

A review of
The Dignity of Difference
by Jonathan Sacks
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Rating: 10

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Discarding anything lower than 6 produces a net five-point scale from 6-10.)

I have to confess right here at the beginning that the phrase *diversity* has always put me off a little bit. It sounds so much like *divide* that I fear it may do more harm than good, more separating than uniting. While John Gardner's admonition on the balance required helps –

“To prevent the wholeness from smothering diversity, there must be a tradition of pluralism and healthy dissent. To prevent the diversity from destroying the wholeness, these must be accommodation, coalition-building and well developed practices of dispute resolution. No leader surveying the world scene today can doubt that the achievement of *wholeness incorporating diversity* is one of the transcendent goals of our time, a task for our generation worldwide.”¹

... I cannot help but hear *diversity* and also hear echoes of *divisiveness*.

Now *difference*, on the other hand, does not carry the same connotation for me. So when someone on an internet listserv suggested that *The Dignity of Difference* fell into his ‘must read’ category, I bought a copy. That the author, Jonathan Sacks, serves as a rabbi suggested that it would offer a *uniting* perspective with a moral basis. Indeed, the book does just that.

At the highest level, Sacks offers his key imperatives for examining differences.

“*Control* means taking responsibility and refusing to see economic or political developments as inevitable. *Contribution* means that there is a moral dimension to economics. ... *Compassion* means that developing countries must take seriously their obligation to the world's poor *Creativity* suggests that (not the only, but) the best way of doing this is through investments in education. *Co-operation* tells us that markets do not survive on the basis of competition alone. ... *Conservation* reminds us of one of our duties to nature and to the future”

He includes *Conciliation* as the seventh essential element:

“Forgiveness breaks the chain. It introduces into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace. ... It is about the action that is not reaction. It is the refusal to be defined by circumstance. It represents our ability to change course, reframe the narrative or the past, and create an unexpected set of possibilities for the future.”

Through the heart of the book, he devotes a chapter to each of these seven elements.

He offers a useful distinction between the usefulness of politics and of religion in addressing *difference*: “Politicians have power, but religions have something stronger:

¹ Gardner, John W. 1990. *On Leadership*. New York: Free Press.

they have influence. Politics moves the pieces on the chessboard. Religion changes lives.” He then suggests a personal test of faith with regard to embracing difference:

“Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his.”

Sacks goes on to point out that

“Fundamentalists, we should never forget, can be economic or scientific as well as religious. Without a moral vision, we will fail. And that vision, to be shared, can only emerge from conversation – from talking to one another and listening to one another across boundaries of class, income, race, and faith.”

Without conversation, we have no opportunity to generate trust.

In what a reader (especially an American) might interpret as a pot-shot at ‘rugged individualism’, Sacks suggests that we seem to have lost our way in terms of not simply accepting but even needing the dignity of difference. He notes that many do not share a consensus on just what constitutes the common good and whether governments ought to have the right to make such decisions – that such decisions ought to remain personal choices. He suggests that our differences lie at the very heart of our need for one another.

“There is a Jewish prayer that contains the words *bore nefashot rabbot vechesronam*, ‘who creates many kinds of souls and their deficiencies.’ This is a strange phrase. ... The explanation is that if each of us lacked nothing, we would never need anyone else. ... Everyone has something to contribute, and everyone gains through the contribution others.”

Our honoring of one another and the unique contributions each of us can make simply recognizes that none of us has everything we need.

Near the end of the book, Sacks brings the reader’s attention to the need to look to the future, the need for *Conservation*, the notion that we do not ‘own’ the planet. Beyond our mere day-to-day contractual links, we have a covenantal link to our children, their children, and their children. He says he has learned an important distinction between optimism and hope.

“Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the faith that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but takes a great deal of courage to have hope.”

Sacks asks us to step up to the challenge of creating a future that honors *each* of us *and all* of us, the individual *and* the society. To do that, we must deliberately seek the dignity in our differences.