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The Intellectual Legacy of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Was Rabbi Sacks a Theological Maverick or Mystical Traditionalist?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' writings were generally aimed at social and ethical themes: avoiding a clash of civilizations,[1] the place of faith in the public arena,[2] the relationship between religion and science,[3] the moral health of contemporary society,[4] and more. Indeed, R. Sacks was convinced that every last detail of the Torah, "not only [its] commandments but also [its] narratives," are there "solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction."[5] Perhaps inspired by this thought, R. Sacks seemed uninterested in developing a systematic philosophical theology. The further removed a question was from ethical consequence, the less interested in it he seems to have been.

He was also uninterested in constructing a philosophical system that would "aim at embracing the whole of Jewish tradition and the whole of contemporary culture in a comprehensive engagement with one another."[6] Rather than Jewish *philosophy*, R. Sacks thought of himself as contributing to Jewish *thought*. Where the former seeks to be systematic and exhaustive, the latter is more interested in the here and now—"at a coherent statement of what it means to be a Jew at this particular

1 Most centrally in *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid The Clash of Civilizations* (Continuum, 2002).

2 This was a recurring theme from *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality & Society in a Secular Age* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), to *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Basic Books, 2020).

3 Most centrally in *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (Schocken, 2012).

4 This was a recurring theme made especially salient in *The Persistence of Faith* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), *The Politics of Hope* (Vintage, 2000), *The Dignity of Difference* and *Morality.*

5 Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible—Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Maggid Books, 2009), 16.

6 Jonathan Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age: Essays on Modern Jewish Thought* (Valentine, Mitchell & Co., 1990), xv.

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juncture of history and civilisation."[7] Where the former seeks to build a system of Jewish thought from first principles (a project that could take a lifetime and more), the latter is tasked with the more urgent question of how to make a choice, in particular sociological situations, in which Jewish values are brought into conflict with one another; "which, if a choice must be made between conflicting values, stands closer to the heart of the Jewish enterprise?"[8] Jewish philosophy may be important, but Jewish thought, even though it may be informed by Jewish philosophy, is urgent. In short: systematic philosophy and abstract theology were never primary concerns for R. Sacks, who was more concerned with urgent questions of a moral and social nature. But having said that, a philosophical theology can be mined from his writings.

This essay demonstrates that R. Sacks was committed to two controversial theological doctrines known as divine personalism and open theism. I first explore these two commitments and situate them within the Jewish and philosophical traditions. Then I turn to one of R. Sacks' earliest extant writings: a paper published in 1975, still very much under the influence of Lubavitch theology. We shall ask: to what extent does his mature philosophical theology cohere with this article from his mid-twenties? The two answers that I develop to this question can only amount to biographical speculation, but they give rise to two very different portraits of R. Sacks as a theologian: one presents him as a distinctively modern iconoclast (indeed, a maverick), the other as a classical Jewish mystic.

Is God a (Non-Human) Person?

In various passages throughout his writings, R. Sacks relates to God as a personal being. This theme is particularly prominent in *Celebrating Life*, where he records:

> For me faith is the belief in the objective reality of the personal. The God heard by Abraham, Moses and the prophets was not a tribal deity, group self-interest projected onto the sky. Nor was he a member of the pantheon of paganism, a capricious spirit invoked to explain why things are as they are, a pseudo-scientific construct rendered redundant by proper science. The God our ancestors heard was the voice of reality as it responds to and affirms the personal, echoing our consciousness, telling us that we are not alone.[9]

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places* (Fount, 2000), 68.

Our consciousness and our personhood—indeed, our very subjectivity—find an echo in the universe. It turns out that our experience of having a personality has an objective correlate in the personal being who created the cosmos.

To think that God is a person will strike some people as pagan. But R. Sacks responds that the pagan Gods were not perfect persons but "capricious spirits." In another passage in *Celebrating Life*, he finds support for his claim that God is a person from Judaism's teaching that we were created in His image.

> [The] discovery—that we are the image of God, the trace left by Him—was utterly new and explosive in its implications. It meant that the key to interpreting the universe was not force or power but the personal; and the personal is anything but blind. Everything else in the Bible flowed from the attempt to make this fact the foundation of a new social order. The question became: "What relationships and what kind of society honour the dignity of the person—of all persons in their dependence and independence?" We redeem the world to the degree that we personalize it, taming the great forces so that they serve rather than dominate humanity. That was and remains a marvelous vision. It changed and still changes the world.[10]

Elsewhere, R. Sacks asks: how can the Torah describe us as being created in God's image when it also tells us that God has no image? His beautiful response is that because we, like God, are persons with free will. Nobody can tell us exactly who and what we will be. We thus resemble God precisely in virtue of, so to speak, *not* having a pre-determined image.[11] Moreover, R. Sacks describes the fact that God is sensed, in the midst of religious experience, not as an abstract transcendent entity but as a personal being:

> God is the personal dimension of existence, the "Thou" beneath the "It", the "ought" beyond the "is", the Self that speaks to self in moments of total disclosure when, opening ourselves to the universe, we find God reaching out to us. At that moment we make the life changing discovery that, although we are utterly insignificant, we are also utterly significant, a fragment of God's presence in the world. We know that eternity preceded us and infinity will come after us, yet we know also that this day, this moment, this place, this circumstance is full of the light of the infinite radiance,

10 Ibid., 72.

11 Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*, 204.

