

LEHRHAUS

Over Shabbat

Shemot

Vol. 10, Issue 16 • 20 Tevet 5786 / January 9, 2025

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The New Modern Orthodox Humash At Last?: A Review of the Rabbi Sacks Humash

Yosef Lindell is a lawyer, writer, and lecturer living in Silver Spring, MD, with his wife and two sons.

Review of the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) (Koren Publishers, 2025).

In 2015, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks [told a reporter](#) that he was composing a new Humash intended for synagogue use:

I am writing a new commentary to the Chumash. There was a commentary—it's still used in Anglo Jewry—called the Hertz Chumash, written by one of my

predecessors [as the British Chief Rabbi]. It is a commentary that asks: How do we set this against its historical background? What does it mean to us today? Nobody's done a Hertz Chumash since Hertz a century ago and it's an urgent necessity. ArtScroll anthologizes traditional commentaries and it's done tremendously well. But they have not stepped outside that world of the yeshiva and said how do we make sense of this today?

R. Sacks believed that, while many existing commentaries were effective, they were not sufficiently applicable to much of modern Jewry. He believed that a new Humash for synagogue use

must first and foremost instruct the modern Jew in how the Torah remains relevant.

In 2017, I [published an article in *Lehrhaus*](#) entitled “A Call for a New Modern Orthodox Humash.” The article compared the 1936 Pentateuch by Rabbi Joseph Hertz with ArtScroll’s 1993 Stone Edition Chumash. I concluded with a wishlist of sorts for a new Modern Orthodox shul Humash. I said that it ought to merge the aesthetic appeal of the ArtScroll with the Hertz edition’s engagement with modernity. The commentary, I wrote, should focus on *peshat* (plain meaning), employ literary techniques that notice themes, characters, and narrative structure, provide “religious inspiration within a moral framework,” and speak to both the learned and the uninitiated. It was a tall order, but I noted that I was eagerly anticipating R. Sacks’ Humash, which I hoped would do all of these things.

The article proved far more popular than I expected. It might even be said that the want of a R. Sacks Humash inaugurated the most productive phase in my career as a writer.

But while my writing took off, it seemed like the promised Humash was not to be. In 2018, R. Sacks [called it](#) “the biggest project [he had] ever undertaken,” suggesting that it was far from being finished. And then, in 2020, he tragically passed away. How could his capstone project be completed without him?

That today I hold in my hands the Koren Shalem Humash with the translation and commentary of R. Jonathan Sacks is thanks to the perseverance of a team of editors and writers at Koren Publishers – including R. Sacks’s niece Jessica Sacks (xi).¹ R. Sacks completed the translation of the Humash before he died, and it was published in the 2021 [Koren Tanakh Maalot](#). But it’s clear from the “For Further Reading” section at the back of the present volume—which lists the publications from which each portion of the commentary was taken—that he only drafted a commentary for parts of three *parshiyot*: Shemot, Vaera, and Bo. The rest of the commentary was assembled from his voluminous writings elsewhere—primarily the many cycles of *Covenant & Conversation* on the weekly Torah portion, but also from his other published books and lectures, including his Mahzorim, Siddur, and Haggadah.

The volume’s editors took “great care” to present R. Sacks’s “ideas and messages in his own words, only adapting and reshaping them to preserve his style in the new format” (xii). Nevertheless, because the new Humash commentary is a medley of disparate sources whose compilation was not overseen by R. Sacks, I’ll admit I was initially skeptical. But I shouldn’t have been; the editors have done an outstanding job collecting and synthesizing many of R. Sacks’s major ideas about the Torah in a compelling commentary that speaks in his voice, holds together as a cohesive work, and addresses our contemporary age. Who

¹ All in-text citations are to the volume under review.

knows? It might even be the new Modern Orthodox Humash.

This review will focus on several themes that emerge from the Humash's commentary that allow us to judge its success as a distinctly Modern Orthodox work. First, a few caveats are in order. I am keenly aware that R. Sacks [detested the term Modern Orthodoxy](#), calling it "overrated to the nth degree" because it is exclusionary and promotes "the narcissism of small differences." I use it nonetheless because it describes and resonates with the North American community in which his Humash is likely to have the largest impact. Further, although the Humash was not put together by R. Sacks, I have no convenient alternative other than to treat the editors' choices as reflecting his vision for the work. Finally, I will not discuss R. Sacks's translation, which I have written about [elsewhere](#).

The Humash's Look and Feel

Let's begin with the Humash's layout, aesthetics, and a couple of secondary features. The Hebrew and English text of the Torah is large, crisp, and clear. The thinness of the paper is disappointing, but every Koren Siddur and Humash has this issue. However, this is the first time Koren's longstanding decision to print the Hebrew on the left and the English on the right makes sense to me, as it allows R. Sacks's commentary to be read from left to right across each two-page spread. (However, it does lead to some awkwardness when citing a range of page numbers, as will be evident in many of the citations that follow.)

Targum Onkelos and Rashi are printed below the Torah text, and Koren made unique choices with each. The Humash uses a version of Onkelos that follows Yemenite vocalization and punctuation, which "reflects the ancient tradition of reading the Targum publicly, as is still practiced today in Yemenite communities" (xii). Further, the Humash marks in gray the places where Onkelos departs from a literal rendering of the verse. As for Rashi, the publishers decided to present it in a unique typeface designed by Eliyahu Koren, who founded Koren in 1961, which some might find a little clearer than traditional "Rashi script." More remarkably, the publishers relied on manuscripts of Rashi's commentary as well as early and influential printed editions to create a new "critical" edition of the text, which they believe removes "all later additions and textual corruptions" from the commentary (ibid.). Rashi is also vocalized and punctuated. Finally, the volume includes a short commentary on each Haftarah by Rabbi David Nativ taken from the Hebrew Koren Humash Yisrael and translated into English (xiii).

Next we will consider R. Sacks's commentary.

Torah and Secular Wisdom

Like his predecessor R. Hertz, R. Sacks quotes liberally from secular and non-Jewish sources, particularly with reference to philosophy and psychology. In his commentary on *kashrut*, he writes:

To fully apply the Torah's dietary laws, we need an understanding of

zoology. To apply Torah to the human mind, one must understand psychology and psychiatry. To apply it to society, we must understand sociology and anthropology. To cure poverty, we must understand economics. To avoid environmental catastrophe, we need to understand botany, biology, climatology, and much else besides. (776-79)

To R. Sacks, “pursuing secular studies” is more than “purely instrumental.” It allows us “to see the wisdom of God’s creation. ... To repair the world, you have to understand it” (779-78). This is a proudly modern approach to the value of secular wisdom.

But unlike R. Hertz, R. Sacks wears his scholarship lightly. The Hertz Humash was a sustained polemic against turn-of-the-twentieth-century Biblical criticism and, at the same time, a plea to accept those aspects of modern scholarship and scientific

thought consistent with Torah values. For example, R. Hertz wrote a lengthy essay denying that Genesis Chapters 1 and 2—which use different names for God and present creation stories somewhat distinct from one another—were written by different (necessarily human) authors.² He wrote another essay accepting the theory of evolution but stressing that “each stage is no product of chance, but is an act of Divine will.”³

R. Sacks agrees with R. Hertz on both counts, yet does not dwell on either point. About Genesis 1 and 2, he merely says that creation is “told from two different perspectives, first as cosmology (the origins of matter), then as anthropology (the birth of humanity)” (3). This acknowledges the distinction between the two chapters, but also defuses the larger question by implying that multiple perspectives does not mean there were multiple authors.⁴ A few pages later, he suggests that evolution is hinted to in the Torah’s account of creation (12),⁵ but there’s little discussion of either issue.⁶

² J. H. Hertz, ed., [The Pentateuch and Haftorahs](#) 2nd ed. (Soncino Press, 1960), 198-200.

³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴ R. Sacks even suggests that Genesis 1, with its description of everything being created “according to its kind” is an exemplar of “ordered diversity,” which “is the priestly way of seeing the world” (7)—a reference to the academic view that Genesis 1 came from the priestly school or “P” source. Yet R. Sacks does not discuss the issue further, suggesting that he does not want to wade into Higher Criticism but also that he does not see multiple perspectives embedded in the

Torah’s narrative as a challenge to Mosaic authorship of the Torah.

