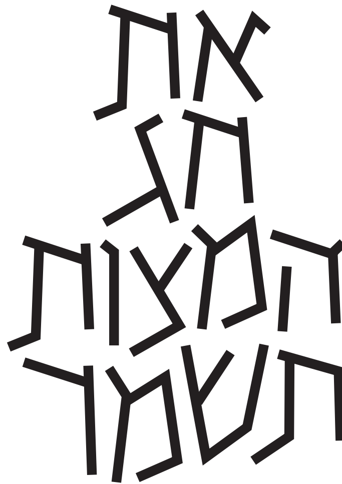
מחזור קורן לפסח • מנהג אנגליה

The Koren Pesaḥ Maḥzor • Minhag Anglia

IN MEMORY OF MARILYN ROSENFELDER ז״ל

מחזור קורן לפסח
THE KOREN PESAḤ MAḤZOR



WITH INTRODUCTION, TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY BY

Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks שליט״א

MINHAG ANGLIA

Dayan Ivan Binstock שליט״א

KOREN PUBLISHERS JERUSALEM

The Koren Pesaḥ Maḥzor
Second Minhag Anglia Hebrew/English Edition, 2016

Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.
POB 4044, Jerusalem 91040, ISRAEL
POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776, USA

www.korenpub.com

Koren Tanakh Font © 1962, 2016 Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.
Koren Siddur Font and text design © 1981, 2016 Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.
English translation and commentary © 2006, 2013 Jonathan Sacks.

The creation of this Maḥzor was made possible through the generous support of Torah Education in Israel.

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Standard Size, Hardcover, ISBN 978 965 301 317 9
Compact Size, Hardcover, ISBN 978 965 301 339 1

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In memory of

Marilyn Rosenfelder (née Isaacs) ז״ל

who passed away on Ḥol Hamo'ed Pesaḥ
(18 Nisan 5770 / 2 April 2010)

For us,
Marilyn will always have a special connection with Pesaḥ
as it was the final Ḥag that we celebrated together.

Her imaginative, questioning mind,
her love of discussion and stories well told,
her dedication to her children's education,
her independence of spirit and strength of resolve
make her an inspiring example of
how to live by some of the key values
that Pesaḥ teaches.

We continue to draw on the legacy she has left for us.

Anthony, Joanne and Joel,
Harriet and Robert, Hannah and Jonathan
and all Marilyn's grandchildren

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PREFACE

In every generation, one must view himself as if he had left Egypt…

The Koren Pesaḥ Maḥzor is a project of such scope, that it would have been virtually impossible without the partnership of the Rosenfelder family. It is more than fitting to honour the memory of Marilyn Rosenfelder ז״ל, who epitomised the values of Torah education and Jewish heritage, with a Maḥzor that enlivens the Pesaḥ themes of redemptive hope and the indomitable spirit of the Jewish people, while handing on the centuries-old tradition of *Minhag Anglia* to a new generation. The Rosenfelder family continues this legacy in their support for the creation of this Maḥzor. On behalf of the scholars, editors and designers of this volume, we thank you; on behalf of the users and readers, we are forever in your debt.

We could not have embarked on this project without the moral leadership and intellectual spark of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Rabbi Sacks provides an invaluable guide to the liturgy through his remarkable introduction, translation, and commentary. His work not only clarifies the text and explains the teachings of our sages, but uniquely and seamlessly weaves profound concepts of Judaism into the reality of contemporary life. It was our distinct privilege to work with Rabbi Sacks to create a Maḥzor that we believe appropriately reflects the complexity and depth of Jewish prayer.

Dayan Ivan Binstock's immense scholarship and understanding are exemplified in this restoration and modern evolution of *Minhag Anglia*. This distinct and important *minhag* has been revitalised over the centuries, from the David Levi edition of 1794 and the Routledge Maḥzor of 1906. We are honoured that the Koren Maḥzor of 2013 joins this distinguished tradition. We thank the Dayan for his historic and remarkable achievement.

We only hope that Rabbi Sacks' and Dayan Binstock's contributions are matched by the scholarship, design and typography that have been hallmarks of Koren Publishers Jerusalem for more than fifty years. Raphaël Freeman led Koren's small but highly professional team of scholars, editors and artists. Rabbi David Fuchs supervised the textual aspects of the work. Rachel Meghnagi edited the English texts. Efrat Gross edited

◂ the Hebrew

the Hebrew texts, and these were ably proofread by Yisrael Elizur and Simon David Kurtz. Jessica Sacks supplied the superb translation to *Shir HaShirim*. Aviva Arad translated *Mishnayot Yoma* and Rabbi David Fuchs elucidated the Mishnayot commentary. Rabbi Eli Clark contributed the informative and useful Halakha Guide. We thank Chaya Mendelson for typesetting the text, and we are grateful to Adina Luber for her translation of the *piyutim* and *Kriat HaTorah*. Special thanks go to Dena Landowne Bailey, Esther Be'er, and Rabbi Ḥanan Benayahu for their invaluable assistance.

This new edition of the Koren Maḥzor continues the Koren tradition of making the language of prayer more accessible, thus enhancing the prayer experience. One of the unique features of the Maḥzor is the use of typesetting to break up a prayer phrase-by-phrase – rather than using a block paragraph format – so that the reader will naturally pause at the correct places. No commas appear in the Hebrew text at the end of lines, but in the English translation, where linguistic clarity requires, we have retained the use of commas at the end of lines. Unlike other Hebrew/English maḥzorim, the Hebrew text is on the left-hand page and the English on the right. This arrangement preserves the distinctive "fanning out" effect of the Koren text and the beauty of the Koren layout.

We hope and pray that this Maḥzor, like all our publications, extends the vision of Koren's founder, Eliyahu Koren, to a new generation to further *Avodat HaShem* for Jews everywhere.

Matthew Miller, Publisher
Jerusalem, 5773 (2013)

PREFACE TO THE MINHAG ANGLIA EDITION

The publication of the Koren Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur Maḥzorim for Anglo-Jewry has made a significant impact on many communities. The clarity of the Koren layout, combined with Chief Rabbi Sacks' elegant translation and lucid and profound commentary, have transformed the synagogue prayer experience.

It has been a privilege to work with Chief Rabbi Sacks and the Koren team in preparing this Pesaḥ Maḥzor for the British community. As in the Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur Maḥzorim, we have sought to retain the essential features of *Minhag Anglia* by basing ourselves on the Routledge Maḥzor, and updating it in line with the usages of the Singer's Prayer Book. At the same time we have tried to accommodate changes that have taken place in many communities over the years. I have benefited from the observations of many colleagues who shared their insights after the publication of the previous Maḥzorim and have helped tailor this Maḥzor to best serve the needs of Anglo-Jewry. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Lionel Kopelowitz and Rabbi Mordechai Ginsbury for their many helpful remarks.

Notwithstanding the fact that this is a Maḥzor for Anglo-Jewry, there are a number of instances where options are included for the visitor to Israel, in line with the Koren policy that their Maḥzorim should be fully suitable for those who find themselves in Israel for the *Ḥagim*.

A particular feature of Minhag Anglia is the avoidance of explicit kabbalistic formulations in the prayers. Rabbi Ezekiel Landau, in a well-known responsum (*Noda BeYehuda Kama, YD 93*), criticised the recital of *leshem yiḥud* as a preamble to the performance of a mitzva and that particular formula is not part of the Anglo-Jewish liturgy. Nevertheless, Rabbi Landau, as evidenced in his responsum, was against *any* form of preamble to a mitzva. Indeed it is reported by his disciple Rabbi Eliezer Fleckles, that he forbade someone from using his etrog when he became aware that the person was starting to say a *yehi ratzon* prior to making a blessing! (*Teshuva MeAhava 1:1*). The Anglo-Jewish prayer books, from the first edition of the Singer's onwards, did include meditations before the performance of mitzvot, such as putting on the tallit, taking the lulav and counting the Omer. These were based on the formulations in the

Sha'arei Tziyon of Rabbi Nathan Hanover (Prague, 1662, chapter 3) with the explicit Kabbala removed.

However, even the Singer's Prayer Book could not avoid at least one implicit reference to Kabbala. In fact, it is in the context of *Sefirat HaOmer* that one finds the only mention of the mystical prayer, *Ana BeKhoaḥ*. Its inclusion already in the first edition of the Singer's is acknowledged by Chief Rabbi Dr. Hertz in his commentary: "This prayer was a great favourite of the Cabalists."

The modified *Ribbono Shel Olam*, after *Sefirat HaOmer*, found in the *Avodat Yisrael* siddur of Seligmann Baer, and included in the 1990 edition of the Singer's Prayer Book, is also included in this Maḥzor after *Ana BeKhoaḥ*.

Whilst the *Kerovot* (the *piyutim* inserted into the Repetition of the Amida) have long been omitted in Anglo-Jewry, many communities say the *Ma'aravot* and these have been inserted in the main body of the Maḥzor. Although most communities do not say the *Yotzerot* (the *piyutim* inserted into the blessings of the Shema), the *Geula "Beraḥ Dodi"* (the *piyut* inserted before *Ga'al Yisrael*), with its beautiful depiction of Israel's yearning for a speedy redemption, is said in most communities.

As is noted in the Halakha Guide (law 29), there is discussion whether *Mashiv HaRuaḥ* should be included in the silent Musaf Amida on the first day of Yom Tov. For those communities who start to say *Morid HaTal*, the simple solution is to announce *Morid HaTal* before the commencement of the Amida and this is the signal to the community to omit *Mashiv HaRuaḥ* and replace it with *Morid HaTal*. The Ashkenazi communities outside Israel do not have that option. A number of German *kehillot* opted for the announcement of *Mekhalkel Ḥayyim* as an indication that *Mashiv HaRuaḥ* should be omitted (*Maharil, Tefilla shel Pesaḥ*). Others included *Mashiv HaRuaḥ* in the silent Amida and the community only ceased saying it after they heard the Prayer for Dew from the Leader (*Mishna Berura* 114:3). This is the practice recorded in the most recent edition of the Singer's Prayer Book and the one followed in this Maḥzor.

In producing this Maḥzor for Anglo-Jewry and recognising the value of upholding a *minhag* and *nusaḥ* of our forebears, it is appropriate to acknowledge our original forebears, the Patriarchs, in the phrase that

◂ concludes

concludes the *Piyut Geula* that exemplifies the link between the first Pesaḥ and the ultimate redemption:

בִּגְלַל אָבוֹת תּוֹשִׁיעַ בָּנִים, וְתָבִיא גְּאֻלָּה לִבְנֵי בְנֵיהֶם

"For the sake of the ancestors, redeem the descendants,
bringing salvation to their children's children."

May the devotion and inspiration that this edition of the Maḥzor will engender, help bring about that day, speedily, in our time. Amen.

Dayan Ivan Binstock
London, 5773 (2013)

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INTRODUCTION

FINDING FREEDOM:
Essays on the themes and concepts of Pesaḥ

by

CHIEF RABBI LORD
JONATHAN SACKS

1. Pesaḥ and the Jewish Task

Pesaḥ is the oldest and most transformative story of hope ever told. It tells of how an otherwise undistinguished group of slaves found their way to freedom from the greatest and longest-lived empire of their time, indeed of any time. It tells the revolutionary story of how the supreme Power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless. It is a story of the defeat of probability by the force of possibility. It defines what it is to be a Jew: a living symbol of hope.

Pesaḥ tells us that the strength of a nation does not lie in horses and chariots, armies and arms, or in colossal statues and monumental buildings, overt demonstrations of power and wealth. It depends on simpler things: humility in the presence of the God of creation, trust in the God of redemption and history, and a sense of the non-negotiable sanctity of human life, created by God in His image: even the life of a slave or a child too young to ask questions. Pesaḥ is the eternal critique of power used by humans to coerce and diminish their fellow humans.

It is the story more than a hundred generations of our ancestors handed on to their children, and they to theirs. As we do likewise, millennia later, we know what it is to be the people of history, guardians of a narrative not engraved in hieroglyphics on the walls of a monumental building but carried in the minds of living, breathing human beings who, for longer than any other have kept faith with the future and the past, bearing witness to the power of the human spirit when it opens itself to a greater power, beckoning us to a world of freedom, responsibility and human dignity.

Pesaḥ is more than simply one festival among others in the Jewish calendar, more even than the anniversary of Israel's birth as a free people setting out on its journey to the Promised Land. In this section, I want to show how it emerged, in four ways, as the central event around which most of Judaism turns.

First, close examination shows us that the Torah narrative of Genesis from Abraham to Jacob is a series of anticipations of the exodus, focussing our attention on, and heightening our anticipation of, what would eventually take place in the days of Moses.

◂ Second

Second, remembering "that you were once slaves in Egypt" is the single most frequently invoked "reason for the commands." The exodus was not *just* an event in history – though it *was* an event in history.* It forms an essential part of the logic of Jewish law.

Third, key elements of Jewish law and faith are best understood as a protest against and alternative to the Egypt of the pharaohs even where the Torah does not state this explicitly. Knowledge of that ancient world gives us fresh insights into why Judaism is as it is.

Fourth, sustained meditation on the contrast between Egypt and the society the Israelites were called on to create reveals a fundamental choice that civilisations must make, then, now and perhaps for all time. There is nothing antiquarian about the issues Pesaḥ raises: slavery, freedom, politics, power, state, society, human dignity and responsibility. These are as salient today as they were in the days of Moses. Pesaḥ can never be obsolete.

At the heart of the festival is a concrete historical experience. The Israelites, as described in the Torah, were a fractious group of slaves of shared ancestry, one of a number of such groups attracted to Egypt from the north, drawn by its wealth and power, only to find themselves eventually its victims. The Egypt of the Pharaohs was the longest-lived empire the world has known, already some eighteen centuries old by the time of the exodus. For more than a thousand years before Moses, its landscape had been dominated by the great pyramid of Giza, the tallest man-made structure in the world until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889. The discovery in 1922 by the English archaeologist Howard Carter of the tomb of a relatively minor pharaoh, Tutankhamun, revealed the astonishing wealth and sophistication of the royal court at that time. If historians are correct in identifying Rameses II as the pharaoh of the exodus, then Egypt had reached the very summit of its power, bestriding the narrow world like a colossus.

At one level it is a story of wonders and miracles. But the enduring message of Pesaḥ is deeper than this, for it opens out into a dramatically

* On the historicity of the exodus, see among others, James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Colin J. Humphreys, *The Miracles of Exodus* (London: Continuum, 2003).

◂ new vision

new vision of what a society might be like if the only Sovereign is God, and every citizen is in His image. It is about the power of the powerless and the powerlessness of power. Politics has never been more radical, more ethical or more humane.

Heinrich Heine said, "Since the exodus, freedom has spoken with a Hebrew accent." But it is, as Emmanuel Levinas called it, a "difficult freedom," based as it is on a demanding code of individual and collective responsibility. Pesaḥ makes us taste the choice: on the one hand the bread of affliction and bitter herbs of slavery; on the other, four cups of wine, each marking a stage in the long walk to liberty. As long as humans seek to exercise power over one another, the story will continue and the choice will still be ours.

2. Prefigurations of the Exodus

Almost at the beginning of the Jewish story, something surpassingly strange happens. The initial sequence is clear. God calls Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house and travel "to the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Abraham does so immediately, without delay or demur, and arrives in the land of Canaan.

It is then that something unexpected happens. No sooner has he arrived than he is forced to leave: "There was a famine in the land" (ibid. 10). Abraham must travel to Egypt where there is food. Sarah is a beautiful woman; Abraham fears he will be killed so that Sarah can be taken into the royal harem. He asks her to pretend to be his sister, which she does, and Pharaoh takes her into the palace. Plagues then strike him and his household. He intuits – the text is not clear how – that this has something to do with Abraham and Sarah. He summons Abraham who tells him the truth, whereupon Pharaoh sends both of them away. Meanwhile, in Egypt, Abraham has grown wealthy. The story then resumes where we left it, with Abraham and his household in the land of Canaan.

What is this story doing here? It is not there simply because it happened. The Torah never records events merely because they happened. It omits vast tracts of the patriarchs' lives. Later, it omits thirty-eight of the forty years of the Israelites in the wilderness. If an event is told in the Torah, it is there to teach us something. "Torah" means teaching. What, then, is the lesson we are meant to learn?

◂ A midrash

A midrash (*Bereshit Raba* 40:6) gives us the answer. Abraham's forced descent into Egypt is an intimation of, and rehearsal for, what would eventually happen to his descendants. The parallels are many and precise. Here are some:

ABRAHAM	THE ISRAELITES
There was a famine in the land (Gen. 12:10)	For two years now there has been famine in the land (Gen. 45:6)
and Abram went down to Egypt (ibid.)	Our forefathers went down into Egypt (Num. 20:15)
to live there for a while (ibid.)	We have come to live here awhile (Gen. 47:4)
because the famine was severe (ibid.)	because the famine is severe (ibid.)
"They will kill me but will let you live" (Gen. 12:12)	"Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live" (Ex. 1:22)
The LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues (Gen. 12:17)	The ten plagues
Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way (Gen. 12:20)	The Egyptians urged the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste (Ex. 12:33)
Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold (Gen. 13:2)	He brought out Israel, laden with silver and gold (Ps. 105:37)

The similarities are so exact and multiple as to be unmistakable. Even the verb *sh-l-ḥ*, "to send," in the penultimate parallel means, among other things, to liberate a slave. Abraham was not a slave but he was, in a certain sense, a captive. The midrash explains: "The Holy One said to our father Abraham: Go forth and tread a path for your children. For you find that everything written in connection with Abraham is written in connection with his children." The exile and exodus were not accidental. They were rehearsed at the very beginning of the Jewish journey.

In case we should miss the point, the story is repeated twice more with minor variations, first with Abraham and Sarah in Gerar in the land

◂ of the Philistines

of the Philistines (Gen. 20), then with Isaac and Rebecca in the same place with the same key figure, King Avimelekh (Gen. 26). There is the same emphasis on danger, the same circumstance of the key figures, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, being forced into a lie to save a life, the same discovery of the facts just in time, the same anxious release. Something is taking shape.

So it was in the life of the first two generations of the family of the covenant. What about the third, Jacob? Jacob too is forced, by famine, to send members of his family to Egypt for food. Eventually he and the rest of the family join them. But this was not a rehearsal for exile. It was the exile itself. Did something similar happen earlier in Jacob's life? It did, and the Haggada in a famous passage points this out: "Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob."

On the face of it, there is no connection between the events of Pesaḥ and the earlier life of Jacob. The Israelites were forced into Egypt because of famine; Jacob fled his home because his brother Esau was threatening to kill him. Yet it is Jacob's life with Laban that presents many other parallels to the events that would later take place in Egypt. Just as Pharaoh was generous in offering hospitality to Joseph's family, so Laban welcomed Jacob: "You are my own flesh and blood" (Gen. 29:14). Just as the Israelites multiplied in Egypt, so Jacob had many children. He "grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys" (Gen. 30:43). Just as the political climate in Egypt changed – a new king arose who "knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8) – so the climate in Laban's family changed: "Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude towards him was not what it had been" (Gen. 31:2).

Moses asks Pharaoh: "Let my people go" (Ex. 5:1). Jacob asks Laban: "Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland" (Gen. 30:25). Pharaoh refuses. Laban is reluctant. Jacob then works for Laban for a further six years – the length of service after which, in Jewish law, a slave goes free (Ex. 21:2). The Israelites and Jacob eventually leave, against the will of their hosts. Pharaoh and Laban both follow in pursuit. In both cases divine intervention protects pursued from pursuer: an impenetrable cloud comes between the Israelites and the Egyptians. God Himself appears to Laban telling him not to harm Jacob (31:24). Again the parallels

◂ are clear

are clear. The Haggada is drawing our attention to a connection we might otherwise have missed.*

Over and above all these events is one scene in which the entire drama of exile and exodus is foretold, long in advance, to Abraham:

> As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. He [God] said to Abram, "Know that your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own, and they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years; but know that I shall judge the nation that enslaves them, and then they will leave with great wealth. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." (Gen. 15:12–16)

This scene, "the Covenant between the Pieces," makes it clear that the entire sequence of events leading up to exile and exodus did not simply happen. They were pre-scripted. They were meant to be. That is what the Haggada means when it says that God "calculated the end," and that Jacob "went down to Egypt – compelled by what had been spoken." Despite the apparently free actions of human agents, there was a Providence at work behind the scenes. This is as close as Judaism gets to Greek tragedy.

The story of Pesaḥ is thus understood by the Torah not as just a historical event, not even an event that involved signs and wonders and miraculous deliverances. It always was meant to be part of the journey, prefigured five times in advance by four exiles and a night-time vision before there even was a Jewish people. *The way to the Promised Land passes through Egypt and exile.* This was not a detour but part of the route itself, anticipated at the very outset. Why so? The answer lies in the inner logic of the Torah as a set of commands and a way of life, not just for individuals but as a nation in its land.

