

Time as a Narrative of Hope

The unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled.
(Harold Fisch, *A Remembered Future*)

In his monumental work *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, Harvard economic historian David Landes asks a fascinating question. China in the Middle Ages was more advanced than Europe. Long before the West, it had invented paper, printing, gunpowder, the compass, and porcelain. By the eleventh century it had developed blast furnaces, fueled by coal and coke, for smelting iron. By the twelfth it had already produced a water-driven machine for spinning hemp. In many fields it was centuries ahead. Yet the Industrial Revolution took place not in China, but in Europe. Why was it that in China, technological progress moved so far but no further?

There are multiple explanations, but one, suggests Landes, is that Europe had something China lacked, namely the Western sense of time. The Chinese did not see time as the arena of change; the Europeans did. To create a revolution, first you have to be able to imagine it. You need the ideas that make historical transformation possible and desirable. What Europe possessed, and what proved critical to its economic and political success, was a Judeo-Christian concept of time.

We tend to take time for granted. It is, we assume, the same for everyone everywhere – one of the few things that is. There are sixty minutes in an hour, twenty-four hours in a day, seven days in a week, regardless of how rich or poor we are, or where we live on the surface of the world. One of the few differences between ourselves and our ancestors is that we can measure it more accurately, using oscillating quartz crystals instead of the sundials and water clocks, hourglasses and calibrated candles of the ancient world. But time is not simply something we measure. It is also something to which we bring some of our deepest assumptions about the nature of reality and mankind's place in the universe. The understanding of time differs from culture to culture and from age to age. Historians are generally agreed that with the Hebrew Bible a quite new concept of time appeared. It is not too much to say – many scholars have – that this was one of Judaism's greatest contributions to the West.

The most obvious sense of time is given by nature. That is how the ancients thought, and many moderns also. Any understanding of time on the basis of nature is bound to be cyclical. Things change, but they come back to their starting point. The planets revolve in their courses. The climate passes through its seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter. Life has its own rhythms: birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth. That is how time appears to those for whom nature, myth, and/or science are the primary realities. Time, like the slow turning of a wheel, describes a circle, periodically returning to where it began. That which was will be again. Nothing ultimately changes.

That was time in the world of myth. In modernity, it was given its most famous expression by Nietzsche. The sum total of energy in the universe, he argued, is finite. But time is infinite. Therefore any possible configuration of elements has already happened and will happen again in the future. The Hebrew Bible itself contains a book dedicated to this theme – the strange work called *Kohelet*, Ecclesiastes. "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). *Kohelet* draws the inevitable conclusion: "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless" (1:2).

It is difficult to grasp the immensity of the leap that occurred when first Abraham, then Moses and the Israelites, and later the prophets began to see time differently. It was one of the greatest revolutions in

the history of ideas, and it has still not been made by all cultures. It came when the religious visionaries of Israel heard God in history instead of seeing God in nature. If God transcends nature, then He is free. Unlike the gods of the ancient world, He is not bound by the laws of nature. God acts, not because He must, but because He wills and chooses.

The fateful corollary is that, having been made in God's image, we too are free. Though we are part of nature – we have bodies, we feel hunger and cold, we age and die – there is something within us that is not part of nature, namely self-consciousness, the ability to stand back from our immediate situation and pass judgment on it. The Greeks called this “the soul.” The second chapter of Genesis calls it “the breath of God” (v. 7). The combination of language and self-consciousness means that human beings have a sense of time to be found nowhere else in creation. All animals have a sense of cyclical time hardwired into their brains. Some migrate; others hibernate at particular points in the year. What is unique to humans is the sense of a *distant* past and future: “there was” and “there will be.” It took a radical imaginative leap to see that if we are free, not wholly determined by nature, the world of “there will be” might be altogether different from that of “there was.”

Human beings can choose. They can learn by error and experience and act differently next time. The future, therefore, is not destined to be like the past. History is not an endless series of eternal recurrences or *déjà vu*s. Instead it is like a journey, with a starting point and a destination, or like a book with a beginning and middle and distantly glimpsed end. This is the sense of time that makes its appearance in the Hebrew Bible. Until Christianity borrowed it from Judaism, it existed nowhere else. The Greek writer Herodotus, for example, is widely known as “the father of history,” but he had no thought of history as an overarching narrative. It was simply the record of events. History, for him, was interesting simply because it happened and because it contained exemplary cases of courage and folly, success and failure, but it added up to no larger pattern. Jews thought otherwise.

