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The Exodus as the Foundational Paradigm for Social Justice

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A recent survey of the American Jewish population determined that more than 70% of American Jews have participated, at least once in their lives, in a Passover ritual.¹ Passover, along with Hanukkah and Yom Kippur, occupies a significant place in the religio-cultural life of American Jewry. What is the reason this holiday is so widely observed amongst Jews from all denominational backgrounds? One could argue that a significant factor in its widespread popularity may be because so many of its central observances and rituals take place outside of the institutional walls of a synagogue i.e. in the home and family context. However, perhaps there is another reason, one that is more fundamental to the nature of the holiday that compels such a vast percentage of American Jewry, despite its high rates of assimilation and disaffection, to associate with its practice?

Rabban Gamliel is quoted as stating that “in each and every generation, one is obligated to see oneself as having left Egypt” (*Mishna Pesachim* 10:5). This particular mishna occupies a high point in the annual Passover seder, the public feast and set of rituals performed the first two nights of the holiday. The biblical source for the obligation to personalize the liberation from Egypt is a verse in the Book of Exodus, “And you shall tell your child on that day saying: It is because of this that God acted on my behalf when I left Egypt” (13:8). The mishna places the emphasis in the verse on the word “you,” thereby exhorting the reader to view the Exodus not as an event only to be recorded in the annals of history, but rather as a moment living within the consciousness of modern times and within the memory of each living individual. Accordingly, Dr. Ronald Hendel of the University of California at Berkeley describes the Exodus from Egypt quoting a saying by William Faulkner: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”²

The biblical saga of the children of Jacob migrating to Egypt, rising to power and affluence, descending into a state of slavery while suffering immense persecution, and then eventually being redeemed by the mighty and awesome God of their forefathers serves as the main source of

¹ Surveying the Jewish Population in the United States, *Institute for Jewish and Community Research*, 2003.

² “The Exodus in Biblical Memory,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, No. 4 (Winter 2001), 601.

authenticity to the eventual covenant formed between the nascent Israelite nation and God. This is alluded to in the biblical commentary of the preeminent medieval scholar Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra expounds on the verse in Exodus 13:8 and suggests that the term “this” refers to the biblical commandments to eat *matzah* and the sacrificial Passover offering.³ Ibn Ezra maintains that the primary motivation for the miraculous redemption of the Israelite nation was to forge a nation that would heed the Divine command. The people would then commit themselves to performing the will of God as embodied in a set of particularistic obligations and thereby become the “treasured” nation of the Divine (Ex. 19:5). The entire covenantal relationship would most likely never have developed if the children of Jacob had not sojourned in Egypt and went through the ordeals and trauma of slavery and then after experienced a Divine liberation.⁴

Yet one may question why it was necessary - indeed absolutely critical - for the Israelites to experience the torment of oppression in order to become elevated to the status of a chosen, treasured people? The entire Hebrew biblical tradition relies on the Exodus as a critical cornerstone of the narrative of covenant, as the bedrock of all subsequent commandments, and as the inspiration for much of the later prophetic tradition.⁵ Moreover, the holiday of Passover, against all odds, persists in being observed in the modern era despite it being an era of unaffiliation, assimilation, and apathy. The common understanding of the Exodus is that of a prelude to the revelation of the Torah at Horeb and the eventual construction of the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. This perspective is most popularly represented in the liturgical song of the Passover seder “*Dayenu*,” in which the events of the Exodus, the revelation of the Torah, the settlement of the Land of Israel, and the building of the Temple are outlined in a seemingly sequential order, with the most exalted being the construction of the Temple. In other words, the entire liberation seems to serve as a backdrop to future events.

This view, though not the view of Ibn Ezra, nor that of other classic and significant commentators,⁶ operates under the assumption that the Exodus from Egypt served as the foundational moment in the formation of the Israelite nation and its election as God’s chosen people. Yet a question must be raised as to why there was a necessity to begin the covenantal relationship in the furnace of oppression in Egypt? The Exodus serves as the prime biblical event to be forever commemorated and

³ Ibn Ezra, Ex. 13:8.

⁴ The necessity of an experience of servitude was alluded to in Genesis 15:13 at the “Covenant of the Parts” between God and Abraham.

⁵ Hendel, “The Exodus in Biblical Memory,” 601.

⁶ For example, see the commentaries of Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 10th century) and Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Avraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra, 9th century) on the verse in Exodus 13:8 that opine similarly to Nahmanides.

remembered in the lives of the people of Israel. It forges a common identity amongst a collection of disparate tribes, clans, and families and unites them all into a nation. The children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are only first referred to as a nation in the context of the redemptive experience from Egypt. It is through the collective and shared suffering and commiseration that the children of Jacob are able to leave Egypt as the nation of Israel. Hendel opines that the “memories of shared suffering are potent ingredients in the formation and persistence of ethnic identity,” thus, the Pharaoh recorded in the narrative of the Exodus is intentionally left nameless in order to remain an “emblem of collective memory.”⁷ All in all, the beginnings of the Israelite national experience - the major thrust of the biblical narrative and one of the central themes of the Jewish calendrical year - are encapsulated by the experiential depths of oppression and servitude, inversely laced and coupled with an ultimate and climactic redemption and liberation.

