

## *OF BOOKS AND BANS*

**Marc B. Shapiro**

**Biography:** Marc. B. Shapiro holds the Weinberg Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Scranton. His most recent book, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised*, is scheduled for publication in December 2003.

**Abstract:** This essay examines the recent bans of *The Making of a Gadol* by Nathan Kamenetsky and *Dignity of Difference* by Jonathan Sacks, arguing that both are unusual in contemporary Jewish life. It evaluates the literary and scholarly merits of the first book, and explores traditional rabbinic opinion as sources for support of Sacks' thesis of religious pluralism found in the second book.



# OF BOOKS AND BANS

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I.

At the end of 2002, within the space of a few months, Orthodox Jewry witnessed something very unusual. With great publicity two books were placed under a ban: Nathan Kamenetsky's *Making of a Godol*<sup>1</sup> and Jonathan Sacks's *Dignity of Difference*<sup>2</sup>. Kamenetsky is the son of R. Jacob Kamenetsky (died 1986), one of the *gedolim* of the previous generation, and is himself a personality in the *haredi* world, having been one of founders of the Itri Yeshiva. In years past he was even worthy of being referred to as *Ha-Ga'on* by *Yated Ne'eman*, the *haredi* mouthpiece.<sup>3</sup> Sacks is the Chief Rabbi of England (technically only the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain and the Commonwealth), and an eloquent spokesman for traditional Judaism as well as a most prolific author.

Although there was a time when bans were issued against the writings of various alleged heretics, today the boundaries between denominations are clear and members of the Orthodox community do not need any special warning that non-Orthodox works may contain false theology. Besides, due to the sheer mass of such literature, it would be impossible to keep up with even the most significant of such publications.

As such, in modern times leading scholars in the *haredi*

world will only rarely see the need to publicly declare a book to be dangerous and thus forbidden. The only time they do so is when it is thought that members of their community will see the book in question as acceptable. Thus, it is not surprising that condemnations are rare. Yet by the same token, when the condemnations come, they are usually directed against distinguished individuals who also identify with Orthodoxy, for it is their writings that have the potential to infiltrate the *haredi* world and influence it.

While one can find some exceptions to this (the 1945 excommunication of Mordecai Kaplan and public burning of the Reconstructionist Prayer Book comes to mind<sup>4</sup>), it remains a valid generalization. Thus, there is no need for a condemnation of a book written by a typical Modern Orthodox intellectual, for it is unlikely to be read by members of the *haredi* world, and if read, it will not be taken seriously if it opposes the current *haredi da'as Torah*. On the other hand, if we are dealing with a figure such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, there is indeed a possibility that his ideas could have an influence in the *haredi* world. As such, it is no surprise that when R. Eleazar Shakh, at the time the leading ideologue of *da'as Torah* in the *haredi* world, was asked about the Rav's views of Zionism as expounded in his classic *Hamesh Derashot*, R. Shakh replied that his position indeed departed from *da'as Torah*. R. Shakh added that reading the work was forbid-

<sup>1</sup>Jerusalem, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>New York, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>See the interview with Kamenetsky in the Sabbath supplement, Pesah 5756.

<sup>4</sup>See Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community* (New York, 1997), pp. 140-141

<sup>5</sup>*Mikhtavim u-Ma'amarim* (Benei Berak, 1990), vol. 4, pp. 35-40, 107

den, for it contained heresy, pure and simple (*mamash divrei kefirah*).<sup>5</sup>

As the guardian of *haredi* Orthodoxy, it was R. Shakh's role to establish the boundary line between his community and other forms of Orthodoxy, and he did so with a stridency many will find disconcerting. The institutions and books he condemned include Touro College,<sup>6</sup> the Jerusalem College of Technology,<sup>7</sup> Mikhlalah,<sup>8</sup> the Ma`arava school,<sup>9</sup> Heikhal Shelomo,<sup>10</sup> the hesder movement,<sup>11</sup> the Steinsaltz Talmud and other books by this author,<sup>12</sup> and Yehudah Levi's book *Sha`arei Talmud Torah*, which supports a *Torah im Derekh Erets* perspective.<sup>13</sup> Since these institutions and books are clearly part of the Orthodox world and are even supported by great scholars, it was necessary for them to be condemned lest the *haredi* public be led astray.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, all this is not new. Already in medieval times we find bans put on Maimonides' work and the study of philosophy in general. As time went on, Azariah de Rossi's historical work *Me'or Einayim* was condemned, as was Mendelssohn's *Bi'ur*; Naftali Hertz Wessely's *Divrei Shalom ve-Emet*,<sup>15</sup> various Hasidic works, the anti-Kabbalistic writings of R. Yihye Kafih, the proto-Zionist works of R. Akiva Joseph Schlesinger, and the writings of R. Kook, to name just a few.<sup>16</sup>

Because R. Shakh was regarded as a leader only by the *haredi* community, his pronouncements were not the subject of much concern in the wider Orthodox world. In fact, I think it is a testament to the respect people had for R. Shakh's great Torah learning that he was generally not subjected to abuse by those groups he condemned. On the contrary, the religious Zionist community, with few exceptions, continued to treat him with respect, albeit it

<sup>6</sup>*Mikhtavim u-Ma`amarim*, vols. 1-2, pp. 108-109.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 52-53.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 161-162.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 65-67. Steinsaltz himself is categorized as a heretic.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, vols. 1-2, pp. 107-108.

<sup>14</sup>For discussion of many of these bans and other recent controversies, see Chaim Rapoport, *The Messiah Problem: Berger, the Angel and the Scandal of Reckless Indiscrimination* (Ilford, England, 2002), pp. 2ff., 91ff. I take issue with what Rapoport writes on p. 92, that when R. Kook passed away, R. Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, the *Hazon Ish*, declared that he would have no portion in the World to Come. The source for this is Aharon Rosenberg, *Mishkenot ha-Ro'im* (New York, 1997), vol. 3, pp. 1120-1121, who cites a well-known London anti-Zionist. This is hardly an unimpeachable reference. (This same source also claims that the *Hazon Ish* insisted that R. Ben Zion Uziel's *Mishpetei Uziel* be left on the floor, since it is *muktesh mei-hamat mi'us*. See *ibid.*, p. 1198; Elyakim Schlesinger's *haskamah* to Aharon Rosenberg, *Torat Emet* [Monsey, 1992]). The truth is that while the *Hazon Ish* asserted that R. Kook's philosophical works should not be read, he saw nothing objectionable about his halakhic writings and certainly did not regard as R. Kook as a heretic. See Shelomo Kohen, *Pe'er ha-Dor* (Jerusalem, 1969), vol. 2, p. 34. Indeed, one of the first things the *Hazon Ish* did when he arrived in the Land of Israel was to write R. Kook a letter, asking him to decide a halakhic problem he was confronted with. See R. Ben Zion Shapiro, ed., *Iggerot ha-Reiyah* (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 448-449. Furthermore, it is known that when R. Kook came to deliver a talk in Benei Berak, the *Hazon Ish* remained standing throughout the former's address. See Kohen, *Pe'er ha-Dor*, vol. 2, p. 32; R. Mosheh Zvi Neriyah, *Bi-Sedei ha-Reiyah* (Kefar ha-Ro'eh, 1987), p. 247. Even with regard to R. Kook's philosophical writings, the *Hazon Ish* sometimes expressed a more positive view, depending on whom he was speaking to. See Binyamin Efrati, "Shenei Bikurim Etsel ha-Hazon Ish ZT"l," *Morashah* 6 (1974): 62-63.

