

Lesson Plan:

The Dignity of Difference in the Thought of Rabbi Sacks

The following lesson plan is a suggestion of how some of the resources contained in this unit could be incorporated into a 60-minute class period for a class of high-school aged students. This will focus solely on a particular idea within the thought of Rabbi Sacks. There are many other themes and teaching opportunities found in this unit of resources which would take more classroom-time to explore with your students.

Goal: To understand what human dignity is, why humans have often failed to ensure strangers are treated with dignity, and how Judaism tries to ensure that the 'stranger' is treated with dignity by society.

1-5 minutes: Opening Activity - Definitions

Ask your students to produce definitions for the following words (and then compare these with the dictionary definition):

- Stranger
- Dignity (as in human dignity)
- Tribalism
- Universalism

6-20 minutes: Discussion time

Divide your students into pairs and ask them to maintain eye contact while discussing the following:

- What do we have in common with each other?
- What makes us different from each other?

Then come back as a class and share and discuss. Broaden the conversation to include people within the school community who have even more obvious differences (such as non-Jewish staff members, people who were not born locally and whose first language is not the same as everyone).

Play the music lyric video of the song '[This is Me](#)' from the movie *The Greatest Showman*. (See the Diversity page on our website for a film synopsis to understand the context of this song and video)

Core Questions:

- What is the message of this song?
- What do all the performers have in common?
- How does this song express their self-esteem and dignity?
- What does human dignity mean to you?
- Why do some groups suffer from a lack of dignity in our society? Can you think of some examples?
- Rabbi Sacks says that the Torah teaches us that “*Every individual is sacrosanct. Every life is sacred. The human person as such has inalienable dignity*” (Future Tense, p. 78). Where can we learn find this idea expressed in the Torah?
- How can we ensure all people have ‘*inalienable dignity*’ in society?

21-35 minutes: Chavruta - Text A

In *charuta* (pairs or small groups), ask your students to look at the following texts and answer the accompanying questions. Then bring them back together to share their thoughts as a class.

Finding God in the face of the stranger – The Dignity of Difference

Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilisation than to see God, or good, or human dignity in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different colour, whose faith is not my faith and whose truth is not my truth. There are, surely, many ways of arriving at this generosity of spirit, and each faith must find its own. The way I have discovered, having listened to Judaism's sacred texts in the context of the tragedies of the twentieth century and the insecurities of the twenty-first, is that the truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God transcends the particularities of culture and the limits of human understanding. He is my God but also the God of all mankind, even of those whose customs and way of life are unlike mine. That is not to say that there are many gods. That is polytheism. Nor is it to say that God endorses every act done in His name. On the contrary: a God of your side as well as mine must be a God of justice who stands above us both, teaching us to make space for one another, to hear each other's claims and to resolve them equitably. Only such a God would be truly transcendent - greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe capable of being comprehended in any human language, from any single point of view. Only such a God could teach mankind to make peace other than by conquest and conversion, and as something nobler than practical necessity.

What would faith 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

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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 now.

The Dignity of Difference, pp. 65-66

Core Questions:

- Why is it so hard to see God in the face of the stranger?
- How can there be one God but many religions? What message can be learned from this?
- How does this impact the way we live our lives and the way we interact with those who are not the same as us?
- What does the ***Dignity of Difference*** mean and how can we guarantee it within our school, community, and wider society?

36-50 min: Chavruta - **Text B**

Loving the stranger through the experience of Jewish history

Nowhere is the singularity of biblical ethics more evident than in its treatment of the issue that has proved to be the most difficult in the history of human interaction, namely *the problem of the stranger*, the one who is not like us. Most societies at most times have been suspicious of, and aggressive toward, strangers. That is understandable, even natural. Strangers are non-kin. They come from beyond the tribe. They stand outside the network of reciprocity that creates and sustains communities. That is what makes the Mosaic books unusual in the history of moral thought. As the rabbis noted, the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself, but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to 'love the stranger'...

It does not assume that this is easy or instinctive. It does not derive it from reason or emotion alone, knowing that under stress, these have rarely been sufficient to counter the human tendency to dislike the unlike and exclude people not like us from our radius of moral concern. Instead it speaks of history: 'You know what it is like to be different, because there was a time when you, too, were persecuted for being different.'

Indeed, that is what the Israelites are commanded never to forget about their shared experience of exile and slavery. They have to learn from the inside and always remember what it feels like to be an outsider, an alien, a stranger. It is their formative experience, re-enacted every year in the drama of Passover - as if to say that only those who know what it is to be slaves, understand at the core of their being why it is wrong to enslave others. Only those who have felt the loneliness of being a stranger find it natural to identify with strangers...

God cares about the stranger, and so must we... The human other is a trace of the Divine. As an ancient Jewish teaching puts it: 'When a human being makes many coins in the same mint~ they all come out the same. God makes every person in the same image - His image - and each is different.' The challenge to the religious imagination is to see God's image in one who is not in our image. That is the converse of tribalism. But it is also something other than universalism. It takes difference seriously... The God of Israel is larger than the specific practices of Israel. Traces of his presence can be found throughout the world. We do not have to share a creed or code to be partners in the covenant of mankind. The prophets of Israel wrestle with an idea still counterintuitive to the Platonic mind: that moral and spiritual dignity extend far beyond the boundaries of any one civilisation. They belong to the other, the outsider, the stranger, the one who does not fit our system, race, or creed.

The Dignity of Difference, pp. 58-60

Core Questions:

- Why does Jewish history begin with slavery?
- Do you think this can also help us understand Jewish history until today?
- Why have Jews been called on to be the perennial 'stranger' in society?
- How does this place Jews in a leadership position in society? Are we living up to this?

51-60 min: Summing up

In the final few minutes of the class, ensure your students have understood the following points:

- Humans are naturally tribal creatures
- One of Judaism's most radical and most crucial, ideas is that all human beings are created in the image of God, and this means they have an inalienable right to dignity
- While there may be one Truth in Heaven, there can be multiple truths on Earth
- While there is only one God, there can be many ways to approach a relationship with Him
- It is our responsibility to see God in the face of the stranger
- The Dignity of Difference is something to be protected and celebrated in society