

“Not in God’s Name”

By
Rabbi Jonathan Sachs

“Not in God’s Name” draws on over 3000 years of God’s teachings and human experience to help us see the importance of shunning the hurtful and choosing the healing powers of our thoughts, words, and deeds as we live with family, friends and strangers alike.

The book’s stories from the Hebrew Bible (or what Christians call the Old Testament) are familiar to many of us. But Rabbi Sachs’ hunt for clues to their deeper meaning not only leads to some surprising conclusions, but should cause a reader to set the book down from time to time for more than a few moments of quiet reflection on the road to becoming more sensitive to words and deeds that, if unchallenged and unchecked, undermine the best parts of human nature – our desire to serve and care; to show empathy, compassion, respect, tolerance, and acceptance; to be fair and just; and, to do no harm.

What follows is my attempt to capture the central points of each of the book’s three sections and fifteen chapters. At times I put aside the details of a particular story to record Rabbi Sachs’ thoughts on destructive conflict at the expense and to the detriment of other people, our freedom to choose to do our best in support and on behalf of the people we know and the people we don’t, and if we choose unwisely, the all too predictable consequences of a path not taken.

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Highlights from the Book “Not in God’s Name”

Book 1, Chapters 1 and 2: The First Idea:

People need food and shelter and seek security to survive. The family was the first group to face the challenges of finding and securing these things. To improve their chances for success, they welcomed into their "tent" extended family. For the same reason the extended family opened its door to people not related to them. However, none of this would happen unless and until experience led them to trust the newest members of their growing community. Violence was not "a given".

Without competition, the family simply found what it needed. But with others present and competing with the family for finite resources, choices had to be made. People could share without expecting something in return, or trade (the tactical solution), or form alliances (the strategic solution), or deceive, or steal, or take by force. Violence was not "a given".

As groups developed, it was not unnatural for them to extol their virtues, question the thoughts, motives, and actions of others, and draw distinctions between each other, encouraging or discouraging along the way the participation of people not yet committed to one or the other. Friendly and constructive competition was possible. Violence was not "a given".

The Second Idea:

But how do you establish trust between people who do not have sustained contact – in essence, between strangers? Using a code of conduct based on myths, rituals, and a promise of something better or a threat of something worse, very early religion was used as a tool to build bridges between strangers. These religions also codified and legitimized the relationship between leaders and the led; bringing order out of what would otherwise be chaotic relationships between strangers. They taught that "society is as it is because this is the will of the gods and the basic structure of the universe...", thus minimizing "the tension between cosmos and chaos, order and anarchy, structure and disarray."

The Third Idea:

Enter Abrahamic monotheism, where ordinary individuals are offered "a sense of pride and consequence" by being told that "we are in the image and likeness of God in a universe he created in love."

The Fourth Idea:

Even with these two very different top down vs. bottom up ways of defining society's structure through religion, religion was and is not the root cause of violence and war. Consequences arising from the pursuit of resources, power, security, or identity are the sources of violence and war, or at a minimum the sources of destructive conflict between people. At the two ends of what can be a continuum of choice, religion can be used to:

- Support, rationalize, and legitimize rulers and their conflicts, rallying or forcing people to enlist in the pursuit of a particular cause; or;
- Serve as the conscience of the community, reminding people of a set of visions and values that describe an alternative to the naked pursuit of power and resources.

These four ideas from the book's first two chapters are the foundation for the next two chapters and their examination of the extreme consequences arising from a group's

failure to meet its people's needs and its recognition that the world it envisions is not the world it experiences.

The four new concepts following chapters 1 and 2 are dualism, pathological dualism, the scapegoat, and altruistic evil, whereby innocent people are ultimately singled out and their lives destroyed in the name of eliminating the root cause for the society's failure to deliver what people need -- resources, security, identity, meaning and purpose.

- Dualism tells its followers that whatever failure they have suffered is not their fault, but the fault of someone else.
- In the extreme, pathological dualism identifies a specific group that that can be singled out for causing society's failures:
 - Dehumanizing them, destroying along the way "our" empathy and compassion;
 - Declaring that "we" are the victim, deflecting responsibility for our failures and defining "us" as objects not subjects, people who have had something done to them and not people who are capable of doing something to make things better; and,
 - Enabling "us" to describe ourselves as faultless.
- The scapegoat, or those who are identified as the root cause of the society's failure, can be individuals or groups. They are considered "Others" by those who label them. Their reputation among the "insiders" is at least questionable and what is repeatedly said about them ultimately rings true in the minds of those who are inclined not to question. Most important, people who rally others against scapegoats know that they, the scapegoats, will never be strong enough to strike back but are sufficiently disliked to enlist the support of others in their persecution.
- The final step in this process leads to the elimination of the scapegoats, in what is called "altruist evil".

