

**Rabbi Sacks.**

## **The Great Partnership: God Science, and the Search for Meaning**

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What riveted the neo-Darwinians was the implication that evolution proceeded by mere chance, random genetic mutation, which produced the variety on which natural selection could work. Stephen J. Gould drew the conclusion that if the tape of evolution were to be replayed there would be no certainty that Homo sapiens would emerge. **So not only were human beings not made by an act of special divine creation, their very existence was pure accident.**

**So we are nothing, our planet is insignificant, our existence a mere caesura in time. Our noblest thoughts conceal base intentions. There is no freedom, just necessity. There is no truth, just hegemonic narrative. There is no moral beauty, just a sordid struggle to survive...**

There is something surpassingly odd about this. During the entire period that this drama of disillusionment was being enacted, human powers of understanding, explanation and control were expanding beyond all previous imaginings and at an ever faster rate. How is it that the higher human achievements become, the lower the human self-image sinks?

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**Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean.**

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We cannot prove that life is meaningful and that God exists. But neither can we prove that love is better than hate, altruism than selfishness, forgiveness than the desire for revenge. We cannot prove that the hope is truer to experience than the tragic sense of life. Almost none of the truths by which we live are provable, and the desire to prove them is based on a monumental confusion between explanation and interpretation. Explanations be proved, interpretations cannot. Science deals in explanation. Meaning is always a matter of interpretation.

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Science masquerading as religion is an unseemly as religion masquerading as science

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I never understood why it should be considered more courageous to despair than to hope. Freud said that religious faith was the comforting illusion that there is a father figure. A religious believer might say that atheism is the comforting illusion that there is no father figure, so that we can do what we like and can get away with: an adolescent's dream. Why should one be considered escapist and not the other? Why should God's call to responsibility be considered an easy option? Why should the belief, held by some on the basis of scientific determinism, that we have no free will and therefore no moral responsibility, not be considered the greatest escapism of them all?

**Finding God.** Faith is about seeing the miraculous in the everyday, not about waiting every day for the miraculous. (pg.81)

**Meaning** is made, not just discovered. That is what religion for the most part is: the constant making and remaking of meaning. (Pg.197)

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### **Dangers.** Page 151

Two figures in particular held views very close to today's secular materialists, namely the third century BCE Greek thinker Epicurus (341-270 BCE) and his Roman disciple, two and a half centuries later, Lucretius (95-52 BCE). They believed that the material world is all there is... we have no souls. There is no life after death. The gods are uninterested in the affairs of human beings. We are here, we live, we die and cease to be. There is nothing to fear about death, because when we are here, death is not, and when death is here, we are not. Epicurus and Lucretius could be writing today. Their books would be best-sellers.

How did they believe we should live? Unsurprisingly, they had no interest in the concepts of right and wrong. Human life is governed by two considerations only, the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. To pursue pleasure, it helps to have good food and good friends. To avoid pain, stay out of public life, which will only cause others to envy you. Do not marry or have children the risk of emotional entanglement is too great. Sex is fine; love is best avoided. Keep your wants simple: that way you will not be troubled by the things you cannot afford. The end result will be

ataraxia, 'tranquillity of mind', that absence of passion that the Greeks - Stoics, Cynics and Sceptics as well as seemed to see as the mark of a philosophical life. In a word: Chill!

Human Freedom Page 124

**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 its 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 is one that links one physical phenomenon to another without the intervention of will and choice. To the extent that there is a science of human behaviour, to that extent 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.**

**We are free. We know that as surely as we know anything. We know what it is to choose between alternatives, weigh the options, calculate the consequences, consult our conscience, ask the advice of others and so on. Yet throughout history human beings have found almost endless ways of denying choice.** It wasn't me, it was the will of the gods, or the influence of the stars, or malicious spirits, or fortune, luck or happenstance. It was the way we were brought up, or the influence of friends, or economic circumstance, or genetic endowment. Denial of freedom goes all the way back to the first couple in the Garden of Eden. Confronted with their sin, Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent.

Our excuses become more sophisticated over time, but they remain just that. The problem of free will has existed for close to twenty-five centuries. Plato discussed it. So did Aristotle. Paul spoke about it with great feeling in the epistle to the Romans. One of the earliest statements occurs in the fourth chapter of Genesis. God senses that Cain is angry and is about to commit a great crime. He warns him, telling him that though he is in the grip of strong emotion, he can control it:

Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.' (Genesis 4:6-7)

... The dangers implicit in the scientisation of the human person have not disappeared.

## **Page 71**

The Judaism of the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic sages... saw science as an autonomous activity with its own dignity. It was the wisdom of the Greeks, not the gift of the Jews. ...But 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.

The difference between the two is freedom.

