

## Exodus and Revelation

It was and remains the most influential story in the history of politics. When Oliver Cromwell made the first speech of his Parliament after the Civil War, he referred to it. When Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were designing the Great Seal of the United States, it was their first choice of an image to epitomize their dream. When black Americans struggled for civil rights, they sang it. When South Americans wrote their liberation theologies, it was the text from which they began. In century after century one narrative more than any other has inspired people to break the chains of the past and build a new society on the foundations of liberty—the story of Moses leading the Israelites to freedom across the wilderness towards the promised land. It is the great, enduring narrative of hope.

By any standards it is a turning point in history. The ancients could understand the victory of power over power. Empires fought one another, armies clashed and the gods were on the side of the strong. But that God might be on the side of the weak, that He might intervene on behalf of the oppressed, that He might choose as His own people a group of slaves—this was a remarkable turn of events. Individual slaves may have escaped to freedom before, but never an entire population. It was a happening without precedent.

But Moses knew—God had told him—that there was something more important than the event itself. It was to become the cornerstone of a new social order, one never before seen on the stage of civilization. The experience of the Exodus was to shape the entire political vision of the

newly liberated people. One day they would find themselves in a land and sovereign state of their own. There would be kings, princes, elites and hierarchies of power. There would be rulers and ruled. In politics, reality rarely answers to the dream. Revolution replaces one set of oppressors with another. The chains are new, the bondage old. That could never be adequate to the religious vision of a free society.

So Moses told the Israelites never to forget. Their laws, institutions and practices would be built around that moment when, as slaves, they first breathed the air of freedom. Time and again in the Hebrew Bible, laws are explained with the words, "because you were slaves in the land of Egypt". Most remarkably and fatefully, every year on the anniversary of the event, we are instructed to relive it. On Passover we tell the story of how our ancestors left Egypt, eating the bread of affliction, tasting the bitter herbs of slavery, and drinking four cups of wine, each a stage on what Nelson Mandela called "The Long Walk to Freedom".<sup>1</sup> As later rabbinic teaching put it, each person, that night, is meant to see himself or herself as if they personally had just been liberated.<sup>2</sup> For the first time in history, memory became a religious obligation.<sup>3</sup> Jews were commanded to become the people who never forget. And they never did.

As we have already seen, Judaism is a religion of questions. The Passover seder begins with the questions asked by a child. Yet there is one question never asked. Why was the Exodus necessary at all? Had God not led the Israelites into Egypt, He would not have had to rescue them and set them free. The story of Abraham and his children might have been quite different. It might have gone like this: Settling in the land of Canaan, Abraham's children grew, prospered and multiplied until eventually they became a tribe, a people, a power, a state. There might have been no exile and no

redemption. Why, then, did the Israelites have to leave the land before they could enter it? Why did they first have to be slaves before they could be free?

The Hebrew Bible, the Torah, is an unusual book. It is, as I have said, the unique endeavour to communicate the truths that can never be told as system; the truths that can only be told as story, handed on from parents to children, preserved not as a historical document but as a living memory, one that shapes the lives of successive generations as they continue to walk towards the promised land.

It is the ultimate anti-mythological story of how God is not in nature, and how man, responding to God, can rise above nature. At the simplest level this means that those who are part of the covenant may never take things for granted. Nothing to Jews is merely natural—not marriage, not child-birth, not social structures, not the possession by a people of its land. Everything that could be seen as the unchanging, inevitable way of things, endorsed by nature or by nature's gods, is perpetually questioned in Judaism. If it is wrong, it must be changed. If it is right, it must be sustained by a conscious moral decision, an act of the free human will.

This is the key to many otherwise perplexing stories of the Hebrew Bible. Strangest of all is the story of the binding of Isaac. Abraham and Sarah have been promised children. In successive revelations God tells them that they will become a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth, the stars of the sky. Nor will they be one nation alone. Abraham will be the father of many nations. Yet the years pass and they do not have a child. The first recorded words of Abraham to God are, "O Sovereign Lord, what can You give me since I remain childless?"<sup>4</sup> The first Jew feared he would be the last. The eternal people almost dies out in its first generation.

