

The Unorthodox Zionism of Rabbi Sacks

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An obituary should be an exercise in remembering, not in reimagining. Since the passing of Rabbi Sacks, I have been struck by the widespread yet specious assumption of Rabbi Sacks as a conventional religious Zionist figure. This account has been sustained by a wide-ranging coalition from leftist commentators to Likud ministers and *Dati Leumi* Rabbanim. Many have focussed on his political activism at the expense of the philosophy that lay beneath the surface. Such accounts neglect to read his writings in depth and instead concentrate on his latter advocacy for Israel and against anti-Zionism – which he considered to be the new antisemitism.

Even for those without ideological baggage, at first glance, Rabbi Sacks can be deceiving. At his inauguration as Chief Rabbi in September 1991, he called for a *Decade of Renewal* centred on five values, one of which was ‘an unequivocal attachment to Israel’. What is often overlooked however, is that the English-speaking world’s most ardent and articulate religious Zionist – the man who was at home at the AIPAC conference and Mizrahi’s celebrations on the 50th anniversary of Jerusalem Day – diverged from much of the Dati Leumi world he championed. As with other areas of his thought, much appears complex and contradictory. I am not seeking to provide a comprehensive or balanced account of his attitude toward Israel nor to reconcile or endorse the different elements of Rabbi Sacks’ Zionism. Rather, I am writing this piece in an attempt to revive some of his quiet dissension in the hope that the community that venerates him might heed his warnings of the pitfalls of power and the dangers of mixing politics with religion.

The Messiah has not yet come

As Michael Wegier pointed out in his insightful obituary, unlike most religious Zionists, Rabbi Sacks did not view the establishment of Israel in 1948 as the beginning of a Messianic era. Interestingly, in his short, viral video *Why I am a Jew* he included the proclamation, ‘I am proud that our ancestors refused to be satisfied with premature consolations and in answer to the question, “Has the Messiah come?”’, always answered, “Not yet.”

His approach was further articulated in a conversation he had in June 2001 with Howard Jacobson as part of the *Faith Lectures* series, in which he detailed six competing understandings of the relationship between the State of Israel and the Messianic Age. There was the attitude of Rav Kook, who saw the State of Israel in Messianic terms, and the opposing view held by Rav Reines, who saw the state in survivalist terms as a means of rescuing endangered Jews. Next came the view of Neturei Karta that the State, as Rabbi Sacks puts it pithily, is ‘anti-

Messianic'; an attempt by people to bring about an era that can only be delivered by God. Then there were the secular Messianics who had Herzl as their Messiah, for whom the State of Israel was a vehicle to achieve their utopia. This differed from those secular Zionists who wanted a 'state like any other'. Finally, Rabbi Sacks identified himself with 'the extremely boring but nonetheless not bad view of Chief Rabbis of Great Britain' that Israel is 'religiously significant but ... we are not yet ready to say that it is of Messianic significance.' Hence, as Chief Rabbi, he continued in the tradition of his predecessors omitting the phrase *rayshit tzmichat ge'ulataynu* or 'first flowerings of our redemption' from the United Synagogue's prayer for the State of Israel.

Exile: spiritual or spatial?

A crucial view that differentiates Rabbi Sacks, not only from the *Dati Leumi* mainstream in Israel but from classical Zionist thought, is his attitude to exile and the diaspora. The American historian Carl Becker spoke of the 'history that common people carry around in their heads'. He reflected that 'whether the general run of people read history books or not, they inevitably picture the past in some fashion'. *Shlilat ha'golah* – the negation of the Diaspora – explains in large part how most Zionists view Jewish history.