Opposing this is Rabbi Sachs' description of monotheistic Judaism and its view that we are wrong to create dueling universes; projecting our failure onto someone else, separating them from the community and eliminating them in the name of addressing whatever ills have befallen "us". Said a different way, if all of us are made in the image of God; valued by God as members of the community's body, with differing talents that contribute to the betterment of the community, then finding solutions through exclusion and destruction cannot be seen as a path forward.

This sets the stage for the book's examination of conflict reconciliation at the intersection of a community's most intimate and sustained interactions – the family.

Chapter 5 turns to Sibling Rivalry and, Book 2 Chapter 6 to a story of half-brothers. The question introduced in Chapter 5 is surprisingly simple. "What is it that brought Jews, Christians and Muslims, spiritual children of a common father, to such animosity for so long?" The answer offered is in two parts. First is "mimetic desire" or "wanting what someone else has because they have it." Such desires often lead to violence, for obvious reasons, and have been the subject of myth and religious storytelling across time and from the eastern shores of the Atlantic Ocean to deserts of the Middle East. Second is the long and problematic history of Christian religious teachings, starting with Paul.

Regarding Paul, Rabbi Sacks notes that while he was a Jew, he described those following Jesus in a way that set them apart from the rest of Judaism. In speaking to the Gentiles, Paul said that:

- To be a Christian, it is not necessary to be circumcised or follow Mosaic code with its 613 laws;
- Carrying out the terms of the Covenant is a matter of faith, not law, as the relationship between people and God substantively changed through Jesus; and,
- Of Abraham's two sons, one born in an ordinary way to a slave and one born as a result of God's promise to a free woman, only one would inherit the terms of the Covenant.

In the wake of these three statements, Paul introduced the concept of sibling rivalry; with the younger "brother" (Christianity) taking what had been given to the older "brother" (Judaism).

The teachings continue as Paul states that the people following Jesus are, like Isaac, children of the promise and "at that time, the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit." Continuing, Paul quotes Scripture saying "get rid of the slave woman and her son for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son" and concludes "we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman".

In one stroke, Jewish identity, history and tradition are challenged. Later church leaders and others built on this theme, creating and then institutionalizing division and hostility. Ironically, Islam later made similar claims, saying that it is the true religion, not Christianity or Judaism.

Now turn back to the ideas found in the first four chapters of the book. Groups once formed have the tendency to praise themselves and sometimes speak ill of others. To identify themselves, they have used religion or ideology or location, creating along the way an environment where "My Group" sets itself apart and sometimes against the "Other" groups. The resulting tension existed long before the birth of Christianity.

However, monotheistic, universalistic religions, like Christianity and Islam, almost by their nature create an "Us" vs. all "Others" view of their special relationship with their god. This is the framework Paul began building as he tried to explain why following Jesus was the right path to take. Could he have told a different story? In fact, Rabbi Sacks' reading of the Hebrew Bible says a different story had already been told.

In the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, God promises Abraham a son, but Abraham and Sarah remain childless. With his wife Sarah's approval, Abraham conceives with Hagar, Sarah's servant slave, a son. Later, a second son, in keeping with God's promise, is born to Sarah, the free woman, and Abraham. Unsurprisingly, tensions grow within this family of two mothers and one father. In a defining moment, Sarah interprets the first son Ishmael's laughter during a family celebration as an act of mocking his half-brother Isaac and sends Hagar and Ishmael packing into the desert. They return, but are ultimately ordered away once again. However, the family's reunification does not follow this second exile into the desert and only God's intervention brings the exiled to safety.

The story could have ended with the second exile of Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac's near-sacrificial experience at the hands of his father. But it did not.

