

The Koren Sacks Pesah Companion

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Lessons and Inspiration for Passover
from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt"l*



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The Jonathan Sacks Haggada

Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas

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Pesah, Freud, and Jewish Identity

*Excerpt from
The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*

They said to him, "Tell us...what is your trade and where are you coming from? Which country is yours and which is your people?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and it is the Lord God of heaven that I fear, who made both the sea and the land." (Jonah 1:8–9)

Moses' first question to God was *Mi anokhi*, "Who am I?" (Ex. 3:11). That remains the question of Jews throughout the ages. No people has puzzled longer and harder about its own identity, and this was, perhaps, inevitable. For much of history, Jews have been a minority in lands not their own. Even as a sovereign nation, they were surrounded by great empires and indomitable powers. Almost always, what was most conspicuous about them was that they were different. They told a different story, heard a different music, lived a way of life that was singular and countercultural, quite unlike that of their neighbors.

The word *kadosh*, holy, in the Bible means, among other things, “distinctive,” “set apart.” Understanding the word *Ivri*, “Hebrew,” to mean “a side,” or more specifically, “the opposite side,” the sages interpreted the description of Abraham as *haIvri*, “the Hebrew,” to mean that “he was on one side while the rest of the world was on the other.” Identity has never been something Jews could take for granted. It involved, among other things, the courage to swim against the tide, to stand apart from the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times. Beneath the simple question of a child, “Why is this night different?” is another, deeper query: “Why is this people different?” or “Who am I?” We answer by telling a story – the story of our ancestors long ago, but also the story of which we are a part. Pesah is the festival of Jewish identity. It is the night on which we tell our children who they are.

On a superficial reading of the Bible, Moses was asking, “Who am I to stand before Pharaoh?” He was asking not about identity, but about his personal worthiness for such a mission. Moses, the Torah intimates, was not a man convinced of his place in history. He did not seek leadership. On the contrary, he kept refusing it. “They will not believe me . . . I am slow of speech and tongue . . . Please send someone else” (Ex. 4:10). He was, a later passage says, “a very humble man, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). He accepted the divine call not because he held a high opinion of himself, but because the task was real, the need great, the hour pressing, and the command inescapable. He had, in Shakespeare’s phrase, “greatness thrust upon him.”

There is, though, a deeper level at which Moses was indeed asking a question of identity. He faced a problem that has become acute wherever – in the Diaspora, even in the State of Israel itself – Jews have become part of a wider culture. A biographer, describing Moses when he first heard the call of God, would have had difficulty knowing who he was and where his loyalties lay. This was a man rescued as a child by an Egyptian princess, adopted by her, raised in Pharaoh’s palace, and brought up as an Egyptian prince. When he escaped to Midian and rescued Yitro’s daughters at the well, they went back and told their father, “An Egyptian rescued us” (Ex. 2:19). In appearance, manner, dress, and speech, Moses resembled an Egyptian, not an Israelite.

Moses' question, "Who am I?" was therefore real and acute – an existential crisis. Who was he and where did his destiny lie? Was he an Egyptian or an Israelite, a prince or a slave, a member of the ruling family of the greatest empire of the time, or part of a people groaning under oppression? The mind reels at such a choice. Before him lay two alternative futures: on the one hand, a life of quietude in Midian with his father-in-law's family, tending the flock in remote pastures, far from the noise of politics and power. On the other lay a life of struggle and an almost impossible challenge: to lead a people from slavery and teach them to be free – servants of no man, but of God alone.

What Moses discovered, alone with his flocks on the mountain, was that there are some choices from which we cannot hide. Almost the first words God says to him are, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6). God is not, at this point, telling Moses who God is. That comes later, in the famous and enigmatic words *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, "I am who I am" (ibid. 3:14). Instead God is telling Moses who he – Moses – is: the child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, three people who left the securities of land, birthplace, and father's house to begin a journey to an unknown destination, their only security the voice of God. Moses – God is saying – is not a prince of Egypt but the child of his ancestors and therefore the brother of those who, at that moment, were tasting the bitterness of slavery. Their plight was his responsibility. Their fate was his.

In his innermost heart, Moses knew this. There is a fascinating verse near the beginning of his story: "One day, after Moses grew up, he went out to where his people were and he saw their hard labor" (Ex. 2:11). Even then, Moses knew he was one of them. Seeing a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster, he intervened. To be a Jew is to know that one cannot be indifferent when one's people are suffering. "Israel," said Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, "is like a single body with one soul. When one is injured, all feel the pain."

A similar self-discovery affected several individuals who became, in the nineteenth century, protagonists of Zionism, among them Moses Hess and Theodor Herzl. Highly assimilated Jews, they nonetheless identified with the plight of their people as they witnessed anti-Semitism – during the Damascus Blood Libel (1840) in the case of Hess,

the Dreyfus trial in France (1894–95) in the case of Herzl. In a moment of truth they knew that to be a Jew is to be part of a covenant of fate through which, in the rabbinic phrase, “All Israel are responsible for one another” (*Shevuot* 39a).

Jewish identity is a phenomenon of birth because ultimately we carry within us not only the genes but also the hopes, tears, commitments, and dreams of our ancestors. Our God is the God of Abraham and Sarah and of the hundreds of generations of their descendants whose children we are. That is what a child discovers on Pesah, even though it may be many years before he or she can articulate it in these terms: we are part of a story that began long before our birth and will continue after we are no longer here. More than identity is something we choose, it is something that chooses us. To be a Jew is to hear a voice from the past, summoning us to an often tempestuous and never less than demanding future, and knowing inescapably that this is the narrative of which I am a part. That is what Moses discovered alone on the mountain, watching a bush that seemed to catch fire and burn without being consumed.

At the end of his life, Sigmund Freud wrote a strange work called *Moses and Monotheism*. Few works have been more closely studied as a key to Freud's identity. This may have been his intention, because it was the last book he wrote, and by the time it was published, in 1939, Freud was living as a refugee in London. In Vienna, where he had previously lived and worked, Jews were being attacked in the streets. Austrians had welcomed their annexation into Hitler's Germany in March 1938, and almost immediately the Jews of Vienna, who made up one-sixth of the city's population, were stripped of all civic rights: to own property, to be employed, to exercise a profession, and to enter restaurants or public parks. SS sentries took leading Jews, among them Vienna's chief rabbi, Dr. Israel Taglicht, then a man of seventy-five, and forced them to wash the city's pavements in full view of passersby, who watched with amusement and derision. Within a month, knowing that worse was to come, more than five hundred Austrian Jews had committed suicide. This was no passing madness. In 1897, Vienna had elected as its mayor the publicly anti-Jewish Karl Lueger, and it was there, between 1908 and

1913, that the young Adolf Hitler received his first and most influential lessons in anti-Semitism.

Moses and Monotheism, Freud's last testament, is an extraordinary work. In it he tries to prove that Moses was an Egyptian who turned his attention to the Israelites after the failure of Amenhotep IV, later known as Ikhnoton, to introduce an early and primitive form of monotheism (actually, sun worship) into Egypt. Many books have been written in an effort to understand what Freud was trying to achieve by this generally discredited speculation, and what he was communicating, consciously or otherwise, about his own identity as a Jew. That is not my concern here. Early on in the book, however, there is a curious detail whose significance has not been adequately commented on or understood. I call it Freud's greatest and most fascinating Freudian slip.

The context in which it occurs is a digression wherein Freud notes that many legends of heroes in antiquity share a common narrative structure. The hero's birth is fraught with danger. As a child, he is exposed to the elements in a way that would normally lead to his death. Instead, however, he is rescued and brought up by adoptive parents. Only much later does he discover his true identity. This, or something like it, is the tale told of the Babylonian hero Sargon and, among others, Cyrus, Oedipus, Romulus, Karna, Paris, Perseus, Heracles, and Gilgamesh. It is also the story of Moses.

At this point, however, Freud notes that in one respect the Moses narrative is diametrically different from the others. In all the other stories the hero is a person of noble birth who is brought up by a family in humble circumstances and only later discovers that royal blood flows in his veins. In the case of Moses, the opposite is true. He is brought up as a prince. His true identity is that he belongs to a nation of slaves.

Freud draws attention to this fact, but – assuming, as I cannot, that the biblical story is a human construct, a myth – immediately concludes that the Moses narrative is a fabrication designed to mask its original form. In this earlier version, Moses actually *is* an Egyptian prince, whose life was in danger because Pharaoh had been told in a prophetic dream that a child born within his own household would one day threaten his throne and kingdom. According to this version, it was Pharaoh who ordered the baby to be thrown into the Nile, and a Jewish

couple – Amram and Yokheved – who rescued him and brought him up as their own. Freud is aware of the fact that the existence of such a story is utterly implausible. Who, after all, would have told it? Not the Egyptians, because it glorified a man who became their enemy. Not the Israelites, because it turned their own deliverer into a member of the very people that had afflicted them. That, says Freud, is why the tale was changed – leaving unexplained, indeed inexplicable, his own hypothesis, that it originally had a different form.

What Freud failed to see – though the evidence was in front of him – was that the story of Moses is not a myth but an anti-myth, a protest against the social and spiritual assumptions of the mythic age. In myth, people are born to greatness. The universe is hierarchical. Some are born to rule, others – the vast majority – to be ruled. That view, common to all pagan cultures and held by Plato and Aristotle, was what Judaism denied. Heroism is not a fact of birth. It is a matter of moral courage. It is not found only, or even primarily, among kings or princes. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah – these are simple people living ordinary lives, transfigured only by a vision, a call.

Saul, Israel's first king, looks the part. He is tall, "head and shoulders" above his contemporaries. Yet he proves to lack the moral strength needed by a leader. David, Israel's greatest ruler, is the youngest of eight brothers, so insignificant that when Samuel, on God's instruction, visits the family, they forget about him until the prophet, having rejected the other siblings, asks if there is anyone else. True royalty, the Bible intimates, does not lie in physical strength, outward appearance, or noble ancestry. Not accidentally does the life of Moses contradict the stories told of other heroes in antiquity. He is not a prince in disguise. His greatness lies in the fact that he is the child of slaves whose lives were touched and transformed by the word of God.

Freud had mixed feelings about his own identity. He admired Jews and never denied his Jewishness, but he was tone-deaf to the music of Judaism and of religion generally. Who knows whether, seeing the unleashing of those dark instinctual forces he believed to exist just below the surface of civilization as Nazism gripped Vienna, Freud tried to shift the blame for monotheism from Jews to a long-dead Egyptian, as if to

say, “We are not to blame for the repression of those instincts that are now returning with murderous fury.” Whatever his reason, there is no doubt that Freud missed one of the most powerful truths of the Bible, conveyed specifically in the detail of the Moses story that he noted and then misinterpreted. Those whom the world despises, God loves. A child of slaves can be nobler than a prince. God’s standards are not power or privilege. As God tells Samuel just before he first sets eyes on David: “The Lord does not see as a man sees; men judge by appearances, but the Lord judges by the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). To have faith, as Judaism understands it, is to recognize God’s image in the weak, the powerless, the afflicted, the suffering, and then to fight for their cause. Had he understood this, Freud might have sent a quite different message of courage to his people as they faced their darkest night. We, at least, can see what Freud did not: that in deciding that his destiny lay not in an Egyptian palace, but with his people, Moses helped write one of the greatest narratives of hope in the literature of mankind.

Pesah and the Rebirth of Israel

*Excerpt from
The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*

*Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel.
Now – slaves; next year we shall be free.
(Haggada)*

In January 1895, a young Viennese journalist, Theodor Herzl,

reporting on the Dreyfus trial in Paris, was shocked by the sight of crowds shouting, “*A mort les juifs!*” – “Death to the Jews!” Anti-Semitism, he realized, was alive and strong, not only in places like Russia, where in 1881 pogroms had broken out in more than a hundred towns, but in France itself, home of the revolution, the secular state, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. He became a man transformed. Within a year he had written his response, which he called *Der Judenstaat*, “The Jewish State.” In it he summed up the disillusionment of a century of Jewish life, in which the hopes of European enlightenment and emancipation had proved so false:

We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted us. In vain are we loyal patriots, sometimes superloyal; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens; in vain do we strive to enhance the fame of our native lands in the arts and sciences, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In our native lands where we have lived for centuries we are still decried as aliens, often by men whose ancestors had not yet come at a time when Jewish sighs had long been heard in the country.

