

CHAPTER 20

Judaism: A Covenant Relationship

Judaism is the oldest of the world's great monotheistic religions and is the parent of both Christianity and Islam. There is no one identifiable founder in Judaism, and it is not only a religion but also a people. Jews have a very strong sense of their own history and their identity as bound up with that history.

The Jewish scriptures start with God's activity in the Creation of the cosmos, the Garden of Eden, the fall of man and the subsequent history of salvation. In Judaism, history is the arena of God's purposeful activity. More than any other religion, Judaism cannot be understood apart from its history.

The Jewish people themselves can be traced back to the ancient Mesopotamian civilization about 3,800 years ago. They were different from their neighbors because they broke away from the belief in many gods and the use of idols. Instead, they

believed in one God who is just and merciful, who gives human beings laws so that they too can be just and merciful. They served God not just through prayer and sacrifice but also through acts of kindness and hospitality. And they believed that God was active and could be discerned in the patterns of history.

The history of the Jews is recorded in the Bible. It is an unusual account, since all the faults, mistakes and weaknesses of the forefathers of the Jewish people are recorded as well as their successes.

The Patriarchs

It is from Abraham that the Hebrews traced their lineage. There is a fascinating story of how Abraham came to believe in the one God and thus indelibly changed world history.



Abraham and the idols

When Abraham was born, Nimrod was king. Nimrod thought he was a god, and he made all the people worship him. He had statues built to which people had to bow down. However, one day Nimrod found out that a man would be born who would show his religion to be a lie. Nimrod was terrified and had all the baby boys put to death. When Abraham's mother discovered she was about to give birth, she fled into the desert and had her baby secretly. Not being able to take care of Abraham, she abandoned him in a cave and prayed that God would protect him.

The angel Gabriel took care of Abraham, and he grew up very quickly. Walking along the edge of the valley one evening, Abraham saw the stars and said to himself, "These are the gods!" But when the dawn came, and the stars could no longer be seen, he said, "I will not worship the stars, for they are not gods." Then the sun came up and he said, "This is my god; him I will worship." But the sun eventually set, and Abraham said, "He is no god." Seeing the moon, he said, "I will worship you." But the moon became obscured by a cloud and he cried out, "This too is no god. But there is One who created heaven and earth and who sets them all in motion."

After meeting the angel Gabriel, Abraham went to find his parents. When he met his mother, he told her who he was and what had happened. He told her that there was only one God, who was living, everlasting and great, who sees but who cannot be seen. "He is in the heavens above, and the whole earth is full of His glory."

His mother took him home to meet his father, Terah, who was an idol maker. That is to say, he made the images of the god Nimrod that people worshiped. One day when Terah was sick, he told his new-found son to take some idols into the market to sell. As Abraham was walking to the market, an old woman came up to him and asked him how much the idols cost. He replied, "Old woman, why do you want to buy this piece of wood to worship? My father only made it last week. It is not even as old as you, and yet you want to worship it?" The old woman was astonished and asked Abraham whom he worshiped. Abraham replied that he worshiped the God who created the heavens and the earth but who was invisible. The old woman believed him and became his first follower. But when Abraham went home and told his father what had happened and that he had not sold any idols, Terah was very angry.

One day Terah had to leave home, and so he said to his son, "Since you are not a good salesman, you can stay at home and guard the idols." When his father had gone, Abraham went into the room where all the idols were kept. He talked to them but they would not reply. Then he gave the biggest one a meal. He left the room and came back several hours later, but the meal was untouched. So he took an ax and smashed the idols. When his father came home, he saw the idols were broken. He called Abraham and demanded an explanation. Abraham said, "I brought the biggest god a meal. But the other gods were jealous. So they all had a big fight and they beat each other up." Terah was very angry. He decided to take his unbelieving son to see the god, King Nimrod.

When Nimrod heard from Abraham that there was an unseen God who created the heavens and the earth and who sat in judgment upon all people including the king, Nimrod was very angry. "There is no god greater than I," he said. He had Abraham flung into a burning furnace. However, Abraham did not die. When he was released, God told him to leave home with his family and his several hundred followers and go to Canaan.

Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their extended family traveled to Canaan. It is recorded in the Bible that God established a covenant with Abraham and promised him that one day the land would belong to his descendants.

Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, from whom are descended, respectively, the Jews and the Arabs. Isaac and his wife Rebecca had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob had twelve sons, who, tradition says, were the forefathers of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

However, it is through Moses and the historical events associated with him that the Jewish consciousness was profoundly shaped. It is to them that we now turn.