- God had chosen both Abraham and Isaac. The events set in motion by neither Isaac nor Ishmael displace Ishmael's position as eldest and next in line after Abraham, circumcised and carrying the sign of the Covenant. Isaac's life continues. He settled and married, with the story continuing through the lives of Jacob and Esau. Ishmael and Isaac's story as brothers could have ended here. But it did not.
- Four times Ishmael is called Abraham's son and is blessed by God. He is never vilified.
- Hagar's struggles are described with empathy, compassion, and emotion; evoking the reader's sympathy and identification with her condition.
- Isaac could have been the story's Greco/Roman-like "hero", singled out to carry out his Covenantal destiny. Ishmael could have been described as the victim of his weaker, younger brother. They were not.
- Revenge could have been a path taken. It was not.

Isaac and Ishmael were given by God different missions to fulfill. Neither God nor Abraham abandoned them. Conflict and reconciliation played out inside Abraham's mind, not on some battle field between half-brothers.

Before the story ends and after Sarah's death, Abraham marries again. It is said that Isaac lives in a place where previous texts said that Hagar, and by inference, Ishmael could have settled. In another place, a story tells us that Abraham gives counsel to Ishmael regarding his choice of wives, demonstrating that he knew where he lived and still cared deeply for his first son. However, the historic details, as few as they may be, are not the point. What can be said is that Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac chose reconciliation and that the two sons stood together at the site of the burial of their father.

A revenge story this is not.

Chapter 6's story of Isaac and Ishmael ends with comparatively little detail about what finally brought them together. Chapters 7 and 8 continue with the stories of Jacob, Esau, Joseph and Joseph's brothers, all rich in detail and human drama.

- In the ways of Greek Tragedy, Rebekah, mother of Esau and Jacob, is told that her twins are pre-destined to clash.
- Consistent with what was foretold, the younger Jacob, with cunning and cleverness and in true mimetic fashion, takes his older brother's birthright in trade for a hot meal.
- Later, Jacob, with the help of his mother, deceives his father Isaac into granting him what should be Esau's blessing; his father mistakenly saying to Jacob that God may give him abundance, but that nations will serve him and people, including Esau, will bow to him.
- Upon learning of this trick, Esau and Isaac are mightily distraught. Foreshadowing possible future conflict, Esau receives a blessing similar to the one Jacob stole. It, however, ends differently. "You may have to serve your brother, but when your complaints mount up, you will throw his yoke off your neck."
- Again with the aid of his mother, Jacob flees from Esau's threat to kill him.

The story could have ended here, but it did not. Some twenty years pass and Jacob returns home only to learn that his brother is preparing to meet him. Assuming the worst, Jacob sends gifts. He prays. He divides his camp in the hope that some will survive the expected battle. He wrestles through the dark of night with a stranger. When on the next day the two brothers meet,

Esau greets Jacob with joy and warmth. They embrace. Revenge, once again, is not the end of the story.

- For Jacob, the boy and young man who lied and deceived to receive the blessing due his older brother, there would be a new, Covenantal blessing from his father about the land he would call home and the children who would become sufficient in number to create a community. There would also be a new name from “the man” with whom he fought through the night – Jacob would be called Israel, meaning “for you have struggled with God and men and yet prevailed.”
- For the older brother Esau, the blessing that Jacob stole from him by deceiving their father would be returned to its rightful place. And Jacob would show deference to Esau, bowing down to him and calling him Lord, all in keeping with the blessing his father would have given Esau more than twenty years earlier.
- For Isaac, there would be no need to disinherit either son, for he recognized each as different and acceptable, and he loved them both.
- For the two brothers, there would be different paths to take, neither of which would conflict with the other.
- For Jacob’s camp and Esau’s army, there was no blood to be spilled.
- For the readers, they are told that:
 - Nothing is pre-ordained.
 - People are free to make choices, but with each choice there is a consequence.
 - A new purpose in life can be found and pursued and a path incorrectly taken can be abandoned and a new one taken up.
 - For those who deceive, show favoritism, lie, or who are cowards or untrustworthy, and for those who are guided by righteousness, integrity, justice, and truth but nonetheless must face people who are not so inclined, their mutual and internal struggles will be to find reconciliation when conflict is the more likely outcome.

The next story takes the reader to a deeper understanding of what could be defined as complete reconciliation. Joseph’s story once again is about sibling rivalry, fraught with complexities and hardship. The sons come from the same father, Jacob, but different mothers, Leah and Rachel. Jacob openly favors the two boys from his beloved second wife. Joseph, first born of the second wife, creates discontent with his stories about the comings and goings of his older brothers, his grand visions for himself (not yet known to be divinely inspired), and the simple fact that his brothers know that their father loves him most.