<sup>15</sup>In 2002, R. Mosheh Tsuril, under the pseudonym Hayyim Lifschitz, published N. H. Wessely's *Sefer ha-Middot* (Jerusalem, 2002), with an introduction defending the author's piety. This work was also placed under a ban. See *De'ah ve-Dibbur*, Sept. 4, 2002 (found at [www.shemayisrael.com](http://www.shemayisrael.com)). *De'ah ve-Dibbur* is the internet version of *Yated Ne'eman*.

<sup>16</sup>See Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History* (New York, 1977). Although the book is fairly complete, Carmilly-Weinberger inexplicably does not discuss the condemnations of R. Kook's writings. Concerning this, see Bezalel Naor's introduction to his translation of R. Kook's *Orot* (Northvale, N. J., 1993). See also Rivka Shatz, "Reishit ha-Masa Negeid ha-Rav Kook," *Molad* 6 (1974): 251-262.

from a distance, even though he regarded their *hesder* yeshivot and worldview as destroying Torah, going so far as to declare: "Religious Zionists have done nothing for the benefit of Torah causes in Israel. They are void of Torah and the fear of Heaven and are not capable of producing any *gedolim*."<sup>17</sup> R. Zvi Yehudah Kook was one of the few religious Zionist leaders who publicly criticized R. Shakh, yet when he heard one of his students doing likewise, he was quick to rebuke him.<sup>18</sup> R. Shelomo Aviner, a contemporary leader of the religious nationalist community, has often written about the importance of respecting *all* Torah scholars, even those whose views religious Zionists vehemently reject.<sup>19</sup>

Yet in the *haredi* world, it is much more difficult to find such respect for those whose views differ. It is, of course, no secret that in religious matters it is easy for people to respect those on their right; it is the reverse that is more difficult. For this very reason, people who send their children to Modern Orthodox schools contribute heavily to *haredi* yeshivot, without expecting, or receiving, any reciprocity. Leading *haredi* figures always showed great respect for the Satmar rebbe, but, since they cooperated with and received from money from the State of Israel, they never expected to receive such respect in return.

*Haredi* attitudes towards the leaders of Modern Orthodoxy and religious Zionism are more complicated than this. Even when one finds elements of respect, they are usually coupled with signs that there are also "problems" with the individuals concerned. The very reserved

"eulogy" in the *Jewish Observer*, following the death of Rabbi Soloveitchik, was in line with this.<sup>20</sup> In fact, literature that disrespects Torah scholars is a staple in the *haredi* world, but of course, these Torah scholars are always found in a different ideological camp. Usually, the disrespect is seen in the way *haredi* writers refer to these scholars. While the *haredi gedolim* are referred to as *ha-rav ha-ga'on*, other *gedolim* become simply *ha-rav*. There are times when matters reach more distressing proportions, but as all who read *haredi* literature know, the omitting of the title *ha-ga'on* is the standard way to distinguish real *gedolim* from those who may be learned, but, because they do not follow *da'as Torah*, can never reach the highest rung.

Because of this pattern, it was somewhat of a surprise when people heard that Kamenetsky's *Making of a Godol*, a book that emanated from the *haredi* world, had come under attack. The story, accompanied by all sorts of rumors, quickly spread on the Internet. When the official *herem* finally appeared, with R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv's name featured at the top of the signatories, the book became an immediate collector's item. Most *seforim* stores would not even carry it.

Before even discussing the book itself, a word must be said about the figure of R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv. Over the last ten years, he has become the supreme authority in the *haredi* world, the final word on all matters of importance. R. Elyashiv stands as clear evidence that the institution of the *Mo'etset Gedolei ha-Torah*, a group of Torah scholars who are supposed to decide matters for the *hare-*

<sup>17</sup>Translation in Rapoport, *The Messiah Problem*, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup>See *Itturei Kohanim* (Heshvan, 5763), p. 44. R. Zvi Yehudah told him: "What is permitted for me to say, is not permitted for you." R. Zvi Yehudah could indeed speak sharply about *gedolim* when they did not accept his religious-national perspective. For example, R. Zvi Yehudah downplayed the significance of the *Hazon Ish*, whose non-Zionism and suspicious view of the State prevents him from being embraced by the religious nationalists. R. Zvi Yehudah wrote: "The *Hazon Ish* was not the *gadol ha-dor*. The *gadol ha-dor* and halakhic decisor *par excellence* was my father of blessed memory. In Vilna there were other laymen who were *ge'onim*, R. Shalom David Rabinowitz, R. Yerucham Fishel Perla, R. Moses Kreines, and others. . . . Even if he [i. e., *Hazon Ish*] was a *gadol* [!], he was not the halakhic decisor for this generation and generations to come." See Avraham Remer, *Gadol Shimushah* (Jerusalem), 1984), p. 68 (I am citing from the uncensored version. A censored version of this work, lacking this passage, appeared in Jerusalem, 1994.)

<sup>19</sup>This is a common theme in R. Aviner's letters, which appear monthly in *Itturei Kohanim*.

<sup>20</sup>May, 1993, p. 43. The "eulogy" is actually omitted from the table of contents

<sup>21</sup>*Mi-Katovitz ad Heh be-Iyyar* (Jerusalem, 1995).

*di* community, remains a fiction. In fact, as the *haredi* historian Zvi Weinman has documented,<sup>21</sup> throughout most of its existence the *Mo`etseset* has had no real significance, and when rabbinic authority was required, it became the role of individual *gedolim* to offer guidance. Today, this position is filled by R. Elyashiv.

Although R. Elyashiv assumed R. Shakh's role, the course of R. Elyashiv's life, in contrast to that of R. Shakh, for the most part has not followed the typical *haredi* model. He is the grandson of R. Shelomo Elyashiv, the famed Kabbalist and author of *Leshem Shevo ve-Ahlahamah*, and the son-in-law of R. Aryeh Levin, both of whom were close to R. Kook. R. Elyashiv himself served for many years as a *dayyan* in the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, the same rabbinate condemned by R. Shakh.<sup>22</sup> It was only when R. Shelomo Goren was elected chief rabbi in 1972 that R. Elyashiv, then serving as a member of the rabbinate's Supreme *Beit Din*, resigned. He regarded R. Goren's approach as a threat to the integrity of the halakhic system and refused to serve under him. In retrospect, this was a very significant step, for only with his ties to the official rabbinate removed would he be able to emerge, twenty years later, as the supreme leader of the *haredim*.

Because R. Elyashiv had not always been regarded as part of the *haredi* world, and had not engaged in sharp attacks on the other segments of Orthodoxy, he remained well respected in the religious Zionist community even after he began to publicly identify with the *haredi* ideology. Thus, despite his increasing politicization in the last decade, he is still regarded as a *gadol* whose reputation transcends the *haredi* world. As such, R. Elyashiv's views on various communal matters should certainly be taken seriously, even if not ultimately accepted, by all segments of the Orthodox world.

