





Afterword

Another Voice

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks



Alon Goshen-Gottstein has written an eloquent statement—part analysis, part plea—of how Judaism has understood the Other and how it might do so in the future. To it and to the other contributions to this volume, I add the following footnote.

The Abrahamic monotheisms are distinctive in setting the religious life within the unfolding drama of history. As several historians of ideas have pointed out, the prophets of ancient Israel were the first to break free of cosmological time, time as it exists in the world of myth, in which nothing ultimately changes. There is birth, growth, decline, death and rebirth. There is order, the threat of chaos, defeat of the threat, and a return to order. There are, as Nietzsche put it, eternal recurrences. Time, for myth, is no more than a series of ruffles in the fabric of eternity. That is not how Israel's prophets saw it.

For them time was the essential arena of interaction between the free God and humanity—a humanity which, created in God's image, was thereby given a counterpart of that freedom. Because I always have the choice of how to respond to a situation, my tomorrow is not predestined to repeat my yesterday. The future need not be an endless recapitulation of the past. In this world-transforming insight, history was born, and with it choice, agency and moral responsibility. This may be the single greatest contribution of the Hebrew Bible to civilization (Thomas Cahill in his *The Gifts of the Jews* argued that it was) and from it flowed all the others. One in particular was decisive: the cluster of ideas linking remorse, repentance and forgiveness. If human freedom opened the door to a not-yet-written future, forgiveness broke the hold of a less-than-perfect past.

How does this work out in terms of the relationship between time-embedded humanity and the time-transcending God? The question is deep, the answer vast, but to put it at its simplest: God does not change, but we do. His covenant with us—with humanity, with Abraham’s children and with the children of Israel—is unbreakable. But the drama unfolds as we are faithful or faithless to its terms. Hence the phenomenon of the prophet, one who hears within the word of God for all time, the word of God for this time. In the absence of prophecy we are left with what the rabbinic sages called the Oral tradition and its ongoing task of interpreting our sacred texts in the context of this time, this place, these circumstances. We call this activity Midrash, and it is essential to rabbinic Judaism. Between the eternal and the ephemeral, the timeless and the time-bound, lies the act of interpretation. Thus, new eras bring new perspectives to the unchanging Divine word. We hear new echoes that were always there but not heeded, perhaps not even heard, before. A new age is God’s call to a new act of listening to His word.

Our own new age confronts world religions with potentially their greatest challenge of all time: making space for the Other, religiously, ethically, politically and existentially. For most of history, most of the adherents of the great faiths and civilizations lived closely and continuously with people who believed and acted as they did. Yes, there were minorities, and yes, there were conquered populations. How these were treated is not one of the more edifying strands in the human story. At best they were regarded as less than fully human; at worst they represented a *danger* to be held at a distance, or subjugated, or destroyed.

To be sure, cities, even in the ancient world, were places where people of different cultures came together to trade. From the Hellenistic words for cities—*civis*, *polis*, *urbs*—came the words we still use to describe living graciously with difference: *civil*, *polite*, *cosmopolitan*, *urbane*. Yet precisely for this reason, cities do not fare well in the monotheistic imagination. We think of Cain, the first murderer and the first builder of a city; of Babel, its Tower, and its hubristic builders; of ancient Egypt and its enslavement of the Hebrews. The word “Hebrew” itself, and its possible origin in the term *habiru* or *apiru*, suggests “outsider, stranger, alien.” Abrahamic monotheism is born in a critique of cities and their many gods. Thus the question is real and now urgent: can Judaism and its close cousins, Christianity and Islam, embrace a world of instantaneous global communication in which the Other is constantly and immediately present—a world that eliminates distance from difference?

It is not too much to say that the future of humanity turns on this question. Thus far, the evidence is not good. Not only have communication and trade been globalized; so too have fear, hate, violence and terror, often in the name of religion itself. Yet though the challenge is new, the question is old, for it is implicit in the very first chapter of the Hebrew Bible. Can we recognize

God's image in one who is not in our image? If we fail to do so, there is a clear and present *danger* that religiously fuelled conflict may lead us into an escalating series of confrontations that will leave our planet as devastated as Easter Island, enduring monument of humanity's capacity for self-destruction. The time has come for a new act of listening to the Divine word.

That is what I propose to do now, briefly, schematically, no more than hinting at a way forward, in five simple acts of listening to the Hebrew Bible and what it has to tell us about the Other.

