

The Once and Future Exodus

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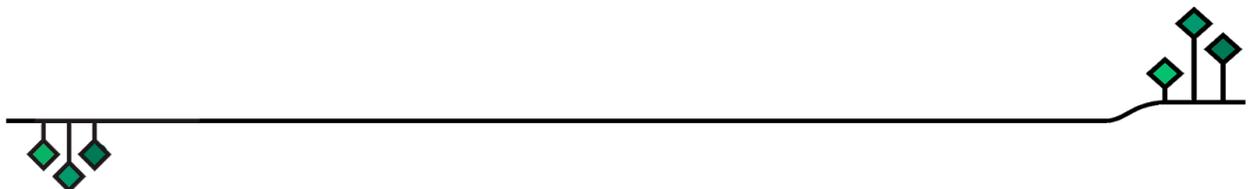
The Seventh Day of Passover, a day of holy convocation, occurs this year on Shabbat. Therefore, the regular Parashat Hashavua Torah reading, Shemini, is postponed to the following week. In its place, we read the Torah chapters describing the actual Exodus from Egypt, the Egyptian chase after the Israelites to recapture and reenslave them, and the climactic splitting of the Reed Sea and destruction of the Egyptian army, including chanting the Song of the Sea.¹

The Exodus from slavery to freedom became the central event of Jewish religion and liturgy. It is celebrated every Passover, reenacted at the annual Seder, and remembered every day of the year.² The Exodus became an “orienting event,” a moment in history held up as a guiding light for the Jewish way of life and ethics, a compass by which to navigate our way through history.³ Some would understand Pesah as a one-time occurrence, unique to the Bible. And some would see the event as an archetype, repeated throughout history, in order to uphold the message of liberation and human value inherent in it.

¹ Exodus 13:7-15:26.

² See Mishnah Berakhot 1:5, also included in the text of our Haggadah.

³ See my essay on Parashat Shemot, “The Exodus as Orienting Event,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/exodus-orienting-event>.



Similarly, interpreters in and out of the tradition have argued whether this event was limited to showing the way for the Jewish people, or if it intended as a sign for all of humanity. If it is a universal signal, this would make the freeing of the Jews a down payment—the first installment of the universal redemption, divinely promised, for the entire world. Over the millennia, different schools of thought in Judaism interpreted the event on this axis, ranging from the narrowest (as a purely Jewish experience), to the most expansive, seeing it as a preview of the final Messianic denouement, where the whole world is turned into a Garden of Eden for all living creatures.

As for this second question, already the prophet Amos makes clear in his vision that the Exodus is not just a Jewish affair. God loves and saves all human beings. Just as God took the Israelites out of Egypt on the way to becoming a covenantal people living in freedom on their own land, so had God brought the Philistines up out of Crete and the Arameans up from Kir in order to realize their destiny (Amos 9:7).⁴ Similarly, in Amos' spirit, I would argue that the Exodus is the initiation—and the sign of the future coming—of the total cosmic plan for universal freedom and human dignity.

On the question of repetition, the prophet Isaiah told of a future Exodus for the Israelites that would be even more splendid than the original liberation. Unlike the original happening, the future event would not be rushed, that is, eating the freedom meal “with haste”, dressed for

⁴ It should be noted that the Philistines and Aram were leading enemy powers against the Kingdom of Judah. Hence, if God loves, chooses, and redeems those people, God surely does the same for all the other peoples in the world. This is confirmed by Amos' comment—in the same verse—that God loves the Israelites just as much as God loves the Ethiopians.



the journey, while hoping to leave at the first indication from Pharaoh that they could go.⁵ Isaiah may be referring to the return, under Persian rulers, from the Babylonian Exile to the land of Israel. However, I read the verse (as does Jewish tradition) as open-ended to the distant future as well.

The Rabbis of the Talmud understood that the future Exodus would be equivalent to the reappearance of the original but would have different characteristics reflecting the unfolding of the covenant of Israel. The Sages believed that just as God self-limited in entering the covenant in biblical times,⁶ God had dramatically self-limited again in renewing the covenant in their time. Rabbinic Judaism is then a second stage of the covenant.

The Rabbis saw five major divine self-limitations in the evolving encounter with God. Through them, the Lord came closer even as God was giving up control and decreasing direct interventions in human history. Each limitation (“*tzimtzum*” in later Kabbalistic terminology) was **designed to give humans a greater role and responsibility in carrying out the covenant:**

- 1) No more revelations from heaven, and no more prophecy— God’s sending a direct instruction to humans (e.g. “Thus saith the Lord”) came to an end after the destruction of the Temple.

⁵ Isaiah’s prophetic vision of a greater Exodus: Isaiah 52:12. The original Passover meal being eaten hastily: Exodus 12:11; the pressure on the Israelites to leave at once: 12:33.

⁶ God, who is all powerful, self-limits to be bound by covenant—that is, to uphold the stability of the laws of nature and not to intervene and bring chaos (such as floods) when humans misbehave. God also binds God’s self not to perfect the world single-handedly, but to hold back and leave an important role for the human partner. The full repair will not take place unless humans do it.