* See David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

◄ 3. Reasons

3. *Reasons for the Commands*

The journey to the Promised Land had to pass through Egypt because Israel was to construct a society that would be the antithesis of Egypt. Therefore they had to know Egypt, experience Egypt, feel it in their bones, carry it with them as an indelible memory that they would hand on to all future generations. They had to experience what it was like to be on the wrong side of power: strangers, outsiders, metics, *apiru* as they were known in Egypt in those days, people without rights who were subject to the whim of a merciless ruler. The taste of that affliction was never to be forgotten.

To this day, the Temples, colossi and pyramids of Egypt are awe-inspiring. They were meant to be, and they succeeded. But there is a question to be asked about monumental architecture through the ages, much of it religious: at whose cost were they built? Virtually none was produced without exploitation on a massive scale: treasures won through war, wealth through taxes on subject populations, and forced labour, the corvée, the earliest and most primitive form of taxation, imposed by rulers on the ruled almost from the dawn of civilisation. The Giza pyramid, for example, with its 2,300,000 blocks of stone, each weighing on average more than a ton, was built during the twenty years of Pharaoh Khufu's reign (c.2545–2525 BCE). A simple calculation shows that the builders would have had to set one stone in place every two minutes for ten hours each day for two decades. This suggests forced labour of the most extensive kind involving tens of thousands of people at any time.

It is against this feature of the first great civilisations – Mesopotamia from which Abraham's family came, and the Egypt Moses and the Israelites left – that the Torah is a protest. In Genesis and Exodus we hear little about the idolatry and pagan rituals that were later to earn the scorn of the prophets. We hear much, however, about something else, namely the hierarchical society by which some presume to rule over others. This, to the Torah, is the unforgivable. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton, like the sages, traces this back to Nimrod, the first great ruler of Assyria and by implication the builder of the Tower of Babel (see Gen. 10:8–11). Milton writes that when Adam was told that Nimrod would "arrogate dominion undeserved," he was horrified:

◂ O execrable son

O execrable son so to aspire
Above his Brethren, to himself assuming
Authority usurped, from God not given:
He gave us only over beast, fish, fowl
Dominion absolute; that right we hold
By his donation; but man over men
He made not lord; such title to himself
Reserving, human left from human free.
(*Paradise Lost*, Book XII: 64–71)

To question this – the right of humans to rule over other humans, without their consent, depriving them of their freedom – was, at that time and for most of history, utterly unthinkable. All advanced societies were like this. How could they be otherwise? Was this not the very structure of the universe? Did the sun not rule the day? Did the moon not rule the night? Was there not in heaven itself a hierarchy of the gods?

Monotheism is a theology, but it is also and no less fundamentally a political philosophy with revolutionary implications. If there is only one God, then there is no hierarchy in heaven. And if He set His image on human beings as such, then there is no justified hierarchy-without-consent on earth either. But to say this is one thing: to live it, breathe it, feel it, was another. There is only one way of so doing. A nation in exile must experience what it feels like to be on the wrong side of power. Why not a nation in its own land? Because a nation in its land cannot but assume that the way things were is the natural course of things. To create a new society you have to leave an old one. That is why Abraham had to leave behind all that was familiar to him. That is why the Israelites could be charged to construct a different social order, because they knew they were not Egyptians. They did not think they were. The Egyptians did not think they were. Outsiders can see the relativity of social structures that insiders believe to be inscribed in the nature of the human condition itself.

Time and again, when Moses explains to the Israelites the reason for the commands, he does so by asking them to *remember what it felt like* to live in a society where matters were arranged otherwise:

◂ Observe

> Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest as you do. *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt* and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. It is for this reason that the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (Deut. 5:12–15)

> And you shall love the stranger, for *you yourselves were strangers* in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:19)

> If your Hebrew kinsman or kinswoman is sold to you, he shall work for you for six years, and in the seventh year, you must release him from your service, free. When you set him free from your service you must not send him away empty-handed. You must give generously to him of your flock, your granary and your wine-vat with which the LORD your God has blessed you; so you shall give him. And you shall remember that you were once a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you; this is why, today, I command you thus. (Deut. 15:12–15)

> Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt* and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. (Deut. 24:17–18)

> When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt*. That is why I command you to do this. (Deut. 24: 21–22)

As the instances accumulate, the plan of the Torah becomes clear. The exodus functions not simply as a fact of history, but also and primarily

◂ as the fundamental

as the fundamental principle of jurisprudence, the logic and justification of the Law.

The Israelites were commanded to create *a society that was not Egypt*, that was different, opposite, counter-cultural. It would be a society in which even slaves rested every seventh day and breathed the wide air of freedom. It would be one in which no one was destitute, no one deprived of the basic necessities of life. It would be one in which no one became trapped endlessly in debt, or forced irretrievably to sell ancestral property. Everyone would have access to justice. Those at the margins of society – the widow, the orphan, the Levite, the stranger – were to be treated with dignity and included in national festivals and celebrations.

This made sense because the Israelites had been on the receiving end of Egypt. They knew what it felt like to be poor, to be deprived of justice, to be treated as less than human. They knew what it felt like to work without cease. In the words of Exodus, they "knew the soul of a stranger" (23:9). They knew from the inside what powerlessness feels like.

Scholars have drawn attention to the fact that what makes Torah law different from other law codes in the ancient world is its appeal to reason. Ancient law in general was "apodictic, without justification and without persuasion. Its style is categorical, demanding, and commanding." It "enjoins, prescribes, and orders, expecting to be heeded solely on the strength of being an official decree." It seeks no understanding and solicits no consent.* Against this the Torah represents "the Jewish predilection for justified law."

It is a point made by the great mediaeval commentator Ralbag (Gersonides, 1288–1344) who also argues that this is what makes the Torah different:

> Behold our Torah is unique among all the other doctrines and religions that other nations have had, in that our Torah contains nothing that does not originate in equity and reason. Therefore this Divine Law attracts people in virtue of its essence, so that they behave in accordance with it. The laws and religions of other nations are not like

* David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 5.

◂ this: they

> this: they do not conform to equity and wisdom, but are foreign to the nature of man, and people obey them because of compulsion, out of fear of the threat of punishment but not because of their essence.*

We now begin to see something singular about the Jewish experience. For as long as human beings have thought about morality, they have asked the question: Why be moral? Why act for the benefit of others if it is to your advantage to behave otherwise? We are self-seeking creatures, driven by desire. Why then desist from something you want to do and can do, merely because you ought not to? Plato, in *The Republic*, uses a thought experiment. He recalls the legend of Gyges' ring which had the power to make anyone who wore it invisible. One who had such a ring could commit any crime and get away with it. Why then would such a person be moral?**

Many answers have been given in the history of thought, none of them wholly satisfactory. The most famous attempt in the second half of the twentieth century was John Rawls' principle of "the veil of ignorance."*** What kind of society would you construct if you did not know in advance who you would be: black or white, rich or poor, upper or lower class, gifted or otherwise? You would, he says, choose a society with equal liberties for all – precisely the kind of society the Torah seeks to create within the constraints of the human, political and social realities of its time.

The trouble with Rawls' principle is that social structures are created by real people in real positions of privilege and power. Outside the classroom there is no veil of ignorance. We are born into the world as this, not that; with these parents, this history, this ethnicity, in this specific place and time. We make decisions on the basis of what we are, not on hypothetical consideration of what, in another life, we might have been.

The Torah gives the most powerful grounding ever contemplated for a moral system. It provides not a veil of ignorance but a sustaining stream of knowledge – acquired through experience, nurtured by memory, enacted in ritual, retold in sacred story, tasted on the tongue, never to be forgotten.

* Gersonides, Commentary to *Va'et-ḥanan*, par. 14.

** Plato, *The Republic*, Book II: 359a–360d.

*** John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

◂ Indeed

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Indeed, says God through the prophets from Moses to Jeremiah, if you ever forget it, you will be forced to relive it, through further exiles, other persecutions.

Egypt was, for the Israelites, the school of the soul. They knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of absolute power: Rameses II, the greatest ruler of the longest-lived empire the world has ever known. They had then experienced something that would serve as a source of wonder from that day to this. They had been rescued by the Creator of heaven and earth who had brought them from slavery to freedom, taken them through the sea on dry land, given them bread from heaven and water from a rock, and then made a covenant with them, not for His sake but for theirs, inviting them under His sovereignty to build a society that would use their God-given freedom to honour the liberty of others.

However, as we will now see, it is not just the commands that explicitly refer to "remembering Egypt" that were shaped by the Egyptian experience. So were many other features of Jewish law and belief.

4. Ozymandias

Stimulated by Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, Europe in the early nineteenth century was intrigued by the rediscovery of the magnificence of the civilisation that once dominated the world but now lay in ruins, leading the young English poet Shelley to publish, in 1818, the most famous and haunting of all critiques of self-aggrandising rulers:

> I met a traveller from an antique land
> Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
> Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
> Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
> And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
> The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
> And on the pedestal these words appear:
> "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
> Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

◂ Nothing

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Ozymandias was the Greek name for the most famous Pharaoh of all, third ruler of the nineteenth dynasty who dominated Egypt for some sixty-six years and is thought by many scholars to be the Pharaoh of the exodus, Rameses II. To the extent that the Torah is a deliberately contrarian work, a protest against and conscious alternative to, the great civilisations of its day, it is worth reflecting more fully on who Rameses was and what he represented.

Early in his reign, in 1274 BCE, he fought a well-documented campaign to reconquer the strategic town of Kadesh in what is now western Syria. Some years earlier it had been taken by the Hittites. Rameses himself led the Egyptian army, and was informed that the Hittites, hearing of his advance, had fled. Approaching the town he discovered that he had been misinformed and that the Hittites were actually hiding behind the town, preparing to make a preemptive strike. A ferocious battle ensued, with the Egyptians initially suffering devastating losses. The arrival of reinforcements just saved the day. The next day, the two forces clashed again, but both were too weakened to achieve a decisive result and a peace treaty was signed. Rameses had barely avoided humiliating defeat, but on returning to Egypt declared that he had won a momentous victory, accounts and depictions of which were, during the ensuing years, inscribed on temple walls throughout the land.

In a culture in which truth took second place to royal glory, it is perhaps not surprising that no record of either the Israelites or the exodus survives in Egyptian inscriptions, with one exception. It is contained in the Merneptah stele inscribed in the reign of Rameses II's successor Merneptah IV. It contains the following line:

Israel is laid waste, her seed is destroyed.

The first ever reference to Israel outside the Bible is an obituary: another triumph of wishful thinking over reality.

◂ No one

No one in history constructed more monuments to his glory than Rameses II. His architectural ambitions were vast, his self-adulation even more so. He undertook huge building projects at Luxor, where he enlarged the already spacious temple, as well as constructing new temples throughout his realm from Lebanon to Sudan. One of his most grandiose projects was the temple of Rameses-beloved-of-Amun at Abu Simbel. The entrance to the smaller of the two buildings has, on each side, a statue of queen Nefertari, flanked by two giant statues of Rameses thirty feet high. The facade of the larger temple has four vast statues of the seated king, each seventy feet high (three-and-a-half times as tall as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington). Inside, the pillared hall – each column adorned with a statue of Rameses depicted as Osiris, the Egyptian god of the afterlife – leads to four vast statues of Egypt's main gods, Ptah, Amun, Ra-Horakhty, the sun god, and Rameses himself. As one scholar writes, "Few autocrats in human history have conceived a more dramatic expression of their personality cult."* It is clear that when Pharaoh responds angrily to Moses' request in God's name to let the Israelites go, saying, "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD," what he means is, "Here, I am god."

It was Rameses II who constructed an entirely new city near Hutwaret where his father Seti I had built a summer palace. It was a vast panoply of mansions, storehouses and barracks which took two decades of construction to complete. The royal quarter alone covered four square miles, and the steps leading to the throne were adorned with images of the king's enemies so that he could symbolically tread on them each time he ascended to the throne. He called it Per-Rameses, "the house of Rameses," and it is one of the two cities mentioned in Exodus 1:11 as being built by the Israelites. The other, "Pithom," or Per-Atum (Tell el-Maskhuta) was in the eastern Nile delta, a day's journey away.

By the time of Moses, Egypt of the pharaohs was eighteen centuries old, already longer lived than any subsequent empire. Its wealth and military power were unsurpassed, but it was not altogether unassailable. The Egyptians had, in the sixteenth century BCE, endured the rule of foreigners, the Hyksos, a fact that gives an edge to the statement of pharaoh

* Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 332.

◂ at the beginning

at the beginning of Exodus, "Look, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we" (Ex. 1:9). This was not a theoretical fear. The Egyptians knew themselves to be vulnerable to incursion especially, though not only, from the north. Egypt had many gods, some 1,500 of them according to recent estimates. But by Rameses' day the real gods of Egypt were its rulers. It was they who were divine, who had communication with the gods and ruled even after death, whose buildings testified to their immortality, whose colossi dominated the landscape, striking fear in all who passed by. Rameses ruled Egypt as the sun ruled the sky.

The wealth of the royal court was astonishing, as become clear after the 1922 discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, with its coffin of pure gold, its funerary mask of gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, quartz, obsidian and turquoise, and its treasury of precious objects. At the same time the population as a whole lived a wretched existence. Remains of human skeletons show that they suffered not infrequently from starvation. There were regular epidemics among the urban population living crammed together in unsanitary conditions. Hepatitis, amoebic dysentery and schistosomiasis were common. Those who did not die were often disfigured. Contemporary documents speak of whole villages of people with impaired eyesight, the bleary-eyed, the one-eyed and the blind.

Farming at best yielded subsistence. Taxes had to be paid on all produce. Defaulters were thrown into prison. The vast majority of the population were illiterate, and virtually all able-bodied men were subject to the corvée, forced to work when the Nile flooded and fields were inundated, on the pharaoh's latest building extravaganza. The corvée was not abolished in Egypt until 1889. The conditions under which the Egyptians worked were not significantly better than those suffered by the Israelites. Their rations were barely enough to sustain life, and the backbreaking work under a sweltering sun with little food and less water meant that many died in the course of the great constructions.

Infant mortality was high, even in royal circles. We do not have independent evidence of what happened during the plagues, but we do know that Rameses II prematurely lost his twelve eldest sons, because his successor, Merneptah, was his thirteenth. Mortality was one of the central preoccupations of ancient Egypt: it was, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, "much possessed with death." Pharaohs, however, even those that did not see

◂ themselves

themselves as gods, on death joined the gods and became immortal. That is what the pyramids were initially: buildings through which the soul of the departed pharaoh ascended to heaven to join the immortals. Temples, although not themselves mausoleums (pharaohs were buried in tombs in the Valley of the Kings on the west bank of the Nile),were nonetheless intended to be eternal memorials, for even deceased pharaohs continued to rule over the destiny of Egypt from their court in heaven. Not until much later was the promise of immortality extended to ordinary people.

Against this background certain features of the Torah appear in a new or stronger light. First and most obvious is the sharpest possible *rejection of permanent economic hierarchy*, of a society in which some are fabulously rich while others are desperately poor. Even a king in Israel was not allowed to accumulate "much silver and gold" (Deut. 17:17). The entire welfare structure of the Torah, the corner of the field, other parts of the harvest, the tithe for the poor in the third and sixth years, the release of debts in the seventh and so on were intended to prevent the despair and destitution that existed in Egypt. "The great concern of Moses," wrote Henry George, "was to lay the foundation of a social state in which deep poverty and degrading want should be unknown."* When the wealth of the rich led to indifference to the poor, the prophets were incensed:

> You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves … but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. (Amos 6:4–6)

Isaiah says, "The LORD enters into judgement with the elders and princes of His people: 'It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people, by grinding the face of the poor?' says the LORD God of hosts" (Is. 3:14–15). Jeremiah says simply of the reforming king Josiah, "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know Me? says the LORD" (Jer. 22:16). Judaism is not socialism or communism: it distrusts the power of governments and sees private property as one of the primary safeguards of liberty. But deep-seated economic inequity

* Henry George, *Moses: A Lecture* (Berlin: J. Harrwitz, 1899).

◂ the fundamental

offends against the fundamental values of *tzedaka* and *mishpat*, social and legislative justice, deemed by God Himself to be "the way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19).

Second, in reaction against Rameses II specifically and rulers of the ancient world generally, the Tanakh redefines the institution of monarchy. Leaving aside the well-known ambivalence of the Torah about monarchy altogether, two features in particular of the Jewish law of kings were unique for their time and significant for all time. One was that the king had no major religious role whatsoever.* He was not the high priest; he was not the performer of key rituals; he was not the intermediary of the nation in relation to the gods; he had no privileged access to their will or favour. The sages famously objected to the later Hasmonean kings because they broke this rule: they said to Alexander Jannaeus (king of Judea, 103–76 BCE), "Let the crown of kingship be sufficient for you; leave to the descendants of Aaron the crown of priesthood" (*Kiddushin* 66a).

The other was that the king had no legislative power. As many scholars have shown, there are parallels between the Israelite system of law and that of other ancient Near-Eastern powers. But everywhere else, acts like the remission of debts or the restoration of ancestral property were within the grant of the king. In Israel all such acts were in the power of God alone. God alone is the legislator. So unique was this that Josephus, trying to explain it to the Romans, had to coin a word for it – there was no other system like it. The word he coined was *theocracy*, "rule by God," but since, in the course of time, the term has come to mean rule by clerics, a better word would be *nomocracy*, "the rule of laws, not men." The king was neither the author of the law nor above the law. As the prophets made clear – Nathan to David, Elijah to Ahab – when it came to the pursuit of private interest rather than the public good, there was no royal prerogative in Israel.

The effect of these two principles was to *secularise* power. The king rules; he is entitled to honour and has many rights, but the power he holds is conditional: first on God, second on God's law, third on the will

* To be sure, the king officiated at *Hak-hel*, the septennial public reading of the Torah, but this was not a sacramental function, a form of worship.

◂ of the people

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of the people. Divine sovereignty and human freedom are the fundamental realities in the politics of covenant. To these, monarchy (except in later messianic interpretations) comes a poor third. Michael Walzer puts it slightly differently: the Hebrew Bible "relativizes" all political regimes.* None is sacrosanct; none is written into the scheme of things. Ideally there would be no politics at all, just a vertical relationship between the people and God and a horizontal relationship of mutual responsibility between the people and one another. *The secularisation and relativisation of power in Judaism are a direct and specific rejection of the politics of the ancient world, never more clearly exemplified than by Rameses II, the ruler who turned himself into a god.*

Perhaps most significantly of all, Egypt left its mark on the Hebrew Bible in its unerring focus on life, not death. Given the obsession of ancient Egypt with the realm of death and the afterlife, the almost complete absence of these subjects from Tanakh is astonishing. There is no mention of it where we would most expect it. Ecclesiastes, for example, is a sustained meditation on mortality; everything is meaningless because we are all going to die. All the questions asked by Job could be answered in a single sentence: "Though you have suffered in this world you will receive your reward in the World to Come." The problematics of both books would be removed at a stroke by reference to the afterlife, but it is not there. Instead, says Moses, "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Therefore choose life, that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19).

It is not that Judaism denies the afterlife or the resurrection of the dead. These are central to its faith. They emerge from their concealment, as it were, in the later prophets and the post-biblical sages. But it is impossible to read the Torah without realising that it is, at specific points and to a high degree, a polemic against beliefs about the afterlife and the practices and cultures to which they give rise that it finds profoundly objectionable. There is almost no injustice that cannot be justified by reference to life after death. Terrorist suicide bombing is the latest example.

* Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 204.

◂ When Karl

When Karl Marx called religion "the opium of the people," this is what he had in mind: that the promise of bliss in an afterlife makes people accept chains and injustices in this life.

Nikolai Berdyaev in *The Meaning of History* argues that this is Judaism's fundamental error of judgement: its belief that perfect justice can ever be found in this world. That, he says, is what gives Judaism its eternal restlessness: it is why people dislike it so much. Christianity, he believes, made the better choice, by transferring its vision of justice, peace and perfection to life after death.

Berdyaev may or may not be right in his characterisation of Judaism and Christianity, but the Jewish reply is compelling and unfaltering. If this physical life, set in this physical universe, is to be forever fraught with pain, cruelty, injustice and betrayal; if humans are doomed in advance by original sin to fail in all their moral aspirations; if life down here is to be endured rather than perfected, then why did God create the universe in the first place? Why was He not content with the angels? Why did He make man? To create a being destined to suffer, fated to fail, unable to achieve anything on his own, briefly granted God's image only to have it snatched away after the first sin – this, to Jews, is not the work of a loving Creator. If all hope belongs in heaven, why do we strive on earth? Berdyaev's is not the Jewish voice in Christianity but the unmistakable accent of ancient Greece, with its orphic cults and Gnostic mysticism and platonic devaluation of the physical world. Rejecting Egypt's cult of death, Judaism commands, "Choose life."

We will understand more of Judaism the more we know about what it was a reaction against,* and in this equation the figure of Rameses II plays a key role. There are two features in particular of the story of Moses that cannot be understood other than in this light. One is the statement, at the end of Deuteronomy, that Moses was buried by God Himself, in the plain of Moab, opposite the Holy Land, and that "no one knows his burial place to this day" (Deut. 34:6). This is directed against the monuments and mausoleums of ancient Egypt. It says in effect: no one needs to know, let alone stand in awe, of the place where you are buried for you

* This, of course, is Maimonides' approach in *The Guide for the Perplexed*. See also Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

◂ to be immortal

to be immortal. "We do not make monuments for the dead: their words are their memorial" (Yerushalmi, *Shekalim* 2:5).