The life of Moses

During Jacob's lifetime, his family migrated into the land of Egypt. At this time Egypt was ruled by the Hyksos — a Semitic people who had invaded Egypt in 1710 BC and established the 15th dynasty. Under their rule, the Hebrews prospered and grew in numbers and prosperity. When the Hyksos were driven out of Egypt in 1540 BC, the Israelites (the descendants of Jacob and his sons), who were associated with them, came to be regarded as a threat to subsequent dynasties. It is probable that gradually they were persecuted and increasingly discriminated against until finally they were enslaved.

The period of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt lasted, according to the Bible, for 400 years. It is commonly believed by scholars that about 1275 BC, during the reign of Rameses II, the Exodus led by Moses took place.

According to the Bible, the Egyptian Pharaoh, frightened by the growth rate of the Hebrews, ordered that all Hebrew baby boys should be put to death. Moses avoided this fate through a ruse of his mother's. He was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and brought up in the palace as an Egyptian prince. Moses' mother, who was employed as his nurse, taught him about his true background. When he was 40 years old, he saw an Egyptian slave driver beating a Hebrew. Feeling the suffering of the slave, he struck and killed the Egyptian. The Pharaoh heard about what he had done and sought to kill him. So Moses fled to the wilderness of Midian.

Many years later, after he had married and had a son, while herding his sheep one day Moses saw a burning bush that was not consumed by the fire. In wonder, he approached it to investigate, and God spoke to him.

"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

— Exodus 3:7-8

God asked Moses to go back to Egypt to bring the Hebrews out of slavery. Moses, however, found many excuses why he was not suited to the task. Moses was very unassuming. He did not self-confidently and ambitiously agree to be the leader. On the contrary, he had to be pressed very hard by God to do the job.

Finally, Moses and his brother Aaron went to Egypt and won the support of the elders of the people of Israel. Together, they went to see the Pharaoh and addressed him.

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.' " Pharaoh said, "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."

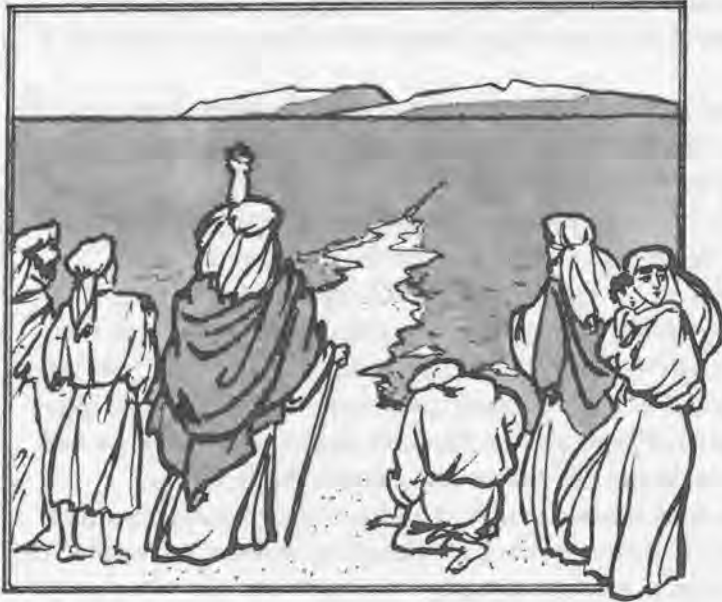
— Exodus 5:1-2

Instead, the Pharaoh increased the Hebrews' workload. According to the Bible, God responded by bringing upon Egypt a series of plagues and disasters. Each time the Pharaoh asked Moses to stop the disaster. But each time, after the trouble ceased, Pharaoh changed his mind and refused to let the Hebrews go. The Hebrews could see that Pharaoh was a stubborn and evil man, one who did not keep his word. Many Egyptians sympathized with the Hebrews, and even the Pharaoh's servants turned against him. Moses' prestige among everyone rose. The people started to gain confidence that Almighty God was on their side.

The final calamity was the death of all the first-born among the Egyptians. The Pharaoh's own son died. In his grief, finally the Pharaoh gave permission for the Hebrews to go. The relieved Egyptians showered the departing Hebrews with gifts of gold, silver and clothing.

The Exodus

According to the Bible, 600,000 men and their families left Egypt and traveled into the desert. As soon as the Pharaoh realized he had lost his work force, he pursued the Hebrews with an army and 600 charioteers. In front of the Israelites was the Red Sea. When they saw the dust clouds of the approaching Egyptian army, the Israelites were afraid and complained to Moses:



“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

— Exodus 14:11-12

Moses, however, encouraged the people to put their trust in God. He stretched his staff over the sea. A strong east wind blew all that night, and the water was divided. Dry ground appeared, and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea

safely. However, the water closed up on the pursuing Egyptians, who were all drowned. The exact location of the crossing is unknown, although it is thought to be to the north of the Red Sea. Miracles such as these could have been the coincidence of natural phenomena happening at the “right” time.