There was, he argued, only one solution to anti-Semitism. If the nation-states of Europe were so hostile to Jews, then Jews must have a state of their own. He was not the first secular Jew to reach this conclusion. Judah Leib Pinsker had said the same in 1882 in the wake of the pogroms. Moses Hess, onetime friend and mentor of Karl Marx, had done so even earlier, in 1862. But there was something altogether compelling about Herzl. Tall, impressive, persuasive, he threw himself into political activity like a man possessed, traveling around Europe, speaking to statesmen, arguing his case with conviction and charm, never admitting the possibility of defeat. Within a year, in 1897, he had succeeded in convening the first Zionist Congress, writing in his diary on September 3 the famous words, “At Basel I founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will know it.” Fifty years later, on November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted to bring a Jewish state into being, and on May 15, 1948, Israel was born.

Herzl died in 1904, at age forty-four, worn out by his eight years of frenetic activity for the Zionist cause. In 1902 he published a novel, *Altneuland*, setting out the Israel of his dreams. In one of the key scenes, he tells how the assimilated Dr. Friedrich Loewenberg – Herzl’s thinly disguised self-portrait – rediscovers his religious roots while attending a seder service. This is how Herzl describes it:

And so the ritual went on, half religious ceremony and half family meal, moving for anyone who had a heart to be moved by ancient

custom. For this most Jewish of Jewish festivals reached back farther into ancient times than any living customs of the civilized world. It was celebrated now, exactly as it had been observed for hundreds and hundreds of years. The world had changed, nations had vanished from the face of the earth, others had made their way into the annals of history... and only this one nation was still here, cherishing its ancient customs, true to itself, remembering the sufferings of its ancestors. It still prays in the ancient language and the ancient formulas to the Eternal God, this nation of slaves and now of free men – Israel.

So the story of the first exodus inspired a new return to Zion.

What is it to see the presence of God in history? The question is exceptionally difficult to answer. Ancient societies were interested in the past. They, like we, wanted to know how we came to be here, why society was the way it was, and how the universe was formed. Yet none before ancient Israel saw the unfolding of events as intrinsically meaningful, a narrative of redemption. Indeed, virtually all later societies who came to share this vision did so under the influence of the Hebrew Bible. As the historian J. H. Plumb puts it: “The concept that within the history of mankind itself a process was at work which would mold his future, and lead man to situations totally different from his past, seems to have found its first expression amongst the Jews” (*The Death of the Past*). In and through their religious vision, “the past became more than a collection of tales, a projection of human experience, or a system of moral examples.... It became an intimate part of destiny, and an interpretation of the future.” Nothing illustrates this more profoundly than the way the story of the Exodus shaped the Jewish imagination, not only of successive generations of those who lived their lives by faith, but even of profoundly secular figures like Hess, Pinsker, and Herzl.

The sequence of exile and homecoming, exodus and redemption, seems from the very beginning to have been part of the basic structure of Jewish consciousness. Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden. Cain is sentenced to a life of exile. The builders of Babel are scattered throughout the earth. Sin – a disturbance of the order of the universe – leads to exile

and displacement. Already foreshadowed in these opening chapters is the possibility of an end of days in which mankind, repenting its sins, experiences a collective homecoming. In Isaiah's words, "The wolf shall live with the sheep and the leopard lie down with the kid They will neither harm nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (11:6–9) – a new Eden, in other words, and a benign flood. This, for the Hebrew Bible, is the metaphysical structure of history as a whole: harmony, broken by wrongdoing, followed by exile, then acknowledgment and atonement, and eventual return to harmony.

It is with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, however, that this pattern becomes vivid in a concrete historical way. One of the most striking facts about the patriarchal families is that they all experience exile. Abraham and Isaac are both forced, through famine, to travel to the land of the Philistines. Jacob suffers exile twice, once to escape Esau, a second time to be rejoined with his son Joseph. In none of these is exile the result of sin, and it is the first instance that provides the interpretive clue to the rest. It occurs in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, almost immediately after God's call to Abraham to leave his land, birthplace, and father's house. No sooner has he done so than we read: "There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt" (Gen. 12:10). He senses danger, fearing that the Egyptians will kill him and take Sarai into the royal harem. Sarai, saying that she is Abram's sister, is indeed taken into Pharaoh's palace, which is then visited by a series of plagues. Pharaoh then sends the couple away.

The episode seems to disturb the narrative logic of the patriarchal story. Why, if God wants Abraham to go to the land of Canaan, does He force him to leave almost as soon as he has arrived? Midrash Raba, an early rabbinic commentary, gives what is undoubtedly the correct answer:

The Holy One, blessed be He, 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. Of Abraham it is written, *And there was a famine in the land* [Gen. 12:10], and of Israel it is written, *For these*

two years there has been famine in the land [45:6]. Of Abraham: *And Abram went down to Egypt* [ibid.]. Of Israel: *And our fathers went down into Egypt* [Num. 20:15]. Of Abraham: *To reside there* [ibid.]. Of Israel: *We have come to reside in this land* [Gen. 47:4]. (*Genesis Raba* 40:6)

And so on through a long series of linguistic and substantive parallels between Abraham's fate and the later experience of the Israelites. The exiles of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are, in other words, prefigurations of what would later happen to their descendants. It is as if the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people had *rehearsed in advance* the fate of their children, not necessarily knowing they were doing so, but nonetheless *laying the foundations of future hope*. The Israelites, exiled and enslaved, would be liberated and redeemed, not only because God said so, but because He had *done so* in the past. He had already shown, several times in different ways, that He was with the ancestors of the nation, protecting them and bringing them safely back.

By the time we open the Book of Exodus, we already know something of immense significance. History is full of unpredictable reversals. Joseph had given the Israelites a haven in the land of Egypt, but there was always the possibility of "a new king who knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). A protected minority can become a vulnerable minority. There is nothing in the Bible or Jewish faith that speaks of historical inevitability. To live in time is to be exposed to the hazards of time. But Israel knows from its own history that however long it may seem to be delayed, redemption is at hand. God will bring deliverance in the future because He has done so in the past.

It was this that, at a later stage in Jewish history, formed the basis of the vision of hope that is shared by all the prophets. Israel might suffer exile again, but it would return. "They will come speedily," prophesies Hosea, "flying like birds out of Egypt" (11:11). "I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel," says Amos in the name of God. "They shall rebuild deserted cities and live in them, they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, make gardens and eat their fruit" (9:14). Moses himself, in one of his darkest visions, ends with the unshakable assurance: "Even so, when they are in the land of their enemies I shall not

reject them and shall not detest them to the point of destruction, to the point of breaking My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God; I shall remember for them the covenant of the early ones, those I took out of the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, in order to be their God: I am the Lord” (Lev. 26:44–45). Micah said it simply: “As in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them My wonders” (7:15). What was would be again.

The Exodus was more than an event in the past. It was a precursor of redemption in the future. Israel, as Moses warned, would not dwell securely in its land. It would forget its moral and spiritual vocation. It would be attracted to the pagan culture of its neighbors. By so doing it would lose its reason for existence and find itself unable, at times of crisis, to summon the shared vision and collective energy needed to prevail against neighboring imperial powers. It would suffer defeat and exile; it would undergo its dark night of the soul; it would, as Ezekiel said, utter the fateful words *avda tikvateinu*, “our hope is destroyed” (37:11). But despair would never prevail. In the past, God had brought His people from slavery to freedom and from exile to the land, and therefore He would do so again. The Jewish people never completely lost faith in God, because its prophets knew that God would never completely lose faith in His people. History intimated destiny. What happened once would happen again. That is what lies behind the words with which the Haggada begins: “Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now – slaves; next year we shall be free.” The Jewish people kept the vision alive. It is not too much to say that the vision kept the Jewish people alive. It is difficult at this distance in time to realize the depth of the crisis represented by the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE, and the later suppression of the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt (132–35 CE). The very foundations of Jewish existence had been destroyed. There was now no Temple or Jewish sovereignty. There were no kings or priests or prophets. Jerusalem had been razed to the ground and rebuilt as a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina, in which Jews were forbidden to live.

More than six centuries earlier, following the destruction of the First Temple, the people had come close to despair. A psalm from that period has left us with an indelible record of their mood: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept as we remembered Zion.... How can we

sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?" (137:1–4) That moment, though, brought its own consolation. There were prophets of the stature of Jeremiah and Ezekiel to assure the people that they would return. The exile would be finite, temporary. It would last, at most, a single lifetime; and their intuition proved correct. There was no such assurance in Roman times. To be sure, figures like Rabbi Akiva were confident that redemption would come. But his hopes were invested in Bar Kokhba, and when that uprising failed, so too did any hope that Israel's fortunes would be restored in the foreseeable future.

A midrash on Jacob's dream of a ladder and angels tells us something of the mood of those times:

The Holy One, blessed be He, showed Jacob the angel of Babylon ascending and descending, the angel of Media ascending and descending, the angel of Greece ascending and descending, and the angel of Rome ascending [but not descending]. Jacob was afraid. He thought: Is it possible this one will never descend? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: *Fear not, My servant Jacob* [Jer. 46:27]. (Tanḥuma, *Vayetzeh* 2)

Every other exile had a finite duration, but the fall of Israel under Rome seemed to extend indefinitely into the future.

What happened next is one of the great, if quiet, dramas of history. The Jewish people, so bound to time and space – seeing God in history and its home in a specific land – reconstituted itself as a nation *outside* time and space. Prayer took the place of sacrifice. The study of Torah replaced prophecy. Repentance became a substitute for the great ritual of atonement performed by the high priest in the Holy of Holies. The synagogue – a building that could be anywhere – became a fragment of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish people itself, once a nation in its own land, became a virtual community scattered through space, bound now by a mystical sense of collective responsibility (Israel, said Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, is “like a single body with a single soul: when one is afflicted, all feel the pain”). In exile everywhere, Jews were at home in a text. The Torah, said the German poet Heinrich Heine, became “the portable homeland of the Jew.”

These developments did not happen overnight. In a sense, Jews had been preparing them ever since the Babylonian exile. It was then, beginning with Ezra, that a succession of scribes, scholars, and sages began to reshape Israel from the people of the land to the people of the book. The result was that Jews succeeded in doing what no other people has ever done. They sustained their identity and way of life through almost two thousand years of exile. Despite the hostility showed to them – Max Weber once described them as a “pariah people” – they kept their dignity and self-respect. And through some of the worst sufferings ever experienced by a group, they preserved their hope: “Next year in Jerusalem; next year free.” There is nothing remotely comparable in history. It was the triumph of faith over circumstance.

But there was a price to be paid, namely the almost complete depoliticization of Judaism. To be sure, from the first to the nineteenth centuries, Jews had self-governing powers. They ran their own communities, arbitrated internal disputes, and created not just synagogues but also remarkable educational and welfare institutions. But the disastrous failure of the two rebellions against Rome, in 66 and 132 CE, left their mark. Jews did not thereafter fight for their independence. They did not mobilize for their return to Israel. They had learned at great cost that these initiatives were likely to backfire, bringing devastation in their wake. Instead, following the advice of the prophet Jeremiah in an earlier age, they sought “the peace of the city to which they were exiled” (29:7), waiting patiently for God to bring His people back to Zion.

The tension of waiting was sometimes unbearable, and this gave rise throughout the Middle Ages to a series of messianic movements in which a would-be savior appeared, promising deliverance. The most famous of these – Shabbetai Tzvi in the seventeenth century – was in fact only one of many (Maimonides mentions several in his father’s lifetime alone). But these movements, beginning in fevered hope and ending in disillusionment, only served to underscore how dangerous it was to “force the end.” Jews believed they would return to Israel, but there was no natural, nonmiraculous route from here to there. Throughout the Middle Ages, individual Jews made the journey to the Holy Land, among them Judah Halevi and Nahmanides. There was always a Jewish presence there, though sometimes small and in dire circumstances.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, followers of both the Hasidic movement and their opponents, disciples of the Vilna Gaon, made their way to Israel in significant numbers. But they came to wait for redemption, not to initiate it.

