

COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATION

A GLOBAL DAY OF LEARNING IN MEMORY OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"ל



Religion and Science

To launch the inaugural *Communities in Conversation*, Gila Sacks spoke of how her late father viewed conversation as a key vehicle for learning: “[My father] learned from books, from text, from laws, from history, and from world events. But mainly, he learned from people. He would seek out people to learn from, from every possible path of life, and he would do this through conversation – through talking and listening. For him, conversation was a defining and spiritual act, a way of opening ourselves up to something beyond ourselves. A training, perhaps, for opening ourselves up to God.”

It is our pleasure to provide resources to generate conversation and learning in memory of Rabbi Sacks. This resource was developed for the 2021 *Communities in Conversation*. May the soul of Rabbi Sacks be elevated in merit of the learning we will do today in his memory.



Opening Video: “Does Scientific Knowledge Contradict Religious Belief”

View the video at rabbisacks.info/religionsciencevideo

TRANSCRIPT

Scientific knowledge doesn't contradict religious belief, and I believe, religiously, that it can't contradict religious belief because the God of Revelation, the God we encounter in our sacred texts, is also the God of Creation. So one way or another, there is a kinship, a substantial coexistence between the world of science and the world of religion. But they really are very different worlds.

The way I put it is: science takes things apart to see how they work, religion puts things together to see what they mean. And those are different mental functions. They even use different bits of the brain.

One of the really most interesting points though, is that religion can affect the way we understand science and the other way round, science can affect the way we understand religion. We know that Charles Darwin personally found his theory of Natural Selection incompatible with his faith as a Christian. But I think 150 years on we can see that Darwin unintentionally and perhaps unwittingly hit on one of the most beautiful religious truths ever discovered, which is that the Creator made creation creative. That's what Darwinism is.

So here you have science allowing us to see that God isn't quite as simple as we thought He was. In fact, God turns out to be much more like a gardener and a teacher than what 18th century thinkers thought He was, namely a mechanic, a clockmaker. So, science does cause us to adjust and refine our religious beliefs and make them much more interesting, I think.



Questions to Consider

1. Why might one think there is a conflict between religion and science?
2. How do science and religion differ in their approach to understanding the world?
3. What unique questions do science and religion ask?
4. Why might Darwinism be a challenge to Torah-observant Jews, and how does Rabbi Sacks resolve this challenge?
5. How can religion enhance our understanding of science and vice versa?

The Universal and the Particular in the Torah

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, pp. 211–212

The structure of the Hebrew Bible is unusual and significant. Its subject is the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Yet the Torah does not start with Abraham. It begins instead with universal archetypes of humanity as a whole. We read about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, Babel and its builders. None of these is a Jew, a Hebrew, an Israelite. They are us in our universality: temptation and sin, sibling rivalry and violence, hubris and the desire for godlike powers. Only after this prologue does the Torah narrow its focus to one man, one family, eventually one nation and its highly specific destiny. **The Torah is a particular text, but it begins with the universals of the human condition.**

What is absolutely clear is that Genesis tells the story not of one covenant, but of two. The first, with Noah after the Flood (Gen. 9), applies to all humanity. The second, with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17), does not. It is the covenant of one people, the people with whom God, many centuries later at Mount Sinai, makes a more highly articulated Covenant of Sinai with its 613 commands.

Judaism is built on a dual structure. It has a universal dimension and particularistic one, neither of which negates the other. God has a general relationship with all humanity and a particular relationship with the Children of Israel. Rabbi Akiva expressed this, simply and beautifully, in his statement in Ethics of the Fathers: ‘Beloved is humanity, for it was created in God’s image... Beloved are Israel for they are called God’s children.’ (3:14)



Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the Torah begins with the “universals of the human condition”?
2. What do we mean when we say that “the Torah is a particular text”?
3. What could this idea help us to understand about the differences between Torah/religion and science?

Torah and Chochmah: Particular and Universal Knowledge

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, p. 219

So we have a dual ontology, two modes of being. But Judaism also recognises a dual epistemology. There are two ways of knowing. One is called *chochmah*, ‘wisdom’, the other is Torah, ‘teaching, instruction, law, guidance’. The difference was stated clearly by the Sages: ‘If you are told that there is wisdom among the nations believe it. If you are told there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it.’ (Midrash Eichah Rabbah 2:13).

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, p. 221–222

We can now state the difference between the two modes of knowledge. *Chochmah* is the truth we discover; Torah is the truth we inherit. *Chochmah* is the universal heritage of humankind; Torah is the specific heritage of Israel. *Chochmah* is what we attain by being in the image of God; Torah is what guides Jews as the people of God. *Chochmah* is acquired by seeing and reasoning; Torah is received by listening and responding. *Chochmah* tells us what is; Torah tells us what ought to be. *Chochmah* is about facts; Torah is about commands. *Chochmah* yields descriptive, scientific laws; Torah yields prescriptive, behavioural laws. *Chochmah* is about creation; Torah is about revelation...

...We can now state the following. *Chochmah* has an honourable place within the Jewish worldview. It has religious dignity. It is the gift of God. It is available to everyone, because everyone is in the image of God. We can also hazard the following definition: *chochmah* is what allows us to understand the world as God’s work (science) and the human person as his image (the humanities).



