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REVIEW ESSAY

Nostra Aetate, §4, the Rabbis, and the Messianic Age

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Elliot N. Dorff, *The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), paper, xiv + 287 pp.

Robert N. Levine, *There is No Messiah and You're It: The Stunning Transformation of Judaism's Most Provocative Idea* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), paper, viii + 170 pp.

Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), paper, viii + 280 pp.

Developments since *Nostra Aetate*, §4

In 1985 the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, in its efforts to further develop and expand the new teachings on Jews and Judaism begun in the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate* (NA), stated:

Attentive to the same God who has spoken, hanging on the same word, we have to witness to one same memory and one common hope in Him who is the master of history. We must also accept our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons and nations and for social and international reconciliation. To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbor, by a common hope for the Kingdom of God and by the great heritage of the Prophets.¹

In this teaching, the Commission effectively merged the reference to the messianic era in NA, §4 with the call in its own 1974 "Guidelines" for joint social action. Immediately following its statement that God "does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues," NA had gone on to say: "In company with the prophets...the church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and 'serve Him with one accord'...." The "Guidelines" had later outlined a vision of joint social action: "Love of the same God must show itself in effective action for the good of mankind. In the spirit of the prophets, Jews and Christians will work willingly together, seeing social justice and peace at every level – local, national and international."² In merging the two, the Commission's 1985 document conveyed the message that it is the joint responsibility of Christians and Jews to help make the messianic era a reality.

With the beginning of the new Christian millennium, this call to joint responsibility was significantly reinforced and advanced by local Jewish-Christian efforts and through formally sponsored international programs. For example, in the hope of helping to promote the Christian-Jewish relationship in the Third

¹ "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church," II, §11.

² "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4," IV.

Millennium, a group of Christians and Jews from New Jersey, USA presented a resolution to Pope John Paul II which read in part:

We, Christians and Jews, mindful of the gift of human dignity and hope for a new heaven and a new earth each singular life has received from our common Creator, resolve to hear again and act upon the profound and resonant cries of the ancient prophets for mercy, compassion, peace, liberty, justice, and righteousness: that together – we, Christians and Jews – take upon ourselves the alleviation of poverty, misery, violence, and ignorance from all of humanity in the Third Millennium.³

In Great Britain the British Progressive Rabbis, in cooperation with a Vatican delegation and in consultation with the Council of Christians and Jews, marked the new millennium with an international conference to explore the theme, “The Theology of Partnership.” Their expressed hope was to heighten awareness and to further advance Jewish-Christian partnerships based on shared ethical values and directed towards contributing to the welfare of humanity on a global basis. Various other statements which further reinforced this vision and hope followed, such as *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity* (September 10, 2000),⁴ *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* (August 12, 2002),⁵ and *A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People* (September 1, 2002).⁶

Contributing to this ongoing reflection are three noteworthy new-millennium books. Authored by prominent rabbis in the United States and Great Britain, they help communicate and explicate developing Jewish thought in relation to messiah, messianism and the messianic era, to the teaching of *tikkun olam*, and to an ethics of social responsibility. The books are: Rabbi Robert N. Levine’s 2003, *There Is No Messiah And You’re It: Transformation of Judaism’s Most Provocative Idea*; Rabbi Elliott Dorff’s 2005, *The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)*; and Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks’ 2005, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. These three publications have great potential to help allay concerns expressed over the past decade by Jews and Christians committed to the dialogue relationship. Sensing that post-Vatican II developments have reached a plateau, a new impetus has been sought to effectively move this maturing interfaith effort into its next stage of development in a responsible manner. This search has included the hope to broaden the base of involvement, particularly among the younger generation whose leadership is needed to ensure this new relationship’s future. It would appear that this intensifying focus on responsible Jewish-Christian partnership in view of the messianic age is providing a direction for this new phase. This effort can benefit considerably from works such as the three publications which this essay will now briefly review.

³ This joint resolution was presented on November 18, 1998 by representatives of the Julius and Dorothy Koppelman Holocaust/Genocide Resource Center at Rider University. For the entire resolution, see *SIDIC* XXXII, 1 (1999): 23.