Three factors changed Jewish attitudes in the course of the nineteenth century. The first was the rise of European nationalism. If the Italians could win their independence, why not the Jews? There was ferment in the air following the French Revolution. A new political era seemed to be dawning, with messianic possibilities. It was no less a figure than Napoleon who, setting out to conquer the Middle East in 1799, issued a call to Jews: "Israelites, arise! Now is the moment which may not return for generations to claim back the rights you have been deprived of for thousands of years, to live again as a nation among nations." How serious an offer this was was never put to the test. Napoleon was forced to abandon his military campaign. But a note had been struck and it was echoed, not least in Britain, during the course of the nineteenth century. Figures like Lord Shaftesbury and Colonel Charles Churchill began to advocate Jewish settlement in the Holy Land, partly as a way of advancing British interests in the region, but also, and no less, out of a deep belief in the biblical prophecies and a sense that the time was right. The English novelist George Eliot made the rebirth of Jewish nationalism a central theme of her book *Daniel Deronda* (1876). The Damascus Blood Libel of 1840, in which Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolf Cremieux, the lay leaders of British and French Jewry, successfully intervened, demonstrated for the first time the possibility of international Jewish diplomacy. It was in this context that two rabbis, Yehudah Alkalai and Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, began to outline a religious Zionism, based less on a state than on agricultural settlements. What was novel in their work was the suggestion that though, ultimately, redemption rested with God, the preliminary steps should be taken by Jews themselves.

The second development was a certain secularization of Jewish history. I use this word with some trepidation, but there is no other. It began with Spinoza, a Jew who broke with Judaism, but who in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) first raised the possibility that Jews might take hold of their fate and reestablish a Jewish state. Spinoza did not believe in a God of history, and thus thought about

religion in purely natural terms. No less significant was the influence of the nineteenth-century historian Heinrich Graetz, whose writings did much to stimulate Jewish interest and pride in the past. Hess, Pinsker, and Herzl were part of the legacy of this process. Seeing themselves as secular Jews, they did not feel constrained merely to wait and pray for Jewish liberty. The earliest of them, Hess, was also the most insightful. He guessed what Herzl later discovered, that support for Jewish nationalism would come not from the culturally integrated Jews of the West but from the religious heartlands of Eastern Europe. It was the meeting of secular and religious that brought about what neither could have done on their own.

The third and decisive factor, however, was the rise in anti-Semitism in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was this that made the return not merely possible but urgent and necessary. The irony is that this seems to have been foreseen from the beginning. In Babylon in the sixth century BCE Ezekiel had already prophesied: “You say, ‘We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world’ but what you have in mind will never happen. As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and outpoured rage” (20:33). The mishnaic teacher Rabbi Yehoshua predicted that an evil ruler would arise “whose decrees will be as harsh as those of Haman” and drive Jews back to their faith and land. What is common to both these teachings is the belief that Jews would not seek to return of their own accord. They might try to assimilate, but they would fail. Love of the land would not be enough to move Jews to action. The hostility of their neighbors would.

So Zionism was born. It would be hard to find any other movement that brought together so many dissonant, competing visions. There were utopian religious Zionists like Rav Avraham Kook and practical religious Zionists like Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines. Among the secularists were political Zionists like Herzl, cultural Zionists such as Ahad HaAm, Nietzscheans like Berdichevski, Tolstoyans of the caliber of Aaron David Gordon, and dozens of others, each with his own carefully wrought utopia. They clashed, at times vehemently. Yet out of their clamorous discord came one of the most astonishing achievements of all time.

The creation of the State of Israel was fraught with difficulty. Despite the Balfour Declaration (1917), in which Britain, the new mandatory power in Palestine, promised Jews a national home, there was intense opposition – from the Arab world, from other international forces, from politicians in Britain, and at times from Jews themselves. For thirty years, various compromises were proposed, all accepted by Jews and rejected by their opponents. On the day the State of Israel was proclaimed, it was attacked on all fronts by its neighbors. Since then it has lived under constant threat of war, violence, terror, and delegitimization. Yet it has achieved wondrous things.

Through it Hebrew, the language of the Bible, was reborn as a living tongue. Jewish communities under threat have been rescued, including those like the Jews of Ethiopia who had little contact with other Jews for centuries. Jews have come to Israel from over a hundred countries, representing the entire lexicon of cultural diversity. A desolate landscape has bloomed again. Jerusalem has been rebuilt. The world of Torah scholarship, devastated by the Holocaust, has been revived and the sound of learning echoes throughout the land. Economically, politically, socially, and culturally, Israel's achievements are unmatched by any country of its age and size. The sages said that, at the crossing of the Red Sea, the simplest Jew saw miracles that the greatest of later prophets were not destined to see. That, surely, was the privilege of those who witnessed Israel's rebirth and youth. The Messiah has not come. Israel is not yet at peace. The Temple has not been rebuilt. Our time is not yet redemption. Yet many of the prayers of two thousand years have been answered. No one, reviewing this singular history, can doubt that faith makes a difference; that a nation's history is shaped by what it believes.

Judah Halevi once compared the Jewish people to a seed. In his *Kuzari*, a fictional dialogue between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, the king asks the rabbi a pointed question. How is it that, if you are truly chosen by God, you are everywhere subjected to humiliation and persecution? Where is your greatness? The rabbi replies: We are like the seed of a great tree. When first planted in the ground it appears to disintegrate. But it is actually all the while gathering strength to grow. Eventually it will put forth roots and shoots and begin to reach toward heaven.

That is what Pesah was during more than eighteen centuries of exile and dispersion: a seed planted in Jewish memory, waiting to be activated and to grow. Without it Jews would certainly have disappeared. Lacking hope of return – hope tempered by faith into a certainty like steel – they would have made their peace with their condition, merged into their surrounding societies and ambient cultures, and vanished, like every other culture deprived of a home. Pesah, like a seed frozen in suspended animation, contained the latent energy that led Jews in the twentieth century to create the single most remarkable accomplishment in the modern world, the rebirth of Israel, the land, the state, the nation, and the people. Micah's vision, and Ezekiel's, and Moses', came true.

The Irish historian Conor Cruise O'Brien once remarked that Jews who see themselves as unreligious are sometimes very religious indeed. That was true of Hess, Pinsker, Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, and many other heroes and pioneers of the return to Zion. They were not "spiritual" nor did they observe many of the commandments. But the vision of the prophets and the covenant of Jewish history flowed through their veins. God works through people; sometimes, so the prophets taught, without their conscious knowledge and consent. It is difficult to reflect deeply on the rebirth of Israel without sensing the touch of heaven in the minds of men and women, leading them to play their parts in a drama so much greater than any individual could have executed, even conceived. The historian Barbara Tuchman writes, "Viewing this strange and singular history one cannot escape the impression that it must contain some special significance for the history of mankind, that in some way, whether one believes in divine providence or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate" (*Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour*).

Who, then, wrote the script of the Jewish drama? God or the Jewish people? Or was it, as the sages taught, an inextricable combination of both: God as He was heard by the people, and the people as they responded to God? Isaac Bashevis Singer came close when he said, "God is a writer and we are both the heroes and the readers." One thing is certain, that without Pesah, celebrated over the centuries, the State of Israel would not have been born. The prophets were right: the Exodus

Pesaḥ and the Rebirth of Israel

of the past contained within it the Exodus of the future; and I, born in the same year as the state, can only say, “Blessed are You, O Lord ... who has given life, sustained us, and brought us to this time.”

Women and the Exodus

*Excerpt from
The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*

*By merit of the righteous women of that generation,
Israel was redeemed from Egypt. (Sota 11b)*

The human hero of the Exodus was Moses. It was he who saw the suffering of his people and came to the defense of a man being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster, and it was he who heard the call of God, confronted Pharaoh, and led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert on the long journey to the Promised Land. Moses dominates the biblical story – prophet, leader, and lawgiver, the epic figure standing between God and the people, wrestling with both.

Yet the opening chapters of Exodus tell another story, no less fascinating, perhaps more so. A close reading of the text reveals that alongside the hero, matching his strength in the face of tyranny, was a series of heroines. The human face of the Exodus is the story of six remarkable women. Without Moses there might have been no exodus. But without the heroism of women there would have been no Moses. Who were they?

The first was Yokheved, Moses' mother. I try to imagine the courage of a woman willing to have a child once the decree has been issued to "throw every boy who is born into the river" (Ex. 1:22). The scene is Germany, 1939. Anti-Jewish edicts are in force. There is a sense of impending tragedy. To have a child at that time is a supreme act of hope in the midst of despair. That is the bravery of Yokheved.

What do we know about her? Surprisingly little. Her first appearance in the text is conspicuously anonymous: "A man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi" (Ex. 2:1). At this stage neither of Moses' parents, Amram and Yokheved, is named. We soon see Yokheved's resourcefulness. For three months she hides the child. When she can do so no longer, she makes a rush basket and sets him afloat on the Nile, hoping he will be noticed and saved. Like many biblical women, she is a person of action, determination, and courage. What else do we know about her?

Only this, that she gives birth to three children destined for greatness: Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron, Israel's first high priest, and Moses, its greatest leader. She endows her children, genetically or by example, with the gift of leadership. We can infer something more. She and her husband are both from the tribe of Levi. A few chapters earlier, the Torah has told us in connection with Levi, Jacob's third-born child, that his father did not see him destined for great things. Together with Simeon, he had rescued their sister Dina at the cost of what Jacob thought was excessive violence. On his deathbed he delivers both a prediction and a curse: "Simeon and Levi are brothers; their wares are instruments of violence. Let my soul not enter their council, my heart not join their company, for in their anger they killed men and hamstringed oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger for it is fierce, and their fury, for it is cruel" (Gen. 49:5).

We hear little subsequently about Simeon. But the children of Levi defy Jacob's low opinion. From their ranks will eventually come not only the three leaders of the Exodus, but Israel's priests and Levites, its spiritual ministers, for all time. There is more than a hint that something in Yokheved – her capacity for hope or her faith in life – transforms, in her children, violence into courage, and aggression into an unshakable determination to rescue people and set them on the path to liberty. She

has the subtle gift of transforming vice into virtue. She becomes the mother of Israel's leaders.

The second woman is Miriam, Yokheved's daughter, Moses' elder sister. What we know about her is no less impressive. She takes the risk of following the rush basket containing the baby as it floats down the Nile. She sees it taken out of the water by an Egyptian princess. Not content with witnessing its rescue, she takes a remarkable initiative. She goes up to the princess and offers to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child. The result is that Moses, against all odds, is taken home and brought up in his own family. Miriam is the child slave who has the confidence to be undaunted in the presence of royalty, the courage to speak openly to the daughter of her people's oppressor, and the resourcefulness to think of a way of bringing the baby back to its home. We sense in her qualities of character of a high order. Without her, Moses might never have known his identity. He would have grown up not knowing he was an Israelite. As if sensing what was at stake, Miriam performs a role that in retrospect was crucial for Israel's redemption – one of the few instances in the Bible (David's encounter with Goliath is another) in which heroism is attributed to a child.

Jewish tradition, however, ascribes to her a gesture more remarkable still:

Amram was the most eminent man of his generation. Aware that Pharaoh had decreed, "Every son who is born shall be cast into the river" [Ex. 1:22], he said, "In vain do we labor," and was the first to divorce his wife. After that, all the Israelite men divorced their wives. Then his daughter said to him, "Father, your decree is more cruel than Pharaoh's. He has decreed only against the males; you decree against both males and females. Pharaoh decreed only concerning this world, while you decree concerning both this world and the next. Since Pharaoh is a wicked man, there is doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not; but since you are a righteous man, your decree is sure to be fulfilled." At once, he went and took back his wife, and so did all the others. (*Sota* 12a)

What are we to make of this strange suggestion?

Rabbinic commentaries of this kind are sometimes described as “legends.” That is not what they are. In filling the gaps of the biblical text – reading between its lines – Israel’s early rabbinic sages were doing two things. Firstly, they were listening (the word “reading” is inadequate) to the nuances of the biblical text. In the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, midrash, or biblical exposition, became the rabbinic substitute for prophecy. God was “hiding His face.” He was no longer manifest in Israel’s fate. But He had left something of His presence behind: the Torah, the covenant, His “marriage contract” with the Jewish people. When two lovers are present, they rejoice in one another’s company. When one disappears and the other awaits his return, she reads and rereads the letters he wrote her, sensitive to every detail, discovering aspects of his character she had not noticed before, and bringing back a vestige of presence in the midst of absence. That is midrash: the close reading of the Torah, in the wake of national tragedy, as God’s love letters to His people.