Questions to Consider

1. What can *chochmah* give us, that Torah cannot?
2. What does the Torah give us that *chochmah* cannot?
3. According to Rabbi Sacks, should Jews actively pursue the study of *chochmah*? Why?

The Great Partnership

RABBI SACKS

The Great Partnership, pp. 2–3

I want... to argue that we need both religion and science; that they are compatible and more than compatible. They are two essential perspectives that allow us to see the universe in its three-dimensional depth. The creative tension between the two is what keeps us sane, grounded in physical reality without losing our spiritual sensibility. It keeps us human and humane.

The story I am about to tell is about the human mind and its ability to do two quite different things. One is the ability to break things down into their constituent parts and see how they mesh and interact. The other is the ability to join things together so that they tell a story, and to join people together so that they form relationships. The best example of the first is science, of the second, religion.

Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. Without going into neuroscientific detail, the first is a predominantly left-brain activity, the second is associated with the right hemisphere.

Both are necessary, but they are very different. The left brain is good at sorting and analysing things. The right brain is good at forming relationships with people.

RABBI SACKS

The Great Partnership, p. 70

There is a difference between wisdom and Torah. Wisdom tells us how the world is. Torah tells us how the world ought to be. Wisdom is about nature. Torah is about will. It is about human freedom and choice and the way we are called on to behave. Wisdom is about the world God makes. Torah is about the world God calls on us to make, honouring others as bearers of God's image, exercising our freedom in such a way as not to rob others of theirs.



Questions to Consider

1. How is science an example of “left-brain” thinking and religion an example of “right-brain” thinking?
2. Why are both important?
3. Which one resonates most with you?

To Change the World, You Have to Understand the World

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, pp. 226

Without Torah we cannot understand the Jewish story. But without chochmah we cannot understand the human story... There are three elements of Jewish faith: creation, revelation and redemption. Creation is God's relationship with the universe. Revelation is God's relationship with us. Redemption is what happens when we apply revelation to creation, when we apply God's word to God's world. We cannot apply Torah to the world unless we understand the world. Without an understanding of creation, we will fail to bring about redemption.

RABBI SACKS

Future Tense, pp. 227–228

A Judaism divorced from society will be a Judaism unable to influence society. It will live and thrive and flourish behind high walls within its own defensive space, but it will not speak to those who wrestle with the very realities – poverty, disease, injustice, inequality and other assaults on human dignity – to which Torah was directed in the first place. At best, those who engage with the world and are at the same time faithful to Judaism will be divided personalities, unable to integrate the two halves of their being because Torah and chochmah are un-integrated in our time. They will suffer from the cerebral lesion I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

Creation and revelation have a single author. At the climax of Yom Kippur, in the last words of prayer, Jews say seven times: *Hashem hu ha-Elokim*, 'the God of revelation is the God of creation'. Judaism is a sustained call to heal the rift between creation and revelation, between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. To do that requires both Torah and wisdom.



Questions to Consider

1. What arguments are found here for encouraging not just Torah study, but also secular wisdom?
2. How can studying both *chochmah* (creation) and Torah (revelation) lead to the redemption of the world?
3. What must this mean for the education we give our children?

The Limits of Science

RABBI SACKS

Morality, p. 243

Science cannot, in and of itself, give an account of human dignity, because dignity is based on human freedom. Freedom is a concept that lies outside the scope of science. Science cannot locate freedom, because the scientific world is one of causal relationships. A stone is not free to fall or not to fall. Lightning does not choose when and where to strike. A scientific law links one physical phenomenon to another without the intervention of will and choice. To the extent that there is a science of human behaviour, there is an implicit denial of the freedom of human behaviour. That is precisely what Spinoza, Marx and Freud were arguing: that freedom is an illusion. But if freedom is an illusion, then so is the human dignity based on that freedom. Science cannot but deconsecrate the human person, thereby opening the gate to a possible desecration.

At this point, the voice of morality – the very voice that has been progressively weakened over the past fifty years – has to intervene, and explain explicitly what is unique about humankind, and what we must cultivate and protect in the coming years.



To be sure, the world of wisdom is a danger zone. All too rarely do scientists and humanists acknowledge the difference between fact and value, wisdom and culture. Perhaps, within the humanities, it is impossible to make a sharp separation between the two. Can we read Homer or Dante or Milton or T. S. Eliot without entering their mental world, their culture-saturated combination of fact and value, which may be incompatible with, subversive of or antagonistic towards the values to which Jews have been called?

Science can easily become scientism, the belief that what science measures is all there is. Materialism, determinism, behaviourism, Darwinism: these are all forms, not of science but of science-become-metaphor-and-myth, doctrines that lay claim to a truth far beyond the evidence on which they are based. So there is no risk-free encounter with wisdom. Even Maimonides, the greatest expert in Jewish law and life who ever entered the Elysian field of wisdom, was, in the view of many, too Platonic in his politics and too Aristotelian in his metaphysics.



Questions to Consider

1. What are the dangers of only learning science?
2. What are the dangers of only learning Torah?
3. How can we ensure we have a healthy balance between Torah and science in our lives?