Having offered this background, we can now ask what was so problematic about *Making of a Godol* that this great sage was forced to issue his condemnation. Furthermore, what can we say about the book in general, since lost in all the hubbub has been any discussion of its quality and general approach? The book is subtitled, "A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities," and this is certainly an apt description. Filling some 1400 pages, Kamenetsky uses the biography of his father to discuss many *gedolim* and aspects of the yeshiva world, focusing on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is a basic text, of less than a hundred pages, and numerous excursuses and notes. It is in the latter section that the book's real significance lies.

It is not an easy book to read, as it has been organized very poorly and there are far too many cross-references—some of which lead to nowhere. A good editor could have improved matters immeasurably. Also, the author's method of transliteration is downright foolish, as is his manner of sometimes referring to people by the Yiddish pronunciation of their names, e. g., Ya`akov becomes Yankev or Yankel, Mosheh becomes Maisheh, Yehezqel becomes Hatzqel, Avraham becomes Avrohm, Yosef becomes Yoshe, etc. Here too, an editor would have been very helpful. Yet even though he did not have such assistance, the book is beautifully typeset with helpful maps at the beginning and end. I did not find one typo, which is no small achievement considering the length of this book. There are pictures of twenty-one *gedolim* on the front and back book jackets. Unfortunately, none of them are identified, and the average reader will not realize that one of the pictures is of a youthful and very stylishly dressed R. Aaron Kotler. There is also a picture of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, showing that the author's view of who qualifies as a *gadol* is wider than that of much of

<sup>22</sup>His own *mehuttan*, R. Jacob Israel Kanevsky, the famed Steipler Rav, and R. Shakh both urged their followers not to take the examinations to become a government *dayyan*. See R. Kanevsky, *Karyana de-Iggarta* (Benei Berak, 1986), vol. 1, p. 263; R. Shakh, *Mikhtavim u-Ma'amarim*, vols. 1-2, p. 165.

<sup>23</sup>In R. Shakh's *Mikhtavim u-Ma'amarim*, vol. 4, p. 107, R. Soloveitchik is referred to as a *gadol* with quotation marks around the word, after which his ideas are described as *mammash divrei kefirah*. While not usually going as far as this, *haredi* denigration of the Rav was common during his lifetime, and was made most vivid by the widespread *haredi* boycott of his funeral. Regarding the boycott, see Eliezer (Louis) Bernstein, "Ve-Lamashmitsim lo Tihye Tiqvah," *Ha-Tsofeh*, Oct. 29, 1993.

the *haredi* world.<sup>23</sup> On the book jacket, we are informed that the author "has accumulated much more material on this general subject, and this volume is the first in an anticipated series." One wonders whether with all the controversy that has ensued, this will ever come to pass. Certainly, if more volumes do appear, they are not likely to be similar to the first one.

In the forward to the book, Kamenetsky discusses two ways history has been written in the Orthodox community: the hagiographic and the realistic. He tells us that he intends to write real history and justifies this choice, which no longer is an obvious one in *haredi* circles.<sup>24</sup> While portraying *gedolim* as the outstanding figures they were, he also notes that "if a minor blemish – and on a truly great man it is never more than minor—also exists, it does not ruin the grace of the outstanding personality" (p. xxvii). By calling attention to imperfections, he does not believe that he is diminishing these *gedolim* in any way.

Here, of course, is the problem in the eyes of the *haredi* world. While most of them would admit that even *gedolim* have their faults, it is regarded as improper for these faults to be pointed out. Now it is true that stories of the sort recorded by Kamenetsky have always been part of yeshiva lore, but they have always been transmitted orally. To see them written down, recorded for posterity, is, I admit, a little jarring. I submit that it is this, rather than any beliefs in the supposed infallibility of *gedolim*, that brought out the fury of the *haredi* leadership and is reflected in the text of the ban:

We were appalled to hear from reliable *talmidei chachomim* about the distribution and sale of a book called *Making of a Godol* which is full of severely debasing remarks, derisiveness, degradation and *hot-zo'as shem ra* against several figures among *gedolei horabbonim*, the leading lights of Yisroel in recent

generations and the *rishonim kemal'ochim* whose words guide the lives of all Beis Yisroel, whose elucidations of the Torah we imbibe and whose greatness, veneration and holiness are rooted in the hearts of all Jews with a fear of Heaven. This is what the book seeks to negate, by discrediting, disgracing and debasing their illustrious honor, which is also the honor of *Hashem yisborach* and the holy Torah. . . . This is not a book of tales about *gedolei Yisroel*, but just the opposite. It is wholly filled with a chilling spirit that distances one from the true purpose in life that can have unforeseen and grave consequences.<sup>25</sup>

The ban also mentions that the book is dangerous for it "blemishes the proper *hashkofah*" that condemns "blending external studies together with the pure study of our holy Torah." Here I must confess that I don't know what the ban is referring to, for nowhere in the book does the author criticize the Torah-only perspective of the yeshiva world in favor of some sort of Hirschian *Torah im Derekh Erets* approach. I would assume that a few references to his father being acquainted with Modern Hebrew and Russian literature, as well as having some awareness of Aristotle, Plato, and Kant, are not so terrible as to bring about such a strong denunciation.<sup>26</sup> Neither is the report that R. Jacob Kamenetsky recommended to the principal of the secular department at Yeshivat Torah Vodaath that students study certain Shakespeare plays "because in olden times there was less reference to topics to which yeshiva bahurim should not be exposed" (p. 264). I could be wrong about this, and it is possible that *haredi* society has now reached the point where *gedolim* are supposed to have absolutely no knowledge of matters other than Torah. Yet it is also possible that the signers of the *herem*, none of whom could read the book in the original, were misinformed about its content in this regard.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>See Jacob J. Schacter, "Facing the Truths of History," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 8 (1998-1999): 200-276.

<sup>25</sup>See *De'ah ve-Dibbur*, Dec. 25, 2002 (found at [www.shemayisrael.com](http://www.shemayisrael.com)).

<sup>26</sup>Kamenetsky also discusses the secular knowledge of R. Aaron Kotler (pp. 305ff.)

<sup>27</sup>In addition to the *herem* by the Israeli *haredi* leaders, a number of American Roshei Yeshivah signed another *herem*, which mentions nothing about Torah and secular studies.

In *Making of a Godol*, Kamenetsky shows himself to be a master of the Lithuanian yeshiva world. One won't find here sociological analysis of the sort in Shaul Stampfer's book on the subject,<sup>28</sup> but it is impossible not to be struck by the incredible amount of information the author amassed during his fifteen years of research. It is a true labor of love, and there is hardly anyone who can match Kamenetsky's sheer knowledge of this world and its rabbinic figures, most of whom are completely forgotten today. Using this knowledge, the author is able to bring a wide range of sources to each issue and personality he discusses.<sup>29</sup>

Yet the book suffers from some serious flaws. I would not mention them if *Making of a Godol* were a typical *haredi* hagiography, but Kamenetsky is at pains to point out that his book is the exact opposite. We see this not only in the text itself, but even in the book's layout. It includes a book jacket with a picture of the author and a short description, much like one finds in "regular" books but which are conspicuously absent in *haredi* works.

As such, it is important to point out that despite the author's great erudition, this is not a properly synthesized book that flows neatly from one topic to another. It is rather a smorgasbord of facts, impressive indeed, but without any sight of the big picture. What we get instead are attempts, some very clumsy, at illuminating selected episodes and personalities. A trained historian could have done wonders with the information Kamenetsky provides.

