

## When Exodus Replaces Creation (Or Not)

*R. Yitz Greenberg – [ygreenberg@hadar.org](mailto:ygreenberg@hadar.org)*

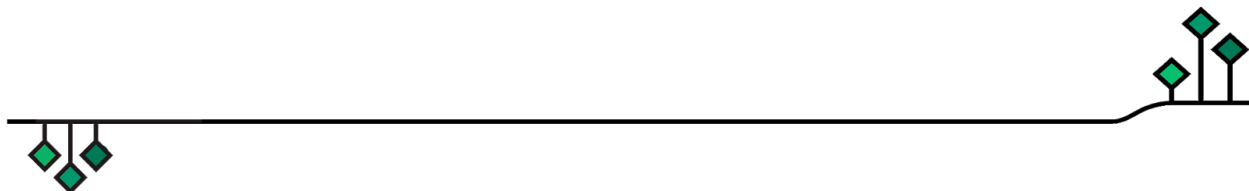
### **Parashat Va'Ethanan 5781**

In our *parashah*, Moses continues his narrative of the journey of the Exodus generation and the teachings of the Torah as he prioritizes them.<sup>1</sup> The most dramatic expression of his understanding is the repeat of the Ten Commandments. His retelling dramatizes the remarkable dialectic of the universal and particular, which reflects the Torah's vision that is at once distinctively focused on the people of Israel, but also is simultaneously addressed to all humanity.

Despite the centrality of the Ten Commandments (including, after all, that they were the main content of the covenant entered into at Sinai), our *parashah*'s text is not identical with that of the Ten reported in the Book of Shemot. The most striking “deviation” from the Yitro version is in the Shabbat commandment. In Parashat Yitro, we are told we are to rest on Shabbat in order to identify with (and reenact) the divine act of Creation of the world, and to celebrating its being—that is, just living this life. When God finished creating, God simply savors being.

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<sup>1</sup> See my thoughts last week on Parashat Devarim, “Moses' Narrative—and Ours,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/moses-narrative-and-ours>.



We imitate God by celebrating creation and living on Shabbat, even as we continue to work and improve the world the other six days.<sup>2</sup>

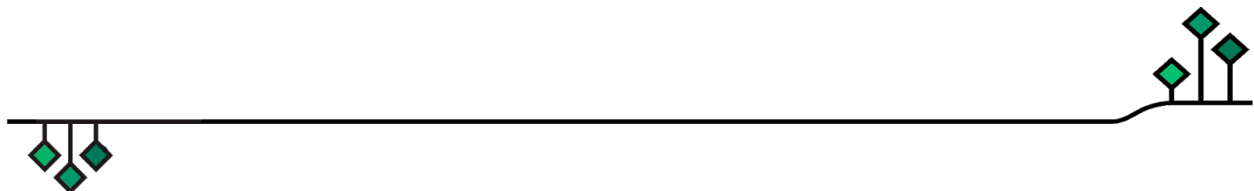
In earlier Divrei Torah, I have argued that the Genesis Creation story is not a portrait of the actual process of divine shaping and emergence of order, but rather a snapshot of the perfect world which is the intended climax of Creation. The Garden of Eden—a perfect reality in which there is no poverty, oppression, war, or sickness—is the world as it will be when we get through repairing all its flaws. This is God’s desired outcome of the universe, which God asks humans to join in covenant partnership to complete.<sup>3</sup>

In my book, *The Jewish Way*, I argue that Shabbat is sacred time: it is the foretaste of the perfected world. In the twenty-five hours of Shabbat, humans live the final perfection, **now**. This gives them an extraordinary (if temporary) taste of the ultimate paradise on Earth, so they are motivated to resume working to bring that repaired world into being, from Sunday to Friday. Having tasted perfection, they will not settle for the flawed present and reality, even if they enjoy a privileged state and many of the available gratifications. Inspired by Shabbat, Jewry continues to operate as an avant garde, as a teaching community and as a pioneering role model of a society starting to achieve full justice, dignity, and peace for all.<sup>4</sup> This is the picture of Shabbat one gleans from the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments.