The other is a curious feature of the narrative of Moses' birth. We recall that he was placed in a basket and set afloat on the Nile where he was seen and subsequently adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. She gives him the name Moshe (Moses), saying, "I have drawn him [*meshitihu*] from the water" (Ex. 2:10). It takes a while before we realise that there is something strange about this sentence. It presupposes that Pharaoh's daughter spoke Hebrew. It also makes the impossible assumption that not only would she adopt a Hebrew child in direct contravention to her father's decree that every male child be killed, but would advertise the fact by giving him a Hebrew name. In short, the Hebrew etymology of the name is only half of the story.

Moses – in the form Mose, Mses or Messes – is in fact an Egyptian word. It figures in the names of several Pharaohs, including Thutmose, and most significantly Rameses himself. The word means "child." Understanding this we stand before one of the Torah's boldest and most revolutionary strokes. Years later, two men are to be involved in a monumental confrontation: Rameses and Moses. Their names tell us what is at stake. Rameses means "child of the sun god Ra." Rameses, as we have seen, saw himself as a god and erected a temple at Abu Simbel to that proposition. Moses was simply, anonymously, "a child" – with no more identification than that, exactly as there is no name given to his parents when we first encounter them in the biblical text, other than the bare description, "A man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman" (Ex. 2:1).

It is not one man, a supreme ruler, who is in the image of God, but every man, woman and child on the face of the earth. It is not one infant who is a child of God but all infants: "My child, My firstborn, Israel," as God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh on their first meeting (Ex. 4:22). The greatest ruler, if he holds himself to be a god, stands lower in the true order of things than any child who serves God rather than making God serve him. Moses means "a mere child." Nothing could be more skewed than the various commentators, most famously Otto Rank and Sigmund Freud, who read the story of the childhood of Moses as a variant on the "birth-of-the-hero myth" to be found in the ancient world in endless versions, among them the stories about Sargon, Oedipus, Paris and many

◂ others

others. What they failed to see is that the story of the birth of Moses is *a polemic against such myth*: an anti-myth, a sharp, stinging rejection of the idea that every hero is really of noble blood, raised by commoners, but truly royal and destined by birth to conquer and rule. This is not the world of Israel: it is the world Israel rejects.

Rameses II, worshipped in his lifetime, revered ever since, left gigantic statues of himself all over Egypt and beyond. One of the greatest of these was the huge granite colossus that stood in the mortuary temple he built in his own honour at Thebes. It was eventually destroyed by an earthquake. The account of the shattered fragments, inscribed with Rameses' throne name Usermaatra – rendered in Greek as Ozymandias – inspired Shelley's famous poem, testimony to the iron law of history that the greatest empire will eventually crumble and fall. But it was not this that had a lasting impact on the Hebraic mind but something else altogether: that when humans try to be more than human they end up less than human. Only when God is God can we be us. Only under divine sovereignty can a truly humane social order be built.

5. *Exodus Politics*

The political vision to emerge from the crucible of exile was unique, an ideal never fully realised yet never ceasing to make Jewish life different from the way other societies have structured themselves. Essentially it is a sustained critique of power at every level: political, economic, military, even demographic.

The use of power by one human over another is a form of violence. It diminishes victim and perpetrator alike. Power is a zero-sum game. I use it to buy my freedom at the cost of yours. It is a way of getting you to do my will despite your will. It turns you into a means to my end. Dominance, the use of force, brutality, whether raw as in primitive societies, or cultivated as in the case of hierarchical, class- or caste-based social orders, is an act of defiance against the principle of the first chapter of Genesis, that we are all created equally in the image and likeness of God.

So ideally Israel would not have a power structure in the form of kings at all. As Gideon the judge said when the people sought to make him king, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you, God will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). Israel's army will not rely on force of arms or

◂ brute

brute strength: God "does not take delight in the strength of horses, nor pleasure in the fleetness of man" (Ps. 147:10). Whether it is Joshua against Jericho, Gideon against the Midianites, David against Goliath, or Elisha predicting the sudden end of an Aramean siege, the emphasis is always on the few against the many, the weak against the strong, intelligence against brute force, the unexpected outcome through unconventional means.

Wealth may be as much of a danger as poverty: "When you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart may become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deut. 8:12–14). Nor, despite the repeated promises in Genesis of as many children as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth or the sand on the seashore, would Israel find strength in numbers: "The LORD did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7).

The political structure envisaged by the Torah emerges out of a profound meditation – beginning in the opening chapters of Genesis – on the tension between freedom and order. God creates order, calling the universe into being day after day by mere speech ("And God said"); for the first three days creating carefully differentiated domains: night and day, upper and lower waters, sea and dry land, then for the next three days furnishing them with the appropriate forms: sun and moon, birds and fish, animals and humans. This finely tuned order, seven times pronounced "good," is disrupted because of the freedom God has bestowed on man, sin leading to murder and from there to a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all in which life is nasty, brutish and short. The human alternatives set out in Genesis and Exodus are stark: there is freedom without order – the world before the Flood – and there is order without freedom – the Egypt of the pharaohs.

How then can there be both? This is the problem and it is not simple. The sages had a tradition that the question, "What is this service to you?" (Ex. 12:26) was asked by "the wicked son." The Haggada attributes this to the phrase "to you" – implying "but not to me." Other commentators*

* Rabbi Moshe Silber, *Ḥashukei Kesef* to Exodus 12:26.

◂ point

point to the verb used in the verse. Normally a question is *asked*, but here it is *said* ("And if your children should *say* to you…"). When you ask a question, you seek an answer, but when you state a question you merely seek to challenge and undermine.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Pesaḥim* 10:4), though, has a quite different explanation. It focusses on the word "service," and has the child asking, "What is the point of all this effort at which you are toiling?" What the Yerushalmi is alluding to is that the word the Torah uses for the enslavement of the Israelites to Pharaoh, *avoda*, is exactly the same as it uses for serving God. In what sense, then, were the Israelites liberated from slavery to freedom? Before the exodus they were *avadim*. After the exodus they were *avadim*. The only difference was to whom. Before it was to Pharaoh, thereafter it was to God. On the face of it, this looks less like freedom than a mere change of masters. One may be cruel, the other benign, but *avdut*, service or servitude, is still the opposite of freedom. Where then does liberty enter the human condition?

The Torah's answer consists of three elements. First is the principle of consent. Read the Torah carefully and we see that God binds Himself to make a covenant with the Israelites only if they agree. He tells Moses to make a proposal to the people. God will take them as His *am segula*, favoured people, if and only if they willingly assent to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Both before and after the revelation at Mount Sinai the people give their consent. Note the wording. Before the revelation:

> *All the people answered as one* and said, "All that God has spoken, we will do" (Ex. 19:8)

Afterward, we read:

> Moses came and told the people all of God's words and all the laws. The people *all responded with a single voice,* "We will keep every word that God has spoken" […] He took the book of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. They replied, "We will do and obey all that God has declared." (Ex. 24:3, 7)

◂ Unlike

Unlike all other covenants in the ancient world this was not made on behalf of the people by their ruler. Moses is not empowered to speak on behalf of the Israelites. They all have to be asked; they all have to give their consent. This, argues political philosopher Michael Walzer, is part of what makes the political structure of the Torah an "almost democracy."*

Note also that God insists on asking the people whether they agree to the covenant and its terms, despite the fact that He has rescued them from slavery, and that they have already called themselves, in the Song at the Sea, "the people You acquired" (Ex. 15:16). Implicit in this strong insistence on voluntary agreement is the principle (stated in the American Declaration of Independence**) that *there is no government without the consent of the governed, even when the governor is God Himself*. The presence or absence of assent is what makes the difference between freedom and slavery.***

The second is that throughout Deuteronomy, the Torah's key covenantal document, the commandments are not given as "decrees of the king" to be obeyed merely because they have been ordained. Reasons are constantly given, usually in terms of the phrase, "remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt." By this appeal to reason, God "invites the receiver of the law to join in grasping the beneficent effect of the law, thereby bestowing dignity upon him and giving him a sense that he is a partner in the law."****

There is a fundamental difference between a parent teaching a child why certain things are wrong, and a commander instructing those under his command not to do this or that. The one is a form of education; the other is a relationship of command-and-control. Education is an apprenticeship in liberty; command-and-control is a demand for obedience,

* Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 200.

** "To secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

*** The Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a) famously questions whether the consent given at Mount Sinai was truly free. The covenant however was subsequently renewed several times under different circumstances.

**** David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 14.

◂ pure

pure and simple. One of the most striking facts about biblical Hebrew is that, despite the Torah containing 613 commandments, it contains no word that means "to obey." Modern Hebrew had to adopt the Aramaic word *letzayet*. The word the Torah uses instead of "to obey" is *shema*, a word that means "to listen, to hear, to understand, to internalise, and to respond." God does not call for blind submission to His will. As the sages said, "God does not act like a tyrant to His creatures" (*Avoda Zara* 3a).

God wants us to keep His laws freely and voluntarily because we understand them. Hence the unique insistence, throughout the Torah, on the importance of education as the constant conversation between the generations. Parents are to talk to their children repeatedly about them, "when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deut. 6:7).

> When your children ask you, "What are the testimonies, the statutes and laws that the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell them: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand… The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. (Deut. 6:20–24)

Third is the radical alternative to a hierarchical society: the horizontal society formed by the covenant, through which each is responsible for playing his or her part in the maintenance of a just and gracious order: by helping the poor, acting justly, honestly and compassionately, educating children, not neglecting marginal members of society and so on, the principle later formulated by the sages as "all Israel are sureties for one another" (*Sanhedrin* 27b; *Shevuot* 39a).

This is a radically devolved leadership that Exodus calls "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," (Ex. 19:6) and to which Moses alludes to when he says, "Would that all God's people were prophets" (Num. 11:29). Covenant, as set forth in the Hebrew Bible, is the dramatic idea that the people, individually and together, accept responsibility for determining their fate by acting righteously with one another, relying on the God of justice to secure justice in the arena of history. They have autonomy: only God has sovereignty. If the people act well, God will ensure that they fare

◂ well

well. If they act badly, it will end badly. All depends on faithfulness to God and decency to people. All else – governments, rulers, armies, alliances, strategy, warfare, the entire repertoire of power – will prove illusory in the long run.

The politics of the Torah are unlike any other in the emphasis they place on society rather than the state; "we the people" rather than governments, monarchs or rulers; voluntary welfare rather than state-based taxation; devolved rather than centralised authority; education and social sanction rather than the coercive use of power. It never fully succeeded in biblical times. The reluctant conclusion of the book of Judges is that "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6 and 21:25). Without government there is anarchy. Even the Israelites were forced to this Hobbesian conclusion ("Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for fear of it, people would swallow one another alive" [*Avot* 3:2]). Thus monarchy was born and with it the corruptions of power.

Yet the ideal remained and gained in strength after the reforms of Ezra, the growth of rabbinic Judaism and its academies, and the dispersion of Jewry after the collapse of the Bar Kokhba rebellion. What emerged was a unique collection of semi-autonomous communities, each with its own religious, educational and welfare institutions, self-funded and self-governing, with fellowships, *ḥevrot*, for almost every conceivable communal need – supporting the poor, visiting the sick, performing last rites for the dead, helping families who had suffered bereavement, and so on through the catalogue of requirements of dignified life as a member of the community of faith. The educational structure, lynchpin of the entire system, worked on the assumption that everyone was expected to be learned in the law – to know it, understand it, keep it and ensure that it was kept by others.

In a manuscript found among his papers after his death, the French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed amazement at the power of this "astonishing and truly unique spectacle," an exiled, landless and often persecuted people, "nonetheless preserving its characteristics, its laws, its customs, its patriotic love of the early social union, when all ties with it seem broken." Athens, Sparta and Rome, he says, "have perished and no longer have children left on earth; Zion, destroyed, has not lost its children." He continues:

◂ What

> What must be the strength of legislation capable of working such wonders, capable of braving conquests, dispersions, revolutions, exiles, capable of surviving the customs, laws, empire of all the nations, and which finally promises them, by these trials, that it is going to continue to sustain them all, to conquer the vicissitudes of things human, and to last as long as the world?*

The short answer is that in its unique political structure, in which all sovereignty belongs to God and where the other covenantal partner is not the king, high priest or prophet but the nation as a whole, responsibility is maximally diffused and ethics does the work of what in other systems is done by politics. The opposite of one man ruling over a nation is a nation ruling over itself, under the eye of, following the laws of, and accountable to, God Himself. Utopian to be sure and never fully realizable in a world of wars, yet it remains the greatest experiment ever undertaken in the idea of politics without power, the rule of right not might.

6. The Future of the Past

As we noted above, the exodus happened five times *before* it happened. First Abraham and Sarah went into exile in Egypt, then Abraham foresaw the fate of his descendants in a night vision, then he and Sarah were forced into exile to Gerar, then Isaac and Rebecca suffered the same fate, then Jacob went into exile to Laban: four journeys and a prophecy, each prefiguring what the Israelites would have to endure, but each also a kind of assurance that they would survive and return.

So it came about that the exodus also happened *after* it happened. In one of his most remarkable flights of prophecy, Moses warned the people even before they had entered the land, that one day they would dishonour the covenant and be forced into exile again. There, far from home, they would reflect on their fate and come to the conclusion that defeat and disaster were not the mere happenstance of history but the result of their faithlessness to God. If they would return to God then God would return to them and bring them back to their land:

* Quoted in Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. III, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 104–5.

◂ Then

> Then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where He scattered you. Even if you are scattered to the furthermost lands under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and take you back. (Deut. 30:3–4)

It was an astonishing vision but, as it happened, a necessary one. Israel's existence as a nation in its land could never be taken for granted. It was a small country, surrounded not only by other small nations but by large and hungry empires. It was also fractious. The tribal confederation that lasted throughout the period of the judges gave way to a monarchy, but the nation was imperfectly united and after a mere three generations of kings it split into Israel and Judah, north and south. Most of the literary prophets either anticipated defeat and exile, or experienced it. Yet they had hope.

Theirs was not *mere* hope, optimism, wishful thinking. It was grounded in historical experience and theological principle. God had redeemed the people in the past. He would do so again in the future. Partly because the people, sobered by suffering, would repent. Partly because God had given His word and would not break it. Partly because the bond between God and the people was unbreakable, like that between a father and a son, or as the prophets preferred to see it, like that between a husband and a faithless wife he cannot bring himself to divorce because he still loves her. But fundamentally, because the exodus is the shape of Jewish time. Sin brings exile. Repentance brings return. So it was; so it will be.

So the prophets foresaw a second exodus. Hosea did, long in advance:

> "They shall come trembling like a bird from Egypt, like a dove from the land of Assyria. And I will let them dwell in their houses," says the LORD. (Hos. 11:11)

Likewise Amos:

> I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit *them;* they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land… (Amos 9:14–15)

◂ Amos

Amos and Hosea both prophesied in the eighth century BCE and both directed their words to the northern kingdom, which did indeed fall to the Assyrians as they had foreseen. A century and a half later the southern kingdom of Judea also fell, this time to the Babylonians. There in exile it was Ezekiel who gave the people hope, though his was a dark hope.

In one of the most haunting of all prophetic visions – we read it on Shabbat Ḥol HaMo'ed – Ezekiel sees his people as a landscape of corpses, a valley of dry bones. They are devastated. They say *avda tikvatenu*, "our hope is gone." God then asks him: "Son of man, can these bones be revived?" The prophet does not know what to say. Then he sees the bones slowly come together and grow flesh and skin and come to life again. Then he hears God say:

> Son of man, these bones are all the house of Israel: behold, they say, "Our bones have dried, our hope is lost, our decree has been sealed." Therefore, prophesy, saying to them, "Thus spoke the Lord God: Behold, I shall open your graves and lift you out of your graves, My people; I shall bring you to the land of Israel. And you will know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and lift you out of your graves, My people." (Ezek. 37:11–13)

Isaiah, the poet laureate of hope, had a more positive vision – we read it as the Haftara for the eighth day. The prophet foresaw a day in which "the Lord will reach out His hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant that is left of His people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, Pathros, Cush, from Elam, Shinar, Hamath and the islands of the sea." Once again He would prevail over the waters, drying up "the gulf of the Egyptian sea" and the Euphrates river, so that the Israelites will once again walk through waters that have become dry land, and "There will be a highway for the remnant of His people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt" (Is. 11:11–16).

Isaiah's younger contemporary Micah put it most simply: "As in the days of your exodus from Egypt, so I will show you wonders" (Mic. 7:15). And so it happened. Barely half a century after conquering Judea and destroying the Temple, Babylon fell to the Persians. First Cyrus, then Darius, gave the Jews permission to return, rebuild the Temple and reestablish

◂ their

their national life. It may have been less miraculous than the prophets hoped: not all the people returned, nor was there true political independence. But it was a second exodus.

Then came Greece, the empire of Alexander the Great, and then Rome. There were times when these Hellenistic powers allowed Jews a measure of autonomy and religious freedom, but others when that freedom was denied. Three times Jews rose in revolt, once successfully against Antiochus IV, twice unsuccessfully against Rome, the Great Revolt of 66–73 and the Bar Kokhba rebellion of 132–135. These were two of the greatest disasters of Jewish history. In the first, the Temple was destroyed again. In the second, the whole of Judea was devastated (see "Surviving Grief," page lxii).

Jews went into exile again, some to Babylon, others to Egypt, yet others to Rome and other parts of the Mediterranean and beyond. A rabbinic midrash,* commenting on Jacob's dream of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending, interprets it as a reference to the empires that would conquer Jacob's children. He saw the angels of Babylon, the Medes and Persians, and Greece rise and then come down, but the angel of Rome kept rising, showing no sign of decline, and Jacob was afraid. This was an exile seemingly without end.

For the first time we hear a note of absolute despair. In the wake of the Hadrianic persecutions that followed the defeat of Bar Kokhba, we find the following statement in the Talmud: "By rights we should issue a decree that no Jews should get married and have children, so that the seed of Abraham might come to an end of its own accord" (*Bava Batra* 60b). Rarely before and rarely since have such words been said, let alone recorded in one of Judaism's canonical texts.

Yet despair did not prevail. From Babylon in Talmudic or early post-Talmudic times, we begin to hear of a new custom, of saying at the beginning of the Seder service in Aramaic: "This is the bread of oppression our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come in and eat; let all who are in need come and join us for the Pesaḥ. Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now – slaves; next year we shall be free." As if to say: yes, we are in exile again. But we have been here before, and we have returned before. Next year.

* *Vayikra Raba, Emor* 29.

◂ The centuries

The centuries passed. Then came the 1860s and the childhood of a young member of a highly assimilated family in Austro-Hungary, Theodor Herzl. Previously, in the atmosphere of European nationalism and the unification of Italy, rabbis like Zvi Hirsch Kalischer and Yehuda Alkalai had to begun to advocate a return to Zion. Moses Hess, a secular Jew and one-time companion of Karl Marx, had found himself drawn back to the fate of his people by the Damascus blood libel of 1841, and he too had become a Zionist. Herzl knew none of this at the time, but in later life, he recalled the following childhood dream:

> One night, as I was going to sleep, I suddenly remembered the story of the exodus from Egypt. The story of the historical exodus and the legend of the future redemption, which will be brought about by King Messiah became confused in my mind … One night I had a wonderful dream: King Messiah came … On one of the clouds we met the figure of Moses … and the Messiah … turned to me: "Go and announce to the Jews that I will soon come and perform great miracles for my people and for the whole world."*

Herzl's parents had given him little Jewish instruction and he grew up to be somewhat dismissive of religion. But this he knew: that once there was an exodus and there would be again.

At the end of the Second World War, as in Moses' day, the Jewish people had barely survived attempted genocide. As the scale of the Final Solution became clear, the Jewish people were closer to Ezekiel's vision than ever before. A third of them had become a valley of dry bones. Now in a last-ditch effort to restore to the Jewish people its ancient, ancestral home, David Ben Gurion stood to address the United Nations Commission charged with deciding the fate of the land to which Moses had led his people those many centuries before. If it voted for partition, then in effect the United Nations would be deciding to bring into being the modern State of Israel, restoring sovereignty to the people that had lost it two thousand years earlier. Ben Gurion must have known that it was the most important speech of his life and that the fate of the

* Quoted in T. Herzl, *The Jewish State* (Borgo Press, 2008), intro. Alex Bein, 17.

◂ Jewish people

Jewish people rested on its outcome. In the course of his remarks he said this:

> Three hundred years ago a ship called the Mayflower set sail to the New World. This was a great event in the history of England. Yet I wonder if there is one Englishman who knows at what time the ship set sail? Do the English know how many people embarked on this voyage? What quality of bread did they eat? Yet more than 3,300 years ago…the Jews left Egypt. Every Jew in the world, even in America or Soviet Russia knows on exactly what day they left – the fifteenth of the month of Nisan – and everyone knows what kind of bread the Jews ate."*

The United Nations voted, with the requisite majority, for partition. Seven months later the State of Israel was reborn. The third exodus had taken place.

