

## The G-d Who Acts in History

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The Israelites are at their lowest ebb. They have been enslaved. A decree has been issued that every male child is to be killed. Moses is sent to liberate them, but the first effect of his intervention is to make matters worse, not better. Their quota of brick-making remains unchanged but they now have to provide their own straw. Initially they had “believed” Moses when he told them that G-d was about to rescue them, and performed the various signs G-d had given him. Now they turn on Moses and Aaron, accusing them:

When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, “May the LORD look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (Ex. 5: 20-21).

At this point Moses - who had been so reluctant to take on the mission - turns to G-d in protest and anguish:

Moses returned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all” (Ex. 5: 22-23).

None of this, however, has been accidental. The Torah is preparing the ground for one of its most monumental propositions: *It is in the darkest night that Israel has its greatest visions. Hope is born at the very edge of the abyss of despair.* There is nothing natural about this, nothing inevitable. No logic can give rise to hope; no law of history charts a path from slavery to redemption, exile to return. The entire sequence of events has been a prelude to the single most formative moment in the history of Israel: the intervention of G-d in history - the supreme Power intervening on behalf of the supremely powerless, *not* (as in every other culture) to *endorse* the status quo but to overturn it.

The speech that follows is breathtaking in its grandeur and literary structure. As Nechama Leibowitz and others point out, it takes the form of a chiasmus:

G-d said to Moses

**[A] I am the Lord.**

[B]I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as the Lord Almighty, but by my name G-d I was not known to them.

[C]I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens.

[D]Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and have remembered my covenant.

[E]Therefore say to the Israelites,

**I am the Lord**

[D1]and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgments. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your G-d. Then you will know that I am the Lord your G-d who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

[C1]And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hands to give

[B1] to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession.

**[A1] I am the Lord.**

The structure is worked out in extraordinary detail. The first and second halves of the speech each contain *exactly fifty words* in the Hebrew text. B and B1 are about the patriarchs; C and C1 about the land; D and D1 about Egypt and slavery. The first half is about the past, the second about the future. The first half refers to the Israelites in the third person (“them”), the second in the second person (“you”). The entire speech turns on the three-fold repetition of “I am the Lord” - at the beginning, end and middle of the speech. (The phrase actually appears four times, the extra mention occurring in D1. It is not impossible that this is linked to the fact that the name - which is, as we will see, the central theme of the speech - has four letters, the so-called tetragrammaton).

The entire speech is full of interest, but what will concern us - as it has to successive generations of interpreters - is the proposition signaled at the outset: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as the Lord Almighty, but by my name G-d I was not known to them.” A fundamental distinction is being made between the experience the patriarchs had of G-d, and the experience the Israelites are about to have. Something new, unprecedented, is about to happen. What is it?

Clearly it has to do with the names by which G-d is known. The verse distinguishes between *E-l Shaddai* (“the Lord Almighty”) and the four-letter name of G-d which, because of its sanctity, Jewish tradition referred to simply as *Hashem* (“the name” par excellence).

As the classic Jewish commentators point out, the verse must be read with great care. It does not say that the patriarchs “did not know” this name; nor does it say that G-d did not “make this name known” to them. The four-letter name appears no less than 165 times in the book of Bereishith. G-d himself uses the phrase “I am the Lord” to both Abraham (Gen. 15:7) and Jacob (28: 13). Rashi’s explanation is therefore the simplest and most elegant:

It is not written here, “[My name, The Lord] I did not make known to them” but rather “[By the name, The Lord] I was not known to them” - meaning, I was not recognized by them in my attribute of “keeping faith,” by reason of which my name is “The Lord,” namely that I am faithful to fulfill My word, for I made promises to them but I did not fulfill them [during their lifetime].

What then is the difference between the other names of G-d and *Hashem*? For the sages, *Hashem* signified the Divine attribute of compassion:

G-d said to Moses, "You wish to know My name? I am called according to my deeds... When I judge creatures, I am called *Elokim*. When I wage war against the wicked I am called "Lord of hosts." When I suspend judgment for man's sins I am called *E-l Shaddai*. When I am merciful towards My world I am called *Hashem*."

For Judah Halevi and Ramban, the key difference has to do with G-d's acts *within* and *beyond* nature. This is how Halevi puts it in *The Kuzari*:

This is perhaps what the Bible means when it says, "and I appeared to Abraham...as *E-l Shaddai*" namely, in the way of power and dominion... He did not, however, perform any miracle for the patriarchs as he did for Moses... for the wonders done for Moses and the Israelites left no manner of doubt in their souls that the creator of the world also created these things which He brought into existence immediately by His will, such as the plagues of Egypt, the division of the Red Sea, the manna, the pillar of cloud, and the like.

Similarly Ramban writes:

Thus G-d said to Moses, "I have appeared to the patriarchs with the might of My arm with which I prevail over the constellations and help those whom I have chosen, but with My name *Hashem* with which all existence came into being, I was not made known to them, that is, to create new things for them by the open change of nature."

Thus, for the Midrash, the key to the new revelation of G-d in the days of Moses was his *compassion* in responding to the cries of the oppressed Israelites. For Judah Halevi and Ramban it was the fact that the exodus was accompanied by *supernatural events* (what Ramban calls "revealed" as opposed to "hidden" miracles).

The simplest and most cogent explanation, however, is that of Rashi. Something was about to change. The patriarchs had received the covenantal promise. They would become a nation. They would inherit a land. None of this, however, happened in their lifetime. To the contrary, as the book of Bereishith reaches its close, they number a mere seventy souls and they are in exile in Egypt. Now the fulfillment is about to begin. Already, in the first chapter of Shemot, we hear, for the first time, the phrase *am bnei Yisrael*, "the people of the children of Israel." Israel has at last become, not a family, but a nation. Moses at the burning bush has been told, by G-d, that He will bring them to "a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." *Hashem* therefore means *the G-d who acts in history to fulfill His promises*.