Another serious shortcoming is his use of sources—in particular, the hundreds of personal communications he records. While oral history can be valuable, it has to be used carefully and must yield when faced with documentary evidence to the contrary.<sup>30</sup> The *haredi* culture is in

many respects an oral culture, with stories of *gedolim* told and retold, and with this come distortions and falsehoods. Kamenetsky at times shows that he is aware of this, but only when the oral history is contradicted by another version of oral history or by a reliable written source. Otherwise, he chooses to rely on all sorts of tales.

It is one thing when oral history focuses on an event or an oral exchange witnessed by a particular individual—and there are numerous such examples in the book—but often Kamenetsky will record a story he heard from X who heard from Y who heard from Z, sometimes about an event that happened 100 years ago! Clearly, this does not qualify as history. Again, if this were a book of hagiography, one would expect this type of thing. In that sort of book we would anticipate being told what R. Hayyim Soloveitchik said when he was on a train or how the Rogochover rebuked another *godol* in the privacy of their hotel room. But Kamenetsky wants his book to be judged by the standards of historical scholarship, and in this respect it is sorely lacking.

This failure to recognize the unreliability of oral history leads Kamenetsky to take different versions of the same story and try to determine what actually occurred. While there is no doubt a kernel of truth in the basic story, a historian must acknowledge that at this late date it is simply impossible to come to any firm conclusions. Similarly, his detailed and tedious analysis of events, most notably the mission of Max Lilienthal in Russia (pp. 188-257), combine what is best about the book – a gathering together of widely scattered material – with the book's weakness, a reliance on stories and traditions, together with hypotheses, which, at the end of the day, have no basis.

This criticism, however, does not mean that the author's

<sup>28</sup> *Ha-Yeshivah ha-Lita'it be-Hithavutah* (Jerusalem, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> I find it surprising, however, that there is no mention of Rav Tsair's autobiography (*Pirkei Hayyim* [New York, 1954]), which contains much relevant material.

<sup>30</sup> This point is stressed by Zvi Weinman, a contemporary *haredi* historian who works with original documents and whose writing is far removed from hagiography. See *Mi-Katovitz ad Heh be-Iyyar*, pp. 10, 165 n. 12.

hypotheses are never compelling or at least thought provoking. For example, he questions whether the unusual paths of men such as R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, Prof. Saul Lieberman and Prof. Samuel Atlas<sup>31</sup> had something to do with their being childless and thus feeling free to make unconventional choices (p. 820). This, I think, is a compelling insight.

Another problematic element of the book, admittedly found only on occasion, is its use of unnamed sources. This is acceptable in journalism, but not in scholarship. For example, the evidence for one of the most controversial passages in the book, concerning R. Aaron Kotler, his future wife, and his future father-in-law, R. Isser Zalman Meltzer, is "a reliable source" (p. 802).<sup>32</sup> I understand why the source would not want his or her name to be given, but when repeating such a loaded story, which one knows will be controversial and its veracity challenged, the author is obligated to name the source, thus allowing the reader to judge its reliability. After all, if the source is R. Kotler's daughter, its authenticity is more apparent than if it is another example of what X heard from Y. If the source does not wish to go on the record, it is best for the story to be omitted. (In my own biography of R. Weinberg, I was forced to leave out a number of "juicy" details, precisely for this reason.)

As for the controversial elements in *Making of a Godol*, which are only a very small portion of the book, I will leave it to others to judge whether they should have been

included. One can easily understand, especially in our day and age, why the *haredi* leaders would react so sharply to any book that portrays *gedolim* in a non-hagiographic light, discusses conflicts these *gedolim* had with one another, and repeats stories that portray some of them as having made errors and even as possessing personality flaws.<sup>33</sup>

Since my own work has been the subject of a major dispute in this regard, I have given these issues a good deal of thought. Every biography involves choosing from a mass of information in order to portray various characters. When dealing with potentially controversial matters, my own yardstick has always been whether the information will help in one's assessment of the individuals concerned, or if it is simply voyeuristic gossip. Kamenetsky would no doubt reply that this is a judgment call, and he was not writing an intellectual biography but seeking to portray personalities. Indeed, the *gedolim* do come to life in *Making of a Godol*, and the stories are always entertaining, sometimes even shocking. Yet, in the final analysis, one must wonder whether they are true.

## II.

Sacks's book is in a completely different category and the reasons for the controversy are much more fundamental, indeed reaching to the heart of what traditional Judaism affirms.<sup>34</sup> The controversy over the work forced Sacks to issue a new, soft-cover edition of the book, in which he has rephrased the disputed passages,<sup>35</sup> but he has refused

<sup>31</sup>An example of the unreliability of oral history and yeshiva lore is Kamenetsky's identification of Atlas as the youngest son of R. Meir Atlas, the rav of Shavli (p. 820). The dedication at the beginning of Atlas' edition of *Hiddushei Rabad on Bava Kamma* (London, 1940) identifies his father, and it is not R. Meir Atlas.

<sup>32</sup>That there was some tension between R. Kotler and R. Meltzer, specifically with regard to Zionism, has recently been documented. See Yoel Finkelman, "Haredi Isolation in Changing Environments: A Case Study in Yeshiva Immigration," *Modern Judaism* 22 (2002), pp. 63-64.

<sup>33</sup>To be sure, it is not only *gedolim* revered in the *haredi* world who are the focus in this regard. Thus, Kamenetsky cites R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's report that R. Hayyim Soloveitchik regarded R. Isaac Jacob Reines, the founder of Mizrachi, as a heretic (p. 479). The Rav himself is known to have made some very sharp comments about certain *gedolim*, most notably R. Jacob David Willovsky (*Ridbaz*), whose harsh criticism of R. Hayyim Soloveitchik is well known. I would be surprised if these appeared in any future biography of the Rav.

<sup>34</sup>I am grateful to Rabbi Chaim Rapoport for sending me relevant clippings from the *Jewish Chronicle* and the *Jewish Tribune*

<sup>35</sup>This review was written before the soft-cover edition appeared. Both versions remain in print.

<sup>36</sup>The very fact that Sacks submitted to *haredi* pressure and, instead of defending his position, agreed to issue a "revised" edition, leads Geoffrey Alderman to assert that the real leader of English Orthodoxy today is not the Chief Rabbi and his *Bet Din*, but the *rav* of Gateshead, R. Bezalel Rakow. See the *Jewish Chronicle*, Nov. 15, 2002



to retract anything that appeared in the first edition.<sup>36</sup> What has made the book so controversial is that Sacks stakes out an ecumenical position that apparently breaks new theological ground, which understandably is anathema in *haredi* circles. What must be considered, and what Sacks shockingly does not do, is whether there is any support in the Jewish tradition for his approach.

Before discussing this let me briefly describe Sacks's general position. The book is an attempt to provide guidance in the era of globalization, so that we can avoid the much talked about "Clash of Civilizations." In addition to religion, Sacks focuses on charity, education, and the value and problems of capitalism. Yet it is his theory of religion that is most original, and that led R. Elyashiv, in a letter to the *rav* of Gateshead, to characterize the book as "containing heresy and matters that are against our faith in the holy Torah, and it is forbidden to have such a book in one's home."<sup>37</sup>

According to Sacks, in our current post-September 11 climate, we must do more than have tolerance for other cultures and religions, and do more than search for common values and give other religions basic respect.<sup>38</sup> Rather, we must *celebrate* the diverse world we live in. Such a celebration of the diversity of God's world is more than tolerance and even more than pluralism; it is a recognition of the truth found in all religions.