The narrative arch is vast, from the banks of the Jordan to Babylon to Austro-Hungary to the United Nations in New York, spanning more than half the history of civilisation. Yet the Pesaḥ story lived on, time and again rescuing a people from despair.

There is no proof of hope, no scientific theory on which it can be grounded, no compelling, unequivocal historical evidence that the human story is destined to end well. The optimistic reading, which used to be called the Whig theory of history, was dealt a catastrophic blow in the twentieth century: two world wars, a hundred million deaths, and two evil empires, the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, as bestial as any the world has ever known. The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall led to vicious ethnic conflict in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya and elsewhere. The "Arab Spring" of 2011 has not, as I write, yet led to the spread of freedom, civil rights and the rule of law in the Middle East. There is no straight inference from the past to optimism about the human future. But there are grounds for hope: the story of Israel, its exiles, its exoduses, its survival against the odds, its refusal to despair.

* Quoted in Lawrence Hoffman, *Israel: A Spiritual Travel Guide* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 114–15.

◂ Israel's

Israel's existence has never been easy: not in biblical times and not today. It has always been a small country surrounded by large empires, without the natural resources, the wealth, the landmass or the demographic strength ever to become, in worldly terms, a superpower. All it had, then and now, was the individual strength and resourcefulness of its people – that and its faith and way of life. The relationship between God and the Jewish people has been fraught. There were times when the people turned away from God. There were times when God "hid His face" from the people. But the name "Israel" itself, according to the Torah (Gen. 32:28), means one who wrestles with God and with man and prevails. We never stop wrestling with God, nor He with us.

Reading the story of the exodus against the history of the Jewish people through the ages, one thing shines with greater intensity than all others: the way that monotheism confers dignity and responsibility on the individual, every individual equally. There is no hierarchy in heaven; therefore there is, ideally, no hierarchy on earth. We are each called on to be holy, to be knowledgable like priests, visionary like prophets, willing to fight battles like kings.

The ideal society is one formed by covenant, in which we each accept responsibility for the fate of the nation. That is not democracy in the Greek sense, which is about government and power. It is about society as a moral enterprise. It is about freedom-as-responsibility, not freedom-as-autonomy. It is, as John Locke put it, about liberty, not license. It is about freedom as the collective achievement of a people who know what it tastes like to eat the bread of affliction and know also that a society of everyone-for-himself is less like the route to the Promised Land than like the way back to Egypt. It is a difficult freedom, but it is one worth having.

Societies where everyone is valued, where everyone has dignity, where there may be economic differences but no class distinctions, where no one is so poor as to be deprived of the essentials of existence, where responsibility is not delegated up or down but distributed throughout the population, where children are precious, the elderly respected, where education is the highest priority, and where no one stands aside from their duties to the nation as a whole – such societies are morally strong even if they are small and outnumbered. That is the Jewish faith. That is what Israel, the people, the land and their story mean.

◄ There is

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There is one passage missing from the Haggada that, perhaps, deserves to be reinstated. It occurs at the point where Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria has compared himself to a seventy-year-old man (the burdens of leadership made his hair turn grey overnight [*Berakhot* 28a]) but he never understood until now why we must mention the exodus from Egypt at night until Ben Zoma explained it to him. Ben Zoma inferred it from the phrase, "so that you may remember the day of your exodus out of Egypt *all* the days of your life." The word "all," says Ben Zoma, comes to include nights. Not so, said the sages. It comes to include the messianic age.

There the text breaks off. It is, in fact, an extract from the Mishna. However, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 12b) tells us how the conversation continued. Ben Zoma said to the sages: Will we remember the going out of Egypt in the messianic age? Did not the prophet Jeremiah say otherwise? For he said, "The days are coming – declares the Lord – when people will no longer say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,' but they will say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where He had banished them.' Then they will live in their own land" (Jer. 23:7–8). The sages concurred, adding simply that when that time comes we will still remember the exodus from Egypt, even though we will have another and larger exodus for which to thank God.

So it has come to pass, and it is wondrous in our eyes. There are stories that change the world, none more remarkable than that of Pesaḥ, the master-narrative of hope.

7. The Omer: Three Studies

Pesaḥ, as befits a celebration of beginnings, is not only a self-contained festival in its own right. It also looks forward. It is the start of a journey through space and time. Hence the command, associated with the bringing of the grain offering known as the Omer, to *count time*, numbering the days and weeks until the next festival, Shavuot. The following three essays are about this command. The first is about a famous controversy that arose between different Jewish groups in the late Second Temple period. The second is about a later disagreement, in the era of the Geonim (c.589–1038). The third is about the post-Talmudic custom to mark this time, or at least a major portion of it, as a period of collective mourning.

◂ New Light

NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD CONTROVERSY

One feature of Pesaḥ occasioned intense controversy between the various factions in the Second Temple period and in early mediaeval Jewish life. It concerned the offering known as the Omer and the count it initiated to the next festival, Shavuot. Here is the law as stated in Leviticus:

> When you enter the land which I am giving you, and you harvest its grains, you shall bring the first omer measure of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the omer in the presence of the LORD so that it may be accepted from you; the priest shall wave it on the day following the [Pesaḥ] rest day… And you shall count seven complete weeks from the day following the [Pesaḥ] rest day, when you brought the omer as a wave-offering. To the day after the seventh week you shall count fifty days. Then you shall present a meal-offering of new grain to the LORD. (Lev. 23:10–11, 15–16)

The passage raises obvious questions. What did the Omer offering signify? What did it have to do with Pesaḥ, or for that matter with Shavuot? Why the counting of the days between, something we do not find in connection with any other festival?

The real historical controversy however, and it was prolonged and acrimonious, was about the phrase "the day following the [Pesaḥ] rest day." What does this mean? If we translate *moḥorat haShabbat* as "the day following the Sabbath," then the plain sense is Sunday. But which Sunday? And why? And did it really mean Sunday here? There are after all two cycles of time in the Jewish year. There is weekly time, determined by the cycle of seven days culminating in the Sabbath, set by God Himself in the act of creation. And there is monthly time, entrusted by God in His first command to the Israelites themselves (Ex. 12:2), to determine the calendar in a complex synthesis between the sun that gives rise to seasons and the moon that gives rise to months. So the reference to the Sabbath in the context of Pesaḥ and Shavuot seems discordant, a confusion of two time modes – God's time (the Sabbath) and Israel's time (the festivals).

There was a tension here and it highlighted the deep schisms in Jewish life in the late Second Temple period between Pharisees on the one hand, and other groups like the Boethusians, Sadducees, Samaritans

◂ and the Qumran

and the Qumran sect on the other. Later in the period of the Geonim, from the eighth century onward, a similar controversy arose between the followers of the rabbis and the Karaites. The Pharisees and the rabbis held, as we do, that there is an Oral tradition, the *Torah Shebe'al Peh*, of equal authority with the Torah's written text, the *Torah Shebikhtav*. That tradition said that "the day following the rest day" meant "the day after the first day of the festival," which, being a day of rest, could also be called Shabbat.

The other groups, denying the oral tradition, held that the word "Shabbat" was to be construed literally. For them the Omer was offered on a Sunday, and Shavuot would fall on Sunday seven weeks later. The Boethusians, Sadducees and Karaites understood the phrase to mean "the day after the Shabbat *during* Pesaḥ." The Qumran sect understood it to refer to the Shabbat *after* Pesaḥ. The Jews of Ethiopia held a fourth view, understanding it to mean the last day of the festival, so for them Shavuot fell six days later than for the Pharisees and rabbis. The result was chaos: different groups celebrating a major festival on different days.

Almost certainly the controversy arose because of an ambiguity that developed in post-biblical Judaism. Two concepts that in the Torah are quite distinct became blurred: the word *Pesaḥ* and the phrase *Ḥag HaMatzot*, "the festival of unleavened bread." *Pesaḥ* in the Torah refers to the fourteenth day of Nisan, on the afternoon of which the Paschal offering (the Pesaḥ) was brought. *Ḥag HaMatzot* is the name of the seven-day festival that begins the next day, on the fifteenth of Nisan (see Lev. 23:5–6). Pesaḥ itself was not a day of rest, but the first day of *Ḥag HaMatzot* was (Lev. 23:7). That is why in this chapter, Leviticus 23, the Torah uses the phrase "the day after the Sabbath," meaning "the day after the day of rest," to make it clear that it does *not* mean, "the day after Pesaḥ," that is, the day after the fourteenth, but rather, "the day after the fifteenth, which is a day of rest." Only in post-biblical usage, when Pesaḥ began to be used as a synonym for *Ḥag HaMatzot*, did the confusion, and thus the controversy, arise.

Why, though, did it take the shape it did? I will argue in this essay that a different issue was at stake than the authority of the Oral Law. But first, though, the count itself. What did it represent? There were two types of approach, depending on whether we understand the festivals

◂ seasonally

seasonally or historically. Historically Pesaḥ was the anniversary of the exodus, Shavuot the anniversary of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.* On this reading, the counting of days has to do with the journey between Egypt and Sinai, between liberation on the one hand and the making of the covenant – the constitution of liberty – on the other. The count is a way of marking the significance of this key seven-week journey, italicising time for emphasis.

The rationalist and mystical traditions, in the form of Maimonides and the *Zohar*, understood this in their respective ways. For Maimonides** it was a counting-to. The Israelites keenly anticipated their encounter with God at Sinai and counted the days as they travelled to the destination. For the *Zohar* it was a counting-from. The Israelites, defiled by their long stay in Egypt, were engaged in a process of purification.***

The festivals, though, also have a seasonal dimension, relating to the agricultural year. The Omer was an offering of the first produce of the barley harvest. It was this that allowed the people to eat from the new produce of the field: until then it was forbidden to do so. The following seven weeks were the most intensive time of the farmer's year, the period of the grain harvest, culminating in Shavuot with its offering of two loaves of bread made of leavened wheat.

From this perspective, counting the days had to do with the extended period of the grain harvest. It was a way of praying for a good crop (Abudraham), or of giving thanks for God's blessings in the fields (Sforno). Probably it was both. There is a further theory that the counting was necessary because people were in the fields, away from the town. There was a danger that people might forget when the festival was due. Hence the count so as not to lose track of the fact that Shavuot was imminent (*Roke'aḥ*).

* Note, however, that the association of Shavuot and the giving of the Torah at Sinai is nowhere mentioned in Tanakh. This too is part of the oral tradition.

** *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:43.

*** *Zohar, Emor* 97a. This difference neatly coincides with two other commands of counting in Jewish law. A *nidda*, a woman who has menstruated, counts the days until she can become purified again – a counting-from (Lev. 15:28). And in biblical times the court counted the seven cycles of seven years to the Jubilee – a counting-to (Lev. 25:8). The former corresponds to the *Zohar*'s reading of the Omer count, the latter to Maimonides' interpretation.

◂ To return

To return now to the phrase "the day following the rest day": those who understood it literally as Sunday had some compelling arguments in their favour. First, that is what the phrase usually means. If the Torah meant, as the Pharisees said, "the day after the first day of the festival," why did it not say so? Besides which, only by starting the count on the first day of the week does a count of forty-nine days yield "seven complete weeks" in the usual sense, namely a seven-day period beginning on Sunday and ending on Shabbat. One Boethusian reported in the Talmud (*Menaḥot* 65a) offered a third and touchingly human consideration. Moses, he said, was "a lover of Israel." Realising that after seven exhausting weeks in the field, farmers would be tired, Moses (or rather, God) had compassion on them and gave them a festival that immediately followed Shabbat – in other words a long weekend!

However there is a further reason, not mentioned in the Talmudic sources but clearly hovering in the background. The word "Omer," in addition to meaning "sheaf," has a highly significant connotation in the context of the exodus. It was the measure of the manna that fell for the Israelites when they had exhausted the matza they had brought with them from Egypt. The Torah (Ex. 16:1–18) tells us that the food ran out, the people were starving, they complained to Moses and God sent them the manna, one of whose miraculous properties was that however much people collected they always found that they had an Omer's quantity (one tenth of an ephah).

This suggests that the Boethusians and other sectarians may have had a specific historical understanding of the Omer. It was a way of remembering the manna itself – the bread of freedom they ate in the wilderness once the unleavened bread of affliction had been consumed. This is not absurd: still today we observe the custom of having two loaves of bread on Shabbat to recall the double portion of manna that fell on Friday in honour of Shabbat. If this is so then the Boethusians would have had another and yet more powerful argument to deploy in their debate with the Pharisees: *the manna first fell on a Sunday*! On this even the Talmud, the classic text of rabbinic Judaism, agrees.* That, the Boethusians might

* *Shabbat* 87b; Rashi to Exodus 16:1.

◂ have argued

have argued, is why the Omer is always offered on Sunday since it recalls the manna that first fell on Sunday.

The mention of manna, however, brings us to one of the simplest and most compelling arguments against the Boethusians. It is given by Maimonides.* He refers to the passage in the book of Joshua that we read as the Haftara for the first day of Pesaḥ:

> The children of Israel camped at Gilgal and they made the Pesaḥ offering on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, on the plains of Jericho. They ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Pesa*ḥ*, matzot and roasted grain, on that very day. And the manna ceased [to come down] the next day, when they ate of the produce of the land, and the children of Israel no longer had manna; they ate of the crops of the land of Canaan that year. (Josh. 5:10–12)

Here we see the Israelites eating from the new produce "the day after the Pesaḥ [*mimoḥorat haPesaḥ*]," not "the day after the Sabbath." New produce may only be eaten after the Omer has been brought. Clearly then the Omer was brought on the day after the festival, rather than on a Sunday. The proof is impressive.** But Maimonides is implicitly telling us something more. *The offering of the Omer recalls not the beginning but the end of the manna*. If this is so, the implications are immense.

The differences between the manna and the new produce of the land, the food Joshua and his contemporaries were the first to eat, were these:

1. The manna came from the wilderness, the new grain from the land of Israel.
2. The manna was in many respects miraculous, the new grain was not.

* *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Daily and Additional Offerings 7:11. See also Ibn Ezra to Leviticus 23:11; Judah HaLevi, *Kuzari*, III:41.

** Note, however, Ibn Ezra's critique of this proof in his commentary to Leviticus 23:11.

◄ 3. The manna

3. The manna was the gift of God; the new grain involved the work of humans, farmers.*
4. The manna is described in the Torah as "bread from heaven" (Ex. 16:4); the new grain is "bread from the earth" (Ps. 104:14).
5. The manna was, according to Rabbi Akiva, "bread that the angels eat" (*Yoma* 75b). The Omer, brought from barley, was coarse food, sometimes the feed of animals.

The manna was special. The Israelites did not have to work for it. There was no ploughing and planting and tending and reaping. It was God's gift; it fell from the sky. New manna appeared every day and all they had to do was collect it. Entering the land must have seemed in one sense a disappointment, an entry into the prosaic quotidian world of labour in the fields and waiting anxiously to see whether the harvest would be a good one or whether it would be ruined by drought as often happened in the land of Israel.

Judaism, though, has historically and from the outset taken a different view of the world of work. It contains a deep polemic against the idea of a leisured class, and a strong sense of the dignity of labour. God Himself, in Genesis 2, plants a garden and fashions the first human from the earth. The first man is charged with serving and protecting the garden. "Sweet is the sleep of a labouring man," says Ecclesiastes (5:11). "When you eat the fruit of your labour, happy and fortunate are you," says the Psalm (128:2). The vision of happiness in the prophets is "each man under his vine and his fig tree" (Mic. 4:4).

Flay carcasses rather than be dependent on others, said the third-century Amora Rav (*Pesaḥim* 113a). Someone who does not engage in *yishuv ha'olam*, constructive work, is invalid as a witness in Jewish law (*Sanhedrin* 24b). Rabbi Yehoshua said of the nasi Rabban Gamliel, "Woe to the generation that has you as a leader," since you do not understand people's struggle to earn a livelihood (*Berakhot* 28a). Work is a source of dignity and self-respect. Dependence is the opposite. As

* To be sure, the grain the Israelites ate at Gilgal in the days of Joshua was not the result of the Israelites' work but that of the Canaanites. Nonetheless it represented the fruit of human labour, which in the future would be that of the Israelites themselves.

◂ the Grace

we say in the Grace after Meals, "Do not make us dependent on the gifts or loans of other people… so that we may suffer neither shame nor humiliation." Jewish mysticism coined the phrase *nahama dekisufa*, "the bread of shame," for food you receive from others without having to work for it.

Work is dignity. Work without cease, however, is slavery. *Parekh*, the term used to characterise the labour the Egyptians imposed on the Israelites, probably means: work without rest and without an end in sight.* That is why Shabbat is central to the project of constructing a world that is not Egypt. Keep Shabbat, said Moses in the second iteration of the Ten Commandments, in Deuteronomy, so that "Your male and female slaves may rest as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt… It is for this reason that the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day" (Deut. 5:13–14). Freedom does not mean not working. It means the ability to stop working. Shabbat is the first taste of freedom. That is why the first day of Pesaḥ is described in the Torah as Shabbat.

What is the larger significance of the phrase *moḥorat haShabbat*, "the day following the rest day"? To understand this we have to go back to the story of creation itself. In six days God created the world, and on the seventh He rested. As the sages read the text, dovetailing the two accounts in Genesis 1 and 2–3, God created the first humans on the sixth day. That same day they sinned and were sentenced to exile from the garden. God granted them one complete day in paradise, Shabbat itself. Immediately after Shabbat they left Eden for the darkness of the world. God however made them "garments of skin" (read in the school of Rabbi Meir of the Mishna as "garments of light")** and, according to rabbinic tradition, taught them how to make fire, which is why we make a blessing over light in *Havdala*, the service to mark the end of Shabbat (Yerushalmi, *Berakhot* 8:5). Again, this has far-reaching implications. *On Shabbat we celebrate the world God creates. The day after Shabbat is when we celebrate the world we create.* The phrase *moḥorat haShabbat* is a metaphor for human endeavour and achievement – the space God makes for us.

* Ex. 1:13, 14; normally translated as "with rigor"; *Sifra, Behar* 6:6.

** Genesis 3:21; *Bereshit Raba* 20:12.

◂ The argument

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The argument between the Boethusians and the Pharisees now takes on a completely new dimension. It is generally argued by scholars that the Sadducees and Boethusians were an elite. They were either priests in the Temple or officials or landowners, as close as Judaism came to a leisured class. The sectarians at Qumran were an elite community who had turned their backs on society as a whole. The Pharisees were, as far as we can tell, largely made up of the working class. Certainly the image we have of figures like Hillel, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yehoshua and others, is that they were poor but refused to live on charity. It is to them that we owe many of the key rabbinic statements about the importance of independence and of working for a living.

We can now hypothesise that for the Boethusian, Sadducees and sectarians, the event we would wish to memorialise is the first falling of the manna. This was holy, miraculous, spiritual, the gift of God, bread from heaven that fell through no earthly labour. This, the bread that first fell on Sunday, is what we recall when we offer the Omer, whose dimensions (one tenth of an ephah) are precisely those of the manna itself.

For the Pharisees the complete opposite was the case. As long as the Israelites were completely dependent on God they were querulous, ungrateful, rebellious, and immature. That is what dependence does. It arrests the growth of character. The one time the Israelites achieved their real dignity was when they laboured together to build the Tabernacle. They worked; they gave of their time and skills and possessions. There was harmony. They gave so much that Moses had to say, Stop. That was their true apprenticeship in liberty.

The supreme moment of religious achievement came when, no longer homeless nomads, they entered the land God had promised Abraham. The first moment they ate of its produce was the first taste of that long-delayed fulfilment. Each year that moment was recaptured in a single symbolic moment: the first produce of the grain harvest. This was the dream finally made real: a holy people working the land God had called holy – at last, His partners in the work of creation. The land was His, the labour was theirs; the rain was His, the grain was theirs. They had sown in tears; now they were reaping in joy. And though the grain was coarse – barley – and though it was entirely non-miraculous, coming from earth not heaven, it was precious in their eyes because

◂ it was precious

it was precious in God's eyes. It was the humble symbol of the-day-after-Shabbat, the first day of human creation after the seven days of God's creation. They had received so much from God. Now God had given them the greatest gift of all – the ability to give Him a gift. What mattered was not that it was refined like the finest wheat flour (that came later, in the two loaves of Shavuot) but that it was the work of their hands.

Now, too, we can understand the significance of counting the days. Genesis 1 describes divine creation. God said "Let there be light," and there was light. For God there is no delay between conception and execution, the idea and the fact. For humans, however, there is a delay. It is the ability to endure the delay that makes all human creative achievement possible. It takes time to become a farmer, to learn how to plough and plant and tend. It takes time to become anything worth becoming.

