

The Revelation at Mount Sinai: Creation, Exodus, and Faith

By Rachel Friedman

Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Beth Samuels a"b, a woman of unwavering faith, who saw the awe of God in nature and the compassion of God in the human experience.

THE CORE OF OUR FAITH: CREATION OR THE EXODUS?

In the twelfth-century work *Sefer HaKuzari* (*The Book of the Kuzari*), R. Judah HaLevi tells of his experiences with the king of the Khazars whose conversion to Judaism provides the literary framework of the book. The king is informed by an angel in a dream that the way he leads his life is not acceptable to God. In an effort to discover how he might better lead his life, the king invites an Aristotelian philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jewish scholar to his residence and asks each to explain the core of his belief system. When the turn of the Jewish scholar arrives, he responds, "I

believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles..." Puzzled, the king questions him, asking, "Now should you, O Jew, not have said that you believe in the Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide, and in God Who created and keeps you?" (*Sefer HaKuzari*, First Statement, section 11).

This exchange between the king and the Jewish scholar is striking: when a highly knowledgeable Jew is asked to explain his faith to one who has very little knowledge of Judaism, he relates his belief in God to the experience of the Exodus from Egypt, rather than to the creation of the world. Why does he do so? After all, what could be more awe-inspiring than the contemplation of the creation of the world?

In truth, the response of the Jewish scholar to the king is a reflection of the Bible itself. The Exodus from Egypt is mentioned more than 120 times in the *Tanakh*, and on numerous occasions it is cited as the basis for the Israelite faith in God. The question we must ask then is this: why is the Exodus from Egypt the central theological experience of the nation of Israel? Why does this experience define our relationship with God?

APPROACHES OF MEDIEVAL SCHOLARS

An appropriate place to begin our exploration of this issue is the text of the Ten Commandments, which represents the eternal covenant between God and the nation of Israel. God's opening statement at this moment of revelation is, "I am the Lord your God *Who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*" (Ex. 20:2, Deut. 5:6).

In this context, many commentators ask the same question posed by the king of the Khazars to the Jewish scholar: why does God present His credentials as the God who took Israel out of Egypt, rather than as the God who created heaven, earth, and all beings? Let us consider how philosophers and exegetes have dealt with this question over the millennia.

One approach is reflected in *Sefer HaKuzari* in the context of the very exchange between the king and the Jewish scholar that we quoted earlier. The scholar declares:

When God spoke to the nation of Israel assembled [at Mount Sinai], He said, "I

am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." but did not say, "I am the Creator of the world and your Creator." I responded to you similarly, [king] of the Khazars, when you asked me about my creed. I informed you that that which obligates me and the nation of Israel to God first became clear through personal experience and afterwards was transmitted through uninterrupted tradition which is similar to personal experience (*Sefer HaKuzari*, First Statement, section 21).

The Jewish scholar aptly concludes that human belief emanates from *personal experience*. Because the people of Israel witnessed the Exodus from Egypt with their own eyes, rather than learning of it as a matter of historical discourse, it naturally established the basis for their faith in God.

Nahmanides, the great thirteenth-century Talmudist and biblical commentator, also questions why God introduces Himself at the Sinai revelation as the God of the Exodus, rather than the God of creation. Nahmanides offers an alternative approach:

The Exodus is also evidence for the creation of the world, for assuming the eternity of the universe, [i.e., that God did not create the world from nothing] it would follow that nothing could be changed from its nature (Nahmanides on Ex. 20:1).

In the Middle Ages, many philosophers rejected the rabbinic idea that God created the world *ex nihilo* (from nothing) in favor of the idea that the universe is eternal. Some adopted the Platonic approach that matter is eternal and that the role of God in creation was to give form to unformed matter. Others insisted on the Aristotelian idea that both matter and form are eternal and that God's role as Creator was to set the world in motion. Nahmanides rejected any theory of the eternity of the universe—whether of matter or form—and adopted the classical rabbinic approach that God created the world from nothing. To Nahmanides, the miracles preceding and during the Exodus, in which God's mastery over nature was demonstrated, conclusively disproved the theories of the eternity of matter and form and established that of creation *ex nihilo* by God. For if God did not create nature, Nahmanides argued, God could not change nature as He did in the process of the redemption of Israel from Egypt.

To Nahmanides, then, there is no

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reason to question why God identifies Himself as the God who took Israel out of Egypt, rather than as the God who created the world. For *both creation and the Exodus are equivalent expressions of the same idea – that God is Creator and Master of the Universe.*

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, the twelfth-century Spanish exegete and Hebraist, offers yet another reason for God's identification as the God of the Exodus at the opening of the Ten Commandments. If God introduced Himself as the God of creation, the Israelites might object as follows:

Why are we obligated to keep the commandments of God more than other human beings? After all, there is one Creator for all of us...[The answer is]...we were slaves to Pharaoh and God acted toward us with great goodness. Therefore we are obligated to keep all that God commands us (Ibn Ezra on Ex. 20:1).

The Sinai covenant codifies the *special and exclusive* relationship between God and Israel. God created all of humanity, but Divine salvation from Egyptian bondage is the unique experience of the nation of Israel. God states at the outset of the Sinai revelation that He is the God of the Exodus for this represents the basis for Israel's unique obligation to keep the numerous commandments of the Torah.

A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

Building on the analyses of our medieval commentators, I would like to suggest a more contemporary perspective on the Exodus from Egypt as the central theological experience of the nation of Israel. In so doing, I draw on the thought of the twentieth-century Talmudist and seminal Jewish thinker, Rabbi Joseph D. Soloveitchik, on the qualitative nature of a human being's relationship with God.