Joseph, in essence, is hard to take. So at a point, his older brothers first conspire to kill him but on second thought, they sell him into Egyptian slavery. Years pass and Joseph, through his good work plus the talent he received for interpreting dreams, is appointed second-in-command of Egypt. During a drought that was foretold in a dream interrupted by Joseph, his brothers and his father Jacob suffer to the point where his brothers travel to Egypt to purchase grain. There they meet Joseph, who recognizes them. However, they do not recognize him. With one believable and bold stroke, Jacob and Joseph could have been reunited. The dreams long ago foretold could have come true. The story could have ended, but it does not.

Instead, Joseph plots to play a game of “Turn-About is Fair Play”. He makes plans to force his brothers to face the real prospect of slavery, with his younger brother, Benjamin, becoming a pawn in a chess game whose outcome remains uncertain until the story’s end.

To the reader, the story plays out through twists and turns, each of which is built upon what came before it.

- At the start, outright revenge is a real possibility. The brothers could have been sent into slavery, or worse. But that would not have communicated what Joseph had in mind.
- A better path would be to cause each brother to experience the agonies that Joseph experienced during his early years in Egypt. They could only understand what they did to Joseph by being introduced to the life of the “Other”, the outcast, the stranger. But this would require more than the process of haggling for grain in exchange for silver.
- So introduce fear and moral pain. Don’t issue commands. Let their worries and guilt guide them. Set the play in motion but don’t interfere. Leave it to them as to what to do.
- Call the brothers out as spies. Offer a deal that includes proof that they are not by requiring that they present to Joseph something of great value, their father’s youngest son Benjamin. To assure compliance, hold one brother as hostage. As the other brothers return home, confuse them by packing in their sacks of grain the silver they used to purchase it. Add to the mix Jacob’s fear for Benjamin and his brother’s promise to keep him safe. Further confuse them upon their return with Benjamin by treating them to food, warmth and hospitality. Then charge Benjamin with theft, confront only him with the certainty of slavery and see what the brothers will do.
- In response, Judah, who had plotted against Joseph, offers himself in trade for Benjamin, potentially sacrificing his freedom in trade for Benjamin’s safety.

What the reader finds in the story’s dialogue are the choices that follow from forcing someone to walk in the other person’s shoes; followed by true repentance – a real turning away from a path once taken; followed by forgiveness and reconciliation.

As Rabbi Sacks notes, “the way we learn not to commit evil is to experience an event from the victim’s perspective.”

Chapter 9 draws to a conclusion Book 2. Before it ends, one more story of sibling rivalry is added, raising the count to 5: Cain and Abel; Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his brothers; and Leah and Rachel. When Jacob flees Esau, he goes to the House of Laban, meets and falls in love with Laban’s younger daughter Rachel; marries to his surprise (and by local custom) the older daughter, Leah; makes a new arrangement with Laban; and, shortly thereafter is able to also marry Rachel. However, by failing to anticipate and navigate the consequences of declaring that he loves Rachel more than Leah, he creates a rift between the sisters as intense as and more painful than Jacob’s fears concerning what he believed would happen at the hands of his older brother Esau. As the story continues, God is said to see (or identify with) Leah’s rejection and humiliation, which is described in dramatic, humanly emotional detail and depth, just as Hagar and Ishmael’s plight was described in an earlier story, and just as was the case with Esau and Isaac after being tricked by Jacob.

From these five stories, which unfold over generations, a reader is presented at least five questions, not as abstractions, but in ways that ring true to anyone who lives in community with others.

- Regarding the conflicts attached to a first born son’s blessing and inheritance, what ultimately happens? By Moses’ time, the community decides that the pain arising from

Jacob's behavior cannot be repeated. Inheritance will go to the first born son, regardless of circumstances, second wives, or one being loved and the other less-loved.