A slave never learns this. He or she lives in the moment. The master commands, the slave carries out the task. The slave does not have to worry about long-term risks and consequences. In this sense, the manna the Israelites ate in the wilderness was not yet the bread of freedom, for it involved no time consciousness. It fell each day; it had to be eaten each day; with the exception of Friday it could not be kept for the morrow. The Israelites ate it the way slaves eat their daily subsistence diet. It had the taste of holiness but not yet the taste of freedom. A free human being has to learn the art of time that goes with risk-taking and creation. He or she has to acquire skill and wisdom, patience and the ability to persist through many failures without giving way to despair. The fundamental lesson of the wilderness years, as Maimonides emphasises in *The Guide for the Perplexed* (3:32), is the time it takes for erstwhile slaves to acquire the mental and emotional habits of free and responsible human beings. In the case of the Israelites it took a generation.

The mark of a free human being is the ability to count time, to endure a lengthy delay between the start of a journey and its completion. "Teach us rightly to number our days," says the psalm, "that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). Counting the days, without impatience or attempting shortcuts, is the precondition of all creative endeavour – and at the heart of the Pharisees' and rabbis' creed is the belief that the God of creation wants us to be creative rather than be dependent on

◂ the creativity

the creativity of others. There were some who believed otherwise: the wealthy Sadducees, the apocalyptic desert dwellers of Qumran, mystics like Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai who at one stage apparently believed that the words, "you shall gather in your grain, wine and oil" were not a blessing but a curse and who viewed with contempt those who ploughed fields (*Berakhot* 35b; *Shabbat* 33b). But these were voices at the margins. The mainstream held otherwise.

The Omer is the immensely powerful symbol of an offering from the first fruits of the humanly planted and reaped grain, brought on the anniversary of the day the "bread from heaven" ceased and "bread from the land" of Israel began. Coarse and unsophisticated, yet the combined work of land and rain from God and labour from man – partners in the work of creation. The journey to freedom begins on Pesaḥ with *HaShabbat* "the rest day," the first taste of freedom, which is knowing that you do not have to work without cease. But immediately, on the second day, it passes to "the day following the rest day," the world of human work, the day on which Adam and Eve left paradise to make their way in the world, a task full of difficulties and threats, yet one in which they were robed, in Rabbi Meir's lovely phrase, in "garments of light." You do not have to live in Eden to be bathed in divine light. Work that is creative is not the work of slaves. But it requires one discipline: the art of counting time or as Freud put it, the ability to defer the gratification of instinct. Indeed most of Jewish law is a form of training in the art of disciplining and deferring the gratification of instinct.

So the argument about the Omer and its significance was a deep one and not just one about the authority of the Oral Law. It was about the nature of the religious life. Does God want us to be involved with society, contributing to it and being creative within it, or is that for others, not for us? It is fair to say that the argument has not yet ceased. This side of the end of days, perhaps it never will.

TWO CONCEPTS OF TIME

More minor, but in its way no less interesting, is the disagreement that arose between two of the great sages of the period of the Geonim (sixth to tenth century) on a seemingly minor detail of the command to count the Omer. The Torah states the law in the following terms:

◂ And you shall

> And you shall count seven complete weeks from the day following the [Pesaḥ] rest day, when you brought the omer as a wave-offering. To the day after the seventh week you shall count fifty days. Then you shall present a meal-offering of new grain to the Lord. (Lev. 23:15–16)

The following question arose: What is the law for someone who forgets to count one of the forty-nine days? May he continue to count the remainder, or has he forfeited the entire commandment for that year? There were two sharply contrasting views. According to the *Halakhot Gedolot* (a work usually attributed to Rabbi Shimon Kayyara, first half of the ninth century) the person has indeed forfeited the chance to fulfil the command. According to Rav Hai Gaon he has not. He continues to count the remaining days, unaffected by his failure to count one of the forty-nine (see *Tur*, OḤ 489).

How are we to understand this disagreement? According to the *Halakhot Gedolot*, the key phrase is "seven full [*temimot*, i.e. complete] weeks." One who forgets a day cannot satisfy the requirement of completeness. On this view, the forty-nine days constitute a single religious act, and if one of the parts is missing, the whole is defective. It is like a Torah scroll: if a single letter is missing, the entire scroll is invalid. So, too, in the case of counting days.

According to Rav Hai Gaon however, each day is a separate command – "You shall count fifty days." Therefore, if one fails to keep one of the commands, that is no impediment to keeping the others. If, for example, one fails to pray on a given day, that neither excuses nor prevents one from praying on subsequent days. Each day is a temporal entity in itself, unaffected by what happened before or after. The same applies to the Omer. Forgetting one day does not invalidate the others.

The final law mediates between these two opinions. Out of respect for Rav Hai, we count the subsequent days, but out of respect for the *Halakhot Gedolot* we do so without a blessing – an elegant compromise (*Terumat HaDeshen*, 37).

We might, before moving on, note one salient fact. Usually in the case of a dispute about Jewish law, the doubt lies in us, not in the biblical text. God has spoken, but we are not sure what the words mean. In the case of

◂ counting

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counting the Omer, however, the doubt lies *within the biblical text itself*. Unusually, the command is specified in two quite different ways:

1. "Count seven complete weeks"
2. "Count fifty days"

There is a view that this dual characterisation signals two distinct commands, to count the days, and to count the weeks (Abaye in *Menaḥot* 66a). However, as we have seen, it also suggests two quite different ways of understanding the counting itself – as a single extended process (*Halakhot Gedolot*) or as fifty distinct acts (Hai Gaon). This duality was not born in the minds of two halakhic authorities. It is there in the biblical text itself.

Within Judaism there are two kinds of time. One way of seeing this is in a Talmudic story about two of the great sages of the Second Temple period, Hillel and Shammai:

> They used to say about Shammai the elder that all his life he ate in honour of the Sabbath. So, if he found a well-favoured animal he would say, "Let this be for the Sabbath." If he later found a better one, he would put aside the second for the Sabbath and eat the first. But Hillel the elder had a different approach, for all his deeds were for the sake of heaven, as it is said, "Blessed is my LORD for day after day" (Ps. 68:20). It was likewise taught: The school of Shammai say, From the first day of the week, prepare for the Sabbath, but the school of Hillel say, "Blessed is my LORD for day after day." (*Beitza* 16a)

Shammai lived in teleological time, time as *a journey towards a destination*. Already from the beginning of a week, he was conscious of its end. We speak, in the *Lekha Dodi* prayer, of the Sabbath as "last in deed, first in thought." Time, in this view, is not a mere sequence of moments. It has a purpose, a direction, a destination.

Hillel, by contrast, lived each day in and for itself, without regard to what came before or what would come after. We speak in our prayers of God who "in His goodness, continually renews the work of creation, day after day" (page 458). From this perspective, each unit of time is a separate entity. The universe is continually being renewed. Each day is a

◂ a universe

universe; each has its own challenge, its task, its response. Faith, for Hillel, is a matter of taking each day as it comes, trusting in God to give the totality of time its shape and direction.

The dispute is strikingly similar to the more recent disagreement about the nature of light. Is it a continuous wave or a series of discrete particles? Paradoxically, it is both, and this can be experimentally demonstrated.

The argument, however, goes deeper. Much has been written by historians and anthropologists about two distinctive forms of time consciousness. Ancient civilisations tended to see time as a circle – *cyclical time*. That is how we experience time in nature. Each day is marked by the same succession of events: dawn, sunrise, the gradual trajectory of the sun across the sky to its setting and to nightfall. The year is a succession of seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Life itself is a repeated sequence of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. Many of these moments, especially the transition from one to another, are marked by religious ritual.

Cyclical time is time as a series of eternal recurrences. Beneath the apparent changes, the world remains the same. The book of Ecclesiastes contains a classic statement of cyclical time:

> Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises… All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again… What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. (Eccl. 1:4–9)

In Judaism, priestly time is cyclical time. Each part of the day, week and year has its specific sacrifice, unaffected by what is happening in the world of historical events. Halakha – Jewish law – is priestly in this sense. Though all else may change, the law does not change. It represents eternity in the midst of time.

In this respect, Judaism did not innovate. However, according to many scholars, a quite new and different form of time was born in ancient Israel. Often, this is called linear time. I prefer to call it *covenantal time*. The Hebrew Bible is the first document to see time as an arena of

◂ change

change. Tomorrow need not be the same as yesterday. There is nothing given, eternal and immutable about the way we construct societies and live our lives together.

Time is not a series of moments traced on the face of a watch, always moving yet always the same. Instead it is a journey with a starting point and a destination, or a story with a beginning, middle and end. Each moment has a meaning, which can only be grasped if we understand where we have come from and where we are going to. This is time not as it is in nature but as it is in history. The Hebrew prophets were the first to see God in history.

A prophet is one who sees the future in the present, the end already implicit in the beginning. While others are at ease, he foresees the catastrophe. While others are mourning the catastrophe, he can already see the eventual consolation. There is a famous example of this in the Talmud. Rabbi Akiva is walking with his colleagues on Mount Scopus when they see the ruins of the Temple. They weep. He smiles. When they ask him why he is smiling, he replies: Now that I have seen the realisation of the prophecies of destruction, shall I not believe in the prophecies of restoration? (*Makkot* 24b). Rabbi Akiva's companions see the present; he sees the future-in-the-present. Knowing the previous chapters of the story, he understands not only the current chapter, but also where it leads to. That is prophetic consciousness – time as a narrative, time not as it is in nature but in history, more specifically in covenant history, whose events are determined by free human choices but whose themes have been set long in advance.

If we look at the festivals of Judaism – Pesaḥ, Shavuot and Sukkot – we see that each has a dual logic. On the one hand, they belong to cyclical time. They celebrate seasons of the year – Pesaḥ is the festival of spring, Shavuot of first-fruits, and Sukkot of the autumn harvest.

However, they also belong to covenantal/linear/historical time. They commemorate historic events. Pesaḥ celebrates the exodus from Egypt, Shavuot the giving of the Torah, and Sukkot the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It follows that the counting of the Omer also has two temporal dimensions.

It belongs to cyclical time. The forty-nine days represent the period of the grain harvest, the time during which farmers had most to thank God for – for "bringing forth bread from the earth." Thus understood, each

◂ day of

day of the counting is a separate religious act: "Blessed is my Lord for day after day." Each day brought forth its own blessing in the form of new grain, and each therefore called for its own act of thanksgiving. This is time as Hillel and Rav Hai Gaon understood it. "Count fifty days" – each of which is a command in itself, unaffected by the days that came before or those that will come after.

But the Omer is also part of historical time. It represents the journey from Egypt to Sinai, from exodus to revelation. This, in the biblical worldview, is an absolutely crucial transition. The late Sir Isaiah Berlin spoke of two kinds of freedom, negative liberty (the freedom to do what you like) and positive liberty (the freedom to do what you ought). Hebrew has two different words for these different forms of freedom: *ḥofesh* and *ḥerut*. *Ḥofesh* is the freedom a slave acquires when he no longer has a master. It means that there is no one to tell you what to do. You are master of your own time.

This kind of freedom alone, however, cannot be the basis of a free society. If everyone is free to do what they like, the result will be freedom for the strong but not the weak, the rich but not the poor, the powerful but not the powerless. A free society requires restraint and the rule of law. There is such a thing as a constitution of liberty. That is what the Israelites acquired at Mount Sinai in the form of the covenant.

In this sense, the forty-nine days represent an unbroken historical sequence. There is no way of going directly from escape-from-tyranny to a free society. The attempt to do so only results in a new form of tyranny (sometimes the "tyranny of the majority" as Alexis de Tocqueville called it). In human history prophetically understood, time is an ordered sequence of events, a journey, a narrative. Miss one stage, and one is in danger of losing everything. This is time as *Halakhot Gedolot* understood it: "Count seven complete weeks," with the emphasis on "complete, full, unbroken."

Thus, both forms of time are present in a single mitzva – the counting of the Omer – as they are in the festivals themselves.

We have traced, in the argument between the two authorities of the period of the Geonim, a deeper duality, going back to Hillel and Shammai, and further still to the biblical era and the difference, in their respective forms of time-consciousness, between priests and prophets. There is

◂ the voice

the voice of God in nature, and the call of God in history. There is the word of God for all time, and the word of God for *this* time. The former is heard by the priest, the latter by the prophet. The former is found in halakha, Jewish law; the latter in *aggada*, Jewish reflection on history and destiny. God is not to be found exclusively in one or the other, but in their conversation and complex interplay.

There are aspects of the human condition that do not change, but there are others that do. It was the greatness of the biblical prophets to hear the music of covenant beneath the noise of events, giving history its shape and meaning as the long, slow journey to redemption. The journey *has* been slow. The abolition of slavery, the recognition of human rights, the construction of a society of equal dignity – these have taken centuries, millennia. But they happened only because people learned to see inequalities and injustices as something other than inevitable. Time is not a series of eternal recurrences in which nothing ever ultimately changes. Cyclical time is deeply conservative; covenantal time is profoundly revolutionary. Both find their expression in the counting of the Omer.

Thus an apparently minor detail in Jewish law turns out, under the microscope of analysis, to tell us much about the philosophy and politics of Judaism – about the journey from liberation to a free society, and about time as the arena of social change. The Torah begins with creation as the free act of the free God, who bestows the gift of freedom on the one life-form that bears His image. But that is not enough. We must create structures that honour that freedom and make it equally available to all. That is what was given at Sinai. Each year we retrace that journey, for if we are not conscious of freedom and what it demands of us, we will lose it. To see God not only in nature but also in history – that is the distinctive contribution of Judaism to Western civilisation, and we find it in one of the most apparently minor commands: to count the days between negative and positive liberty, from liberation to revelation.

SURVIVING GRIEF

Beginning in the period of the Geonim, from the eighth century onward, we find the period of the Omer given a character it had not had before,

◂ as a time

as a time of mourning. The customs developed not to celebrate a wedding during this period, or have a haircut.* The earliest sources speak of this applying to the whole of the Omer period with the exception of *Lag BaOmer*, the thirty-third day. Later sources speak of thirty-three days of mourning only, but here customs start to diverge. Sephardim – the Jews of Spain and Portugal, as well as the majority of those in Israel – observe the period from Pesaḥ to *Lag BaOmer* (*Shulḥan Arukh*, OḤ 493:2), while Ashkenazi communities begin the ban on weddings and haircuts after Rosh Ḥodesh Iyar (Rema ad loc. 493:3).

The custom of mourning during the Omer is not mentioned in the Talmud. Surprisingly, since he knew the literature of the Geonim in which it is mentioned, Maimonides makes no reference to it in his halakhic code, the *Mishneh Torah*. Unravelling the complex story behind the custom and its later variants yields a fascinating insight into how Jews responded to tragedy and may even guide us in understanding the response of religious Jewry to the Holocaust.

The sources all cite, as the basis of the custom, a passage in the Babylonian Talmud:

> Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples from Gabbatha to Antipatris, and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect. The world remained desolate until Rabbi Akiva came to our masters in the South and taught the Torah to them. These were Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua; and it was they who revived the Torah at that time. A Tanna taught: "All of them died between Passover and Shavuot." Rabbi Ḥama ben Abba, and some say Rabbi Ḥiyya ben Abin, said: "All of them died a cruel death." What was it? Rabbi Naḥman replied: "Croup." (*Yevamot* 62b)

This is a tantalising passage. We have no other evidence of a plague that mysteriously claimed the lives of twenty-four thousand students, nor is it

* Rabbi Yitzḥak ibn Ghayyat (Spain, 1038–1089), *Me'a She'arim*, 109; *Tur*, OḤ 493.

◂ clear

clear in what way they "did not treat each other with respect." It is hard to believe that this was true of the disciples of the man who taught that "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" was the great principle on which the Torah was based (Yerushalmi, *Nedarim* 9:5), and who said that reverence for your teacher should be as great as your reverence for Heaven itself (*Kiddushin* 57a). Equally, as a number of commentators point out, it is puzzling as to why this event should be marked through the ages as an extended period of mourning, when there is no special day of mourning for other and more innocent deaths. Nor does the Talmud itself suggest that this incident be memorialised.

There is, however, a significantly different version of events given in the famous letter of Rabbi Sherira Gaon (906–1006). The letter, a reply to a series of queries about historical events, is our main source for many otherwise obscure events in rabbinic history up to the Geonic era and is highly regarded for its accuracy. Rabbi Sherira writes:

> After the death of Rabbi Yose ben Kisma [killed by the Romans for teaching Torah in public], Rabbi Akiva handed himself over [to the Romans] to be killed. Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon was also killed, and after these deaths, wisdom decreased. Rabbi Akiva had raised many disciples, but a decree of persecution [*shemada*] was issued against them. Authority then rested on the secondary disciples of Rabbi Akiva, as the rabbis said: Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand disciples from Gabbatha to Antipatris, and all of them died between Pesaḥ and Shavuot. The world remained desolate until they came to our masters in the South and taught the Torah to them.

Note the differences between Rabbi Sherira's account of events and that given in our text of the Talmud. First, the disciples did not die because of an epidemic, but as a result of religious persecution by the Romans. Secondly, the deaths occurred after Rabbi Akiva had been killed, not beforehand. This places a completely different construction on events.

Twice before, Jews in Israel had risen against the Romans. First came the great rebellion of 66 CE, which led to the destruction of the Second Temple under Vespasian and Titus. Second was the rebellion – not confined to Jews or Israel – that spread through the Roman Empire under

◂ Trajan

Trajan between 115 and 117. Third was the revolt of Bar Kokhba that began in 132. The Roman emperor of the time, Hadrian, had initially been tolerant in his approach to the various nations under Roman rule, but he became less so over time, undertaking a programme of enforced Hellenisation that included a ban on circumcision, and the transformation of Jerusalem into a pagan Roman city.

For as long as Hadrian was in the region, there was no large-scale open revolt, but as soon as he left, Jews rose against their rulers in defence of their religious freedom. Bar Kokhba was a charismatic leader. Rabbi Akiva supported him, believing that he would liberate Israel and prove to be the Messiah. It is not clear that Bar Kokhba himself had any messianic pretensions. In contemporary documents he is referred to as a *nasi*, a leader or prince, rather than as a king. Other sages strongly dissented from Rabbi Akiva's position. The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Ta'anit* 4:5) states that Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta said, "Akiva, grass will grow from your cheeks and still the son of David will not come" (i.e. the messiah will not come in your lifetime).

Initially the rebellion succeeded. The Roman forces in Israel were defeated. The nation briefly regained its independence. Coins were struck, carrying the date of the relevant year "after the redemption of Israel." The Romans sent additional troops from Syria and Egypt. These too were defeated. Realising that nothing short of all-out war would save Rome from humiliation, Hadrian summoned Julius Severus, the governor of Britain, together with his troops and others from the Danube region. Slowly the war turned against the Jewish forces, until only a refuge at Beitar, southwest of Jerusalem, remained. Beitar fell in the summer of 135. Tradition dates its defeat to the Ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av).

The result was devastating. The contemporary Roman historian Dio estimated that 580,000 Jews died in the fighting, plus countless others through starvation. Fifty of the country's strongest forts were destroyed, together with 985 towns and settlements. "Nearly the entire land of Judea lay waste." Jerusalem was levelled to the ground and rebuilt as a Roman polis named Aelia Capitolina. Jews were forbidden entry except on Tisha B'Av. Hadrian even changed the name of the land from Judea to Syria-Palestina, the origin of the name Palestine by which it was known until 1948.

◂ Even more

Even more acute than the physical destruction was the spiritual catastrophe. Countless rabbis were put to death, giving rise to the famous account of "the Ten Martyrs," recited in different versions on Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur. One sage, Rabbi Natan, has left us this account of what became almost commonplace at this time:

> "Those who love Me and keep My commandments" – those are the Jews who live in the land of Israel and give their lives for the sake of the commandments. Why are you to be killed? For having circumcised my son. Why are you to be burned? For having studied the Torah. Why are you crucified? For having eaten matza. Why are you flagellated? For having blessed the lulav. (*Mekhilta*, *Baḥodesh* 6)

Jews were prevented from meeting in synagogues, engaging in communal prayer, studying the Torah or maintaining communal institutions. It was a devastating period. There were Jews who lost their faith; the story of Elisha ben Abuya, the rabbi who became a heretic, dates from this period. Others de-Judaised and became Hellenistic in their way of life. Yet others despaired of the Jewish future. In human terms it was the worst disaster of Jewish history before the Holocaust.

We can now revisit the Talmudic passage that speaks of the death of Rabbi Akiva's students. If Rabbi Sherira Gaon's account is accurate, we have in the Babylonian Talmud a highly veiled reference to the persecutions that occurred shortly before, and then after, the Bar Kokhba revolt. It is not unknown for the Babylonian Talmud in particular to speak indirectly and allusively about historic events that were almost too painful to bear. It records a statement dating from this period, that "By rights we should issue a decree that no Jew should marry and have children, so that the seed of Abraham might come to an end of its own accord" (*Bava Batra* 60b). It seemed like the end of Judaism and the Jewish people.

