

THE EXODUS AS ORIENTING EVENT¹

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IF THE BOOK of Genesis is dominated by the theme of covenant, the Book of Exodus is focused on the second great motif that runs through Jewish history and religion: the journey toward redemption—that is, realization of the covenantal task of bringing about a world of dignity and freedom. In this book, the Israelites start under slavery and genocidal persecution. With the help of God, they go out on a journey through the desert toward a home and future independence in the land of Canaan.

The Exodus is the core event of Jewish history and religion. In this event, a group of Hebrew slaves were liberated. Moses, called by God, initiates the request that the Hebrew slaves be given a temporary release to go and worship in the desert. Step by step, the power of Pharaoh is broken and the request for a three-day break escalates into a demand for permanent freedom. This intervention in history by God to free the Hebrew slaves is a revelation of the human right to freedom. The Divine Presence contradicts the claims of absolute human power and foreshadows the end of its abusive application. The Exodus is not a brief respite from enslavement, but an open-ended journey to liberation.

The Exodus itinerary is not really a geographic passage through trackless wastes, past hostile or threatening nations, toward the Promised Land of Israel. The journey is much more difficult because it is a psychological odyssey from slavery, and a sense of

worthlessness, toward freedom, maturity, and taking responsibility as free adults. The Israelites must gain a sense of self-worth that is not self-centered or achieved at the expense of others. Their ultimate goal—not necessarily grasped at first—is to reach the level of loving one's self, but then extending the feeling and to love one's neighbor as one's self.²

It turned out that the people who were actually liberated were too broken internally and too infantilized by enslavement to ever fully grow up. Only the next generation—raised under difficult circumstances, and with parents making halting steps toward maturity—was able to attain the level of understanding and responsibility that equipped them to live a free life with all its challenges. Only the later generations had the inner fortitude to carve out a homeland and strive for an ideal society.

The Torah's account of the Exodus journey was not intended to be just a generational portrait of the Children of Israel. The prophetic understanding is that what happened to the Israelites is the first stage—a divine down payment, as it were—on the journey that all humanity will someday take.³ This is a model, a demonstration that all nations should learn from and take up. Some day, all people will go out from slavery, or widespread deprivation, or inequality and exploitation—the general human condition in ancient times—and attain full dignity.

1 This essay was originally written for Parashat Shemot 5781, available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/exodus-orienting-event>.

2 Leviticus 19:18.

3 See especially the Book of Isaiah, chapters 40-66.

All people will learn to be free and to treat each other as images of God are meant to be treated. God, who has lovingly singled out Israel and started their process of emancipation, loves all humans. They too will be liberated. They too will find their homelands where they live by right, where their dignities are not dependent on the good will or tolerance of others. The final, universal Exodus will outstrip the initial Exodus.⁴ Then the whole world will be free of war and oppression, of enervating sickness and crushing poverty.⁵ Prophetic messianism, the promise that the whole world will be liberated and provided for, is the Exodus writ large for all humanity.

Once we widen our lens to encompass all humanity, we realize that the image of being on a journey covers a vast period, even before the emergence of humanity. In this way, the grand narrative of the Exodus also includes Creation. Life itself, grounded in God and sustained by the Divine Presence, has been a journey from its initial one-celled forms toward the ever richer phenomena of complex and capable life. With the emergence of *homo sapiens*, the human being with a fully developed frontal cortex, we have a form of life so developed and so Godlike as to be able to understand the natural process and the laws of nature instilled by God into reality. Then, God recruits human beings to join in the evolutionary process and focus development on the completion and perfection of nature and of human societies to the end that we achieve paradise on earth.

Of course, this process, still unfinished, has taken eons. Moreover, history is full of contradictory evidence to this vision. Slavery is an extreme version of the reality that most people endured in past history; outright oppression and widespread deprivation are not that dissimilar. If our ancestors as slaves internalized their servitude and inferiority, there is a great danger that people living in poverty, hunger, and sickness today will be crushed into acceptance and passivity. The Torah and Jewish religion hold up the Exodus, not as a one-time event, but as a norm by which life should be judged and guided. The Exodus is an “orienting event”—an event which sets in motion and guides the Jewish way (and humanity’s way) toward a Promised Land—i.e. an entire planet set free and perfected.⁶

Since the Exodus from Egypt, humanity has gone through ancient, medieval, modern—and now into postmodern—civilization. As the geographic coordinates and the cultural consensus is transformed, it is easy to lose the way: which is the right path toward freedom and dignity? People also become uncertain of which values are true and permanent. The Torah holds up the Exodus and its norms so that people can chart their behaviors along the way by this event. The Exodus serves as a kind of navigational star by which to measure whether we are heading on the right path.

The Exodus norms are concretized in specific laws in Jewish tradition. The ethical actions are guided by the memory of being oppressed, as well as how the state of subjugation and mistreatment was then overthrown by the Exodus experience. These laws include not oppressing the stranger (Exodus 23:9), but rather treating them right and loving them as yourself (Leviticus 19:33-34); acting justly by using honest weights and measures (19:35-36); helping the poor and not taking interest on loans to the poor (25:35-38); taking care of the widow, orphan, and Levite, and rejoicing with your family (Deuteronomy 16:11-12); leaving part of the crops in the field for the vulnerable—stranger, orphan, and widow (23:21-23).

To ensure that the Exodus and its norms drive our behavior, the ritual life of Jewry is structured so that we relive and reenact the Exodus. Thus, each generation experiences the full power of the Exodus and lives by its implications, no matter what culture it is in.⁷

The Book of Exodus starts by having us taste the bitterness of servitude, genocide, and despair. Week by week, the Torah portion takes us through the process of breaking the slave masters’ power and undermining the fixity and authority of their moral-cultural regime. Thus the Torah brings the past into the present to guide our behavior. The Exodus account orients us away from absolutizing the local norms, but instead upgrading our behaviors to meet the standards of the ultimate Exodus and the messianic norms of the future. ♦

4 See Isaiah 52:11-12 and Jeremiah 23:7-8.

5 See Isaiah, especially such examples as chapters 11, 55, 56, 65.

6 The ethical and ritual implications of Exodus are treated more expansively in the chapter on Pesah in my book, *The Jewish Way*, “Judaism as an Exodus religion.”

7 The rituals of Pesah (Seder, *matzah*, retelling), Shabbat, Sukkot, daily prayers, and many holiday liturgies make the Exodus ever-present in our lives.