



On Liberty

Rabbi Sacks, Sir Isaiah Berlin and two concepts of freedom

David Levenson



A few days before his death in 1997 Sir Isaiah Berlin, the most renowned thinker on liberal ideas in the second half of the 20th century, called then Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks to ask if he would officiate at Berlin's funeral.

Like many philosophy students in the 1960's and 70's, Rabbi Sacks Z"L was closely acquainted with the work of Berlin, then at the height of his intellectual and academic fame as President of Wolfson College, Oxford (which he helped to found) and the British Academy.

Many years later, Rabbi Sacks described Berlin's work as "a sustained commentary to the book of Exodus" (Shemot). Earlier, in his book *"The Dignity of Difference"* (2004), Rabbi Sacks explained his reasons for bringing the following Talmudic passage into his eulogy to Berlin seven years earlier:

*"When G-d was about to create Adam, the angels split into contending groups.
Mercy said, 'Let him be created, because he will do merciful deeds'.
Truth said, 'Let him not be created, for he will be full of falsehoods'.
Righteousness said, 'Let him be created, for he will do righteous deeds'.
Peace said, 'Let him not be created, for he will never cease quarrelling'.
What did The Ribono Shel Olam do? He took truth and threw it to the ground.
So it is written, 'Let truth spring from the earth' (Psalm 85:12)*

Rabbi Sacks explained this audacious statement by the Rabbis in the following way. Truth in heaven is harmonious and eternal. But we humans are fallible, we cannot possibly aspire to such a perfect version of truth. Those who attempt to do so may go to great lengths to preserve their version of a "perfect truth", even at the cost of the lives of those who do not share it. By "throwing truth to the ground", G-d acknowledged that human beings must live according to a less than heavenly standard of the truth, one that is conscious of its limitations.

The relevance to Berlin's philosophical writing and teaching on liberty is illuminated by Rabbi Sacks' insight and choice of this particular Rabbinic commentary. Berlin's essay *"Two Concepts of Liberty"* (1958) which propelled him to international fame, was in fact a personal search for truth about the essence of freedom in liberal democracies.

Berlin posited the following arguments for what he coined “negative liberty” and “positive liberty”. Of negative liberty, he wrote:

“I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no human being interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by other persons from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or, it may be, enslaved.”

Positive liberty meant the following, according to Berlin:

The ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master.... I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside.

(the underlining in both passages are mine)

Rabbi Sacks concluded in *“Dignity of Difference”* that Berlin’s dual understandings of freedom may seem at no great logical distance from each other – “no more than negative and positive ways of saying the same thing”. And yet, positive and negative notions of freedom historically developed in divergent directions and by the 21st century, had fallen into direct conflict with each other.

It is no coincidence that Isaiah Berlin wrote *“Two Concepts of Liberty”* when the Cold War between West and East was reaching its zenith and people’s fears of a possible nuclear holocaust were very real. Anyone who has watched Stephen Poliakoff’s autobiographical television series *“Summer of Rockets”* will appreciate the atmosphere that pervaded English society at this time.

For Berlin, the acclaimed champion of liberal democracy, the Soviet Union – all that it was and stood for – was the arch enemy of “negative liberty”, a controller of forces which coerced and enslaved its citizens. But in his definition of “positive liberty” Berlin went further by warning of the dangers for individual citizens of having their lives directed by causes “from outside”, a clear reference to the philosophy and ambition of the Soviet Empire as he saw it.

Much later, in the context of his comments about Berlin’s work being a sustained commentary to Exodus, Rabbi Sacks said, nevertheless, this commentary was bounded by the concept of negative liberty alone, the liberty which Berlin espoused and believed in. According to Rabbi Sacks, Berlin didn’t like positive liberty which he associated with the ideas expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *“Social Contract”* and practiced by the Soviet regime, a freedom of the collective which is decided and dictated by some remote higher authority.

In the opinion of Rabbi Sacks, Berlin’s rejection of “positive liberty” represented a blind spot in his philosophy and very specifically an abrogation of a critical part of the Torah’s message about the Jewish people’s Exodus from Egypt. By “throwing truth to the ground” G-d challenges us to seek a means of reconciling variant truths such as Berlin’s two concepts of liberty while acknowledging the limitations of our understanding of eternal truth. Not surprisingly Rabbi Sacks located a pathway which enables us to achieve this.

Isaiah Berlin did not live to witness 9/11 and all that ensued. As is well known, Rabbi Sacks was among the leading voices who sought on our behalf to make sense of this cataclysmic tragedy and the violent spectre of Islamic fundamentalism which it unleashed.

In effect, Berlin's clarion calls about the dangers of Soviet hegemony had now transformed in a new and highly virulent variant, from nationalist to supra-nationalist creed in which one version of the truth supersedes everyone else's. Rabbi Sacks wrote "Dignity of Difference" specifically to respond to this dangerous and growing phenomenon.