The Israelites traveled in the desert toward Mount Sinai, guided by a pillar of fire during the night and a pillar of cloud during the day. Soon their supplies of food and water were exhausted. The Israelites grumbled and complained to Moses and Aaron.

“If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

— Exodus 16:3-4

The covenant

After many adventures, trials and tribulations the people arrived at Mount Sinai. Moses perceived the presence of God on the mountaintop. He climbed the mountain, and there God spoke with him.

“This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be

my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, “We will do everything the Lord has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord.

— Exodus 19:4-8

God had demonstrated His love and care for the people. He had liberated them from slavery and brought them out of the land of Egypt. He wanted to lead them to Canaan, a land “flowing with milk and honey.” But He also wanted them to be “a holy nation and a kingdom of priests.” God wanted them to be His people. He wanted to make a covenant with them. A covenant is a relationship that is binding, wholehearted, enduring and based on mutual loyalty. The emphasis is on mutual belonging and enduring responsibility, even if there is unfaithfulness. Such an intimate relationship, because it is based on trust, is characterized by great inner freedom. Of course, such a relationship can only be freely entered into. It cannot be forcibly imposed. So God was wooing the Israelites, as a man might woo his prospective bride. God wanted to propose to them, but before that He had to win their trust.

So when they accepted His proposal, God told them to purify themselves for three days, washing their clothes and abstaining from sexual relations. Then Moses once again went up the mountain, where God revealed to him the Ten Commandments and gave him guidance about other matters.

These were the conditions of the covenant. If the people kept them, they would be blessed by God. If they acted faithlessly, God, as their parent and king, would punish them until they recognized the error of their ways, repented, and practiced once more the true way of life. After receiving the Words from God, Moses told the people all the Lord’s words and laws, and they responded with one voice, “Everything the Lord has said we will do.”

This was very important. God was not asking them to agree to something they did not fully understand. The laws were simple, just and easy to understand. The people responded and agreed to keep the laws which God had given them. There followed the covenant ceremony to make the covenant binding.

Through this ceremony the people of Israel became God’s kinsmen. No longer were they to be slaves belonging to and ruled by evil kings. Now they were God’s family. Like all families, the relationship was often stormy, and the dialogues of the prophets show the intimacy and freedom they felt in their relationship with God.

After the covenant was established, God once more called Moses to go up the mountain and receive the two tablets of stone upon which were carved the Ten Commandments. To receive the tablets, Moses fasted for 40 days. Meanwhile, the people at the foot of the mountain grew restless. Moses had been away a long time, and others came forward to challenge his leadership and policies. They pressured Aaron into making a golden calf, an idol which they then worshipped. God was shocked by the way the people quickly forgot their promises and attributed to an idol the saving work God had just wrought. He spoke to Moses:

The Ten Commandments

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

— Exodus 20:1-17

“Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

— Exodus 32:7-10



Moses, however, was no ordinary leader. Even though the people caused him a lot of frustration and pain, he stood up and defended the Israelites before God. He reminded God that He, too, was obliged to keep the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob:

“Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

— Exodus 32: 11-14

That Moses could change God’s mind shows that the covenant was a living, dynamic relationship.

The Israelites later built the Tabernacle, a portable temple in which was placed the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark contained the two tablets of stone. This was the focal point of Jewish religious ceremony. The Tabernacle was later replaced by the Temple, built by King Solomon in 960 BC.

These two events, the Exodus and the occurrences at Sinai, liberation and covenant, formed the two pillars of Judaic self-understanding. They were two sides of the same coin. The liberty they had been granted was to be preserved and guaranteed by the covenant. The law protected people’s freedom as it prevented people from oppressing each other. The goal was the promised land, a land of milk and honey, of prosperity. But prosperity without an ethical dimension would have led back to tyranny and injustice. The only way the Israelites could remain free was if they became a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. In a nation filled with righteous people, no one goes in fear of losing his life, or of his property being stolen. Promises are kept, and the strong do not terrorize the weak.

Into Canaan

The Israelites then continued on their journey to Canaan. However, conditions in the desert were not easy, and the people often grumbled. Sometimes the hardships they experienced as slaves in Egypt seemed mild in comparison.

“If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost, also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”

— Num. 11:4-6

Moses told God about the situation, and in his words we see revealed the honest relationship he had with God.

“Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now — if I have found favor in your eyes — and do not let me face my own ruin.”

— Num. 11:11

Finally, after 21 months, they reached the border of Canaan. Moses sent out 12 men to spy on the land for 40 days. When the spies returned, they gave their report to the people.

