

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Shemot, Exodus, Chapters 1-6 | January 6, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Moses, Freud, and Herzl in Vienna

In Vienna, at 19 Bergenstrasse, sits the Freud Museum, the former home of Sigmund Freud. A bit down the street, at 6 Bergenstrasse, sits the house where Theodor Herzl once lived. According to Google Maps, it is a two-minute stroll from one to the other. The two most famous Jews in the history of Vienna were neighbors, lived right next to each other, and presumably passed each other often in the street. And yet so far as we know, they did not meet in person.

To ponder these two Viennese neighbors is to realize the profound similarities between them, as well as their differences. Both, in their youth, represented the trend of Jewish abandonment of tradition and ritual in Western Europe; both attended the University of Vienna and launched themselves upon successful careers. And both publicized, at around the same time, the unique ideas that defined their lives, and on which their fame would be founded. And in very different ways, the respective reaction of each to his own Jewishness dominated the last years of each one's life. Herzl, of course, devoted the end of his short life to the Zionist cause. Meanwhile, Freud, having fled from Vienna in the wake of the *Anschluss*, would publish in London before he died the shocking work *Moses and Monotheism*, in which he would insist that much of what Judaism claimed about its most famous figure was a lie.

This contrast between Herzl and Freud in Vienna is worth rediscovering today, as we begin the second book of the *Tanakh*, when the story of Moses begins. Reading the text through the lens of the Viennese Jewish experience, and the biographies of Herzl and Freud, will reveal deeply relevant teachings about Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and the remarkable story of our people.

In English, we refer to the second book of the Bible by the political title "Exodus," but in Jewish parlance it is known as "*Shemot*," "Names," after its opening verse, "And these are the names of the children of Israel that were coming to Egypt."

It is seemingly strange that the Bible, which already described the coming to Egypt of Jacob's family in Genesis, would immediately describe it again, and in the present tense. But for Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, that is precisely the point: even after the children of Israel sojourned for centuries in Egypt, they were still seen by Egyptians as outsiders, recent arrivals:



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Even though the children of Israel came many years earlier, Egypt still viewed them as strangers. This belief in the otherness of the Jew repeats itself through history.

The perceived “otherness” of Israel in Exodus inspires a new Pharaoh, who “knew not Joseph,” to enslave Israel, and also to engage in the infanticide of Israelite babies. Thus does the first major persecution in our history begin.

With this in mind, we turn to the Western Europe of the late 19th century. There, Jewish success in society was made manifest, but the Jews were seen as “others.” As the historian Robert Wistrich tells us, the year 1848 heralded an era of emancipation for the Jews of the city; they sought, much as Jews did in America, to advance themselves as much as possible through education. The response to this enormous influx of Jews into the academic and professional life of Vienna, Wistrich writes, was the rise of Jew-hate:

Though Vienna had emerged as the largest Jewish city in the Austrian half of the empire and as a dynamic, creative center of Jewish life, the success story had already been somewhat tarnished by the strength of political anti-Semitism in the city since the 1880s. The mass exodus to Vienna had opened up a new world of secular modernity and unprecedented opportunities to thousands of Jews, but in its wake it also brought new problems of identity and the ominous rise of a raucous mass politics, one of whose primary vehicles was Judeophobia.

It was in just such a Vienna that both Freud and Herzl were raised—experiencing the best of Austrian culture, but ultimately making very different choices about their respective relationships with the Jewish people. We keep this in mind as we now study the story of Moses, which is also a tale of assimilation and discovered identity.

The details are well known. A Hebrew family of the tribe of Levi has a son; seeking to save him from the Pharaonic decree, the mother places her child in a basket in the Nile. There he is saved by a daughter of Pharaoh, who bestows a striking name upon the baby:

And she named him *Moshe*, for she said, I have drawn him (*m'shitihu*) out of the water. (Exodus 2:10)

The simple understanding is that the appellation is a Hebrew pun; but countless commentators find this profoundly puzzling. Why would an Egyptian princess ascribe to her son a name bearing a Hebrew play on words?

It is therefore more likely, as Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin argues, that the name was not intended by its bestower as a pun; Moses, in Egyptian, is essentially the word for “son.” For Rabbi Berlin, Pharaoh’s daughter is exclaiming, “I have drawn him from the water; I have saved his life, therefore he is now my son.” Moses, in other words, is an Egyptian name. This is even more striking when we consider the fact that presumably, Moses’ Israelite parents bestowed a Hebrew name upon their child at his birth; indeed, the Midrash contains all sorts of suggestions as to what that name was. But never, not once, are those names used in the Torah. What this means



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is that Moses knew that he was a Hebrew, but his very name bespoke his assimilation into Egyptian society.

