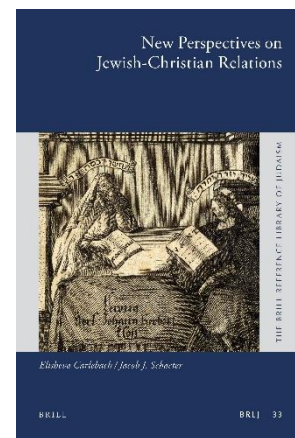
## (6) MEIRI, 13<sup>TH</sup> C. PROVENCE

### MEIRI AND THE NON-JEW: A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION

Yaakov Elman

For their dispositions are not identical, and their  
faces are not identical...

*b. Berakhot 58a*



#### בית הבחירה (מאירי) מסכת בבא קמא דף קיג עמוד ב

ומ"מ אם נודע לו על כל פנים חייב להחזירו וכן אף באבדה כל צד שיהא חלול השם בעכובה מחזירה הא כל שהוא מעממין הגדורים בדרכי הדת ועובדי האלהות על איזה צד אף על פי שאמונתם רחוקה מאמונתנו אינם בכלל זה אלא הרי הם כישראל גמור לדברים אלו אף באבדה ואף בטעות ולכל שאר הדברים בלא שום חלוק:

#### בית הבחירה (מאירי) מסכת עבודה זרה דף כב עמוד א

והמשנה הראשונה ממנו אמנם תכוין לבאר קצת חלק ענין הראשון והוא שאמר אין מעמידין בהמה בפונדקאות של גוים מפני שהם חשודים על הרביעה וכבר בארנו שהם מוזהרים עליה ויש כאן משום לפני עור לא תתן מכשול ואפילו היתה לו בהמה אסור מפני שהוא חס על בהמתו אם בנקבה שלא תעקר ואם בזכר שלא יכחיש ורובע את של אחרים ומתוך כך אף במקום שהתירו למכור אסור ליחד וכבר התבאר שאף במקום שלא נחשדו על הרביעה נאמר כן שסתמן נעשו חשודים בבהמה שלנו ומ"מ כל מקום שידוע בודאי שאין נוהגין בכך אף על פי שהם עובדי האלילים מותר וכבר התבאר שדברים הללו נאמרו לאותם הזמנים שהיו אותם האומות מעובדי האלילים והיו מוזהמים במעשיהם ומכוערים במדותיהם כענין האמור בקצת כמעשה ארץ מצרים אשר ישבתם בה לא תעשו וכמעשה ארץ כנען וגוי אבל שאר אמות שהם גדורים בדרכי הדת ושהם נקיים מכעורים שבמדות הללו ואדרבה שמענישים עליהם אין ספק שאין לדברים הללו מקום להם כלל כמו שבארנו וכבר נכפל זה הרבה בדברינו כדי שלא תצטרך לכמה דחקים שאתה מוצא בחדושיך ובתוספות ללא צורך:

(7) RAV MOSHE RIVKES 17<sup>TH</sup> C. VILNA באר הגולה

Choshen mishpat 425

The Rabbis said this in relation to the pagans of their own times only, who worshipped stars and the constellations and did not believe in the Exodus or in *creatio ex nihilo*. But the peoples in whose shade we, the people of Israel, are exiled and amongst whom we are dispersed do in fact believe in *creatio ex nihilo* and in the Exodus and in the main principles of religion, and their whole aim and intent is to the Maker of heaven and earth, as the codifiers have written. . . . So far, then, from our not being forbidden to save them, we are on the contrary obliged to pray for their welfare, and as Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi wrote at length on the Passover *Haggadah*, concerning the sentence *Pour out Thy wrath upon the peoples who have not known Thee* (Ps. lxxix. 6), it was King David, peace be upon him, who prayed to God to pour out His wrath on the heathen who did not believe in *creatio ex nihilo* and in the signs and wonders which God, Blessed be He, performed for us in Egypt, and at the giving of the *Torah*. But the Gentiles, in whose shadow we live and under whose wings we shelter, believe in all these things, as I have written; hence we stand on guard to pray continually for the welfare and success of the kingdom and the ministers, for all the States and places over which they rule; and indeed Maimonides ruled, in concurrence with Rabbi Joshua (B.T., *Sanhedrin*, 105a), that the pious of the Gentile nations too have a portion in the world to come.

וכמו"ש המוספה בשם היושלותי : ש לא  
 אהרו הז"ל דבר זה אלא על העכו"ם  
 שהיו כוזמניה' שהיו עובדי כוכבי' ומגלים  
 ולא היו אחימי' כיליחה חלרי' וכמדת  
 העולם אבל אלו הגוים אשר אמתו אומה  
 יעזרליה מוסים כלל פלהם ומפוזרים  
 ביניהם הם אחימיים נהודת העולם  
 וביניהם עברי' וכעיקרי' הדם וכל כוונתם  
 לעולם שמים וארץ כמ"ש הפוסקים  
 וביהו רמ"א בא"ח סי' קכ"ו בהנהגה לא  
 די שאין איבוד להלילו אלא אפי'  
 אלהו עמויבי' להספיל בשמותם ובאשר  
 האריך בזה בעל המש"ס בפרק הגדה  
 צפוקי' שפך חמסך על הגוים אשר לא  
 ידעו שרוד העני' הספיל לשמו על  
 פעבו"ם אשר אינם אחימיים במדות  
 העולם וענין החומות והנעלות אשר  
 עשה הש"ס לנו בחלמים ובמתן תורה  
 אבל הגוים אלו אשר אמתו בליים חיים  
 וחוסים תחת כנפיהם הם אחימי' בכל  
 אלה כמ"ש וכל משורשינו אמתו עומדי'  
 להספיל המיד על שנוס המלכות והקרי'  
 להלחחם ועל כל מדינות ומקומות  
 משעלהיהם ובהם הרמב"ם דהלכה כד'  
 יהושע כפי' חלק רב קיים ע"ה דאפי'  
 חסידי' עכו"ם יש להם חלק לעוה"ב ש  
 כ"י הכ"מ פי' ואינו עומד כרשמו שמיד  
 להפוקי רועה נהנה דקט' אמ"ם שפוזי'  
 להנחה מלון צשכיל חדות עמון מ"ם  
 כוח עומד צרשמו שגיד \*לאפוקי