SCENE 1: THE FIRST OTHER

The opening chapters of Genesis are one of the great meta-narratives of Western civilization, and their literary form is designed to draw attention to fundamental features of the universe to which we are called on to respond. They use a repeated construction: "And God said, 'Let there be. . . .' And there was. . . . And God saw that it was good." The universe unfolds according to a plan and it is good. What breaks the mood is the sudden appearance, in the second chapter, of the phrase "not good." Nothing has prepared us for this expression. Thus far we have encountered only God, the natural world and its highest life-form, *Homo sapiens*, on whom the Creator has set His own image. Unlike mythic creation narratives, there is no resistance or struggle, since there is only one personality, the Artist who is not merely fashioning a work of art but also bringing into being the materials out of which it is made. What, in such a universe, can be "not good"? In a single phrase—five words in Hebrew—the origin of all love and conflict is set forth. "It is not good for man to be alone."

The Hebrew Bible thus sets out two propositions that frame its entire vision of humankind. The first is the sanctity of the human individual as individual. Every person is in "the image of God." The second asserts the incompleteness of the individual as individual. "It is not good for man to be alone." Hence the human need for relationship, association, and for stable structures within which these can grow and be sustained.

God then creates the first woman. The man responds with the first poem in the Bible:

This is now
bone of my bone,
flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called woman [ishah]
because she was taken from man [ish]. (Genesis 2:23)

I have included two Hebrew words, because the Hebrew text contains a nuance often missed in translation. Until this point man has been called



adam, man-as-part-of-nature (the word adam signifies “that which is taken from the earth”). Now for the first time man is called—indeed calls himself—ish, which means man-as-person. Significantly, he does this only after he has named woman. The Bible is suggesting, with great subtlety, that the human person must first pronounce the name of the Other before he can know his own name. He or she must say “Thou” before he can say “I.” Relationship precedes identity. Hypothesis 1: Until I know the Other, I do not know myself.

SCENE 2: CAIN, CONVERSATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

With the first human children comes the first act of fratricide. Cain’s murder of Abel follows directly after the first human act of worship: “Cain brought some of his crops as an offering to God. Abel also offered some of the firstborn of his flock, from the fattest ones” (Genesis 4:3-4). The religious impulse is not always a force for good. It can lead to bloodshed in God’s name. Religion is like fire. It warms, but it can also burn; and we are the guardians of the flame.

The narrative contains a remarkable literary device, often missed in translation. We read: “Cain said to his brother Abel . . . then, when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.” (Gen. 4:8)

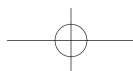
The sentence is ungrammatical. It contains a lacuna: “Cain said to his brother Abel . . .” At this point the sentence breaks off. So jagged is the edge that the Greek and Syriac versions added the words “Cain said to Abel his brother, ‘Let us go out to the field.’”

There are many traditional interpretations, each of which fills in the gap. Listening to the text, however, we hear the eloquence of its sudden lapse into silence. In the midst of speaking, Cain stops. When words end, violence begins. As long as people converse, there is hope that they will conquer hate. Confrontation is inevitable when two competing parties are unable to talk. “Violence,” said Alan Brien, “is the repartee of the illiterate.”¹

Maimonides introduces this principle into Jewish law as an explanation of the command, “You shall surely rebuke your neighbour” (Lev. 19:17):

When one person sins against another, the injured party should not hate the offender and keep silent, as it is written about the wicked, “Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar” (2 Samuel 13:22).

Instead it is his duty to inform the offender and say to him, “Why did you do this to me? Why did you sin against me in this matter?” That is why it says, “You shall surely rebuke your neighbour.” If the offender repents and asks for forgiveness, he should be forgiven. (Mishneh Torah, De’ot 6:6)



Speech is an essential element of reconciliation. Words heal.

We find the same principle in another branch of Jewish law—the case of manslaughter. Someone who killed another without *mens rea*, criminal intent, was given protection under biblical law in one of the cities of refuge. This is not the case where the act of murder was an accident verging on the deliberate (*shogeg karov le-mezid*). One of the conditions the Torah lays down for accidental death is that the killer “did not previously hate” his victim (Deut. 19:6). The operative definition of hate in such a case is the fact that the two parties refused to speak to one another for three days (Sanhedrin 27b). Absence of speech testifies to the presence of hate.