> whose proof is the mere fact that we are here to experience it. At its height, faith is none other than the transfiguring knowledge that, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for You are with me."[12]

One reason it can strike Jewish ears as somewhat peculiar to describe God as a person is that it might be the sort of theology we associate with Christianity. But that's because Christians believe that God somehow became a *human* person in the body of Jesus. That's not at all the sort of thing that R. Sacks has in mind when he describes God as a person. He certainly doesn't mean that God has a body. And he doesn't mean that God is a *human* person.

What exactly, then, does he mean? Here, we can turn to an earlier thinker for help. Perhaps the most personalist Jewish theology of the twentieth century was developed by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the Jewish intellectuals R. Sacks met on his formative 1968 trip to the United States. When Heschel describes God in personal terms, he talks about God's *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*.[13] He uses these terms somewhat idiosyncratically, so let me provide some definitions that should suffice for our purposes:

- A being possesses *logos* if it has a set of beliefs with non-normative content (i.e., beliefs about how things *are*, not about how things *should* be).
- A being possesses *pathos* if there is something that it feels like to be that being. Most of us don't believe that there's something that it feels like to be a table, for example. But we do tend to assume that there's something that it feels like to be a bat. Admittedly, I can't imagine *what* it feels like to be a bat and to chart my surroundings using echolocation.[14] Still, I imagine there is something that it feels like. Accordingly, it seems to us that tables don't have *pathos* and that bats do. People do as well.
- A being has an *ethos* if it has a set of beliefs with normative content (i.e., beliefs about how things should be).

Drawing on Heschel, I would suggest that personhood combines *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. Moreover, a being cannot be a person without possessing these properties reflectively, meaning that it is aware of

12 Sacks, *Celebrating Life*, 84.

13 This terminology is ubiquitous, for example, throughout Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial, 2001). See Todd Berman, "Berkovits, Heschel, and the Heresy of Divine Pathos," *Tradition* 54:4 (2022), 50–90.

14 See Thomas Nagel, "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 5:4 (1974), 435–450.

possessing them. Finally, I would add that a person who can't enter into interpersonal relationships would be lacking much of what allows for the flourishing of personhood. If God is a person, I assume that His personhood isn't impaired (given His perfection). Therefore, when I ask whether God is a person, I want to know whether He satisfies four criteria: the reflective possession of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*, in addition to the capacity to engage in interpersonal relations.

When R. Sacks describes God, he seems to be describing a being who possesses all four of these criteria. Therefore, the God of R. Sacks is a non-physical, non-human, perfect, and loving "person," albeit one different than you and me.

Rabbis Sacks and Heschel, with their talk of a personal God, hark back to the God of the Talmud, and Midrash, and—of course—to the God of the Bible. But for great stretches of Jewish history, it would have been taboo to describe God as a person. Indeed, it would have been taboo to suggest that He can be described at all.

Divine Simplicity

Maimonides describes God as a simple being.[15] By calling God simple, Maimonides meant that He cannot be divided into parts. That makes good sense. If God has parts, we could ask who put those parts together; but since God is the first being and the first cause of all subsequent events, it would make no sense to assume that He was the sort of being who had to be put together in the first place. Yet, when Maimonides calls God simple, he means more than that. He means that God is somehow logically prior to any concept or distinction. I call this conceptual simplicity. What exactly does conceptual simplicity mean?

If I'm holding a red ball, I can distinguish between the object—that is, the ball—and its properties—that is, its being round, its being red, etc. But if God is simple, and if being simple means being prior to any concept or distinction, then God will be neither an object, nor a property, nor an object with properties, because God will be prior to the entire distinction between objects and properties. Properties or attributes simply cannot apply to God.

Rabbi Judah Halevi (who pre-dates Maimonides) agrees. In his *Kuzari*, he writes that "God . . . is above [all attributes]. We describe Him as 'living' to negate the idea of the rigid and dead…"[16]—but, in fact, neither the word "living" nor "dead" can really apply to God. The way we speak about God resembles the way we speak about a rock's intelligence in that

15 *Guide for the Perplexed* I:52.

16 *The Kuzari* II:2.

> one cannot call a stone ignorant although we may say that it is not learned. Just as a stone is too low to be brought into connection with learning or ignorance, thus the essence of God is too exalted to have anything to do with life or death.[17]

But why think that God should be simple in this way?

The tenth century polymath Saadia Gaon provides the following argument. God created all properties. Since God created them, He cannot have any properties—or, at the very least, He cannot have any essential properties (i.e., properties that make Him what He is, such that without them, He would cease to exist). After all, He existed before all properties existed.[18]

However convincing this argument was to Saadia, very few philosophers today would be convinced. Indeed, it's not at all clear that properties and abstract categories stand in need of creation to begin with. God created all red things. Did He also have to create redness? He created all pairs, but did He have to create the number 2?

In fact, Saadia's position might lead to various absurdities. For example, did God have to create the property of being the creator of something; and if He did, how did He create it if there was, at that point, no such property? Wouldn't it make more sense to say that since properties (and other abstract things) don't exist in space or time and have no beginning in time, they simply do not need a maker? Perhaps the most fundamental properties exist as something like the basic cognitive architecture of God's mind. That would allow all things, including abstract properties, to be grounded somehow in God. But just because properties are grounded in God it doesn't necessarily follow that none of them apply to Him.