Listening to the biblical passage (Deut. 26:5–8) that forms the centerpiece of the Haggada, the sages heard in the phrase “He [God] saw our oppression” an echo of other contexts in which the word “oppression” appears and has a specific sexual connotation. “Oppression,” as we say in the Haggada, refers to “the separation of husband from wife.” From this hint they then reconstructed the following scenario: once Pharaoh had decreed that all male babies were to be murdered, the Israelites decided not to have children. To bring a child into the world with a fifty-fifty chance of being killed was taking an unwarranted risk with life. For that reason the men separated from their wives. How, then, was Moses born? Something and someone must have changed the Israelites’ mind, specifically in the case of Amram, Moses’ father. That must have been either Yokheved or Miriam, the only other figures to feature in the narrative at this point. Of the two, Miriam is the obvious candidate. The text says nothing more about Yokheved than that she bore a child, whereas Miriam’s resourcefulness shines from every word written about her. It must, therefore, have been Miriam who persuaded her father that he was wrong, that his decision, logical and ethical though it was, lacked one thing, namely faith itself. That is the textual basis for the story.

Midrash is a child of prophecy, though, in another sense. The prophets were interpreters of history. They spoke to their generation and their times. Lacking prophecy, the rabbis turned to the biblical text to hear, within the word spoken for all time, the specific resonance for *this* time. Unlike *peshat*, the “plain, simple, or accepted meaning,” midrash is the hermeneutic quest for the meaning of the text as if it were spoken not then but now. Midrash is interpretation in the context of *covenantal time*, the word spoken in the past but still active in the present. It is an exercise in conscious and deliberate anachronism (the secular equivalent would be a performance of a Shakespeare tragedy in modern dress, the better to feel its force as contemporary, rather than classical, drama). It is prophetic in the sense of interpreting current events in the light of the divine word. Midrash is the attempt on the part of the sages to understand their own times as a continuation of the narrative of the covenant. In what historical context can we place the story they told of Miriam?

One of the most traumatic of all periods in Jewish history was the failure of the Bar Kokhba rebellion and its brutal suppression by the Roman emperor Hadrian. Israel was devastated and most of its leading rabbis put to death. The practice of Judaism – including the teaching of Torah and the act of circumcision – was proscribed on pain of death. A talmudic passage reveals the depth of despair the surviving rabbis felt at that time:

From the day a government has come to power that issues cruel decrees against us and forbids us the observance of the Torah and the precepts, and does not allow us to enter into the “week of the son,” we ought by rights to bind ourselves not to marry and have children, so that the seed of Abraham our father will come to an end of itself. However, let Israel go their way: it is better that they should err in ignorance than presumptuously. (*Bava Batra* 60b)

This is a passage of intense pathos. The rabbis are saying nothing less than that it would have been reasonable at that point to let the Jewish people cease to be. They had been defeated by the Romans. Their last hope of recovering national sovereignty had failed. The thing that mattered above all – the practice of Judaism – was now banned. Here, therefore,

is the historical context of the story the rabbis told about Miriam and Amram. It was not just in Egypt in the age of Ramses II, but in Israel in the days of Hadrian, that Jews contemplated a decision not to bring future generations into being.

The talmudic passage ends on a curious note: “Let Israel go their way.” The rabbis are saying that were they to issue the decree that seemed warranted by the circumstances – no more Jewish marriages or children – people would not listen. That is how Jews and Judaism survived. Ordinary people, suggests the Talmud, sometimes have more faith than their spiritual leaders. This is an astonishing admission, but it is not the only time the sages made it. Commenting on one of Moses’ first challenges to God, “They [the Israelites] will not believe me” (Ex. 4:1), they said, “God replied: they are believers, the children of believers, but there will come a time when you yourself will not believe” (*Shabbat* 97a).

We now sense the full depth of the encounter between daughter and father as the sages understood it. Amram was, they conjectured, “the most eminent man of his generation.” According to one tradition he was head of the Sanhedrin, the rabbinic supreme court. Yet it is not he but his daughter who rightly understood the spiritual demand of the moment: not despair, but faith in the future. The sociologist Peter Berger calls hope a “signal of transcendence” (*A Rumor of Angels*). There is nothing that logically justifies hope: if there were, it would not be hope but something else – confidence, certainty, assurance, foreknowledge. Hope is the narrow bridge across which we must walk if we are to pass from slavery to redemption, from the valley of death to the open spaces of new life. That hope, said the sages, is more likely to come from the young than the old, women (the bearers of new life) than men. It is no small testimony to their depth of self-knowledge that the rabbis attributed more faith to a young girl than to Amram, leader of his generation.

The third figure is Pharaoh’s daughter, who rescued Moses, knowing he was a Hebrew child. Again it is impossible not to be moved by this act of compassion by one who knew all too well what was at stake. To raise an Israelite child in the palace of the very ruler who had issued the decree of death took moral determination of a high order. A midrash states that when her handmaids saw that she was set on rescuing the baby,

they said, “It is the way of the world that when a king issues a decree, even if the whole world does not obey it, his own children and household do” (*Exodus Raba* 1:23). For any Egyptian to protect a Hebrew child was hazardous; to do so in the royal palace doubly so. In Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, there is an avenue of remembrance for the righteous gentiles who saved Jewish lives during the Nazi years. Pharaoh’s daughter created the precedent.

It is notable that she gives Moses his name (*Mses* – as in *Ramses* – is in fact an Egyptian word meaning “child”). Names, in the Torah, are given by parents and in rare cases ordained or changed by God. Moses is the exception. Again a midrash emphasizes the point: “This is the reward for doers of kindness: although Moses had many names, the only one by which he is known through the Torah is that given to him by Pharaoh’s daughter. Even the Holy One, blessed be He, did not call him by any other name” (*Exodus Raba* 1:26).

Pharaoh’s daughter is not mentioned by name. There is, however, a reference in the Book of Chronicles (I 4:18) to a certain “Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh,” and tradition identifies her with Moses’ rescuer. The name “Bitya” means “daughter of God” and the rabbis speculated that this was not her original name, but one given to her by God in recognition of her kindness: “Moses was not your son,” He said, “yet you called him your son. You, too, are not My daughter, but I shall call you My daughter” (*Leviticus Raba* 1:3).

The fourth heroine is Moses’ wife, Tzippora, daughter of the Midianite priest Yitro. The first thing that strikes us about Tzippora is that she was willing to accompany Moses on his return to Egypt, despite the hazards of the journey, the risk of the mission, and the fact that the Israelites were not her people, even if she had adopted their faith. There is, however, one moment during the return journey when Tzippora saves Moses’ life. The passage is cryptic in the extreme:

During the journey, while they were encamped for the night, God confronted Moses and wanted to kill him. Tzippora took a stone knife and cut off her son’s foreskin, throwing it down at Moses’ feet; then she said: “Blood bridegroom by circumcision.” (Ex. 4:24–5)

These two verses contain multiple ambiguities. God was angry with Moses, evidently because he had not circumcised his son. According to some, Moses delayed the operation because of the debilitating effect of the journey. According to others, he had agreed with his father-in-law that at least one of his children would be brought up not as an Israelite but as a Midianite. Whatever the interpretation, Tzipora's prompt action saved a life. One midrash attributes to her the level of righteousness of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

The fifth and sixth are the midwives, Shifra and Pua, whom Pharaoh instructed to kill every male Hebrew child. The Torah then reports:

The midwives feared God and did not do what the Egyptian king had commanded; they allowed the infant boys to live. The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why did you do this? You let the boys live." The midwives replied to Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptians: they know how to deliver; they can give birth even before a midwife gets to them." God was good to the midwives, and the people increased and became very numerous. Because the midwives feared God, He made them houses [of their own]. (Ex. 1:17–21)

Who were Shifra and Pua? The truth is, we do not know. One midrash identifies them with Yokheved and Miriam, using a midrashic technique of relating the unknown to the known. However, in describing them the Torah uses an ambiguous phrase. It calls them *hameyaldot ha'Ivriot*, which could mean either "the Hebrew midwives" or "the midwives to the Hebrews." On the second interpretation, they may not have been Hebrews at all, but Egyptians. This is the view taken, among others, by the scholar and statesman Don Isaac Abrabanel and the Italian commentator Samuel David Luzzatto. Luzzatto's reasoning is simple: could Pharaoh realistically have expected Hebrew women to murder their own people's children? Rather than decide one way or the other, it seems clear that the Torah's ambiguity on this point is deliberate. We do not know who they were or which people they belonged to because their particular form of moral courage transcended nationality and race. In essence, they were being asked to commit a "crime against humanity," and

the fact that they refused to do so tells us something about the ethical parameters of humanity as such. Though Shifra and Pua are seemingly minor figures in the narrative, they are giants in the story of humanity, and since their behavior has bearing on more recent events, it is a tale that deserves to be set in its full historical context.

One landmark of modern international law was the judgment against Nazi war criminals in the Nuremberg trials of 1946. This established that there are certain crimes in relation to which the claim “I was obeying orders” is no defense. There are laws higher than those of the state. “Crimes against humanity” remain crimes, whatever the law of the land or the orders of a government. There are instructions one is morally bound to disobey, times when civil disobedience is the morally necessary response. This principle, attributed to the American writer Henry David Thoreau in 1848, inspired many of those who fought for the abolition of slavery in the United States, as well as the late Martin Luther King in his struggle for black civil rights in the 1960s. At stake in the principle of civil disobedience is a theory of the moral limits of the state.

Until relatively modern times rulers had absolute authority, tempered only by the concessions they had to make to powerful groups. Not only was this true in antiquity. It remained the case until the late seventeenth century, when figures like John Locke began to develop theories of liberty, social contract, and human rights (see “The Universal Story,” earlier in this book). Much, even most, religious thought until then was dedicated to justifying existing structures of power. That was the function of myth, and later of the concept of the “divine right of kings.” In such societies, the idea that there might be moral limits to power would have been unthinkable. To challenge the king was to defy reality itself.

Against this background, biblical monotheism was a revolution thousands of years in advance of the culture of the West. The Exodus was more than the liberation of slaves. It was a redrawing of the moral and political landscape. If the image of God is to be found not only in kings but in the human person as such, then all power that dehumanizes is *ipso facto* an abuse of power. Slavery, seen by all ancient thinkers as part of the natural order, becomes morally wrong, an offense not only against man but against God. When God tells Moses to talk to Pharaoh

of “My son, My firstborn, Israel” (Ex. 4:22), He is announcing to the most powerful ruler of the ancient world that though these people may be your slaves, they are My children. The story of the plagues in Egypt is as much political as theological. Theologically it affirms that the Creator of nature is supreme over the forces of nature. Politically it declares that over every human power stands the sovereignty of God, defender and guarantor of the rights of mankind.

In such a worldview, the idea of civil disobedience is not unthinkable but self-evident. The very notion of authority is defined by the transcendence of right over might, morality over power. Even when wrongfully challenged, leadership has to justify itself. Hence Moses’ words to God during the Korah rebellion: “I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them” (Ex. 15:16). In one of the world-changing moments in history, social criticism was born in Israel simultaneously with institutionalization of power. No sooner were there kings in Israel than there were prophets mandated by God to criticize them when they abused their power.

Not only is this true of Israel’s internal politics. It applied equally when Jews found themselves in exile under foreign powers. The Books of Daniel and Esther – the classic exilic texts – are variations on the theme of civil disobedience. Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria refuse to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image. Daniel disobeys Darius’ command to worship him alone. Mordechai will not bow down to Haman. A “stiff-necked people” may sometimes find it hard to worship God, but it will certainly worship nothing less. As the Talmud puts it: “If there is a conflict between the words of the master and the words of the disciple, whose words should one obey?” (*Kiddushin* 42b) No human order, whoever issues it, overrides the commands of God.

This is further evidence of the case I have argued in chapters 9–11, that the Western tradition of liberty is built less on the foundations of ancient Greece than on the Hebrew Bible. What Greece lacked was a theory of the moral limits of power. As Lord Acton noted, Athenian democracy failed because the Greeks believed that “there is no law superior to that of the State – the lawgiver is above the law” (*History of Freedom*). The result, he writes, was that “the possession of unlimited power, which corrodes the conscience, hardens the heart, and confounds

the understanding of monarchs, exercised its demoralizing influence on the illustrious democracy of Athens,” as it has so often since. Greek political thought assumes the sovereignty of the state. Jewish political thought assumes the sovereignty of God, and hence the moral limits of the state. That is why the Torah is the foundational text of liberty and human rights, rather than the Greek political classics.

How moving it is, therefore, that the first recorded instance of civil disobedience – predating Thoreau by more than three millennia – is the story of Shifra and Pua, two ordinary women defying Pharaoh in the name of simple humanity. We know nothing else about them, not even which nation they came from. All we know is that they “feared God and did not do what the Egyptian king had commanded.” In those fateful words, a precedent was set that eventually became the basis of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Shifra and Pua, by refusing to obey an immoral order, redefined the moral landscape of the world.