It was the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who, in his research into the Trobriand islanders in the early 1920s, first realized that conversation among the natives was not—as he had previously thought—to exchange information. It was to create and sustain fellowship. He inferred that this was true not only of the islanders of New Guinea but of society in general. “Our talk,” he wrote, “serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship.” He called this phatic communion, “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.”²

Speech or violence; dialogue or war. These are the choices. When words fail, violence is waiting in the wings. Cain killed Abel when he could no longer speak to him. Hypothesis 2: Conversation, however difficult, is the alternative to conflict. Dialogue with the Other is necessary if we are to live peaceably with the Other.

SCENE 3: ABRAHAM’S OTHER TRIAL

We are familiar with the story of Genesis 22: the Binding of Isaac, Abraham’s great trial. Yet we sometimes miss the significance of another trial, in the immediately previous chapter. Abraham had another son, Ishmael, born to Sarah’s handmaid Hagar. God had told him that Ishmael would be blessed, but would not be the bearer of Abraham’s specific covenant. After Isaac was born and weaned:

Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” (Gen. 21: 8–9)

Abraham is greatly distressed, but God tells him to listen to Sarah and do as she says. The next morning he sends Hagar and Ishmael away with some food and water for the journey. Eventually the water runs out, and she re-



alizes that, in the blazing sun of the desert, Ishmael will die. She places him under a bush for shade, and weeps. We then read:

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” . . . God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. (Gen. 21: 17–20)

They continue their journey. Ishmael lives.

Genesis 21 and 22 are parallel passages. In both, Abraham has to undergo a trial involving the potential loss of a son. Ishmael and Isaac, the two children, are both only dimly aware of what is happening. In both, they are about to die until heaven intervenes, in the first case by providing a well of water, in the second, a ram, to be offered as a sacrifice in place of Isaac. The similarities serve to highlight the differences.

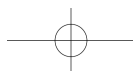
The narrative of the binding of Isaac is notable for its complete absence of emotion. God commands, Abraham obeys, Isaac joins him on the journey, Abraham prepares the altar, binds his son and lifts his knife, at which point an angel says “Stop.” Throughout the ordeal Abraham says nothing to God except one word at the beginning and the end: *hineni*, “Here I am” (22:1, 11).

By contrast, the episode involving Hagar and Ishmael is laden with emotion. Hagar weeps (“Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bow-shot away, for she said to herself, ‘Let me not see the child die.’ And, as she sat, she lifted up her voice and wept,” 21: 16). Ishmael weeps (“God heard the boy crying,” 21: 17). There is here a tenderness and pathos rare in biblical prose. There can be no doubt that the narrative seeks to enlist our sympathy in a way it does not in the case of Isaac. We identify with Hagar and Ishmael; we are awed by Abraham and Isaac. The latter is a religious drama, the former a human one, but its very humanity gives it power.

This is not what we expect. The hero of the narrative should be Isaac, the chosen patriarch’s chosen son. But our sympathies are drawn to Ishmael. God “hears” him; indeed his very name means “God hears.” He will be blessed. God is “with him” as he grows up. “Though my father and mother might reject me, the Lord will gather me in” (Psalm 27: 10). Ishmael is Isaac’s Other. Hypothesis 3: God does not reject the Other.

SCENE 4: HOW ISRAEL ACQUIRED ITS NAME

The episode in which the Jewish people acquired its name—Israel—is among the most enigmatic in the Bible. Jacob is returning home after an absence of many years. He had left because his brother Esau was threatening to kill him. Esau was aggrieved—Jacob had taken his birthright and, in



disguise, stolen his blessing. Now they are about to meet again, and Jacob is overcome by fear. He divides his family into two so that if there is a battle, at least some will survive. He prays to God. He sends Esau gifts in the hope that they may placate him. He avails himself of all the options. If the gifts fail, prayer will help. If prayer fails, he is prepared for war. But uneasiness still haunts him. He moves his family across the river. As he is coming back he meets a stranger:

Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overcome him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." (Gen. 32: 25–29)

With whom was Jacob struggling? A man? An angel? God? Why was it this moment that gave its name not only to Jacob but to his descendants? The encounter is clearly meant to be emblematic of Jewish destiny and identity. For Jews it is an intimation not only of who our ancestor was but also of who we are.