⁵ R. Sacks writes that when the Torah says that God rested from all the work He created (*asher bara elokim*), it adds an unnecessary word, *la-asot* ([Genesis 2:3](#)). This could mean that God created the world “to make”—in other words, “to evolve” (12).

⁶ However, R. Sacks addresses conflicts between science and religion at length in his book [The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning](#) (Schocken, 2011). See particularly his chapter on Darwin, 209-232.

R. Sacks's decision not to explore conflicts between Torah and science or Torah and historical scholarship is not an oversight, but consistent with how he conceived of the Torah's purpose. He writes, "To understand a book, one needs to know to which genre it belongs. ... [T]he Torah is not a book of history, even though it includes history. It is not a book of science" either (3). Rather, "the Torah is, first and last, a book about how to live" (ibid.). The Torah teaches lessons of eternal relevance, not science or history. As R. Sacks writes memorably in his book *The Great Partnership*, "Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean."⁷ On the one hand, this separation of realms permits one to accept science and historical scholarship as long as it is consistent with fundamental beliefs like the divinity of the Torah. On the other hand, it means that R. Sacks's focus as an interpreter of the Torah is on making or deriving meaning, not on scientific or historical issues.⁸

Sins of the Fathers

One of the starkest themes in ArtScroll's Chumash is that the Patriarchs and several other biblical figures never sinned. In ArtScroll's telling, for example, the fact that Rebecca received a prophecy of *ve-rav ya'avod tzair* ([Genesis 25:23](#))—that the elder brother would serve the younger—

meant that Jacob had to steal Esav's blessing to fulfill his destiny, even though it was hard for him to act against his truthful nature. Esav, on the other hand, was irredeemably evil and unfit for the Abrahamic mission.⁹

R. Sacks's approach couldn't be more different. "No one in the Torah is portrayed as perfect," he writes (103), and no book "has been more honest about the failings of even the greatest" (82). Rebecca's prophecy, R. Sacks points out, could mean that the elder will serve the younger, but the Hebrew is ambiguous enough to support the opposite interpretation as well (172).¹⁰ In fact, "*reading this parasha, we cannot but identify with Esav, not Yaakov*"—we feel Isaac's shock and see Esav's tears (ibid.). Esav "is carved from an altogether coarser grain" than Jacob. "But he is not without his humanity, his filial loyalty, and a decent if quick-tempered disposition" (189). R. Sacks poignantly explains that in desiring to bless Esav, Isaac reasoned that although Esav was unfit for the covenantal mission:

he, too, is my child. I refuse to sacrifice him, as my father almost sacrificed me. I refuse to send him away, as my parents sent Hagar and Yishmael away. ... I do not ignore who or what he is. But I will love

⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁸ Rabbi Gil Student makes this point succinctly in a recent piece based on an article R. Sacks wrote in 1989. Gil Student, "[Rabbi Sacks on Reading Chumash Faithfully](#)," *Torah Musings* (Nov. 10, 2025).

⁹ [The Stone Edition Chumash](#), Nosson Scherman, ed. (Mesorah Publications, 1993), 134-43.

¹⁰ The verse can be rendered in English so as to preserve this ambiguity: R. Sacks translates, "The greater shall the younger serve," which can mean either option.

him anyway, even if I do not love everything he does. (188)

This sympathetic reading of Esav is far from ArtScroll's more traditional one.

Further, according to R. Sacks, Jacob was punished for his deception. Lavan tricks him into marrying the older sister, Leah, before the younger sister, Rachel, as "those who deceive will be deceived" (207). And Jacob is forced to pay obeisance to Esav when they meet again: he is frightened, he bows down seven times, and he calls Esav his lord and himself Esau's servant. "The roles," writes R. Sacks, "have been reversed" (191). When Jacob sends Esav a gift of livestock, he even implores "accept my blessing [*birkhati*]" (Genesis 33:11). R. Sacks says that "Yaakov is symbolically giving back the blessing he took all those years before" (243).

R. Sacks's reading of the story of Jacob and Esav is thematic, character driven, and sensitive to the Torah's use and repetition of specific words. This demonstrates the influence of the literary method of Tanakh study best exemplified in the Orthodox world by the work of Machon Herzog in Israel and teachers like Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun, Yaakov Medan, and Elchanan Samet, among many others. Indeed, R. Sacks's indebtedness to the literary school is evident throughout the commentary. He refers to the chiasmic structure of certain stories—where the second half parallels the first half in reverse order (72, 413, 701)—and points out the thematic significance of the sevenfold repetition of a word (13, 133). Both R. Sacks's willingness to explore the failings of biblical heroes and his adoption of

literary exegetical techniques are emblematic of a Modern Orthodox approach.

Novel Directions

As R. Sacks noted in the interview with which this review began, ArtScroll presents a digest of commentaries. R. Sacks's commentary in this Humash also cites many rabbinic commentators, but in true Modern Orthodox fashion, he includes figures who are often not part of the right-wing canon, such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (10), Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (317), the nineteenth century Italian exegete Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (379, 1095)—who was more academic than most—and Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook (583). R. Sacks also notes opinions that veer from ArtScroll's more traditionalist approach to the Torah's narratives, including Rashbam's suggestion that Jacob crossed the river—leaving him alone to wrestle with the angel—because he was running away from Esav (235) and Rashbam's view that Joseph's brothers do not actually sell him to the Ishmaelites; he was pulled from the pit by the Midianites when the brothers were unaware (270-73).

Moreover, unlike ArtScroll or R. Hertz, R. Sacks frequently presents his own interpretations—or at least ones that I have not seen elsewhere. Here are two. In one of the few comments that R. Sacks wrote specifically for this volume before he passed away, he notes that it is "bitterly ironic" that the Egyptian magicians can make blood and frogs too, but cannot remove the plagues of blood and frogs that are causing their people to suffer! In other words, the magicians can only make "the situation

worse, not better” (427). Also, R. Sacks is deeply ambivalent about Pinhas’ zealous killing of an Israelite who lay with a Midianite woman. He notes—admittedly conflating textual analysis with the later division of the *parshiyot*—that *Parshat Balak* ends on a cliffhanger, “between Pinhas’ act ... and the divine verdict on the act,” forcing us “to wait a week before hearing whether he did right or wrong” (1130). Although God concludes that Pinhas acted appropriately, Pinhas is then made a priest in the Mishkan and given a covenant of peace, clarifying “that once is enough” (1135). “Rare indeed are the circumstances in which Pinhas-like zealotry is justified, and if anyone asks whether he may do the same, the answer must always be: no” (ibid.). In fact, an anti-violence streak suffuses the entire commentary, which is consistent with R. Sacks’s writings elsewhere.¹¹

A Humash for Our Age

R. Sacks, as he promised in the 2015 interview, focuses on addressing the Torah’s application to the challenges of modernity. For instance, he notes how “the laws of *kashrut* limit our sense of possession over nature” (1330), and stresses the

¹¹ Regarding Shimon and Levi’s destruction of Shekhem, R. Sacks writes, “Violence defiles all. It did then. It does now” (244). As to the command not to despise the Edomite, R. Sacks offers, “Esav may hate Yaakov, but it does not follow that Yaakov should hate Esav” (1388). And vengeance, R. Sacks says, is best left to God (1477). R. Sacks explores these themes further in his book [Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence](#) (Schocken, 2015). But, as Rabbi Alex Israel writes in *Tradition’s* just-published special issue on the intellectual legacy of R. Sacks, “the dangers of power and a distinct aversion to its employment ... pervades virtually every work that R. Sacks wrote.” Alex Israel, “Not by Might: Aversion to Power in Rabbi Sacks’ Writings,” *Tradition* 57:4/58:1 (Fall 2025/Winter 2026): 120.

importance of environmental conservation (1370).

He also attacks the “hyper-individualism of our late capitalist society” and a culture that glorifies “I” and not “we,” (1225-24) arguing instead that storytelling centered around a values-driven historical narrative—like what is modeled in the Torah—can build a covenantal society that fosters a “sense of collective belonging” (1417).¹²

R. Sacks also seeks to instill personal responsibility. When Moses responds to God’s call at the burning bush, R. Sacks writes, “There is no life without a task, no person without a talent ... There is an act only we can do, and only at this time” This “is the meaning of our life, the purpose of our existence, the story we are called on to write” (388).