“We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large.” Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”

But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

— Num. 13:27-14:4

Since the people were not yet ready to enter Canaan, they were doomed to wander in the wilderness for another 40 years. Almost all the people who left Egypt died in the desert. It was their children who crossed the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Moses himself could only look at Canaan from the top of a mountain before he died.

“The Lord God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the earth.”

— Deut. 7:6

A chosen people

Jews are sometimes called the chosen people. This term is often misunderstood. Indeed, many people find it offensive, since it suggests that God has favorites. This notion has become a source of much misunderstanding and hostility. There have been other nations that have thought they were chosen by God to rule over other peoples because they were superior. For the Jews, though, the term means responsibility,

not privilege. Whereas all other people are required to observe only seven of the commandments (this is explained in the next chapter), Jews have to keep 613 laws, as part of their covenant with God. They see themselves as chosen to serve God and to suffer the ordeals that such service entails. By establishing the covenant with God and accepting the demands of the Mosaic law, they suffered the penalties for its violation.

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; Therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.”

— Amos 3:2

The Jewish notion of being chosen was not exclusive. God loves all the nations and wants to save them all. Israel was just to be the means through which this salvation was to be mediated.

Thus we can understand the implications of being “chosen.” Individuals and nations who think they have some special calling can look to the Bible to see what the responsibilities of such a position are. The failure to acknowledge such responsibility has led to egoism on individual, national and racial levels. Unfortunately, many who thought they had a special calling understood this to mean they should have unlimited power and could do no wrong. The Old Testament, by contrast, is an extraordinarily honest litany of all the errors and sins committed by the Jewish people. In this sense it is without precedent. Whereas other nations hid their wrongdoings and boasted of their accomplishments, the Old Testament recounts all the wrongdoings of the people and gives all the credit to God for anything good.

Something to think about



- Why do you think Moses was reluctant to agree immediately to become God’s prophet?
- How do you understand the notion “covenant”? What examples of covenant relationships do you know?
- Why does it often happen that people first enthusiastically respond to new ideas, but then start to doubt them?
- Do you agree with the statement “It is one thing to be freed from slavery. It is another thing to be a free man”?
- To what extent is it important to understand the meaning of any new responsibilities and their consequences before accepting them?
- How do you understand the phrase “The only way to keep freedom is to become a righteous people”?
- What is the relationship between the notions “chosen” and “responsible”? Imagine that you are chosen for some high position. Would it change your life — your views, your attitude toward people, your material well-being? If so, what kind of changes?

For Your Journal



After a shipwreck you and your class are stranded on a desert island. There is no hope of being found. You are faced with the necessity of creating a new society. What kind of society would you like to see? How should it develop? What obstacles do you think you will meet? What will you do to enable an orderly and equitable society to develop, so that a majority of the people on the island will be happy? Explain the steps you think would be necessary. Would your classmates agree with your plans, or would there be problems?

Moses and the Fox

Adapted from *School for Prayer*, by Anthony Bloom

Moses finds a shepherd in the desert. He spends the day with the shepherd and helps him milk his ewes. At the end of the day he sees that the shepherd puts the best milk he has in a wooden bowl, which he places on a flat stone some distance away. Moses asks him what it is for, and the shepherd replies, "This is God's milk." Moses is puzzled and asks him what he means. The shepherd says, "I always take the best milk I possess, and I bring it as an offering to God." Moses, who is far more sophisticated than the shepherd with his naive faith, asks, "And does God drink it?" "Yes," replies the shepherd. "He does." Then Moses feels compelled to enlighten the poor shepherd, and he explains that God, being pure spirit, does not drink milk. Yet the poor shepherd is sure that He does, and so they have a short argument, which ends with Moses telling the shepherd to hide behind the bushes to find out whether in fact God does come to drink the milk. Moses then goes out to pray in the desert. The shepherd hides, the night comes, and in the moonlight the shepherd sees a little fox that comes trotting from the desert, looks right, looks left and heads straight for the milk, which he laps up, and disappears into the desert again. The next morning Moses finds the shepherd quite depressed and downcast. "What's the matter?" he asks. The shepherd says, "You were right. God is pure spirit, and He doesn't want my milk." Moses is surprised. He says, "You should be happy. You know more about God than you did before." "Yes, I do," says the shepherd, "but the only thing I could do to express my love for Him has been taken away from me." Moses sees the point. He retires into the desert and prays hard. In the night in a vision, God speaks to him and says, "Moses, you were wrong. It is true that I am pure spirit. Nevertheless I always accepted with gratitude the milk which the shepherd offered me, as the expression of his love, but since I am pure spirit, I do not need milk, I shared it with this little fox, who is very fond of milk."