- 2) The age of visible miracles like the splitting of the Reed Sea was over. Henceforth, there would only be hidden miracles in which God operates behind the scenes.
- 3) In the biblical era, God appeared—mostly in protected special environments such as the Temple—with transcendent presence, as an external Force of explosive power. In the Rabbinic era, God presented as Shekhinah, a hidden, more tempered and maternal Presence encountered in all walks of life and the mundane.
- 4) To learn what God wants of us now, human judgement would be the source—Rabbis' interpretations and rulings, based on past revelations. This included that the Rabbis might well disagree on what God wants and such argumentation is a better source of truth. Rabbinic intelligence in applying inherited principles to the present situation was mediated by the intuition and practice of their living communities.
- 5) Human behaviors and policy judgement would be more decisive in the outcome of military conflicts and political issues. This was unlike in the biblical period where, if the Israelites were on God's side (and not betraying the Torah with idol worship or sinful behavior), then God would assure them of victory even over mightier powers. Thus, according to the Rabbis, both Temples were destroyed due to Jewish sins. But in the First Temple the sins were cardinal sins against God—such as idolatry—whereas in the Second Temple the sins were between people—including a vicious civil war (*sinat hinam* / baseless hatred) and reckless behavior in revolting against Rome.⁷

Following the Rabbis' framework, we can see that there was an Exodus event for the talmudic period—the experience of going from suppression and being outlawed, of living in danger and threat of genocide, to acceptance and the right to self-defend in the Persian Empire. This is

⁷ I explore the repeated role of divine *tzimtzum* (= self-limitation) at length in my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Life*.



what we celebrate on Purim. But as appropriate in an age of greater divine hiddenness, the miracle of being saved was initiated by the human leaders, Esther and Mordecai, while God operated behind the scenes. (Note there is no mention of God's name in the Megillah). Nevertheless the Rabbis determined that in recognizing Purim as the new form of divine miracle and accepting the holiday, the Jews renewed the covenant that had been initiated by the Exodus redemption.⁸

I believe that in our era we are living through a third stage of Jewish religion.⁹ As in Rabbinic times, the new stage of covenant is initiated by another divine *tzimtzum*/self-limitation. God becomes totally "hidden." In our times, God is closer and more totally present even than in Shekhinah form. There are more miracles than ever but they, like God, are more difficult to discern because they are hidden in the natural process. They occur through the operation of natural laws (such as technological wonders), as uncovered and applied entirely through human agents, God's partners in the covenant of *tikkun olam*. Again, God renews the covenant and relinquishes more control in order to call humans to take on full responsibility for realizing the covenant in the world.¹⁰

⁸ “*Kiy mu ve-kiblu*—the Jews ordained and took upon themselves [two days of Purim]’ (Esther 9:13). They ordained [Purim as the new Passover, thereby renewing] what they had already taken upon themselves [in the first Exodus]” (Talmud Shabbat 88a).

⁹ I believe that it began with the modern age which is, in itself, a response to a divine call to humans to take power and bring *tikkun olam*.

¹⁰ This case is made at length in my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Life*. The strongest “proof” of the thesis is found in the divine non-intervention to stop the Holocaust. The catastrophe of the Holocaust was inflicted by humans (Nazis) misusing their freedom and power to carry out a total genocide. The other human agents, viz. the Allies and the neighbors/host countries of the Jews, totally failed to carry out their mission to stop the slaughter. Where they rose to their agency and responsibility to save the Jews (as in Denmark, Albania, Bulgaria, Le Chambon in France,) the Holocaust was “stopped” and Jews were saved.



There is an Exodus event for this era in Jewish history, only—as the Rabbis explained with regard to the Megillah—the miracle and experience reflect the changed circumstances of divine-human partnership. The contemporary Pesah event is the creation and building of the State of Israel. In this Exodus, the operation appears to be completely functioning in a naturalistic way with humans taking full responsibility for achieving the covenantal goal. There are more miracles than ever but they occur only when humans act and take full charge of doing what needs to be done. This redemption includes making errors, misjudgements, and inflicting pain on others.¹¹

This fulfillment of the prophet’s vision—that the renewal of the covenant will occur by Jews returning to the homeland—was desperately needed. It occurred when the Holocaust and murder of six million Jews seemed to have crushed the Jewish Torah teaching that the good will triumph in history. The development of Israel and the rebuilding of Jewish community—and Torah throughout the world—reinstated the credibility of the Jewish affirmation that life is stronger than death.

Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israel Independence Day) recreates the Passover/Exodus event for our time. The distance from powerlessness and genocide in Auschwitz to the heights of a rebuilt and flourishing Jerusalem, is of a greater magnitude than the movement from slavery in Egypt to the entry into the Holy Land. The numbers are greater. In the Torah narrative, 600,000 Jews came out of Egypt. By comparison, 600,000 Jews survived and won the War of Independence. They were followed in redemption by 800,000 Jews from Arab countries going from marginal status and persecution to freedom in the homeland. They were followed by several hundred

¹¹ In Israel’s Declaration of Independence, God is totally hidden. The only reference to the divine is to “the Rock of Israel” which can be interpreted religiously or in purely secular terms.



thousand Ethiopian Jews going from minority pariah status and from poverty and hunger to a new life as citizens of a Jewish majority state. They were followed by a million Jews released from oppression and discrimination in Russia to full rights and a free economy in Israel. By sheer demography alone, the Exodus of our era considerably outweighs the classic biblical redemption as living proof of the Torah's vision.

One of the sad truths of our time is that the official religious authorities have been slow to recognize—let alone celebrate—the remarkable religious message in the Passover of our era. But to anyone who can see through the tribulations and denials and the flaws of the liberation process, the restoration and renaissance of the Jewish state is a sign for human beings everywhere that the promised future Exodus for all of humanity is also coming. It is in human hands to take responsibility and make it happen. By humanity's actions and policies, we can overcome poverty, oppression, and war, take the measure of sickness and affliction and bring on the final *tikkun olam* for all.