And R. Sacks addresses modernity with an eloquence that few other writers can match. For example, he rhapsodizes about the Land of Israel with the insight of one who has walked its soil and witnessed firsthand the delicate balance between

¹² The need for covenantal community is a central philosophical idea underpinning R. Sacks’s work. Dr. Tanya White writes that for R. Sacks, “Covenant is not just a religious concept; it is a way of thinking about the world, one that prioritizes relationships, responsibility, and the pursuit of shared values. What began as a biblical concept narrowly focused on Divine-human relations evolves in R. Sacks’s later work into a comprehensive framework for grappling with the universal challenges of modern life, including those posed by society, postmodernism, and beyond.” Tanya White, “Covenantal Theology in the Work of Rabbi Sacks,” *Tradition* 57:4/58:1 (Fall 2025/Winter 2026): 247-48.

strength and fragility that defines the modern State:

For only in Israel is God so close that you can feel him in the sun and wind, sense Him just beyond the hills, hear Him in the inflections of everyday speech, breathe His presence in the early morning air, and live, dangerously but confidently, under the shadow of his wings. (1200)

I can almost hear R. Sacks reading this passage. The Land of Israel comes alive in the power of his poetry. How I miss his voice.

Concluding Thoughts

It's fair to say that the way R. Sacks incorporates secular wisdom, reads thematically and sometimes counterintuitively, employs literary techniques, and addresses the challenges of our age with inspiring prose makes this work a Modern Orthodox Humash.

Is it *the* Modern Orthodox Humash? Of that I am not sure.

For one, as Rabbi Yaakov Bieler [pointed out in response to my original 2017 article](#), there are many different directions a Modern Orthodox Humash could take, and the Modern Orthodox community is too diverse for one work to speak to every individual. Rabbi Yaakov Jaffe similarly [wondered](#) if we really need our texts to match our ideology precisely; if so, everyone might need

their own version of the Humash. Indeed, R. Sacks's Humash addresses certain aspects of modernity. Yet it largely ignores others, such as the challenges posed by biblical criticism. The [Steinsaltz Humash](#) that Koren published in 2018, [which I reviewed for the Forward](#), is another take on a Modern Orthodox Humash: it cites many *peshat*-based commentaries and places the Torah's narratives into historical and geographical context. Yet, by incorporating commentary into the translation, it fails to adequately distinguish between what's in the Torah's text and what's an interpretation beyond the text. Both Humashim are "modern" in their own ways, and neither will satisfy every reader. At this point I'm willing to concede that *the* Modern Orthodox Humash may be a chimera.

There is also the practical problem of getting a new Humash onto synagogue shelves. More than 15 years after its publication, the Koren Sacks Siddur is only very slowly starting to displace the ArtScroll Siddur, and only in a minority of Modern Orthodox congregations. And the 2018 Rabbinical Council of America's [Siddur Avodat HaLev](#), which I reviewed [here](#), is almost nowhere to be found. ArtScroll's Stone Chumash is even more entrenched than the Siddur. I see very few Steinsaltz Humashim on the bookshelf. (There are more Hertz Humashim in my synagogue, to tell the truth.) I worry that Rabbi Sacks's Humash will similarly struggle to gain a foothold. Siddur and Humash stock turn over glacially.

Finally, like every book, the new Humash has its drawbacks. I would have liked to see more focus

on the traditional commentaries and discussion of how their methodologies differ. In my opinion, as noted above, R. Sacks also pays insufficient attention to the challenges posed by modern biblical scholarship. R. Hertz's treatment of those issues is nearly a century old; we need a new primer. And the Humash is missing an introduction. If R. Sacks had lived, no doubt he would have worked to compose a revelatory and paradigm-shifting introduction like he did for the Siddur and Mahzor. Perhaps he would have also written longer essays on difficult thematic and textual issues like R. Hertz did at the end of each of the Five Books in his Humash. On a similar note, one gets a sense from the commentary to Va'era—which is the only *parsha* for which R. Sacks wrote nearly a full commentary—that he was planning on offering many short verse-by-verse insights that built toward a larger point. The editors were unable to replicate this style when assembling the commentary from his longer essays elsewhere. In these ways and so many others, his passing is still deeply felt five years on.

In some sense, this Humash is incomplete because R. Sacks's own journey was incomplete. And this is the final lesson he and the volume's editors leave us with. Moses did not make it to the Promised Land. This teaches us, according to R. Sacks, that "humanity at its highest is still human. We are mortal. ... We each have a destination we will not reach" (1480). Life "is about getting up every

¹ This took place on the same [oft-mentioned trip](#) on which Sacks also met with R. Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik and R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson. It should be noted that Sacks says in his *hesped* of Soloveitchik that the meeting

morning and walking one more day to the Promised Land even though you know you may never get there, but knowing also that you helped others get there" (1482). And who has helped our generation take more steps toward God, Torah, and the Promised Land than R. Sacks?

My relatively minor critiques hardly lessen the achievement of this Humash. So buy it for your home. Buy it for your synagogue. It is a classic for our age, and maybe even for the ages.

Aggadic Men: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks's References to Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel

Steven Gotlib is the Associate Rabbi at Mekor Habracha/Center City Synagogue and Director of the Center City Beit Midrash in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Mr. Bond, they have a saying in Chicago: 'Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it's enemy action.' - Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger*

In 1968, a nineteen-year-old not-yet-rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020) met R. Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) in Los Angeles.¹ Details of their meeting were never shared, but it

took place in 1968, but writes elsewhere that he "met the Rav in the summer of 1967." (Jonathan Sacks, [Tradition in an Untraditional Age, : Essays on Modern Jewish Thought](#) (Maggid, 2023), 272).

is clear that a lasting impression was left on the future Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, as both quotations of, and allusions to, Heschelian ideas are unmistakable in Sacks's writings throughout his life.²

Direct Mentions

Sacks was clearly familiar with Heschel's writings before his life-changing trip to the United States. In his [posthumously-released interview with R. Efram Goldberg](#), Sacks recounted finding Heschel's writings "very moving" from a young age, and R. Aryeh Solomon noted that, "having now studied early Hasidic texts [with various Chabad *hasidim* with whom he stayed while waiting to meet R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson], [Sacks] had 'discovered' the origins of many of the refreshing ideas so beautifully enunciated in the writings of Heschel."³ It is also known from Sacks's writings in various places that Heschel came up in passing with another great thinker he met at that time; R. Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

[Soloveitchik] said, 'you have read Prof A. J. Heschel's book called *The Sabbath*?' I said, 'yes.' He said, 'it's a beautiful book, isn't it?' I said, 'yes.' And he said, 'what does he call Shabbat? – A sanctuary in

time.' He said, 'this is an idea of a poet, it's a lovely idea. But what is Shabbat? Shabbat,' he said, 'is *lamed-tet melakhah*, it is the 39 categories of work and their *toladot* 'and it is out of that halakhah and not out of poetry that you have to construct a theory of Shabbat.'⁴

Sacks apparently did not agree with Soloveitchik's dismissal of Heschelian poetic philosophy. The above idea from *The Sabbath* in particular was quoted favorably in Sacks's *divrei Torah*:

Not only is the seventh day a time when secular work comes to an end. It also brings rest from the holiest of labours: making a house for God. Indeed, the oral tradition defined 'work' – *melakhah*, that which is prohibited on the Sabbath – in terms of the thirty-nine activities involved in making the sanctuary.

At a more metaphysical level, the Sanctuary mirrors – is the human counterpart to – the Divine creation of the universe (for the

² Much of this article originated as footnotes in my [Lehrhaus essay](#), *Men of Faith: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks's Critique of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, The Lehrhaus (Nov. 12, 2025).

³ Aryeh Solomon, [The Chief Rabbi and the Rebbe: Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's Engagement with Habad Hasidism](#), The Lehrhaus (Nov. 11, 2025).

