Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

PASSOVER 2024

Misunderstanding the Drops of Wine

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

This article was first published in Commentary *in May 2019.*

On First Avenue in New York City, across the street from the United Nations General Assembly, sits what is known as the Isaiah Wall. Inscribed on the structure, in large, ornate letters, are the words of the Hebrew prophet who gave the wall its name: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." These sentences conclude Isaiah's prediction of the "end of days," when all the nations of the world will recognize the God of Jacob and join Israel in serving Him in Jerusalem. The verse reflects one of the most sweeping, audacious, and universalistic beliefs in Judaism, and its presence on the Upper East Side, adorning the United Nations, cannot be seen as anything other than utterly inappropriate. For it is at the UN, more than at any other location on earth, where dictators are welcomed, tyrannical nations celebrated, and the peoples of the world gather to collectively deny the rights of the people of Israel and Israel's historic connection to Jerusalem.

For those who recognize the incongruity of the verse's location, the Isaiah Wall embodies an important reminder. While Judaism does indeed look forward to a time of universal peace, it also insists that this cannot come about without the defeat of evil. Jews have always looked forward to a time without war, but Jewish tradition also recognizes that at times we must give war a chance. Even as Isaiah looks forward to weaponry being rendered obsolete, the prophet Joel speaks of the exact opposite:

> Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong.

Joel, as biblical scholars note, is deliberately reversing Isaiah's words to stress that Isaiah's vision is contingent upon his own; the wicked must be fought in order for war to cease.

This profound moral and political point lies at the heart of the structure of the Passover seder. One of the most renowned and venerable traditions of the evening, unmentioned in the Talmud but perpetuated for centuries, is the removal of a bit of wine from one's goblet at the mention of each of the ten plagues, the divine wrath wreaked upon Egypt. Today, most Seder participants believe that this ritual illustrates that our joy is diminished at the punishment of others. It is an explanation that is famous, ubiquitous, cited by Jews devout and secular alike.

And it is utterly unfounded in Jewish tradition.

In fact, the point meant to be made by the removal of wine is the exact opposite of what is assumed. One of the earliest documentations of this ritual is that of the 14th-century German rabbi Jacob Moelin, known as Maharil, in his collection of Jewish traditions. We remove the wine, he writes, in order to express our prayer that God "save us from all these and they should fall on our enemies." The drops, in other words, express our desire that the visitation of the Lord's wrath upon Egypt should happen to others, to every evil empire on earth. Though we definitely do not delight in the death of innocents who may also have suffered during the plagues, nevertheless the notion that God punishes nations as well as individuals is part of biblical theology, and a desire to see wicked nations punished is bound up in the belief in a just and providential God. "The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance," the Psalms proclaim, and then the psalmist explains why: "So that a man shall say, Verily *there* is a reward for the righteous: verily he is a God that judgeth in the earth."

As to the notion that the tradition reflects a diminishing of joy at this moment, the concept did not make its appearance in Jewish texts until half a millennium later. In an outstanding article in the journal *Hakirah*, Zvi Ron demonstrates that the earliest version of it was published in 19th-century Germany. It then made its way to the United States, where it "resonated with the sensibilities of English-speaking American Jews in particular, and was popularized through being presented as the only explanation for the custom in American Haggadot from the 1940s and on." "This explanation," Ron reflects, "came to be seen as more humane and understandable than the original explanation."

The problem however, is that it is *not* more humane. We need reminders that only in the defeat of evil can innocents be saved; only when justice is done can swords finally be beaten into plowshares.

This is why the final eating of matzah at the Seder is followed by another plea for punishment: "Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name." This controversial sentence is also misunderstood, as it is elucidated by the verse that follows: "For they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his dwelling place." The reference is not to all nations, but to those who have sought to destroy the Jewish people; it, too, is a plea for the punishment of the wicked. Also missed is the significance of the paragraphs that immediately follow—psalms of praise that are largely not about Israel at all, but about a time when the "united nations" of humanity will join in praise of God. "Praise the Lord, all the nations, adore him, all the peoples," we read in the Haggadah, followed by another stanza universalistic in nature: *Nishmat kol chai tevarekh et shimkha*, "the soul of every living being will bless Your Name."

