

Shabbat Toldot 5781- Rabbi Sacks Z'L and the Genesis of Responsibilities
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Shabbat Shalom!

Good lord! Could the good lord tell a story.

That the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks could weave brilliant Torah commentaries - everybody knew. Very rarely did he begin an essay with an anecdote. But when he did, it was exquisite. Like this one:

Nearly 30 years ago, he had just been elected Chief Rabbi of England. At the same time, a new Archbishop of Canterbury had been chosen. They shared one major passion: they were both huge fans of the soccer club Arsenal. So the Archbishop invited Rabbi Sacks to an Arsenal soccer match to shmooze and hopefully watch their team win.

Before the game began, they were led onto the field itself to present a check to charity. The PA system announced who they were and the throngs of fans roared in approval. As Rabbi Sacks writes, "Whichever way you played the theological wager, that night Arsenal had friends in high places. They could not possibly lose."

That night Arsenal got annihilated 6-2, their worst home defeat in over 60 years. The next day a major newspaper reported the story and wondered aloud: if the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi between them can't bring about a win for Arsenal, doesn't it prove that G-d does not exist?

Rabbi Sacks did not flinch. He said, "To the contrary. It proves that G-d exists. It's just that He supports Manchester United!"

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks passed away recently, leaving behind tens of thousands of admirers and students. Last Shabbat Rabbi Schwab offered a beautiful tribute in his memory. This week I offer my own because I consider Rabbi Sacks a teacher of mine too.

I read Rabbi Sacks's weekly Parsha essays for years, the contents of which now form several of his 25 books. Almost every week I finished reading them with the word "Wow" on my lips. How could he read the same words of Torah I had - words I had read many times - and discover such greater depths? He had an unmatched gift to discover

something new in ancient words. One of his greatest strengths as a teacher was to educate every audience without watering anything down. He really expected the reader to understand complex ideas, but he used just the right language for everyone to follow along.

I was lucky to hear him speak in person three times in New York City. These Torah lectures were tremendously exciting, and he had the whole room of one thousand people perched on every word for the whole hour. As skilled a writer as he was, he might have been an even better public speaker. Many lectures and essays are still available at rabbisacks.org.

Today I want to share one of my favorite teachings of his. In his essay “Noach: A Drama in Four Acts,” he reads the opening stories of Genesis as an ever-deepening commentary on responsibility.

Rabbi Sacks highlights the early Genesis narratives that feature interactions between G-d and people. G-d poses different tests to measure responsibility. Time after time, humanity fails. I'll share three of these failures, followed by my own examples of what success looks like.

First we find Adam and Eve. Once they eat the forbidden fruit, they feel shame. G-d asks them what they have done.

And G-d said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman You put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then the L-rd G-d said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Gn. 3:11 –13)

Confronted by their Maker, Adam blames Eve and even G-d. While Eve blames the serpent. Both people deny *personal* responsibility. Both say, it wasn't me.

Adam and Eve here teach us what *not* to do. It's easy to think we should own up to our mistakes, but in the dark storm of the moment, it's so challenging to actually admit to them.

I think of a baseball story that happened 10 years ago. The Detroit Tigers' pitcher Armando Galarraga was magical that day. With two outs in the ninth inning, he was one out away from throwing a perfect game. Raucous Tiger fans were on their feet, preparing to witness history. The final batter hit a weak ground ball, and the second baseman scooped it up and threw to first base just as the batter reached first. It was a really close play. Umpire Jim Joyce signalled "safe," and the crowd booed and bellowed. But the replay showed the runner was clearly *out*. Joyce's blown call denied the pitcher a perfect game, a historic achievement.

Moments after the game, the umpire saw the replay - and his mistake. To his full credit, Joyce acknowledged that he got the call wrong, and he immediately found the pitcher and apologized directly and face to face. He owned his mistake. Joyce later reflected: "But what does the word 'perfect' mean? Sometimes the word 'perfect' means to be able to accept imperfection." Unlike Adam and Eve, Jim Joyce passed the test of *personal* responsibility.

G-d's second test of humanity involves Adam and Eve's sons Cain and Abel. Both brothers offer sacrifices but G-d accepts only Abel's. Enraged, Cain kills Abel before G-d confronts him.