In desperation Sarah gives Abraham her handmaid Hagar

as wife, an established custom in patriarchal times. Hagar has a child, Ishmael. Now at last Abraham has a son. Yet God tells him that Ishmael is not the one. He too will be blessed and will become a great nation. But he is not the child of the covenant.

God repeats the promise that Sarah will have a child. She laughs. She is past childbearing age. Physiologically it is impossible. Yet the child is born. He is called Isaac, meaning the "laughter" that turned from incredulity to rejoicing. And then, just as the story seems to have reached its happy end, we hear the words spoken by God to Abraham: "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering."<sup>5</sup>

It is one of the most devastating moments in all literature. All of Abraham and Sarah's hopes are about to be destroyed at the command of the very God who had promised them a child. Silently Abraham takes his son, travels to the mountain, builds an altar, binds his son, takes the knife and lifts his hand. At that moment a voice from heaven cries, "Stop. Do not lay a hand on the boy."<sup>6</sup> And so the trial ends, as incomprehensibly as it began. Why the drawn-out hopes, the repeated disappointments and the final joy only to be so nearly shattered for all time?

The answer is this. What we have, we eventually take for granted. Only what we lose and are given back again do we not take for granted, but consciously cherish and constantly protect. This sequence of events, told time and again in different contexts, is one of the axes of Jewish spirituality. Nothing is more natural than procreation. The entire structure of plant and animal, as well as human, life is directed to it. Every species devises ways of replicating itself and handing on its genetic endowment to the future. This is nature's most fundamental mechanism. But to be a Jew is to see

nothing as merely natural, not even the process of bringing a new generation into the world.

Abraham and Sarah had a child because they so nearly did not have a child. Never again, after their experiences, could they or their descendants take children for granted. The years of waiting, the disappointment of Ishmael, the near-loss of Isaac, burned into Jewish consciousness the knowledge that generational continuity does not simply happen. Judaism became, and still is, that rarest of phenomena, a child-centred faith.

Just as Abraham and Sarah lost and were given back their child, so the Israelites in Egypt lost and were given back their freedom. The oldest and most tragic phenomenon in history is that empires which flourish eventually decline. Freedom becomes licence, licence 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. That has been the trajectory of virtually every civilization known to man.<sup>7</sup> It begins by taking freedom lightly, assuming that once gained it will continue of its own accord, forgetting that it exists and is sustained only by constant vigilance and repeated acts of self-restraint.

The Jewish people were, from the outset, called on to live out the truth that the free God desires the free worship of free human beings, and that therefore it must construct a society whose members never take freedom for granted. Before they could taste freedom—not merely live it but taste it with the starburst of flavour that only a starving man knows when he tastes food—they had first to lose it. The experience of slavery became, for an entire people, the matrix of the passion for freedom. It became part of their memory, renewed each year and handed on to their children, as the taste of unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

Freedom cannot simply be conceived in the mind and then translated into life, nor is it arrived at instantaneously through revolutionary moments as if slaves could break their chains and become overnight a nation of free people. As the old Jewish saying has it: It took one day to take the Israelites out of Egypt. It took forty years to take Egypt out of the Israelites. Freedom is the political transformation that occurs only through personal transformation. Judaism is the truth that can only be told as story, the truth that unfolds in the course of history, as part of the experience of a people who undertake a long journey, extended over many generations and continued by the act of passing on their memories and hopes to their children so that they never forget where they came from and where they are going to. Freedom is one such truth, and in the life of society it is the most fundamental. When Moses led his people out of Egypt, he did more than remove their chains. He taught them and us what it is to stay free: Never take freedom for granted.

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The Exodus is normally seen as the birth of Israel as a nation. But was it? To this the Bible gives two conflicting answers. The first occurs in a passage we read on Passover at the seder table:

*A wandering Aramean was my father,  
And he went down to Egypt  
And sojourned there, few in number;  
And there he became a nation [vayehi sham le-goi] ...<sup>8</sup>*

The other occurs in the wilderness of Sinai immediately prior to the revelation of the Ten Commandments and Israel's

acceptance of the covenant with God:

*You have seen what I did to Egypt  
And how I carried you with eagles' wings  
And brought you to Myself.  
Now if You obey Me fully  
And keep My covenant,  
Then out of all the nations  
You will be My treasured possession,  
For all the earth is Mine.  
You will be for Me a kingdom of priests  
And a holy nation [goi kadosh] ...<sup>9</sup>*

There is an evident contradiction between these two passages. The first says that the Israelites became a nation in Egypt. The second says that they became a nation only after they left Egypt and had begun their journey through the desert. There at Mount Sinai God offered them the covenant, they accepted, and only then did they become a nation. How do we reconcile these two accounts?