<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 2:3: “*asher bara elohim la’asot*, which the Lord created in order to be [further] made.” A passage in Bereishit Rabbah 11:6 seems to be picking up on the same ambiguity: “Everything that was created in the six days of creation needs *assiyah* (action).”

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. my essays on Parashat BeHar-BeHukkotai, “Judaism’s Utopian Vision of Universal Equality,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/judaisms-utopian-vision-universal-equality>; Parashat Emor, “Partners With God,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/partners-god>; Parashat Bereishit, “Creation,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/creation>.

<sup>4</sup> Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, pp. 131-135, 157-158. Also see my essay on Parashat VaYakhel-Pekudei, “Sacred Space, Sacred Time,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/sacred-space-sacred-time>.



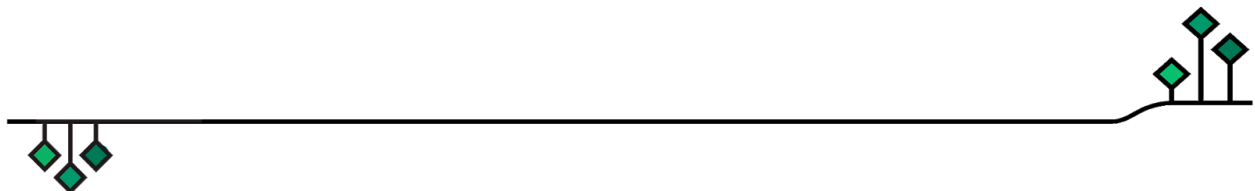
In Parashat Va'Ethanan, however, Shabbat is explained as a reenactment of the Exodus from Egypt. Just as God liberated the Israelites from slavery, so are all people—masters and workers alike—released from labor, to experience liberation and the pure experience of living and self-fulfillment (Devarim 5:14-16). This explanation would appear to speak to the Jewish people and their experience **only**.

However, here we see the dialectic of the Torah. The Exodus account is considered equivalent to the Creation/Redemption account. One is substituted for the other without raising an eyebrow or offering some translation from one to the other. How can that be? The answer is that the Exodus is partial fulfillment of the general divine commitment to turning the world into a universal human paradise. The Exodus of the Israelites is a **down payment**, the first divine installment of the promised universal liberation. This redemption is an assurance to the world that the universal redemption will follow.

This ritual and its implications grow out of the model that God recruits all humans to join in the covenant of filling the world with life.<sup>5</sup> Then God enters into covenant with Abraham and Sarah and their family to serve as teachers, role models, and a pioneering community, setting the pace for humanity. The Jewish covenant is not a replacement or substitute for humanity's covenant. It is meant to be a living example and a continuing confirmation of humanity's way. All humans eventually will be beneficiaries of the final world repair. The Messianic age is the Exodus writ large.

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<sup>5</sup> The Noahide covenant, see Genesis 8:22ff; 9:1-9.



Over historical time, the Jewish dialectic, with its built in universal-particular synthesis, has been subject to dissolution. Various Jews and Jewish movements turned away from universal humanity, instead interpreting the Torah and its promises as purely focused on Jewry.<sup>6</sup> I dare say that this narrowing of focus (most powerfully expressed in some parts of haredi culture) leads to a situation where Jews and Judaism would appear to be indifferent to the fate of the world. Judaism becomes a tribal religion. In our globalized culture, many Jews abandon this Judaism to embrace all of humanity.

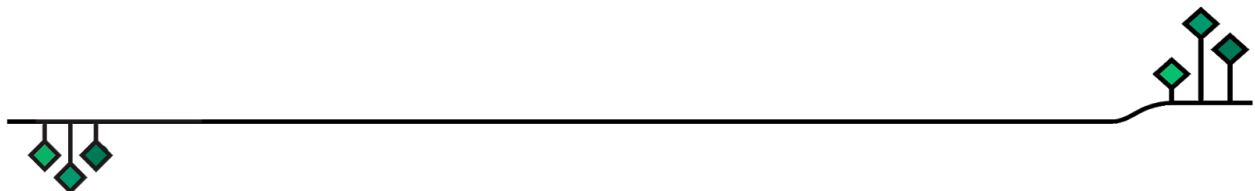
The alternative extreme has made a strong appearance in modern culture. Many revolutionary “non-Jewish Jews”<sup>7</sup> rephrased the Torah’s promises as exclusively intended for the universal human race. Therefore, they abandoned and/or actively rejected Jewish identity out of the belief that universalism—in dignity, equality, and justice—is the superior moral standard and the best historical outcome.

