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Moses at the Bush

Without chosenness, there is no Israel



URING THE 15 years that Israel controlled the Sinai Peninsula, an archaeological excavation there uncovered something remarkable. Scholars revealed a set of large clay storage jars (pithos) from the ninth century B.C.E. featuring ink inscriptions that mention the personal name of the biblical God, “YHWH.” This, together with a 14th-century B.C.E. temple inscription mentioning the same divine name associated with a nomadic tribe, prompted Bible scholars to theorize that nomadic tribes in the Sinai Desert maintained a belief in YHWH before the Israelites did. If true, this would mean that the Israelites had in fact adopted some of their key theistic tenets from their desert neighbors.

One of these neighbors may have been none other than Jethro — the Midianite priest and father-in-law of Moses — whom the biblical text already credits with having advised Moses on organizing a judicial

system. In this reading, Moses did not independently discover God as much as recognize the value of Jethro's spiritual teachings. Moses then acted as the conduit to broadcast these lessons to Pharaoh, to the Israelites, and to the world. Interestingly, the Midianites also play a significant role earlier in the biblical story, pulling Joseph out of the pit and selling him into slavery in Egypt, where he would later rise to prominence and establish the house of his father, Jacob.

The stories of Exodus 3 and 18, by this reading, encapsulate a historic cultural and religious transfer of ideas from one people, the Midianites, to another, the Israelites, who in turn, adapted and shaped those beliefs into a robust and lasting covenant.

This historical reconstruction, based on the archaeological discovery, sheds light on an otherwise cryptic verse in the concluding poem of Deuteronomy 33:2, "YHWH came from Sinai, and rose from Seir to them. He shone forth from Mount Paran... At His right hand was a fiery law for them." The verse suggests that belief in YHWH by the various peoples to the north and to the east of Sinai set the background and led directly to the lawgiving by that same Being to the Israelite people. Even without the benefit of archaeological support, the sages, as recorded in the Sifre, concluded from this verse that God offered the Torah to all the peoples of the region. They each questioned its requirements and decided to opt out of its moral and spiritual demands. Had any of them chosen to accept, they would have been God's treasured nation.

"And He said: YHWH came from Sinai" (Deuteronomy 33:2): When the Lord appeared to give Torah to Israel, it is not to Israel alone that He appeared, but to all of the nations. First, He went to the children of Esau, and He asked them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They asked: "What is written in it?" He answered: "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). They answered: "The entire essence of our

father is murder,” as it is written . . . “And by your sword shall you live” (Genesis 27:40). He then went to the children of Ammon and Moav and asked them: “Will you accept the Torah?” They asked: “What is written in it?” He answered: “You shall not commit adultery.” They answered: “Lord of the Universe, illicit relations is our entire essence.” . . . He then went and found the children of Yishmael and asked them: “Will you accept the Torah?” They asked: “What is written in it?” He answered: “You shall not steal.” They answered: “Lord of the Universe, our father’s entire essence is stealing.” . . . There was none among all of the nations to whom He did not go and speak and knock at their door, asking if they would accept the Torah . . . Only Israel accepted the Torah with all of its explanations and inferences. (Sifre Deuteronomy 343)

In this dramatized retelling, Israel was actually God’s last pick. This last-chosen people is simply the only nation to have chosen the responsibility of practicing God’s laws and enacting His vision for the world.



But why Moses? Why was he chosen as the intermediary?

Born an Israelite, raised as an Egyptian prince, married to the daughter of a Midianite priest, Moses has a composite background that’s meant to convey his bona fides. But Exodus 3 offers a deeper explanation for why Moses was chosen to shepherd the Israelites from Egyptian idolatry to biblical monotheism.

Moses first hears from God while shepherding Jethro’s flock in the Sinai Desert. The verses introducing the encounter contain an essential message about human agency:

Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why

doesn't the bush burn up?" When YHWH saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (Exodus 3:3-4)

God calls to Moses only after Moses himself takes the initiative to turn from his routine to notice something extraordinary. There may have been a dozen other shepherds who either did not see or did not care enough to veer from their path to investigate. By noticing the bush, by his curiosity and fascination, Moses — raised as an Egyptian prince — proves himself the person to shepherd the Israelites out of Egypt and partner with God as his messenger. His perceptiveness leads him to realize a God independent of the natural world, who creates energy rather than depends on it — a fire that does not consume its fuel.

Alternatively, the fire represents Egyptian persecution, and the bush is Israel, which continuously suffers but is not destroyed. Moses as an individual and Israel as a nation are the ones who go out of their way to notice the One liberatory power of the universe. And they recognize the responsibility inherent in that noticing, to take the initiative to build and maintain the righteous society God envisions.

This view conforms with the universalist beginnings and ambitions of the Torah, which addresses its message to all of God's creatures. Israel's treasured status is due to its willingness to uphold and spread that message, including God's equal care for all of humanity. This is the spirit of Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 that rejects all racism or claim of superiority of any individual or group: "For a human mints one hundred coins with one stamp and they are all similar to each other. But the King of kings, the Holy One blessed be He, mints each human with the stamp of primordial Adam and yet not one of them looks similar to his fellow."