Then the L-rd said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The L-rd said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground (Gn. 49:9-10).

Here Cain does not deny *personal* responsibility. He doesn't say, "it wasn't me." Instead, he denies *moral* responsibility. I am *not* my brother's keeper. I am *not* responsible for his well-being. It's not my problem.

Cain, you are mistaken. G-d calls on you and us to be responsible for our loved ones.

Like Art Garfunkel. Yes, of Simon and Garfunkel fame. While in college at Columbia, Art Garfunkel was friends and roommates with Sanford Greenberg. During his junior year, Greenberg tragically lost his vision from a botched eye surgery. He remained at his parents' house, despairing about his future and doubting that he would make it through college without sight. Instead, Art Garfunkel "flew in, turned [him] around, and said 'I will help you.'"

Garfunkel was true to his word: He was careful to keep their room arranged exactly as Greenberg had memorized it; he read his friend's class readings aloud to him; he walked his friend to class; he fixed the broken tape recorder; he bandaged Greenberg's cuts incurred from walking into things. Garfunkel became Greenberg's eyes. And after college, when Garfunkel became world famous, he remained loyal, inviting Greenberg to join him for many performances and the like. Greenberg shares these memories and more in a new book. Garfunkel said, as it were, I *am* my friend's keeper.

The Torah's third example is the story of Noah. Without knowing much about him, we learn he is a Tzaddik, righteous. Here is Rabbi Sacks:

"Yet though Noah is a righteous man, he is not a hero. Noah does not save humanity. He saves only himself, his family and the animals he takes with him in the ark. The Zohar contrasts him unfavourably with Moses: Moses prayed for his generation, Noah did not. We have to do what we can to save others, not just ourselves. Noah failed the test of collective responsibility."

We, Noah's children, are called on to do better. Sadly, there are places in the world today that are being destroyed by water - not by a biblical flood but by tropical storms. Just this week the Jerusalem Post reported that Israel is assisting those countries battered by tropical storm Eta. Guatemala, Honduras and Panama applied to Israel for humanitarian aid, and Israel responded. "Israel does not forget its allies and certainly not in times of crisis," said Matanya Cohen, Israel's Ambassador. Israel's Foreign Ministry has distributed humanitarian aid equipment, including: first aid kits, dry food, water, hygiene products, clothing, milk powder, Covid-19 PPE, blankets, and other donations from the Foreign Ministry.

We Zionists are probably familiar with stories of Israel helping out other nations after major natural disasters, like years ago in Haiti and Nepal. Those are not isolated responses, but rather a reflex to help out those in need. Not because the victims are Jewish - they are not - but simply because they are human beings. Because collective responsibility is a Jewish value.

Rabbi Sacks presents one more example, which I will skip for the sake of time.

At the end of this illuminating essay, he sums up and takes the progression of responsibility even further:

“What we see in Genesis 1–11 is an exceptionally tightly constructed four-act drama on the theme of responsibility and moral development, presenting the maturation of humanity, as echoing the maturation of the individual. The first thing we learn as children is that our acts are under our control (personal responsibility). The next is that not everything we can do, we may do (moral responsibility). The next stage is the realisation that we have a duty not just to ourselves but to those on whom we have an influence (collective responsibility). This is developmental psychology as we have come to know it through the work of Jean Piaget, Eric Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg and Abraham Maslow.”

Wow, right? He uncovers a gem in the Torah and then seamlessly demonstrates how it serves as a basis for modern psychology. Of course it is! This was his gift: unparalleled knowledge of Torah and worldly subjects and the ability to synthesize them.

In Rabbi Sacks' honor and his memory, let us each study a little Torah to find a new insight. Let us strengthen our own commitments to personal responsibility, like umpire Jim Joyce; to moral responsibility, like Art Garfunkel the friend; and to collective responsibility, like Israel's humanitarian response.

I leave the last word to the singular Rabbi Sacks, the man whose Torah made me feel closer to Sinai than anyone else's:

“The subtlety and depth of the Torah is remarkable. It was the first, and is still the greatest, text on the human condition and our psychological growth from instinct to conscience, from ‘dust of the earth’ to the morally responsible agent the Torah calls ‘the image of G-d.’

Shabbat Shalom!