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Soloveitchik constructs a paradigm to illustrate the ways in which a human being relates to God¹. The two differing accounts of the creation of humanity in the first two chapters of Genesis, he proposes, metaphorically reflect two distinct aspects of a human being's relationship with God.

On the one hand, a human being strives to emulate God's creativity and mastery over the universe. And so, the first human being in the story of creation in Genesis 1 – called by Rabbi Soloveitchik "Adam the first" – is an ambitious creature who seeks to emulate God by gaining control over nature:

There is no doubt that the term "image of God" in the first account [of creation] refers to man's inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Man's likeness to God expresses itself in man's striving and ability to become a creator...God in imparting blessing to Adam the first and giving him the mandate to subdue nature, directed Adam's attention to the functional and practical aspects of his intellect through which man is able to gain control of nature (pp. 12-13).

On the other hand, a human being wants to feel an emotional closeness to God because it is God Who gives us life. This is reflected in the story of the Garden of Eden in the second chapter of Genesis in which the first human being seeks to *understand* the world, rather than to *control* it, and to establish an intimate relationship with God.

In a word, Adam the second [in the Garden of Eden story] explores not the scientific abstract universe but the irresistibly fascinating qualitative world where he establishes an intimate relation with God. The biblical metaphor referring to God breathing life into Adam alludes to the actual preoccupation of the latter with God, to his genuine living experience (p. 23).

By extension of Rabbi Soloveitchik's paradigm, I would suggest that the creation of the world and the Exodus from Egypt are the biblical events that embody the two different aspects of a human being's relationship with God. When we think of God who created the world, we are filled with awe and want to emulate God's greatness. But when we think of God who saved us from Egyptian bondage, we feel a deep and close bond to God – God was with us in our time of need. Like a child to a parent, human beings look to God for a relationship that is not only one of creation but also one of interaction.

These two aspects of a human being's relationship with God are echoed in another section of the Ten Commandments as well. Two different rationales are given for the commandment to keep the Sabbath in the accounts of the revelation at Sinai in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. In Exodus 20 we are commanded to keep the Sabbath in order to emulate God's activity at the time of creation. Because God rested on the seventh day, we must cease creative work on the Sabbath as well: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy... for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth... And rested on the seventh day" (Ex. 20: 8, 11).

In Deuteronomy, however, we are
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The Shavuot Ketubah

Before the Torah reading on the first day of Shavuot, there is a custom in many Sephardic communities to read a special *ketubah* that marks the symbolic betrothal of God and Israel. Different versions of the text are based on the *tenai'im* (betrothal) document and the standard *ketubah*. These Shavuot *ketubot* display a remarkable melding of daring mystical expression of the bond between God and Israel and precise contractual terminology. All are dated 6 Sivan 2448 (the year the Torah is traditionally said to have been given) and the place of the wedding is Mount Sinai. The heavens and the earth are recorded as the witnesses.

Some Shavuot *ketubot* describe the symbolic marriage as being between Israel and the Torah. In these versions, God as the bride's father gives the 613 commandments, the Bible, Talmud and other texts as a dowry. These contracts are witnessed by God and Moses.

The most common text is that of Safad mystic, Israel Najara (1550-1625). The bride (Israel) brings as a dowry, "an understanding heart, ears that hearken and eyes that see", and the contract confirms that the bridegroom (God) has given His oath to carry out the agreed upon conditions "in favor of His people."



KETUBAH FOR SHAVUOT.
Probably Tetuan, Morocco.
First Half of 19th Century.

Courtesy of the Library of
the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Mount Sinai

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commanded to keep the Sabbath for a different reason: “Keep the Sabbath day...and remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out from there” (Deut. 5: 12, 15). We rest on Sabbath because God took us out of a place where we could not rest and He then restored our freedom so that we could rest again. Keeping the Sabbath is not only about emulating God but also about remembering that which God did for us.

There is an additional nuance in the articulation of the commandment to keep the Sabbath in Deuteronomy that is absent from the Exodus version: “On [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work...so that your male and female servants may rest as well” (Deut. 5:14). The motivation for the commandment to keep the Sabbath in Deuteronomy is in large measure a humanitarian one. The memory of Israelite servitude in Egypt is intended to foster empathy for the need of fellow human beings to

rest. This adds a whole new dimension to our understanding of the Exodus from Egypt as the central theological experience of the nation of Israel. The Exodus experience teaches us not only that God took care of us but also that by God’s example we must take care of others.

The centrality of this lesson from the Israelite experience in Egypt is manifested in the Torah’s use of it as the motivation for observing many humanitarian commandments. Perhaps the most provocative example is the injunction against oppression of the stranger: “Do not oppress a stranger, for you *know the soul of the stranger*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 23:9).

CONCLUSION: EXODUS AS THE CORE OF THE SINAI COVENANT

Why is the Exodus from Egypt the central theological experience of the nation of Israel? Why does this experience define our relationship with God?

The Exodus from Egypt adds a dimension to our relationship with God that enables us not only to *emulate* God but also to feel an *intimate*

connection to God. Not only did God create us but God continually cared for us. At Mount Sinai, God asks the nation of Israel to willingly enter into a covenantal bond – as human beings we tend to make commitments to those who are with us in times of stress and defeat, to those with whom we feel a deep existential connection. It is clear then why God identifies Himself as the God who redeemed Israel from Egypt in the introduction to the Ten Commandments. The redemption from Egypt encompasses not only the idea that God is our Creator in control of our natural existence but also that God cares for us always and similarly we must care for each other.

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1 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Jason Aronson Publishers, Northvale, 1997.