Exodus Politics

An extract from the Introductory essay in the Jonathan Sacks Haggada

The political vision to emerge from the crucible of exile was unique, an ideal never fully realized yet never ceasing to make Jewish life different from the way other societies have structured themselves. Essentially it is a sustained critique of power at every level: political, economic, military, even demographic.

The use of power by one human over another is a form of violence. It diminishes victim and perpetrator alike. Power is a zero-sum game. I use it to buy my freedom at the cost of yours. It is a way of getting you to do my will despite your will. It turns you into a means to my end. Dominance, the use of force, brutality, whether raw as in primitive societies, or cultivated as in the case of hierarchical, class- or caste-based social orders, is an act of defiance against the principle of the first chapter of Genesis, that we are all created equally in the image and likeness of God.

So ideally Israel would not have a power structure in the form of kings at all. As Gideon the judge said when the people sought to make him king, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. God will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). Israel's army will not rely on force of arms or brute strength. God "does not take delight in the strength of horses, nor pleasure in the fleetness of man" (Ps. 7:10). Whether it is Joshua against Jericho, Gideon against the Midianites, David against Goliath, or Elisha predicting the sudden end of an Aramean siege, the emphasis is always on the few against the many, the weak against the strong, intelligence against brute force, the unexpected outcome through unconventional means.

Wealth may be as much of a danger as poverty: "When you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deut. 8:12–14). Nor, despite the repeated promises in Genesis of as many children as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth or the sand on the seashore, would Israel find strength in numbers: "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7).

The political structure envisaged by the Torah emerges out of a profound meditation – beginning in the opening chapters of Genesis – on the tension between freedom and order. God creates order, calling the universe into being day after day by mere speech ("And God said"); for the first three days creating carefully differentiated domains: night and day, upper and lower waters, sea and dry land; then for the next three days furnishing them with the appropriate forms: sun and moon, birds and fish, animals and humans. This finely tuned order, seven times pronounced "good," is disrupted because of the freedom God has bestowed on man, sin leading to murder and from there to a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all in which life is nasty, brutish and short.

The human alternatives set out in Genesis and Exodus are stark. There is freedom without order – the world before the Flood – and there is order without freedom – the Egypt of the pharaohs.

How then can there be both? This is the problem and it is not simple. The sages had a tradition that the question, "What is this service to you?" (Ex. 12:26), was asked by "the wicked son." The Haggada attributes this to the phrase "to you" – implying "but not to me." Other commentators[1] point to the verb used in the verse. Normally a question is *asked*, but here it is *said* ("And if your children should say to you…"). When you ask a question, you seek an answer. But when you state a question, you merely seek to challenge and undermine.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Pesachim* 10:4), though, has a quite different explanation. It focuses on the word "service," and has the child asking, "What is the point of all this effort at which you are toiling?" What the Yerushalmi is alluding to is that the word the Torah uses for the enslavement of the Israelites to Pharaoh, *avoda*, is exactly the same as it uses for serving God. In what sense, then, were the Israelites liberated from slavery to freedom? Before the Exodus they were *avadim*. After the Exodus they were *avadim*. The only difference was to whom. Before it was to Pharaoh, thereafter it was to God. On the face of it, this looks less like freedom than a mere change of masters. One may be cruel, the other benign, but *avdut*, service or servitude, is still the opposite of freedom. Where then does liberty enter the human condition?

The Torah's answer consists of three elements. First is the principle of consent. Read the Torah carefully and we see that God binds Himself to make a covenant with the Israelites only if they agree. He tells Moses to make a proposal to the people. God will take them as His *am segula*, favoured people, if and only if they willingly assent to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Both before and after the revelation at Mount Sinai the people give their consent. Note the wording. Before the revelation:

> *All the people answered as one* and said, "All that God has spoken, we will do." (Ex. 19:8)

Afterward, we read:

> Moses came and told the people all of God's words and all the laws. The people *all responded with a single voice,* "We will keep every word that God has spoken" […]. He took the book of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. They replied, "We will do and obey all that God has declared." (Ex. 24:3, 7)

Unlike all other covenants in the ancient world this was not made on behalf of the people by their ruler. Moses is not empowered to speak on behalf of the Israelites. They all have to be asked; they all have to give their consent. This, argues political

[1] Rabbi Moshe Silber, *Chashukei Kesef* to Exodus 12:26.

philosopher Michael Walzer, is part of what makes the political structure of the Torah an "almost democracy."[2]

Note also that God insists on asking the people whether they agree to the covenant and its terms, despite the fact that He has rescued them from slavery, and that they have already called themselves, in the Song at the Sea, "the people You acquired" (Ex. 15:16). Implicit in this strong insistence on voluntary agreement is the principle (stated in the American Declaration of Independence[3]) that *there is no government without the consent of the governed, even when the governor is God Himself*. The presence or absence of assent is what makes the difference between freedom and slavery.[4]

The second is that throughout Deuteronomy, the Torah's key covenantal document, the commandments are not given as "decrees of the king" to be obeyed merely because they have been ordained. Reasons are constantly given, usually in terms of the phrase, "remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt." By this appeal to reason, God "invites the receiver of the law to join in grasping the beneficent effect of the law, thereby bestowing dignity upon him and giving him a sense that he is a partner in the law."[5]

There is a fundamental difference between a parent teaching a child why certain things are wrong, and a commander instructing those under his command not to do this or that. The one is a form of education; the other is a relationship of command-and-control. Education is an apprenticeship in liberty; command-and-control is a demand for obedience, pure and simple. One of the most striking facts about biblical Hebrew is that, despite the Torah containing 613 commandments, it contains no word that means "to obey." Modern Hebrew had to adopt the Aramaic word *letzayet*. The word the Torah uses instead of "to obey" is *shema*, a word that means "to listen, to hear, to understand, to internalize, and to respond." God does not call for blind submission to His will. As the sages said, "God does not act like a tyrant to His creatures" (*Avoda Zara* 3a).

God wants us to keep His laws freely and voluntarily because we understand them. Hence the unique insistence, throughout the Torah, on the importance of education as the constant conversation between the generations. Parents are to talk to their children repeatedly about them, "when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deut. 6:7).

> When your children ask you, "What are the testimonies, the statutes and laws that the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell them: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand.... The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so

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[2] Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow,* p. 200.
[3] "To secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."
[4] The Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a) famously questions whether the consent given at Mount Sinai was truly free. The covenant however was subsequently renewed several times under different circumstances.
[5] Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, Gemara,* 14.

> that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today." (Deut. 6:20–24)

Third is the radical alternative to a hierarchical society: the horizontal society formed by the covenant, through which each is responsible for playing his or her part in the maintenance of a just and gracious order – by helping the poor, acting justly, honestly and compassionately, educating children, not neglecting marginal members of society and so on, the principle later formulated by the sages as "all Israel are sureties for one another" (*Sanhedrin* 27b; *Shevuot* 39a).

This is a radically devolved leadership that Exodus calls "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6), and to which Moses alludes when he says, "Would that all God's people were prophets" (Num. 11:29). Covenant, as set forth in the Hebrew Bible, is the dramatic idea that the people, individually and together, accept responsibility for determining their fate by acting righteously with one another, relying on the God of justice to secure justice in the arena of history. They have autonomy; only God has sovereignty. If the people act well, God will ensure that they fare well. If they act badly, it will end badly. All depends on faithfulness to God and decency to people. All else – governments, rulers, armies, alliances, strategy, warfare, the entire repertoire of power – will prove illusory in the long run.

The politics of the Torah are unlike any other in the emphasis they place on society rather than the state; "we the people" rather than governments, monarchs or rulers; voluntary welfare rather than state-based taxation; devolved rather than centralized authority; education and social sanction rather than the coercive use of power. It never fully succeeded in biblical times. The reluctant conclusion of the Book of Judges is that "in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6 and 21:25). Without government there is anarchy. Even the Israelites were forced to this Hobbesian conclusion ("Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for fear of it, people would swallow one another alive" [*Avot* 3:2]). Thus monarchy was born and with it the corruptions of power.

Yet the ideal remained and gained in strength after the reforms of Ezra, the growth of rabbinic Judaism and its academies, and the dispersion of Jewry after the collapse of the Bar Kokhba rebellion. What emerged was a unique collection of semi-autonomous communities, each with its own religious, educational and welfare institutions, self-funded and self-governing, with fellowships, *chevrot*, for almost every conceivable communal need – supporting the poor, visiting the sick, performing last rites for the dead, helping families who had suffered bereavement, and so on through the catalogue of requirements of dignified life as a member of the community of faith. The educational structure, lynchpin of the entire system, worked on the assumption that everyone was expected to be learned in the law – to know it, understand it, keep it and ensure that it was kept by others.

In a manuscript found among his papers after his death, the French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed amazement at the power of this "astonishing and truly unique spectacle," an exiled, landless and often persecuted

people, “nonetheless preserving its characteristics, its laws, its customs, its patriotic love of the early social union, when all ties with it seem broken.” Athens, Sparta and Rome, he says, “have perished and no longer have children left on earth; Zion, destroyed, has not lost its children.” He continues:

> What must be the strength of legislation capable of working such wonders, capable of braving conquests, dispersions, revolutions, exiles, capable of surviving the customs, laws, empire of all the nations, and which finally promises them, by these trials, that it is going to continue to sustain them all, to conquer the vicissitudes of things human, and to last as long as the world?[6]

The short answer is that in its unique political structure, in which all sovereignty belongs to God and where the other covenantal partner is not the king, High Priest or prophet but the nation as a whole, responsibility is maximally diffused and ethics does the work of what in other systems is done by politics. The opposite of one man ruling over a nation is a nation ruling over itself, under the eye of, following the laws of, and accountable to, God Himself. Utopian to be sure and never fully realizable in a world of wars, yet it remains the greatest experiment ever undertaken in the idea of politics without power, the rule of right not might.

[6] Quoted in Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. III (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 104–5.