Returning to Maimonides, we find that he thought of God as conceptually simple for a somewhat more complicated reason. Maimonides was an Aristotelian. According to Aristotle, whenever we are confronted with an object and its properties, we are entitled to ask for an explanation: why did this object come to have these properties? Now, if God exists, you might think that He must be the ultimate explanation of everything else. Indeed, God is thought to be the reason there is something rather than nothing. But if He were an object possessing properties, an Aristotelian would say that you're owed an explanation: why does this object have the properties it has?

Accordingly, if there really is an ultimate explanation for the universe, that explanation must transcend the very distinction between object and property. It must be prior to all concepts and distinctions. It must be

17 Ibid.

18 Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (Yale University Press, 1989), 111 (II:8).

conceptually simple. Only something with that sort of simplicity fails to call for explanation. Only something conceptually simple transcends the distinction between matter and form. Explanation can only bottom out in conceptual simplicity.[19]

When we say that God loves or that God is wise, we must be speaking metaphorically because, as Halevi said, God transcends all descriptions. He has no properties. And if He has no properties, He certainly doesn't have the four properties that would make Him a person. In fact, we can't really describe this being at all because to describe Him would be to attach properties to Him. In fact, we shouldn't really be able to say that we can't describe Him, since to say that we can't describe Him is already to offer some sort of description!

Questioning Simplicity

Should we be moved by Maimonides's Aristotelian argument? I don't think so. Perhaps there are some facts that simply don't call for an explanation. Or perhaps it's acceptable for explanation to stop with something less than total simplicity. Instead, explain as much as you possibly can, which may well take you all the way down to positing a being who is necessarily existent, and (say) necessarily omnipotent. But once you've accepted the existence of this God, do we then need to ask, "What *causes* God to have all of those necessary properties?" Not at all. At that point, it may be in order to say: "Those properties are essential to a being who grounds all other beings. He has to have those properties." Why? Because that's how the notions of necessity, grounding, power, and being relate to one another. That's how those things must work for anything else to make sense. Why? "Well, because!"

At no point am I tempted to ascend to positing a being so simple that we can't actually talk about it. Would that proposition actually explain anything? Since we can't really understand what it would mean, and since we can't say anything about it, if you're anything like me, you might think that the answer is "no." And therefore, there's no good reason for thinking that God is conceptually simple. These are the sorts of reflections that make room for Heschel and Sacks to relate to God as the pre-medieval Jewish tradition suggests we should—as a person.

Where Should Explanation Stop?

Many early modern philosophers (such as Descartes, Hume, and Berkeley) insist that our philosophical investigations begin with reflection upon experience and thinking. Descartes held that our experience of thinking is

19 *Guide for the Perplexed* II:4.

the one thing about which we can't be mistaken. We can be mistaken about pretty much everything else, but we can't be mistaken about the brute fact that we're thinking.

Hume insisted that all we can hope to do, in thinking, is to organize our various experiences. Even the so-called objective natural sciences can only really help impose order upon the experiences we have, both in the laboratory and on the street, predicting what we're most likely to experience next.

The notion of experience is basic to all our thinking. This seems to me to be related to what philosophers nowadays call the hard problem of consciousness.[20] Advocates of that problem maintain that no scientific theory could ever completely explain the emergence of consciousness in purely physical terms. Consciousness, they argue, is inherently first-personal. Physical theories, by contrast, trade in third-personal descriptions of physical matter. No third-personal description of the world, these philosophers argue, will ever capture everything that can be grasped from the first-personal perspective. While we can describe and explain all the functions of the brain and the body, no such description or explanation will ever preserve the "what-it-is-like"-ness of conscious experience.

These reflections, among others that I don't have the space to develop here,[21] lead me to believe that some sort of totally fundamental mind, or center of experience, is a reasonable place for explanation to stop. There is something ultimate about mentality. There is something ultimate about personality. Indeed, faith, for R. Sacks, was "the belief in the objective reality of the personal."[22] Not only does this hark back to a pre-medieval Judaism, it is also distinctively modern.

Did God Create Time?

Before we proceed, there is one more possible objection to R. Sacks' notion of divine personhood we should address. Medieval Jewish philosophers argued that God is above description and that He exists altogether outside time. After all, if God is perfect, God would never need to change. And if He is an unchanging being, then God simply isn't the sort of thing that lives in time.

But this would raise a clear difficulty for the idea that God is a person, as we have defined the term: if God transcends time, he presumably

20 David Chalmers, "Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2 (1995), 200-219.

21 See Samuel Lebens, "Is God a Person? Maimonidean and Neo-Maimonidean Perspectives" in *The Divine Nature: Personal and A-Personal Perspectives*, eds. S. Kittle and G. Gasser (Routledge, 2022), 80-105.

22 Sacks, *Celebrating Life*, 68.

cannot establish a relationship with, say, human beings, who exist in time. This would then undermine the possibility that God is a person.

