

The Tiny Chosen People

Parashat Va'etchanan, Deuteronomy, Chapters 3-7 | August 11, 2022

“The Photograph,” an essay published in the journal *Azure* by Yossi Klein Halevi, describes how the most famous image in modern Jewish history came into being:

Sometime around 10:15 on the morning of June 7, 1967, the first reservist paratroopers of Brigade 55 broke through the Lion's Gate leading into the Old City of Jerusalem and reached the narrow enclave of the Western Wall. Having just fought a fierce two-day battle in the streets of east Jerusalem, they grieved for lost friends, and grieved as well for their own lost innocence in what for many was their first experience of combat. They leaned against the Wall, some in exhaustion, some in prayer. Several wept, instinctively connecting to the Wall's tradition of mourning the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty—precisely at the moment when Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem had been restored.

Several hours later, Yitzhak Yifat, a twenty-four-year-old reservist about to begin medical school, reached the Wall. As part of the brigade's 66th Battalion, he and his friends had fought in the Six Day War's toughest battle: Intimate combat against elite Jordanian Legionnaires in the trenches of Ammunition Hill, on the road to Mount Scopus. Something in their faces—perhaps a combination of exhaustion and uplift—caught the eye of news photographer David Rubinger. He lay on the ground and photographed the paratroopers, who appeared, in the subsequent photograph, almost

statuesque. Though the newspaper captions claimed the paratroopers were gazing up at the Wall, they were in fact standing with their backs to it, looking off into the distance, at an object or a scene beyond the photograph's reach.

Yifat is the centerpoint of the photograph, and not only because he is physically positioned there. Among his friends, only Yifat's face is truly memorable; the faces around him seem to blur into his. Partly that is because he alone has removed his helmet, revealing the civilian beneath the soldier. Yifat also allows himself to appear vulnerable: While the men around him are tight-lipped, suppressing emotion, his mouth is open, as if trying to express the ineffable.

Halevi goes on to describe his own attempt to fully understand why this photograph has endured, and why it is the most recognizable image in Israeli history. He recounts how he met with Rubinger, the man who took the photo, and with Yitzhak Yifat, the man who stands at the center of the image. Ultimately, Halevi argues that this photograph inspires because it somehow captures the miracle that is a tiny people that incredibly endures, impacting the earth in ways far beyond its size and revealing the God who dwells at the heart of history itself. The picture is therefore worth pondering again, for this miracle is at the heart of our Torah reading as well.

In Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 of Deuteronomy, Moses focuses on the substance of Jewish chosenness: the giving of the Torah, the revelation at Sinai, the obligation to obey the commandments and to preserve them. We encounter the passage known as the “*Shema*,” and the

commandments known today as *mezuzah* and *tefillin*. But in several sentences, Moses momentarily focuses on the reason for Israel's chosenness. He says:

The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all peoples.

But rather because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he swore unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:7-8)

Here then is why Israel was chosen: because of God's unique love for his people. What is the source of the Almighty's love? Moses here does not say, but earlier in Deuteronomy, he explains that it is founded upon God's original love for Abraham:

Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he made thee to see his great fire; and thou didst hear his words out of the midst of the fire.

And because he loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 4:36-37)

If the Jews are chosen to serve for all eternity as a light unto the nations and as a sign of God's hand in history, it is because God, in the words of the theologian Michael Wyschogrod,

sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved.

This aspect of Moses' message in Deuteronomy is quite clear, but there is another clause in the very same statement with which we began that ought to strike us as particularly interesting. Not because of your size, Moses says to Israel, did God choose you, for you are the fewest of all peoples. But just a bit earlier in Deu-

teronomy, Moses seems to celebrate the size of Israel, saying that:

The Lord your God hath multiplied you, and behold you are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude. (Deuteronomy 1:10)

Which is it? Can one be struck by the size of Israel if it is also incredibly small when compared to the other nations of the earth? The commentators attempt to explain this, often asserting that one of these two sentences is less than literal. But perhaps both verses can be taken in tandem. Moses can marvel at Israel's size even if Israel is relatively small. Consider: Abraham lived not so many generations before, and Pharaoh made every attempt to destroy Israel; to subdue them; to murder Israel's male children; and yet Pharaoh failed, and 40 years after the Exodus, Moses stands before hundreds of thousands of his brethren. How can he not marvel at their size and at their endurance?

This is what Moses seems to say again in Deuteronomy 10:22:

Thy fathers went down into Egypt with seventy persons; and now the Lord thy God hath made thee as the stars of heaven in multitude.