- The five stories take the reader from murder through various examples of reconciliation, setting up the story of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, siblings between whom there was no rivalry. From this, what do we learn? Rivalry between the younger and the older is not a given and its absence opens the door to personal freedom, community, and nation building.
- We feel the struggles of Ishmael, Esau, Leah and Joseph, just as we are able to understand the motivations of Sarah, Jacob and Joseph's brothers. So what, you ask? Only the most casual reader can miss the fact that virtues and faults are found in each of these people, making it very hard to see people as all good or all bad. This, in turn, undermines one's ability to demonize and dehumanize the "Other" person. Declaring victimhood also becomes harder, as we see when Joseph takes responsibility for creating good from what anyone else would see as a crushing turn of events – his sale into slavery.
- With Joseph and his brothers peacefully reconciled, rejection and its consequences are, in fact, rejected. By the time of Exodus, first born rights are granted to all children of the Covenant. And why? To remove a source of division from within the community.
- Love, which is the foundation of Abrahamic monotheism, can be a source of grief and conflict, as demonstrated in the eleven times the word is found in Genesis. What lesson must be learned from this? Love, like the kind between people who are close, is clearly insufficient. It can divide people in ways that result in hurt and hate, with people who feel hurt and hated more likely to hurt and hate others. Justice and mercy, empathy and sympathy must be added to the mix.

Lastly, because of humankind's need to create groups, sometimes in the process turning "Us" against "Them", Rabbi Sacks reminds us of God's commitment. He will not destroy us because of the "wickedness in the human heart" and by implication the consequences arising from destructive conflict between "Us" and "Them". God will forgive preemptively, demonstrating to all humankind, by whatever means, the meaning of love, justice and mercy in the lives of the "loved" and the less-loved; to the people who reject and the people who have been rejected; and in a world populated by "Both". Humanity's job is to try to do the same.

Book 3 takes us from the family into the community at large. Chapter 10 introduces the idea of imagining yourself as a member of the group called the "Others", offering this as an antidote to dualism and the commission of violence against people who are not like "Us". Held up as the missing element of moral philosophies since the time of Plato, the likes of Ishmael, Hagar, Esau, Joseph and his brothers and Leah and her children force "Us" to examine life from the perspective of the "Others". These people show that personal virtue is not the sole dominion of those who call themselves "Us" and that personal shortcomings are not the sole dominion of those who are called the "Others". "Others" are human too. Heroes can emerge from both groups. Furthermore, loving your neighbor as yourself is not hard to imagine if your neighbor is, as is most likely the case, like "Us". How much harder would it be to love a stranger, a person we don't know, choose not to trust, and from whom we are unable to draw upon previous experience to assess what his or her intentions and future behavior might be?

Related, but more problematic, monotheistic religions by definition create a tension between their believers and the "Others" – people who are on the outside looking into churches or mosques. True, such religions may be accepting of "Others", but often only so long as the "Others" follow the "one and true path", as defined by "Us".

To gain perspective regarding the “Other”, we would have to at least imagine ourselves as the “Other”, a path not easily taken and one that may not even be open.

In this context Genesis introduces a different, even radical idea. It asks us to sympathize with the “Others”, like Hagar, Ishmael, Esau and Leah. It asks us to consider that these people are also accepted and blessed by God. Stories later found in Exodus, remind the community not to “oppress a stranger (i.e., the ultimate member of the “Other” group), for you know what it feels like to be a stranger, for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” And “those who forget what it feels like to be a stranger eventually come to oppress strangers, and if the children of Abraham oppress strangers, why did I make them my Covenantal partners?”

To be even more clear:

- In Genesis, the phrase “stranger and temporary resident” is introduced as Abraham is seeking a place to bury his wife Sarah. All along, he had been promised land but at his time of need, he had none and was forced to negotiate with the Hittites in Hebron, beginning with the words “I am a stranger and a temporary resident among you.”
- Later Moses leads the people to the Promised Land, where at last the people will own the land, but in Leviticus this expectation is dashed with the words “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, you are strangers and temporary residents with me.” The family of Abraham’s fate is to live permanently as a temporary resident.
- Still later, at Israel’s height, King David remembers his people’s past glories and then prays “We are strangers and temporary residents in your sight, as were all our forefathers.” “This abundance that we have provided for building you a Temple for our Holy Name, it comes from our hand, and all of it belongs to you.”

So, is the mission of the children of the Covenant to remind all of us that the best way to overcome hostility to strangers “is to remember that we too, from someone else’s perspective, are strangers” and that the way we treat strangers is the true test of our commitment to loving our neighbor?

Chapter 11 starts with a somewhat startling hypothesis in the form of two questions.