Forty years ago, at the height of the ecumenical movement, a number of Jewish religious leaders were asked the following question: "Is Judaism the one true religion,

or is it one of several true religions?"<sup>39</sup> It is significant that none of the Orthodox respondents were willing to grant that there is any truth in other religions, other than those truths that Mendelssohn would describe as the product of reason.<sup>40</sup> In other words, everyone grants that if Christianity teaches that murder is wrong, then this is a truth, but it is not a religious truth particular to this faith, and it is not what Sacks has in mind.

Sacks is a child of a different era, one in which post-modern ideas are now prevalent, and this explains his alternative view of religion and truth. In fact, he attempts to locate "the celebration of [religious] diversity at the very heart of the monotheistic imagination" (p. xi). He begins his book by describing an interfaith service that took place at Ground Zero in New York City, at which the Archbishop of Canterbury, a Muslim Imam, and a Hindu Guru recited prayers and meditations, and the Chief Rabbi of Israel read a reflection. This is a model of how religions should co-exist, according to Sacks. He sees our era as one in which:

The great faiths must now become an active force for peace and for the justice and compassion on which peace ultimately depends. That will require great courage and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that, more than at any time in the past, we need to search – each faith in its own way – for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of, those who are not of our faith. Can we make space for difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a

<sup>37</sup>See the text of his letter in the *Jewish Tribune*, Nov. 7, 2002. Some *haredi* fundamentalists also objected to Sacks's departing from the traditional notion that the world is under six thousand years old (p. 69); see, e. g., Ben Yitzchok in the *Jewish Tribune*, Nov. 21, 2002. Surprisingly, none of the fundamentalist critics seem to have noted the passage on p. 50, where Sacks refers to events at the beginning of Genesis, including the Flood and Tower of Babel, as "not *simply* an etiological myth" (emphasis added). In these circles, the notion that any biblical stories portray non-historical archetypes is regarded as heretical.

<sup>38</sup>Not noted by Sacks is that such respect is almost always absent in traditional Jewish texts. For example, one outstanding *poseq* routinely refers to churches as *beit tiffah*. If a leading Christian figure spoke of synagogues in this fashion, the response of the ADL and other Jewish organizations would be fast and furious, and rightfully so.

<sup>39</sup>*The Condition of Jewish Belief* (New York, 1966), p. 7.

<sup>40</sup>Sacks's predecessor as Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, was most adamant: "As a professing Jew, I obviously consider Judaism the only true religion, just as I would expect the adherents of any other faith to defend a similar claim for their religion." *Ibid.*, p. 112.

culture not our own? (pp. 4-5.)

In other words, Sacks is asking us to see God not merely in the peoples of the world, but even in their varying religions. This is a very bold stance when one considers Judaism's monotheistic tradition. Sacks himself acknowledges: "I have not hesitated to be radical, and I have deliberately chosen to express that radicalism in religious terms" (p. 17). As he puts it, our faith can give rise "to a generosity of spirit capable of recognizing the integrity—yes, even the sanctity—of worlds outside our faith" (p. 9). In pre-modern times "it was possible to believe that our truth was the only truth; our way the only way" (p. 10). Today, the challenge is: "Can I, a Jew, hear the echoes of God's voice in that of a Hindu or Sikh or Christian or Muslim. . . . Can I do so and feel not diminished but enlarged? What then becomes of my faith which until then had encompassed the world and must now make space for another faith, another way of interpreting the world?" (pp. 17-18).<sup>41</sup>

Sacks' conclusion is to reject the notion that "one God

entails one faith, one truth, one covenant" (p. 200). In other words, while God's covenant at Sinai remains true for the Jewish people, other religions are expressions of alternative covenants with God, each of which represent its own truth. In Sacks's words, "God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims . . . *God is God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity.*" (p. 55, italics in original).<sup>42</sup>

Although he claims that his position is *not* an endorsement of polytheism (p. 65), Sacks never explains why not. He himself tells us that truth on earth is not the whole truth: "When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true [and] the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality, an alternative way of structuring order. . . . In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths." (p. 64).<sup>43</sup> Who then is to say that a polytheistic conception is not the truth of another culture—"a different perspective on reality"—while monotheism is the truth of the Jews? After all, as Sacks further notes, "God is greater than reli-

<sup>41</sup>I would also ask, what becomes of the liturgy, which in a number of places expresses a very exclusivist approach? Unfortunately, Sacks does not discuss whether he would be open to liturgical alterations in accord with his ecumenical vision. At the very least, it is impossible for his vision to coexist with the (often excised) words of *Aleinu*: "For they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god which helps not."

<sup>42</sup> Sacks also writes that, "There is no equivalent in Judaism to the doctrine that *extra ecclesium non est salus*, outside the Church there is no salvation." This is, however, incorrect, and it is none other than Maimonides who asserts it, when he declares in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim* 8:11 that even Noahides must accept the binding authority of God's revelation to Moses in order to receive a share in the World to Come (though, admittedly, he doesn't require Gentiles to actually convert to Judaism). In his commentary to this passage, R. Joseph Karo expresses agreement with Maimonides' view. See Steven S. Schwarzschild, "Do Noahites Have to Believe in Revelation," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 52 (1962): 297-308, *ibid.*, 53 (1962): 30-65. According to Maimonides, any non-Jewish system of religious ritual is illicit; the only alternatives for Gentiles are conversion or observance of the Noahide laws, which by definition exclude any Gentile system of ritual. See *Hilkhoh Melakhim* 10: 9; Gerald Blidstein, "Maimonides and Me'iri on the Legitimacy of Non-Judaic Religion," in Leo Landman, ed., *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction Between Judaism and Other Cultures* (New York, 1990), pp. 28-33. See also R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, *Kol Sifrei Maharatz Chajes* (Jerusalem, 1958), vol. 2 p. 1036; Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe* (New York, 1973), *Yoreh Deah* II, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Sacks is here following the path advocated by the philosopher of religion, John Hick, in his influential book *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, 1989). According to Hick, the truth formulations of all religions should be viewed as "incomplete attempts at expressing the ineffable, i. e., 'truths' only in a very weak sense of the term." See Tamar Ross, "Reflections on the Possibilities of Interfaith Communication in our Day," *The Edah Journal* 1 (5761; available at [www.edah.org](http://www.edah.org)). The quote is Ross's summary of Hick's position.) Ross's discussion of interfaith communication, which is a philosophically more sophisticated analysis and covers much of the same ground as Sacks's, is not reticent about acknowledging that even so-called idolatrous religions must be included when truth is understood with a small "t", that is, as a subjective portrayal of how we see the divine. The corollary to this, as Ross makes clear yet Sacks does not, is that there can no longer be a hierarchy of religions, with Judaism at the top, containing Truth, and the other religions below it. As Ross puts it, "The varieties of religious particularism teach us the infinite range of possibilities open to the human spirit rather than the wealth of the one track to be taken by all."

gion" and "He is only partially comprehended by any faith" (p. 65).

