

# Pesah, Freud, and Jewish Identity

*They said to him, "Tell us...what is your trade and where are you coming from? Which country is yours and which is your people?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and it is the Lord God of heaven that I fear, who made both the sea and the land." (Jonah 1:8-9)*

**M**oses' first question to God was *Mi anokhi*, "Who am I?" (Ex. 3:11). That remains the question of Jews throughout the ages. No people has puzzled longer and harder about its own identity, and this was, perhaps, inevitable. For much of history, Jews have been a minority in lands not their own. Even as a sovereign nation, they were surrounded by great empires and indomitable powers. Almost always, what was most conspicuous about them was that they were different. They told a different story, heard a different music, lived a way of life that was singular and countercultural, quite unlike that of their neighbors.

The word *kadosh*, holy, in the Bible means, among other things, "distinctive," "set apart." Understanding the word *Ivri*, "Hebrew," to mean "a side," or more specifically, "the opposite side," the sages interpreted the description of Abraham as *haIvri*, "the Hebrew," to mean that "he was on one side while the rest of the world was on the other." Identity has

never been something Jews could take for granted. It involved, among other things, the courage to swim against the tide, to stand apart from the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times. Beneath the simple question of a child, "Why is this night different?" is another, deeper query: "Why is this people different?" or "Who am I?" We answer by telling a story – the story of our ancestors long ago, but also the story of which we are a part. Pesah is the festival of Jewish identity. It is the night on which we tell our children who they are.

On a superficial reading of the Bible, Moses was asking, "Who am I to stand before Pharaoh?" He was asking not about identity, but about his personal worthiness for such a mission. Moses, the Torah intimates, was not a man convinced of his place in history. He did not seek leadership. On the contrary, he kept refusing it. "They will not believe me.... I am slow of speech and tongue.... Please send someone else" (Ex. 4:10). He was, a later passage says, "a very humble man, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). He accepted the divine call not because he held a high opinion of himself, but because the task was real, the need great, the hour pressing, and the command inescapable. He had, in Shakespeare's phrase, "greatness thrust upon him."

There is, though, a deeper level at which Moses was indeed asking a question of identity. He faced a problem that has become acute wherever – in the Diaspora, even in the State of Israel itself – Jews have become part of a wider culture. A biographer, describing Moses when he first heard the call of God, would have had difficulty knowing who he was and where his loyalties lay. This was a man rescued as a child by an Egyptian princess, adopted by her, raised in Pharaoh's palace, and brought up as an Egyptian prince. When he escaped to Midian and rescued Yitro's daughters at the well, they went back and told their father, "An Egyptian rescued us" (Ex. 2:19). In appearance, manner, dress, and speech, Moses resembled an Egyptian, not an Israelite.

Moses' question, "Who am I?" was therefore real and acute – an existential crisis. Who was he and where did his destiny lie? Was he an Egyptian or an Israelite, a prince or a slave, a member of the ruling family of the greatest empire of the time, or part of a people groaning under oppression? The mind reels at such a choice. Before him lay two alternative futures: on the one hand, a life of quietude in Midian with his father-in-law's family, tending the flock in remote pastures, far from

the noise of politics and power. On the other lay a life of struggle and an almost impossible challenge: to lead a people from slavery and teach them to be free – servants of no man, but of God alone.

What Moses discovered, alone with his flocks on the mountain, was that there are some choices from which we cannot hide. Almost the first words God says to him are, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6). God is not, at this point, telling Moses who God is. That comes later, in the famous and enigmatic words *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, “I am who I am” (ibid. 3:14). Instead God is telling Moses who he – Moses – is: the child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, three people who left the securities of land, birthplace, and father’s house to begin a journey to an unknown destination, their only security the voice of God. Moses – God is saying – is not a prince of Egypt but the child of his ancestors and therefore the brother of those who, at that moment, were tasting the bitterness of slavery. Their plight was his responsibility. Their fate was his.

In his innermost heart, Moses knew this. There is a fascinating verse near the beginning of his story: “One day, after Moses grew up, he went out to where his people were and he saw their hard labor” (Ex. 2:11). Even then, Moses knew he was one of them. Seeing a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster, he intervened. To be a Jew is to know that one cannot be indifferent when one’s people are suffering. “Israel,” said Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, “is like a single body with one soul. When one is injured, all feel the pain.”

A similar self-discovery affected several individuals who became, in the nineteenth century, protagonists of Zionism, among them Moses Hess and Theodor Herzl. Highly assimilated Jews, they nonetheless identified with the plight of their people as they witnessed anti-Semitism – during the Damascus Blood Libel (1840) in the case of Hess, the Dreyfus trial in France (1894–95) in the case of Herzl. In a moment of truth they knew that to be a Jew is to be part of a covenant of fate through which, in the rabbinic phrase, “All Israel are responsible for one another” (*Shevuot* 39a).

Jewish identity is a phenomenon of birth because ultimately we carry within us not only the genes but also the hopes, tears, commitments, and dreams of our ancestors. Our God is the God of Abraham and Sarah and of the hundreds of generations of their descendants whose

children we are. That is what a child discovers on Pesah, even though it may be many years before he or she can articulate it in these terms: we are part of a story that began long before our birth and will continue after we are no longer here. More than identity is something we choose, it is something that chooses us. To be a Jew is to hear a voice from the past, summoning us to an often tempestuous and never less than demanding future, and knowing inescapably that this is the narrative of which I am a part. That is what Moses discovered alone on the mountain, watching a bush that seemed to catch fire and burn without being consumed.