In truth, though, there is a straightforward response. The Christian philosopher, William Hasker asks us to imagine a perfect watch:

> A short while ago, it registered the time as five minutes after six o'clock, but now it registers twelve minutes after six. Clearly, this is a change in the watch. . . . Is this a change for the better, suggesting a previous state of imperfection? Not at all. . . . Is it then a change for the worse, a decline from perfection? . . . It is, in fact, an example of a change that is consistent with and/or required by a constant state of excellence.[23]

Perfection *can* allow for change. In fact, some perfect things would have to change so as to retain their perfection over time. Perhaps, like Hasker's watch, God is both perfect and lives—as we do—within the flow of time.

Perhaps you'll say that, because God created time, He must be beyond time. But that's to make various assumptions about what time is. True, if time is the measure of change in the physical universe, it would seem to follow that the creator of the physical universe must somehow transcend time. Aristotle certainly seems to have thought that time can only pass in the presence of changing physical states. But in more recent times, Sydney Shoemaker has convinced many that we can make sense of time passing even through a completely frozen physical universe. This loosens the connection between time ticking and the existence of anything physical.[24] If time can carry on ticking even when there is nothing happening in the physical universe, or through stretches of time in which there is no physical universe, there is no reason to think that the creator of the physical universe was also the creator of time. Indeed, time might be uncreated, forever ticking, without beginning—even before God created anything.

Perhaps you'll think that if time is uncreated, and if God is bound by time, then the very existence of time becomes something of a threat to God's sovereignty. But if God is, by nature, a temporal being—because persons are, and because God is a person—then it's peculiar to say that God is a prisoner to time. If God is good by nature, then He can do no wrong. Does that make Him a prisoner to His goodness? No. It's absurd to complain that God is a prisoner to His own nature.[25]

23 William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 126–154.

24 Sydney Shoemaker, "Time without Change," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66:12 (1969), 363–381.

25 These arguments are owed to Ryan Mullins, "Doing Hard Time: Is God the Prisoner of the Oldest Dimension?," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (2013), 160–185, and *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Certainly, if we're thinking of time as some sort of container that exists prior to God and forces itself upon God, then God's sovereignty would be undermined. But for all we know, the passage of time is nothing more than the passage of God's consciousness from moment to moment. Perhaps the very fabric of time is grounded in God—indeed, grounded in the fact that God is a person—such that the passage of time is just a consequence of God's nature, and nothing more.

Having established that R. Sacks' concept of divine personhood is consistent with the passage of time, we may turn to R. Sacks' second theological commitment: to what has become known as open theism, meaning that the future is open for humans to shape. To explain that commitment, we begin with the classic problem of divine omniscience and free will.

R. Sacks and Open Theism

R. Sacks was committed to the notion that human beings possess free will, and related to this as a foundational principle of Jewish faith.[26] One of the puzzles for theists who believe in free will is how to reconcile that belief with the belief in God's omniscience. If God knows the future, then it seems as if the future must already, in some sense or other, exist. If, in some sense, the future already exists such that God can already know it, it seems to follow that we no longer have the power to change our fate. Our futures are already set in stone. Thus, either God knows the future but we don't have free will, or we do have free will but God can't know the future. That's the dilemma.

There have been many responses to this problem. Rabbi Hasdai Crescas simply denies that we have free will, which, of course, raises a host of other questions.[27] Maimonides, by contrast, argues that we can't know what the word "knowledge" means when applied to God, so we can't be sure that there's really a puzzle here to solve. Gersonides takes a more radical option, arguing that since we have free will, it must mean that the future isn't yet written.[28] And since the future isn't (yet) written, it doesn't (yet) exist. And since the future doesn't (yet) exist, God can't (yet) know it. God is still omniscient, according to Gersonides, because to be omniscient is to know all things, but the future isn't (yet) a thing, so even an omniscient being couldn't (yet) know what it contains.

26 Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible—Deuteronomy: Renewal of the Sinai Covenant* (Maggid Books, 2019), 287.

27 *Or Hashem* 2:5:3.

28 Gersonides actually has more than one way to solve this problem, but I'll focus just on the most relevant one.

Not only is God still omniscient for Gersonides, but He is also still omnipotent. For example, if God promises us that the future will contain salvation and a Messiah, God can make sure that that happens—but until it does happen, it isn't something God can actually see. What He gives to the prophets, according to this view, is not a vision of a future that already exists, but His heavenly assurance that God will act so as to bring about certain events in the future. If you think of God as a person—existing in time with us, responding to and interacting with us—and if you think that our futures are unwritten, this Gersonidean option, known today as open theism, might be attractive.

And indeed, it seems as if R. Sacks was an open theist. As he put it, the decision to create human beings with free will gave rise to a

> dilemma [that] even God could not escape. Were He not to create humanity there would be no one in the universe capable of understanding that he or she was created and that God exists. Only with the birth of humanity did the universe become self-conscious. Without us, it would be as if God had created billions of robots mindlessly doing what they [had] been programmed to do for all eternity. So, even though by creating humans God was putting the entire future of creation at risk, God proceeded to create humankind.
>
> This is radical theology indeed. . . . As the *Sifrei* explains the phrase in Moses' song, "the God of faith" (Deuteronomy 32:4)—this means, "the God who had faith in the universe and created it." The real religious mystery, according to Judaism, is not our faith in God. It is God's faith in us. . . .
>
> God invests His hopes for the universe in this strange, refractory, cantankerous, ungrateful, and sometimes degenerate creature, called Homo sapiens, part dust of the earth, part breath of God, whose behaviour disappoints and sometimes appals Him. Yet He never gives up.[29]

This notion that creation was a risk, and that God places faith in us as He looks into our uncertain future, is highly suggestive of open theism. After all, if God could see into the future of any possible world He might seek to create, then He would never be taking any risks at all. Nothing would ever surprise such a God. Elsewhere, R. Sacks writes:

> [If] mankind closes its ears and refuses to listen, there is nothing God can do, short of taking away its freedom, the very thing He granted in creating mankind.