It began with Abraham's journey from Ur. But the decisive event was the Exodus. In Egypt, the Israelites first sensed the intervention of God in history on a massive scale. The Egypt of the pharaohs was the oldest, most stable and seemingly impregnable of the empires of the ancient world. It embodied timelessness. With the solitary exception

of the Hyksos invasion three centuries before, Egypt was the supreme example of civilization-as-order, power immune to change. The seasons, life and death, pharaohs themselves came and went, but the social structure, like Egypt's monumental buildings, defied time.

The overthrowing of this structure and the unprecedented release of a whole nation from slavery showed that societies are *not* immutable. They belong not to nature but to culture. They are made by men and women; therefore they can be unmade and remade by men and women. Injustice, oppression, dominance, exploitation, the enslavement of the weak by the strong, are not written into the constitution of the universe, for beyond them is the voice of the transcendent God, the "ought" beyond the "is," summoning us to shape a more gracious and humane world. That is where the Israelites' journey began. To those who hear the voice, it continues still.

The historian Eric Voegelin suggests that it was not by accident that God chose the desert to reveal the plan of a new kind of society: "When the world has become Desert, man is at last in the solitude in which he can hear thunderingly the voice of the spirit" (*Israel and Revelation*). Voegelin does not make the verbal connection between the Hebrew terms for "desert," *midbar*, and "word," *davar* (both are derived from the root D-B-R); but it is a significant one. The desert is the place of human silence in which the divine word can be sensed in its fullness and power. "What emerged from the alembic of the Desert," he concludes, "was not a people like the Egyptians or Babylonians, the Canaanites or Philistines, the Hittites or Arameans, but a new genus of society, set off from the civilizations of the age by the divine choice. It was a people that moved on the historical scene while living toward a goal beyond history."

For the first time an abyss opened up between the past and the future, Egypt and the Promised Land. The journey through space, across the wilderness, came to symbolize a journey through time, whose destination is something new, unprecedented, a tomorrow radically unlike yesterday. In this context we begin to understand the Israelites' constant complaints and their expressed desire, on several occasions, to go back to Egypt. The psychologist Erich Fromm coined the phrase "fear of freedom," and when the Israelites first experienced it, it must have been fearful indeed – the loss of everything secure, predictable, unchanging,

and in its place only uncertainty and a destination always beyond the horizon. An open future – the essential negation of cyclical time – can be terrifying. Only God’s promise, and the Israelites’ trust in that promise, made it bearable. This concept of time makes the Hebrew word *emuna*, usually translated as “faith,” utterly distinctive in the religious language of mankind. It does not mean certainty; it means, to the contrary, *the courage to live with uncertainty*, knowing that the future is radically unpredictable, but that it can be faced without fear because we are not alone. God and His word are with us.

Voegelin is particularly acute when he says that Israel was “a people that moved on the historical scene while living toward a goal beyond history.” The destination of the Jewish journey was much more than a place, Canaan, the land “flowing with milk and honey.” It was an ideal future, the “time to come,” an era of justice and peace. Moses spoke of it in his majestic closing speeches that we know as the Book of Deuteronomy. Isaiah foresaw it in the surpassing visions that form the closing chapters of the book that bears his name. Almost all the prophets have their own formulations. Joel speaks of a day in which God will “pour out My spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (3:1). Jeremiah envisions a future in which, in God’s words, “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts.... No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest” (31:32–33). Eventually it became known as the messianic age.

No concept has been more debated, contested, and fraught with controversy than the messianic age. It led, in Jewish history, to a series of false messiahs, each of whom left disruption in his wake. In more modern times it created a deep rift between Zionists and their opponents, between those who believed that redemption could or should be initiated by man and those who argued that, to the contrary, it could be brought only by God, so any attempt to hasten the end by human intervention was heresy. If not for the Holocaust, that debate might still divide the Jewish world. Gershom Scholem argued on secular grounds that the messianic idea had caused more harm than good. It led, he said, to “a life lived in *deferment*, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished” (“The Messianic Idea in Judaism”).

Because, for centuries, Jews were suspended between a remote miraculous past (the biblical era) and an equally remote miraculous future (the messianic age), the present was systematically devalued; suspended animation.