What clues does the Bible itself offer that might help us decipher the mystery? What else does it tell us about Jacob? It describes a series of events, all of which cast light on how Jacob saw himself. When he was younger, he bought Esau's birthright. Later he dressed in Esau's clothes, told his blind father that he was Esau, and took Esau's blessing. His very name Jacob was given to him because, when he was born, he was holding on to Esau's heel. Taken together they suggest that Jacob wanted to be Esau: the firstborn, the stronger, a hunter, the child whom his father loved.

Read the biblical text carefully and we make a remarkable discovery. The real blessing intended for Jacob was not the one he took while pretending to be Esau: "May God give you from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth" (Gen. 27: 28). That was a blessing of physical prosperity. The blessing meant for Jacob was the one given to him later as Jacob, when Isaac was distressed that Esau had married into the local Hittite tribes. It was then that Isaac blessed him with these words: "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May He give you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as a stranger, the land God gave to Abraham" (Gen. 28: 3–4). Children and a land: these throughout Genesis have been the covenantal promise. This blessing had all along been destined for Jacob. The irony is overwhelming. Jacob's striving



to be Esau was unnecessary. To acquire the blessing, he needed to be not Esau, but himself.

Alone at night many years later, about to meet Esau again after long estrangement, Jacob faces the defining crisis of his life. Who is he? Is he still the man who wants to be Esau? Or is he ready to become himself? On this psychological drama the entire course of Jewish history will turn. Jacob cannot escape. The next day he was to stand face-to-face with his brother. Now or never he must decide who he is.

The simplest interpretation of Jacob's mysterious adversary is that it was himself. His greatest struggle was internal. Would he spend his life wishing he were someone else, or would he at last be content to be who he was? His struggle ended when he was able to let go of all the things he had clung to in the past. According to this reading, Jacob became Israel when he learned to be Jacob. No longer holding on to Esau's heel, his blessing, his identity, his name, Jacob conquered his sense of inadequacy and learned to be himself. For the first time he could meet his brother without envy, deception or fear. The next morning, the brothers meet and, instead of violence, they embrace, kiss, speak in friendship, and go their separate ways in peace. If Jacob has the courage to be Jacob, then he need not fight Esau.

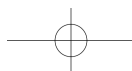
Too often, the Abrahamic monotheisms have sought their brother's blessing: the mimetic rivalry that Rene Girard sees as the source of "violence and the sacred." Their followers have tended, in Shakespeare's words, to

look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least.³

That is a feeling we must reject. The Torah commands Jacob's descendants: "Do not hate an Edomite [i.e., a descendant of Esau], for he is your brother" (Deut. 23: 8). Instead we must wrestle, as did Jacob, alone at night, in the depths of our soul, and discover the face, the name and the blessing that is ours. Before Jacob could be at peace with Esau he had to learn that he was not Esau but Israel—one who wrestles with G-d and never lets go. Seeking someone else's identity, someone else's covenantal promise, creates confusion, anxiety and insecurity. Hypothesis 4: When brothers, religions, faiths, are secure in their own identity, they can meet as equals and part as friends.

SCENE 5: LETTING GO OF PAIN

In the verse in Deuteronomy that commands the Israelites not to hate the descendants of Esau, there is a further clause, momentous in its implications,



a command so counter-intuitive that we have to read it twice to make sure we have heard it correctly: “Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land” (Deut. 23: 8).

What can this mean? The Egyptians of Moses’s day had enslaved the Israelites, “embittered their lives,” subjected them to a ruthless regime of hard labor and forced them to eat the bread of affliction. They had embarked on a program of attempted genocide, Pharaoh commanding his people to throw “every male [Israelite] child born, into the river” (Ex. 1: 22).

Now, forty years later, Moses speaks as if none of this had happened, as if the Israelites owed the Egyptians a debt of gratitude for their hospitality. Yet he and the people were where they were only because they were escaping from Egyptian persecution. Nor did he want the people to forget it. To the contrary, he told them to recite the story of the exodus every year, as we still do on Passover, re-enacting it with bitter herbs and unleavened bread so that the memory would be passed on to all future generations. If you want to preserve freedom, he implies, never forget what it feels like to lose it. Yet here, on the banks of the Jordan, addressing the next generation, he tells the people, “Do not hate an Egyptian.” Why?

To be free, you have to let go of hate. That is what Moses is saying. If they continued to hate their erstwhile enemies, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would not have taken Egypt out of the Israelites. Mentally, they would still be there, slaves to the past. They would still be in chains, not of metal but of the mind—and who knows if chains of the mind are not the most constricting of all?