At the end of his life, Sigmund Freud wrote a strange work called *Moses and Monotheism*. Few works have been more closely studied as a key to Freud's identity. This may have been his intention, because it was the last book he wrote, and by the time it was published, in 1939, Freud was living as a refugee in London. In Vienna, where he had previously lived and worked, Jews were being attacked in the streets. Austrians had welcomed their annexation into Hitler's Germany in March 1938, and almost immediately the Jews of Vienna, who made up one-sixth of the city's population, were stripped of all civic rights: to own property, to be employed, to exercise a profession, and to enter restaurants or public parks. SS sentries took leading Jews, among them Vienna's chief rabbi, Dr. Israel Taglicht, then a man of seventy-five, and forced them to wash the city's pavements in full view of passersby, who watched with amusement and derision. Within a month, knowing that worse was to come, more than five hundred Austrian Jews had committed suicide. This was no passing madness. In 1897, Vienna had elected as its mayor the publicly anti-Jewish Karl Lueger, and it was there, between 1908 and 1913, that the young Adolf Hitler received his first and most influential lessons in anti-Semitism.

*Moses and Monotheism*, Freud's last testament, is an extraordinary work. In it he tries to prove that Moses was an Egyptian who turned his attention to the Israelites after the failure of Amenhotep IV, later known as Ikhnaton, to introduce an early and primitive form of monotheism (actually, sun worship) into Egypt. Many books have been written in an effort to understand what Freud was trying to achieve by this generally discredited speculation, and what he was communicating, consciously or otherwise, about his own identity as a Jew. That is not my concern

here. Early on in the book, however, there is a curious detail whose significance has not been adequately commented on or understood. I call it Freud's greatest and most fascinating Freudian slip.

The context in which it occurs is a digression wherein Freud notes that many legends of heroes in antiquity share a common narrative structure. The hero's birth is fraught with danger. As a child, he is exposed to the elements in a way that would normally lead to his death. Instead, however, he is rescued and brought up by adoptive parents. Only much later does he discover his true identity. This, or something like it, is the tale told of the Babylonian hero Sargon and, among others, Cyrus, Oedipus, Romulus, Karna, Paris, Perseus, Heracles, and Gilgamesh. It is also the story of Moses.

At this point, however, Freud notes that in one respect the Moses narrative is diametrically different from the others. In all the other stories the hero is a person of noble birth who is brought up by a family in humble circumstances and only later discovers that royal blood flows in his veins. In the case of Moses, the opposite is true. He is brought up as a prince. His true identity is that he belongs to a nation of slaves.

Freud draws attention to this fact, but – assuming, as I cannot, that the biblical story is a human construct, a myth – immediately concludes that the Moses narrative is a fabrication designed to mask its original form. In this earlier version, Moses actually *is* an Egyptian prince, whose life was in danger because Pharaoh had been told in a prophetic dream that a child born within his own household would one day threaten his throne and kingdom. According to this version, it was Pharaoh who ordered the baby to be thrown into the Nile, and a Jewish couple – Amram and Yokheved – who rescued him and brought him up as their own. Freud is aware of the fact that the existence of such a story is utterly implausible. Who, after all, would have told it? Not the Egyptians, because it glorified a man who became their enemy. Not the Israelites, because it turned their own deliverer into a member of the very people that had afflicted them. That, says Freud, is why the tale was changed – leaving unexplained, indeed inexplicable, his own hypothesis, that it originally had a different form.

What Freud failed to see – though the evidence was in front of him – was that the story of Moses is not a myth but an anti-myth, a protest against the social and spiritual assumptions of the mythic age.

In myth, people are born to greatness. The universe is hierarchical. Some are born to rule, others – the vast majority – to be ruled. That view, common to all pagan cultures and held by Plato and Aristotle, was what Judaism denied. Heroism is not a fact of birth. It is a matter of moral courage. It is not found only, or even primarily, among kings or princes. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah – these are simple people living ordinary lives, transfigured only by a vision, a call.

Saul, Israel's first king, looks the part. He is tall, "head and shoulders" above his contemporaries. Yet he proves to lack the moral strength needed by a leader. David, Israel's greatest ruler, is the youngest of eight brothers, so insignificant that when Samuel, on God's instruction, visits the family, they forget about him until the prophet, having rejected the other siblings, asks if there is anyone else. True royalty, the Bible intimates, does not lie in physical strength, outward appearance, or noble ancestry. Not accidentally does the life of Moses contradict the stories told of other heroes in antiquity. He is not a prince in disguise. His greatness lies in the fact that he is the child of slaves whose lives were touched and transformed by the word of God.

Freud had mixed feelings about his own identity. He admired Jews and never denied his Jewishness, but he was tone-deaf to the music of Judaism and of religion generally. Who knows whether, seeing the unleashing of those dark instinctual forces he believed to exist just below the surface of civilization as Nazism gripped Vienna, Freud tried to shift the blame for monotheism from Jews to a long-dead Egyptian, as if to say, "We are not to blame for the repression of those instincts that are now returning with murderous fury." Whatever his reason, there is no doubt that Freud missed one of the most powerful truths of the Bible, conveyed specifically in the detail of the Moses story that he noted and then misinterpreted. Those whom the world despises, God loves. A child of slaves can be nobler than a prince. God's standards are not power or privilege. As God tells Samuel just before he first sets eyes on David: "The Lord does not see as a man sees; men judge by appearances, but the Lord judges by the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). To have faith, as Judaism understands it, is to recognize God's image in the weak, the powerless, the afflicted, the suffering, and then to fight for their cause. Had he understood this, Freud might have sent a quite different message of

courage to his people as they faced their darkest night. We, at least, can see what Freud did not: that in deciding that his destiny lay not in an Egyptian palace, but with his people, Moses helped write one of the greatest narratives of hope in the literature of mankind.