Yet Moses knows that his brethren suffer, and this draws him to them:

And he went out to his **brothers**, and saw their labors, and he saw an Egyptian man, striking a Hebrew from among his **brothers**. (Exodus 2:11)

For Abraham Ibn Ezra, the emphasis on brotherhood is meant to mark the transformation of Moses. When he first set out to study the slaves, he may have seen the Egyptian taskmasters as his brothers, but then, in the suffering of Israel, he finds his own flesh and blood. In other words, Moses feels forced to choose between seeing himself as an Egyptian and seeing himself as a Hebrew. It is the suffering of his brethren that summons, within Moses, a sudden embrace of his own Israelite identity. Winston Churchill, in his incredible 1931 essay on Moses, describes Moses' encounter with the enslavement of his fellow Hebrews:

He sees them the drudge of Egypt, consuming their strong life and seed in the upholding of its grandeur, and even grudging the pittance which they earn.

He sees them treated as a helot class; they, the free children of

the wilderness who came as honored guests and had worked every hour of their passage! Upon these general impressions he sees an Egyptian beating an Israelite; no doubt a common spectacle, an episode coming to be accepted as part of the daily social routine. But he has no doubts; not for a moment does he hesitate. He knows which side he is on. . . . The call of blood surges in him. He slays the Egyptian, amid the loud and continuing applause of the insurgents of the ages.

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In this one act, to speak anachronistically, he becomes a Jew. It is in *feeling* the suffering of his brethren that Moses is inspired to find his own true identity.

It is striking, therefore, to ponder the way in which Herzl embraced his own Jewishness. As Rick Richman has noted, the signal inspiration for Herzl's transformation seems to have been the political rise of Vienna's mayor Karl Lueger, who placed anti-Semitic rhetoric at the very center of his platform. Lueger, who transformed Vienna into a modern city, was the role model of a man who studied in Vienna during Lueger's tenure: Adolf Hitler, who would give Lueger a special mention in *Mein Kampf*.

The rise of Lueger struck Herzl profoundly. In his diary, he describes being present at an election in Vienna when Lueger appeared:

Municipal elections in Vienna took place the day before Rosh Hashanah eve. The anti-Semites won all the mandates. The mood among the Jews is desperate. The propaganda against them has whipped up a lot of hatred among the Christians. . . . One sees the look of hatred everywhere, even without the



paranoid fear that makes one go around seeking eye contact. On election day I was in Leopoldstadt outside the polling place, to take a closer look at all the hate and anger. Toward evening I went to the Landstrasse district. In front of the polling place a silent tense crowd. Suddenly Dr. Lueger stepped out into the square. Wild cheers, women waving white kerchiefs from the windows. The police held the crowd back. Next to me, someone said, with tender warmth but in a quiet voice: this is our *Führer*. More actually than any declamations and outbursts, it was this phrase that proved to me how deeply anti-Semitism is entrenched in the hearts of these people.

At this moment—as the Jews who had been in Europe for so many centuries were again targeted as an “other”—Herzl felt a surge of brotherly feeling and responsibility for his people. It is this experience, as Rick Richman notes, that drove Herzl to compose *The Jewish State*, and it is toward the beginning of that pamphlet that Herzl stated the central sentence of his work:

We are a people: one people.

It is connection to the Jewish people, a deep sense of fellowship with other Jews and a responsibility for them, that drives Jewish leadership.

Moses, in Egypt, begins his path toward becoming the greatest Jew in history by embracing his belonging to the people of Israel; but, perhaps, initially, only for a moment. The next day Hebrew slaves make clear that they do not appreciate his heroism, and, it appears, it is because of these Hebrews that Moses’ treason against Pharaoh is found out. Moses flees to the desert, marries a Midianite, and lives for many decades as a shepherd. Suddenly, as an octogenarian, he encounters God, Who speaks from within a burning bush. The Almighty informs Moses that he would be the one who would lead Israel out of Egypt. Moses haltingly replies:

Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh? (Exodus 3:11)

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments, the statement is not only about humility but also about identity. Moses is unsure at this moment who he truly is:

[W]hen Moses asks, “Who am I?” it is not just that he feels himself unworthy. He feels himself uninvolved. He may have been Jewish by birth, but he had not suffered the fate of his people. He had not grown up as a Jew. He had not lived among Jews. He had good reason to doubt that the Israelites would even recognize him as one of them. How, then, could he become their leader?

But of course, Moses would emerge as Israel’s leader—and become the greatest Israelite of all time. And as Rabbi Sacks further reflected, it is Moses’ emergence from assimilation to Israelite identity that Freud himself could not understand. Thus it was that, as World War II descended, Freud published *Moses and Monotheism*, wherein he noted how seemingly similar Moses’ origin story might appear to those ascribed to other ancient heroes such as Sargon. These stories feature children in terrible danger, a wondrous salvation, the separation of a child from his parents, and the eventual embrace by the child of his original identity. But the very formulaic nature of the usual tale highlights, as Freud observes, the uniqueness of Moses’ story. As Rabbi Sacks puts it:



At this point . . . Freud notes that in one respect the story of Moses isn't like the others at all. In fact, it's the opposite. In the conventional story the hero's adoptive parents are humble, ordinary people. Eventually he discovers that he is actually of royal blood. . . . In the Moses story, the reverse is the case. It is his adoptive family that is royal. . . . His true identity, he discovers, is that he belongs, by birth, to a nation of slaves.