29 Jonathan Sacks, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Maggid Books, 2020), 5.

> Hence creation involves risk. . . .
>
> 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 humankind. *More than we search for God, God searches for us*, asking us, as He did to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?"[30]

This language of God searching for man is a clear allusion to the theology of Heschel, and evokes the title of one of his best-known works.[31] We have a God who wants to be in interpersonal relation with other persons; a God who cannot see the future, since He has given us a radical freedom to shape that future with Him. We have divine personalism and open theism.

Personally, I worry that open theism might be an overreaction to the problem of God's foreknowledge. Even if God exists in time, I don't see a reason to think that He doesn't know the future, or that the future can't already exist for Him to know. The fact that our future choices are free doesn't, to my mind, entail that God can't see them yet. What makes an action free is that it isn't caused by forces outside the person who acts. The fact that your future actions might already exist, over there, in the future, doesn't entail that anything happening over here, in the present, is forcing future-you to be acting the way that future-you is acting over there in the future. As long as nothing external to future-you is causing future-you to act in a certain way, then future-you is free—even if God, in the present, can already see the future where future-you is acting freely.[32]

But it seems to me that R. Sacks was so committed to God's being a person, responding to and interacting with his human creations, that the real-time unfolding of that relationship, as described by the open theist, was the most attractive theology conceivable. And so R. Sacks was an open theist. It is fitting, then, that he describes an "eternal, immutable, simple, self-sufficient" God as "the God of Aristotle and the philosophers, not the God of Abraham and the prophets."[33]

This brings the first half of the paper to a close. We have established that R. Sacks was committed to divine personalism and to open theism.

R. Sacks and Hasidism

R. Sacks was in his forties when he published his first book. Accordingly, all that we've cited so far was written in his maturity. But at the tender age

30 Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Deuteronomy*, 327–329.

31 Joshua Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955).

32 In this paragraph, I'm following the lead of Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

33 Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, 64.

of 25, he wrote a pathbreaking essay, published in this journal, in which he critiqued the pessimistic philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.[34] R. Soloveitchik thought that there was a certain sort of existential angst, or a sense of internal dislocation, that was all but inevitable in the life of faith. R. Sacks wanted to articulate an alternative that allows the person of faith to feel a sense of real integration. He therefore describes an experience in which a Jew can feel so intimately related to God, and to every other Jew, in which dislocation or angst would have no place:

> The man who is defined by his relation with God is only dialectically aware of himself as a distinct entity. He was made by God, indeed he can reach God by an inward journey to the depths of his soul. He is joined with God in love and separated from Him in awe. But even the separation is full of the consciousness of God. So his embodiment in the physical world is not his only or his primary reality: he views it teleologically. He is placed here for a purpose, and he can discover this by analyzing his capacities and his environment—this I can effect, this I cannot. His identity is given by his distinctive role in relation to the world, his covenantal mission. But in being himself—in performing his role—he is placing himself in harmonious fusion with the rest of the world, for his role has meaning only in the light of all others. It is said: there are 600,000 letters in the Torah and 600,000 Jewish souls. Each soul is like a letter of the Torah. Each is distinct but meaningful only in the context of the whole. And though they have no independent reality, each is supremely important for if a single letter is missing or malformed, the whole *Sefer Torah* is unfit for use.[35]

This perspective includes many themes to which R. Sacks would repeatedly return in his later work: the intimate closeness of God, sensed in the here and now; the sense that every Jew is part of a story that binds us together; that our identities only make sense against the background of a community and its traditions; that we are each a "letter in the scroll;" and that we find our place in this world by asking where our talents overlap with what needs to be done. But we also see here the clear imprint of Lubavitch theology, an imprint that is less apparent in his later writings. Indeed, other than his free translation of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's Torah discourses,[36] this essay from the 1970s is the only time R. Sacks quotes the *Tanya*, the foundational text of Chabad Hasidism, in print.

34 "Alienation and Faith," *Tradition* 13:4–14:1 (1973), 137–162; reprinted in Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*.

35 Ibid., 236.

36 Jonathan Sacks, *Torah Studies* (Kehot Publication Society, 1985).

The most strikingly Lubavitch claim in the above excerpt is the apparent suggestion that the individual isn't fundamentally distinct from God. His physical embodiment, in this world, as an independent creature, is not his primary reality. His primary reality is, rather, an underlying unity with God. As the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, was to put it, "there really is nothing other than God."[37] The extent to which it seems as if things exist in addition to God, is—for a Lubavitcher—some sort of illusion.