- Is the Hebrew Bible written to directly confront and provide a theology that addresses the root causes of conflict and violence; and,
- Since God’s people are naturally identified by language, culture, myths and codes of conduct and are also prone to challenge each other, does God nonetheless provide a way to address the destructive conflicts between “Us and Them” as well as oppression in the name of uniformity and order?

At least three times people have tried to unify large portions of humanity under the universality of a single doctrine: through the spread of Christianity and Islam, through Enlightened Reason of 18th and 19th century Europe, and today in the West by elevating the rights and freedoms of the Individual to a status which is rarely questioned. Better than living without laws and in a constant state of fear, universality comes with its own set of weaknesses. Principle among them is its inclination to force alignment of doctrine and thought in the name of the case being made for eliminating the chaos and conflict arising from the diversity of multiple groups who collectively struggle with each other for resources, security, identity, meaning and purpose.

If society's foundation is the family and the Hebrew Bible's red flag with a black square in the middle is sibling rivalry and its consequences, then there is found in that same Bible two stories which are just as important but very different from those of Abraham and the trials of his immediate and extended family. The first is about the Flood and the people who were swept away by it. These people are wicked, violent and evil, living in the absence of what we call today the Rule of Law. The second is about the Tower of Babel, whose architects and builders impose uniformity of language on peoples of many cultures and tongues. These two realities are thus described: Freedom without Order; and, Order without Freedom. Both are literally life threatening, personally and culturally.

The Hebrew Bible suggests a way out of the Freedom vs. Order dilemma by setting a third course. It tells us that:

- God is universal and one of God's Covenants is applicable to all people.
 - Its tenants are justice, fairness and causing no harm.
 - These are applied to everyone, friend and stranger, fellow countryman and foreigner.
 - The objective is social order.
 - Its guiding lights, to name a few, are respect for God, human life, family, property, animal welfare and the rule of law.
- God is also particular, pleased with the full diversity of creation. For the community of Abraham and Moses, there is an additional Covenant.
 - Its overarching foundation is love.
 - This is applied to anyone who is or becomes a member of the community as well as to those who encounter it.
 - Its objective is to recognize the virtues and failings of individuals at an individual level, guiding them whenever necessary into a loving relationship with others.
 - Its guiding lights are serving God, caring for the powerless, knowing one's responsibilities, humility, criticism and growth through listening and self-reflection.

These are the legs of the stool upon which sits a servant community.

Chapters 12 and 13 are bookends placed on the same table. The stories that describe the evolution of Chapter 12's "Hard Texts" are all about the struggles and consequences that foreshadow Chapter 13's "Relinquishing Power". But first, two points made earlier in the book should be remembered. Culture precedes and frames the context into which a religion spreads and flourishes. Next, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can be traced back to a man who had no armies, no palaces, and no territories.

Reversing order and starting with Chapter 13, a hard line is drawn in its second sentence. "Politics is about power..." But what about religion...?

More than once during their long history, Jews succeeded in building and protecting their nation-state, their Temple, their palaces, their kings and themselves. Some two centuries before the life and times of Jesus, Judean forces battled against the Greeks to restore their independence and religious freedom. They succeeded. Some two centuries later against the Romans, they failed. They failed to unite in one cause. They failed to stop internal and religiously motivated terror attacks on their own people by their own people. They failed to withstand the power of the Roman army. They, as a community bound together by one religion, failed each other.

But from the debris of defeat they discovered a different way. It would be advanced without armies, kings, palaces or their Temple. They discovered that religion can survive without power. Scattered to the corners of civilizations, always the minority and always living as a stranger in someone else's land, they redirected their attentions from what their "siblings" (i.e., their neighboring nation-states) possessed. Through debate and study of their holy texts, they turned to pursuing a deeper understanding of their mission, as given to them through the Covenant, and explored how to serve as the conscience of a community, reminding people of an alternative to the naked pursuit of power and resources.

Some 16 centuries later, European Christians reached a similar crossroad and concluded that the use of secular power in the resolution of religious disputes was a formula for death and destruction. With the Treaty of Westphalia the church no longer commanded kings and armies. A little more than 100 years later, the newly formed United States of America took a more decisive step by completely separating church and state, religious thought from the hard assets used in the projection and application of power.

Parts of Islam today find themselves locked in the same battles fought within Judaism and Christianity centuries earlier.