### **Page 286.**

You may say, I refuse to believe what I cannot test, what I cannot subject even in principle to some kind of proof. But the big decisions of life ... are like that. You can never know in advance the facts that would make your decision the right one under the circumstances. That applies to the decision to marry, to have a child, to start a business, to undertake a research project, to write a symphony, to paint a picture. There is no creation without risk. What impresses me about the Bible is that it suggests that, even for God, creating humanity was a risk, and one that at least once he regretted having taken. The same is true about the basic attitudes we take towards life.

...To be human is to live in a world fraught with risk. We face a future that is unknowable, not just unknown. Faith is a risk, and there is no way of minimising that risk, of playing it safe. Hamlet's soliloquy - 'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come?' - tells us that there is no death, let alone life, without risk. Those who are unprepared to take a risk are unprepared to live fully.

Faith is the courage to take a risk. And what if I am wrong? I would rather have lived believing the best about humanity and the universe than believing the worst.

### **Page 96-97**

Faith is what moves people to great achievement that defies probability and predictability.

**Faith is not certainty. It is the courage to live with uncertainty.** Faith is never easy. The great heroes of the moral life, like the great artists and scientists and thinkers, like anyone who has undertaken to live a life of high ideals, know failure after failure, disappointment after disappointment. What made them great is that they refused to despair.

...**The sheer wonder that God could take** the risk of creating a creature with the freedom to disobey him and wreck his world. **There is no faith humans can have in God equal to the faith God must have had in humankind to place us here as guardians of the vastness and splendour of the universe.** We exist because of God's faith in us. That is why I see in the faces of those I meet a trace of God's love that lifts me to try and love a little as God loves. I know of nothing with greater power to lift us beyond ourselves and to perform acts that carry within them a signal of transcendence.

### **Genesis ch.1 Page 68-71**

Why then is Genesis I there?

**The most obvious reason** is it is not a myth but a polemic against myth. Unlike the gods myth, God is not part of nature. He is the author of nature which He created by a free act of will. By conferring his image on human kind, God gives us freedom of the will. This generates the entire moral world of the Bible with its vision of the human person as a responsible, choosing moral agent. Rejecting myth, the Bible discovers freedom.

**Second** is the insistence on the goodness of the world. Seven times we read that 'God saw that it was good'. This too was revolutionary. Most religions, ancient and modern, have contrasted this world and the next, earth and heaven, the world of the senses and that of eternity, this life and the

afterlife. Here is chaos, there is order. Here is suffering, there is its reward. To a quite remarkable degree the Hebrew Bible is reticent about life after death and never uses it to reconcile people with their condition on earth. The religious drama takes place here. This world, this life, is where we meet God and either do or fail to do his will. The universe is good, but humans are free to do evil. This frames the entire religious drama of humankind.

**Third** is the orderliness of the universe. Gone is the mythic mindset of ever-threatening chaos. The narrative is tightly structured. For three days God creates domains - light and dark, sea and sky, sea and dry land. For the next three days he populates those domains with moving things: the sun, moon and stars, fish and birds, land animals and man. The seventh day, the day of rest, is holy: an enduring symbol of the world at peace with itself and its maker. The implication is clear. God creates order; it is man who creates chaos.

**Equally radical** is the fact that, since God created everything, he is God of everywhere. For the first time, God and religion are de-territorialised. There is no longer a god of this place and a god of that; a god of these people as opposed to those. Abrahamic universalism is born here.

The Hebrew Bible emphasises both the universal and the particular. It is a worldview of extraordinary simplicity and power. The buzzing confusion of the polytheistic pantheon has disappeared and the entire universe has been cleared for the drama between the lone God and lonely humanity, who have, as it were, only each other for company. Nature has been demystified and demythologised. All earthly power has been relativised, allowing for the desacralisation of kingship and the eventual secularisation of the political domain.

**So Genesis 1, a text that might have been a prelude to science!**

### **Page 237-245 The Problem of Evil**

Suffering tears our world apart. Something in our life that once rooted us is taken from us. Where there was once wholeness there is now a gaping hole. Suffering threatens to render life meaningless. How can I live with this pain? How can I want to continue to live in such a world? In extremis we cry with the words of the Psalm, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:1).

In the Bible there is a whole literature of lament, grief, protest. Much of it is written in tears. There can be a darkness so dark that it extinguishes any attempt to light a light. **The Bible does not hide from this. It is an honest book.**

In the face of unbearable, inexplicable or unjustifiable suffering, **there are three responses.**

**The first says:** This life is not all there is. There is another world, after death. There is heaven. There is peace and eternal life.

... But it cannot be the whole answer, for it is never given as such in the Hebrew Bible. God does not say to the Israelites suffering in slavery: My children, relax, endure, bliss awaits you in another life. God does not tell Moses to preach them a sermon on the delights of paradise. Nothing could be further from the spirit of the Hebrew Bible.

Yes, there is life after death. It is spoken of in the Bible. It is a fundamental of faith. But it occupies a surprisingly marginal part of the book of God's word.