This is what we mourn between Pesaḥ and Shavuot: the massacres and devastation that accompanied the failure of the Bar Kokhba rebellion, the loss of hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives, the de-Judaisation of Israel and Jerusalem, and the loss of an entire generation of rabbis, among them almost all of the disciples of Rabbi Akiva. We can only guess at what is meant by the phrase "because they did not treat each other with respect,"

◂ but the

but the simplest explanation is that it refers to the deep division within the ranks of the sages as to whether the revolt was justified or not, whether it was likely to succeed or bring disaster, and whether or not Bar Kokhba himself warranted the messianic expectations Rabbi Akiva had of him. Divided, the Jewish people could not stand.

Another traumatic tragedy, almost a thousand years later, explains the differences of custom between Ashkenazim and Sephardim as to whether the thirty-three days of mourning are at the beginning or end of the Omer period. In 1095 Pope Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade, to take back Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Muslim to Christian hands. On their way towards the East, the Crusaders interrupted their journey in order to massacre Jewish communities in northern Europe. As Rabbi Solomon ben Samson, a Jewish chronicler of those times, puts it, the Crusaders argued, "here are the Jews dwelling in our midst… First let us take vengeance on them and destroy them as a people, so that the name of Israel shall no longer be remembered."*

Jews in Cologne, Metz, Mainz, Speyer and Worms called on the Emperor, lords and local bishops to defend them, often offering large sums of money to do so, but to little avail. Some bishops did act heroically. Others found themselves powerless before the mob. Eight hundred Jews were murdered in Worms, eleven hundred in Mainz. Many families of Jews committed collective suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Christians, whom they knew would torture and kill them if they refused to convert. Three years later when the Crusaders reached Jerusalem, they gathered together all the Jews and burned them alive.

The massacres of 1096 traumatised Ashkenazi Jewry, as the Hadrianic persecutions had done in their time and as the expulsions of 1492 and 1497 would later do for the Jews of Spain and Portugal. Jews in Europe now knew that they were unsafe, whatever protection had nominally been offered to them. Rulers could turn against them whenever it was in their interest to do so. So could the Church, so could the mob. Here and there, there might be exceptions. Bishop Johann of Speyer, for example, was praised in Jewish sources for resisting and punishing the Crusaders

* Rabbi Solomon Ben Sampson, *The Massacres of 1096*, quoted in H.H. Ben Sasson (ed.), *A History of the Jewish People,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 413.

◂ and preventing

and preventing a massacre. But even well-intentioned Christians could no longer be relied on. From then on, for at least seven centuries, the situation of Jews in Europe was fraught with risk and fear.

The Rhineland massacres took place during the latter weeks of the Omer. An Ashkenazi custom developed to say special lament-type prayers from early Iyar onward. Later, the mourning customs of the Omer were associated with the same period. The Sephardi communities of Spain and Portugal were unaffected by the Crusades, so they continued the earlier custom of mourning for the victims of the Bar Kokhba revolt.

This, then, is the explanation of the custom of mourning during the Omer period, and why Ashkenazim and Sephardim do so in different ways. The Omer was Jewry's Holocaust memorial before there was a Holocaust. What is remarkable, though, is the rabbis' obliquity. There is not a word said during the Omer about the victims of the Romans: that is left to the story of the Ten Martyrs on Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur. As for the victims of the Crusaders, they are recalled in the prayer *Av HaRaḥamim*, said before Musaf on Shabbat (see page 607), as well as in a number of *Kinot* on Tisha B'Av.

In general, Jewish communities set limits to their grief, knowing that if they looked back too directly on the destruction they might, like Lot's wife, be turned into a pillar of salt by their tears. Despite the many Jewish martyrs in history, it remains the Jewish way to look forward, to affirm life, to survive.

The same has proved true since the Holocaust. With some exceptions, the great religious leaders of Jewry, especially those who were Holocaust survivors themselves, spoke relatively little about the *Sho'a* for several decades. Instead they focussed on rebuilding their shattered world in new lands. They encouraged their disciples to marry and have children. They built schools and yeshivot. Today they are the fastest growing group in the Jewish world.

The custom of mourning during the Omer without saying exactly why, testifies to the extraordinary Jewish capacity to suffer tragedy without despair, surviving and enduring through faith in the future and in life itself. Jews never forgot the victims of the past, but they contained their sorrow, saving their tears and confining their grief, for the most part, to Tisha B'Av, so as not to be overwhelmed by the accumulated weight of

◂ unredeemed

unredeemed affliction. They carried the past with them, but even while doing so they looked forward not back.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that, having had no new days added to the calendar in more than two thousand years, four have been added in living memory: *Yom HaSho'a* (Holocaust Memorial Day), *Yom HaZikaron* (Memorial Day for Israel's fallen), *Yom HaAtzma'ut* (Israel Independence Day) and *Yom Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem Day), all of them within the seven-week period of the Omer. It is as if the journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai continues to be fraught with history, beginning in tears yet ending in the joy of the Jewish return to the holy land and the holy city at its heart.

8. The Song of Songs: Faith as Love

> The biblical "love of one's neighbour" is a very special form of love, a unique development of the Judaic religion and unlike any to be encountered outside it. (Harry Redner, *Ethical Life*)

> If love in the Western world has a founding text, that text is Hebrew. (Simon May, *Love: A History*)

> My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, as in a dry, parched land where there is no water. (Ps. 63:2)

Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, is the strangest book in the Hebrew Bible, one of the strangest ever to be included in a canon of sacred texts. It is written as a series of songs between two human lovers, candid, passionate, even erotic. It is one of only two books in Tanakh that does not explicitly contain the name of God (Esther is the other) and it has no obvious religious content. Yet Rabbi Akiva famously said: "The whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the [sacred] Writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Mishna, *Yadayim* 3:5).

Rabbi Akiva's insight is essential. *Shir HaShirim,* a duet scored for two young lovers, each delighting in the other, longing for one another's presence, is one of the central books of Tanakh and the key that unlocks the rest. It is about love as the holy of holies of human life. It is about the

◂ love

love of Israel for God and God for Israel, and the fact that it is written as the story of two young and human lovers is also fundamental, for it tells us that to separate human and divine love and to allocate one to the body, the other to the soul, is a false distinction. Love is the energy God has planted in the human heart, redeeming us from narcissism and solipsism, making the human or divine Other no less real to me than I am to myself, thus grounding our being in that-which-is-not-me. One cannot love God without loving all that is good in the human situation.

Love creates. Love reveals. Love redeems. Love is the connection between God and us. That is the faith of Judaism, and if we do not understand this we will not understand it at all. We will, for example, fail to realise that the demands God makes of His people through the prophets are expressions of love, that what Einstein called Judaism's "almost fanatical love of justice" is about love no less than justice, that the Torah is God's marriage-contract with the Jewish people, and the mitzvot are all invitations to love: "I seek You with all my heart; do not let me stray from Your commands" (Ps. 119:10).*

Sadly, one must emphasise this point because it has long been said by the enemies of Judaism that it is a religion of law not love, justice not forgiveness, retribution not compassion. Simon May in his *Love: A History* rightly calls this "one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in all of Western history."**

If we seek to understand the nature of biblical love, the place to begin is the exodus itself. One feature of the narrative from the beginning of Exodus to the end of the book of Numbers is unmistakable. The Israelites are portrayed as ungrateful recipients of divine redemption. At almost every stage of the way they complain: when Moses' first intervention makes their situation momentarily worse, when they come up against the barrier of the Sea of Reeds, when they have no water, when they lack food, when Moses delays his return from the mountain, and when the spies return with a demoralising report about the Promised Land and its inhabitants.

They sin. They rebel. They make a golden calf. They engage in false

* Psalm 119, which is entirely about Torah and mitzvot, contains the word "love" twelve times.

** Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 20.

◂ nostalgia

nostalgia about Egypt. More than once they express the desire to return whence they came. God gets angry with them. At times Moses comes close to despair. So unlovely is the portrait painted of them in the Torah that it almost seems to invite the thought, "How odd / of God / To choose / the Jews."

Yet as we proceed through Tanakh another picture emerges. We hear it in the eighth century BCE from one of the first literary prophets, Hosea. The story Hosea has to tell is extraordinary. God appears to him and tells him to marry a prostitute, a woman who will bear him children but will be unfaithful to him. God wants the prophet to know what it feels like to love and to be betrayed. The prophet, uncertain perhaps about whether the children are in fact his, is to call them "Unloved" and "Not my people."

He will then discover the power and persistence of love. He will wait until his wife is abandoned by all her lovers, and he will take her back, despite her betrayal. He will love her children, whatever his doubts about their parentage. He will change their names to "My people" and "Beloved." He will, in other words, know from his own experience what God feels about the Israelites. It is an astonishing and daring narrative, suggesting as it does that God cannot, will not, cease to love His people. He has been hurt by them, wounded by their faithlessness, but His love is inextinguishable. Hosea then hears God say this:

> I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Trouble a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. (Hos. 2:16–17)

This is a *retelling of the exodus as a love story*. In Hosea's vision, it has become something other and more than the liberation of a people from slavery. Israel left Egypt like a bride leaving the place where she has lived to accompany her new husband, God, on a journey to the new home they will build together. That is how it was "in the days of her youth" and how it will be again. The desert is now no longer simply the space between Egypt and Israel, but the setting of a honeymoon in which the people and God were alone together, celebrating their company, their intimacy.

Two centuries after Hosea, the people are now in exile in Babylon.

◄ There the

There the prophet Ezekiel retells the past in a different but related way. God had first seen Israel as a young girl, a child. He watched over her as she grew to adulthood:

> You grew and matured and came forth in all your glory, your breasts full and your hair grown, and you were naked and exposed. Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of My garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you My solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became Mine. (Ezek. 16:7–8)

Again, a daring love story. God sees Israel as a young woman and cares for her. He "spreads the corner of His garment" over her, which as we recall from the book of Ruth (3:9) constitutes a promise to marry. The marriage itself takes the form of a solemn oath, a covenant. The giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai has been transformed by the prophet into a marriage ceremony. Hosea and Ezekiel both envisage the exodus as a kind of elopement between a groom – God – and His bride – Israel. However, in both cases it is God who loves and God who acts. It was left to Jeremiah, Ezekiel's somewhat older contemporary, to deliver the decisive transformation in our picture of the exodus, saying in the name of God:

> I remember of you the kindness of your youth, your love when you were a bride; how you walked after Me in the desert, through a land not sown. (Jer. 2:2)

Now it is not just God who calls, but Israel who responds – Israel who follows her husband faithfully into the no-man's-land of the desert as a trusting bride, willing in the name of love, to take the risk of travelling to an unknown destination. The message of Hosea, Ezekiel and Jeremiah is that the exodus was more than a theological drama about the defeat of false gods by the true One, or a political narrative about slavery and freedom. It is a love story – troubled and tense, to be sure – yet an elopement by bride and groom to the desert where they can be alone together, far out of sight of prying eyes and the distractions of civilisation.

◂ That is

That is the theme of the Song of Songs. Like God summoning His people out of Egypt, the lover in the song calls on his beloved, "Come… let us leave" (2:10). The beloved herself says: "Come, draw me after you, let us run!" (1:4). Then in an image of extraordinary poignancy we see the two of them emerging together from the wilderness: Who is this, rising from the desert, leaning on her beloved? (Song. 8:5).

Israel, leaning on God, emerging, flushed with love, from the wilderness: that is the exodus as seen by the great prophets. Nor were they the first to develop this idea. It appears, fully fledged, in the book of Deuteronomy, where the word "love" appears twenty-three times as a description of the relationship between God and the people. When we read the Song of Songs on Pesaḥ as a commentary to the exodus, it spells out Jeremiah's message. God chose Israel because Israel was willing to follow Him into the desert, leaving Egypt and all its glory behind for the insecurity of freedom, relying instead on the security of faith.

GOD LOVES

The depth and pathos of this idea goes much deeper, however. Monotheism as it appears for the first time in the Hebrew Bible raises a fundamental question. Why would an infinite God create a finite universe? The idea of creation did not arise in the world of myth. Matter was eternal. The gods themselves were part of nature. They argued, fought, established hierarchies of dominance, and that is why the world is as it is. But in Judaism, God transcends nature. Why then would He create nature? Why make a creature as troublesome as Homo sapiens, the one being capable of defying His will?

The Torah does not give an explicit answer, but one is implicit. God loves. Love seeks otherness. Love is emotion turned outward. Love seeks to give, to share, to create. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg translated the repeated phrase in Genesis 1 not as "God saw *that* it was good" but as "God saw *because* He is good."* Goodness creates goodness. Love creates life. God sought to bestow the gift of being on beings other than Himself. We exist and the universe exists because God loves.

This is one of the most radical ideas ever to have transformed the

* Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, *HaKetav VeHaKabbala* to Genesis 1:4.

◂ human

human mind. The very fact that we can say the words "God loves" is itself a measure of the influence Judaism has had on the West. It is an idea that would have sounded strange, counterintuitive, even incomprehensible to the ancient world.

In the world of myth, the gods did not love human beings. At best they were indifferent to them, at worst actively hostile. When one of the immortals, Prometheus, steals for humans the secret of fire from the gods, he is punished by Zeus by being chained to a rock and having his liver pecked out by an eagle every day. In King Lear, Shakespeare has Gloucester say: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport."

Equally, the idea that God loves would have been unintelligible to the Greek philosophers who rejected myth. Plato thought that we love what we lack. Since God lacks nothing, by definition He cannot love. Aristotle thought similarly, though for a different reason. To love as husband and wife or parent and child love, we must focus on the particular: this person, not that. But for Aristotle, God did not have knowledge of particulars, only universals. So the idea of a loving God in the biblical sense would have been unintelligible to him also. The God of Aristotle might love humanity but not individual humans. Plato and Aristotle wrote insightfully about interpersonal love. But that the relationship between God and humanity might be one of love: that to them would have seemed like a categorical mistake, an intellectual absurdity.

What made Israel different was its belief that "In the beginning, God created…" In love God brought energy, matter, stars and planets into being. In love He created the biological forms of self-organising complexity that constitute life. In love He created the one being capable of asking the question "Why?" – setting His own image on each of us. In love He fashioned the first human from the dust of the earth, breathing into him His own breath. In love, so that man should not be loveless, He created woman, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh.

Even for God, however, love involves risk. Again the idea sounds paradoxical in the extreme. God is God, with or without the universe, with or without the worship of man. Yet whether one is finite or infinite, to love is to make oneself vulnerable. That is the story the Torah tells in its opening chapters. Having made humanity in love, bestowing on it His own image, God finds that His love is not reciprocated. Adam and Eve disobey His

◂ command

command. Cain murders. Within a few chapters we find ourselves in an earth "filled with violence" (Gen. 6:13). God "regretted that He had made man on earth and He was grieved to His very core" (6:6).

God brings a flood and begins again, making a covenant, through Noah, with all humanity. Still, divine love is not reciprocated. Humans build Babel, a cosmopolis, a man-made civilisation in which humans do not serve God but seek to make God serve them by turning religion into an endorsement of a hierarchical society in which kings are priests, even demigods. Religion becomes a force for injustice. Where is there a human being willing to abandon this entire civilisation of self-aggrandisement and follow God out of self-sacrificing love? God calls. Abraham hears. That is the act of love with which Judaism begins. It is also, as we have seen, the first of several prefigurations of the exodus.

When Rabbi Akiva called the Song of Songs the Holy of Holies of religious poetry, he was reading it in the context of the entire story of Israel. For it was Israel's willingness, first in the days of Abraham, then later in the time of Moses, to leave behind the great civilisations of their time and live in a land where they could never found an empire, never grow rich like the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, where they would be vulnerable to famine, drought, invading armies and surrounding powers, but where their love for God vindicated God's love for humanity. It was an imaginative leap but not a blind or irrational one to conclude that the lovers of the Song of Songs are God and His people, seeking one another in the wilderness of space and time.

EROS

That is the first level of meaning in the Song of Songs. But there is a second. For *Shir HaShirim* is unmistakably a book about *eros*, love as sexual passion. An old Western tradition, the result of a synthesis of Christianity and the culture of ancient Greece, has contrasted *eros*, love as physical desire, with *agape*, love as selfless devotion. *Eros* is physical, *agape* spiritual. *Eros* is about the body, *agape* about the soul. *Eros* seeks personal pleasure, *agape* bestows impersonal, generalised care. This may make sense in terms of an Platonic bifurcation of body and soul, but it makes little sense in terms of the union of body and soul characteristic of the Hebrew Bible. What then is the place of *eros* in Judaism?

◂ To understand

To understand this we have first to turn to one of the great theological puzzles of Judaism. It concerns the book of Genesis. The central theme of the Hebrew Bible is the battle against idolatry. Abraham, if not the first monotheist, is at least the first to rediscover monotheism. In Jewish legend he breaks his father's idols. According to Joshua (24:2), "Teraḥ, father of Abraham … served other gods." Maimonides believed that the rationale of most of the *ḥukkim*, the laws of the Torah for which there is no apparent reason, is that they are barriers against idolatrous practices.

Yet, with the possible exception of the subplot of Rachel stealing her father Laban's "images" (Gen. 31:19), there is very little mention of this theme. In Genesis we see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their families, evidently living among idolaters – Canaanites, Hittites, Egyptians and the rest – but we find a lack of reference to idolatry, no polemic against it. If Genesis is about monotheism as against idolatry, should it not be more present?

One theme however *is* significantly present. It figures so regularly that it cannot be dismissed as mere happenstance – namely, sexual anomie: the power of *eros* to disturb law and justice, threatening life itself. Leaving aside the question of whether *eros* was involved in the first sin – Adam, Eve, the serpent and the forbidden fruit – it is certainly the key element in at least six other stories in Genesis.

Three are variations of the same basic situation. Famine forces the patriarchal family to leave home in search of food. Abraham is forced first to Egypt, then to Gerar and the land of the Philistines. Isaac similarly has to travel to Gerar (Gen. 12, 20, 26). In all three cases the patriarch fears that he will be killed so that his wife – Sarah, Rebecca – can be taken into the local harem. They have to pretend that they are brother and sister.

The fourth scene is Sodom, city of the plain. There, seeing Lot's two visitors, the members of the town – "all the men from every part of the city of Sodom, both young and old" (Gen. 19:4) – demand that they be brought out for an act of homosexual rape. In an attempt to placate them, Lot offers the mob his two daughters, "who have never known a man," giving the townsmen permission to "do what you like with them" (ibid. 8). Lot has become corrupted, as have his two daughters who

◂ after the

after the destruction of Sodom both engage in an act of incest with their father.

The fifth episode is the story of Dina who goes out "to visit the women of the land" (Gen. 34:1) in Shekhem, where she is abducted, raped and held hostage by the son of the local king. This prompts an act of bloody vengeance on the part of her brothers Shimon and Levi, for which Jacob never forgives them.

Sixth is the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Seeing that the Hebrew servant is handsome, she attempts to seduce him. He replies, "My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). It would be an act of disloyalty as well as adultery, and a sin as well as an immoral deed. Potiphar's wife takes her revenge by successfully accusing him of rape.*

These six episodes tell a story. When a member of the covenantal family leaves his or her domestic space and enters local territory they enter a world of sexual free-for-all, with all its potential for violence, murder, rape, false accusations and unjust imprisonment.

The setting of the scenes is also significant. For the most part they take place in cities; cities are not good places in Genesis. The first city is built by Cain the first murderer (Gen. 4:17). The great city, Babel, becomes a symbol of hubris. Sodom represents the lawlessness that exists in ancient cities towards foreign visitors. There may even be a linguistic connection between the Hebrew word *ir*, city, and the verb *ur* (and its intensive *urar*), a keyword of *Shir HaShirim* which means (sexual) arousal. Cities are places where sexual fidelity is compromised.

We cannot be sure precisely what we are meant to infer from these stories, but this seems possible: *Eros* allied to power is a threat to justice, the rule of law and human dignity. When a ruler sees an attractive woman

* There is a seventh story about Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38) which has many sexual under- and overtones. However, it is more complex than the other six. Here it is Judah and his sons who, having become separated from the rest of the family and married into a Canaanite environment, have become morally lax, while Tamar acts with propriety throughout.

◂ it is taken

it is taken for granted that, if she is married, the life of her husband is in danger. A mob will not stop at homosexual rape and those like Lot who try to stop them are themselves in danger. A prince protected by his father can get away with abduction and rape. The combination of sexual desire and lawless power results in people being used as means to ends, with no respect for persons. So it was; so it will be. So it is among the primates: the alpha male dominates access to females. It was this that led Freud to believe that sexual envy is at the heart of the Oedipus complex.

The argument against idolatry in Genesis is conducted almost entirely in terms of sexual ethics, or more precisely, the conspicuous absence of a sexual ethic. The gods in myth cohabited promiscuously, often incestuously, sometimes bestially. Pagan temples often had sacred prostitutes. Herodotus documents this in the case of Mesopotamia, from which Abraham came. Strabo says the same about Egyptian priestesses in the Temple of Amun in Thebes. Rameses II, often believed to be the Pharaoh of the exodus, married his own daughter. Baal, the Canaanite god, having defeated the goddess of the sea is then conquered by the god of death but is resurrected each year to impregnate the earth. And so on. Outlandish sexuality by the gods and their devotees was regarded as essential to the fertility of the land and the life it sustained.