Unlike Berlin's binary approach, Rabbi Sacks' more nuanced interpretation of the two liberties neither regarded Soviet nor Islamic fundamentalism as reason for rejecting the concept of "positive liberty". The dangers that Rabbi Sacks always highlighted were the manifestations of "negative liberty" which flowered (in the case of late 1960's California, literally) as a libertarian, "do as I please so long as I don't encroach your freedoms" laissez faire approach.

For Rabbi Sacks, after 9/11 moral relativism and its bed-fellow multi-culturalism, would never be strong enough to defend liberal democracies from the forces of fundamentalism, the seekers of "perfect truth on earth". And yet, Rabbi Sacks continued to espouse both the universal "negative liberty" of Berlin and the quintessentially Jewish "positive liberty", based on a conscious understanding and acceptance of one's role. How did he manage to reconcile these apparent polarities?

For an explanation, we can turn to a pre-Pesach talk delivered by Rabbi Sacks just three years ago to Jewish students at University College London, entitled "*A New Concept of Freedom*". The complete transcript of his fascinating shiur, including examples of his inimitable style of inter-active dialogue with the students, was recorded and is available on the rabbisacks.org website.

<https://rabbisacks.org/new-concept-freedom/>

Briefly, Rabbi Sacks characterised Berlin's two concepts of liberty with the Hebrew words most associated with freedom, "*Chofshi*" and "*Cherut*".

Chofshi (same root as chofesh, commonly used in Israel to represent holiday) is derived from one of the first laws given to B'nei Yisrael after they leave Egypt, appropriately the law pertaining to Jewish slaves. At the seventh year, slaves are to be set free, and here the Torah uses Chofshi (Shemot 21:2). When Naftali Herz Imber wrote "*Hatikva*", he employed the same term; "*Liyot am Chofshi be'artzenu*" – may we be free people in our land.

Cherut, the more familiar Hebrew term for freedom or liberty, appears nowhere in Tanach. But the Rabbis of the Talmud in Pirkei Avot recognised the significance of Cherut from the following verse:

"And is says, 'And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d, engraved upon the tablets' (Shemot 32:16). Read not 'Charut' (engraved) but 'Cherut' (freedom). For there is no free man but one that occupies himself with the study of the Torah". (Pirkei Avot 2:6)

What did the Rabbis mean by connecting the idea of freedom to the carving of the Tablets (Luchot Ha Brit)? Rabbi Sacks explained thus to the UCL students:

“There are two ways you can make an inscription, you can write it with ink on paper or parchment or you can engrave it in stone. What’s the difference between those two things? (A student responds: ‘one fades’). One of them fades, the ink is a different (material) to the parchment, it is on the surface which means it can (fade or) be rubbed out. Whereas the inscription is not an addition of new material... it’s engraved into the stone so it can’t be rubbed off. Engraving is internal to the stone. And that is what the Rabbis understood as the supreme metaphor for the Jewish relationship to freedom under the law”.

Rabbi Sacks continued, the concept of “positive freedom” in Jewish thought is that Torah law isn’t imposed externally like the rule of law in, say, the Soviet Union. It isn’t alien to us, it is engraved within us, in our hearts and minds through millenia of our tradition and experience and through teaching our children “*Be’Dor La Dor*” from generation to generation. This, says Rabbi Sacks, is what prompted the Talmudic sages to coin *Cherut* as a new word for freedom.

Chofshi, the personification of negative liberty, where slaves and everyone or thing go free, ends with a *balagan* – a mess, said Rabbi Sacks to the students. Berlin’s liberty can itself end in a form of tyranny, the tyranny of disorder and the breakdown of society, vaguely holding on to relative moralities and Lennon-ist (John, not Vladimir Ilyich) idealism; “*imagine there’s no heaven, it’s easy if you try*”.

Sadly we have now lost both Sir Isaiah Berlin and Rabbi Lord Sacks, two of the greatest thinkers in living memory; both Jews, with profoundly different outlooks on religious faith. Two men who held each other in the highest esteem and respect, who debated with each other in the finest Talmudic tradition of the schools of Hillel and Shammai, Shmuel and Rav and so on.

What both have gifted to us is their unique understanding and insight of on the one hand universal liberty and on the other freedom under the law for us as Jews which we celebrate every year on Pesach and Shavuot. They are timeless and incalculable contributions in the increasingly anxious and fraught world in which we live today.

These and these are the words of the living G-d

אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן

Talmud: Eruvin 13b:10

Author’s note: I was moved to write this article for which I am indebted to the ideas of Rabbi Joe Wolfson, originally from the UK, now Rabbi and Director of the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus at the Bronfman Center of New York University, from his pre-Pesach 2021 online shiur at London School of Jewish Studies. In particular, I would like to thank Rabbi Wolfson for bringing to our attention Rabbi Sacks’ pre-Pesach shiur to Jewish students at University College London in 2018.