⁴ This eight-part statement, initiated and supported by the National Jewish Scholars Project, was authored by Dr. Peter Ochs, Dr. David Novak, Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky and Dr. Michael Signer. It has been signed by a large number of Rabbis and Jewish scholars of various institutional affiliations internationally. Part eight of the statement enlarges on the theme: “Jews and Christians must work together for peace and justice,” and includes the statement: “...our joint efforts...will help bring the kingdom of God for which we hope and long.” See <http://icjs.org/what/njsp/dabruemet.html> .

⁵ This joint statement, meant to facilitate further dialogue, was drafted by the Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, USCCB. The Jewish part of the text, “The Mission of the Jews and the Perfection of the World,” ends by suggesting “a joint agenda for Christians and Jews” and includes the invitation: “Why not join together our spiritual forces to state and to act upon the values we share in common and that lead to repair of the unredeemed world?” See www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/interreligious/ncs_usccb120802.htm

⁶ This document by The Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, an association of twenty-one Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars, offers ten statements to Christians, the tenth of which enlarges on the theme: “Christians should work with Jews for the healing of the world.” This statement includes: “As violence and terrorism intensify in our time, we must strengthen our common efforts in the work of justice and peace to which both the prophets of Israel and Jesus summon us.”

See www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/sites/partners/csg/Sacred_Obligation.htm .

The Rabbis and Their Writings

Rabbi Robert N. Levine, a much sought after speaker and media guest, is senior rabbi of Temple Rodeph Sholom, the largest synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side. In September 2005 he was installed as the 58th president of the New York Board of Rabbis, which includes the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism and which attempts to bridge potential polarizations due to ideological and philosophical differences. In this role Levine is representative and spokesman for mainstream Jewry on a variety of issues. His book, the very title of which cannot help but be provocative in the Jewish world, is a serious study of Jewish identity as it surveys the evolution of the concept of messiah in Judaism.

There Is No Messiah And You're It is an informative account, accessible to a wide range of readers, of the nature and power of the messianic ideal throughout Jewish history. In its sixteen chapters Levine draws on the Bible, the Talmud, rabbinic sources and modern-day scholars to trace the enduring power of a messianic vision in spite of myriad challenges which have included: the often calamitous effects of false messiahs who tended to emerge particularly during desperate times in Jewish history; the 19th century inward turn by Eastern European Hasidism; and the Western European experience of an emancipated people loyal to their state during the period of the Enlightenment. He surveys as well the evolution of the concept from that of a personal messianic *leader* to that of a messianic *era* in which the political and social conditions are such that the demands of Sinai and the prophetic promises are fully realizable. Levine writes with a vision of hope which inspires his readers to actively work for messianic change instead of passively anticipating it. His message is to resist being caught in our own brokenness and the brokenness of the world, and to embrace instead our messianic potential to heal the world and to be a partner in co-creation. It is unfortunate that continuous repetition of the title message throughout the book distracts considerably from the quality of the book's content and message. Lengthy repetitive filler at the conclusion of each chapter unfairly contributes to a simplistic impression of an informative and inspiring work eminently worthy of attention and appreciation.

Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, a conservative rabbi with a PhD in moral theory, is a prolific writer on Jewish law, thought and ethics. He is rector and distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Judaism, visiting professor on Jewish Law at the UCLA School of Law, and visiting professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. A leading spokesperson for ethics in Conservative Judaism today, he is Vice-chair of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Many of his papers and Rabbinic Letters have formulated the stance of the Conservative Movement on such topics as end of life issues, cloning and stem cell research, human sexuality and poverty. It is with this rich background and experience that Dorff, in *The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)*, explores the roots of the beliefs and laws which form the basis of the Jewish commitment to improve the world.