If you were to approach your average Jewish Israeli on the street, be they secular or religious, and ask them how they view the eighteen centuries of exile in the diaspora, I doubt their answer would be especially positive. *Shlilat ha'golah* argues that the years in the diaspora were morally, spiritually and materially desolate. Emblematic of this are the words of Peretz Smolenskin, the Russian Zionist writer. In 1881, amidst the brutality of the Russian pogroms, Smolenskin decried: 'There is no end to the affliction that has already struck so many tens of thousands. ... We have no sense of national honour; our standards are those of second-class people. We find ourselves rejoicing when we are granted a favour and exulting when we are tolerated and befriended'. This is a sentiment that permeates various strands of Zionist thought. The Labour Zionist Ya'akov Zerubavel wondered: 'Which other nation has such abundance of martyrs ... in tragedies which have their source in the passivity of our faith?'

Rabbi Sacks, although an enthusiastic Zionist whose writings are replete with stories that illustrate the depths of persecution, did not have the same notion of *Shlilat ha'golah*. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Efrat, himself on the more liberal fringe of the religious Zionist world penned a critical response to *Not in God's Name* (to which Rabbi Sacks felt moved to reply) in the *Jewish Review of Books*. He takes issue with what he views as Rabbi Sacks' idealising of *galut* such as when he wrote that: 'Out of darkness, though, sometimes comes light. What Jews discovered when they had lost almost everything else was that religion can survive without power.' Riskin charges that Rabbi Sacks runs 'beyond the biblical point, and in a direction that classical Zionist thinkers, among others,

saw as dangerously misguided'. However, whilst Rabbi Sacks never believed in a de-territorialised Judaism, he nonetheless saw exile more in spiritual than spatial terms.

As he wrote in *Crisis and Covenant*, 'Israel does not negate the diaspora, because Judaism is a matter of holy lives as well as holy places.' For him exile 'cannot be reduced to a spatial or political category. Exile means "alienation, disintegration, inner strife". In that sense, American Jews are in *galut*, alienated as they are from their own traditions. But that is not a *galut* that can be eliminated by geographical relocation, a trip across the ocean.' This was an attitude that was reflected in his life's work. He sought, wherever possible, to move Jews closer to God more than move them to Israel. Indeed, Rabbi Sacks was a distinctly British Zionist, educated in British and Anglo-Jewish institutions. He served a diaspora community. He was a public intellectual in Britain long before his works were widely read in Israel. It is notable that among his two dozen books, there is not one exclusively focused on Israel or Zionism.

Power and Chosenness

Amidst the unholy marriage of religious fundamentalism and political power in Israel today, there is much in *Not in God's Name* that is immensely timely. Rabbi Sacks advances a profoundly inclusive reading of the series of sibling rivalries in Genesis. He argues that our sympathy and God's love extends, for instance, to the 'rejected' sibling. Perhaps most radically, he proposes a conception of chosenness that is antithetical to that assumed by many religious Zionists:

"A chosen people is the opposite of a master race, first, because it is not a race but a covenant; second, because it exists to serve God, not to master others. A master race worships itself; a chosen people worships something beyond itself. A master race values power; a chosen people cares for the powerless ...
A chosen people is not a master race but its opposite: a servant community."

Rabbi Riskin sees in this passage an aversion to power with which he disagrees. He writes that: 'Power may corrupt, and absolute power may corrupt absolutely, but powerlessness corrupts too, for it necessitates accommodation with, and sometimes even surrender to, evil.' Such a critique misunderstands the nature of Rabbi Sacks' antipathy to power. At no point is he embracing the abject powerlessness of the diaspora. In his reply, he explains: 'I have never argued for a disempowered, de-territorialised Judaism, and I never will. But neither will I defend the toxic mix of religion and politics that has been the downfall of every culture that embraced it.' Rabbi Sacks, in this exchange and elsewhere, differentiates between influence and power. For him, as Tocqueville foresaw when religion fuses with politics, "it becomes a divisive, not a uniting, force. If it seeks power, it will forfeit influence. If it is priestly, it will fail to be prophetic." As he said with reference to modern-day Israel in

Future Tense “Judaism must be de-politicised and put back where it belongs, in civil society, far removed from all structures of power”.

