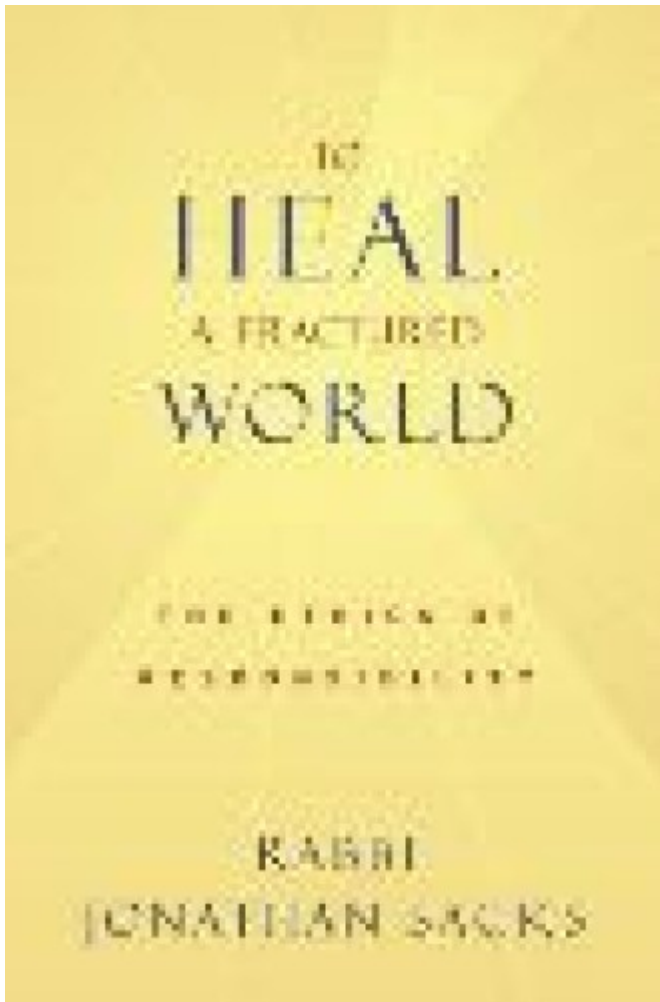


The Messiah waits

By [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

In Review



To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility

Jonathan Sacks
Schocken

Here is a lovely parable—all the more lovely considering that it comes from the chief rabbi of Great Britain's Orthodox Jews. A young man, having troubled over the

question, asks his father: Why does the Messiah not come? Maybe in former times the Jews were not ready, but now, having endured the Holocaust and returned to Israel, surely they are ready.

“I will tell you, my son,” said the Rebbe. “How could the Messiah come? Consider: if he were a hassid of one sect, the hassidim of the other sects would not recognize him. If he were a hassid of any kind, the mitnagdim, their opponents, would not recognize him. If he were Orthodox, the Reform Jews would not recognize him. If he were religious, the secular Jews would not recognize him. How then can he come?”

“And now,” continued the Rebbe, “I will tell you a great secret.” The Rebbe dropped his voice to a whisper. *“It is not we who are waiting for the Messiah. It is the Messiah who is waiting for us.* He has been here all the time. It is we who are not yet ready for him.”

In his 14 years as chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks has become one of the foremost religious figures of the English-speaking world, acclaimed for his interfaith dialogue and knighted by Queen Elizabeth. He tells a story so well that we cannot escape its message of responsibility.

From a seemingly inexhaustible storehouse of tales (this is his 16th book in as many years), Sacks has written another elegant volume. He certainly has packed a lot into it—humor, pathos, philosophy, scholarship. It offers a bracing challenge to anyone who uses God as a dodge, whether they be Jews or Christians. (Indeed, his book may be even more important for a Christian audience conditioned to “lay it all on Jesus.”) It is so brimful of helpful theology, anecdotes and biblical insight that the best way to review it may be simply to say, “Read this.” And yet something seems to be missing.