Given when Abraham and Jacob lived, and given the tyranny of Pharaoh, the fact that the Israelites even comprised a significant nation is a striking miracle. At the same time, Israel, relative to the mighty nations of Moses' age, was still small. In speaking of chosenness, Moses is emphasizing that biblical Israel was not chosen because of its size, but rather because of God's love for Israel. That such a seemingly tiny people can serve as the Almighty's anchor in his providential plan for history also marks a miracle. As Milton Himmelfarb once said:

Each Jew knows how thoroughly ordinary he is; yet taken together we seem caught up in things great and inexplicable...The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Yet we remain bigger than our numbers. Big things seem to happen around us and

to us.”

Thus, perhaps both descriptions of Israel by Moses have relevance to our time and communicate to us profound truth today. On the one hand, the Jews comprise a relatively small people. On the other hand, given the vicissitudes of history, the existence of every Jew is a miracle, and therefore the millions of Jews that exist today embody millions of miracles. Here I cite the southern Christian writer Walker Percy, who once wrote:

Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite, even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people?

When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable. What are they doing here? But it is even more remarkable to wonder, if there are Jews here, why are there not Hittites here?

Where are the Hittites? Show me one Hittite in New York City.

Jewish covenantal continuity, our endurance from Abraham until today, cannot be naturally explained. It defies all logic. To be a Jew, loyally linked to Abraham, is to be a living, walking miracle.

Yet even Jews themselves do not always focus on the fascinating fact that is the miracle of the Jewish people. There are, however, times when, even for Jews who might have doubted the miraculous nature of the Jewish story, a flash of insight occurs. It is with this perspective that we can understand why for all the famous photographs of statesmen in Israel's history, the most famous image of all is that of three simple soldiers standing, seemingly staring up, at the newly liberated Temple Mount.

The picture of the paratroopers is constantly compared to an American image: Joe Rosenthal's capturing of the moment that American Marines hoist-

ed the stars and stripes aloft at Iwo Jima. In fact, however, as I noted in an article in *Commentary*, the two images are very different. The Iwo Jima photo inspires us because of the action that it illustrates: young men working in unison to plant a flag—a tribute, to all the service of the Marine soldiers and sailors who served in action. In Rubinger's photo, however, the emphasis is the exact opposite. What is stressed is not action, but sudden inaction. After achieving the most famous Jewish military victory in 2,000 years, the soldiers stand still. They are suddenly, to use Himmelfab's phrase, “caught up in things great and inexplicable.”

This cuts to the heart of the magic of the image. As Yossi Klein Halevi writes, Rubinger's image is beloved in part because:

of the humility it conveys: At their moment of triumph, the conquerors are themselves conquered. The paratroopers, epitome of Zionism's “new Jews,” stand in gratitude before the Jewish past, suddenly realizing that they owe their existence to its persistence and longing. Rubinger's photograph catches a precise historical moment: The return of the last two thousand years of Jewish history to the Zionist story. Many of the paratroopers identified themselves as Israelis first, Jews only a distant second; some weren't quite sure whether they identified as Jews at all. And yet it is at the Wall of all places, symbol of the quietism of exile, where secular Israelis become reconciled with their Jewishness. As one paratrooper put it, “At the Wall I discovered that I'm a Jew.”

Halevi further writes that:

Perhaps the photograph continues to endure because it caught an even more profound moment in the story of Zionism—the return not only of Jewish identity but of the Jewish God. Judaism posited a daring idea: That God's power and goodness would be revealed not only in the majesty of nature but in

the messiness of history—and even more improbably, in Jewish history. The meaning of Jewish history, then, is that history has meaning.

This is the miracle of the Jewish people; a tiny people that endured all persecutions from the exodus to today; a tiny people whose existence is today the greatest argument for God. Jews themselves do not always remember this. Halevi describes how living in Jerusalem, he often gets caught up in the annoyances of everyday life, but then he writes:

I suddenly remember where I am. I feel myself, then, like one of those barefoot and wide-eyed Ethiopian immigrants, silently stepping off the plane at Ben-Gurion Airport into Zion. I recall, too, my father's wonder at the Wall, whose fragile and improbable endurance he saw as a metaphor for the Jewish people. Like him, I ask myself what it is about this strange little people that continually finds itself at the center of international attention, repeatedly on the front lines against totalitarian forces of evil—Nazism, Soviet Communism, now jihadism—all of which marked the Jews as their primary obstacle to achieving world domination. At those moments, I feel gratitude for having found my place in this story.

To ponder the incredible endurance of the Jewish people is to ponder a mystery. To ponder this tiny people whose impact is so far beyond its numbers, is to ponder a miracle. It calls us to gratitude and to find our own place in this story.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does the universal God's unique love for the Jewish people, along with the fact that the Jewish people play a central role in God's plan for the whole world, teach us about Jewish theology's balance between universalism and particularism?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik concludes by noting the miraculous nature of everyday life in the Holy Land. How can those of us who live in the Diaspora also seek to imbue our regular lives with a greater sense of the miracle that is Jewish endurance?

meirsoloveichik.com

This pamphlet may contain Divrei Torah and may contain Sheimot - Please dispose of accordingly