I see no way to accept Sacks' basic propositions and at the same time to discount the legitimacy of polytheism for those cultures which approach the divine in this fashion. Sacks himself says, with reference to religious truth, that "each culture has something to contribute" (pp. 64-65, italics added). In other words, he explicitly includes even polytheistic societies. Once Sacks is prepared to understand truth in a non-absolutist sense, then it is not merely Christianity and Islam that become part of the great circle of truth, but *all* religious expression.

Does the Jewish tradition have room for such a position, one that speaks of multiple religious truths? In formulating this question I speak of the Jewish tradition in its widest sense, obviously much broader than that recognized by the *haredi* world, which, for instance, does not regard R. Kook's theological views as legitimate. In fact, Sacks could have looked to R. Kook in support of what he states regarding the differences between truth on earth and Divine truth. R. Kook wrote: "In relation to the highest Divine truth, there is no difference between formulated religion and heresy. Both do not yield the truth, because whatever positive assertion a person makes is a step removed from the truth of the Divine."<sup>44</sup>

Yet even with such a passage, we still do not have a precedent for Sacks's overall thesis. Since the outlook he describes is a product of new intellectual approaches, many will wonder how sages of previous generations could possibly provide support. To be sure, new positions can be offered in Jewish theology, but unless there is some support in the tradition both the new position, and the individual advocating it, will probably be read out of the fold.

Sacks himself acknowledges that his approach is radical, and he notes that "God is summoning us to a new act of listening, going back to the sources of our faith and hearing in them something we missed before, because we did not face these challenges, this configuration of dilemmas before. In religions of revelation, discoveries are rediscoveries, a discernment of something that was always there but not necessarily audible from where our ancestors stood" (p. 19). Clearly, we are faced with a controversial position when the author admits that what he is advocating was not—indeed, could not—have been known previously. Since he posits that a basic religious truth was unknown to the greats of previous generations but has now been revealed to us, one understands why there was such a strong reaction to Sacks' words.

If we are to conclude, as Sacks himself seems to, that while his position has biblical roots, it is absent from the rabbinic tradition, then we would be forced to agree with the *haredi* critique. Some might argue that there are lots of things that we know today that the greats of previous generations did not know. Yet those are matters in the realms of history and science. On the other hand, Sacks is referring to a basic theological assumption. If he can show that we now recognize facts that must change our perceptions of other religions, facts that earlier generations were unaware of, this would be important. Yet he does not do this. Rather, he simply asserts that there is a need to go back to the sources of our faith and hear something that wasn't heard in previous generations. This assertion, that earlier generations lacked our multicultural perspective, is simply begging the point, for he has not established that our multicultural perspective is positive in and of itself and can thus be the springboard for a new ecumenical theology, for what Sacks acknowledges to be "a paradigm shift in our understanding of our commonalities and differences" (p. 48). As such, any effort in this

<sup>44</sup>*Arpelei Tohar* (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 45; translation in Tamar Ross, "The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements: Rabbi A. I. Kook and Postmodernism," in Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock, eds. *Hazon Nahum* (New York, 1997), p. 491.

<sup>45</sup>Sacks' religious ecumenism is actually anticipated to a certain extent by the late British Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz, who wrote that according to the Sages, the heathens were not held responsible for a false conception of God and "were judged by God purely by their moral life." *Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London, 1980), p. 759. Hertz also declares that pagan worship of the sun, moon, and stars, albeit as a first stage of religious belief, "forms part of God's guidance of humanity" (*ibid.*).

direction must proceed on the basis of Jewish sources, rather than on *ex cathedra*, post-modern declarations.<sup>45</sup>

Let us then take up the question of whether there is any basis in traditional Jewish sources for Sacks's assertion that there is truth, indeed sanctity, in other religions. Nowhere does Sacks discuss the issue of *avodah zarah*. This is crucial, because the concept stands in contradiction to his claim that the truth of Judaism need not mean the falsehood of other religions. If the other religions fall into the category of *avodah zarah*, how can one not affirm their falsehood? At first glance, there appears to be no room for speaking of such religions as wonderful ingredients in God's great mosaic. Rather than honoring these religions for what they provide their adherents, as Sacks wishes to do, *halakhah* would seem to require that these religions be condemned for teaching a non-monotheistic theology. Needless to say, such an approach is hardly the friendly perspective Sacks wants Judaism to project in our multicultural world.

But this assumption that religions of *avodah zarah* are deserving of condemnation, though seemingly the Talmudic approach and codified as such by Maimonides, is not the only perspective our tradition offers. An opening for a more tolerant approach is seen in the writings of Meiri. Although Meiri is often cited as the source for the notion that Christianity is not a form of idolatry, he actually can be read as saying a lot more than this. An examination of his various statements, as has been expertly done by Moshe Halbertal, shows that as far as Gentiles are concerned, Meiri essentially regards idolatry as a moral error, not a theological error.<sup>46</sup> To put it another way, the main problem with Gentile idolatry is that it leads to a society not bound by norms of civilized behav-

ior.

Although in one place Meiri describes Christianity as affirming the unity of God,<sup>47</sup> leading J. David Bleich to a restrictive understanding of Meiri's view,<sup>48</sup> elsewhere Meiri's tolerance appears much broader. For example, he describes the idolatrous nations, those not "restricted by the ways of religion," as violent people "who are possessed of no religion in the world and do not yield to fear of the Divinity and, instead, burn incense to the heavenly bodies and worship idols, paying no heed to any sin."<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere he states, concerning the idolators of old: "They were not restricted by the ways of religion. On the contrary, every sin and everything repulsive was fit in their eyes."<sup>50</sup> These formulations put the focus on the idolators' lack of any fear of divine punishment, which in turn leads to a society not restrained by moral standards. As Moshe Halbertal has recently written, "Intolerance for idolators has its source, therefore, not in their being members of another religion, but in their being members of no religion at all because they are not restricted by the ways of religion. The Meiri is the first thinker to suggest a concept of inter-religious tolerance built on the functional value common to all religion."<sup>51</sup>

To be sure, Meiri identified polytheistic societies as also being barbaric. But today it is obvious that we can indeed speak of societies that are "restricted by the ways of religion," that is, civilized, even if these societies' religions are, from a strict theological standpoint, idolatrous. In one place, Meiri himself actually refers to the nations who are restricted by the ways of religion as "worshipping the divinity in any way, even if their faith is far from ours."<sup>52</sup> It is certainly possible to construct an interpretation of Meiri's approach to idolatry that would enable

<sup>46</sup> *Bein Torah le-Hokhmah: Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri u-Va'alei ha-Halakhah ha-Maimonim be-Provence* (Jerusalem, 2000), ch. 3. An English version of this chapter appears in *The Edah Journal* 1 (5761; available at [www.edah.org](http://www.edah.org)).

<sup>47</sup> *Beit ha-Behirah to Gittin* (ed. Schlesinger), pp. 257-258.

<sup>48</sup> J. David Bleich, "Divine Unity in Maimonides, The Tosafists and Me'iri," in Lenn E. Goodman, ed., *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany, 1992), pp. 243ff.

<sup>49</sup> *Beit ha-Behirah to Avodah Zarah* (ed. Sofer) p. 39.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59

<sup>51</sup> *Bein Torah le-Hokhmah*, p. 102.