One further note is in place. Though Greek literature does not know of the concept of civil disobedience, it does contain one famous case where an individual defies the king, not in the name of justice but out of loyalty to established custom and family feeling – Sophocles’ *Antigone*, who buries her brother in defiance of King Creon’s order that he stay unburied as a traitor. The contrast between Sophocles and the Bible is fascinating. *Antigone* is a tragedy: the eponymous heroine pays for her defiance with her life. The story of Shifra and Pua is not a tragedy. It ends with a curious phrase. God “made them houses.” What does this mean? Luzzatto offers an insightful interpretation. Sometimes women become midwives when they are unable to have children of their own. That, he suggests, was the case with Shifra and Pua. Because they saved children’s lives, God rewards them – measure for measure – with the blessing of their own children (“houses” = families). In Judaism the moral life is not inescapably tragic, because neither the universe nor fate is blind.

“By merit of the righteous women of that generation, Israel was redeemed from Egypt” (*Sota* 11b). There are many midrashic traditions about the faithfulness of women during the days of oppression in Egypt and the subsequent journey to the Promised Land (according to the sages, they joined neither in worship of the golden calf, nor in the doubts that led to the episode of the spies). I have chosen these six

examples, however, because they are explicit in the biblical text. Each is a vignette of courage in the face of power, and faith in the presence of despair. The story of the Exodus as we tell it at the seder table is about God, not about human beings. Even Moses is mentioned only once in the Haggada, as an aside. Yet there was a human aspect to the story, and it is about one great man and six outstanding women.

Moses became a hero because he had “greatness thrust upon him.” He led Israel not because he chose to, but because he was commanded by God. Yokheved, Miriam, Bitya, Tzipora, Shifra, and Pua were not commanded. They acted because they had a strong moral sense, indomitable humanity, and an intuitive grasp of what heaven asks of us on earth: they “feared God.” The monument the Torah erects to freedom, the sovereignty of God, and the sanctity of life bears the names of those women who by their courage showed that though tyranny is strong, compassion is stronger still.

The Missing Fifth

*Excerpt from
The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*

Many commentators, among them the Vilna Gaon, have drawn attention to the influence of the number four in connection with the Haggada. There are four fours:

1. the four questions
2. the four sons
3. the four cups of wine
4. the four expressions of redemption: “I will *bring you out* from under the yoke of the Egyptians and *deliver* you from their slavery; I will *redeem* you with an outstretched arm and with mighty judgment. I will *take* you to Me as a nation.” (Ex. 6:6–7)

It may be, though, that just as an x-ray can reveal an earlier painting beneath the surface of a later one, so beneath the surface of the Haggada there is another pattern to be discerned. That is what I want to suggest in this chapter.

The Missing Fifth

The first thing to note is that there is, in fact, another “four” on the seder night, namely the four biblical verses whose exposition forms an important part of the Haggada:

1. “An Aramean sought my father’s death.”
2. “And the Egyptians dealt cruelly with us and oppressed us.”
3. “And we cried to the Lord, God of our ancestors.”
4. “And the Lord brought us out of Egypt.” (Deut. 26:5–8)

There are, then, not four fours, but five.

In early editions of the talmudic Tractate *Pesahim* (118a) there is a passage that perplexed the medieval commentators. It reads: “Rabbi Tarfon says: over the *fifth* cup we recite the great Hallel.” The medieval commentators were puzzled by this because elsewhere the rabbinic literature speaks about four cups, not five. The Mishna, for example, states that a poor person must be supplied with enough money to buy four cups of wine. In both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the discussion revolves around the assumption that there are four cups on seder night. How then are we to understand the statement of Rabbi Tarfon that there is a fifth cup?

Among the commentators three views emerged. The first was that of Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak, 1040–1105) and the Tosafists. According to them, there are only four cups on the seder night, and it is forbidden to drink a fifth. The statement of Rabbi Tarfon must therefore be a misprint, and the texts of the Talmud should be amended accordingly.

The second was that of Maimonides. He holds that there is a fifth cup, but unlike the other four, it is optional rather than obligatory. The mishna that teaches that a poor person must be given enough money to buy four cupfuls of wine means that we must ensure that he has the opportunity to fulfill his obligation. It does not extend to the fifth cup, which is permitted but not compulsory. Rabbi Tarfon’s statement is to be understood to mean that those who wish to drink a fifth cup should do so during the recitation of the great Hallel.

The third view, that of Ravad of Posquières, a contemporary of Maimonides, is that one *should* drink a fifth cup. There is a difference in

Jewish law between an obligation, or *hova*, and a religiously significant good deed, or mitzva. The first four cups are obligatory. The fifth is a mitzva, meaning not obligatory but still praiseworthy, and not merely, as Maimonides taught, optional.

Thus there was a controversy over the fifth cup. Rashi said we should not drink it; Maimonides said we may; Ravad said we should. What does one do, faced with this kind of disagreement? Jewish law tries wherever possible to propose a solution that pays respect to all views, especially when they are held by great halakhic authorities. The solution in the present case was simple. A fifth cup is poured (out of respect for Ravad and Maimonides) but not drunk (out of respect for Rashi).

When a disagreement in the Talmud is not resolved, the sages often use the word *Teiku*, “Let it stand.” We believe such disagreements will be resolved in the time to come when Elijah arrives to announce the coming of the Messiah. One of his roles will be to rule on unresolved halakhic controversies. An allusion to this task is to be found in the word *Teiku* itself, which was read as an abbreviation of *Tishbi yetaretz kushiyot ve’ibayot*, “The Tishbite [Elijah] will answer questions and difficulties.” This therefore is the history behind “the cup of Elijah” – the cup we fill after the meal but do not drink. It represents the “fifth cup” mentioned in the Talmud.

According to the Jerusalem Talmud, the reason we have four cups of wine is because of the four expressions of redemption in God’s promise to Moses. How, then, could Rabbi Tarfon suggest that there are not four cups but five? *The fascinating fact is that if we look at the biblical passage, there are not four expressions of redemption but five.* The passage continues: “And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you as a possession – I am the Lord” (Ex. 6:8).

There is a further missing fifth. As mentioned above, during the course of reciting the Haggada we expound four biblical verses, beginning with, “An Aramean sought my father’s death.” In biblical times, this was the declaration made by someone bringing firstfruits to Jerusalem. However, if we turn to the source we discover that there is a fifth verse to this passage: “He brought us to this place [the land of Israel] and gave

us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 26:9). We do not recite or expound this verse at the seder table. But this is strange, since the Mishna states explicitly, “And one must expound the passage beginning, ‘An Aramean sought my father’s death,’ *until one has completed the whole passage*” (Mishna *Pesaḥim* 10:4). In fact we do not complete the whole passage, despite the Mishna’s instruction.

So there are three “missing fifths” – the fifth cup, the fifth expression of redemption, and the fifth verse. It is also clear why. All three refer to God’s not merely bringing the Jewish people out of Egypt but also *bringing them into the land of Israel*. The Haggada as we now have it and as it evolved in rabbinic times is, in Maimonides’ words, “the Haggada as practiced in the time of exile” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Ḥametz Umatza*), meaning, during the period of the Dispersion. The missing fifth represented the missing element in redemption. How could Jews celebrate arriving in the land of Israel when they were in exile? How could they drink the last cup of redemption when they had said at the beginning of the seder, “Now [we are] slaves, next year we shall be free; now we are here; next year in the land of Israel”?

The fifth cup – poured but not drunk – was like the cup broken at Jewish weddings. It was a symbol of incompleteness. It meant that as long as Jews were dispersed throughout the world, facing persecution and danger, they could not yet celebrate to the full. One great sage of the twentieth century, the late Rabbi Menaḥem Kasher, argued that now that there is a State of Israel, many exiles have been ingathered, and Jews have recovered their sovereignty and land, the fifth cup should be reinstated. That remains for the halakhic authorities to decide.

What, though, of the four questions and the four sons? There *was* a fifth question. The Mishna states that a child should ask: “On every other night we eat meat that is cooked, boiled, or roasted; but this night only roasted meat” (Mishna *Pesaḥim* 10:4). This text can still be found in the early manuscripts of the Haggada discovered in the Cairo Geniza. It refers to the time when the Temple stood and the food eaten at the seder included the Paschal offering, which was roasted. After the Temple was destroyed and the practice of eating a Paschal lamb was discontinued, this question was dropped and another (about reclining) substituted.

Was there a fifth child? The late Lubavitcher Rebbe suggested that there is a fifth child on Pesah. The four children of the Haggada are all present, sitting around the table. The fifth child is the *one who is not there*, the child lost through outmarriage and assimilation. Rabbinic tradition tells us that in Egypt, many Jews assimilated and did not want to leave. The Torah uses a phrase to describe the Israelites' departure from Egypt, *Vahamushim alu Benei Yisrael miMitzrayim* (Ex. 13:18). This is normally translated as "The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle." However, Rashi, citing earlier authorities, suggests that *hamush* may not mean "armed." Instead it may be related to the word *hamesh*, "five." The sentence could therefore be translated as "Only a fifth of the Israelites left Egypt."

The rest, he explains, perished in the plague of darkness. The plague itself was less an affliction of the Egyptians than a way of covering the shame of the Israelites, that so many of their number did not want to leave. Certainly the loss of Jews through assimilation has been an ongoing tragedy of Jewish history. How do we allude to it on seder night? By silence: the fifth child – the one who is not there.

So beneath the surface of the Haggada we find not four fours, but five fives. In each case there is a missing fifth – a cup, an expression of deliverance, a verse, a question, and a child. Each points to something incomplete in our present situation. In the half-century since the Holocaust the Jewish people has emerged from darkness to light. The State of Israel has come into being. The Hebrew language has been reborn. Jews have been brought to safety from the countries where they faced persecution. In the liberal democracies of the West Jews have gained freedom, and even prominence and affluence.

But Israel is not yet at peace. In the Diaspora assimilation continues apace. Many Jews are estranged from their people and their faith. Something is missing from our celebration – the fifth cup, the fifth deliverance, the fifth verse, the fifth question, and the fifth child. That is a measure of what is still to be achieved. We have not yet reached our destination. The missing fifths remind us of work still to be done, a journey not yet complete.

Bo

Telling the Story

*Excerpt from
Essays on Ethics:
A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*

Go to Washington and take a tour of the memorials and you will make a fascinating discovery. You can begin at the Lincoln Memorial, with its giant statue of the man who braved civil war and presided over the ending of slavery. On one side you will see the Gettysburg Address, that masterpiece of brevity with its invocation of “a new birth of freedom.” On the other is the great Second Inaugural with its message of healing: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right . . .”

Walk down to the Potomac Basin and you see the Martin Luther King Memorial with its sixteen quotes from the great fighter for civil rights, among them his 1963 statement, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” And giving its name to the monument as a whole, a sentence from the “I Have a Dream” speech: “Out of the Mountain of Despair, a Stone of Hope.”

Continue along the tree-lined avenue bordering the water and you arrive at the Roosevelt Memorial, constructed as a series of six spaces, one for each decade of his public career, each with a passage from one of the defining speeches of the time – most famously, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

Lastly, bordering the Basin at its southern edge is a Greek temple dedicated to the author of the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Around the dome are the words he wrote to Benjamin Rush: “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Defining the circular space are four panels, each with lengthy quotations from Jefferson’s writings, one from the Declaration itself, another beginning, “Almighty God hath created the mind free,” and a third, “God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?”

Each of these four monuments is built around texts and each tells a story.

Now compare the monuments in London, most conspicuously those in Parliament Square. The memorial to David Lloyd George contains three words: David Lloyd George. The one to Nelson Mandela has two, and the Churchill memorial just one: Churchill. Winston Churchill was a man of words – in his early life a journalist, later a historian, author of almost fifty books. He won the Nobel Prize not for peace but for literature. He delivered as many speeches and coined as many unforgettable sentences as Jefferson or Lincoln, Roosevelt or Martin Luther King, but none of his utterances is engraved on the plinth beneath his statue. He is memorialised only by his name.

The difference between the American and British monuments is unmistakable, and the reason is that Britain and the United States have quite different political and moral cultures. England is, or was until recently, a tradition-based society. In such societies, things are as they are because that is how they were “since time immemorial.” It is unnecessary to ask why. Those who belong know. Those who need to ask show thereby that they do not belong.