Seek peace and pursue it

Another underexplored aspect of his thought was a belief in peace as a religious ideal. In his Haggadda Rabbi Sacks wrote: “One day we will learn the lesson of peace, that war never solved any conflict in the long run; that in victory the victor too is defeated; that in conquering others we diminish ourselves; that only in and through peace do we honour the image of God that is mankind.” He publicly supported the peace process at a time when much of the religious Zionist world rallied against it and wrote privately to Yitzhak Rabin warning him about the scale of internal opposition to the plan. Tragically, Rabin’s reply to his letter arrived in London after his funeral and assassination. Rabbi Sacks later reflected on the letter: “It was three pages long, deeply moving, an eloquent restatement of his commitment to peace. But by the time it was delivered, he was no longer alive. He had pursued peace, as we are all commanded to do, but he had paid the ultimate price.”

A still small voice

Rabbi Sacks was never as critical of Israeli Governments as his predecessor Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, who sparked widespread ire in Israel when, rather explosively, the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram* quoted him endorsing a Palestinian state long before the Oslo Accords. Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel Shlomo Goren replied that such a ‘Satanic declaration’, as well as previous declarations by Jakobovits, ‘disqualifies him from leading a Jewish congregation’ and called on the ‘rabbis of the world and the Jews of Britain to remove this dangerous man from our midst’.

In his 1984 book *If Only My People*, Jakobovits took aim at the settlement movement: ‘The pages of Jewish history are littered with the lethal shrapnel flung out by the explosion of pseudo-Messianic movements.’ By contrast, Rabbi Sacks tended to abide by the well-worn adage against airing dirty laundry in public, which characterised much of Anglo-Orthodoxy’s attitude to Israel amidst the rise in anti-Zionism in the twenty-first century. He tended to temper support for peace with avid support for Israel, walking a tightrope that enabled him to retain support from across a politically divided constituency. I was always moved by his depiction of the prophetic ideal of peace. In 2006 he told Ziauddin Sardar of the *New Statesman*: ‘It seems to me that if there is one people that can understand Palestinian tears better than most, it is the Jewish people.’

Rabbi Sacks went furthest in a 2002 interview in *The Guardian*. Amidst the backdrop of the Second Intifada and the failures of Oslo, Jonathan Freedland asked him if he could square the biblical command not to ill-treat a stranger with Israel’s 35-year-long occupation of the West Bank and Gaza? Rabbi Sacks replied: ‘You cannot ignore a command that is repeated 36 times in the Mosaic books: “You were exiled in order to know what it feels

like to be an exile.” I regard that as one of the core projects of a state that is true to Judaic principle. And therefore, I regard the current situation as nothing less than tragic, because it is forcing Israel into postures that are incompatible in the long-run with our deepest ideals.’

When pressed he continued: ‘There are things that happen on a daily basis which make me feel very uncomfortable as a Jew’, expressing his profound shock at reports of smiling Israeli soldiers posing for a photograph with the body of a Palestinian. Perhaps with the diversity of his constituency in mind, he told Freedland that in 1967, following the Six Day War, he had a rare disagreement with his late father. ‘I was convinced that Israel had to give back all the land for the sake of peace. My father, bless him, was convinced that Israel’s neighbours would never make peace. Thirty-five years later, I think we were both right.’ Amidst the predictable uproar that followed, Rabbi Sacks wrote to Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Lau that ‘sensationalist headlines’ emphasised certain statements and explained that ‘as anyone who has read The Guardian interview in full will see, it contains a strong defence of Israel, the strongest that this paper has printed.’ However, he did not expressly recant any of the searing criticisms he made. In the interview itself, Freedland wondered if it ‘would not help if he was less roundabout on this topic?’ No, Rabbi Sacks replied, ‘people listen to “a still, small voice” more readily than a loud one.’