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, ["A Hespered in Honour of Rav Yosef Soloveitchik."](#)

precise linguistic parallels between Exodus and Genesis, see [Covenant and Conversation, Terumah](#)). Just as Divine Creation culminates in the Sabbath, so too does human creation. The sanctity of place takes second position to the holiness of time (on this, see A. J. Heschel's famous book, *The Sabbath*).⁵

Heschel is the only Jewish thinker that Sacks directly mentions in the essay, albeit sans honorifics. Furthermore, the title of that twice-published *devar Torah* ("The Sabbath: First Day Or Last") is itself perhaps a nod to Heschel's book. The brunt of Sacks's references to Heschel, however, are not as straightforwardly cited.

Allusive References

In a *devar Torah* for *Parashat Ha'azinu* titled "[The Faith of God](#)," Sacks wrote that "infinitely transcending man's love of God is *God's love of mankind*" and that, "according to Judaism, the classic questions of Western theology are

precisely wrong, upside down – for the Torah is not a human book of God, but God's book of human kind. *More than we search for God, God searches for us.*" The italicization present in the original is no doubt an intentional reference to Heschel's well-known book, *God in Search of Man*.⁶ Less obvious, though, is that the entire idea presented by Sacks directly paraphrases Heschel.

For Heschel, "it is perhaps more proper to describe a prophetic passion as theomorphic than to regard the divine pathos as anthropomorphic."⁷ More directly influencing Sacks's language, Heschel wrote that "the Bible is primarily not man's vision of God but God's vision of man. The Bible is not man's theology but God's anthropology, dealing with man and what He asks of him rather than with the nature of God."⁸ Indeed, "the decisive thought in the message of the prophets is not the presence of God to man but rather the presence of man to God. This is why the Bible is God's anthropology rather than man's theology.... It is precisely God's care for man that constitutes the greatness of man. To be is to stand for, and what man stands for is the great mystery of being His

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, "[The Sabbath: First Day Or Last?](#)" *Covenant & Conversation* (Ki Tissa 5769, 5777).

⁶ JPS, 1955. Similarly, in the beginning of his 2020 collection of *divrei Torah*, Sacks wrote that "the real religious mystery, according to Judaism, is not our faith in God. It is God's faith in us... The real subject of the Torah is not our faith in God, which is often faltering, but His unflinching faith in us. The Torah is not man's book of God. It is God's book of man." (Jonathan Sacks, [Judaism's Life Changing Ideas: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible](#) (Maggid, 2020), 5. Interestingly, in [the version of that devar Torah appearing on the Sacks](#)

[foundation website](#) (but not the printed volume), the lines "[t]he real religious mystery, according to Judaism, is not our faith in God. It is God's faith in us" and "[t]he Torah is not man's book of God. It is God's book of man" are italicized.

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, [The Prophets: Volume 2](#) (Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 40.

⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, [Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion](#) (Octagon Books, 1972), 129.

partner. *God is in need of man.*"⁹ Heschel also points out, like Sacks after him, that "Judaism is *God's quest for man*... More statements are found in the Bible of God's love for Israel than about Israel's love for God."¹⁰

Another clear allusion to Heschelian language can be found in Sacks's affirmation that

It is easy to tell stories about figures of superhuman piety, but the essence of our humanity is that we are human – fallible, frail, prone to doubts, susceptible to despair, as were the great heroes and heroines of the Bible. In my work I have come across many *lemed-vavniks*, and meeting them has been a greater education than any ethics text. We need not only textbooks, but textpeople. Hence the stories in this book.¹¹

The term *textpeople*, as many know, was coined by Heschel:

The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. He is

either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself. When asking himself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? he must be able to answer in the affirmative.

What we need more than anything else is not *textbooks* but *textpeople*. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.¹²

In a recent [Tradition](#) article, R. Dr. Daniel Rose of the Rabbi Sacks Legacy Fund called attention to the fact that the term *textpeople* was "borrowed from Heschel." He also noted that, although Sacks was talking about general influences and Heschel was talking about classroom teachers, the core line is used identically by both thinkers to suggest "that role models, even... distant ones, can be the source of morals and values in much the same way as textbooks are the source of information and education."¹³

Least directly, Sacks quoted the famous poem of John Donne in his book, *The Dignity of Difference*:

⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, [God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism](#) (Octagon Books, 1972), 412-413.

¹⁰ Ibid. 425.

¹¹ Jonathan Sacks, [To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility](#) (Schocken Books, 2007), 11.

¹² Abraham Joshua Heschel, [The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence](#) (Schocken Books, 1966), 237.

¹³ Daniel Rose, "A Nation of Storytellers: From Pedagogy to Religious Philosophy," in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought: The Intellectual Legacy of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks* (Fall 2025 - Winter 2026), 62.

All mankind is of one Author, and is one volume... No man is an Iland, entire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if [a] Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me; because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never sent to know for whom the bell toll; It tolls for thee.¹⁴

Sacks utilized Donne's poem to emphasize the idea that globalization, as brought about by "the power of instantaneous global communication, the sheer volume of international monetary movements, the internationalization of processes and products and the ease with which jobs can be switched from country to country have meant that our interconnectedness has become more immediate, vivid and consequential than ever before. It is one thing for a poet such as Donne to conjure a metaphysical idea, quite another to experience it daily."¹⁵ We must ask: "are religions ready for the greatest challenge they have ever faced, namely a world in which even local conflict can have global repercussions? It was one thing for Christians and Muslims to fight one another in the age of the Crusades; quite another to do so in an age of

nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. It was one thing for wars of religion to take place on a battlefield, another when anywhere – a plane, a bus, an office-block – can become the frontline and a scene of terror."¹⁶

A similar point, invoking the same poem by Donne, was made by Heschel in his famous essay, *No Religion is an Island*:

Our era marks the end of complacency, the end of evasion, the end of self-reliance. Jews and Christians share the perils and the fears; we stand on the brink of the abyss together. Interdependence of political and economic conditions all over the world is a basic fact of our situation. Disorder in a small obscure country in any part of the world evokes anxiety in people all over the world... The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations. Energies, experiences, and ideas that come to life outside the boundaries of a particular religion or all religions continue to challenge and to affect every

¹⁴ John Donne, [Complete Poetry and Selected Prose](#) (Nonesuch, 1930), 537-538.

¹⁵ Jonathan Sacks, [The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations](#) (Continuum, 2003), 28.

¹⁶ Ibid. 43.

religion.

Horizons are wider, dangers are greater... *No religion is an island.* We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us. Views adopted in one community have an impact on other communities. Today religious isolationism is a myth.¹⁷

Both Sacks and Heschel utilize Donne's poem to great effect in order to share the same message: in today's interconnected/globalized world, religions are in no position to ignore one another. The consequences of not learning how to live productively amongst those who believe differently than we do (whoever "we" is) can be catastrophic.

It is somewhat common knowledge that Sacks significantly edited *The Dignity of Difference* between its first and second editions. The first version reveals an even starker Heschelian influence than the one many readers of this essay are likely to have on their shelves.¹⁸ Whereas the first printing included the question, "Can I, a Jew,

hear the echoes of God's voice in that of a Hindu or Sikh or Muslim or Christian or in the words of an Eskimo?," the second printing asked "Can I, a Jew, recognize God's image in one who is not in my image: in a Hindu or a Sikh or Muslim or Christian or in the words of an Eskimo?"¹⁹ Sacks wrote originally that Judaism "believes in one God but not in one religion, one culture, one truth. *The God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the faith of Abraham is not the faith of all mankind.*" He changed it to Judaism "believes in one God but not in one exclusive path to salvation. *The God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the demands made of the Israelites are not asked of all mankind.*"²⁰ In the first printing, Sacks wrote that "Truth on earth is not, nor can it be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal." This became a statement that "the Divine word comes from heaven but it is interpreted on earth. The Divine light is infinite but to be visible to us it must be refracted through finite understanding."²¹ In a line that was not replaced, but taken out entirely, Sacks wrote that "Truth on the ground is multiple, partial. Fragments of it lie everywhere. Each person, culture, and language has part of it; none has all of it." Compare Sacks's original lines with this extended excerpt from Heschel's essay:

¹⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, [Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays Edited by Susannah Heschel](#) (Noonday, 1998), 237.