Throughout these studies I have tried to convey the world-changing character of this idea. What is revolutionary in Judaism is not simply the concept of monotheism, that the universe is not a blind clash of conflicting powers but the result of a single creative will. It is that G-d is *involved* in His creation. G-d is not simply the force that brought the universe into being; nor is He reached only in the private recesses of the soul. At a certain point He intervened in history, to rescue His people from slavery and set them on the path to freedom. *This* was the revolution, at once political and intellectual.

At the heart of most visions of the human condition is what Mircea Eliade (in his book *Cosmos and History*) calls “the terror of history.” The passage of time, with its disasters, its apparent randomness, its radical contingency, is profoundly threatening to the human search for order and coherence. There seems to be no meaning in history. We live; we die; and it is as if we had never been. The universe gives no sign of any interest in our existence. If that was so in ancient times, when people believed in the existence of G-ds, how much more so is it true today for those neo-Darwinians who see life as no more than the operation of “chance and necessity” (Jacques Monod) or “the blind watchmaker” (Richard Dawkins).

It is against this background that myth and ritual arise as the attempt to endow the human condition with significance by re-enacting the divine drama at the beginning of creation. Human beings become like gods. A holy site becomes the centre of the universe. Ritual becomes the act through which people are transposed to time beyond time, and space beyond space. In Eliade’s words: “an object or an act becomes real only in so far as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation... any repetition of an archetypal gesture, suspends duration, abolishes profane time, and participates in mythical time.” The mythic imagination is *an attempt to escape from history*.

In ancient Israel, by contrast, “for the first time, the prophets placed a value on history... For the first time, we find affirmed and increasingly accepted the idea that historical events have a value in themselves, insofar as they are determined by the will of G-d... Historical facts thus become situations of man in respect to G-d, and as such they acquire a religious value that nothing had previously been able to confer on them. It may, then, be said with truth that the Hebrews were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of G-d.” Judaism is the escape *into* history, the unique attempt to endow events with meaning, and to see in the chronicles of mankind something more than a mere succession of happenings - to see them as nothing less than a drama of redemption in which the fate of a nation reflects its loyalty or otherwise to a covenant with G-d.

Eliade’s conclusion is worth quoting at length:

Basically, the horizon of archetypes and repetition cannot be transcended with impunity unless we accept a philosophy of freedom that does not exclude G-d... Faith, in this context, as in many others, means absolute emancipation from any kind of natural “law” and hence the highest freedom that man can imagine: freedom to intervene even in the ontological constitution of the universe. It is, consequently, a preeminently creative freedom. In other words, it constitutes a new formula for man’s collaboration with the creation – the first, but also the only such formula accorded to him since the traditional horizon of archetypes and repetition was transcended. Only such a freedom... is able to defend modern man from the terror of history – a freedom, that is, which has its source and finds its guarantee and support in G-d. Every other modern freedom, whatever satisfactions it may procure to him who possesses it, is powerless to justify history; and this, for every man who is sincere with himself, is equivalent to the terror of history... Any other situation of modern man leads, in the end, to despair.

Not just then, in other words, but at all times including the present, the ultimate choice lies between *faith in the G-d of history* (who invites human beings to become His partners in the work of redemption), or the “terror of history” from which the only refuge is myth.

Where is G-d? It is a mark of how deeply influenced we have been by ancient Greece that we tend to answer this question in philosophical terms, by referring to logic (the “ontological argument”) or nature (the “argument from design”). Many Jewish thinkers themselves - Maimonides is the most famous example - did likewise. Judah Halevi, however, thought otherwise. The ten commandments begin - he pointed out - not with the words “I am the Lord your G-d who created heaven and earth” but “I am the Lord your G-d who brought you out from Egypt, from the house of slavery.” G-d - the One we call *Hashem* - is to be found not primarily in creation (that is another face of G-d to which we give the name *Elokim*) but in *history*.

I find it moving that this is precisely what non-Jewish observers concluded. Pascal, for example, wrote:

It is certain that in certain parts of the world we can see a peculiar people, separated from the other peoples of the world, and this is called the Jewish people... This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has also lasted for a singularly long time... For whereas the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens and Rome, and others who came so much later have perished so long ago, these still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to wipe them out, as their historians testify, and as can easily be judged by the natural order of things over such a long spell of years. They have always been preserved, however, and their preservation was foretold... My encounter with this people amazes me...

The once-Marxist Russian thinker Nikolai Berdayev came to a similar conclusion:

I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint... Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history: all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny.

More recently, the historian Barbara Tuchman wrote:

The history of the Jews is... intensely peculiar in the fact of having given the western world its concept of origins and monotheism, its ethical traditions, and the founder of its prevailing religion, yet suffering dispersion, statelessness and ceaseless persecution, and finally in our times nearly successful genocide, dramatically followed by fulfillment of the never-relinquished dream of return to the homeland. Viewing this strange and singular history, one cannot escape the impression that it must contain some special significance for the history of mankind, that in some way, whether one believes in divine purpose or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate.

Some 3,300 years ago, G-d told Moses that He would intervene in the arena of time, not only (though primarily) to rescue the Israelites but also “so that My name may be declared throughout the world” (9:16). The script of history would bear the mark of a hand not human but divine.

*Parashat Va'era*

And it began with these words: “Therefore say to the Israelites: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.”