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Moses, in stark contrast to mythical heroes, is adopted by royalty, and embraces his belonging to an enslaved people. Freud was so struck by this difference that he insisted that in fact Moses was actually Egyptian, and had led Israel from bondage only to be murdered by the Israelites he led. Judaism,

according to Freud, was a result of the guilt Israel felt after this event. Of course, Freud's thesis is perverse, made all the more repugnant by the fact that it was published as Jews were suffering so terribly around the world. But as Rabbi Sacks notes, there is also a larger lesson that the father of psychoanalysis missed:

What Freud failed to realize is that the story of Moses is not a myth but an anti-myth. It takes a myth and turns it upside down. True royalty—the Bible suggests—is the opposite of our conventional wisdom. It isn't privilege and wealth, splendor and palaces. It's moral courage. Moses, in discovering that he is the child of slaves, finds greatness. Had Moses been an Egyptian prince, he would have been eminently forgettable. Only by being true to his people and to God did he become a hero.

This is eloquent, and insightful. But I would add that there is a deeper irony here that Rabbi Sacks does not note, but which, given our own subject, is worth pointing out. Freud doubted that an Israelite would grow up a member of the elite and then decide to identify with the enslaved, the poor, and downtrodden. But that, of course, is exactly what happened to Freud's coreligionist who lived several minutes away. Herzl grew up as part of European society and then decided to devote his life to his persecuted brethren. Herzl, of course, was not Moses—no one is—but he did make the journey from assimilation to embracing his bond with the persecuted members of his people. The fact that such an unlikely event occurred, that this reversal happened, is a hint to us of the truth that the Torah sought to teach to us from the beginning of Moses' story: that the tale of the Jewish people is often a reversal of expectations, a miracle that reason cannot explain.

Freud did not understand this, and dismissed Herzl's dream of a Jewish state in the Holy Land as a false hope. In a fascinating discussion on the blog of Israel's National Library, Ro Oranim describes how in 1930, following the Arab riots in the Holy Land in 1929, the head of Keren Hayesod (an organization raising funds for the Jews of Palestine) in Vienna asked the city's most famous Jew publicly to endorse its *aliyah* campaign. Freud replied:

I cannot do as you wish. Whoever wants to influence the masses must give them something rousing and inflammatory and my sober judgment of Zionism does not permit this. . . . It would have seemed more sensible to me to establish a Jewish homeland on a less historically burdened land.



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Freud thought that Herzl's dream could not become reality. But become reality it did. And we must seek to understand why. Herzl himself had originally sought, in Jewish statehood, the normalization of the Jews, which he thought would end anti-Semitism. But when Moses asks how someone like himself could lead Israel from bondage, the Almighty answers from the midst of the bush that burned atop Sinai:

For I will be with you, and this will be the sign that I have sent you: When you have taken the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain. (Exodus 3:12)

It is the providential mission of the Jews that is reflected in its unlikely endurance and its miraculous story; and this mission lies at the heart of the bond connecting us all. Herzl himself seemed to grow more aware of this as his own mission continued.

In an interesting series of lectures on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, the distinguished historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi noted that in 1934, around the time that Freud began to work on this book, an article had been published attacking Freud by his former disciple Carl Jung. Jung had been arguing that each nation had a collective subconscious and that Freud "did not understand the Germanic psyche." Yerushalmi seems to suggest that this may have inspired Freud's own journey to examine what he saw as the Jewish subconscious.

That journey, perhaps, brought us the awful thesis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. In truth, however, Jews do tend to speak of an inner aspect that connects us all; it is not psychological or neurological, but a metaphysical bond with one another. It lives not in the form of Freudian repressed guilt, but as something positive, which can make itself known when it is least expected. In the end, that is why Herzl's vision succeeded; because he himself suddenly found within him this Jewish connection, leading him to inspire so many among downtrodden Jewry.

As much as we might wish it otherwise, the story of the Jews of Vienna is very relevant today. Rabbi Sacks, in a lecture on anti-Semitism, described the state of Europe as he saw it:

We are not today back in the 1930s. But we are coming close to 1879, when Wilhelm Marr founded the League of Anti-Semites in Germany; to 1886 when Edouard Drumont published *La France Juive*; and 1897 when Karl Lueger became mayor of Vienna. These were key moments in the spread of anti-Semitism, and all we have to do today is to remember that what was said then about Jews is being said today about the Jewish state.

Meanwhile, in our current moment, there are Jews who, encountering the surge of anti-Semitism, are asking themselves the age-old question first uttered by Moses: who am I? Some are suddenly realizing their connection to their people. The metaphysical bond joining us as Jews, and the strength and resilience of our people, can be felt right now; and as we begin to study the Exodus story, we realize how utterly wondrous our tale is, and we hope that the miraculous nature of Jewish history will make itself manifest again very soon.



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Additional Resources

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on *Shemot*, "Who Am I?" January 2012. [Click here to read.](#)

Winston Churchill on Moses, "Moses: The Leader of a People," November 8, 1931. [Click here to read.](#)