The concept of messianic time is dangerous, because it can lead to two possibilities: a refusal to act in the present, because all redemption is in the hands of God, or, to the contrary, a readiness to act recklessly in the present, because redemption is at hand and God will ensure success. The very existence of Israel depends on the ability to keep these two tendencies in check. My own interpretation of the messianic idea, however, is that it stands in relation to Jewish history as the stars did to ancient navigation. As Kenneth Minogue notes, "when you steer by a star you don't aim to arrive there" (*Politics*). The perfect world – the world we rehearse every Shabbat – is beyond history; but history itself is the attempt, never wholly successful, but marked nonetheless by real and significant advance, to come ever closer to that ideal. God alone can bring about a world of perfect justice, but we are not wrong to keep that vision constantly before us as we seek to create a society less random and cruel than those in the past.

The messianic idea gave Jewish sensibility its unique restlessness, its striving, its principled orientation to the future, unlike almost every other civilization known to mankind, whose golden age is in the distant, usually mythical past. Moses spent his life traveling toward a land he was not allowed to enter. "It is not for you to complete the task," said Rabbi Tarfon, "but neither are you free to stand aside from it" (*Mishna Avot 2:16*). Jewish time sees us as travelers on the road to a destination not yet reached; wayfarers on a journey begun by our ancestors, to be continued by our children. At best we see the promised age as Moses saw the land of Israel at the end of his life – distantly, as from a mountaintop. But that is enough. All of history tells us that we are not wrong to travel, to take risks, to see poverty, hunger, disease, and injustice as things we are called on to fight, not accept. Not all of mankind's dreams are destined, as they were for the Greek dramatists, to end in tragedy. With God's help, and that of other people with whom we are bound in covenant, we can change the world.

Thomas Cahill gives us a sense of the impact of this idea on the imagination of the West:

The Jews gave us the Outside and the Inside – our outlook and our inner life. We can hardly get up in the morning or cross the street without being Jewish. We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes. Most of our best words, in fact – *new, adventure, surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice* – are the gifts of the Jews. (*Gifts of the Jews*)

The name usually given by historians to this new concept is linear (as opposed to “cyclical”) time. This, though, is a profound mistake. Linear time is, in fact, the quite different idea that took shape between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries when the religious view of time, born in the Hebrew Bible and reintroduced into the West by the Puritans, was secularized. Now it was no longer God, or the Bible, or faith that would drive history forward, but reason and experimentation. Through science, humanity would conquer ignorance. Through reason, it would banish prejudice. Through trade it would develop the wealth of nations. Through technology, it would dominate nature. That was the view shared by thinkers as diverse as Saint-Simon, Comte, Hegel, and Marx, economists like Adam Smith, biologists like Darwin, and the historians and anthropologists of the nineteenth century. Condorcet put it as well as any when he wrote, “Nature has set no term to the perfection of our human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite, and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe on which nature has cast us” (*Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*).

This is not biblical time but a translation of it into a quite different frame of reference. Instead of seeing history as an interactive drama between heaven and earth, God’s word and mankind’s response, it sees it as an arena dominated by man alone. In place of ethics it enthrones science; instead of a journey full of risk, it sees history as continuous, unbroken advance; it deletes the word “redemption” and replaces it with the word “progress.”

These were powerful ideas, and for almost three centuries they were effective. They led to the development of science, improvements in medicine, the Industrial Revolution, the spread of democracy, and

the growth of tolerance as an ideal. By now, though, we know their limitations. The Enlightenment failed to prevent the Holocaust. Technology has given us the power to destroy life on earth. The growth of consumption threatens the ecological system whose air we breathe. We have moved from modernity to post-modernity, meaning that we have lost confidence in the upward march of time. As Robert Bellah notes, "Progress, modernity's master idea, seems less compelling when it appears that it may be progress into the abyss" (*Habits of the Heart*).