The message is that every human being is created equal in the

image of the One God and is unique, worthy, and infinitely valuable. This sublime origin story matches an equally lofty vision for the end of days, when all peoples of the earth will recognize and serve God as One (Zephaniah 3:9; Isaiah 2:2–3; Zachariah 14), seemingly leaving no special status for Israel.



So what does that mean for Israel's chosenness?

It means that Israel's treasured status is fundamentally conditional, conditional on the work it is here to do. If Israel completes its mission, it will lose its *raison d'être*.

Even 800 years ago, Maimonides recognized that Christianity and Islam had accepted the biblical God and that the “entire world has already become filled with the mention of the Messiah, Torah, and commandments. These matters have been spread to the furthestmost islands and to many stubborn-hearted nations” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11:8).

The liberal world order has also proven to be an expression of the message. Its system of politics and morality is based on the biblical premise that all humans are created equal. While the Torah in its time was at the forefront of rights and opportunities for slaves, women, the poor, foreigners, and the animal kingdom, modern morality and law have extended the Torah's principles and are a fulfillment of them.

If the tiny Jewish nation has now done its part in transmitting these ideas to the vast majority of religious adherents and the world's most powerful countries, might this be the end of the Jewish mission and, to paraphrase Francis Fukuyama, the end of Jewish history? Why are the Jews still around?

Ironically, the spread of monotheism via Christianity and Islam

led to exactly this assertion by those religions. Their claims to have superseded Judaism and YHWH's bond with Israel were effectively making this point—that Israel had been made obsolete by the universalization of its God.

But, in the most literal sense, they have been wrong. The Jews have not disappeared. Why not?

The answer is embedded in the words of the covenant itself. In Exodus 19:5–6, God prefaces the Ten Commandments with a conditional declaration: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The command makes clear that Israel's treasuredness is contingent on its fulfillment of the commandments. But it also doesn't give Israel a way out. It tethers Israel's very peoplehood to the work Israel is meant to do. Even if Israel should veer away from the covenant, and exile and persecution should befall it, the prophets emphasize that God will always protect a remnant of Israel as a seed for a future restoration of its mission and prominence. The Israelites are not granted the freedom to exist as a nation outside of the covenant.

More important for our day, the Torah does not give the Israelites the authority to decide when they have completed their mission. Although repeatedly threatening to destroy Israel if it fails in the mission, God stubbornly refuses to let it fail. Take for example God's threat to destroy Israel after the sin of the Golden Calf. Moses responds to the threat with his own, “Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!” (Exodus 32:32).

There is something deeply instructive in this statement. Moses exists for us only because of this record. Were his name to be erased from the book, it would be the same as having never existed. This

ultimatum and his advocacy for Israel's survival are the essence of his existence.

What makes Israel worthy of any mention in this same record, indeed, worthy of any identity at all, is its mission. If it abdicates that mission, it loses its identity. Chosenness is therefore intrinsic to Israel's very existence. The covenant is not a feature of Israel but its essence, or if you prefer, its very name: Israel — *the one who struggles with God*. Israel can never become an un-chosen people. The Jews are chosen or they are nothing at all.

Chosenness therefore represents a constant existential requirement, and the loss of it an existential threat. Either Israel continues to spread YHWH's mission, as it was spread to the Israelites, or it ceases to exist, just like the Midianites.

The threat, then, is that by not accepting the responsibility of chosenness, Israel will become like its neighboring tribes, extinct. In the words of the prophet Amos, “‘To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Cushites’ — declares the Lord. ‘True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir. Behold, the Lord God has His eye upon the sinful kingdom: I will wipe it off the face of the earth!’” (Amos 9:7–8). But how is this to be reconciled with the same prophet's claim, quoting the Lord, in the following line: “‘But, I will not wholly wipe out the House of Jacob’”?

The point is that for Israel to exist as a nation, it must be on God's mission. The concept of chosenness cannot be extricated from the concept of Israel itself. There is no version of Israel that can exist outside of its namesake. And if, as the Torah makes clear, there is no chosenness without responsibility, Israel's task, like that of Moses, is to take responsibility, to notice where there is more work to be done.

And that goes for the State of Israel as well. While the young nation still struggles in many areas, these challenges and tensions may prove

to be the laboratory of its next great gifts to the world. Having helped to birth both monotheism and liberalism, Israel now struggles to be both a Jewish state and a liberal democracy. It is a fitting tension and not an easy one to resolve. But if the State of Israel can find a way to do so, it will be an invaluable model for Western democracies the world over on how to be both spiritually cohesive and politically and socially free. Israel's war ethics as it battles for its safety are being tested in ways unprecedented in any other democracy. Here again, if it can succeed in its long-term defense and remove terrorists while still minimizing casualties, it can set a paradigm for other nations facing similar threats.

Despite all of its military, political, and social challenges, Israel is rated one of the happiest countries on earth. It also has one of the highest birth rates among Western democracies, reflecting its optimism for the future. It is a melting pot where religious and secular people from dozens of countries have come together to fulfill a biblical dream of return. But that return must also be a return to Israel's Mosaic beginnings, the willingness to be the lone shepherd to notice the fire in the bush, and the choice to move toward it. *

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