Dorff presents *tikkun olam* as the goal Jewish tradition sets for life, providing for Jews both personal and collective mission and meaning. Though deeply rooted in religious beliefs and laws, it is a goal instinctively understood by religious and secular Jews alike. Dorff probes the rich roots of *tikkun olam* by exploring its "why" and "how" through a work in three parts: *Tikkun Olam* in Theory; *Tikkun Olam* for Individuals and Society; and *Tikkun Olam* within Families. He begins with an overview of the term's development over time, exploring related Jewish terms and concepts which throughout the history of Judaism expressed the duties and acts which Jews today increasingly speak of as *tikkun olam*. Drawing on a variety of sources to convey the significance of these acts in classical Judaism, he moves on to briefly engage the critical question of the relationship between religion and ethics. His exploration of the theory and practice of *tikkun olam* in Jewish social interactions includes: the ethics of speaking, the duty and proper limits of helping the poor, Jewish thought and law on redeeming captives, the duties of providing health care and emotional support to the sick, and communal support to those celebrating weddings and mourning the death of loved ones. Turning to the inner circle of the family, he draws

ancient and medieval sources into modern day conditions and opens an effective dialogue between them as he addresses spousal, filial and parental duties.

One misses in Dorff's work a treatment of care of the environment, interfaith relations, and business dealings. This omission is explained by the fact that the book is one of a major series of fourteen books intended to provide an accessible, basic introduction to Judaism. The series provides opportunities for adults to interact with sacred texts as they relate to some of Judaism's most important concepts. "Judaism and the Environment," "Money and Ownership," and "The Relationship between Jews and Non-Jews" each constitute a separate volume in this *A Way into...* series. After having been exposed to Dorff's erudite command of Jewish texts and his practical wisdom regarding the nature of human beings and the ways of the world, the reader may wish to further benefit from his book, *To Do the Right and the Good*. In this 2002 publication, which received the National Jewish Book Award, he deals specifically with Judaism's commitment to social equality. Indicating that many laws and theological tenets of Torah reveal social justice as a central Jewish principle, he applies this observation to poverty, war, intrafaith and interfaith relations, family and privacy. He includes as well a comparison of Jewish social ethics with Christian and American belief systems today.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, one of the most eminent religious scholars of our time, has been Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of Great Britain and the Commonwealth since 1991. This great religious thinker, distinguished author, and much sought after speaker has received honorary degrees from universities throughout the world. After completing his first ten years as Chief Rabbi – during which his leadership focused on a program of Jewish renewal and continuity – in September 2001 (Ellul 5761) he expressed his vision for the next phase of his Chief Rabbinate. The vision was that of Jewish Responsibility which challenged his community to not wait for something to happen, but to join hands to make it happen.⁷ Now, through his book *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, the entire international interfaith community is able to hear this same voice on a topic of interest to Jews and non-Jews alike. Considering his work as "a Jewish voice in the conversation of humankind, (p.14)" Sacks has chosen to present his vision and message in as simple and readable a style as possible. His success in this enables a broadly-based readership to access the many subtleties and complexities which enrich this inspiring text.

Sacks presents his understanding of the ethics of responsibility in three parts: The Call to Responsibility, The Theology of Responsibility, and The Responsible Life. Bringing together law and theology, biblical interpretation and philosophical reflection, general principles and specific examples, narrative and analysis, he sets out Judaism's key concepts of social ethics. These include justice, charity, sanctifying the Holy name, the 'ways of peace,' and 'mending the world.' In presenting the theology underlying these ethical concepts, he addresses such theological themes as divine and human initiatives, the holy, monotheism, faith, and evil. One need only glance at his generous chapter end-notes to appreciate the wide-ranging authorities he draws on, both from within Judaism as well from other faiths and cultures. As he presents his understanding of how these ethical concepts affect the life one lives he makes an impassioned plea for a world of justice and compassion. Calling on all of humanity to reclaim its innate moral goodness, he pleads for a return to the true purpose of religion – that of a partnership with God in the work of ethical and moral living. His fundamental message is that life is God's call to responsibility.

While Levine traces developments within Judaism through the evolving concept of messiah and messianism, Sacks traces an evolution within the Bible itself – an evolution from a controlling to an empowering presence of God. This movement from divine initiative to human endeavor is a shift of responsibility, the progression of which he traces through the several covenants between God and humanity and through the three-fold division of the books of the Bible. For Sacks biblical time is "an arena

⁷ For Sacks' September 2001 open letter to British Jewry, "From Renewal to Responsibility," see his website at www.chief Rabbi.org.

of growth and development” in which a unilateral act on the part of God (the Noahide Covenant) progresses to a nation being born through a peoples’ free assent to covenantal terms (the Sinaitic Covenant), and in which God speaks first *to* humans (*Torah*), then *through* humans (*Nevi'im*), and finally human beings turn to speak *to* God (*Ketuvim*). It is a time in which a father is empowering his child and the child is growing into an adult.