Long before the reader senses that anything’s missing, Sacks offers great helpings of wisdom. He acknowledges that responsibility in our day has become problematic. The world is so vast that the actions of any individual make little difference; therefore responsibility must have a moral rather than a practical dimension. This brings him to a sparkling definition of community: “A community is where they *know your name* and where they *miss you when you are not there.*”

Stories from Jewish sages pour from Sacks so naturally that he comes off never as a scholar but rather as a conversationalist. The Talmud suggests to him that the greatest commandment (“You shall love the Lord your God”) may be interpreted as, “You shall cause the Lord your God to be loved.” As for the second-greatest commandment, he offers this thought from a Hassidic master:

As Jews, we are individuals only as bodies, not as souls. . . . In such a state the command, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” is natural and inevitable, because your neighbour is a part of yourself, or rather, you and your neighbour are both parts of a larger self which is the collective soul of the Jewish people.

Although Sacks is erudite, he wears his learning lightly—so lightly that he even quotes *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*. And he is worldly enough to cite the sardonic Ambrose Bierce.

For an Orthodox rabbi he comes across as pretty progressive. News accounts suggest that Sacks has had sharp differences with the Reform movement, but some of his own readings of the Hebrew Bible seem to me unconventional, even daring. He argues that the Pentateuch portrays a self-effacing God who rejoices at being eclipsed by humankind. (Lest this sound like a modern idea, he cites ancient writers in support of it.) Years of interfaith work carried out in the shadow of terrorism have made his orthodoxy generous:

Our faiths are different. Judaism is not Christianity; Christianity is not Islam; the Abrahamic monotheisms are different from Eastern mysticisms on the one hand, scientific humanism on the other. Yet when we bring our respective heritages of wisdom to the public domain, we have no need to wish to convert others. Instead, we are tacitly saying: if this speaks to you, then please take it as our gift. Indeed, it is yours already, for wisdom (unlike revelation) belongs to us all.

Plainly Sacks himself embodies the work that is the theme of *To Heal a Fractured World*. Alert readers will have recognized that his title comes from *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. Christians would do well to hear that if the world needs saving, we must take some responsibility for it. As J. H. Hertz puts it, “The Jew should remember that the glory of God is, as it were, entrusted to his care and that every

Israelite holds the honour of his faith and of his entire people in his hands.”

Sacks makes this idea the centerpiece of his book, arguing that sacred history portrays God’s retreat and our ascent, that the Pentateuch is “an extended essay on human responsibility.” Tracing the story of human responsibility from Adam and Eve through Cain and Noah to Abraham, he suggests that we will be saved by ethics—that is, by what we do:

On the face of it, this is a strange claim to make. Surely, of all religions, Judaism emphasizes the work of God, not humans. . . . How then can I say that it is God’s call to us to accept responsibility and become, with him, coauthors of the script of history, his partners in the work of creation?

Sacks promises to answer this question—but never fully does. Indeed, it rings in the air.

This brings us to what is missing : a fuller appreciation of human frailty and sin. Sacks puts a lot of stock in our power to better or to save ourselves and leaves little for God to do. Frankly, this is hard for me to square with the horrors of history, where one attempt at utopia after another has resulted in a pogrom.

What seems to me a curious lack of emphasis on God’s work may simply be a difference in our traditions. As Sacks acknowledges in an endnote, “The Jewish understanding of covenant, both in the biblical and in the postbiblical literature, emphasizes mutuality and divine empowerment as opposed to the fallen condition of humanity and its dependence on divine grace.” Still, his faith in human nature strikes me as extraordinary even among Jews.

Eventually Sacks’s optimism leads him to share a few too many stories of saints triumphing over adversity and spreading goodness everywhere; the latter chapters, especially the credo of his last two pages, sound very much like *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

These are small complaints, really, for such rewarding reading. Though *To Heal a Fractured World* is stamped with the content of one man’s heart, mind and soul, it is nonetheless the product of thousands of years, hundreds of voices. This book will lead readers to appreciate the vast extrabiblical literature that informs Judaism—the stories, parables, wise sayings, refinements of law and elaborations of ethics from great figures of the past: Rabbis Shimon bar Yokai, Isaac Luria, Maimonides,

Menahem Mendel Schneerson. And it reveals the keen mind, capacious memory and generous yet distinctive theology of a learned, very humane man. When Rabbi Sacks quotes the sages, plainly he belongs in their company.