In coming to this conclusion, the universalists missed the power of the Jewish dialectic. Their universalization became a homogenization of humanity. In history, this homogenization frequently led to the denial of dignity or outright suppression, not only of Jews, but of many other minorities. In the extreme, for example, to achieve true, pure Communism, Stalinism

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<sup>6</sup> Thus, chosenness became a promotion of Jewry and a demotion of humankind. A classic expression of this is found in the shift of interpretation whereby the dignities of the image of God, i.e. infinite value, equality, uniqueness, are shifted only to Jews. See the text of the mishnah on Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a in the Vilna edition (the most widely available version of the Talmud), which inserts in the mishnah: “One who saves one **Jewish** life, it is equivalent to saving a whole world.” Clearly the implication is that only a Jewish life attains the dignity of being a full image of God. Yet, clearly the Torah (and the original text of this mishnah!) says that **all humans** are created in the image of God; Adam and Eve were not Jewish.

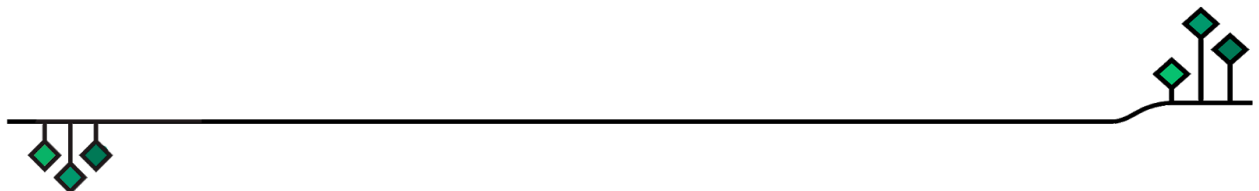
<sup>7</sup> Isaac Deutscher coined the phrase “non-Jewish Jews” to describe radical intellectuals (like himself) who repudiated their Jewishness in order to better realize the (Jewish) vision of *tikkun olam* on a universal basis. See Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew* (Oxford University Press, 1968).



went on to suppress many nationalities, not just Jews. The Yevseksia, the Jewish wing of the ruling Communist party in Russia, was happy to take the lead in a systematic program of closing synagogues, *yeshivot*, and community centers in order to hasten the arrival of Stalin's universal Communist utopia.

This forced standardization became the enemy of tribal loyalties, local cultures, and family bonds. In power, it generated an assault on many human attachments and loyalties. In its most acute forms, this led to totalitarianism and coerced uniformity. The result often was not universal dignity but universal oppression. Forced universalism led to denial of the local and human connections that enrich human life, that keep power on a human scale and respectful of individuals and smaller groupings. Similarly, in economics, out-of-control globalization leads to flattening out local differences and leaving many people disadvantaged and at the wayside.

Judaism's ideal model is a universalism of dignity and values that is comprised of a rainbow of different groups and religions. Humans are united in a common vision of a world repaired, but they savor variety, celebrating and drawing insights from different historical cultures and multiple religions. The Jewish idea is to marry the universal-particular dialectic in culture, religion, and community. The universal-particular play off each other and enrich the other. They make for a more human, multi-leveled, less controlling governance system, and a universal culture that celebrates differences and is enriched by the variety of human influences.



The Shabbat is at once a deeply Jewish, local family-centered, distinctly-framed national experience. At the same time, it is a model for all humans—whether it be the need to turn off the universal media platforms, or the right to time off for all workers in the world. The Exodus too is at once a deeply Jewish historical liberation. At the same time, it is the model and message for all humans that they are meant to be free—and someday will be.