The works of these three authors enrich and complement one another as they engage Jewish sources to articulate Judaism’s call for human partnership with God to help realize the ideal world, the messianic era. However, it is the concept of *tikkun olam* which most obviously unites these voices coming from the reform, conservative and orthodox denominations within Judaism today. While Dorff’s entire book focuses on this theme of “Repairing the World,” Sacks and Levine each devote a chapter specifically to the development of this concept within Lurianic kabbalism. The very title of Sacks’ work evokes sixteenth century Safed and Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria’s teaching of *shevirat ha-kelim* (‘breaking of the vessels’) and the scattered fragments of light which need to be gathered up, the light released, and the fractures healed. Luria’s teaching focused, not on the messiah as a single person, but on the entire people Israel involved in realizing the vision of the messianic age through daily acts of mending the world’s fractures. Sacks considers *tikkun olam* a most compelling metaphor for shaping moral imagination today. However, he is careful to distinguish between Luria’s mystical and spiritual idea of *tikkun olam*, with its emphasis on the individual’s relationship to God, and modern Judaism’s focus on human actions directed toward healing the sufferings and injustices of the world.

In their effort to present a Jewish social vision for today, these three rabbinic voices speak as one in decrying a passive, resigned stance in face of human injustice, need and suffering. Sacks confronts this most directly right at the outset. His second chapter, “Faith as Protest,” is an unequivocal challenge to the Marxist belief that religious faith anaesthetizes and reconciles people to their condition, thus preserving an unjust status quo. If the written word were audible, Sacks’ writing would resonate at its loudest when he counters Marx’s hostility to Judaism with:

Judaism is not a religion that reconciles us to the world. It was born of an act of defiance against the [injustices of] the great empires of the ancient world...The religion of Israel emerged out of the most paradigm-shifting experience of the ancient world: that the supreme power intervened in history to liberate the powerless. It was in and as the voice of social protest that the biblical imagination took shape (p. 18).

All three authors also address the universalization of this Jewish “voice of social protest.” Levine focuses on this universalization while discussing developments during and after the enlightenment when Jews in Western Europe were accepted as fully participating citizens in their countries, and their messianic hopes extended to “the nations” to an unprecedented degree. Dorff notes this enlightenment shift as well. It is included in his explanation of the series of concentric circles of Jewish responsibility as depicted by Classical Jewish sources: that Jews’ primary duties are to themselves and their family, then to their local community and the wider Jewish community, and ultimately to the world at large. He further observes that post-enlightenment developments have been such that Jews now seek for society as a whole, not merely fairness and equity, but as much of the ideal as possible. While the message of Jewish responsibility to be a blessing to the whole of humanity resounds throughout Sacks’ book, it is significantly intensified in his chapter on “Responsibility for Society.” Here he draws specific attention to the covenant with Noah which, according to Sacks, “tells us that, prior to our particular commitment to this faith or that, this culture, nation, civilization or that, we are human beings, cast together in a fate which grows more interconnected with every passing century, each passing year” (p. 125). Sacks expands on this, indicating that “[t]he willingness non-coercively to share our several traditions of moral insight is, in a religiously plural culture, an essential part of the democratic conversation, indeed of societal beatitude” (p. 126).

Each author's personal universalized concern and hope is most profoundly conveyed when he addresses the specific "brokenness" of our present age. Dorff does this in a more general manner in his closing "Forward" when he refers to illness and disease, struggles with infertility, starvation and homelessness, unjust distinctions in the application of procedural and substantive justice, conflict in the modern State of Israel, hostility and war. Sacks keeps the realities of our present fractured world before the reader throughout his book through his generous use of examples, anecdotes and stories. If one recalls his ample illustrations, presented with sensitivity, concern and compassion, while reading Levine's compelling chapter on the legend of the Golem, one appreciates even more the appropriateness of this striking metaphor which warns of the unpredictable potency of many present-day human achievements, be they technological developments, the harnessing of nuclear energy, or genetic manipulation. It is already too obvious that, once unleashed, their power quickly extends beyond the control of their human creators.

