



Little Books of Big Questions  
Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

Jane wanted to know what I thought about interfaith dialogue. Is it something Jews should be involved in, or wary of? Is there a risk that learning about other people's beliefs may weaken our own? Just how important is it? And are there limits to dialogue?

#### **Why has interfaith work become so important?**

For most of history, most people lived among people who were like themselves: they shared the same culture, the same traditions, the same history, the same values. Today we live with difference. On an average high street or typical campus we find ourselves surrounded by more different cultures than a nineteenth century anthropologist would have known in a lifetime. So it becomes important to understand one another and to develop a respect for diversity. The very future of free societies depends on it. And we should be taking the lead.

#### **Why us? Do we have something special to contribute?**

We do. Jews have had more experience than any other group in history, of being a minority and yet sustaining our identity. Jews have lived in most countries and cultures: in Christian Europe, Islamic North Africa and the Ottoman Empire and among Hindus, Sikhs and Jain in India. There were Jewish communities in many parts of Africa as well as in China. They developed a principled approach to good community relations: they called it *darkhei shalom*, 'the ways of peace'. But they cared too about maintaining their identity, about Jewish continuity. This is a delicate balance, one in which we have had long practice.

From each of these encounters Jews learned much, despite holding firmly to our own beliefs. As the sages said: 'If they tell you there is wisdom among the nations, believe it; if they tell you there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it.' Faith is particular, wisdom universal. The Talmudic sages respected the Greeks for their astronomy, the Persians for their etiquette, the Romans for their technical expertise, while at the same time believing that the Torah is unique in its spirituality.

Two Jewish ideas are particularly important in a diverse society like ours. The first is that we have never sought to convert anyone. Friendship between faiths depends on this. The desire to convert others has led, historically, to prejudice and persecution. The second is the principle of integration without assimilation. This dates back twenty-six centuries to the prophet Jeremiah who wrote to the Jewish exiles in Babylon: 'Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'

#### **But why haven't Jews sought to convert others? Surely if Judaism is true, we should try to persuade everyone to become Jewish?**

The Torah has a unique structure. It begins, for its first eleven chapters, with a history of humanity as such. Then, in Bereishit [Genesis] chapter 12, it moves from the universal to the particular, from Noah to Abraham. So there are two covenants in Bereishit, one with all humanity in the days of Noah, the other with a particular family, Abraham and Sarah and their children.

That, I believe, is true to the human situation. There are universals. Every human being needs food, clothing, shelter, access to medical treatment and an education. Virtually every society values justice, fairness and the rule of law. These form the basis of universal codes of human rights. They are the contemporary equivalent of the covenant with Noah.

But there are also particularities, in respect of which cultures are profoundly different. As Jews we celebrate freedom through Pesach and the story of the Exodus. We honour creation and the integrity of nature by keeping Shabbat. We are a faith based on asking questions and engaging in 'argument for the sake of heaven'. These things are not universal. They are what make Judaism distinctive. And we are enlarged by difference. By being true to our uniqueness, we contribute what only we can give.

So we have to balance the universal and the particular, our commonalities and differences. *If we were totally unlike, we could not communicate. If we were totally alike, we would have nothing to say.* Judaism achieves this balance by speaking of two covenants: the universal covenant with Noah and the particular covenant with Abraham. Or to put it simply: our task is to be true to our own faith while being a blessing to others regardless of their faith.

#### **But doesn't mixing with others risk weakening our own faith?**

With few exceptions, most of us are going to come into contact with people of different faiths anyway. Complete segregation is difficult, perhaps impossible, so we each have to learn how to relate to others without losing our own heritage and identity.

Perhaps an analogy would help here. There are not many Norwegians in Washington DC, so that if you are Norwegian, it is quite likely that either you or your children will lose their identity in time. But there is one house in Washington DC that flies the Norwegian flag. On its walls are paintings of Norway. The people in the house speak Norwegian and observe all of Norway's customs and holidays. They will never assimilate.

What house is it? Right – you guessed. It is the Norwegian Embassy, and ambassadors never assimilate. Regard yourself as a Jewish ambassador and you too will not assimilate.

#### **But do we really believe in diversity, or is it that we simply believe in exclusivity, that being Jewish means belonging to a club with only a few members?**

No: we really do believe that 'the righteous of the nations of the world have a share in the world to come'. The Torah gives high praise to Abraham's contemporary Malkizedek, calling him a 'priest of the most high God', even though he was not part of the Abrahamic covenant. It values Moses' father-in-law Yitro, even though he was a Midianite priest. The single most blameless individual in Tanach [Bible], Job, is not described as Jewish. He is a kind of 'everyman', the righteous counterpart of Adam.

There are two ways of learning how to be moral. One is by general rules: don't steal, don't murder, don't tell lies. The other is by particular examples: find good people, those you can admire, and see how they live. You need both. Judaism respects both. The Noah covenant is about general rules. Jews and Judaism are meant to be a particular example. That is why we believe there can be other ways of reaching heaven, and why we can respect other examples of good and Godly people.

#### **To what extent should we engage in theological dialogue? Should everything be open to discussion?**

There are universal problems that affect all of us: global warming, the overexploitation of natural resources, the growing disparities between rich and poor, the risks and benefits of new medical technologies and so on. It is important that we come together on these issues, regardless of our particular theologies or sacred texts. Matters that affect us all should involve us all.

It is important too, for citizenship in a liberal democracy, that we make friendships across boundaries and come to understand other people's sensitivities. Jews, for example, must understand what is hurtful to Muslims; Muslims must understand what is hurtful to Jews. We win respect by showing respect: there is no other way.

But there are core beliefs that are ultimately intelligible only to those within a tradition. Those outside may 'understand' them in some sense, but always as an outsider. This is like the difference between science and poetry. Science is translatable across cultures, poetry is not. There are aspects of faith that are more like poetry than science. There are elements of any faith that will always be partially incomprehensible to those outside that faith.

It was the view of the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik that such core beliefs should not be made the subject of interfaith dialogue. In general, love means giving the other space to be themselves. Even in the deepest relationship, there will always be something in the other person we do not fully understand. If that is true between two individuals of the same faith, how much more so between those of different faiths? There is a margin of mystery we must respect.

### How then should we be involved?

Jewish students should be in the forefront in fighting prejudice, respecting difference and working across faiths to create a climate of mutual respect. Maintaining the balance between our commonalities and our differences is what gives liberal democracies their vitality and creativity.

After the Tower of Babel, the human condition has meant a world in which, though there is only one God, there are many languages and cultures, each with something unique to contribute to our collective heritage. We tell different stories, practise different ways of life, yet we are all created in God's image. There are many faiths but only one world in which we must learn to live together. That is our challenge, never more so than now.

### For further reading

My own book, **The Dignity of Difference**, is about this subject. For other Jewish views, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, **No Religion is an Island**; Irving Greenberg, **For the Sake of Heaven and Earth**; Michael Wyschogrod, **Abraham's Promise**; and David Novak, **Jewish-Christian Dialogue**. Rabbi Soloveitchik's essay, 'Confrontation', can be found in Norman Lamm and Walter Wurzburger (eds.), **A Treasury of Tradition**. An important historical study is Jacob Katz, **Exclusiveness and Tolerance**.