¹⁸ All quotations from the first printing of *The Dignity of Difference* were found in Alon Goshen-Gottstein, [Covenant and World Religions: Irving Greenberg, Jonathan Sacks, and](#)

[the Quest for Orthodox Pluralism](#) (Littman Library, 2023), 273-284.

¹⁹ Sacks, *Dignity of Difference*, 17-18.

²⁰ Ibid. 281.

²¹ Ibid. 64.

Religion is a means, not an end. It becomes idolatrous when regarded as an end in itself. Over and above all being stands the Creator and Lord of history, Who transcends all. To equate religion and God is idolatry.

Does not the all-inclusiveness of God contradict the exclusiveness of any particular religion? The prospect of all men embracing one form of religion remains an eschatological hope. What about here and now? Is it not blasphemous to say: I alone have all the truth and the grace, and all those who differ live in darkness and are abandoned by the grace of God?

Is it really our desire to build a monolithic society: one party, one view, one leader, and no opposition? Is religious uniformity desirable or even possible? Has it really proved to be a blessing for a country when all its citizens belong to one denomination? Or has any denomination attained a spiritual climax when it had the adherence of the entire population? Does not the task of preparing the Kingdom of God require a diversity of

talents, a variety of rituals, soul-searching as well as opposition?

Perhaps it is the will of God that in this eon there should be a diversity in our forms of devotion and commitment to Him. In this diversity of religions is the will of God.

In the story of the building of the Tower of Babel we read: "The Lord said: They are one people, and they have all one language, and this is what they begin to do" ([Genesis 11:6](#)). These words are interpreted by an ancient rabbi to mean: What has caused them to rebel against me? The fact that they are one people and they all have one language...²²

Heschel's invocation of the Tower of Babel should immediately ring familiar to readers of Sacks, who placed the exact same imagery at the center of both editions of *The Dignity of Difference* with the same exact meaning as Heschel:

Babel – the first global project – is the turning point in the biblical narrative. It ends with the division of mankind into a multiplicity of languages, cultures, nations and civilizations. God's covenant with

²² Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 243-244.

humanity as a whole has not ceased. But from here on he will focus on one family, and eventually one people, to be his witnesses and bearers of his covenant – a people in whose history his presence will be peculiarly felt...²³

God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different, *teaching humanity to make space for difference. God may at times be found in human other, the one not like us.* Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one gateway to his presence. To the contrary, it is the idea that *the unity of God is to be found in the diversity of creation.*²⁴

Thus, for Sacks, “*God is the God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity.*” Such a narrative

²³ Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 52.

²⁴ Ibid. 53.

²⁵ Ibid. 55.

²⁶ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 244.

²⁷ It should be noted that Sacks saw the projects of Heschel and Kook as related. In his words, “some of the most resonant Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century – Martin Buber, A. J. Heschel, and Rabbi Avraham Hachohen Kook

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.”²⁵ Or, as Heschel asked, “if we accept the principle that the majesty of God transcends the dignity of religion, should we not regard a divergent religion as His Majesty’s loyal opposition? ... the voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of language. One truth comes to expression in many ways of understanding.”²⁶

Of course, it is not certain that Sacks based these parts of *The Dignity of Difference* on Heschel’s work. Sacks explicitly rooted some of his edited text in the writings of R. Abraham Isaac Kook, and it is not unthinkable to assume that his reading of the Tower of Babel was simply the way he naturally understood it.²⁷ Indeed, R. Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein noted that, although Heschel and Sacks utilize the Babel narrative identically, “this in itself does not suggest Sacks’s dependence on Heschel. The biblical text invites such a reading by readers with an interest in validating other faiths.”²⁸

among them – wrote in a poetic, enigmatic prose whose precise meaning is almost impossible to determine. Their language is a curious hybrid of theology and diplomacy, hovering above the inevitably fragmenting ground of referential precision... Jewish thought, it seems, is caught between being denominational and divisive, or global and ambiguous, or determinate and private.” (Sacks, [*One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity*](#) (Littman Library, 1993), 14-15).

²⁸ Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Covenant and World Religions*, 284 n.51.

However, Sacks himself indicated that he was well aware of the similarities between his and Heschel's readings of Babel. One of his 2007 *Little Books of Big Questions* produced for London's Union of Jewish Students was dedicated to the topic of "Judaism in a Multifaith Society." In it, Sacks summarized his understanding of the narrative for inquisitive undergraduates. In the "for further reading" section of the booklet, Sacks cited Heschel's *No Religion is an Island* immediately after his own *Dignity of Difference*.²⁹ This, along with the popularity of Heschel's essay, similarity of ground covered, and shared invocation of Donne makes it hard to ignore the clear similarities.

Incomplete Citations

Thus far, only one of the four examples above has included a direct citation of Heschel by Sacks. If readers recognized the allusions then they would know where the ideas originated, but no attempt was made by Sacks to lead his audience towards Heschel. We now come to a more perplexing, perhaps even troubling, phenomenon; *partial* citations of Heschel in Sacks's writings.

In his book *A Letter in the Scroll* (alternatively titled *Radical Then, Radical Now*), Sacks referred to a *midrash* ([Bereishit Rabbah 39:1](#)) depicting Abraham's journey towards faith in God as akin to

a man coming across a desert palace that is either *lit up* or *in flames* depending on how one understands the Hebrew word *doleket*.

Sacks described the *midrash* as "a deeply enigmatic passage, so much so that distinguished Jewish thinkers have often misunderstood it. One of them translated the phrase 'a palace in flames' as 'a palace full of light.'"³⁰ That mistranslation was cited to page 112 of Heschel's *God In Search of Man*. Heschel's full quote is as follows:

Lift up your eyes on high. Religion is the result of what man does with his ultimate wonder, with the moments of awe, with the sense of mystery.

How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is a God who is concerned with the world? According to the Rabbis, Abraham may be "compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw *a palace full of light*. 'Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the palace?' he wondered. Until the owner of the palace looked at him and said, 'I am the owner of the palace.' Similarly,

²⁹ Jonathan Sacks, [The Eternal Conversation](#) (Maggid, 2024), 137. Other works for further reading included Irving (Yitz) Greenberg's [For the Sake of Heaven and Earth](#), Michael Wyschogrod's [Abraham's Promise](#), and David Novak's [Jewish-Christian Dialogue](#). These works were listed in neither chronological nor alphabetical order (by first name,

last name, or title) so it may be telling that Heschel's essay was listed first.

³⁰ Jonathan Sacks, [A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion](#) (Free Press, 2000), 55.

Abraham our father wondered, 'Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?' The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said, 'I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world.'" It was in wonder that Abraham's quest for God began.³¹

Consistent with his naming the chapter "A Palace in Flames," Sacks immediately moved on to offer the alternative reading of the *midrash* in which "Abraham sees a palace. The world has order, and therefore it has a creator. But the palace is full of flames. The world is full of *disorder*, of evil, violence, and injustice," and Abraham recognizes that "no one builds a building and then deserts it. If there is a fire there must be someone to put it out."³² He concluded that, "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."³³

Although Sacks only cited Heschel's initial explanation of the *midrash* as referring to a "palace of light," Sacks's alternative explanation

³¹ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 111-112.

³² Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, 56.

³³ *Ibid.* 57. This idea is powerfully restated in Sacks's 2019 [devar Torah on parshat Lekh Lekha](#), also titled "A Palace in Flames":

Abraham was struck by the contradiction between the order of the universe – the palace – and the disorder of humanity – the flames. How, in a world created by a good God, could there be so much evil? If someone takes the trouble to build a palace, do they leave it to the flames? If someone takes the

was also prefigured by Heschel later in *God in Search of Man*:

There are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of wonder, in moments of joy; there are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of horror, in moments of despair. It is both the grandeur and the misery of living that makes man sensitive to the ultimate question. Indeed, his misery is as great as his grandeur.

How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is a God who is concerned with the world? Said Rabbi Isaac: Abraham may be "compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw *a palace in flames*. Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the palace? He wondered. Until the owner of the palace looked at him and said, 'I am the

trouble to create a universe, does He leave it to be disfigured by His own creations? On this reading, what moved Abraham was not philosophical harmony but moral discord. For Abraham, faith began in cognitive dissonance. There is only one way of resolving this dissonance: by protesting evil and fighting it.

