

## Why are you here? Individuality & Responsibility in Rabbi Sacks's thought

### Remembering his second *yahrzeit*, 14.11.22

“Where what we want to do meets what is crying out to be done,  
that is where we should be.” (Rabbi Sacks, 2013)

#### Maimonides – Laws of Blessings 11:1 [12<sup>th</sup> century]

There are positive commandments that a person is obligated to make an effort to pursue until they do them – for example, wearing *tefillin* on weekdays, sitting in a *sukkah* and shaking a *lulav* & *etrog* on *Sukkot*, and hearing the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*. These are referred to as obligations, since a person is required to fulfill them.

There are other commandments that are not obligations but resemble voluntary activities, like attaching a *mezuzah* to your house and constructing a guardrail on the roof. This is because a person is not obligated to dwell in a home that needs a *mezuzah*. Indeed, if they want they can dwell in a tent or a ship for their entire life. Similarly, a person does not have to build a house in order to build a guardrail.

For all positive commandments that are **between a person and God**, whether they are obligatory or not, a blessing should be recited before it is done.

יש מצוות עשה שאדם חייב להשתדל ולרדף עד שיגיעה אותה כגון תפילין וספח ולולב ושופר ואילו הן הנקראין חובה. לפי שאדם חייב על כל פנים לעשות.

ויש מצוה שאינה חובה אלא דומין לרשות כגון מזוזה ומעקה שאין אדם חייב לשפן בבית החייב מזוזה כדי שיגיעה מזוזה אלא אם רצה לשפן כל ימיו באהל או בספינה יושב. וכן אינו חייב לבנות בית כדי לעשות מעקה.

וכל מצוות עשה שבין אדם למקום בין מצוה שאינה חובה בין מצוה שהיא חובה מברך עליה קדם לעשייתה :

| <i>ben adam l'makom</i> - בין אדם למקום                                                                                                                                                                   | <i>ben adam l'chavero</i> - בין אדם לחבירו                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Laws 'between a person and God'                                                                                                                                                                           | Laws 'between a person and their fellow'                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Prayer – saying the <i>Shema</i> and <i>Amidah</i> .<br>Fasting on <i>Yom Kippur</i> .<br>Attaching a <i>mezuzah</i> to your home.<br>Lighting <i>Shabbat</i> candles.<br>Eating <i>kosher</i> food, etc. | Giving <i>tzedakah</i> (charity).<br>Visiting the sick ( <i>bikur cholim</i> ).<br>Helping out people in need ( <i>hessed</i> ).<br>Greeting people warmly and politely.<br>Not getting needlessly angry or bearing a grudge, etc. |

#### Why no blessing for interpersonal laws?

- (a) Not fully in your power, assistance often needed – R. Solomon ibn Aderet (Rashba), 13<sup>th</sup> cent.
- (b) Response to unideal circumstances – Rabbi David Abudraham, 14<sup>th</sup> cent.
- (c) Not limited to the Jewish people – Rabbi haLevi Epstein (Torah Temimah), 1860–1941
- (d) Intention vs. Action – Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 1948-2020...

“An act between us and another human being, however, has a different character. What matters is not the act but its result... What matters in acts of *tzedakah* or *hessed* is that we help the needy, alleviate the poverty of the poor, ease the distress of the bereaved. The point of the command is its effect on the world, on the other person... *motives are irrelevant to acts the purpose of which is to bring aid to those who are in need.*” (To Heal a Fractured World, p.104-105, Continuum 2005)

### Talmud – Pesachim 8a/b [4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century]

One who says, "This sum of money is for charity to save the life of my child" or "to ensure my share in the World-to-Come" – such a person is regarded as completely righteous.

הַאֲמֵר "סָלַע זֶה לְצַדִּיקָה בְּשָׁבִיל  
שְׂחִיחָה בְּנִי" אוֹ "שְׂאֵהָיָה בֶּן הָעוֹלָם  
הַבָּא" הֵרִי זֶה צְדִיק גָּמוּר!

"A command between us and other people needs no blessing because it requires no special intent. Someone was in need; we gave. Someone was ill; we visited. Someone was lonely; we invited them home. The religious character of the moment lay not [in] ...the motive for which it was performed, but the comfort given, the help received, the loneliness lifted... *Far from needing a blessing, the act itself is the blessing.*" (p.105)

p.262...

#### *To Heal a Fractured World*

Immanuel Kant famously defined morality as the universal imperative: 'Act only on a maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'<sup>10</sup> Perhaps that is what morality is to the mindset of reason. There surely are universal imperatives. We all know them. Don't murder. Don't injure the innocent. Don't rob or steal. Don't lie. Those are the rules we learned as children, and if we failed to learn them, others quickly taught us. The interesting part of the moral life, the grown-up part, comes not in universals but particulars.<sup>11</sup> It speaks to me, here, now: this person, in this situation, at this time. It knows my name. It calls to me, not to the person next to me. It says: there is an act only you can do, a situation only you can address, a moment that, if not seized, may never come again. God commands in generalities but calls in particulars. He knows our gifts and he knows the needs of the world. That is why we are here. There is an act only we can do, and only at this time, and that is our task. The sum of these tasks is the meaning of our life, the purpose of our existence, the story we are called upon to write. God's call is almost inaudible. I translate the biblical phrase, 'a still, small voice' (1 Kings 19:12) as 'the voice we can only hear if we are listening'. But it is there, and if, from time to time throughout our lives, we create a silence in the soul, we will hear it.

There is no life without a task; no person without a talent; no place without a fragment of God's light waiting to be discovered and redeemed; no situation without its possibility of sanctification; no moment without its call. It may take a lifetime to learn how to find these things, but once we learn, we realize in retrospect that all it ever took was the ability to listen. When God calls, he does not do so by way of universal imperatives. Instead, he whispers our name – and the greatest reply, the reply of Abraham, is simply *hineni*: 'Here I am', ready to heed your call, to mend a fragment of your all-too-broken world.

Check it out... [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)

And...