Jewish time is not linear but something more profound. I call it *covenantal time*. This is time not as continuous advance, but as a narrative with a beginning and a distant end, in whose midst we are and whose twists and turns continue to surprise us. The terms of the drama are set. There are two characters, God and mankind. There are continuing themes: exile and redemption, wanderings in the wilderness, backslidings and lapses, atonement and forgiveness, returns and rededications, epiphanies and moments when man looks for God and fails to find Him. Nothing in this narrative is as simple as linear time. There is no guarantee of progress. There are constant digressions, false turns, wanderings in the wilderness. There is no "historical inevitability" – that modern idea which, as Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin remind us, has been the source of so much brutality and bloodshed in the modern world ("progress," like every other false god, has called forth the blood of human sacrifice in abundance). Above all, covenantal time is conscious of *limits* in our dealings with nature and our fellow men. The prophets of linear time have always been convinced that there are no limits: that nature is infinitely bountiful, economic growth open-ended, and humanity – through revolution, or social engineering, or eugenics, or selective cloning – ultimately perfectible. Whenever mankind loses a sense of limits, disaster follows as surely as does night, day.

The deepest difference between linear and covenantal time is that whereas the first gives rise to *optimism*, the latter leads to *hope*. These two concepts, often confused, are in fact utterly different. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage – only a certain naivety – to be an optimist. It takes great courage to sustain hope. No Jew – knowing what we do of the past, of hatred, bloodshed, persecution in the name of God, sup-

pression of human rights in the name of freedom – can be an optimist. But Jews have never given up hope. “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall,” says Isaiah, “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength” (40:30). “Hold back your voice from weeping,” urges Jeremiah, “there is hope for your future” (31:15). To be a prophet is to find a vestige of hope in the wreckage of despair. Jewish time – this is the secret of the influence of the Pesah story on the Western imagination – is the supreme narrative of hope.

It is worth adding, because I have not seen it said, that this is why the British and American revolutions succeeded while the French and Russian revolutions failed. There is a fundamental difference between philosophy, the gift of the Greeks to Western civilization, and the Hebrew Bible, the gift of Israel. Philosophy (that “series of footnotes to Plato,” as Alfred North Whitehead called it) sees *truth as system*. The Bible sees *truth as story*. Philosophical systems are essentially timeless. They speak either of truth as eternal, or (in the case of Hegel and Marx) of history as inexorable, predetermined. In Judaism, by contrast, time is of the essence, which is why its vision can be told only in the form of narrative (first this, then that; “it came to pass after these things”; chronological rather than logical sequence). Two things only stand outside of time: the beginning of days (Eden) and the end (the messianic age). Between them lies the long journey to redemption.

More than any other system, the Hebrew Bible teaches that it takes time to realize moral ideals. Pesah, 3,300 years ago, was the definitive protest against slavery, yet the West did not abolish slavery until the nineteenth century, and in America, only at the cost of civil war. The opening chapter of the Torah, with its statement that man is “the image of God,” was the first articulation of the sanctity of the individual and thus of human rights. It was not until 1948 that the United Nations issued its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Isaiah and his younger contemporary Micah were the first to envision peace as an ideal. Humanity has not reached it yet. Nor has any society yet realized the vision of a world without hierarchy and manipulation, experienced by Jews one day in seven, every Shabbat. The messianic age is not now. There is still a way to go.

Because of its systemic failure to understand time, philosophy (an immense gift to civilization, and still our best way of thinking about

thinking) has always been, and will always be, disastrous when applied to the political realm, which is what happened in revolutionary France and communist Russia. Philosophy as political ideology constantly holds forth the promise of a shortcut to utopia – and there is no shortcut. It took forty years for the Israelites to get from Egypt to the banks of the Jordan, a journey that should have taken days. That, says Maimonides, was no accident. A generation born in slavery was not ready for the responsibilities of freedom. Hope is the ability to combine aspiration with patience; to be undeterred by setbacks and delays; to have a sense of the time it takes to effect change in the human heart; never to forget the destination even in the midst of exile and disaster. The politics of progress, from Plato to Marx (what J. L. Talmon calls “secular messianism”), is always impatient, because it lacks more than a superficial understanding of time. Judaism has never ceased to wrestle with time (“I will not let you go until you bless me,” said Jacob to the angel [Gen. 32:26], as Jews have always said of time and fate). Because of this it yields a different kind of aspiration, one that I call *the politics of hope*.