The *devar Torah* was re-printed in the posthumously-published collection [I Believe: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible](#) (Maggid, 2022) and was part of the last cycle of *divrei Torah* that Sacks wrote before his passing in 2020.

owner of the palace.’ Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, ‘Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?’ The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said, ‘I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world.’” The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?³⁴

Heschel concluded the chapter with a call that “the world is in need of redemption, but the redemption must not be expected to happen as an act of sheer grace. Man’s task is to make the world worthy of redemption,”³⁵ presumably through fighting the flames of evil in much the same way that Sacks called for.

It is remarkable that Sacks, who had clearly read *God In Search of Man*, only cited one of Heschel’s readings as a rejected translation of the relevant *midrash* despite using both in his own analysis. Sacks must have been aware that Heschel also read *doleket* as “in flames,” since the note connected to Heschel’s initial translation of “palace full of light” in *God in Search of Man* reads

as

follows:

The word *doleket* is ambiguous. It may mean “illuminated,” “full of light,” or it may mean “in flames.” In the first sense it is understood by the “Rashi” Commentary on *Genesis Rabba*, in the second by *Yede Moshe* and the commentaries of Rabbi David Luria and Rabbi Zev Einhorn. The parable is significant in both senses. See p. 367.³⁶

That note is on the very next page of the book, already open to the reader of *God in Search of Man*. It is at least as unthinkable that Sacks could have missed the note as it is to assume that he stopped reading the book before getting to Heschel’s second reading of the *midrash*. It seems that Sacks knew Heschel read the *midrash* as he did but chose, for one reason or another, not to cite him fully. Further evidence for this can perhaps be deduced by contrasting Sacks’s 2000 framing of the *palace in flames* reading, of the *midrash* as his own interpretation, with his 2019 framing of it simply as “this reading” of the *midrash*.³⁷

³⁴ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 367.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 380.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 113. It was noted to me by R. Dr. Shai Held that Dr. Paul Mandel has [compellingly argued](#) that the *midrash* in question need not be read ambiguously. The word in rabbinic Hebrew for “lit up” would have been *mu’eret* so *doleket* in this context can only mean “in flames.”

³⁷ Heschel’s final book, submitted for publication shortly before he passed away, also makes note of the *midrash* in the context of the Kotzker Rebbe:

Time and again, the Kotzker returned to this issue: was it conceivable that the entire world, Heaven and earth, was a palace without a master? Whenever an exceptionally knotty Talmudic problem was raised, just one person’s interjection, “Lord of Abraham!” would force the opposition to change its course. Reb Mendl often referred to the

One explanation for this, suggested by R. Dr. Sam Lebens in private correspondence, is that Sacks genuinely felt that Heschel misunderstood the *midrash*. Heschel presents two different ways of understanding it, one according to each translation of the word *doleket* and each applying separately to different sorts of religious personalities. Sacks, on the other hand, perhaps thought that the linguistic ambiguity of the *midrash* was deliberate and that the ideal way to read it was to assume both meanings at once. The *birah doleket* does not teach that some people are moved to God by flames, and that other people are moved to God by light, but that Abraham was moved by the world's paradoxical combination of order and disorder, design and evil. This explanation, while eloquent, does not explain why Sacks only acknowledged the translation of Heschel's that could more easily be considered a "misunderstanding" compared to his own while ignoring Heschel's more accurate translation entirely.

following parable [of the palace without a master]...

In the original Hebrew the phrase describing the palace, *birah doleket*, is ambiguous. It could mean "a palace full of light" or "a palace in flames." According to one interpretation, Abraham saw a world of infinity, beauty, and wisdom and thought: is it possible for such grandeur to have come into being accidentally, without a creator? The second interpretation is that he saw a world engulfed in the flames of evil and deceit and thought, Is it possible that there is no Lord to take this misfortune to heart?

Apparently, Reb Mendl accepted the latter meaning. He also considered Abraham's question to be the central issue in the search for faith.

An alternative explanation might be gleaned from Sacks's treatment of another thinker whom he cited as having "misunderstood" the *midrash*; R. Dr. Louis Jacobs (1920-2006). In *A Letter in the Scroll*, Sacks noted that Jacobs incorrectly read the *midrash* as an argument from design immediately after his mention of Heschel. In the same note citing Jacobs' articulation in his book *We Have Reason to Believe*, however, Sacks also directed readers to Jacobs' *Principles of the Jewish Faith*, "where the author correctly interprets the passage as a statement, not of the argument of design but of the problem of evil."³⁸

In his treatment of Jacobs, Sacks only quoted the elder theologian's incorrect understanding in the body of *A Letter in the Scroll* without mentioning Jacobs' name. It was in the footnotes that Sacks named Jacobs and pointed readers to his other, correct, reading of the text. In his treatment of Heschel, Sacks pointed readers only to his initial translation, even in the footnotes. Anyone who

"Could it be that this palace has no lord?" This problem tormented Reb Mendl. He, who never ingratiated himself with anyone and spoke the truth to everyone's face, did not delude himself with facile solutions.

(Abraham Joshua Heschel, [A Passion for Truth](#) (Jewish Lights, 1995) 272-273).

Sacks seems to have been familiar with that work, writing in passing that "A.J. Heschel's last book was a study of the Rebbe of Kotzk and his face-to-face encounter with despair" (Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*, 282).

³⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, 234 n.12. Sacks's implication that Jacobs understood the *midrash* correctly while Heschel did not is especially puzzling, as the chapter in which Heschel shares his alternative understanding is explicitly titled "The Problem of Evil."

actually took the time to look up the Heschel citation, however, would immediately have been pointed to Heschel's alternative reading on the very next page. That would not have been the case with Jacobs. Sacks may then have wanted his readers to recognize the Heschelian influence on his approach, but only after taking the time to read Heschel's original formulation themselves.³⁹

The Question of Why

On one hand, it is clear that Sacks saw Heschel as a thinker worthy of quoting and as someone whose worldview rubbed off on him in innumerable ways. On the other hand, Sacks appears to have been deeply uncomfortable citing Heschel too directly and never referred to him using a rabbinic title – similar to his treatment of Jacobs and other non-Orthodox thinkers.⁴⁰ This was likely due to Sacks's precarious political position in the context of British Orthodoxy and Heschel's affiliation with the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative Movement it represented.

Proof of this may be ascertained by examining Sacks's broader presentations of Heschelian theology. For example, in 1992, Sacks discussed

Heschel's theology in conversation with that of many other liberal Jewish thinkers:

The Conservative thinker, Abraham Heschel, developed a more theocentric view of revelation [than Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and others]. The prophet experiences the divine pathos, God's concern for man. There is a profound difference between prophetic and philosophical knowledge, between relationship and objectivity. God, for the prophets, "is encountered not as a universal, general, pure Being but always in a particular mode of being, as personal God to a personal man, in a specific pathos that comes with a demand in a concrete situation."⁴¹ Nonetheless, in his three-volume work on the concept of *Torah min ha-shamayim*, Heschel intimated that a historical and critical approach to the Pentateuch was consistent with one strand within rabbinic Judaism.

³⁹ Less charitably, this could alternatively be read as an attempt by Sacks to obscure from his readers the influence of Heschel's reading of the *midrash* on his own.

⁴⁰ This is also true of Sacks's treatment of various thinkers who identified themselves with Orthodoxy but were considered *persona non grata* by the mainstream community, such as R. Dr. David Hartman and R. Dr. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg.

⁴¹ Sacks cites this line from *The Prophets*. Interestingly, in a 1998 article, Sacks noted that the motif of Divine pathos was present in the Bible before becoming popular in post-Holocaust theology and noted that its presence "at the heart of prophetic consciousness is the argument of A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets*" (Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*, 158 n.41).