Sacks’ warning

I always heard that ‘still small voice’ for peace, but I wonder if all of his other readers and listeners did. Eight days after Yitzhak Rabin’s murder on 12th November 1995, Rabbi Sacks told the Communal Memorial at the Royal Albert Hall: ‘The Judaism I love is not a religion that teaches people to hate one another, that excuses violence, that expresses disdain for the rule of law. The Judaism I love is the faith that first taught the world the sanctity of life and the religious value of peace. The Judaism I love is the one which, in the words of Maimonides, brings not vengeance into the world but love and compassion and peace into the world. And that must be the Judaism we now live.’ He issued a piercing warning: ‘Today I call on religious leaders to begin healing the terrible wound that has opened up in the heart of our people. For if we do not, I fear that the bullet that broke Yitzhak Rabin’s body will enter the Jewish soul.’ In the decades that followed, the wound he spoke of has only grown. Those whose incitement fuelled the hateful frenzy that led to the murder of Rabin, who fuse politics and religion into a noxious ideology, have moved from the fringes to the mainstream.

The Duality of Rabbi Sacks

Returning to the subject of obituaries, the best tributes I have heard since the passing of Rabbi Sacks have acknowledged not only his articulacy and intellect but have also understood his complexity, the competing and

contradictory influences on him, the weight of public office and the enormity of the task that befell him. An especially interesting tribute came from Rabbi Tony Bayfield, who met Rabbi at university and whose career, which culminated in leading the Movement for Reform Judaism, ran in parallel to Sacks'. Bayfield recalled a cartoon on the wall of his office in the mid-1990s: 'It showed him with two heads, facing in opposite directions. One was Dr Sacks, the urbane pipe-smoking Cambridge philosophy don. The other was Rabbi Sacks in full rabbinic garb, the wide-eyed young man whose encounter with the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Crown Heights in 1969 left such a profound impression. Rabbi Bayfield writes that he 'couldn't understand why he would display such a penetrating insight into his duality so publicly'. He ends his obituary by saying he 'will never forget the seminal public thinker who achieved so much in articulating Judaism to wider society. Nor the man with awe-inspiring intellectual abilities who nevertheless found he could not hold the worlds of mainstream and ultra-Orthodoxy together but, while in office, never gave up trying.' Several other tributes have explored how Rabbi Sacks navigated the tensions between mainstream and ultra-orthodoxy and how his Torah was influenced in different ways by Rav Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I would argue that the time has come to consider the dualities of his Zionism. He was Israel's staunchest defender and yet, in a rare intervention, he told a liberal British newspaper he was 'very uncomfortable as a Jew' at the treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank. He was outspoken about the dangers of religious fundamentalism yet met with the radical Iranian cleric Ayatollah Abdullah Javadi-Amoli at the latter's request. He was a passionate religious Zionist, yet he saw liberal democracy as the way of 'instantiating the values of Abrahamic monotheism'. He described his visit to Jerusalem shortly after the Six Day War as an 'almost mystical experience' yet he believed in exchanging land for the sake of peace.

We cannot know how Rabbi Sacks would want to be remembered. A student with a different worldview to mine would write a completely different article to this one and draw fundamentally different conclusions. He was after all prolific and multifaceted and people tend to hear their own politics in his work. I believe that he would, at least in part, like to be remembered as a believer in peace who warned us of the pitfalls of power. Maybe he left us a clue in a 2009 *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio Four entitled 'Perhaps We Should All Read Our Own Obituaries'. In it, Rabbi Sacks recounted (as he did on numerous other occasions) the story of Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite who in 1888 read his own obituary in the morning paper. A journalist had mistaken Alfred's brother's death for his own. Nobel was hurt by his depiction of him as the dynamite king and decided to use the money he'd made from his invention creating five annual prizes in the fields of physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace. Writing on the Friday of Chanukah Rabbi Sacks explains that were one to have only one candle the Shabbat candles which symbolise peace take precedence. He explained that "In Judaism, even the smallest fragment of peace takes precedence over even the greatest victory in war. Like Alfred Nobel, Jews preferred to be remembered for peace. Perhaps we should all read our own obituaries. It might just persuade us to spend less on weapons of war, and more on teaching the world's children the art of peace."