The answer is that there are two ways in which individuals coalesce into a group with its own distinctive identity.<sup>10</sup> The first is the way of history. Individuals feel bound to one another because they share the same ancestry, the same ethnic origins, the sense of a shared past. When they look back they find ties of collective memory. They are what they are because of where they came from and what has happened to them. This is the unifying bond of peoples and ethnic groups. They are a community of fate, an *am*, a people. The second is based on the future. Individuals can be bound together as a group not just because of where they came from but where they are going to; not just because of what happened to them but because of what they are called on to

achieve. They share ideals, a common vision. They participate in a collective life with a distinctive set of rules, values and virtues. They are linked not by history but by destiny—by the journey that lies ahead and the task they have undertaken to fulfil. Such a group is not a community of fate but a community of faith. The Bible calls this an *edah*, a word that political scientist Daniel Elazar translates as “the assembly of all the people constituted as a body politic”.<sup>11</sup>

At the opening of the book of Exodus, as a new pharaoh takes power and announces the enslavement of the Israelites, we hear for the first time the word *am* used in connection with Abraham’s children: “Behold, the people of the children of Israel [*am bnei Yisrael*] have become too numerous for us.”<sup>12</sup> It was then that the Israelites became a community of fate. They faced a common enemy in the form of an enslaving and tyrannical power. Their shared suffering forged them into a distinctive group. To the Egyptians, the Israelites were *Ivrim*, Hebrews, meaning nomads, aliens, outsiders. They belonged to a caste regarded by the Egyptians as unclean. The Torah notes that when Joseph provided a meal for his brothers, they had to sit by themselves “because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians”.<sup>13</sup> They acquired a common identity through the experience of being like one another and different from those around them. They had the same ancestry and origins. Now, transported into an alien environment, they shared the same fate. That was the first way in which they became a nation.

However—and this is crucial to an understanding of biblical politics—the Exodus was only the prelude to Israel’s birth as a nation. The decisive event took place not in Egypt nor even when they left, but seven weeks later as they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. It was there that they heard the

voice of God and received the Ten Commandments, the most famous of all moral codes.

For Judaism, this was the supreme moment of revelation, and it remains unique in the religious literature of mankind. Christianity and Islam are also religions of revelation, but in neither does God reveal Himself to an entire nation. In one He appears to the "son of God", in the other to his "prophet". In neither does revelation have the public character of Sinai, an experience shared by men and women, young and old, righteous and ordinary alike. The difference between revelation to a holy individual and to a nation as a whole is fundamental and defines the unique character of the Jewish project. The revelation at Mount Sinai was a religious moment, but it was also a political event. It is not too much to say that it was the most extraordinary of all political events, more dramatic in its implications than the exodus itself. At Sinai, God made a pact with a people, thus creating covenantal politics.

Covenants or suzerainty treaties were not unknown in the ancient world.<sup>14</sup> They were often made between neighbouring kings. Three things, though, were unique about the Sinai covenant. The first is that it was made not between one king and another but with an entire people. Before stating the terms of the covenant, God told Moses to speak to the people and determine whether or not they agreed to become a nation under the sovereignty of God. Only when "*all* the people responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said'"<sup>15</sup> did the revelation proceed. This is the first time in history that individuals—ordinary individuals, not an elite—were asked to give their consent to a political order. The theological statement of the first chapter of Genesis, that the individual is fashioned in the image of God, here becomes the founding principle of a society. The first-ever

democratic mandate takes place, the idea that there can be no valid rule without the agreement of all those who are affected by it. This itself was a revolution in the concept of human dignity.