There were, he argued, two axes of thought in Judaism, which he traced to the mishnaic period and to the schools of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. The former was mystical, stressing the supernatural. The latter was rational, emphasizing that “the Torah speaks in the language of man.” Evidently Heschel believed that modern scholarship was compatible with the stance of Rabbi Ishmael, perhaps taking only the ten commandments as the direct, unmediated word of God.⁴²

This too is only a partial image. Sacks's description ignores Heschel's simultaneous articulation of R. Akiva's perspective that “the extension of the phrase ‘Torah from Heaven’ to all Five Books of the Torah means that everything written in the Chumash — that is, all of the happenings and commandments [*ha-ma'asim ve-ha-mitzvot*] — was spoken to Moses at Sinai.”⁴³ In the introduction to his English translation of *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim*, R. Gordon Tucker noted that Heschel “is not asking us to choose between the two theological approaches that he persistently

presents to us.”⁴⁴ Tucker later stated that Heschel “obviously valued both approaches. His lifelong pursuit of social justice followed the Ishmaelian view that love of God must be expressed by doing God's work in this world. But his studies of the phenomenology of prophetic experience, of Hasidism, of prayer, and of the rabbinic theology sought to see the divine-human encounter as a reality through which God meets every one of us directly on a personal level” in a way that was clearly reminiscent of R. Akiva.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Dr. Alan Brill has called attention to Dr. Gedalia Haber's [review of Tucker's translation](#), in which it is argued that Heschel has too often been presented “as following Rabbi Yishmael when he really was following Rabbi Akiva.”⁴⁶ In Haber's words,

Another example of Heschel's decisive attitude toward Aggadic material is his discussion of R. Akiva's view regarding revelation. According to Heschel, R. Akiva claimed that Moses ascended to heaven in order to receive the Torah. Heschel claims that “this matter of the ascent of a mortal to

⁴² Jonathan Sacks, [Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust](#) (Maggid, 2023), 170.

⁴³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations* [Hebrew] (Maggid, 2021), 498. My translation.

⁴⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, [Heavenly Torah As Refracted Through the Generations](#) (Continuum, 2005), xxiv.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 189.

⁴⁶ Alan Brill, “[Heschel's Heavenly Torah- Lost in Translation](#),” *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: notes on Jewish theology and spirituality* (Jan. 27, 2010).

heaven is very important in the Torah of faith. Judaism demands that man should acknowledge his place. A basic rule in Israel: ‘God is in heaven, and you are on earth’ [. .].”

The phrase “Torah of faith” should be understood as the doctrine of faith, since the context is “Judaism’s demand” of man. However, Tucker subverts Heschel’s intention by transforming Heschel’s prescriptive, dogmatic style into a historical, descriptive one: “The theme of human ascent to heaven is of great importance in the study of religion, but Judaism demands that humans should know their place. Israel lives by the rule: “God is in heaven, and you are on earth.””

What did Heschel truly believe about the nature of revelation? R. Dr. Shai Held has argued that, “for Heschel, the very power of prophecy is in its merging of the Akivan and Ishmaelian approaches – the prophet meets God in a direct personal encounter and is led thereby to a radical ethical concern for the world.”⁴⁷ How direct is that

encounter? Held argues that, for Heschel, “revelation conveys *divine content* in *human words*”⁴⁸ – that “the language that emerges from the moment of revelation will always be allusive rather than exhaustive, indicative rather than descriptive, but – and this is the crucial point for our purposes – the humanness of the words does not entail, for Heschel, the sheer humanness of the ideas conveyed.”⁴⁹ This aligns well with Heschel’s summary at the beginning of Book Three of *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim*, where, Sacks’s citation notes, “Heschel’s views are stated most clearly.”⁵⁰

On the one hand, the modern person is accustomed to viewing the Torah through the lens of history and to finding in it human thoughts and ways, signs of humanity, the influences of the era, and even traces of contact with the cultures of the ancient Near East. On the other hand, the proponents of the ‘absolute’ approach charge him: You must know that the Torah’s conception and birth are from Heaven — it is entirely divine, entirely beyond time.⁵¹

It is also consistent with Heschel’s 1953 words to

⁴⁷ Shai Held, [Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence](#) (Indiana University Press, 2013), 162.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 110.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 112.

⁵⁰ Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 186 n.32.

⁵¹ Heschel, *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim*, 942. My translation.

the Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis that “if God is *real*, then He is able to express His will unambiguously”⁵² and that:

If we believe that there is something which God requires of man, then what is our belief if not *faith in the will of God, certainly of knowing what His will demands of us?* If we are ready to believe that God requires of me “to do justice,” is it more difficult for us to believe that God requires of us to be holy? If we are ready to believe that God requires us “to love kindness,” is it more difficult to believe that God requires us to hallow the Sabbath and not to violate its sanctity?⁵³

Heschel’s insistence to the members of the CCAR that man’s “primary difficulty is not his inability to comprehend the *Divine origin* of the law; his

essential difficulty is in his inability to sense *the presence of Divine meaning* in the fulfillment of the law”⁵⁴ as well as his Akivan tendencies (despite allowing some degree of legitimacy to biblical criticism) appears significantly at odds with Sacks’s characterization of the “Conservative” theologian.

While Sacks clearly saw Heschel’s theology as an approach which “testified to the continuing power the bible exercised over the Jewish imagination” he also felt that it contributed to the lamentable reality in which “Torah had been historicised, secularised, and fragmented. It had lost its commanding voice... Torah no longer spoke in a unified voice to a coherent covenantal community. Jews had branched out in divergent directions, each carrying with them a bible that was, in essence, a different book.”⁵⁵ For Sacks,

the Torah reveals not only information about God but God

⁵² Abraham J. Heschel, “Toward an Understanding of Halachah” in Seymour Siegel (ed.) [Conservative Judaism and Jewish Law](#) (The Rabbinical Assembly, 1977), 135.

⁵³ Ibid. 142.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 172. Fascinatingly, in a letter by Sacks to Jacobs, he sought himself to separate empirical and religious claims, writing that

“even aware of all recent scholarly developments, a Jew might, without willful oblivion, still say something like 1) Criteria of meaning depend on the light in which the text is viewed... and the authorship which is attributed to it... 2) The issue of

authorship, when one of the candidates is G-d (not Moses), is not an empirical question. 3) The issue of the light in which the text is to be viewed (qua revelation, qua history, qua saga, qua myth) is not an empirical question either, any text being able to bear a number of coherent but mutually incompatible readings... 4) Therefore, if 1), 2), and 3) are true, there is a choice between alternative interpretive schema, so long as each is internally consistent. 5) Therefore a Jew may choose a traditional reading of the text without laying himself open to a justified charge of ‘lack of objectivity.’”

(Cited in Meir Persoff, [Another Way, Another Time: Religious Inclusivism and the Sacks Chief Rabbinate](#) (Academic Studies Press, 2010), 12.)

Himself: for God is found not in nature but in words. To be sure, God creates nature and acts in history, but He can be discerned in both only through His will made articulate in His word. Neither creation nor history carry their meaning on their surface: only the prophet, bearer of the word, or the sage, the word's interpreter, can decipher it. The primary encounter is not with something outside the text but with the text itself... Its words convey not "facts" but instruction and command. The seminal facts of the Pentateuch, the creation and the exodus, have moral implications and their significance lies in teaching us how to live. Torah can therefore never be simply *read*: it is proclaimed, heard, studied and obeyed...⁵⁶

Heschel's understanding, in reality, is actually quite similar. He wrote, for example, that the "exodus from Egypt, or the revelation at Sinai... is an event, not an idea; a happening, not a principle. On the other hand, he who would try to reduce the Bible to a catalog of events, to a sacred history, will equally fail."⁵⁷ Indeed, "to speak of a pure event, an event in and by itself, is to speak of an

⁵⁶ Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, 208-209.