All of this, Genesis testifies, is profoundly shocking to the monotheistic mind. Faithfulness in marriage is not merely a biblical norm: it is the closest human equivalent to the relationship between God and His people. There is one God and there is one people, Israel, who have chosen to bind themselves to one another in a covenant of faith. That is why the prophets consistently describe idolatry as a form of adultery: it is an act of infidelity, the betrayal of a marriage vow. The covenant is love-as-loyalty and loyalty-as-love. *Eros* plus power leads to violence and death. *Eros* plus faithfulness leads to caring and life. The difference between love and lust is that lust is the service of self, love is the service of the Other. The love that is faith is *eros* moralised. As Hosea beautifully put it in the name of God:

> I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, loving-kindness and compassion: I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you will know the Lord. (Hos. 2:21–22)

◂ In Judaism

In Judaism there is no renunciation of the physical: no monasteries, convents, celibacy or other asceticisms of the flesh.* In this context, the Song of Songs is a restatement of the case for *eros*. It is not passion that corrupts, but power. The two lovers sing of a love that is faith not faithlessness. Their songs evoke the innocence of Eden before the sin. They seek to escape from the city to the garden, the hills, the countryside. This is love as it might have been without the serpent; love that is as strong as death; love like purifying fire. The Song of Songs is about the power of love purged of the love of power.

THREE BIBLICAL BOOKS ABOUT LOVE

But *Shir HaShirim* is not the only biblical book about love. It is a complex emotion that cannot be defined from a single perspective, nor do all its dimensions become apparent at the same time. In a way that is subtle and richly complex, the three pilgrimage festivals all have their special book, each about love but about different phases of it. The Song of Songs on Pesaḥ is about love as passion. The lovers are young. There is no mention of marriage, a home, children, responsibility. They have no thought for the morrow nor for others. They are obsessed with one another. They live conscious of the other's absence, longing for the other's presence. That is how love should be some of the time if it is to be deep and transforming all the time.

The book of Ruth, the scroll we read on Shavuot, is about love as loyalty: Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi, and Boaz's to Naomi, Ruth and the family heritage. It is about "loving-kindness," the word coined by Myles Coverdale in his Bible translation of 1535 because he could find no English word that meant *ḥesed*. Beginning as it does with death, bereavement and childlessness, and ending with marriage and the birth of a child it is about the power of love to redeem grief and loneliness and "make gentle the life of this world." It is about what the Song of Songs is not: about marriage, continuity and keeping faith with "the living and

* The major exception was the voluntary adoption of Naziriteship, about which some of the sages were critical. The sages even interpreted Miriam and Aaron's criticism of Moses (Num. 12:1) as condemnation of his refusal to have relations with his wife (*Sifri*, 99).

◂ the dead

the dead" (Ruth 2:20). That too, in Judaism, is a significant part of love, for we are not just selves: we are part of the living chain of generations.

On Sukkot we have a third story about love: love grown old and wise. *Kohelet*, Ecclesiastes, is a book easy to misread as a study in disillusionment, but that is because of sustained series of mistranslations of its key word, *hevel*. This is variously rendered as "vanity, vapour, meaningless, futile, useless," leading readers to think that its author finds life without purpose or point. *Hevel* does not mean that: it means "a fleeting breath." It is about the brevity of life on earth. It begins with the author seeking happiness in philosophy (*ḥokhma*), pleasure, laughter, the accumulation of wealth, fine houses and pleasure gardens, the perennial secular temptations. He discovers that none of them can defeat death. Objects last but those who own them do not. Wisdom may be eternal, but the wise still die.

We defeat death not by seeking a this-worldly immortality but by *simḥa*, the spiritually and morally textured exhilaration about which William Blake wrote, "He who binds to himself a joy / Does the winged life destroy. / He who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in eternity's sun rise." *Kohelet* learns that happiness is to be found not in what you own (bind to yourself) but in what you share. It exists not where you invest your money but where you give of yourself. It lives in work and love: "Enjoy life with the woman you love all the days of this fleeting life you have been given under the sun, all the fleeting days, for that is your portion in life and in all your labour under the sun" (Eccles. 9:9). This is love that has grown from passion to responsibility to existential joy: the joy of being with one you love.

The essential message of Judaism is contained in no one of these books but in the combination of all three. *Eros* is the fire that gives love its redemptive, transforming, other-directed quality. Marriage is the covenantal bond that turns love into a pledge of loyalty and brings new life into the world. Companionship, experience and a life well lived bring *simḥa*, a word that appears only twice in *Shir HaShirim*, not at all in Ruth but seventeen times in *Kohelet*.

Love as passion; love as marriage and childbirth and continuity; love as abiding happiness: three stages of love, traced out in the course of a life and the course of a year and its seasons: the Song of Songs in spring,

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Ruth in harvest time, Ecclesiastes in autumn as the days grow colder and the nights longer. With a wonderful touch of serendipity, Ecclesiastes ends with the advice, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them" (12:1), thus leading us back to youthfulness, spring and the Song of Songs where we began.

LOVE AND JUSTICE

Judaism is about love. But it does not make the mistake of thinking with Virgil that *omnia vincit amor*, "Love conquers all." Much of Genesis, surprisingly, is about the problems love creates.

With Abraham, loves enters the world. But it is not an easy love. The first time in the Torah that we encounter the verb *a-h-v*, "love," is at the start of the greatest trial of them all: the binding of Isaac. "Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac" (Gen. 22:2). What the trial is about is not simple, but it is certainly about love. The conventional reading is that God is testing Abraham by asking him to sacrifice what he loves most, to show that he loves God more than he loves his son. The reading I prefer is that the trial is a definitive rejection of the principle, common in the ancient world and known in Roman law as *patria potestas*, which held that a child is the property of its parent. What God sought from Abraham at the trial was not his willingness to kill his son – in Judaism, child sacrifice is not the highest virtue but the lowest vice – but rather his willingness to renounce ownership of his son. That, though, is a subject for elsewhere. Here we merely note how precisely the note is struck in the Torah. Love is not simple. It leads to conflict and to the question: whom do you love more?

The verb "to love" occurs fifteen times in Genesis, always between humans and almost always as the prelude to strife. Isaac loves Esau while Rebecca loves Jacob, thus setting in motion one of the great sibling rivalries of the Bible. Jacob loves Rachel but is induced unwittingly to marry Leah. Leah feels unloved ("And God saw that Leah was hated" – 29:31), and this leads not only to a palpable tension between the two sisters, but also between their respective children. Jacob's love for Joseph ("more than his other sons" – 37:3) leads to envy on the part of the other brothers,

◂ talk

talk of murder, and eventually the sale of Joseph into slavery in Egypt, the act that begins the long sequence of events that leads to exile.

This is an important and unexpected insight. Love – real, passionate, the very love that humanises us, leading us to great acts of self-sacrifice – unites and divides, divides as it unites. It creates rivalries for attention and affection. Without such love, an essential element of our humanity is missing. But it creates problems that can split families apart and lead to estrangement and violence.

Something else must enter the scene: *love as justice*. Something larger than the family must be its vehicle. Love must be transformed from a form of kinship into a societal bond. It is this that makes exile necessary. That is why Genesis must be followed by Exodus. The way to the Promised Land lies through the formative experiences of persecution and the wilderness.

Three things must happen before love can become the basis of a nation. First, people must feel bound to one another by the common experience of suffering. They must be more than an extended biological family. Families argue and split apart. When they do the opposite they can become narrow and exclusive, suspicious of outsiders. In Genesis, Abraham's children are a family. In the first chapter of Exodus we hear a word used to describe them that has not been used before: *Am*, a people. The word *am* is related to *im*, "with." A people is a group who are, in a strong sense, *with* one another. They suffer the same fate, recall the same history; they have been through a journey together. That is the first thing that happens to them.

The second is that they become not just an *am* but also an *eda*, a congregation, a community, from the word *ed*, "witness," and *y-a-d*, "to designate, specify, arrange." There must be more than fellow-feeling and kinship. There must be an act of shared testimony and commitment to work together for the sake of the common good.

Third, the Sovereign of the nation thus formed must be someone beyond the human situation, God Himself, otherwise the nation will fall like all others into a competition for status and power, in which the strong prevail, the weak suffer, and the people are divided into rulers and ruled. It must be a society in which the only legitimate form of power is delegated power, held conditionally on honouring a moral code, and always subject to moral limits. It must be "one nation under God." Otherwise justice

◂ will become

will become what Thrasymachus tells Socrates it is: the interests of the stronger party. That is not justice but its abuse.

This is the essential journey traced out in *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting of days between Pesaḥ and Shavuot. In Egypt the Israelites become an *am*. They suffer together. They develop a sense of shared fate. Two weeks prior to their departure, they receive their first collective command (to fix the calendar, to structure time) and become, in that act, an *eda* (Ex. 12:1–3). At Sinai, on Shavuot, they enter into a covenant with God making Him their sole Sovereign, and making each responsible for the fate of the nation as a whole. Covenant – a political form of treaty in the ancient Near East – here becomes a kind of marriage-writ-large, a bond of love between God who loves this people, descendants as they are of those who first heard and heeded His call, and the people who owe their liberty to God. At that moment, covenant – a bond of love as loyalty – received its highest expression as the code and destiny of a nation.

THE POLITICS OF LOVE

So we arrive at one of the most remarkable projects ever undertaken by a nation: a society held together by love: three loves. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. And you shall love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. There is no other morality quite like it.

A society is thus formed on the basis of love of neighbour and of stranger. This is not an abstract kind of love. It is translated into practical imperatives. Provide the poor with food from the corners of the field and the leavings of the harvest. Let them eat freely of the produce of the field in the seventh year and provide them with a tithe on the third and sixth. One year in seven, release debts and Hebrew slaves. One year in fifty return all ancestral land to its original owners. Make sure there are courts throughout the land and that everyone has access to justice. Ensure that no one is left out of the festival celebrations, and no one denied access to dignity. Treat employees and debtors ethically and give slaves rest one day in seven. Here in a magnificent passage is how Moses describes this ethic of love:

◂ And now

> And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul… To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set His affection on your ancestors and loved them, and He chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and LORD of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love the stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. (Deut. 10:12–19)

This is a unique vision that shaped the moral horizons of the West (there are Eastern religions, notably Buddhism, that are also based on love, but of a more cosmic, less personal form). The moral life as Judaism conceives it is a combination of love – *ḥesed* and *raḥamim* – and justice – *tzedek* and *mishpat*. Love is particular; justice is universal. Love is interpersonal; justice is impersonal. Love generates ethics: the duties we owe those to whom we are bound by kinship or consent. Justice generates morality; the duties we owe everyone because they are human. Both are ultimately based on our love for God and His for us. It is the fusion of the moral and spiritual that is the unmistakable mark of Israel's prophets.

Simon May's comment is very much to the point: "What we must note here, for it is fundamental to the history of Western love, is the remarkable and radical justice that underlies the love command of Leviticus. Not a cold justice in which due deserts are mechanically handed out, but a justice that brings the other, as an individual with needs and interests, into a relationship of respect."* This is the kind of love that exists within the family transposed to society as a whole, built on *tzedaka* as loving justice and *ḥesed* as loving charity. Out of it emerges the first great attempt in history to build a society (as opposed to a state) on the basis of a radically extended love.

* Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 17.

◂ This too

This too is part of the relationship between the Song of Songs and Pesaḥ. It highlights the radical contrast between a society based on fear and one based on love. The persecution of the Israelites in Egypt began with the words of Pharaoh: "The Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." Oppression is the result of the politics of fear. Its opposite is the politics of justice and love, of covenant and collective responsibility, a principled respect for the humanity of each under the sovereignty of God.

TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

Judaism is incomprehensible without love. How else would God have stayed faithful to a people that so often abandoned Him? How often would a people have stayed loyal to a God who seemed sometimes to have abandoned them? There is a passion, an intensity, a fervour to the books of Bible explicable in no other terms. There is daring language throughout. Speaking to Hosea, God compares Israel to a prostitute. Speaking to his fellow mourners in the ruined Jerusalem, the author of Lamentations says that God has become "like an enemy" (2:5). Each accuses the other of desertion. There are fierce arguments on either side. God calls to humanity, "Where are you?" There are times when humanity makes the same cry to God. There is not the slightest suggestion anywhere in Tanakh that love is easy, calm, idyllic. Yet it is never less than passionate. The epicentre of that passion is contained in the Song of Songs, and it is this that makes it, as Rabbi Akiva said, the Holy of Holies of Scripture.

That love has been the text and texture of Jewish life ever since. It was there in the second century when Rabbi Akiva prepared to die as a martyr, saying, "All my life I have been wondering when I will have the opportunity to fulfil the command, 'Love the LORD your God … with all your soul' [Deut. 6:5], meaning, 'even if He takes your soul.' Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not seize it?" (*Berakhot* 61b). It was there when the Jews of northern Europe died at their own hands during the Crusades rather than be forcibly converted to Christianity. It was there in the twelfth century when Maimonides defined what it is to serve God with love:

◂ What is

> What is the love of God that is befitting? It is to love God with a great and exceeding love, so strong that one's soul shall be knit up with the love of God such that it is continually enraptured by it, like love-sick individuals whose minds are at no time free from passion for a particular woman and are enraptured by her at all times… Even more intense should be the love of God in the hearts of those who love Him; they should be enraptured by this love at all times. (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:3)

It was there in the sixteenth century in Safed when Rabbi Eliezer Azikri wrote the passionate song to God we sing every Shabbat, "Beloved of the soul":

> Like a deer will Your servant run
> and fall prostrate before Your beauty.
> To him Your love is sweeter
> than honey from the comb, than any taste.

It is there every weekday when Jewish men put on the tefillin, "like a seal on your arm," saying, as they wrap its strap around the finger like a wedding ring, the words of Hosea: "I will betroth you to Me forever… I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you will know the Lord" (2:21–22).

Jews were and often still are the God-intoxicated people. For the knowledge of God in Judaism is not a form of theology; it is a form of love. That is what the Hebrew verb "to know" means. It is inescapably an *eros*-word: "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived" (Gen. 4:1). It is the knowledge of intimacy: deep, emotive, physical and spiritual at once. Through love, and only through love, divine blessing flows into the world. Kohanim, as they prepare to bless the congregation, recite the blessing "who has commanded us to bless His people Israel with love," because only when we love do we become vehicles for God's love.

Plato held that we love what is beautiful. Judaism believes something subtly but fundamentally different: what we love *becomes* beautiful. Beauty does not create love: love creates beauty. That is why the Jewish people, derided by others for centuries as pariahs, never internalised that

◂ image

image. "I am dark yet fair, daughters of Jerusalem" (Song. 1:5). If they were beautiful in God's eyes, that was sufficient. That seems to me to be the right source of self-respect and the right sort of love. For to love God is to love the world He made and the humanity He fashioned in His image. To love God is to love His people, despite its many faults. To be loved by God is the greatest gift, the only one we can never lose.

9. Renewing the Covenant: On the Haftara of the Second Day

How do you defeat the decline and fall of civilisations, the fate of almost every world power since the dawn of history itself? That is the question posed and implicitly answered in the Haftara for the second day.

It records a momentous event in Jewish history. The year was 622 BCE and the young king Josiah had been engaged in a massive programme of reform to remove the idolatrous shrines and pagan practices of his grandfather, King Manasseh. During the course of the cleansing of the Temple a copy of the Torah was found, evidently hidden during Manasseh's reign for fear it would be destroyed.

Reading it, the king and his advisers were forcibly reminded of Moses' teachings in the book of Deuteronomy, which identified the nation's fate with its faithfulness to its covenant with God. Deuteronomy records a terrifying series of curses spelling out what would happen to the people if they strayed from the covenant. This struck fear into the king. These were not abstract theological reflections. They were a clear and present warning of what might happen to the nation now if they did not collectively return and repent. A century earlier, a not dissimilar fate had happened to the northern kingdom, Israel, at the hands of the Assyrians, and now only the smaller kingdom of Judah was left.

The king assembled the people and together with them renewed the covenant:

> He read to them all that was written in the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the Temple. The king stood on his platform and made a covenant before the LORD, [pledging] to walk after Him and to observe His commandments and statutes and laws with all his heart and all his soul, to observe the words of that covenant written in the

◂ scroll

> scroll of the Torah – and all the people committed themselves to the covenant. (II Kings 23:2–3)

The king redoubled his efforts to purify the kingdom. That year, as part of the national renewal, there was a massive celebration of Pesaḥ in Jerusalem: "For the Pesaḥ had not been observed [with such ceremony] in the times of the judges who judged Israel, nor throughout the times of all of the kings of Israel or the kings of Judea" (II Kings 23:22; see also the parallel account in II Chronicles 35:1–18).

This was not the only historic occasion in which Pesaḥ marked a covenant renewal. A similar event took place earlier in the days of King Hezekiah. The king had messengers go throughout the land, including those sections of the northern kingdom (the text mentions members of the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun) who remained, inviting them to come not just to celebrate the festival but also to renew their commitment to God and the covenant: "People of Israel, return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that He may return to you who are left, who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria" (II Chr. 30:6).

Many came. The text reports, "There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon, son of David, King of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem" (II Chr. 30:26). Evidently Josiah's later celebration eclipsed even this, because in the days of Hezekiah not all the members of the northern tribes responded favourably to his invitation.

These two great celebrations of Pesaḥ represent something fundamental about biblical politics. They are rooted in the idea of a covenant. Covenants were widely known and used in the ancient Middle East as treaties between nations. Uniquely in the case of Israel, the covenant was between God and a people, through which the people recognised God as their Sovereign and committed themselves to keeping His law. The entire book of Deuteronomy is structured as such a covenant.

The idea of covenant reentered the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, notably in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland, England and the first colonies in America. Only in America does it continue to exist, if not as an active principle, then at least as part of its rhetoric of self-understanding.

Covenant is a distinctive form of politics, different from three others.

◂ One is

One is *hierarchical* society, of which the greatest in the past were the ancient civilisations of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Another is the *civic republican* society, inspired by the city states, especially Athens and Sparta, of ancient Greece. Most recently, a further type emerged in the liberal democracies of the West in the second half of the twentieth century: the *contract* society, a new phenomenon in which the state is seen as an enterprise restricted to keeping the peace and providing services in return for taxation.

Covenant societies tend to be politically, though not economically, egalitarian. They are fundamentally opposed to hierarchy. They aim to create a nation, in Abraham Lincoln's phrase, "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Although all societies contain some hierarchical, non-egalitarian elements, covenant societies insist that all are equal in dignity and must be treated as such.

They are also opposed to one feature of civic republican societies, namely the belief that there is no higher good than the state. Civic republican societies came into vogue in the modern era with the French Revolution and they tend to turn politics into a form of religion, which is as dangerous as turning religion into a form of politics. So in the European nation states of the nineteenth century, politics became replete with the trappings of the ceremonial: flags, symbols, emblems, anthems, parades, oaths, flags, coins, national gatherings and institutions. The state became an object of worship with an exclusive claim on loyalty. This, in biblical terms, is idolatry.

As for the politics of contract, it is too new to know what its future will be. The phrase "social contract" is associated with Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, but they did not mean by it what Western liberal democracies have taken it to be since the 1960s: societies with no shared morality, where the supreme values are autonomy and rights, and the primary political calculations are those of advantage. Almost certainly such societies are too shallow to survive in this form, especially since they fail to make sense of the one value on which all politics depends, namely loyalty.*

* See Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Paul Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

◂ One important

One important feature of the politics of covenant, though, is illustrated by the Pesaḥ celebrations of Hezekiah and Josiah. Covenantal societies are conscious of their origin at a specific time and place. They emerge out of history: usually a history of persecution, followed by the experience of liberation, often involving a struggle, a journey, and a conscious new beginning driven by certain principles of a moral nature. In the case of Israel it was to honour God, keep His commandments and serve Him alone, thus becoming "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6).

Covenants can be renewed. That is what happened in the last month of Moses' life (Deut. 29), at the end of Joshua's life (Josh. 24), in the time of Jehoiada, high priest during the reign of Joash (II Chron. 23:16) and in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8–10), as well as during the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah. The renewal – a national ceremony freighted with religious gravitas – always takes the form of a retelling of the history of the people, emphasising the kindness of God and the waywardness of the nation. When it obeyed God it prospered; when it disobeyed, it suffered defeat. Therefore the people pledge themselves to remain true to the covenant and loyal to God. Covenant renewal is part historical recollection, part mission statement, part rededication, and there is nothing quite like it in other political systems.

This had real historical repercussions. As Shelley made unforgettably clear in his poem Ozymandias (above, page xxx), even the greatest empires have declined, fallen, and been consigned to archeological relics and museums. Except in the case of Israel and the Jewish people it has become a law of history. The fourteenth-century Islamic thinker, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), said that when a civilisation becomes great, its elites get used to luxury and comfort, and the people as a whole lose what he called their *asabiyah*, their social solidarity. The people then become prey to a conquering enemy, less civilised than they are but more cohesive and driven.

Italian political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) described a similar cycle: "People first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful, next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad squandering their estates." We might call this the law of entropy – the principle that all systems lose energy over time – applied to nations.