The Catholic Church, in a different context, wrestled with its own issues of oppression and redemption in the latter half of the twentieth century during a period of intense political upset and revolt in Latin America.⁸ A wave of anti-establishment sentiment swept the continent, which had been historically dominated by colonialist forces. The local Catholic Church responding to the needs of the population began to re-evaluate traditional theological positions of order and hierarchy and developed a theology that would revolutionize Christendom: Liberation Theology. One of the seminal works of this new theology was written in 1972 by the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez entitled *A Theology of Liberation: Perspectives*. Gutierrez in his work, highlights three steps towards a total liberation. The first step dictates there be a real and practical solution implemented to the situation of the world’s poor and oppressed and that there can be no theologizing or any lofty agenda until the immediate temporal needs of the poor are dealt with. The second is that global society must address the systemic biases that “limit their (the oppressed and poor) capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity.”⁹ Finally, in order to create a lasting change that profoundly impacts the lives of the downtrodden, humanity’s bond to God must be reaffirmed and strengthened. People must pursue a life of continuous introspection and improvement. This last step will ultimately bring about a liberation from what lies at the heart of all oppressions: sinfulness and selfishness.

⁷ Hendel, “The Exodus in Biblical Memory,” 608.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Cloutier, “Theologies: Liberation vs. Submission,” *The Haiti Times*, (1987).

⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, ed. & trans. Sister Caridad Ina & John Egelson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988).

The Vatican, the seat of authority for the Roman Catholic Church, did not react positively to the developments in Latin America. The new liberation theologians were quickly dismissed as Marxists with a thin guise of religion.¹⁰ However, widespread popularity of Liberation Theology, particularly amongst the poor, contributed to its success in surviving, despite harsh opposition from the Church establishment. Prior to the formation of Liberation Theology, the Catholic Church in 1962-1965 convened and established the principles of Vatican II under Pope John XXIII and subsequently under Pope Paul VI. At the heart of Vatican II was a struggle with autonomy that preceded the challenge to Church structure that the liberation theologians posed. For centuries the *modus operandi* of the Church could have been summarized in the oft-quoted adage, “*Rome locuta, causa finita* -- Rome has spoken, the case is settled.”¹¹ In other words, the ultimate authority for all matters of theology and religious practice rested not in the Bible, but rather in the halls of the Papal Palace. Indeed, one of the striking features of the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth century Europe was to disseminate the bible to the masses and thereby weaken the authority the Pope held in forming a uniform interpretation and reading of the Holy Writ.¹²

Liberation theologians maintained the tradition of Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers, holding that the Bible must be disseminated to as many people as possible and that the Vatican does not possess any particular, special qualities that enable it to interpret the Bible any more definitively than anyone else. They even went further and argued that while the Vatican did not possess any privileged perspective to interpret the Bible, the downtrodden and oppressed did. These new theologians contended that:

The poor, the dispossessed, and the marginalized in society are uniquely placed to read, interpret, and respond to the Bible. The Bible was written by people much like themselves, about people much like themselves, and decisively for people much like themselves. Having no interest or stake or identity in present society, having indeed no interest anywhere beyond their own need for liberation from misery and oppression that is both spiritual and physical without distinction, they alone of society's classes can read the Bible directly.¹³

The current Pope, Benedict XVI, while he was still Monsignor Joseph Alois Ratzinger, argued that Liberation Theology posed a direct threat to Church authority and undermined its influence

¹⁰ H. Mark Roelofs, “Liberation Theology: The Recovery of Biblical Radicalism,” *The American Political Science Review* 82, No. 2 (June 1988), 549.

¹¹ Cloutier

¹² Herbet F. Hahn, “The Reformation and Bible Criticism,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 21, No. 4 (October 1953).

¹³ Roelofs, *Liberation Theology*, 558.

amongst the laity.¹⁴ Arguably, it still remains the most profound threat to Church authority in the modern era.