Jews are a tiny people, less than a quarter of a percent of the population of the world. They always were. (“Not because you had greater numbers than all the other nations did God embrace you and choose you,” said Moses at the end of his life. “You are among the smallest of all the nations” [Deut. 7:7]). Because of this, they have often found it difficult to understand their place in the totality of mankind. Sometimes they have thought too little of themselves (the verdict of Moses’ spies comes to mind: they are giants, we are grasshoppers). Other times they have thought too much (“When I felt secure,” says David in Psalm 30, “I said, ‘I shall never be shaken’” [v. 7]). Which was it: the pariah people or the chosen people? Caught between these extremes, and despite their almost endless preoccupation with their own identity, they found it hard to arrive at a realistic estimate of their role among the nations. As we saw in the chapter on anti-Semitism, that same difficulty has existed when other nations tried to evaluate Jews and Judaism. They also found themselves caught between contemptuous dismissal and an exaggerated view of Jewish power, sometimes both at once.

My own view, arrived at after long reflection, is that Jews have been called on to bear witness – in their faith, history, and way of life – to certain fundamental truths of the human condition: that we are free, and

thus responsible, and therefore charged with becoming God's partners in the work of redemption; that life is sacred and therefore human rights are nonnegotiable; that civilizations become invulnerable only when they care for the vulnerable; that freedom depends on education and the emotional intelligence that comes from strong families and communities held together by the bonds of shared memory and responsibility; and that all achievement in the social realm takes time and can be sustained only by a narrative of hope.

These are not the only truths of the human situation, and therefore Judaism does not hold a monopoly on wisdom ("If they tell you there is wisdom among the nations, believe it," said the rabbis [*Lamentations Raba* 2:13]; they even composed a special blessing on seeing a non-Jewish sage). Not all truths are compatible. That is why there can be no ultimate global harmony within history (= unredeemed, nonmessianic time). For principled reasons, for example, Jews did not develop the visual arts (they believed in a God who could be heard, not seen). The Greeks did. Nor did Jews cultivate the forms of inner peace practiced by some Oriental mysticisms, for this involves a sense of the unreality of pain and suffering, which Judaism, with its striving for this-worldly justice, cannot accept. For that reason Judaism has a dual concept of peace: the end-of-days peace envisioned by the prophets, and the more modest here-and-now peace articulated by the sages in their concept of *darkhei shalom*, a set of rules for friendly coexistence with those with whom you disagree.

Judaism, as I have argued, teaches the *dignity of difference*: the diversity of the created world and the irreducible multiplicity of human attempts to express the infinite. In such a world, the most important process is *conversation* – a willingness to speak and listen to others, knowing that you have something unique to teach, but others do also ("Who is wise? asked Ben Zoma, and answered: One who learns from everyone" [*Pirkei Avot* 4:1]). Because of their unique experience of the Exodus, Jews learned more than most the importance of loving the stranger, of being true to one's own faith while being a blessing to others, of contributing to the human project as a whole without making the mistake that we are all the same. Judaism is the great countervoice in the conversation of mankind.

I have tried to show how the modern history of the West – especially Britain in the seventeenth century, and America from then

till now – was shaped by the new encounter with the Hebrew Bible, brought about by the Reformation and the invention of printing. Jews themselves suffered a more tempestuous exposure to modernity, which began with the promise of the Enlightenment and ended in the Holocaust and the transfer of Jewish hopes to a reborn Israel. Anti-Semitism has not ended, but the Jewish situation has been transformed. For the first time in two thousand years, the Jewish people has a home, a place where it can construct a macrosociety on the basis of Judaic principle (not a theocratic state: that is something altogether different). For the first time ever, outside Israel, Jews have the chance of making a substantive contribution to the shaping of the liberal, pluralist democracies of the West. The Pesah story is therefore more salient than ever: no longer a mere hope but a real and present challenge.

It is fair to say that we have not yet risen to that challenge. The Jewish religious imagination, still suffering the effects of trauma and dislocation, has not yet recovered its poise, scope, intellectual breadth, or prophetic depth. In the past half-century it has produced too few prophets – men and women sufficiently gifted in the arts of listening to time and eternity, the particularity of Jewish existence and the universality of human concern, to hear in God's word for all time the specific cadences of the word for *this* time. Yet this too will come, and I have tried in these chapters to signal the territory from which it will come and the themes it will embrace. The Pesah story influenced not only Jews but non-Jews, as Moses foresaw – knowing as he did that the God who rescued Israel from Egypt is the God not of Israel only, but of the world, and therefore that the Exodus contains a message not only for Jews, but for all who seek, on this troubled planet, to construct a society that is a worthy dwelling place for God, whose image we are.