There are profoundly universalistic elements to the Haggadah. The first part of the Seder focuses on Israel and its enemies: "In every generation they rise up against us to destroy us, and God saves us from their hands." Yet the Seder is concluded by emphasizing our shared humanity, looking forward to a time when war will cease and the words incised on the Isaiah Wall will be fulfilled. The genius of Judaism lies in its balance of the particular and the universal; indeed, its extraordinary nature consists in its insistence that only through particularism can the universal be appreciated, and only through justice can peace be achieved.

In 1981, Menachem Begin's government annexed the Golan Heights, and the United Nations General Assembly responded with a sweeping condemnation of Israel. The Mayor of New York, Ed Koch, announced his intention to alter the Isaiah Wall, adding an inscription that would reflect the United Nations' "hypocrisy, immorality, and cowardice." Koch's worthy goal was not achieved. Yet the unchanged, incongruous words on the wall at the UN remind us how much evil remains in the world, and why we must pray, and work, for its defeat. Only then will Isaiah's vision of a world without weapons, and of nations united in service of God, be realized. May this eschatological event occur as soon as next year—in Jerusalem.

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Exodus: The Script for the American Story

BY RABBI DR. STUART HALPERN

This article was first published in Jewish Journal *on January 4, 2024.*

Few Americans realize that the book of Exodus is actually one of the political and moral founding documents of the United States. As the historian Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, recently told an interviewer: "Sometimes I go to the National Archives just to check on the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, just to make sure that they're still there and that they're OK. You can't—you shouldn't—read those documents without being aware of where those ideas came from. There are no footnotes, but you know it: These ideas are rooted in the Hebrew Bible."

It was the figure of the tyrannical Pharaoh of Egypt, whose oppression and enslavement of the Israelites is described in Exodus' opening verses, whom Revolutionaries saw as the predecessor of the British King George III, tormentor of the colonies.

On Dec. 17, 1773, John Adams, who would become America's second president, described the Boston Tea Party, the protest against repressive tax policies, in his diary. Was the destruction of 342 chests (roughly $1.7 million's worth in today's currency) truly "necessary," he wondered in his notebook. He then answered his own question in the affirmative, analogizing England to Egypt:

> I apprehend it was absolutely and indispensably so... To let it be landed, would be giving up the Principle of Taxation by Parliamentary Authority, against which the Continent have struggled for 10 years, it was loosing all our labour for 10 years and subjecting ourselves and our Posterity forever to Egyptian Taskmasters—to Burthens, Indignities, to Ignominy, Reproach and Contempt, to Desolation and Oppression, to Poverty and Servitude.

To Adams, the only way to avoid the length of servitude suffered by ancient Israel in days of old was to begin to rebel now.

Strengthening the Revolutionary efforts was the influential pamphlet "Common Sense," published anonymously and written by Thomas Paine. The tract had the largest sale and circulation of any book in American history in proportion to the population at that time. It too saw in the colonists' cause a fight for liberation like that of the Children of Israel. Articulating the moral argument for disobeying the crown, Paine traced the institution of kingship itself back to its biblical roots.

"The will of the Almighty as declared by Gideon, and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by Kings," he wrote, referencing the books of Judges and Samuel. The British aggression on April 19, 1775 at Lexington and Concord was the sign that a revolt against a maniacal monarch was the only option. "The moment the event of that day was made known," he continued, "I rejected the hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of England for ever; and disdain the wretch, that with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE, can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul." King George III, went the argument, was no less bloodthirsty than Pharaoh, and merited a similar oppositional response—this time, it would be Patriots instead of plagues.

