

Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind... Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. . . In the woods, we return to reason and faith. . . Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

—R. W. Emerson, “Nature” (1836)

It is in the wilderness that the voice of God calls out to Moses—in the desert, in the vast expanse of nature’s simplicity: it is amid the solitude of the shepherd, the contemplative soul, the man haunted by the shadows of his past. The miraculous burning bush, unconsumed—mystery and marvel in that desert terrain, the supernatural wonder erupting within the ordinary. Here natural space is transfigured in revelation; the mundane recast as the Indwelling of Divinity.

“Remove your sandals from your feet,” God says to Moses, “for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” It is sacred as the place in which the Divine is first revealed to Moses, as the mountain to which he will return with the people of Israel to receive the Torah (har haElohim horevah). The solitude of Moses’s wandering is not incidental to the mystical experience of the burning bush, and it is that aloneness within the mystery and wonder of Nature that frames the prophet’s opening into the sublime.

But the ethical urgency of his vocation is also inseparable from that powerful individual moment of revelation; for he is called to be God’s instrument of redemption, to alleviate the suffering of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. Spiritual cultivation is inextricable from moral application. Though he is initiated into the divine encounter in the spiritual solitude of nature, Moses must overcome his fear and insecurity in order to ease the suffering of the enslaved. I am the God of your fathers, God says to a frightened Moses. Each of us carry the blessings and burdens of our forbears, the commanding power of the past.

But God is also Ehyeh, as revealed to Moses—the Divine I Am / I Will Be of all existence; the God of Becoming who envelops all time—past, present, and future—into the One of all Being. In that moment, as Emerson put it, “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” God as I Will Be is the immediacy of sacred Presence and the forward-looking hope of redemption and healing.



Shemot 5781

שמו תשפ"א



Guided by the Covenant

Dr. Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor Emeritus and Professor of Jewish Thought, JTS

There is a wonderful midrash in *Pesikta Derav Kahana* that suggests a profound relationship between the arrival of the manna described in Parashat Beshallah and the giving of the Ten Commandments recounted in the following parashah, Yitro. Just as the manna tasted different to each and every Israelite, Rabbi Yosi teaches, so each was enabled according to his or her particular capacity to hear the Divine Word differently at Sinai (12:25).

I have wondered, since encountering this midrash, whether we might think of other aspects of the Exodus story in the same way. Perhaps all of what occurs in this book of the Torah, right up to the world-changing events we read about in chapters 19–20, can usefully be seen as preparation for those events. The Israelites needed more than three days at the foot of the mountain to get ready to hear from God what cannot normally be heard and to see what can never be seen. They required all of the awesome experiences of slavery and liberation; of deliverance from Pharaoh’s chariots at the Red Sea, and deliverance from their own thirst and impatience in the wilderness. We too, thousands of years after them, need preparation as we make our way as readers through this narrative each year. The Torah clearly does not wish us to come upon Sinai unaware. A lot of thoughts and emotion pave the way.

I will leave aside for the moment the particular sort of preparation that Rabbi Yosi sought to capture in the midrash to which I referred above. Let’s reflect rather on the more general themes of the book of Exodus, and how they might get us ready for Sinai. I want to ask, in particular, how immersion in *history* is connected to acceptance of *covenant*.

It seems utterly crucial to the Torah that the contract we will “sign” at Sinai be thoroughly grounded in the historical world as it is and always has been. This teaching is not meant as a blueprint for individual enlightenment (though it certainly

contains such guidelines). The path up to the mountain, like the path down from it, leads straight into and through the most concrete of historical realities. These include day-to-day facts of life such as those Moses' father-in-law witnesses and helps to improve (dispute and judgment), or those Pharaoh witnesses and works to disrupt (the labor of childbirth and Israelite labor in the fields). The relevant history also encompasses extraordinary realities, blessed or cursed, such as the attempted genocide of an entire people (now all too common an item in the news); or—far less common, but not unknown—the liberation of an entire people from slavery. The Torah describes a redemption so public, so visible, and so miraculous that it cannot but provoke notice of, and thanks for, the help of God. This experience is perhaps the most important preparatory step to covenant of all.

Either way, however—blessing or curse; day-to-day facts of life or extraordinary reality—the Torah seems to teach that the covenant we are making with one another and God is to be enacted in the human world—pre-eminently social and political—that we all know from experience. It does not pertain to some fantasy utopia not yet created. God wants us to know God here, now, as we are, as the world is. It is *this* story God wants changed by our reading and our labors.

I don't know about you, but I have long felt challenged by the moment early in the book of Exodus when Moses strikes down the Egyptian who is mercilessly beating an Israelite slave. I realized years ago that by cheering Moses on as the text leads me to do, *wishes* me to do, I become complicit in a way with the action Moses takes. This, too, is part of the Torah's intention, I believe. It wants me to lose my innocence in this fashion so as to increase my sense of responsibility for the world. The lesson is a hard one to learn, year by year. We want innocence back and can't have it.

The Torah wants us instead to be thoughtful moral actors. As such we are not free of responsibility for the evils in which we acquiesce, and, what is more, we share in guilt for the evils in which we join—and perhaps to a lesser extent, for the evils of which we approve. “Few are guilty, all are responsible,” Heschel liked to say. Some of us may choose pacifism as a result of thinking deeply about the costs of the spiraling cycle of violence in the world. This choice, too, involves responsibility and incurs guilt, of course, every bit as much as the decision—based in part on repeated encounters with the story of Israelite suffering in Egypt—that some evil must be stopped by force if necessary. Either way the text haunts us with the tragic knowledge that good rarely comes of violence. The Torah is a determinedly realistic account of history. The covenant it bequeaths us demands wrestling with the deepest of moral dilemmas.

No less, I think, the events leading up to Sinai require that we think as well as we can, using all the resources at our disposal, about what it means for finite creatures like ourselves to “hear”—be in touch with, seek to learn from and obey—the infinite God. What does it mean for women and men who walk on two legs and have two feet planted firmly in the earth to direct our minds' eyes heavenwards? Again and again we try to imagine—each in our different ways—what it might have been like for Moses to stand at the top of that mountain as God “came down.” The text seems convinced that in order to do so effectively, we had better be able to imagine—each in our different ways—what it might have been like for the Israelites to stand in the “narrow place” of slavery and await deliverance, which for so long did not come.

The Torah puts us into their faraway situation so as to bring us closer to our own. It makes us go through as readers what our ancestors went through in life—so that we work to make sure as many of our children as possible have the good fortune of merely reading about suffering and slavery rather than living through them. The book of Exodus begins with the names of those who went down to Egypt, one by one, the better perhaps to challenge us to add our names to the list of those who bring the world up from Egypt. We do so guided and informed by the covenant agreed upon at Sinai.

May we read the book of Exodus well this year, and have the courage to act in accordance with what we taste of and hear in its Divine Word.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

The Landscape of Revelation

Dr. Eitan Fishbane, Associate Professor of Jewish Thought, JTS

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. . . The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?...

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. . . The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible...