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Encampments & Journeys

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Right at the end of the book of Shemot, there is a textual difficulty so slight that it is easy to miss, yet – as interpreted by Rashi – it contains one of the great clues as to the nature of Jewish identity: it is a moving testimony to the unique challenge of being a Jew.

First, the background. The Tabernacle is finally complete. Its construction has taken many chapters to relate. No other event in the wilderness years is portrayed in such detail. Now, on the first of Nissan, exactly a year after Moses told the people to begin their preparations for the exodus, he assembles the beams and hangings, and puts the furniture and vessels in place. There is an unmistakable parallelism between the words the Torah uses to describe Moses' completion of the work and those it uses of God on the seventh day of Creation:

> *And Moses finished [vayechal] the work [hamelakhah].*
> *And God finished [vayechal] on the seventh day the work [melakhto] which He had done.*

The next verse states the result:

> *Then the Cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34)*

The meaning is both clear and revolutionary. The creation of the Sanctuary by the Israelites is intended to represent a human parallel to the Divine creation of the universe. In making the world, God created a home for humankind. In making the Tabernacle, humankind created a home for God.

From a human perspective, God fills the space we make for His Presence. His glory exists where we renounce ours. The immense detail of the construction is there to tell us that throughout, the Israelites were obeying God's instructions rather than improvising their own. The specific domain called "the holy" is where we meet God on His terms, not ours. Yet this too is God's way of conferring dignity on

humankind. It is we who build His home so that He may fill what we have made. In the words of a famous film: "If you build it, he will come."

Bereishit begins with God making the cosmos. Shemot ends with human beings making a micro-cosmos, a miniature and symbolic universe. Thus the entire narrative of Genesis-Exodus is a single vast span that begins and ends with the concept of God-filled space, with this difference: that in the beginning the work is done by God-the-Creator. By the end it is done by man-and-woman-the-creators. The whole intricate history has been a story with one overarching theme: the transfer of the power and responsibility of creation from heaven to earth, from God to the image-of-God called humankind.

"In making the world, God created a home for humankind. In making the Tabernacle, humankind created a home for God."

That is the background. However, the final verses of the book go on to tell us about the relationship between the "Cloud of Glory" and the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle, we recall, was not a fixed structure. It was made in such a way as to be portable. It could quickly be dismantled and its parts carried, as the Israelites made their way to the next stage of their journey. When the time came for the Israelites to move on, the Cloud moved from its resting place in the Tent of Meeting to a position outside the camp, signalling the direction they must now take. This is how the Torah describes it:

> *When the Cloud lifted from above the Tabernacle, the Israelites went onward in all their journeys, but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out until the day it lifted. So the Cloud of the Lord was over the Tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel in all their journeys.* (Ex. 40:36-38)

There is a small but significant difference between the two instances of the phrase b*echol mas'ehem*, "in all their journeys". In the first instance the words are to be taken literally. When the cloud lifted and moved on ahead, the Israelites knew they were about to travel.

However in the second instance they cannot be taken literally. The cloud was not over the Tabernacle in all their journeys. On the contrary: it was there only when they stopped travelling and instead pitched camp. During the journeys the cloud went on ahead.

Noting this, Rashi makes the following comment:

> *A place where they encamped is also called massa, "a journey" . . . Because from the place of encampment they always set out again on a new journey, therefore they are all called "journeys".*[1]

The point is linguistic, but the message is anything but. Rashi has encapsulated in a few brief words – "a place where they encamped is also called a journey" — the existential truth at the heart of Jewish identity. So long as we have not yet reached our destination, even a place of rest is still called a journey – because we know we are not here forever. There is a way still to go. In the words of the poet Robert Frost,

> *The woods are lovely, dark and deep.*
> *But I have promises to keep,*
> *And miles to go before I sleep. ("Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in The Poetry of Robert Frost (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 224-225.)*

[1] Rashi, commentary to Exodus 40:38.