Far more remarkable, though, was the second fact, that the covenant was made between a people and God. There is nothing like this before or since in the history of religion. Ancient civilizations, however they conceived the gods, believed them to be all-powerful. The gods might be placated, appeased, even sometimes outwitted, but they did not submit to laws. The idea of a moral-legal covenant between the gods and human beings would have been absurd. Yet that is what God proposed at Mount Sinai, and it had vast implications. It meant that right was sovereign over might, and that there is no legitimate government without the consent of the governed, even when the governor is God Himself. This, far more than Athenian democracy, is the founding moment of the Western political tradition, with its emphasis on limited government and the rights of the individual: no power, even the unlimited power of God, is absolute. Above kings, emperors and democratically elected governments stands the supreme authority of the moral law. This is the first and eternal defence of liberty, not only against the tyranny of tyrants but also against what Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill called "the tyranny of the majority".<sup>16</sup>

The third revolution lies in the phrase, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation". We know not only from the literature of ancient cultures but also from the Bible itself that the idea of priests and holy people is not exclusive to Israel. Every nation had its priestly elite. In the pages of the Bible we meet Melchizedek, king of Salem, a "priest of the Most High God".<sup>17</sup> There were the priests in Egypt whose land Joseph did not nationalize during the seven years of famine.<sup>18</sup>

There was Jethro, priest of Midian, who became Moses' father-in-law. What is unprecedented is the idea of a kingdom every one of whose citizens is a priest, and a nation every one of whose members is holy. This is the first and most majestic statement of egalitarian politics. Significantly, while the revelation is taking place, Moses is at the foot of the mountain with the rest of the people. At Sinai, God reveals Himself equally to everyone. At Israel's founding moment, every individual is a party to the covenant and none stands higher than any other. Revelation creates a republic of free and equal citizens under the sovereignty of God.

For the Hebrew Bible, there is a difference between freedom and a free society. Hebrew contains many words for freedom but two have particular significance, *hofesh* and *herut*. *Hofesh* means individual freedom, what Isaiah Berlin called "negative liberty".<sup>19</sup> It is what a slave acquires when he or she goes free. They are no longer subject to someone else's orders. They can do what they like. Freedom in this sense can never be an adequate basis for a free society, for an obvious reason. Sooner or later, my freedom will conflict with yours. If I am free to steal, you are not free to own. If I am free to attack, you are not free to walk without fear. "Freedom for the pike means death to the minnows." A society based on *hofesh*—what today is called a libertarian society—will be one in which the strong will prevail over the weak, the many over the few, the powerful over the powerless. In the Exodus the Israelites acquired their *hofesh*. They were no longer slaves. But they were not yet a free society.

At Sinai they acquired *herut*, their "constitution of liberty" as a nation. It was then that they discovered that *God reveals Himself in the form of laws*. For only the rule of law creates the possibility of a society in which my freedom respects yours. Law—a law that treats everyone equally, rich and poor,

native-born and stranger—is the institutional embodiment of collective as opposed to individual freedom. At Sinai, the Israelites were transformed from a community of fate into a community of faith, from an *am* to an *edah*, meaning a body politic under the sovereignty of God, whose written constitution was the Torah. At that moment a fundamental truth was established: that a free society must be a moral society, for without the rule of law, constrained by the overarching imperatives of the right and the good, freedom will eventually degenerate into tyranny, and liberty, painfully won, will be lost.

In Judaism, revelation is political because the Jewish project is not to scale the heavens in search of God but to bring the Divine presence down to earth in the structures of our social life. As political philosopher Michael Walzer puts it:

What is required of a holy nation is that its members obey divine law, and much of that law is concerned with the rejection of Egyptian bondage. In such a nation, then, no one would oppress a stranger, or deny Sabbath rest to his servants, or withhold the wages of a worker. A kingdom of priests would be a kingdom without a king (God would be king); hence it would be without Pharaohs and taskmasters ... If no member of the holy nation is an oppressor, then no inhabitant of the holy land will be oppressed.<sup>20</sup>

This is the destination of the Jewish journey—the promised land, the holy city, a society of justice, generosity and peace. And in the transition from exodus to Sinai, from *am* to *edah*, Jewish identity itself is transformed from passive to active, from fate to faith, from a people defined by what happens to it to a people defined by the social order they are called on to create.