During the Revolution, Connecticut pastor Nicholas Street galvanized his parishioners into supporting the cause of Independence. In an April, 1777 sermon titled "The American states acting over the part of the children of Israel in the wilderness," he preached:

> Thus we are acting over the like sins with the children of Israel in the wilderness, under the conduct of Moses and Aaron, who was leading them out of a state of bondage into a land of liberty and plenty in Canaan. Again, we are ready to marvel at the unreasonable vileness and cruelty of the British tyrant and his ministry, in endeavouring to oppress, enslave and destroy these American States, who have been some of his most peaceable and profitable subjects; and yet we find the same wicked temper and disposition operating in Pharaoh king of Egypt above 3000 years ago...

Egypt's despotic ruler's subjugation of Israelite slaves was not the only biblical villainy Street called to mind. He turned from the Passover story to Purim in criticizing the nefarious ministers in the British government.

> Great men are generally proud, ambitious and aspiring, disdainful of inferiors, and apt to resent the least indignities: We see this in Haman, an aspiring courtier, who when he saw that Mordecai bowed not nor did him reverence, was full of wrath; wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were thro'out the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus; and Haman said unto the king...And the British ministry have been acting over the same wicked, mischievous plot against the American States, as Haman did against the Jews, and we have reason to hope that they will meet with the like fate.

Street made clear that those who would oppose the colonial cause deserved, like Ahasuerus' conniving minister Haman, to be hanged on the gallows.

It wasn't only in that Connecticut congregation that Exodus was evoked and it wasn't only Israel's enemies that were reconstituted in this time. In a 1778 sermon for the parish of New Hampshire, "The Republic of The Israelites An Example To The American States," Samuel Langdon, a Boston minister and revolutionary preacher, saw in the nascent nation's emerging republican model of governance a revival of Moses' model. "When first the Israelites came out from the bondage of Egypt, they were a multitude without any other order than what had been kept up, very feebly, under the ancient patriarchal authority," Langdon noted. Once Moses complained that the burden of judicial responsibility was too heavy for him,

> God commanded him to bring 70 men, chosen from among the elders and officers, and present them at the tabernacle; and there he endued them with the same spirit which was in Moses, that they might bear the burden with him. Thus a senate was evidently constituted, as necessary for the future government of the nation, under a chief commander. And as to the choice of this senate, doubtless the people were consulted, who appear to have had a voice in all public affairs from time to time, the whole congregation being called together on all important occasions: The government therefore was a proper republic.

"If I am not mistaken," Langdon concluded, "instead of the 12 tribes of Israel, we may substitute the 13 states of the American union."

From America's earliest days, then, its influential figures—presidents, pundits and preachers—saw in the pages of Exodus the script for the American story. A textbook for resistance to tyranny and the roots of a Revolution that would light the way towards liberty, its chapters will be read once more by all those seeking a more perfect union.

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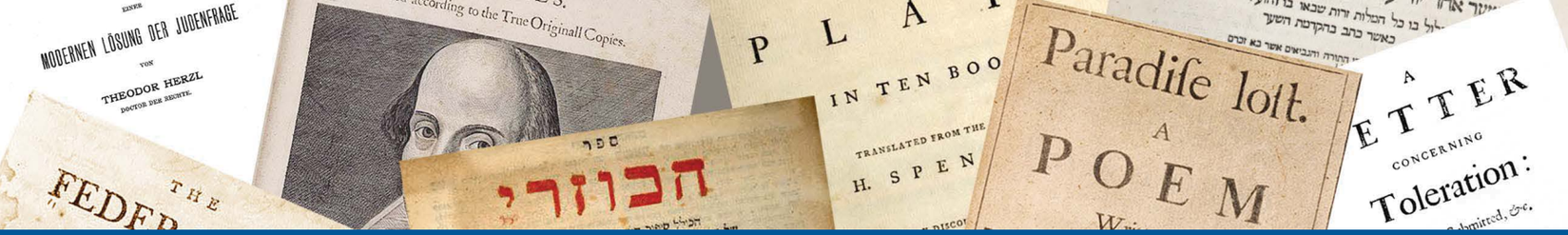

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