Given that each of these Jewish leaders is active in local, national and international interfaith efforts, it is of particular interest to note how they situate Jesus in their treatment of messianism and the messianic age. Dorff ends his book with Isaiah's vision of the ideal society, respectfully noting the Christian assertion that Isaiah is describing Jesus. Referring also to the Christian belief in the Second Coming, he concludes simply: "Jews just think that he was not the Messiah in the first place – a rabbi, a good teacher and preacher, but not the Messiah" (p. 249). Levine, on the other hand, devotes an entire chapter to Jesus, before embarking on an extended exploration of a series of dysfunctional, failed messiahs who have dotted the Jewish historical landscape. He respectfully raises the question: "Who was the real Jesus?" – acknowledging that "no one will be able to answer it with any certainty" (p. 17). He situates Jesus in the complex, deeply troubling atmosphere of his day, locating him outside of the political establishment, publicly unaffiliated with any of the major groups. His assumption is that "Jesus put himself squarely in the prophetic tradition," but that "he clearly is a very different kind of prophet" (p. 20). Highlighting the need to distinguish the "dream" of Paul from the "dream" of Jesus (p. 24), he views Jesus' message, not as one of dire apocalyptic warning and judgment, but as a gentler message of morality and justice in preparation for "the time when God's kingdom will be established on earth (p. 21).

Jewish-Christian Learning and Dialogue Today

While highly recommending these books to a readership at large, I believe they deserve special attention from faculty developing curricula and courses for interfaith study, particularly at the undergraduate level. Jewish and Christian students exploring together a theme embracing the messianic era, *tikkun olam*, and an ethics of responsibility would be introduced to a topic central both to the early "parting of the ways" and to an emerging focus in today's Jewish-Christian interfaith efforts. They would be introduced as well, in an accessible yet scholarly manner, to a broad spectrum of Jewish biblical, rabbinic, classical and modern-day sources. The challenge for those responsible for the Christian component of such an interfaith course will be to identify today's Christian authors and publications which draw on Christian biblical, classical and modern-day sources to set forth in a substantive yet accessible manner the evolving Christian understanding of messiah, the messianic era and social responsibility. A similar course would also be appropriate for adult Jewish-Christian study at the synagogue-parish level.

Underlying my unqualified recommendation of the three authors reviewed in this essay is the fact that their lives bring the message of social responsibility off the written page. Even a superficial reading of Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks' book impresses upon the reader the fact that the highest priority of this Chief Rabbi – whose daily agenda includes accommodating the demands of local, national, and international media, politicians and religious leaders – is clearly one of reaching into the fractures of real lives and real events in a timely and healing manner. Upon entering the Temple led by Rabbi Levine one quickly senses its mission expressed as "embodying a strong commitment to purposeful Jewish living and the pursuit of human dignity." Levine's own professional and personal commitments include being a rabbinic

adviser to the Jewish Fund for Justice, a national, publicly-supported foundation that acts on the historic commitment of the Jewish people to *tzedakah* (righteous giving) and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). He has also provided leadership in the American Jewish Call to Action which urged the Bush administration to assert the moral and political leadership needed to end the atrocities and genocide in Darfur. Rabbi Dorff applies his extensive background in ethics and law in the arena of real life when human rights struggles with issues of poverty, end-of-life questions, sexuality, infertility, and genetic research reveal some of the deepest fractures in modern society. After being on its board of directors since 1985, Dorff now serves as president of the Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles whose more than sixty services include drug and alcohol abuse programs, shelters for battered women and children, and housing for the homeless. In one of his concluding chapters Rabbi Sacks observes: "There are textbooks and there are text-people. We learn virtue less by formal instruction than by finding virtuous people and observing how they live" (p. 239). If our academic institutions, especially those pioneering programs in joint Christian-Jewish learning, effectively incorporate the classic rabbinic interpretation of the words, "We will do; *then* will we understand," the future of the Jewish-Christian relationship will be assured of the kind of leadership which, rooted in the deepest values of the Jewish and Christian traditions, which will help bring an ethics of responsibility into today's fractured world.