This passage is sufficiently opaque that it's hard to determine the extent of the young R. Sacks' commitment to this core principle of Lubavitch theology. However, his serious engagement with the idea becomes even more evident in another excerpt. Here, R. Sacks is trying to make sense of the idea that loving one's fellow Jew could be—as Hillel the Elder said it was—the essence of Judaism. Hillel's statement wasn't hyperbole, R. Sacks insists, because "only in the context of a whole life of Torah and *mitzvot* does *Ahavat Yisrael* [the love of a fellow Jew] appear." To substantiate this claim, R. Sacks cites a statement from the *Zohar*: "Israel, the Torah and God are all one." He then elaborates:

> This is not an ethical but an ontological statement, meaning that our very concept of separate existences lies at the level of religious estrangement; and that through a life not merely lived but *seen* through Torah, God's immanent presence, His will (as embodied in the Torah) and the collectivity of Jewish souls are a real (in the Platonic sense) unity. The very idea of *relation* implies that there are two or more distinct things related. What the Zohar is suggesting is that the way of experience in Judaism demands a profound revision in our ontological categories. . . . To put it more mildly, as we have shown, *Ahavat Yisrael* contains its own specific notion of personal identity; this can be acquired only in the life of Torah; so that the life of Torah and the precondition of the faith community are identical. Hillel's dictum is therefore precisely correct; and his existence in the community of faith is the *whole* life of the Jew.[38]

To love one's fellow Jew is to recognize that there is no true distinction between one Jew and another, and between a Jew and God Himself—whose will is embodied in Torah—because all things are ultimately one. So to fully love one's fellow Jew is to become a totally Torah observant Jew; it is to recognize that "our very concept of separate existences lies at the level of religious estrangement." It is to see the world through the

37 *Tanya*, *Sha'ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emuna*, chapter 3.

38 Sacks, *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*, 238–239.

Torah and thereby penetrate down to the fact that all separation from God is an illusion.

But now we face the central problem of this essay, one that I admittedly do not know how to resolve: Doesn't R. Sacks' commitment to an identity between God and creation contradict his belief in a personal God and open theism? How would he reconcile his belief in a God as the ultimate unity, where all appearances of separation dissolve, with his belief in a personal God who exists within time, interacts with His creations, and is surprised by how humans use or misuse their freedom? Did R. Sacks abandon his Lubavitch theology in favor of something more personal, or is there a way to reconcile these two theological perspectives?

Option 1: A Change in Philosophy

We should be open to the possibility that R. Sacks simply moved on from his early commitment to Lubavitch theology. While he never abandoned his deep and abiding love and admiration for the Lubavitcher Rebbe, after a short stint in a Lubavitch Rabbinical seminary in 1969, it became clear that R. Sacks would be a follower of the Rebbe without being a Lubavitcher.

Now, it's true that the Hasidic movement, with its shift of emphasis from the ivory towers of the Lithuanian *yeshivot* into the hearts and minds of the Jewish masses, readily characterized God in deeply personal terms through its stories and prayer life. But there was always a distinction between the folk theology that Hasidism sanctified in the life of the everyday Jew and the deep theology of the Hasidic masters themselves.[39] That deep theology spoke of a God who, much like the God of Maimonides, transcends all description. Indeed, it was commonplace for the Hasidic masters to describe God as "The Nothing"—*Ha-Ayin*—not because they didn't believe in His existence, but because they believed that nothing could be said of Him that wasn't ultimately inaccurate. And thus, the God of the Hasidic masters was certainly not a *person*, even if they were happy to speak that way with the masses.[40]

Thus, one might propose that in his 1975 article, in which he alludes to a God encompassing all distinctions and transcending anything like personhood, R. Sacks was speaking to the enlightened, while in his later, more popular works, he was speaking to the masses. But that suggests

39 The idea that the masses should be taught a more immanent theology, while the learned should be taught a more transcendent theology, is expressed, for example, by Rabbi Nahman of Breslav in his *Likutei Moharan* II:7:7 and II:68:1–2.

40 Daniel Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. R.K.C. Foreman (Oxford University Press, 1990), 121–161.

a duplicity to his writings that doesn't sit well with the R. Sacks I knew—someone who had little patience for people writing their philosophy in codewords and winks.

A more likely option is therefore that as he matured, R. Sacks simply became less attached to the metaphysical flights of fancy found in the deeper waters of Lubavitch and Hasidic thought. The personal God that R. Sacks met in his prayer-life was perhaps more compelling than the Kabbalists' great abstract Nothing into which all things ultimately collapse.

If, in his twenties, he felt that the gap between a person and His creator was a sign of estrangement, perhaps, in his maturity, he related to that gap as the essential space between an I and a Thou, which allows for real relationship to blossom. So, on option 1, R. Sacks' theology underwent a massive transformation from commitment to the transcendent unity of all being to the much more immanent and personal theology of open theism. This gives rise to a picture of R. Sacks who thrusts aside swaths of Jewish theology to recover what he takes to be the true, personal God of Abraham and the prophets.

But there's one more possibility to explore. To explain, though, we must first delve into an in-depth analysis of Lubavitch theology—an exploration that will ultimately allow us to consider an alternative way of reconciling the seemingly contradictory theologies of R. Sacks.