You cannot create a free society on the basis of pain. Resentment, rage, humiliation, a sense of injustice, the desire to restore honor by inflicting injury on your former persecutors—these are conditions of a profound lack of freedom. You must live with the past, implies Moses, but not in the past. Those who are held captive by *anger* against their former persecutors are captive still. Those who let their enemies define who they are have not yet achieved liberty.

The Mosaic books refer time and again to the exodus and the imperative of memory: “you shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt.” Yet this is never invoked as a reason for retaliation or revenge. Instead it serves as the logic of the just and compassionate society the Israelites are commanded to create: the alternative order, the antithesis of Egypt. Don’t enslave others, says Moses, or if that is too much to ask at this stage of history, treat slaves honorably. Don’t subject them to hard labor. Give them rest and freedom every seventh day. Release them every seventh year. Recognise them as like you, not ontologically inferior. No one is born to be a slave.

Give generously to the poor. Let them eat from the leftovers of the harvest. Leave them a corner of the field. Share your blessings with others. Don’t deprive people of their livelihood. The entire structure of biblical law

is rooted in the experience of slavery in Egypt, as if to say, you know in your heart what it feels like to be the victim of persecution, therefore do not persecute others. Biblical ethics is based on repeated acts of role reversal. You cannot stay moral in hard times and toward strangers without something stronger than Kantian logic or Humean sympathy. That “something stronger” is memory. In Exodus and Deuteronomy, memory becomes a moral force: not a way of preserving hate but to the contrary, a way of conquering hate by recalling what it feels like to be its victim. “Remember”—not to live in the past but to prevent a repetition of the past.

Hatred and liberty cannot coexist. A free people does not hate its former enemies. If it does, it is not yet ready for freedom. To create a non-persecuting society out of people who have been persecuted, you have to break the chains of the past; rob memory of its sting; sublimate pain into constructive energy and the determination to build a different future. That is the profound insight in the paradigm-shifting words, “Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were strangers in his land.” Hypothesis 5: Freedom begins when we let go of hate.

HUMAN OTHER, DIVINE OTHER

These are mere fragments of the larger interpretive task that needs to be undertaken by each of the Abrahamic faiths if they are to confront the “hard texts” each contains—words which, if understood literally and applied directly, lead to violence in the name of God.

Each faith contains the resources it needs to do so, for each understands that sacred texts need interpretation. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have their hermeneutic principles and interpretive methodologies, their dynamic traditions that unfold as God’s timeless word meets His timebound creatures and awakens in them the response appropriate to this time, this place, these circumstances.

One thing, however, is clear. Let me express it by way of four Hebrew words contained in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 26b): *Ein sichah elah tefillah*. Their original context is not germane here, but I interpret their meaning as, “All conversation is a form of prayer.” We meet the Divine Other to the extent that we are able to meet the human Other—respectfully, graciously, peaceably, unthreatened by our differences, knowing that they are part of the post-Babel world. We need the humility to accept that God is the One who defined Himself to Moses (Ex. 3: 14) as “I will be where I will be,” meaning: even where you do not expect Me to be.

In my book, *The Dignity of Difference*, I tried to explain what such an Other-embracing faith would be like:

It would be like being secure in one's home, yet moved by the beauty of foreign places, knowing that they are someone else's home, not mine, but still part of the glory of the world that is ours. It would be like being fluent in English, yet thrilled by the rhythms and resonances of an Italian sonnet one only partially understands. It would be to know that I am a sentence in the story of my people and its faith, but that there are other stories, each written in the letters of lives bound together in community, each part of the story of stories that is the narrative of man's search for God and God's call to mankind. Those who are confident in their faith are not threatened but enlarged by the different faith of others. In the midst of our multiple insecurities, we need that confidence.⁴

NOTES

1. "From The Times November 20, 2008," *Alan Brien—In Memoriam*, November 21, 2008, alanbrien.blogspot.com/2008/11/from-times-november-20-2008.html.
2. Gunter Senft, "Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski," in *Culture and Language Use*, edited by Gunter Senft, Jan-Ola Östman, and Jef Verschueren (John Benjamins Publishing, 2009), 227.
3. William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 29," *The Oxford Library of English Poetry, Volume 1: Spenser to Dryden* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 162.
4. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2003).