... **The second response** is to see, as did John Keats, that this world is 'a vale of soul-making'. We suffer so that we can grow. Others suffer so that we can practise charity or kindness. The bad in our lives is an invitation to the good. For that is how we become morally responsible agents, by living in a world of trial and temptation, torment and tears. A world without suffering would be one in which we never needed to come to anyone's aid, never needed to make sacrifices of our own for the sake of someone else. Without pain, there is no gain.

... As a response to suffering, the argument makes sense, but as a justification for it, it makes no sense at all.

**The third response**, therefore, is to say: There is evil, therefore there is no God. There is no justice, therefore there is no judge. The world is as it is. *Homo hominis lupus est*, man is wolf to man. The world is a restless searching for power after power that ceaseth only in death, as Hobbes said, a struggle for survival in a world of scarce resources as Darwin argued, and there is no reason to expect otherwise. Life is absurd. Human beings are cruel. Epicurus was right. Pursue pleasure, avoid pain, endure such suffering as is endurable and when it ceases to be, then is the moment to cease to be.

**I personally cannot accept such a world**, though many can and do. A world in which there is no God is one in which there are no limits to hubris, no principled constraints to the will to power. In a godless world some, no doubt, will choose the way of Epicurus and live quietly among friends and innocent pleasures. But not all, and there's the rub.

... If there is no Judge, there is no reason to expect justice. If there is no God, there is no transcendental 'Thou shalt not'. These were not theoretical propositions. In Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Communist China they were put into practice, and tens of millions died.

... If we give up belief in the God of justice, we relinquish belief in the objective reality and categorical imperative of justice also. In such a world there is no comfort for the sufferer, no rebuke for the oppressor, no hope, just the stoic endurance of hopelessness. 'The mass of men', said Thoreau, 'lead lives of quiet desperation'. That is what the third response offers us: resignation to a world we have no reason to suppose could be other than unjust.

Three responses, the first religious and other-worldly, the second religious and this-worldly, and the third non- or anti-religious. What they have in common is that they are all, ultimately, philosophies of acceptance. **Abrahamic monotheism is not a religion of acceptance. It is a religion of protest.**

... **God exists and evil exists. The more powerfully I feel the existence of God, the more strongly I protest the existence of evil.** That is why in the Abrahamic faith it is the giants of faith, not the sceptics or cynics, who cry aloud, as Moses and Jeremiah and Habakkuk cried aloud, with a cry that echoes through the ages. That is why Job refuses to be comforted and why he would not let go of God.

There is a difference between a contradiction and a cry. You can solve a contradiction by sitting quietly in a room, thinking, using conceptual ingenuity, reframing. Philosophy, said Wittgenstein, leaves the world unchanged. But faith does not leave the world unchanged.

... Theodicy, the attempt to vindicate God's justice in a world of evil, is compelling evidence that in the translation of Abrahamic spirituality into the language of Plato and Aristotle, something is lost. **What is lost is the cry.**

... 'All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted' (Genesis 37:35).

The sages asked: Why did Jacob refuse to be comforted? ... Excessive mourning is seen in Judaism as a rebellion against reality. We are mortal. No one and nothing lives for ever. Why then did Jacob refuse to be comforted?

The traditional answer is surely the right one. Jacob refused to be comforted because he refused to give up hope that Joseph was still alive-as, indeed, he was.

Hope is not costless in the way that optimism is. It carries with it a considerable price. Those who hope refuse to be comforted while the hoped-for outcome is not yet reached. Given their history of suffering, Jews were rarely optimists. But they never gave up hope. That is why, when the prophets saw evil in the world, they refused to be comforted. **For that is what theodicy is: a comfort bought too cheaply.**

... **"Will the Judge of all earth not perform Justice?" ...Does Abraham seriously suspect God of injustice?** Does he believe that there are in fact fifty innocent people in the city and that God has somehow overlooked this fact? Does he believe that he is more righteous than God?... God is inviting Abraham to respond. 'For I have chosen him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.' ... Abraham challenges God because God invites him to challenge God.

**Do not accept injustice even if you hear it in my name. That is what God is telling Abraham.**

... The sages noted that while Noah was making the ark, he registered no protest against the fact that God was about to destroy most of life through the Flood. That is what made Abraham, not Noah, the hero of faith. Noah accepted. Abraham protested. The religion of Abraham is a religion of protest against evil, in the name of God.

... Evil exists because we exist as free beings in a physical world with all the accidents of matter and the pain of mortality. What difference, then, does it make whether our attitude to evil is one of acceptance or of protest? It makes all the difference. Abraham's protest, and Moses' and Jeremiah's, were not mere cries wasted in the wind. They were cries born in the cognitive dissonance between the world that is and the world that ought to be. The only way of resolving this dissonance is a deed. That is the difference between faith-as acceptance and faith-as-protest.

**The only way to deal with slavery is to lead the people to freedom. The only way to confront the evils of the polis is to build a more just social order, with special emphasis on loving the stranger.**

**... the contradiction is to be resolved, not by philosophical thought, but by redemptive deed.**