Covenant renewal defeats national entropy. A people that never forgets

◂ its purpose

its purpose and its past, that reenacts its story in every family every year, a nation that attributes its successes to God and its failures to itself, cannot die. It may go into exile but it will return. It may suffer eclipse but it will be reborn. That is no small exception to the otherwise universal law of the decline and fall of nations – no small gift of Pesaḥ to the eternity of Israel.

10. The Division of the Reed Sea: On the Torah Reading for the Seventh Day

One thing makes God laugh: human beings who think they are gods. This is a divine response we often do not recognise because we were neither looking for it nor expecting it. The use of humour is one of the Torah's most subtle devices, and its intent is deadly serious. God mocks those who mock Him. Not because He is jealous of His honour. To the contrary, as Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the Talmud: God's greatness is His humility (*Megilla* 31a).

God mocks those who set themselves up above others, who have divine or semi-divine pretensions, because He cares for their victims. His use of humour is precisely judged and measure-for-measure. Those who are high He brings low. Those who are low He lifts high. Those who take themselves seriously, He turns into jokes. Those the world laughs at, He takes as His own. Unless we understand this, we will miss an essential dimension of the division of the Reed Sea. We will see it as a mere miracle – the sea divided, water turned into dry land, the order of nature overturned – which it is, but only secondarily. Its real point is more serious. It is about the will to power, the ethics of militarism and faith in arms and armies. Its message is deep, precise, ominous and very much still relevant.

The best way of understanding the Torah's approach to human self-pretension is through examples. The obvious case is Balaam. Balaam is the archetype of the shaman, the wonder-worker who uses religion in a way the Torah regards as blasphemous, as a means of enlisting supernatural powers to human ends. As Balak, King of Moab says to him:

> Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed. (Num. 22:6)

◂ Balaam

Balaam goes through the usual formalities. He cannot, he says, do anything against God's will. He must first find out whether the mission is acceptable. This turns out however to be mere show because when a second attempt is made to persuade him, promising him more honour and reward, he consults with God again, proving that he believes that God, like man, can change His mind, be bribed and so on. God is angry, though the text does not tell us this yet. The form His anger takes is that He gives permission to Balaam to go. Since Balaam has shown he only half-accepts the answer "No," God gives him the answer "Yes." The sages described this as the rule that "Where you want to go, that is where you will be led" (*Makkot* 10b). The next morning Balaam sets out, and the famous scene with the ass takes place.

A joke is being played on Balaam. His ass sees an angel that Balaam, the greatest seer of his age, cannot see. The ass speaks, proving what God told Moses at the burning bush: "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Ex. 4:11). Balaam has the hubris to think he is the master of God's word, that he can decide who will be blessed and cursed. God shows him that even an ass can see and speak if God wills it. Balaam cannot see an angel with a drawn sword even when it is directly in front of him, and far from cursing the Israelites finds himself losing a moral argument with a talking donkey.

Satire descends into farce as the man Balak has offered a fortune to curse the Israelites proceeds to bestow on them some of the most unforgettable blessings in the entire Torah. This happens because Balak and Balaam believe that blessings and curses are for sale and that divine powers can be exploited for human ends.

The second scene occurs in the story of the tower of Babel. The people on the plain of Shinar propose to build a city with "a tower that reaches heaven" (Gen. 11:4). This is one of the biblical narratives for which the realia are well known through archeology. More than thirty Mesopotamian ziggurats or towers have been unearthed, the most famous of which, and one of the largest, was that of Babylon which rose to a height of some three hundred feet from a square base, with a sanctuary at the summit.

At the beginning of the second millennium BCE the Sumerian ruler of Lagash, Gudea, says of the temple of Eninnu that "it rose to the sky."

◂ Later

Later Esarhaddon says of the temple of Ashur that he made "its top high as heaven." The same language is used of the temple of Marduk in Babylon. So the ambition was real. The towers of the first great civilisation on earth, the place Abraham and his family left, were man-made structures, artificial holy mountains, on which it was believed people – kings especially – could ascend to heaven to meet the gods.

The biblical text, having described this briefly and with precision, then says: "God said…Come, *let us descend*" (11:6–7). So miniscule is the tower that God has to "descend" to be able to see it at all: a joke we can only fully appreciate now that we are able to fly over skyscrapers from a height of thirty thousand feet and see how small the highest building looks from even a modest elevation in the sky. The builders had been led to this hubris by a simple technological advance: the use of kilns to make bricks harder and more durable than their sun-dried equivalents.

No sooner had they achieved this than they began to believe that humans can make mountains, reach the sky and be like gods. In response God uses no high technology, no miracle. He merely confuses the language of the builders. Immediately the serious project of human self-aggrandisement is reduced to farce as orders are shouted out by the supervisors and no one understands what they are saying. Not only can the builders not converse with the gods. They cannot even converse with one another. It is a *coup de theatre* designed to make fun of those who take themselves seriously as masters of the universe.

The result is precisely judged. The builders sought to make the city so that they "would not be scattered over the face of the earth" (v. 4). The result is that they were "scattered over the face of the earth" (vv. 8, 9). They sought to "make a name for ourselves" (v. 4) and they succeeded, but not as they intended. Babel became the eternal name, not for order but for confusion.

The logic of these and similar narratives is given in Psalm 2, the text that speaks about God's laughter:

> Why do the nations clamour, why are the peoples speaking futilities?
> The kings of this earth have assembled;
> the leaders have banded together
> against the LORD and His anointed.

◂ "Let us

> "Let us cut their bonds," they have said, "and cast from us their cords."
> The One who presides in heaven shall laugh;
> the LORD will jeer at them. (Psalm 2:1–4)

Turning to the division of the Reed Sea, we begin by noting a pointed ambiguity in the Torah's description of what happened and how:

> Moses raised his hand over the sea, and the LORD *moved the sea with a strong easterly wind* all that night; it turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. So the children of Israel walked into the midst of the sea on dry land, and the water was *like a wall for them on their right and on their left.* (Ex. 14:21–22)

Of the two phrases emphasised above, the second phrase, "the water was like a wall," suggests a supernatural event. God suspended the laws of nature. The Israelites walked on dry land between walls of water held in place by the divine will alone. This is the first reading, with all its drama. The Egyptians, with their horse-drawn chariots, see themselves as an invincible military power about to crush a group of powerless, fugitive slaves. God unleashes against them the forces of nature itself, using the sea (in ancient times a symbol of primal chaos, the Ugaritic god Yam, or in Egyptian mythology Apep, enemy of the sun god Ra), wielding it as a weapon to defend His otherwise defenceless people to overthrow the army of the man who thought himself a god.

But the first phrase, *moved the sea with a strong easterly wind,* suggests a different reading. No suspension of the laws of nature is needed for a strong east wind, in the right place at the right time, to uncover dry land where, at other times, there was sea. To mention just one of many recent scientific accounts, in September 2010, researchers at US National Center for Atmospheric Research and the University of Colorado showed by computer simulation how a sixty-three-miles-per-hour east wind, blowing overnight, would have pushed back water at a point in the Nile Delta where an ancient river merged with a coastal lagoon. The water would have been driven back into the two waterways and a land bridge opened at the bend, allowing people to walk across the exposed mud flats. As soon as the wind died down, the waters would have rushed back. The leader of

◂ the project

the project said when the report was published: "The simulations match fairly closely with the account in Exodus."* This is one of several explanations offered by scientists to show how the division of the sea might have happened naturally.

This does not mean that it was not a miracle. Rather, it suggests a different way of understanding the nature of a miracle: not an event that suspends the laws of nature but rather one that, by happening when, how and to whom it did, constituted a deliverance that was a signal of transcendence, written unmistakably in God's handwriting, a divine intervention but not a scientific impossibility.**

The second reading suggests a quite different way of understanding the events that took place at the sea. The military dominance of the Egyptians was based on the horse-drawn chariot, introduced into Egypt by the Hyksos in the sixteenth century BCE. This made the Egyptian army invincible. It was the symbol of their strength. There is however one form of terrain in which the horse-drawn chariot is a source not of strength but of weakness, namely an uncovered, saturated sea-bed. The Israelites, travelling on foot, were able to walk across, but the Egyptians, pursuing after them in their chariots, found that "the wheels of their chariots were unfastened and drove with difficulty" (Ex. 14:25). They became stuck in the mire, unable to move forward or back. Their very obsession with catching up with the Israelites had driven them heedless into danger. By the time they found themselves trapped, they were helpless. As the wind dropped and the waters returned they were caught, defeated not by an

* A report can be found at https://www2.ucar.edu/atmosnews/news/2663/parting-waters-computer-modeling-applies-physics-red-sea-escape-route. For another account by a professor of materials science at Cambridge University, see Colin Humphreys, *The Miracles of Exodus* (London: Continuum, 2003).

** The sages offered a third, mediating possibility. By a play on the word *le'eitano*, "the sea returned *to its original strength*," the sages said, this means *letano*, "to its condition," suggesting that "the Holy One, blessed be He, made a condition with the elements of the universe during the six days of creation." One of these was that the sea should split before the Israelites (*Bereshit Raba* 5:5). On this reading the division of the sea was programmed into the script of nature from the beginning of time. Thus did the sages seek to reconcile the supernatural with the natural: miracles happen but the universe retains its law-like character.

◂ army

army but by their own desire to exercise power over the vulnerable and by their own reliance on military technology.

On this reading the significance of the event is not its supernatural quality but something more consequential, an irony that echoes through the centuries: those who trust in weapons of war, perish by weapons of war. Those who worship military technology eventually become its victims. We become, says Psalm 115 (part of Hallel), what we worship. If we worship instruments of death, we die. If we worship the God of life, we live. Or, as Psalm 147 puts it:

> He does not take delight in the strength of horses nor pleasure in the fleetness of man. The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His loving care. (Psalm 147:10–11)

The scene of the Israelite refugees, on foot, crossing the sea to safety while the Egyptian army floundered, rendered helpless by the very vehicles that had made them believe they were invulnerable, is unforgettable. The powerful have been rendered powerless while the powerless make their way to freedom. The truth conveyed by that image does not require for its proof a suspension of the laws of nature. It is one of the laws of human nature, forgotten in every generation by those who worship power. Those who see themselves as more than human become less than human. Those who laugh at God become the laughing-stock of history.

11. Empathising with Your Enemies: On Some Laws and Customs of Pesaḥ

There are two aspects of Pesaḥ that make it different from the other pilgrimage festivals, Shavuot and Sukkot. First, in the Torah, the word *simḥa*, "rejoicing," does not appear at all in connection with it. In Leviticus the word appears specifically in connection with Sukkot. In Deuteronomy it figures twice in connection with Sukkot, once with Shavuot. But there is no explicit command to rejoice on Pesaḥ.

The second is that a Full Hallel is said only on the first day (outside Israel, the first two days). The Talmud (*Arakhin* 10a–b) gives a reason for this. The sacrifices offered in the Temple did not vary on the seven days of Pesaḥ (Num. 28:24), whereas they did on Sukkot. This gives each day

◂ of Sukkot

of Sukkot something of the status of a festival in its own right whereas on Pesaḥ the subsequent days are a mere repetition of the first.

However, the answer of the Talmud is not sufficient to explain one phenomenon: the fact that we do not say a Full Hallel on the seventh day. According to tradition, the division of the Reed Sea took place on the seventh day. Moses had initially asked Pharaoh for permission to travel with the people three days into the wilderness to worship God. When it became clear that they were not about to return, Pharaoh was notified on the fourth day. He and his chariots travelled on days five and six. On the seventh the Israelites crossed the Sea and sang the Song (Rashi to Exodus 14:5). That is why the crossing of the Sea is the Torah Reading for the seventh day. The Talmud, in its discussion of the origin of Hallel (*Pesaḥim* 117a), lists a number of historic occasions on which it was sung. The first of these is *at the Reed Sea*! In other words, according to the Talmud, Hallel originated on the seventh day of Pesaḥ. Therefore, regardless of the sacrifices, it should at least be said on that day.

A midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Emor* 654) gives a similar answer to both questions. Rejoicing is not mentioned in connection with Pesaḥ because it was a period "during which the Egyptians died." We do not say a Full Hallel other than on the first day because of the principle (Prov. 24:17), "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart be glad" – a prohibition against Schadenfreude. This recalls another passage in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 39b), which says that during the division of the Reed Sea, the angels above wanted to sing a song of triumph like the Israelites below. God silenced them with the words, "The works of My hands are drowning in the sea and you wish to sing a song?"

There is an obvious question: if God stopped the angels singing, why did He not stop the Israelites? The technical answer is that there is a halakhic difference between Hallel said at the time of the event and Hallel said subsequently on the anniversary of the event. The first is a direct expression of emotion; the second is an act of memory. The first does not require a blessing, the second does. That is why we do not make a blessing on the Hallel said at the Seder table whereas we do in the synagogue. At the Seder table there is a halakhic requirement that "each person must see himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt" (Mishna, *Pesaḥim* 10:5). Therefore Hallel for us is as it was for the Israelites at the

◂ time:

time: an immediate personal experience. At the time of a miraculous escape we are overwhelmed with gratitude and a sense of relief and release. It is not a time for balanced emotion and detachment. However, for the angels (and for the Israelites themselves on subsequent years) Hallel was not the result of an immediate experience. Hence it was overridden by the prohibition against taking pleasure at seeing your enemy fall, and only an abridged version ("Half Hallel") is said.

The same reasoning – "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls" – appears in the famous explanation offered by Abudraham (Abu Dirham, Seville, fourteenth century) as to why we spill drops of wine while reciting the Ten Plagues at the Seder table: to remind ourselves of the suffering of the Egyptians. The implication may be that we should feel sorry for the Egyptians who suffered for the recalcitrance of a single individual, Pharaoh (Moses once said to God, "Shall one man sin and will You be angry with the whole congregation?" [Num. 16:22]). Or perhaps the point is that even the execution of justice should occasion mixed feelings. The Talmud rules that the command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," applies even to a criminal who has committed a capital crime (*Sanhedrin* 52a). Death must be as painless as possible, because though a person has forfeited his life, he has not forfeited his status as a human.

Are these sentiments merely the products of post-biblical Judaism? Or do they have some basis in Tanakh itself?

There are two puzzling passages which may shed light on the question. The first is the strange insistence by God that, before they leave, the Israelites should ask their Egyptian neighbours for "articles of silver and gold" (Ex. 11:2). Did they need silver and gold for the journey? Besides which, as the sages pointed out, if they had not taken gold from Egypt they would not have been able to make a golden calf (*Berakhot* 32a). Yet there is nothing minor or accidental about this detail. God mentioned it to Moses before he had even started his mission (Ex. 3:22). Centuries earlier He alluded to it to Abraham: "Afterward they will come out with great possessions" (Gen. 15:14). Even before then it had been a feature of Abraham's own exile to Egypt: "Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold" (Gen. 13:2).

It cannot be that the years of exile and suffering were for the sake of wealth. Divine blessings are to be found in Israel, not exile. Nor is there

◂ anything

anything to be said for taking money from the wicked. As Abraham said to the king of Sodom, "I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich'" (Gen. 14:23).

Instead, the explanation is to be found in the later law of Deuteronomy about releasing a slave:

> When you set him free from your service you must not send him away empty-handed. You must give generously to him of your flock, your granary and your wine-vat with which the LORD your God has blessed you; so you shall give him. And you shall remember that you were once a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you; this is why, today, I command you thus. (Deut. 15:13–15)

There are two elements at stake here. The first is that when you release a slave you must give him initial support to start a new life in freedom. The other and more significant is emotional closure. Slavery is humiliating. The parting gift from the master does not compensate for the years of freedom lost, but it does mean that there is a final act of goodwill. It is there precisely to mitigate the resentment that otherwise exists between a former slave and his or her master. It is there to prevent some form of revenge (see Lev. 19:18).

The law in Deuteronomy refers to an Israelite releasing a slave. But there is no reason to doubt that the same logic applies to God's insistence that the Israelites receive gifts from the Egyptians. The Torah is calibrated to human nature. It was, as the sages say, "not given to angels" (*Berakhot* 25b). Humiliation, resentment and the desire for revenge have destroyed civilisations in the past.* They are no basis for a nation about to create a free society under the sovereignty of God. The Israelites were to leave Egypt without a legacy of hate.

The same logic applies to the arresting statement of Moses: "You shall not despise an Egyptian, for you were strangers in his land" (Deut. 23:8). This is one of the great apparent non-sequiturs in the Torah. The

* See Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

◂ Egyptians

Egyptians enslaved our ancestors. They tried to carry out a programme of genocide. It is not as if Moses wanted the people to forget their suffering in Egypt. To the contrary, God had commanded the Israelites never to forget it, never to cease reenacting it once a year.

Rather, the explanation is this: If the Israelites continued to resent the Egyptians for the way they had been treated, then Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but would not have taken Egypt out of the Israelites. In a psychological sense they would still be slaves to the past. They would see themselves as victims, and victimhood is incompatible with freedom. Victimhood defines you as an object not a subject, someone others act upon not someone who takes destiny into his own hands. Victims destroy; they do not build. Victims look back, not forward. *To be free, you have to let go of hate.* That is the burden of Moses' command.

Egypt never became, in the Jewish imagination, a symbol of evil. That was reserved for the Amalekites. The humanising of the Egyptians led Isaiah to one of the most remarkable prophecies in all religious literature. The day will come, he says, when the Egyptians will themselves suffer from a tyrannical leader. On that day they will cry out to God, who will respond by performing the same kind of miracle for them as once before He had performed for the Israelites:

> When they cry out to the LORD because of their oppressors, He will send them a saviour and defender, and He will rescue them. So the LORD will make Himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the LORD. (Isaiah 19:20–21)

There will come a day when God Himself will bless the Egyptians, saying, "Blessed be Egypt, My people" (ibid. 25).

This same biblical concern that one should not dehumanise one's enemies is a key theme of the book of Jonah. It is the lesson God seeks to teach the prophet by sending him a leafy plant to give him shade during the day. When the plant dies, Jonah curses his fate. God then says:

> "You cared about that plant, which you did not toil for and did not grow, which appeared overnight and was lost overnight. And am I not

◂ to care

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> to care for the great city of Nineveh, which has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people in it – who do not know their right hands from their left – and many animals?" (Jonah 4:10–11)

The fact that the Assyrians were Israel's once and future enemies does not justify depriving them of the chance to repent and be forgiven.

This entire cluster of attitudes is extraordinary, yet it is central to our understanding of the exodus. The sin of the Egyptians was that they dehumanised the Israelites. Therefore if Israel is to be the antitype, the opposite, of Egypt, it must not dehumanise the Egyptians. We must not hate them. We must not say a Full Hallel on the day they drowned in the Sea. Because Egyptians died, our entire "joy" on the festival is muted, not even mentioned in the Torah at all.

Retribution is not revenge. Punishment is not hate. Justice is not vindictiveness. The moral system of the Torah depends on making a fundamental distinction between interpersonal emotion and impersonal law. Revenge, hate and vindictiveness are all I–Thou relationships. Justice is the opposite: the principled refusal to let I–Thou relationships determine the fate of individuals within society. Justice means that all must submit to the impartial process of law. Retribution is an act of restoring moral order to society. It has nothing to do with revenge which is, strictly speaking, lawless. When law and justice prevail, there can be punishment without animosity. The law-based society envisaged by the Torah is one where people hate not the sinner but the sin.

One of the recurring dangers of religion, indeed of civilisations generally, is that they divide humanity into the saved and the damned, the redeemed and the accursed, the believer and the infidel, the civilised and the barbarian, the children of light and the children of darkness. There is no limit to the evils that can be visited on those not of our faith, since one is doing so in the name of God, truth, and right, and since one's victims are less than fully human. That is an abomination, an offence against God and His image – humankind.

Spilling wine during the recitation of the plagues, refraining from Full Hallel on the seventh day, not hating an Egyptian: all these and more are fundamental to the Torah's insistence that *our humanity precedes our*

◂ *religious*

religious identity. Man was made in God's image long before the covenant with Abraham or the Israelites. To be a Jew is the Jewish way of being human. It is not a justification for seeing others as less than human.

If Rabbi Yaakov Emden is right, then there is a statement to this effect at the very beginning of the Seder. The first words we say at the opening of *Maggid* are: "This is the bread of oppression our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come in and eat; let all who are in need come and join us for the Pesaḥ." The difference between the first invocation and the second, says Rabbi Emden, is that the first, "Let all who are hungry come in and eat" is addressed to non-Jews, on the basis of the principle that "We must support non-Jews as well as Jews because of the ways of peace" (*Gittin* 61a).*

This is no small principle. We are commanded not to forget the victims of our victories, not to lose empathy with our enemies, nor to dehumanise the human other. That does not mean abandoning the search for justice: quite the reverse. But law is one thing, interpersonal emotion another. There is a haunting line in the account of the plagues, when Pharaoh's own advisers tell him: "Let the people go… Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?" (Ex. 10:7). Hate destroys the hater, not just the hated.

To be free, you have to let go of hate.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks
London, 5773 (2013)

* Rabbi Yaakov Emden, *Siddur Amudei VeSha'arei Shamayim*.