<sup>52</sup> *Beit ha-Behirah to Bava Kamma* (ed. Schlesinger), p. 330 (emphasis added).

religious acceptance even of the archetypal pagan from the Orient, so often referred to on the first page of seforim published in Eastern Europe. Such an interpretation would be especially valuable in modern times, since we now live with polytheists and can observe that they are not evil people. Perhaps such an interpretation was in the mind of R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, who was particularly adamant about the need to accept Meiri's view so that we could "put an end to the hatred of the religions for one another."<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, Weinberg himself wrote quite ecumenically: "We believe that a Gentile can also be blessed, when he remains true to his religion and faithfully fulfills its precepts."<sup>54</sup>

The common assumption is that Meiri's view has no source in any talmudic or midrashic text. Yet there is one *midrash* that actually expresses a remarkable tolerance of non-monotheistic theologies. *Exod. Rabbah* 15:23 reads as follows:

It is written: *Let them be only thine own, and not strangers' with thee* (Prov. 5:17). The Holy One blessed by He said, "I do not warn idolators concerning idolatry, but you," as it is said: *Ye shall make you no idols* (Lev. 26:1). Only to you have I given judgment, for it says: *Hear this, O ye priests, and attend, ye house of Israel, and give ear, O house of the King, for unto you pertaineth the judgment* (Hos. 5:1).

It would be hard to find a more clear declaration that idolatry is only a prohibition as far as Jews are concerned.

We must also call attention to Deut. 4:19, which states: "And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven and when thou seest the sun and the moon and the stars, even all the host of heaven, thou be drawn away and worship

them and serve them, which the Lord thy God hath allotted unto all the peoples under the whole heaven." The implication appears clear, and is noted as such by Rashbam, namely, that the stars are intended to be worshipped by the nations.<sup>55</sup>

Mal. 1:11 similarly states: "For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name is great among the nations, and in every place offerings are presented unto My name, even pure libations; for My name is great among the nations, saith the Lord of Hosts." This verse seemingly recognizes the religious legitimacy of non-Israelite worship. In other words, although the adherents of other faiths offer sacrifices to their gods, God regards this worship as also being directed to him, even though He per se is not yet recognized. In the words of the late Chief Rabbi Hertz, "Even the heathen nations that worship the heavenly hosts pay tribute to a Supreme Being, and in this way honour My name; and the offerings which they thus present (indirectly) unto Me are animated by a pure spirit, God looking to the heart of the worshipper. This wonderful thought was further developed by the Rabbis, and is characteristic of the universalism of Judaism."<sup>56</sup>

This notion, that gentiles are not bound by a prohibition on idolatry, is also affirmed by two important medieval commentators, R. Isaac Abarbanel and R. Isaac Arama. They agree precisely with the passage from *Exod. Rabbah* cited above, although neither of them cites this text. In discussing the Jonah story and the actions of the people of Nineveh, Abarbanel cites the verse from Deut. 4:19 and concludes from it that the Ninevites were not to be punished for their idolatry. They did not know any better and indeed were never commanded against idolatry.<sup>57</sup> This understanding of Abarbanel is also found in

<sup>53</sup>See my "Scholars and Friends: Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg and Professor Samuel Atlas," *Torah u-Madda Journal*, 7 (1997), p. 118

<sup>54</sup>"Zum Proselytproblem," *Jüdische Rundschau-Maccabi*, Sep. 8, 1950, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup>The Talmud, *Megillah* 9b and *Avodah Zarah* 55a, specifically rejects such a reading.

<sup>56</sup>*Pentateuch and Haftorahs.*, p. 103.

<sup>57</sup>Commentary to Jon. 4:11

his commentary to 1 Kings chapter 3, where he again cites the verse from Deut. 4:19 in the context of Solomon informing the nations how best to worship the stars of the heavens. Since this is permitted for Gentiles, Solomon did no wrong in this.<sup>58</sup>

R. Isaac Arama also cites the verse from Deut. 4:19, as well as some other biblical passages, and is explicit that "the nations are not obligated in the prohibition against idolatry."<sup>59</sup> He also points to a passage in *Bava Kamma* 38a: "R. Joseph said: *He stood and measured the earth he beheld [and drove asunder (va-yatter) the nations*<sup>60</sup>]. What did He behold? He beheld the seven commandments which had been accepted by all the descendants of Noah, but since they did not observe them, He rose up and granted them exemption (*ve-hittiran lahem*)." While the Talmud records a couple of amoraic understandings of what R. Joseph meant, Arama holds to the simple meaning, which is that Gentiles are no longer obligated in the Noahide Laws. Not noted by Arama is that *Lev. Rabbah* 13:2 is also explicit that since the Gentiles "were unable to endure even the seven precepts accepted by the descendants of Noah, God took these off them and put them on Israel."

This notion, that God no longer requires obedience to the Noahide Laws, is, of course, quite surprising.

According to this view, law is based on convention rather than revelation. Each society is therefore free to establish its own standards in all areas, including religion. With such an understanding, even gentile idolatrous worship would cease to be objectionable. In addition to Arama, this view concerning the current non-binding nature of the Noahide Laws is shared by at least one of the Tosafists, who distinguishes between the period prior to the giving of the Torah, when Gentiles were obligated by these laws, and the time subsequent to the revelation at Sinai, when they were freed from them.<sup>61</sup> Others who assert that the Noahide laws are no longer binding include R. Solomon ben Abraham Algazi<sup>62</sup> and R. Meir Azariah da Fano<sup>63</sup>. R. Joseph Trani is quoted by R. Hayyim Abulafia as having held the identical position, and, based upon it, disputed Maimonides' ruling that it is a capital offense for Gentiles to violate the Noahide Laws.<sup>64</sup> R. Isaac Palache too regards the Noahide Laws as no longer binding on Gentiles by virtue of divine law, although he argues that one is still permitted (!) to instruct them in these laws because they have a strong utilitarian purpose, in that they make for a civilized society (*tiqqun ha-olam*).<sup>65</sup>

Finally, in his earliest work, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch also implies that Gentiles are not obligated by the prohi-

<sup>58</sup>Pp. 475-476 in the standard editions. This latter text (as well as the texts from Arama discussed forthwith) are cited by David Berger, "'The Wisest of All Men': Solomon's Wisdom in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Kings," in Elman and Gurock, eds. *Hazon Nahum*, p. 107, n. 39. In his article "*Al Tadmitam shel ha-Goyim ba-Sifrut ha-Pulmusit ha-Ashkenazit*," in Yom Tov Assis, et al. eds., *Yehudim mul ha-Tselav*, p. 90, Berger discusses Abarbanel's assertion that God will wipe out the Christians for their sin of attributing corporeality to God. I don't see how this latter position can be squared with the position cited in the text, which frees Gentiles from culpability for idolatry. In private communication Professor Berger has commented, "Arguably, we have there a remarkable position that some forms of paganism are less blameworthy than Christianity. I am tempted to say, '*Benei Noah lo huzharu al avodah zarah shel ammei kedem* (or at least some forms of it), *aval huzharu al ha-Natzrut*.'"

<sup>59</sup>*Akedat Yitzhak*, ed. Pollak (Israel, 1974), Deut., ch. 88, p. 17a, *Hazut Qashah*, ch. 12, pp. 32a-32b.