⁵⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 20-21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 217.

artificial abstraction that exists only in the minds of some theologians... Loyalty to the norms and thoughts conveyed in the event is as essential as the reality of the event."⁵⁸ So too the giving of the Torah "was both an event in the life of God and an event in the life of man.... At Sinai God revealed His word, and Israel revealed the power to respond."⁵⁹ For Heschel, like Sacks after him, "knowledge of God is knowledge of living with God. Israel's religious existence consists of three inner attitudes: engagement to the living God to whom we are accountable; engagement to Torah where His voice is audible; and engagement to His concern as expressed in mitzvot (commandments)."⁶⁰

Sacks may well have recognized the overly simplistic nature of labeling Heschel a Conservative thinker based on the following 1990 footnote directly comparing Heschel with Soloveitchik:

There appears to be an implicit criticism here [in *The Lonely Man of Faith*] of the stance adopted by A. J. Heschel (1907 - 1972), who argued in *The Sabbath* that Judaism was a religion of time aiming at time's sanctification whereas technical civilization represents man's conquest of

⁵⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 260.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 281.

space. *Halakhic Man*, too, with its comparison between the halakhist and the modern theoretical mathematician, is set in counterpoint to Heschel's romantic-nostalgic portrayal of Eastern European Jewry in [The Earth is the Lord's](#) (*The Earth is the Lord's/The Sabbath*, Meridian Books 1963).⁶¹ A detailed contrast between the two men, both leading theologians of the twentieth century, both heirs of famous dynasties (Heschel was a descendant of several outstanding Chasidic leaders: the Maggid of Mezeritch, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and Abraham Joshua Heschel – after whom he was named – the Apter Rav), both deeply immersed in the Western philosophical tradition, might yield some fascinating results. The schools that they represent – for

Soloveitchik, Lithuanian talmudism, for Heschel, Chassidism – were directly opposed in the nineteenth century, and some of the classic dichotomies persist in their work. Both in Germany, where he worked with Martin Buber in the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus*, and in America, where he taught at the Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary, Heschel belonged outside the institutional framework of Orthodoxy, and his involvement with the civil rights movement and interfaith dialogue were outside American Orthodoxy's central concerns. But the contrast between the two men lies along a different axis than a simple Orthodox/non-Orthodox rift.⁶²

The note, penned before Sacks's appointment as Chief Rabbi, heavily implies a deep interest in,

⁶¹ Sacks seems to have been quite comfortable casually referring to this work of Heschel's. He also wrote, for example, that "Rav Kook was born on the margins of modernity, in the small town of Grieve in Latvia. This was still part of the as yet unshaken hinterland of Eastern European Jewish life celebrated by A. J. Heschel in his prose-poem *The Earth is the Lord's* (Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*, 21).

⁶² Jonathan Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*, 53 n.33. Interestingly, Heschel's belonging "outside the institutional framework of Orthodoxy" needn't have been the case had history gone in a slightly different direction. R. Bezalel Naor recently noted that "there survive two letters from Jacob I. Hartstein, Director of Bernard Revel Graduate School inviting

Professor Heschel to teach in the Graduate School and on the undergraduate level at Yeshiva College. The letters are dated April 10 and June 8, 1945. They are addressed to Heschel % Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati." (Bezalel Naor, [The Project of Hasidism](#) (Kodesh Press, 2025), 123 n1). One can only imagine what contemporary Jewish discourse would look like had Heschel accepted that invitation over the one he accepted at JTS.

Sacks's framing of Heschel representing hasidism and Soloveitchik representing talmudism may signal why Sacks seems to have been drawn to Heschelian over Soloveitchikian frameworks throughout his writings. Sacks's invocation of Heschel in his [interview with R. Efreim Goldberg](#) came in the context of discussing the importance of hasidism and hasidic stories.

appreciation for, and familiarity with Heschelian thought as well as a desire to further place Heschel and Soloveitchik in conversation. Based on Sacks's writings elsewhere and his consistent critique of Soloveitchik's worldview, it is clear at least to this author that Sacks felt a greater affinity towards Heschel than towards Soloveitchik.⁶³ It also seems clear that, after Sacks ascended to the role of Chief Rabbi, Heschel became to him a "Conservative thinker" who had to be handled with care, if at all, as opposed to an intellectual inspiration to be quoted and placed in conversation with the likes of Soloveitchik freely. Indeed, much of Sacks's utilizations of Heschel's language examined above can be read as an attempt to translate (and thereby *kasher*, in a

sense) Heschelian ideas within an Orthodox context.⁶⁴

In Conclusion

We have explored just six different usages of Heschelian language by Sacks. In the first, Sacks quoted from *The Sabbath* by name. In the second, Sacks alluded to Heschelian ideas while referencing the title of one of Heschel's most famous works. In the third and fourth, Sacks used Heschelian sources and ideas without any attribution. Finally, Sacks directly quoted parts of Heschel's ideas while obscuring other parts. This demonstrates a clear pattern.

What is unmistakable is the lasting impact that

⁶³ Dr. Daniel Rynhold has noted that, in Soloveitchik's worldview,

we cannot ever finally resolve the tensions at the very heart of human existence in this world, for they are what define our humanity. Finally achieving the ideal would be self-defeating – by Soloveitchik's own lights, we would no longer be recognizably human were we to attain such stasis, nor would we experience the conflict necessary for human greatness, greatness, neither of which would be true of the ideal "lonely man." (Daniel Rynhold and Michael J. Harris, [Nietzsche, Soloveitchik, and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 180).

Therefore the Soloveitchikian religious ideal "can be glimpsed, or maybe even momentarily attained by all-too-human individuals at those instants where one ascends to the peaks of human experience; they just cannot be a permanent resting place for any living human being" (Ibid. 182). On the other hand, Held affirms that

the idea of self-transcendence is the foundation, for Heschel, both of who God *is* and of who man *could be*. More, it is the dynamic principle that makes covenant possible: a God who transcends

egocentricity summons man, who has the potential to transcend egocentricity, in order to be His partner, to be "in travail with God's dreams and designs, with God's dream of a world redeemed, of reconciliation of heaven and earth, of a mankind which is truly His image, reflecting His wisdom, justice, and compassion." (Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, 233).

See my *Lehrhaus* article, [Modern Men of Faith: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's Critique of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik](#) for a thorough examination of Sacks's apparent Heschelian rejection of Soloveitchikian loneliness. Sacks's appreciation for Heschel over Soloveitchik was also confirmed in private conversation between myself and a long-time friend of the former Chief Rabbi.

⁶⁴ It is perhaps no coincidence that *Koren Publishers*, who have been heavily responsible for the republication of Sacks's early works and the consistent publishing of his *divrei Torah* and commentaries, are also responsible for republishing Heschel's magnum opus, *Torah Min-Ha-Shamayim*, as well as a Hebrew translation of Heschel's writing on the Kotzker.

Heschel had on Sacks as a thinker. Indeed, in his above-mentioned [posthumously-released interview](#) with R. Efreim Goldberg, Sacks referred to meeting Heschel as a “great privilege” and described him as “a poet of the spirit,” the “*Ish Ha-Aggadah*” complementing Soloveitchik’s *Ish Ha-Halakhah*. Though cautioning listeners that he felt Heschel had “drifted a little towards the end,” Sacks nonetheless recommended *God in Search of Man* and Heschel’s early books quite highly.⁶⁵

Heschel’s influence on Sacks, though rarely cited plainly, was often direct and easily recognized by those familiar with the former’s works. My teacher R. Dr. Sam Lebens suggested to me that this was almost certainly intentional by Sacks, so that some of his readers would notice the nods to Heschel (and other thinkers Sacks treated this way, albeit to a lesser extent) while others would not. Such was the narrow bridge which the Chief Rabbi walked day in and day out.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ It is unclear what exactly Sacks meant by this comment, since many of the Heschelian positions that most consider to be theologically radical are also prevalent throughout *God in Search of Man*.

⁶⁶ Of course, a considerably less charitable reading of this situation is also possible. Sacks’s uncited references to Heschel might facilitate Orthodox readers’ openness to his ideas, but credit was nevertheless withheld where it was obviously due. More troubling were Sacks’s partial citations, which significantly mischaracterized many of Heschel’s

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positions - positions which were, in fact, shared by the two thinkers and were articulated nearly identically at times. Such editorial decisions by Sacks may have been designed to keep the “Conservative” Heschel at a safe distance from Orthodoxy and from Sacks’s own reputation within the hareidi-influenced United Synagogue. Sacks’s comment that Heschel “drifted” later in life may also have been meant that way. It is perhaps telling that the segment in which Sacks recommended Heschel’s books is absent from the interview’s transcript on the *Rabbi Sacks Legacy* website at the time of this article’s publication.