The dilemma posed at the outset of this essay as to why the initial formative experience in the creation of the Israelite nation had to occur in the depths of oppression and servitude could possibly find an answer in the ideas similar to those articulated by exponents of Liberation Theology. While Liberation Theology developed in the realm of Christianity and during a specific generation of struggle in Latin America, its message of viewing the bible through the lens of slavery is as potent for the Jewish community as it is for the Christian one. The covenantal relationship between God and Israel relies in its entirety on the experience of bondage in Egypt. The revelation of the Decalogue was preceded by a reminder that God's relationship to Israel is precisely in the context of "I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). Moses, in his last testimony to the nation, addressed the question as to what shall those who witnessed the creation of the covenantal relationship relay to the future generations who were not there. He frames the special relationship Israel enjoys with God in the context of, "You shall say to your child, 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand.'" (Deut. 6:21) Nahmanides intimates this idea when he opines that the reason the Book of Exodus begins with the conjoiner word "and" (the Hebrew letter *vav*) - as in "And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt" (Ex. 1:1) - is to demonstrate that the Book of Exodus is an immediate continuation of the Book of Genesis.¹⁵ In other words, the narrative of the Creation, the Great Flood, and the Tower of Babel (amongst other meta-events) are directly related to the journeys of Abraham and his family, their eventual sojourn to Egypt, their oppression under the Pharaoh, and their ultimate redemption. Not only does the covenantal relationship rely on the experience of slavery in its formation, but indeed, Nahmanides alludes, the entire Torah - including the Creation of the Universe - is profoundly connected to the event of the Exodus.

Furthermore, much of the Hebrew legislative body is guided by the memory of slavery. On four separate occasions are major national laws set forth based on the collective memory of oppression and servitude.¹⁶ The Torah exhorts the Israelites not to oppress because they "know the spirit" (Ex. 23:9) of those that are maligned, marginalized and, subsequently, persecuted. The mishna quoted earlier that has become a focal point of the Passover rituals in order to view the Exodus as a personal

¹⁴ Cloutier

¹⁵ Nahmanides, Ex. 1:1.

¹⁶ See Ex. 23:20, 23:9; Lev. 19:34, and Deut. 10:19.

event and as a memory alive in the minds of Jews in every generation, is at its core a plea to never lose sight of the existential nature of the nascent Israelite experience and to stress how fundamental and primary a role it played in the creation of the Jewish religion.

The Exodus from Egypt was a demonstration of the nature of humanity, of the potential for people to be liberated from the conditions and environments that oppress them, and, through their struggle, change the cultural landscape of human civilization forever. Along these same lines, Gutierrez, the foremost liberation theologian wrote:

To conceive of history as a process of the liberation of man is to consider freedom as a historical conquest; it is to understand that the step from an abstract to a real freedom is not taken without a struggle against all the forces that oppress man, as a struggle full of pitfalls, detours, and temptations to run away. The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structures, or a social revolution; it is more: the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be a man - a permanent cultural revolution.¹⁷

Utilizing this perspective, one might suggest an answer to our opening question. Perhaps the reason the holiday of Passover enjoys such a widespread observance amongst American Jewry in the face of overwhelming assimilation and apathy is because it represents a powerful force in the human condition: the ability to overcome and overthrow the oppressive forces that dominate our lives. It appeals to the social consciousness of those who are troubled by global slavery, human trafficking, and forced labor. More profoundly, perhaps Passover attracts such a wide rate of observance because more than any other holiday it touches on one of the primary narratives of the Jewish religious experience: an experience with oppression, the exaltation and jubilation of liberation, and a commitment to form a national religious culture, legal system, and theology deeply rooted in the slavery experience. It is the slaves who bring the mighty empire of ancient Egypt to a standstill and it is the freed slaves who introduce the Bible and its system of ethics and morals to the world. Our God of the Torah is presented as the God who hears the cries of the oppressed and redeems them. It is no wonder then, why God specifically designates a nation of slaves as the divinely-chosen people.

Additionally, the Exodus also illustrates a life of redemption through action. While in traditional Christianity the grace of God was the salvation of humanity, in Judaism it is an “active existence as experienced, factual life”¹⁸ that motivates and arouses the mind of the Hebrew Bible. The language employed in the Bible connotes action, not just meditative reflection. God redeems the nation

¹⁷ Roelofs, *Liberation Theology*, 558.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 552.

of Israel with an “outstretched arm” (Ex. 6:6). The Torah spends a considerable bulk of its space devoted to constructing a system of laws and ethics that are directly concerned with the temporal, immediate, and physical. Rachel Elijor, in her work *Exile and Redemption in Jewish Mystical Thought*, states that:

Redemption signifies the aspirations for a reversal of existential experience -- an alternative mode of existence encompassing vision of freedom, liberty, equality and sovereignty, autonomic power and independent being, promise for continuity, replacement, an ingathering within national territory, divine providence and an eternal messianic order of justice and liberty.”¹⁹

Only two items in Elijor’s list reflect a supernatural longing in the Jewish redemptive vision. The rest are concerned with the very real lives of people in this world who are seeking a world free from the oppressions of tyranny, inequality, and servitude.