To be a Jew is to travel, and to know that here where we are is a mere resting place, not yet a home. It is defined not by the fact that we are here, but by the knowledge that eventually – after a day, a week, a year, a century, sometimes even a millennium – we will have to move on. Thus, the portable Tabernacle, even more than the Temple in Jerusalem, became the symbol of Jewish life.

Why so? Because the gods of the ancient world were gods of a place: Sumeria, Memphis, Moab, Edom. They had a specific domain. Theology was linked to geography. Here, in this holy place, made magnificent by ziggurat or temple, the gods of the tribe or the state ruled and exercised power over the city or the empire. When Pharaoh says to Moses: "Who is the Lord that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2), he means – here, I am the sovereign power. Egypt has its own gods. Within its boundaries, they alone rule, and they have delegated that power to me, their earthly representative. There may indeed be a God of Israel, but his power and authority do not extend to Egypt. Divine sovereignty is like political sovereignty. It has borders. It has spatial location. It is bounded by a place on the map.

With Israel, an old-new idea (it goes back, according to the Torah, to Adam, Cain, Abraham and Jacob, all of whom suffered exile) is reborn: that God, being everywhere, can be found anywhere. He is what Morris Berman calls the "wandering God."[2] Just as in the desert His cloud of glory accompanied the Israelites on their long and meandering journey, so, said the rabbis, "when Israel went into exile, the Divine Presence went with them."[3] God cannot be confined to a specific place. Even in Israel, His presence among the people depended on their obedience to His word. Hence there is no such thing as physical security, the certain knowledge that here-I-am-and-here-I-stay. As David said in Psalm 30:

> When I felt secure, I said,
> "I will never be shaken."
> …but when You hid Your face,
> I was dismayed.

"Even a place of rest is still called a journey – because we know we are not here forever. There is a way still to go."

Security belongs not to place but to person, not to a physical space on the surface of the earth but to a spiritual space in the human heart.

If anything is responsible for the unparalleled strength of Jewish identity during the long centuries in which Jews were scattered throughout the world, a minority everywhere, it is this – the concept to which Jews and Judaism gave the name *galut*, exile. Unique among nations in the ancient or modern world, with few exceptions they neither converted to the dominant faith nor assimilated to the prevailing culture. The sole reason was that they never mistook a particular place for home, a temporary location for ultimate destination. "Now we are here," they said at the beginning of the Seder service, "but next year, in the land of Israel."

In Jewish law, one who rents a house outside Israel is obliged to affix a *mezuza* only after thirty days.[4] Until then it is not yet regarded as a dwelling place. Only after thirty days does it become, de facto, home. In Israel, however, one who rents a house is immediately obligated, *mishum yishuv Eretz Yisrael*, "because of the command to settle Israel." Outside Israel, Jewish life is a way, a path, a route. Even an encampment, a place of rest, is still called a journey.

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[2] Morris Berman, *Wandering God: A Study in Nomadic Spirituality* (State University of New York Press, 2000).

[3] Megilla 29a; Sifrei, Numbers, p. 161

[4] Yoreh De'ah 286:22.

In this context, one detail stands out in the long list of instructions about the Tabernacle. It concerns the Ark, in which were kept the tablets of stone that Moses brought down the mountain, permanent reminders of God's covenant with Israel. On the side of the Ark were gold rings, two on each side, within which poles or staves were fitted so that the Ark could be carried when the time came for the Israelites to move on (Exodus 25:12-14). The Torah adds the following stipulation:

> The poles are to remain in the rings of this Ark; they are not to be removed. (Exodus 25:15)

Why so? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explained that the Ark was to be permanently ready when the need arose for the Israelites to travel. Why was the same not true about the other objects in the Tabernacle, such as the altar and the menorah? To show supremely, said Hirsch, that the Torah was not limited to any one place.[5] And so it was. The Torah became, in the famous phrase of Heinrich Heine, "the portable homeland of the Jew." Throughout history Jews found themselves scattered and dispersed among the nations, never knowing when they would be forced to leave and find a new home. In the fifteenth century alone, Jews were expelled from Vienna and Linz in 1421, from Cologne in 1424, Augsburg in 1439, Bavaria in 1442, Moravia in 1454, Perugia in 1485, Vicenza in 1486, Parma in 1488, Milan and Lucca in 1489, Spain in 1492 and Portugal 1497.[6]

How did they survive, their identity intact, their faith, though sorely challenged, still strong? Because they believed that God was with them, even in exile. Because they were sustained by the line from Psalms (23:4), "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." Because they still had the Torah, God's unbreakable covenant, with its promise that "In spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the Lord their God" (Leviticus 26:44). Because they were a people used to travelling, knowing that even an encampment is only a temporary dwelling.

Emil Fackenheim, the distinguished theologian, was a Holocaust survivor. Born in Halle, Germany, in 1916, he was arrested on Kristallnacht and interned at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, from which he eventually escaped. He recalled a picture hanging in his parents' house when he was a child:

> It was not our kind of picture…because what it portrayed was not a German-Jewish experience: Jews fleeing from a pogrom. Even so it moved me deeply, and I remember it well. The fleeing Jews in the picture are bearded old men, terrified, but not so much as to leave behind what is most precious to them. In the view of antisemites these Jews would doubtless be clutching bags of gold. In fact, each of them carries a Torah scroll.[7]

There is nothing in history quite like this Jewish ability to travel, to move on, accompanied by no more than the Divine word, the promise, the call, the faith in an ultimate destination. That is how Jewish history began, with God's call to Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house (Genesis 12:1). That is how Jewish history has continued for most of four thousand years. Outside Israel, Jews' only security was faith itself and its eternal record in the Torah, God's love letter to the Jewish people, His unbreakable bond. And during all those centuries, though they were derided as "the wandering Jew,"[8] they became living testimony to the possibility of faith in the midst of uncertainty, and to the God who made this faith possible, the God of everywhere, symbolised by the Tabernacle, His portable home.

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[5] The Pentateuch, translated with commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1982), 2:43-35.

[6] Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 2:434-435.

[7] Emil Fackenheim, *What Is Judaism?* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 60.

[8] See Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes, *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

And when the time came for Jews to make one more journey, to the land first promised to Abraham and that Moses spent his life as a leader travelling towards, they did so without hesitation or demur. Scenes of leave-taking were repeated time and again during the years 1948-51, when one after another, the Jewish communities in Arab lands – the Maghreb, Iraq, Yemen – said goodbye to homes they had lived in for centuries and left for Israel. They too knew that those homes were mere encampments, stages on a journey whose ultimate destination lay elsewhere.

In 1990, Dalai Lama, who had lived in exile from Tibet since 1951, invited a group of Jewish scholars to visit him in North India. Realising that he and his followers might have to spend many years in exile before they were allowed back, he had pondered the question, how does a way of life sustain itself far from home? He realised that one group above all others had faced and solved that problem: the Jews. So he turned to them for advice.[9]

Whether the Jewish answer – which has to do with faith in the God of history – is applicable to Buddhism is a moot point, but the encounter was fascinating nonetheless, because it showed that even the Dalai Lama, leader of a group far removed from Judaism, recognised that there is something unparalleled in the Jewish capacity to stay faithful to the terms of its existence despite dispersion, never losing faith that one day the exiles would return to their land.

How and why it happened is contained in those simple words of Rashi at the end of Exodus. Even when at rest, Jews knew that they would one day have to uproot their tents, dismantle the Tabernacle, and move on. "Even an encampment is called a journey." A people that never stops travelling is one that never grows old or stale or complacent. It may live in the here-and-now, but it is always conscious of the distant past and the still-beckoning future.

> But I have promises to keep
> and miles to go before I sleep.

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[9] The full story of the encounter is told in Roger Kamenetz's book, *The Jew in the Lotus* (HarperOne, 2007).