The lesson, not yet wholly accepted but taught over centuries by, for example, a Muslim philosopher, a Jewish Rabbi, a Christian thinker, and an English secular humanist, is that you should not impose truth, and in particular religious truth, or even an approximation of same, through force. Religious truths must be discerned through study, conversation, debate and example. They can inform the moral compass of the body politic. They can create communities of support. They can work as a counterbalance to unconstrained individualism. But they should not be used to force, threaten with conflict, or hold captive other parts of the body politic simply because some subset of believers has both the desire and the physical and political means to do so. As important, they should not be used to legitimize one view and one way, destroying in its wake the diversity of God's creation, putting at risk the application of God's mercy and presence of God's love.

The lesson, and our individual and collective responsibility, is to learn from God's teachings; make room for differences; turn our backs on Dualist and Apocalyptic thinking, search for ways to resolve conflict by seeing ourselves in the shoes of the other person; envision internally and with others ways to reconcile differences fairly, justly, and lovingly without threat of harm; and, using our informed moral and ethical compasses, act as a member of the body politic to keep the peace between those "contesting factions" that will always scrap for resources, power, security, purpose, and identity.

Turning back to Chapter 12, the time has come to ask "what about those 'Hard Texts'?" They are found in Holy Scripture. They have been legitimized by the Church. They have been taught to generations. They must be as true as any other part of scripture. Here Rabbi Sachs would suggest we pause. The first question deserves a second and third question. What are, he would ask, the historic and cultural contexts of these lessons and how should they be interpreted and applied over time?

Chapter 12 is about seeking answers to the second and third questions. Some texts simply do not square with the love that is at the center of Abrahamic monotheism. If taken literally, they cause violence and harm; in the absence of thoughtful reflection and experience, they lead to grief. In response, Jews, Christians and Muslims have put in place careful processes to

examine places where scripture is at odds with God's overarching message of love. In fact, Judaism states that "going from revelation to application without interpretation" is considered "heretical". Why? Because:

- Our religious texts are from a very different time and place when life was brutal, wars were frequent, and the application of force most often ruled the day.
- Relying on only the written word, picking what suites a reader's pre-disposition or what aligns with how they would start to address their multiple grievances:
 - Demonstrates a potentially dangerous impatience born from a belief that interpretation corrupts rather than informs.
 - Reflects a person's potentially destructive feelings of dissonance between their ideals and the world in which they live; their idealized belief in their political and social institutions and the realities of every-day rough and tumble politics.
 - Leaves the door open for using the "Hard Texts" as justification for the application of force to impose a single view of the truth, as defined by those who can command such tools as are needed to impose their views.

Rabbi Sachs' examples of reinterpreting ancient texts to align with God's message of peace are numerous.

- God's question to Israel "Did I ever (ask) why have you not built me a house of cedar" became a message through David "You shall not build a house for my Name because you have shed much blood on the earth I my sight."
- Judah came to the House of Study and asked permission to enter. Rabbi Joshua responded yes. But Rabban Gamliel noted that Judah, as an Ammonite, may not enter. In response, Rabbi Joshua said that since the communities of Ammonites and Moabs were long ago displaced and mixed by Sennacherib, King of Assyria, one cannot say that Judah was or was not an Ammonite. Thus, he was allowed to enter.
- "What of Joshua's campaign to conquer the land?" A reinterpretation, by Maimonides, qualified the story by noting as part of Joshua's three messages before entering the land "No war, either permitted or obligatory may be initiated without first offering terms of peace."
- Regarding the Laws of the Sabbath, was the weapon on your hip an ornament, like clothing and thus permitted or a burden, forbidden as one of the categories of "work". After their disastrous wars against Rome, they re-examined the texts and the majority concluded that these "ornaments" were no badge of honor but a burden, contrary to the vision of a world at peace.
- Two centuries after the debate about the nature of a sword, one Rabbi Kahana noted that he cannot understand why the word "sword" doesn't actually mean "words", for "what else does the Jewish people defend itself, if not its sacred merits achieved by devotion to religious learnings?" Same words, same texts, but an interpretation far removed from the days of armies, kings, palaces and their Temple.

To close Chapter 12, Rabbi Sachs says "Living traditions constantly reinterpret their canonical texts." Going from text to action, without interpretation is considered "an act of violence against" one's own history. "The word, given in love, invites its interpretation in love."