A possible model of a practical application of a Jewish redemptive ethics can be found in the populist movement developing throughout North and South America called “Base Communities.” These communities of faith began developing in Latin America at the same time Liberation Theology was first being articulated. Base Communities, traditionally, are grassroots-organized groups comprised of people of faith who wish to translate that faith into three concrete areas: bible study, communal action, and self-consciousness.²⁰ The organized Jewish community could benefit from considering applying these three areas operating under the framework of a Jewish Liberation Theology.

While study of Jewish texts is a particularly well developed aspect of at least the Orthodox Jewish community,²¹ a focus on examining the canon through the perspective of the oppressed and downtrodden is often lacking. A culture of study within the Jewish community could be encouraged that engages the Jewish textual tradition with questions like: What does it mean to be an American Jew residing in a country of tremendous wealth and power and yet come from a religious tradition that demands hearing the cry of the oppressed? If servitude was the mechanism by which the nation of Israel was formed, yet the Torah was revealed to freed slaves, how can we as a community and as individuals connect back to that history of slavery? Are there aspects of the modern era that serve to

¹⁹ Rachel Elijor, “Exile and Redemption in Jewish Mystical Thought,” *Studies in Spirituality* 14 (1991): 1-15.

²⁰ Roelofs, “Liberation Theology,” 559.

²¹ For example, the March 17th, 2005 edition of *The New York Times* reported on the attendance of more than 26,000 Orthodox Jews at the ceremony marking the completion of the 7-year cycle of the Daf Yomi program, studying of a page of Talmud daily.

enslave us today? What ethos is the Torah attempting to convey by framing mankind's biblical experience of the divine in the context of oppression? Finally, what are the actions the Torah demands of me with which to respond to the state of human slavery and suffering today?

The last question posed is a natural catalyst to lead to the second area of a Base Community: communal action. The areas in which a community could choose to act are varied and diverse and will reflect the composition of each group. In the past, Base Communities have acted on issues of health care, education and affordable housing, and providing assistance to members in need.²² Jeannie Appleman, director of the "Rabbinical Leadership for Public Life" program at the non-profit Jewish Funds for Justice, opined that by creating these communities of shared vision and action we will be working towards building "community, one person and institution at a time," and by "weaving together our shared stories and mutual interests, we provide opportunities for our generation to model the values we cherish, create the communities our families deserve, and work to create a just world."²³ In effect, we transition from a community of study, faith, and prayer to a Jewish community actively transforming the vision of the covenantal relationship to a reality.

The final area of the Base Community revolves around self-consciousness. Base communities hold that real poverty is a "poverty of self-understanding".²⁴ For a true fulfillment of Liberation Theology, the "poor, oppressed and depressed must be wrenched out of those denigrating self-understandings society imposes upon them and brought to new understandings of themselves as human beings, as proper members of society, and as beings able to love and be loved."²⁵ At the same time though, there can be no self-delusion as to the actual material state of those who are downtrodden and suffering. Yet, an understanding that each human being is created in "the image of God" (Gen. 1:26) with immeasurable worth, and that this understanding is an overarching principle of the Torah,²⁶ should never lead to apathy about the state of their existence. On the contrary, the realization that one is created in the likeness of God should lead an individual to a "revolutionary transformation in self-understanding, a genuine social, political, economic and religious self-transcendence."²⁷

While the approach outlined in this paper was developed as Liberation Theology within Christendom, its message is most powerfully heard within the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish historical

²² Roelofs, Liberation Theology, 559.

²³ Jeannie Appleman, "Developing Rabbinical Leadership: New Ways to Measure Success," *Sh'ma* (January 2007).

²⁴ Roelofs, Liberation Theology, 559.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Sifra, Kedoshim 2:4.*

²⁷ Roelofs, Liberation Theology, 559.

narrative. The central theme of the Passover holiday as stated in the *mishnaic* text that lies at the heart of the seder is to release ourselves from modern day oppressions and to wrestle with the contemporary biblical Egypt—in whatever guise they may appear. A Jewish community that strives to rid the world of oppression and slavery is strengthened by doing so and will have put into practice the lessons from the biblical account of the Jewish national liberation. As Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva and Academic Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah expressed it:

What somehow always goes unaddressed is the number of people in our *shuls* who can barely afford to pay the rent or put food on the table for Shabbat. We allow ourselves to pretend that that's not us, maintaining an image of financial affluence. Caring for the orphan and the widow recurs as a theme in the Torah so often because these figures are invisible members of society. The rabbi doesn't get the same kudos for spending time addressing their needs as he does with the *shul's* movers and shakers. This is why it is so crucial that these issues not remain invisible in our own communities.²⁸

Indeed, it is critical that these issues and the broader topic of a Jewish Liberation Theology do not remain invisible to the Jewish community or we will have neglected a key component of the Jewish tradition.

²⁸ Elizabeth Richman, "Training Rabbis to Lead," *Sh'ma* (January 2007).