American society is different because from the Pilgrim Fathers onwards it was based on the concept of covenant as set out in Tanakh,

especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The early settlers were Puritans, in the Calvinist tradition, the closest Christianity came to basing its politics on the Hebrew Bible. Covenantal societies are not based on tradition. The Puritans, like the Israelites three thousand years earlier, were revolutionaries, attempting to create a new type of society, one unlike Egypt or, in the case of America, England. Michael Walzer called his book on the politics of the seventeenth-century Puritans *The Revolution of the Saints*.¹ They were trying to overthrow the tradition that gave absolute power to kings and maintained established hierarchies of class.

Covenantal societies always represent a conscious new beginning by a group of people dedicated to an ideal. The story of the founders, the journey they made, the obstacles they had to overcome, and the vision that drove them are essential elements of a covenantal culture. Retelling the story, handing it on to one's children, and dedicating oneself to continuing the work that earlier generations began are fundamental to the ethos of such a society. A covenanted nation is not simply there because it is there. It is there to fulfil a moral vision. That is what led G. K. Chesterton to call the United States a nation "with the soul of a church,"² the only one in the world "founded on a creed"³ (Chesterton's anti-Semitism prevented him from crediting the true source of America's political philosophy, the Hebrew Bible).

The history of storytelling as an essential part of moral education begins in *Parashat Bo*. It is quite extraordinary how, on the brink of the Exodus, Moses turns to the future and to the duty of parents to educate their children about the story that was shortly to unfold. In fact, he does so three times: "When your children ask you, 'What is this service to you?' you shall answer, 'It is the Passover service to God. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians, sparing our homes'" (Ex. 12:25–27); "On that day, you shall tell your child, 'It is because of this that God acted for me when I left Egypt'" (13:8); "Your child may later ask you, 'What is this?' You shall

1. *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

2. *What I Saw in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1922), 10.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

answer him, ‘With a show of power, God brought us out of Egypt, the place of slavery’” (13:14).

This is truly extraordinary. The Israelites have not yet emerged into the dazzling light of freedom. They are still slaves. Yet already Moses is directing their minds to the far horizon of the future and giving them the responsibility of passing on their story to succeeding generations. It is as if Moses were saying: Forget where you came from and why, and you will eventually lose your identity, your continuity, and *raison d'être*. You will come to think of yourself as the mere member of a nation among nations, one ethnicity among many. Forget the story of freedom and you will eventually lose freedom itself.

Rarely indeed have philosophers written on the importance of storytelling for the moral life. Yet that is how we become the people we are. The great exception among modern philosophers has been Alasdair MacIntyre, who wrote, in his classic *After Virtue*, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” Deprive children of stories, says MacIntyre, and you leave them “anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.”⁴

No one understood this more clearly than Moses because he knew that without a specific identity it is almost impossible not to lapse into whatever is the current idolatry of the age – rationalism, idealism, nationalism, fascism, communism, postmodernism, relativism, individualism, hedonism, or consumerism, to name only the most recent. The alternative, a society based on tradition alone, crumbles as soon as respect for tradition dies, which it always does at some stage or another.

Identity, which is always particular, is based on story, the narrative that links me to the past, guides me in the present, and places on me responsibility for the future. And no story, at least in the West, was more influential than that of the Exodus, the memory that the supreme power intervened in history to liberate the supremely powerless. This was paired with the covenant that followed, whereby the Israelites bound themselves to God in a promise to create a society that would be the

4. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216.

opposite of Egypt, where individuals were respected as the image of God, where one day in seven all hierarchies of power were suspended, and where dignity and justice were accessible to all. We never quite reached that ideal state but we never ceased to travel towards it and believed it was there at journey's end.

"The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us," said the BBC's political correspondent, Andrew Marr.⁵ God created man, Elie Wiesel once wrote, because God loves stories.⁶ What other cultures have done through systems, Jews have done through stories. And in Judaism, the stories are not engraved in stone on memorials, magnificent though they are. They are told at home, around the table, from parents to children, as the gift of the past to the future. That is how storytelling in Judaism was devolved, domesticated, and democratised.

Only the most basic elements of morality are universal: "thin" abstractions like justice or liberty that tend to mean different things to different people in different places and times. But if we want our children and our society to be moral, we need a collective story that tells us where we came from and what our task is in the world. The story of the Exodus, especially as told on Passover at the Seder table, is always the same yet ever-changing, an almost infinite set of variations on a single set of themes that we all internalise in ways that are unique to us, yet we all share as members of the same historically extended community.

There are stories that ennoble, and others that stultify, leaving us prisoners of ancient grievances or impossible ambitions. The Jewish story is in its way the oldest of all, yet ever young, and we are each a part of it. It tells us who we are and who our ancestors hoped we would be. Storytelling is the great vehicle of moral education. It was the Torah's insight that a people who told their children the story of freedom and its responsibilities would stay free for as long as humankind lives and breathes and hopes.

5. Andrew Marr, *The Observer*, Sunday, May 14, 2000.

6. *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston), preface.

The Future of the Past

*Excerpt from
Ceremony & Celebration:
An Introduction to the Holidays*

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 dishonor 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:

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 furthestmost

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.

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 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 *Hol HaMo'ed* – Ezekiel sees his people as a landscape of corpses, a valley of dry bones. They are devastated. They say *avda tikvateinu*, “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 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,” below).

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,¹ 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 Jew should marry 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 Pesah. Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now – slaves; next year we

1. Leviticus Raba, *Emor* 29.

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.

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 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.”²

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

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

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 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.³

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 civilization. Yet the Pesah 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

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

future. But there are grounds for hope: the story of Israel, its exiles, its exoduses, its survival against the odds, its refusal to despair.

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 knowledgeable 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 his 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 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 gray 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 Pesah, the master-narrative of hope.

Ki Tavo

A Nation of Storytellers

*Excerpt from
Lessons in Leadership:
A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*

Howard Gardner, professor of education and psychology at Harvard University, is one of the great minds of our time. He is best known for his theory of “multiple intelligences,” the idea that there is not one thing that can be measured and defined as intelligence but many different facets – one dimension of the dignity of difference. He has also written many books on leadership and creativity, including one in particular, *Leading Minds*, that is important in understanding *Parashat Ki Tavo*.¹

Gardner’s argument is that what makes a leader is *the ability to tell a particular kind of story* – one that explains ourselves to ourselves and gives power and resonance to a collective vision. So Churchill told the story of Britain’s indomitable courage in the fight for freedom. Gandhi

1. Howard Gardner in collaboration with Emma Laskin, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

spoke about the dignity of India and non-violent protest. Margaret Thatcher talked about the importance of the individual against an ever-encroaching state. Martin Luther King Jr. told of how a great nation is colour-blind. Stories give the group a shared identity and sense of purpose.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has also emphasised the importance of narrative to the moral life. “Man,” he writes, “is in his actions and practice as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.”² It is through narrative that we begin to learn who we are and how we are called on to behave. “Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.”³ To know who we are is in large part to understand the story or stories that we are a part of.

The great questions – “Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “What is our task?” – are best answered by telling a story. As Barbara Hardy put it: “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative.”⁴ This is fundamental to understanding why Torah is the kind of book it is: not a theological treatise or a metaphysical system but a series of interlinked stories extended over time, from Abraham and Sarah’s journey from Mesopotamia to Moses’ and the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert. Judaism is less about *truth as system* than about *truth as story*. And we are part of that story. That is what it is to be a Jew.

A large part of what Moses is doing in the book of Deuteronomy is retelling that story to the next generation, reminding them of what God did for their parents and of some of the mistakes their parents made. Moses, as well as being the great liberator, is the supreme storyteller. Yet what he does in *Parashat Ki Tavo* extends way beyond this.

He tells the people that when they enter, conquer, and settle the land, they must bring the first ripened fruits to the central Sanctuary, the Temple, as a way of giving thanks to God. A mishna in Bikkurim (3:3)

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 216.

3. Ibid.

4. Barbara Hardy, “An Approach Through Narrative,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 2 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968), 5.

describes the joyous scene as people converged on Jerusalem from across the country, bringing their first fruits to the accompaniment of music and celebration. Merely bringing the fruits, though, was not enough. Each person had to make a declaration. That declaration became one of the best-known passages in the Torah because, though it was originally said on Shavuot, the Festival of First Fruits, in post-biblical times it became a central element of the Haggada on Seder night:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there, few in number, there becoming a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. (Deut. 26:5–8)

Here for the first time, *the retelling of the nation's history becomes an obligation for every citizen of the nation*. In this act, known as *vidui bikkurim*, “the confession made over first fruits,” Jews were commanded, as it were, to become a nation of storytellers.

This is a remarkable development. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi tells us that “only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.”⁵ Time and again throughout Deuteronomy comes the command to remember: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt” (5:14; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18; 24:22); “Remember what Amalek did to you” (25:17); “Remember what God did to Miriam” (24:9); “Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you” (32:7).

The *vidui bikkurim* is more than this. It is, compressed into the shortest possible space, the entire history of the nation in summary form. In a few short sentences we have here

5. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 9.

the patriarchal origins in Mesopotamia, the emergence of the Hebrew nation in the midst of history rather than in mythic pre-history, slavery in Egypt and liberation therefrom, the climactic acquisition of the land of Israel, and throughout – the acknowledgement of God as lord of history.⁶

We should note here an important nuance. Jews were the first people to find God in history. They were the first to think in historical terms – of time as an arena of change as opposed to cyclical time in which the seasons rotate, people are born and die, but nothing really changes. Jews were the first people to write history – many centuries before Herodotus and Thucydides, often wrongly described as the first historians. Yet biblical Hebrew has no word that means “history” (the closest equivalent is *divrei hayamim*, “chronicles”). Instead it uses the root *zakhor*, meaning “remember.”

There is a fundamental difference between history and memory. History is “his story,”⁷ an account of events that happened sometime else to someone else. Memory is “my story.” It is the past internalised and made part of my identity. That is what the mishna in Pesahim means when it says, “Each person must see himself as if he went out of Egypt” (10:5).

Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people – no less than fourteen times – *not to forget*. If they forget the past they will lose their identity and sense of direction and disaster will follow. Moreover, not only are the people commanded to remember, they are also commanded to pass that memory down to their children.

This entire phenomenon represents a remarkable cluster of ideas: about identity as a matter of collective memory, about the ritual retelling of the nation’s story, and above all, about the fact that *every one of us is a guardian of that story and memory*. It is not the leader alone, or some elite, who are trained to recall the past, but every one of us. This too is an aspect of the devolution and democratisation of leadership that we find throughout Judaism as a way of life. The great leaders tell the story

6. *Ibid.*, 12.

7. This is a simple reminder, not an etymology. *Historia* is a Greek word meaning inquiry. The same word comes to mean, in Latin, a narrative of past events.

of the group, but the greatest of leaders, Moses, taught the group to become a nation of storytellers.

You can still see the power of this idea today. As I point out in my book *The Home We Build Together*,⁸ if you visit the presidential memorials in Washington, you see that each carries an inscription taken from their words: Jefferson's "We hold these truths to be self-evident" in the Declaration of Independence; Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself";⁹ Lincoln's Gettysburg Address¹⁰ and Second Inaugural Address, "With malice towards none; with charity for all."¹¹ Each memorial tells a story.

London has no equivalent. It contains many memorials and statues, each with a brief inscription stating who it represents, but there are no speeches or quotations. There is no story. Even the memorial to Churchill, whose speeches rivalled Lincoln's in power, carries only one word: "Churchill."

America has a national story because it is a society based on the idea of covenant. Narrative is at the heart of covenantal politics because it locates national identity in a set of historic events. The memory of those events evokes the values for which those who came before us fought and of which we are the guardians.

A covenantal narrative is always inclusive, the property of all its citizens, newcomers as well as the native-born. It says to everyone, regardless of class or creed: this is who we are. It creates a sense of common identity that transcends other identities. That is why, for example, Martin Luther King Jr. was able to use it to such effect in some of his greatest speeches. He was telling his fellow African-Americans to see themselves as an equal part of the nation. At the same time, he was telling white Americans to honour their commitment to the Declaration of Independence and its statement that "all men are created equal."

8. Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009).

9. First Inaugural Address (United States Capitol, March 4, 1933).

10. November 19, 1863.

11. United States Capitol, March 4, 1865.

England does not have the same kind of national narrative because it is based not on covenant but on hierarchy and tradition. England, writes Roger Scruton, “was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don’t need an explanation. They are there because they are there.”¹² England, historically, was a class-based society in which there were ruling elites who governed on behalf of the nation as a whole. America, founded by Puritans who saw themselves as a new Israel bound by covenant, was not a society of rulers and ruled, but rather one of collective responsibility. Hence the phrase, central to American politics but never used in English politics: “We the people.”