Chapter 14, “Letting Go of Hate”, takes us back to our personal and collective responsibilities. As Moses approaches both the Promised Land and the end of his life, he is told that “it is not for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it”. His job becomes one of guiding his community into a future without him. Rabbi Sachs builds on this by weaving together scripture and lessons from today.

- “Love your neighbor. Love the stranger for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land” and “to be free, you have to let go of hate.”
- Build a future, like Holocaust victims who have shown that one must live with the past but not in the past. Avoid the fate of Lot’s wife, who looked back while fleeing her city only to be transformed into a pillar of salt, salt from her tears, captured by the past and unable to pursue a future.
- Treat others with kindness.
- Love your enemies, or at least help them lighten their “burden” and in the process, you may lighten your own (i.e., those shared “burdens” being the root of your respective ill feelings toward each other).
- Never seek revenge since it will not undo the past. Leave such matters to God.
- Recognize and atone for past failures, freeing yourself to look to the future.
- Correct past wrongs, “apologize, atone, and acknowledge people’s sense of suffering and grievance. But realize, there is no perfect justice in history, only a rough approximation, and that must do.”
- Internalize conflict and avoid what myth does – it externalizes it.
- Repent and forgive, which breaks the grip of the past, and reconcile differences, which is the foundation for building a future with those who are the “Egyptians” of our time and place.
- Do not submit to a culture of blame. It perpetuates every condition from which you are trying to be freed.
- Do not be manipulated by a culture of blame. It reduces people to being a means to an end, not an end.
- Do not live in a culture of blame. It is the home of denial and hate.
- Learn from every experience “how to build a society without persecution”.

With Chapter 15, “The Will to Power or the Will to Life”, we reach the end of the book.

Surprisingly, it starts with one more story; this time about Cain and Abel. But instead of repeating the story we know, its re-telling focuses on the Hebrew meaning for the names Cain and Abel. Abel means a shallow or fragile breath, as in the exceptionally fragile breath of life given to humanity by God. Cain, whose name means to “acquire, possess, and own” and who represents power as ownership and ownership as power, is pitted against the holiness and fragility of life.

Now, to the question: Are we stewards of God’s creation, here to do our best to protect and sustain it or are we its owners to use it for our own purposes and to our own benefit, whatever these may be? If we see ourselves as owners and power comes from “ownership”, then begins the “competition for scarce goods, of which the first is land.” And if power in this case is strength, made stronger by people looking to expand their ownership of (or control over) resources (or from a different perspective, to improve their control over their life); empowered and motivated by words and ideals plucked from a world of dualism, scapegoats, conflict, and violence; sustained by the use of force in the pursuit of their objectives, then are the ideals of “democracy and freedom” alone enough to meet the challenge?

The same question could be asked differently, but this time from the perspective of a sibling rivalry. If those people who want from “us” what they don’t have just because they want it, are the singular ideals of democracy and freedom up to the task of protecting the people who believe in such ideals when more and more of those same people are also guided by an ethic of “whatever’s good for me or my group”; when they ignore the stark differences in affluence that set people and communities apart and adrift; and, when their community is weakened by their belief in the importance of the individual at the expense of ideals like loyalty, reverence, respect, and the bonds that move us to work for the common good?

Rabbi Sachs suggests our civic culture could be strengthened and made more resilient by drawing from the ethics and morality of the Abrahamic faiths, working as a counter weight against those who:

- Benefit from dividing people into groups, projecting failure on “that other group”;
- Shape a narrative based on thoughts that lead to dualism and worse; and,
- Peddle the dehumanization and demonization of individuals or groups, victimhood, and the use of the scapegoat as a way to deflect accountability from where it belongs.

Such a counter-weight would stand against hate, which “paralyzes the mind and perpetuates the very failures that caused defeat and underachievement in the first place.” He continues by stating we must:

- Campaign against the teaching and preaching of hate.
- Reclaim the absolute values of our collective Abrahamic faiths:
 - The sanctity of life;
 - The dignity of the individual;
 - The moral responsibility of the rich for the poor;
 - The command to love the neighbor and the stranger;
 - Justice and compassion; and,
 - Peaceful methods of conflict resolution.
- Focus on building a future where everyone can live in peace and grace.

His closing guidance is even clearer:

- If you seek respect, give respect.
- If you ask for tolerance, demonstrate tolerance.
- If you don’t want to be offended, don’t offend.
- Remember that our common humanity precedes our religious differences.