Option 2: A Change in Emphasis

Lubavitch theology is very difficult to understand with any degree of mastery. But it can never be unlocked if one doesn't pay attention to the fact that it operates on two distinct levels.

The *Tanya* relates to these two levels by way of an analogy. It asks us to imagine a beam of light emanating from the sun, at two distinct stages of its existence. At stage one, the beam of light hasn't yet left the orb of the sun itself. At that stage, the beam of light still has some sort of existence, because—after all—we're still able to talk about it. And yet, on the other hand, it is so engulfed by the sun itself that its meager form of existence is almost totally overwhelmed or negated. At stage two, we're to think about the beam of light after it has left the orb of the sun. At that point, it seems to take on a life of its own, even though, more fundamentally, it's still nothing more than an emanation of the sun itself.[41]

Likewise, the *Tanya* asks us to think of the universe from two different perspectives. When we view it, so to speak, from God's perspective, we should think of it like the beam of light that remains within the sun. Its existence is all but negated, as it is totally subsumed, so to speak, within the

41 *Tanya*, *Sha'ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emuna*, chapter 3.

mind of God. But we can also view the universe from our perspective, in which it appears more like a beam of light that has left the orb of the sun. From our perspective, it possesses a much more distinct existence than it does from God's perspective, even though, ultimately, it is nothing more than an emanation—an emanation of God.[42]

This whole way of thinking about the universe—from God's perspective and from ours—is a legacy of a long tradition that stretches back to Rabbi Isaac Luria (Arizal). Although he had some precursors, R. Luria first introduced the fully-fledged notion of *Tzimtzum* (contraction) to the world of the Kabbala.[43] R. Luria's most prominent disciple, Rabbi Hayyim Vital, provides the first explicit, written account of the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*. The beginning of God's creation, he tells us, involved contraction. First there was the infinite light of God, uniformly extended, leaving no space untouched. Next, there was a contraction of that light away from a central point, leaving a circular void surrounded by the light. Finally, there was a line of light penetrating the circle, creating a channel for the light to move from the outside to the inside. Only after these three stages could creation begin.[44]

In a paper I co-authored with Tyron Goldschmidt, I worked to uncover the underlying philosophical motivation for thinking that a divine contraction must have preceded the creation.[45] Some would say that the problem looks like this:

1. God is infinite.
2. If God is infinite, then He (or His light) fills all space.
3. If He (or His light) fills all space, then there is no space vacant in which creation can occur; therefore:
4. If God is infinite, creation cannot occur; therefore
5. creation cannot occur; but
6. creation *did* occur. Problem!

If this really is a problem, then the traditional theist can only escape it if she accepts either:

a) God must have contracted His infinity, or

b) God didn't really create a world outside of Himself.

42 Ibid.

43 See Brakha Sack, "R. Moses of Cordovero's Doctrine of Zimzum" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 58:2 (1989), 207–237.

44 *Etz Hayyim* 1:2.

45 See Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens, "Divine Contractions: How Theism Gives Birth to Idealism," *Religious Studies* 56:4 (2020), 509–524.

But this can't really be the problem that bothered R. Luria. For one, line 2 trades on an elementary confusion about infinity. To be infinite isn't to fill all of space. For instance, the natural number sequence is infinite, but it doesn't take up any space at all.

A more charitable reconstruction leaves infinity behind and concentrates on omnipresence instead:

1. God is omnipresent.
2. If God is omnipresent, He fills all space.
3. If God fills all space, there is no vacant space in which creation can occur; therefore,
4. if God is omnipresent, creation cannot occur; therefore
5. creation cannot occur, but
6. creation *did* occur. Problem!

Once again, the traditional theist can escape it if she accepts either:

a) God must have contracted His omnipresence, or

b) God didn't really create a world outside of Himself.

But again, line 2 is problematic. Omnipresence needn't entail that God is actually located in space. Instead, omnipresence can be understood in terms of God's power and knowledge extending over every region of space. Indeed, you might think that God, as a non-physical being, and despite having complete knowledge and control over what's going on everywhere, isn't literally located anywhere. And even if you think that God is literally located in every region of space, you might think that because God is non-corporeal, He is the sort of being who can share His location with other things. That would mean that line 3 is faulty too.

Goldschmidt and I argue that we would do better to interpret R. Vital's talk of God's light filling all of space as a metaphor. We're not really talking about light or space. Instead, the talk of God's light getting in the way of creation is a way of conveying the idea that some divine attribute or other, metaphorically rendered as "light," makes creation impossible. It's not that God's nature leaves no room in physical space for creation; it leaves no room in logical space for creation. To put the problem more formally, we could say:

1. God has perfection P (we'll say more later on about what this perfection might be).
2. If God has perfection P, there is no logical space for creation; therefore,
3. there is no logical space for creation.

4. If there's no logical space for creation, then the creation cannot occur; therefore,
5. the creation cannot occur; but
6. the creation *did* occur. Problem!

What perfection could we substitute for P to arrive at something compelling? Goldschmidt and I argue that there are a number of candidates. For example, it might be that God's goodness gets in the way of creation. How so? You might think that any entity that isn't God could always be somehow improved. If that's the case, any universe that God creates could always have been, even in its very initial conditions, somehow better. But if God is perfectly good, then you might think that He wouldn't create any universe that could have been, from the very beginning, somehow better. This means that God's goodness could serve in our argument as perfection P, and it would entail that there is no room in logical space for God to create a universe. A perfectly good God just couldn't create anything worthy of His goodness.