By making the Israelites a nation of storytellers, Moses helped turn them into a people bound by collective responsibility – to one another, to the past and future, and to God. By framing a narrative that successive generations would make their own and teach to their children, Moses turned Jews into a nation of leaders.

12. Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), 16.

Va'era

The Cup of Hope

*Excerpt from
Covenant & Conversation Exodus:
A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*

As a child, I used to be fascinated by the cup of Elijah at the Pesah Seder table. Would the prophet come when we opened the door after the meal? Would he be visible or invisible? Did the level of the wine go down, however imperceptibly? The idea of the prophet who did not die, but went to heaven in a chariot of fire (II Kings 2:11), and who would one day return to bring the good news of redemption was intensely dramatic. Only later did I discover the real significance of Elijah's cup, and found, as so often, that the truth is no less moving than the stories we learned as children.

The Mishna in *Pesahim* speaks of four cups of wine.¹ These are the basic requirements of the Seder, and the community must ensure that even the poorest person has sufficient wine to drink these cups. According to the Jerusalem Talmud,² they represent the four stages of redemption at the beginning of our *parasha*. God assures Moses that despite the fact that his intervention with Pharaoh has initially made things worse, liberation will indeed come:

1. Mishna, *Pesahim* 10:1.

2. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Pesahim* 10:1.

The Cup of Hope

“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God.’” (Exodus 6:6–7)

The first cup corresponds to “I will bring you out,” the second to “I will free you,” the third to “I will redeem you,” and the fourth to “I will take you.” Geographically, God will take the Israelites out of Egypt, physically He will save them from oppression, legally He will liberate them from Pharaoh’s rule, and spiritually He will take them under His own protection and tutelage. Each of the four cups is a stage on the way to freedom, a way of pausing and giving thanks.

In the Babylonian Talmud, however, there is a strange statement:

The fifth cup: over this, one completes Hallel and says Hallel Hagadol (Psalm 136: “Gives thanks to the Lord, His love endures forever”). These are the words of Rabbi Tarfon.³

Rashi is puzzled by these words. Thus far, the discussion has been about four cups, not five. He is therefore driven to the conclusion that the text is a scribal error. He believes it should say, “the fourth cup.”⁴

Maimonides, however, accepts the text as it stands. He writes that after drinking the four cups and completing Hallel:

One may pour a fifth cup and say over it Hallel Hagadol... This cup is not obligatory, unlike the four cups.⁵

Ravad (R. Avraham ibn Daud), a contemporary of Maimonides, takes a slightly different view. For him it is a mitzva to drink a fifth cup.⁶ There is a difference between mitzva and *hova*. The latter is an obligation,

3. *Pesaḥim* 118a.

4. Rashi, commentary to *Pesaḥim*, ad loc.

5. *Mishneh Torah*, *Ḥametz u’Matza*, 8:10.

6. Ravad, commentary to *Ba’al HaMe’or*, 794.

the former an act which, though not obligatory, constitutes a positive religious deed.

Two questions arise on the views of Maimonides and Ravad. The first is: why does the Mishna speak about four cups if there are in fact five? To this the answer is straightforward: The four cups are obligatory, unlike the fifth. That is why the community must provide the poor with the means of fulfilling their obligation, but they do not have to make provision for the fifth cup, which according to Maimonides is optional, and according to Ravad is desirable but not absolutely necessary.

The second question seems stronger. When God speaks to Moses, He uses four expressions of deliverance, not five. Hence, the four cups. Asking this question, however, takes us back to the text at the beginning of our *parasha*. It is then that we discover, to our surprise, that there is in fact a fifth expression of deliverance:

“And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.” (Exodus 6:8)

The drama of the fifth cup now becomes apparent. Pesah represents the start of the great journey of Jewish history, from slavery to freedom, Egypt to the promised land. The fifth cup stands for the destination, the “land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). What then became of it after the destruction of the Second Temple, the failure of the Bar Kochba rebellion, the Hadrianic persecutions and the long, tragic series of events that led to the greatest exile-and-dispersion of Jewish history? Could Jews, no longer a sovereign people in their own land, celebrate freedom under such circumstances?

The pathos of this question is evident in the opening words of the Seder: “This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.” The very festival that spoke of liberty gained became – for almost two thousand years – a poignant reminder of what the Jewish people had lost: freedom, a land, a home. A new phrase was born: next year. “This year we are slaves; next year we will be free. This year we are here; next year in Israel.” The past became the future. Memory was transfigured into hope. It is not too much to call the Jewish people “the

people of hope.” What had happened once would happen again. As the prophets of exile – Jeremiah and Ezekiel – said: there would be a second exodus. The loss was only temporary. The divine promise was forever.⁷

It was in this context that the debate over the fifth cup arose. Jews could speak about the four preliminary stages of redemption – but could they celebrate the fifth: “I will bring you to the land”? That is the debate between Rashi, Maimonides and Ravad. Rashi says one should not drink a fifth cup; Maimonides says one may; Ravad says one should.

Hence the extra cup at the Seder table. Out of respect for Maimonides and Ravad, we pour it. Out of respect for Rashi, we do not drink it. According to the sages, unresolved halakhic disputes will one day be resolved by Elijah (the word *Teyku*, “Let it stand [undecided],” refers to Elijah: “The Tishbite [Elijah] will come and answer questions and problems”). Hence the fifth cup became known as the cup of Elijah.

In our times, the Jewish people have returned to the land. According to one sage (the late Rabbi Menahem Kasher), we should now drink the fifth cup. Be that as it may, it is no less moving to think back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries – the age of Rashi, Maimonides and Ravad – and know that in the darkest night of exile, the only question was: how far, in the present, do we celebrate hope for the future? Four-fifths? Or all five? The promise God gave Moses at the beginning of this *parasha* spoke not just to that time, but to all time. Pesah kept hope alive. Hope kept the Jewish people alive.

7. “This is what the Lord says, He who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord Almighty is His name – ‘Only if these decrees vanish from My sight,’ declares the Lord, ‘will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before Me’” (Jeremiah 31:35–36).

“As surely as I live,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered’” (Ezekiel 20:33–34).

Bo

Schools of Freedom

*Excerpt from
Covenant & Conversation Exodus:
A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*

*“And you shall explain to your child on that day,
‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I
went free from Egypt.’” (Exodus 13:8)*

It was the moment for which they had been waiting for more than two hundred years. The Israelites, slaves in Egypt, were about to go free. Ten plagues had struck the country. The people were the first to understand; Pharaoh was the last. God was on the side of freedom and human dignity. You cannot build a nation, however strong your police and army, by enslaving some for the benefit of others. History will turn against you, as it has against every tyranny known to mankind.

And now the time had arrived. The Israelites were on the brink of their release. Moses, their leader, gathered them together and prepared to address them. What would he speak about at this fateful juncture, the birth of a people? He could have spoken about many things. He might have talked about liberty, the breaking of their chains, and

the end of slavery. He might have talked about the destination to which they were about to travel, the “land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17). Or he might have chosen a more sombre theme: the journey that lay ahead, the dangers they would face: what Nelson Mandela called “the long walk to freedom.” Any one of these would have been the speech of a great leader sensing an historic moment in the destiny of Israel.

Moses did none of these things. Instead he spoke about children, and the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn. Three times in the *parasha* of *Bo* he turns to the theme:

When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children say to you, “What does this ceremony mean to you?” then tell them, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.” (Exodus 12:26–27)

On that day tell your son, “I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.” (Exodus 13:8)

In days to come, when your son asks you, “What does this mean?” say to him, “With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (Exodus 13:14)

About to gain their freedom, the Israelites were told that they had to become a nation of educators. That is what made Moses not just a great leader, but a unique one. What the Torah is teaching is that freedom is won, not on the battlefield, nor in the political arena, nor in the courts, national or international, but in the human imagination and will. To defend a country you need an army. But to defend a free society you need schools. You need families and an educational system in which ideals are passed on from one generation to the next, and never lost, or despaired of, or obscured. There has never been a more profound understanding of freedom. It is not difficult, Moses was saying, to gain

liberty, but to sustain it is the work of a hundred generations. Forget it and you lose it.

Freedom needs three institutions: parenthood, education and memory. You must tell your children about slavery and the long journey to liberation. They must annually taste the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slave labour. They must know what oppression feels like if they are to fight against it in every age. So Jews became the people whose passion was education, whose citadels were schools and whose heroes were teachers.

The result was that by the time the Second Temple was destroyed, Jews had constructed the world's first system of universal compulsory education, paid for by public funds:

Remember for good the man Yehoshua ben Gamla, because were it not for him the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. At first a child was taught by his father, and as a result orphans were left uneducated. It was then resolved that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem, and a father [who lived outside the city] would bring his child there and have him taught, but the orphan was still left without tuition. Then it was resolved to appoint teachers in each district, and boys of the age of sixteen and seventeen were placed under them; but when the teacher was angry with a pupil, he would rebel and leave. Finally Yehoshua ben Gamla came and instituted that teachers be appointed in every province and every city, and children from the age of six or seven were placed under their charge.¹

By contrast, England did not institute universal compulsory education until 1870. In America it took from 1852 (Massachusetts) until 1918 (Mississippi). The seriousness the sages attached to education can be measured by the following two passages:

If a city has made no provision for the education of the young, its inhabitants are placed under a ban, until teachers have

1. *Bava Batra* 21a.

been engaged. If they persistently neglect this duty, the city is excommunicated, for the world only survives by the merit of the breath of schoolchildren.²

Rabbi Yehudah the Prince sent R. Hiyya and R. Issi and R. Ami on a mission through the towns of Israel to establish teachers in every place. They came to a town where there were no teachers. They said to the inhabitants, “Bring us the defenders of the town.” They brought them the military guard. The rabbis said, “These are not the protectors of the town but its destroyers.” “Who then are the protectors?” asked the inhabitants. They answered, “The teachers.”³

No other faith has attached a higher value to study. None has given it a higher position in the scale of communal priorities. From the very outset Israel knew that freedom cannot be created by legislation, nor can it be sustained by political structures alone. As the American justice Judge Learned Hand put it:

Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few; as we have learned to our sorrow.⁴

That is the truth epitomized in a remarkable exegesis given by the sages. They based it on the following verse about the tablets Moses received at Sinai:

2. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhhot Talmud Torah 2:1.

3. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Hagiga* 1:6.

4. Speech at Central Park, New York, 21 May 1944.

The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved [*harut*] on the tablets. (Exodus 32:16)

They reinterpreted it as follows:

Read not *harut*, engraved, but *herut*, freedom, for there is none so free as one who occupies himself with the study of Torah.⁵

What they meant was that if the law is engraved on the hearts of the people, it does not need to be enforced by police. True freedom – *cherut* – is the ability to control oneself without having to be controlled by others. Without accepting voluntarily a code of moral and ethical restraints, liberty becomes license and society itself a battleground of warring instincts and desires.

This idea, fateful in its implications, was first articulated by Moses in this *parasha*, in his words to the assembled Israelites. He was telling them that freedom is more than a moment of political triumph. It is a constant endeavour, throughout the ages, to teach those who come after us the battles our ancestors fought, and why, so that my freedom is never sacrificed to yours, or purchased at the cost of someone else's. That is why, to this day, on Passover we eat matza, the unleavened bread of affliction, and taste *maror*, the bitter herbs of slavery, to remember the sharp taste of affliction and never be tempted to afflict others.

The oldest and most tragic phenomenon in history is that empires, which once bestrode the narrow world like a colossus, eventually decline and disappear. Freedom becomes individualism – “each doing what was right in his own eyes,”⁶ individualism becomes chaos, chaos becomes the search for order, and the search for order becomes a new tyranny imposing its will by the use of force. What, thanks to Torah, Jews never forgot, is that freedom is a never-ending effort of education in which parents, teachers, homes and schools are all partners in the dialogue between the generations. Learning, *talmud Torah*, is the very foundation of Judaism, the guardian of our heritage and hope. That is

5. Mishna, *Avot* 6:2.

6. Judges 21:25.

Schools of Freedom

why, when tradition conferred on Moses the greatest honor, it did not call him “our hero,” “our prophet” or “our king.” It called him, simply, Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our teacher. For it is in the arena of education that the battle for the good society is lost or won.