<sup>60</sup>Hab. 3:6

<sup>61</sup>See the version of *Tosafot in Ein YaIaqov, Hagigah* 13a, s. v., ein. This *Tosafot* is quoted by R. Joel Sirkes, *Haggahot ha-Bah to Hagigah* 13a.

<sup>62</sup>*Ahavat Olam* (Dyhenfurth, 1693), pp. 27a-b.

<sup>63</sup>See *She'elot u-Teshuvot ha-Rama mi-Fano* (Jerusalem, no date), no. 123 (pp. 256-257). He himself contradicts this position *ibid.*, no. 30

<sup>64</sup>*Miqra'ei Qodesh* (Jerusalem, 1993), p. 184. Abulafia does not cite where Trani expressed this view, and it doesn't seem to be found in his published works, but many of his writings were lost. I assume that when Abulafia refers to Maharit, he has Trani in mind, but it is also possible that he means R. Joseph Taitatzak.

<sup>65</sup>*Yafeh la-Lev* (Izmir, 1889), vol. 5, *Yoreh De'ah* 246:9.

bition against idolatry. He writes, with reference to the Jews being regarded as the Chosen People, "This designation does not imply, as some have falsely interpreted it, that Israel has a monopoly on God's love and favor. On the contrary, it proclaims that God has the sole and exclusive claim to Israel's devotion and service; that Israel may not render Divine homage to any other being."<sup>66</sup> The implication of the final comment is that whereas Israel, as the Chosen People, may not render Divine homage to any other being, the nations of the world are permitted to do so.

To be sure, these are minority views, but minority views have a place in the tradition. This is especially so when dealing with matters of Jewish thought, which, by their nature, do not require a practical halakhic ruling. Since Sacks wishes to develop a radical idea, it is crucial that he have at least some support for it in the tradition. The sources cited here can perhaps be of some assistance in this regard.

So far we have only spoken of the negative, and shown why the common notion that idolatry is prohibited for Gentiles is not without dissent. But what about the positive side, which Sacks stresses, that other religions have

real, objective truth? Can we also find support for this notion in the tradition?

Here too there are some passages that could assist Sacks. The most famous is found at the end of the *Mishneh Torah*, where Maimonides notes that both Christianity—which, according to Maimonides, is an idolatrous religion<sup>67</sup>—and Islam "served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord." In other words, both of these religions in fact contain truth, and serve to move society closer to a pure view of God. To be sure, Maimonides sees their truth as provisional, and this is hardly identical with Sacks's understanding. Yet the passage is still significant in that it recognizes that other religions, even idolatrous ones, can indeed contain truth.

What about Sacks's more extreme assertion, that other religions also contain sanctity?<sup>68</sup> The Talmud speaks of prophets who were sent to the nations of the world (*Bava Batra* 15b). Their role was to bring God's word, and it is certainly possible that this word could exist in the framework of another religion. Furthermore, one need not assume that the prophets mentioned in the Talmud are all that have appeared among the Gentiles. Although there

<sup>66</sup>*Nineteen Letters*, tr. Jacob Breuer (New York, 1969), pp. 96-97. R. Joseph ben Joshua of Krakow's position is not entirely clear, but he, too, believes that the Noahide Laws are not currently binding, or perhaps only binding rabbinically. See *She'elot u-Teshuvot Penei Yehoshu'a* (Lvov, 1860), vol. 1, *Yoreh De'ah*, no. 3, vol. 2, *Even ha-Ezer*, no. 43, and the criticism of R. Moses Sofer, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Hatam Sofer* (Jerusalem, 1991), *Hoshen Mishpat*, no. 185.

<sup>67</sup>See his commentary to *Avodah Zarah* 1:3-4, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 9:4 (uncensored version). For responsa that permit Jews to contribute to the building of a church (some more grudgingly than others), see R. Marcus Horovitz, *Matteh Levi* (Frankfurt, 1933), vol. 2, *Yoreh De'ah*, no. 28; R. Isaac Unna, *Sho'alin ve-Dorshin* (Tel Aviv, 1964), no. 35; R. Yehudah Herzl Henkin, *Benei Vanim* (Jerusalem, 1997), vol. 3, no. 36; R. Shalom Messas, *Shemesh u-Magen* (Jerusalem, 2000), vol. 3, *Orah Hayyim*, nos. 30-31. Messas is the recently deceased Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. After this essay was completed I discovered that the Zohar, *Pekudei* 237a, refers to the kingdom of Greece as having been "near the true faith". Zohar, Introduction 13a, after noting that the *Shekhinah* takes under its wings those who separate themselves from impurity, states: "Let the earth bring forth a living soul according to its kind." The expression 'after its kind' denotes that there are many compartments and enclosures one within the other in that region which is called 'living', beneath its [the *Shekhinah*'s] wings. The right wing has two compartments, which branch out from it for two other nations who are most closely related to Israel [in their monotheistic belief], and therefore have entrance into these compartments. Underneath the left wing there are two other compartments which are divided between two other nations, namely Ammon and Moab. All these are included in the term 'soul of the living'." As for Islamic monotheism, Maimonides positive evaluation was also shared by Nahmanides, commentary to Genesis 2:3 (end).

<sup>68</sup>Eugene Korn, in an essay that parallels Sacks in many ways, also speaks of the "Jewish conception of covenantal pluralism [that] lays the groundwork for multiple sacred covenants that all moral people can follow" (emphasis added). See his "One God: Many Faiths - A Jewish Theology of Covenantal Pluralism," [www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/articles/Korn\\_13Mar03.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/articles/Korn_13Mar03.htm).

are rabbinic passages that state that once the Torah was given, *ruah ha-qodesh* was removed from the nations, this is not a unanimous view, and Maimonides indeed rejects it.<sup>69</sup>

The clearest support for Sacks' position is provided by R. Netanel ben al-Fayyumi (twelfth century), who maintains that "God sent different prophets to the various nations of the world with legislations suited to the particular temperament of each individual nation."<sup>70</sup> Although Sacks is motivated by a post-modern vision, the medieval R. Netanel also claimed that God's truth was not encompassed by Judaism alone. According to R. Netanel, various religions are to be viewed by their adherents, and correctly so, as sanctified.<sup>71</sup>

I do not intend to argue that Sacks' position is reflective of the main trend of rabbinic thought, for it certainly is not. But, as been demonstrated here, it is also the case that some precedent can be found even for his most radical statements. There is no question that he has gone beyond these earlier sources and offered a more complete theory of ecumenism than could possibly have been found in previous generations. One can certainly disagree with it, and I for one am not comfortable with many aspects of Sacks's presentation, in particular his obvious enthrallment with multiculturalism. Yet, by the same token, *haredi* assertions that the Chief Rabbi's comments are a denial of a foundational Jewish belief also strike me as wide of the mark.

<sup>69</sup>See *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Kafih (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 38

<sup>70</sup>Encyclopedia Judaica XII, col. 971. The most recent discussion of R. Netanel is Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *Ha-Rambam, ha-Mashiah be-Teman, ve-ha-Shemad* (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 94ff

<sup>71</sup>See *Gan ha-Sekhalim*, ed. Kafih (Jerusalem, 1984), ch. 6.



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