Other perfections, such as God's omnipotence or His perfect rationality, could also be used, as candidates for perfection P, to give rise to the same sort of problem. But those candidates needn't detain us here. Once again, our problem leaves us with our familiar two options, either:

a) God contracted His perfection P, or
b) God didn't really create a world outside Himself.

If we adopt option a, then we're taking *Tzimtzum* literally. This gives rise to a doctrine known as *Tzimtzum kifshuto*. But there are reasons to resist option a. Orthodox theological sensibilities might bristle at the suggestion that, even if only temporarily, God isn't currently perfect in every way. Furthermore, we might think that by dint of His perfection, God cannot render Himself less than perfect. A being who can be rendered less than perfect (even by Himself) is a being with certain vulnerabilities, but God is invulnerable.

For good reason then, many interpreters of the kabbalistic tradition, including R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi and the Lubavitch tradition that he founded prefer option b. There simply isn't a world outside of God. The appearance of such a world is an illusion. God didn't really contract Himself, even if He appears to have done so. His contraction was also an illusion. This is known as the doctrine of *Tzimtzum she-lo kifshuto* (non-literal *Tzimtzum*). I call this doctrine—at least as it was developed by the Lubavitch movement—Hasidic idealism.

Regarding *Tzimtzum*, the Hasidic idealist says that God didn't really contract perfection P. Instead, He created a world that appears to be

outside of His mind, but which, in fact, has been inside His mind all along. In other words, every existent being, other than the mind of God, is an idea in the mind of God. Again, it's not that other things don't exist. They do. But they only exist in the mind of God. And there, in the mind of God, they are like a beam of light within the orb of the sun. They are totally absorbed so as to have no real significance. As R. Sacks put it in his 1975 paper, it is only when we are not looking at the word through the prism of Torah that we could experience ourselves as having a separate existence from God.

Now, imagine that the world itself is a story that God tells. That would mean that, from God's perspective, you and I aren't real persons, just *ideas* of persons—even if, inside the story, we're human people made of flesh and blood.

If God chooses to appear as a character in His own story, and in that story, He is the creator of everything outside His mind, then the story must show that He set aside any perfections that could have prevented Him from creating the world. That is to say: *Tzimtzum* happens, but only in the story. Beyond the story, of course, God remains as perfect and transcendent as He ever was.

The world, then, can be viewed from two perspectives. Both are real and objective, even if one is more fundamental than the other. From God's perspective, you and I barely exist at all—we are like beams of light altogether absorbed in the orb of the sun, ideas in the mind of God and nothing more. From that perspective, we don't have free will, let alone the ability to surprise our Creator. We do only what He dreams up for us to do.

But there's also the perspective that emerges within the story itself. From that perspective, you and I are persons of flesh and blood, not mere ideas. We do have free will. If we sin, that is up to us, and us alone.

All this is to say that R. Sacks, for all we can know, never really abandoned the Lubavitch metaphysics of his 1975 essay. Instead, there may have been a shift in emphasis. In 1975, he was interested in experiencing the world with the distinctive dual perspective of a Hasidic philosopher. In his later writings, by contrast, he was more interested in experiencing the world simply as a character within the story—a character who can come to know God, not as He exists beyond the story, but as a personal character within it, living alongside us in time.

It's interesting to note that the non-Hasidic kabbalistic work of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's ancestor, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, adopts nearly the same metaphysics as one finds in the *Tanya*. The key difference between R. Hayyim's *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* and the *Tanya* is this: once we've ascertained that the world is something like a story in the mind of God,

should we fixate on that fact, or should we basically ignore it most of the time and lean into the story that we're living? The *Tanya* suggests that true human flourishing consists in a sort of dual-consciousness, one that looks at the universe as both real and fictional all at once.[46] *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, by contrast, counsels us to focus on the content of the story of our lives and to leave the metaphysical mysteries mostly to one side.[47]

If R. Sacks did not abandon the Hasidic metaphysics of his twenties, it seems he at least underwent a shift in emphasis, akin to moving from the *Tanya* to *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*. Sadly, we have no way to find out whether option 1 or option 2 is truer to the facts—whether R. Sacks changed his mind about Hasidic metaphysics or merely changed his emphasis. Both options seem to be consistent with the data. Interestingly, the second option, though it commits him to a more odd metaphysics, helps to soften the controversial edge of his personalism and his open theism. All the Hasidic idealist has to say is that God is a person and that the future is open in the story of the universe. But that needn't tell us anything about God in His transcendence.

We may never know whether option 1 or 2 cuts closer to the heart of R. Sacks' philosophy. But perhaps he'd like it that way, since he would prefer we focus on Jewish thought rather than upon Jewish philosophy. And what we need to know to flourish in the here and now is simply that there exists a divine person who has more faith in us than we have in ourselves.[48] Whether or not that truth is relative only to one layer of reality is nowhere near as important as the redemptive fact that it's true.

46 *Tanya*, op. cit., teaches that the "true joy of the soul" is found when we are aware of both levels of reality at once.

47 *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* 3:3.

48 Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis*, 252.