Bershalah

Four Models of Leadership

*Excerpt from
Covenant & Conversation Exodus:
A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*

*“That day, God saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians... The Israelites saw the great power God had displayed against the Egyptians, and the people were in awe of God. They believed in God and in His servant Moses. Moses and the Israelites then sang this song to God and said, saying...”
(Exodus 14:30–15:1)*

The Song at the Sea was one of the great epiphanies of history.

The sages said that even the humblest of Jews saw at that moment what even the greatest of prophets who lived afterwards was not privileged to see.¹ For the first time they broke into collective song – a song we still

1. *Mekhilta*, commentary to Exodus 15:2, Horowitz-Rabin edition (Jerusalem: 1970), 126.

recite every day. There is a fascinating discussion among the sages as to how exactly they sang. On this, there were four opinions. Three appear in the tractate of *Sota*:²

Our rabbis taught: On that day Rabbi Akiva expounded: When the Israelites came up from the Reed Sea, they wanted to sing a song. How did they sing it? Like an adult who reads the Hallel [for the congregation] and they respond after him with the leading word. Moses said, “I will sing to the Lord,” and they responded, “I will sing to the Lord.” Moses said, “For He has triumphed gloriously,” and they responded, “I will sing to the Lord.”

R. Eliezer son of R. Yose the Galilean said: It was like a child who reads the Hallel [for a congregation] and they repeat after him all that he says. Moses said, “I will sing to the Lord,” and they responded, “I will sing to the Lord.” Moses said, “For He has triumphed gloriously,” and they responded, “For He has triumphed gloriously.”

R. Neḥemia said: It was like a schoolteacher who recites the Shema in the synagogue. He begins first and they respond after him.

According to Rabbi Akiva, Moses sang the song phrase by phrase, and after each phrase the people responded, “I will sing to the Lord” – their way, as it were, of saying Amen to each line.

According to Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean, Moses recited the song phrase by phrase, and they repeated each phrase after he had said it.

According to Rabbi Nehemiah, Moses and the people sang the whole song together. Rashi explains that all the people were seized by divine inspiration and miraculously, the same words came into their minds at the same time.³ There is a fourth view, found in the *Mekhilta*:⁴

2. *Sota* 30b.

3. Rashi to *Sota*, ad loc., based on *Mekhilta*, commentary to Exodus 15:1, Horowitz-Rabin edition, 115.

4. *Ibid.*, 119.

R. Eliezer ben Taddai said, Moses began [each verse] and the Israelites repeated what he had said and then completed the verse. Moses began by saying, “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously,” and the Israelites repeated what he had said, and then completed the verse with him, saying, “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and its rider He hurled into the sea.” Moses began [the next verse] saying, “The Lord is my strength and my song,” and the Israelites repeated and then completed the verse with him, saying, “The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.” Moses began [the next verse] saying, “The Lord is a warrior,” and the Israelites repeated and then completed the verse with him, saying, “The Lord is a warrior, Lord is His name.”

Technically, as the Talmud explains, the sages are debating the implication of the (apparently) superfluous words *vayomru lemor*, “and said, saying,” which they understood to mean “repeating.” What did the Israelites repeat? For Rabbi Akiva it was the first words of the song only, which they repeated as a litany. For Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean they repeated the whole song, phrase by phrase. For Rabbi Nehemiah they recited the entire song in unison. For Rabbi Eliezer ben Taddai they repeated the opening phrase of each line, but then completed the whole verse without Moses having to teach it to them.

Read thus, we have before us a localised debate on the meaning of a biblical verse. There is, however, a deeper issue at stake. To understand this, we must look at another Talmudic passage, on the face of it unrelated to the passage in *Sota*. It appears in the tractate of *Kiddushin*, and poses a fascinating question.

There are various people we are commanded to honour: a parent, a teacher (i.e., a rabbi), the Nasi (religious head of the Jewish community), and a king. May any of these four types renounce the honour that is their due?

R. Yitzhak ben Shila said in the name of R. Mattana, in the name of R. Hisda: If a father renounces the honour due to him, it is renounced, but if a rabbi renounces the honour due to him

it is not renounced. R. Yosef ruled: Even if a rabbi renounces his honour, it is renounced...

R. Ashi said: Even on the view that a rabbi may renounce his honour, if a Nasi renounces his honour, the renunciation is invalid... [An objection to this view is then brought by the Talmud].

Rather, if [the teaching of R. Ashi] was stated, it was stated thus: Even on the view that a Nasi may renounce his honour, yet a king may not renounce his honour, as it is said, You shall surely set a king over you, meaning, his authority [literally “fear”] should be over you.⁵

Each of these people exercises a leadership role: parent to child, teacher to disciple, Nasi to the community and king to the nation. Analysed in depth, the passages makes it clear that these four roles occupy different places on the spectrum between authority predicated on the person, and authority vested in the holder of an office.⁶ The more the relationship is personal, the more easily honour can be renounced. At one extreme is the role of a parent (intensely personal), at the other that of king (wholly official).

I suggest that this was the issue at stake in the argument over how Moses and the Israelites sang the Song at the Sea. For Rabbi Akiva, Moses was like a king. He spoke, and the people merely answered Amen (in this case, the words “I will sing to the Lord.”) For Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean, he was like a teacher. Moses spoke, and the Israelites repeated, phrase by phrase, what he had said. For Rabbi Nehemiah, he was like a Nasi among his rabbinical colleagues (the passage in *Kiddushin*, which holds that a Nasi may renounce his honour, makes it clear that this is only among his fellow rabbis). The relationship was collegial: Moses began, but thereafter, they sung in unison. For Rabbi

5. See the passage in full in *Kiddushin* 32a–b; for reasons of space I have only quoted a fragment here.

6. Max Weber famously called this the distinction between charismatic and bureaucratic authority. See Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* (New York: Free Press, 1964).

Eliezer ben Taddai, Moses was like a father. He began, but allowed the Israelites to complete each verse. This is the great truth about parenthood, made clear in the first glimpse we have of Abraham:

Terach took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. (Genesis 31:11)

Abraham completed the journey his father began. To be a parent is to want one's children to go further than you did. That too, for Rabbi Eliezer ben Taddai, was Moses' relationship to the Israelites.

The prelude to the Song at the Sea states that the people "believed in God and in his servant Moses" – the first time they are described as believing in Moses' leadership. On this, the sages asked: What is it to be a leader of the Jewish people? Is it to hold official authority, of which the supreme example is a king ("The rabbis are called kings")? Is it to have the kind of personal relationship with one's followers that rests not on honour and deference but on encouraging people to grow, accept responsibility and continue the journey you have begun? Or is it something in between?

There is no single answer. At times, Moses asserted his authority (for example, during the Korach rebellion). At another, he said, "Would that all God's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29). There are times when it is important to show that "There is only one leader for the generation, not two,"⁸ and others when the highest mark of leadership is inviting others to share in it.⁹

Judaism is a complex faith. There is no one Torah model of leadership. We are each called on to fill a number of leadership roles: as parents, teachers, friends, team members and team leaders. There is no doubt,

7. *Gittin* 62a.

8. *Sanhedrin* 8a.

9. *Sanhedrin*, ad loc. According to the sages, this was the difference between Moses, and God's advice to Joshua in Deuteronomy 31:7, 23. See Rashi, commentary to Deuteronomy 31:7.

Four Models of Leadership

however, that Judaism favours as an ideal the role of parent, encouraging those we lead to continue the journey we have begun, and go further than we did.¹⁰ A good leader creates followers. A great leader creates leaders. That was Moses' greatest achievement – that he left behind him a people willing, in each generation, to accept responsibility for taking further the great task he had begun.

10. See Rashi, commentary to Genesis 6:9.

Beshallah

The Longer, Shorter Road

*Excerpt from
Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*

At the end of his new book, *Tribe of Mentors*,¹ Timothy Ferris cites the following poem by Portia Nelson. It's called "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters":

Chapter 1: I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in this same place. But it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in It's a habit But,

1. Timothy Ferris, *Tribe of Mentors: Short Life Advice from the Best in the World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

The Longer, Shorter Road

my eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter 4: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

Chapter 5: I walk down another street.

That is probably how life is like for many of us. It certainly was for me. We set off, confident that we know where we are going, only to find that it is rarely that simple. “Life,” said John Lennon in “Beautiful Boy,” “is what happens while we are making other plans.” We fall into holes. We make mistakes. Then we make them again. Eventually we avoid them, but by then we may have the growing suspicion that we took the wrong turning to begin with. If we are lucky, we find another road.

Hence the opening of this *parasha*:

When Pharaoh let the people leave, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearby, for God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they encounter war and return to Egypt.” So God brought the people by a round-about route by way of the desert to the Red Sea ... (Ex. 13:17–18)

This is actually quite a difficult text to understand. In and of itself it makes eminent sense. God did not want the people immediately to face battle with the seven nations in the land of Canaan since, as newly liberated slaves, they were psychologically unprepared for war. We now know also that there was an additional factor. There were Egyptian forts at various points along the sea route to Canaan, so the Israelites would come up against them even before reaching the land.

Three facts, though, still need to be reckoned with. First, the Torah itself says that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (14:4), leading him to pursue the Israelites with a force of six hundred chariots. This so demoralised the Israelites that they cried, “Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die in the desert? ... It would have been better to be slaves in Egypt than to die

in the desert” (14:11–12). Why did God cause Pharaoh to pursue the Israelites if He did not want them to think of going back? He should surely have made the first stage of their journey as undemanding as possible.

Second, the people *did* face war long before they came anywhere near the land of Canaan. They did so almost immediately after crossing the Red Sea, when they were attacked by the Amalekites (17:8). The strange fact is that when they had to fight a battle on their own, without any miraculous intervention from God, they expressed no fear. Inspired by Moses’ upraised arms, they fought and won (17:10–13).

Third, the roundabout route failed to prevent the people’s response to the report of the spies. Terrified by their account of the strength of the native population and the well-fortified nature of their cities, they said, “Let us appoint a [new] leader and return to Egypt” (Num. 14:4).

It seems, therefore, that the circuitous route by which God led the Israelites was not to prevent their *wanting* to return, but rather, to prevent their being *able* to return. Leading them miraculously through the Red Sea was like Caesar crossing the Rubicon, or Cortes burning his boats before his conquest of the Aztecs. It made retreat impossible. Whatever their doubts and fears, the Israelites had no real choice. They had to continue onward, even if in the end it took forty years and a new generation to reach their destination.

What this meant was that almost from the dawn of their history as a nation, Jews were forced to learn that *lasting achievement takes time*. You can never get there by the shortest road. Thanks to the work of Anders Ericsson, popularised by Malcolm Gladwell, we know that greatness in many fields takes 10,000 hours of practice.² The history of all too many nations born after the Second World War and the end of empire shows that you can’t create a democracy by United Nations decree, or freedom by a Universal Declaration of

2. See Anders Ericsson, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016); Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2013). Of course, as many have pointed out, this is not true in all fields, nor is it the only relevant factor.

Human Rights. People who try to get rich fast often discover that their wealth is like Jonah's gourd: it appears overnight and disappears the next day. When you try to take a shortcut, you find yourself, like the poet, falling into a hole.

The Talmud tells the story of R. Yehoshua ben Ḥanania who asked a young man sitting at a crossroad, "Which is the way to the town?" The young man pointed to one of the paths and said, "This way is short but long. The other way is long but short." Yehoshua ben Ḥanania set out on the first path, quickly arrived at the town, but found his way blocked by gardens and orchards. He then returned to the young man and said, "Didn't you tell me that this path was short?" "I did," said the young man, "but I also warned you that it was long."³ Better to take the long road that eventually gets you to your destination than the short one that doesn't, even though it looks as if it does.

Today's world is full of books, videos, and programmes promising a fast track to almost anything from weight loss to riches to success and fame. The life-changing idea symbolised by the route God led the Israelites on when they left Egypt is that *there are no fast tracks*. The long way is short; the short way is long. Better by far to know at the outset that the road is long, the work is hard, and there will be many setbacks and false turnings. You will need grit, resilience, stamina, and persistence. In place of a pillar of cloud leading the way, you will need the advice of mentors and the encouragement of friends. But the journey is exhilarating, and there is no other way. The harder it gets, the stronger you become.

Life-Changing Idea #16

There are no fast tracks. Lasting achievement takes time. You can never get there by the shortest road. The harder it gets, the stronger you become.

3. Eiruvim 53b.

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