

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy, Chapters 26-29 | September 21, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

The God of Salvation and Jewish History

A striking and stirring article from some years ago describes Jews who, during World War II, sought and strove to observe and celebrate Passover during the direst of circumstances. Here is one example from the article, which appeared in the *New York Times*.

A few weeks ago, Hadassa Carlebach discussed the work of her activist father, Rabbi Zalman Schneerson, during the war, when his last name was spelled Chneerson. The rabbi, who was born in Russia and moved to France in 1935, was responsible for hiding many Jews, mostly children whose parents had been sent to the death camps. In 1944, with help from the French Resistance, he found hiding places for about 60 people in farmhouses in the countryside near Grenoble. For Passover, they wanted to find a way to make matzo.

“We had a little wheat, which we milled into flour for Passover,” said Mrs. Carlebach, 80, who now lives in Brooklyn. The local farmers baked in a communal oven.

“It was too dangerous for us to go there during the day, so in the middle of the night we went in, burned the oven to kosher it, and baked the matzo in a hurry, while the dogs were barking,” she said.

“I was so scared, but we had one matzo per person for Pesach with the wine that we made ourselves from raisins. Besides the danger, we celebrated with the sincere hope that we were going to be liberated.”

We are thus presented with what may seem a jarring juxtaposition: Jews celebrating the Festival of Freedom when they themselves are persecuted, exiled, and in great fear for their lives—Jews commemorating God’s salvation when they themselves, at the moment, are desperate for anything approximating salvation. And in truth, our own *parashah* offers its own scriptural joining of celebrating salvation and description of exile; and while this juxtaposition may seem odd, in its own way it tells a great deal about Jewish faith, and Jewish history.

The *parashah* begins with the recitation given by an Israelite when “*bikkurim*,” “first fruits,” were brought as a gift to the Temple priesthood. The entire early history of Israel is succinctly summarized by the pilgrim father; now,

many of these verses have made their way into the Haggadah, so that they have become the very medium by which Passover is marked, commemorated, and celebrated:

And you shall make response before the Lord your God, A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs, and wonders. And he brought us into this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deuteronomy 26:5–9)

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would be experienced by the people of Israel during their exile. While a similar *tokhabah* appears in Leviticus, the one in Deuteronomy is far longer. Verses about the exile describe terrors that would come:

And among these nations you shall find no ease, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot. . . . Your life shall hang in doubt before you; night and day you shall be in dread, and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, Would it were evening! and at evening you shall say, Would it were morning! because of the dread which your heart shall fear, and the sights which your eyes shall see. (Deuteronomy 28:65–67)

How, emotionally, does the opening of the *parashah* pair with its closing? How do Jews celebrate the salvation of the past while knowing the horrors in our history? The answer lies in the fact that the eternity of the Jewish people, and its covenant with God, is assured; even as the empires that persecute God's people end up on the ash heap of history, one ancient people not only endures, but is told of its ultimate restoration. So Deuteronomy describes in the next *parashah*:

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will fetch you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, that you may possess it; and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. (Deuteronomy 30:4–5)

And, following the rebuke in Leviticus:

Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. . . . Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them, so as to destroy them utterly, and break my covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sake remember the covenant



with their forefathers, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 26:42–45)

It is these promises, joined to the way we celebrate salvational events of the past, keeping them ever present, that have defined the Jewish relationship with God, even in the midst of the most awful experiences of exile. If anyone eloquently and excellently pondered this point, it was the medieval Spanish poet and philosopher Rabbi Judah Halevi, whose work *The Kuzari* opens with a Gentile king who surveys the world's religions, looking for theological truth; he interviews a Christian, a Muslim, and a philosopher. Still unsatisfied, Halevi writes, the king

then invited a Jewish Rabbi, and asked him about his belief. The Rabbi replied: I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles . . .

The king is unimpressed, for he had expected the rabbi to speak of God's universal power, not His connection to a particular people or His salvation of the children of Abraham. And so he coldly replies:

I had not intended to ask any Jew, because I am aware of their reduced condition and narrow-minded views, as their misery left them nothing commendable. Now shouldst thou, O Jew, not have said that thou believest in the Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide, and in Him who created and keeps thee, and such attributes which serve as evidence for every believer, and for the sake of which He pursues justice in order to resemble the Creator in His wisdom and justice?

To this, the rabbi readily replies that Judaism does indeed proclaim a universal truth about a God Who created the world, Who made man in His image, Who communicates a moral code to all humanity. But the universal God, the rabbi argued, is known best through the particular, and that particular is the story of the Chosen People, and the miracle that is its history. The rabbi replies,

In this way I answered thy first question. In the same strain spoke Moses to Pharaoh, when he told him: 'The God of the Hebrews sent me to thee,' viz. the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. . . . He did not say: 'The God of heaven and earth,' nor 'my Creator and thine sent me.' In the same way God commenced His speech to the assembled people of Israel: 'I am the God whom you worship, who has led you out of the land of Egypt,' but He did not say: 'I am the Creator of the world and your Creator.' Now in the same style I spoke to thee, a Prince of the Khazars, when thou didst ask me about my creed.

For Halevi, it is Israel's memory of the Exodus that is *the* argument for the existence of God. My own version of Halevi's interpretation of God's statement at Sinai is this: God is saying to Israel and ultimately the world, "You will find Me in the story of My covenantal people, a story more miraculous than any other. *That* is the source of

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faith. You will know Me above all as the God who took My people out of Egypt, marking it as the people whose history will contain similar surprises.”

That is how God seeks to be known, and it has defined the Jewish description of God. Michael Wyschogrod put it this way:

Revelational acts are saving acts. . . . great events on which the faith of Israel is founded are divine acts of salvation: the election of Abraham, the Exodus, . . . These events, interpreted by the word of God, establish God as a redeeming God and constitute the foundation of Israel's faith in the coming redemption. As God has redeemed us in the past, so will he redeem us in the future.

There is a kind of primitive induction at work here except that it is an induction which ignores contrary instances. . . . There are rabbinically enacted days of mourning which remember non-saving acts in Jewish history. But these cannot be equated with the festivals nor with the Sabbath which celebrates the first saving act of God, the creation of the world. The Fast Day of the 9th of Av is not one of the pillars of Judaism. But Passover, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot* and the Sabbath are such pillars because they teach that the God of Israel is a saving God.

In the end, like Halevi, we know God first and foremost as the God who took us out of Egypt; that is what has sustained us in so many centuries, and it certainly sustains us in the difficult moment in which we find ourselves, when we are now witness, in our age, to the wonder of an ingathering of the Jewish people from around the world. And we can continue to seek inspiration from those in the past who celebrated the Jewish covenant with the God of the Exodus even at the most terrifying of times. The aforementioned article describing the celebration of the Passover seder in dire straits concludes:

But none of this compares with the ingenuity of Pearl Benisch, who lives in Brooklyn. She remembers Passover in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany in the spring of 1945, just days before her liberation.

“We had nothing to eat but watery soup, with bread once a week,” she told me in a very quiet voice. “But I was one of the lucky ones. I was working in a place where we peeled potatoes and turnips. I cut three turnips in narrow rounds, covered them up with a piece of brown paper and hid them in my shoes.

“When we had our Seder in the peeling room with one woman keeping watch for the guards, the other women moaned that there was no matzo. I said, ‘they are here, they are under the cover.’ They opened the brown paper and there were the three round turnip matzos.”

Then, Mrs. Benisch, now in her late 80's, paused and said in a whisper, “Only God can make matzo from turnips.”

We, who are witness to the miracles of our own age, can see those like Mrs. Benisch as our own spiritual beacons, and make her faith in God's enduring covenant our own.



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Additional Resources

Michael Wyschogrod on Judaism's Revelational God, "Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust," *Tradition*, Fall 1977. [Click here to read.](#)

