

# Pesah and the Rebirth of Israel

*Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel.*

*Now – slaves; next year we shall be free. (Haggada)*

**I**n January 1895, a young Viennese journalist, Theodor Herzl, reporting on the Dreyfus trial in Paris, was shocked by the sight of crowds shouting, “*A mort les juifs!*” – “Death to the Jews!” Anti-Semitism, he realized, was alive and strong, not only in places like Russia, where in 1881 pogroms had broken out in more than a hundred towns, but in France itself, home of the revolution, the secular state, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. He became a man transformed. Within a year he had written his response, which he called *Der Judenstaat*, “The Jewish State.” In it he summed up the disillusionment of a century of Jewish life, in which the hopes of European enlightenment and emancipation had proved so false:

We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted us. In vain are we loyal patriots, sometimes superloyal; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens; in vain do we strive



to enhance the fame of our native lands in the arts and sciences, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In our native lands where we have lived for centuries we are still decried as aliens, often by men whose ancestors had not yet come at a time when Jewish sighs had long been heard in the country.

There was, he argued, only one solution to anti-Semitism. If the nation-states of Europe were so hostile to Jews, then Jews must have a state of their own. He was not the first secular Jew to reach this conclusion. Judah Leib Pinsker had said the same in 1882 in the wake of the pogroms. Moses Hess, onetime friend and mentor of Karl Marx, had done so even earlier, in 1862. But there was something altogether compelling about Herzl. Tall, impressive, persuasive, he threw himself into political activity like a man possessed, traveling around Europe, speaking to statesmen, arguing his case with conviction and charm, never admitting the possibility of defeat. Within a year, in 1897, he had succeeded in convening the first Zionist Congress, writing in his diary on September 3 the famous words, "At Basel I founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will know it." Fifty years later, on November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted to bring a Jewish state into being, and on May 15, 1948, Israel was born.

Herzl died in 1904, at age forty-four, worn out by his eight years of frenetic activity for the Zionist cause. In 1902 he published a novel, *Altneuland*, setting out the Israel of his dreams. In one of the key scenes, he tells how the assimilated Dr. Friedrich Loewenberg – Herzl's thinly disguised self-portrait – rediscovers his religious roots while attending a seder service. This is how Herzl describes it:

And so the ritual went on, half religious ceremony and half family meal, moving for anyone who had a heart to be moved by ancient custom. For this most Jewish of Jewish festivals reached back farther into ancient times than any living customs of the civilized world. It was celebrated now, exactly as it had been observed for hundreds and hundreds of years. The world had changed, nations had vanished from the face of the earth, others had made their way into the annals of history... and only this one nation was still



here, cherishing its ancient customs, true to itself, remembering the sufferings of its ancestors. It still prays in the ancient language and the ancient formulas to the Eternal God, this nation of slaves and now of free men – Israel.

So the story of the first exodus inspired a new return to Zion.

What is it to see the presence of God in history? The question is exceptionally difficult to answer. Ancient societies were interested in the past. They, like we, wanted to know how we came to be here, why society was the way it was, and how the universe was formed. Yet none before ancient Israel saw the unfolding of events as intrinsically meaningful, a narrative of redemption. Indeed, virtually all later societies who came to share this vision did so under the influence of the Hebrew Bible. As the historian J. H. Plumb puts it: “The concept that within the history of mankind itself a process was at work which would mold his future, and lead man to situations totally different from his past, seems to have found its first expression amongst the Jews” (*The Death of the Past*). In and through their religious vision, “the past became more than a collection of tales, a projection of human experience, or a system of moral examples.... It became an intimate part of destiny, and an interpretation of the future.” Nothing illustrates this more profoundly than the way the story of the Exodus shaped the Jewish imagination, not only of successive generations of those who lived their lives by faith, but even of profoundly secular figures like Hess, Pinsker, and Herzl.

The sequence of exile and homecoming, exodus and redemption, seems from the very beginning to have been part of the basic structure of Jewish consciousness. Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden. Cain is sentenced to a life of exile. The builders of Babel are scattered throughout the earth. Sin – a disturbance of the order of the universe – leads to exile and displacement. Already foreshadowed in these opening chapters is the possibility of an end of days in which mankind, repenting its sins, experiences a collective homecoming. In Isaiah’s words, “The wolf shall live with the sheep and the leopard lie down with the kid.... They will neither harm nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (11:6–9) – a new Eden, in other words, and a benign flood. This, for the Hebrew Bible,



is the metaphysical structure of history as a whole: harmony, broken by wrongdoing, followed by exile, then acknowledgment and atonement, and eventual return to harmony.

It is with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, however, that this pattern becomes vivid in a concrete historical way. One of the most striking facts about the patriarchal families is that they all experience exile. Abraham and Isaac are both forced, through famine, to travel to the land of the Philistines. Jacob suffers exile twice, once to escape Esau, a second time to be rejoined with his son Joseph. In none of these is exile the result of sin, and it is the first instance that provides the interpretive clue to the rest. It occurs in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, almost immediately after God's call to Abraham to leave his land, birthplace, and father's house. No sooner has he done so than we read: "There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt" (Gen. 12:10). He senses danger, fearing that the Egyptians will kill him and take Sarai into the royal harem. Sarai, saying that she is Abram's sister, is indeed taken into Pharaoh's palace, which is then visited by a series of plagues. Pharaoh then sends the couple away.

The episode seems to disturb the narrative logic of the patriarchal story. Why, if God wants Abraham to go to the land of Canaan, does He force him to leave almost as soon as he has arrived? Midrash Raba, an early rabbinic commentary, gives what is undoubtedly the correct answer:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to our father Abraham, "Go forth and tread a path for your children." For you find that everything written in connection with Abraham is written in connection with his children. Of Abraham it is written, *And there was a famine in the land* [Gen. 12:10], and of Israel it is written, *For these two years there has been famine in the land* [45:6]. Of Abraham: *And Abram went down to Egypt* [ibid.]. Of Israel: *And our fathers went down into Egypt* [Num. 20:15]. Of Abraham: *To reside there* [ibid.]. Of Israel: *We have come to reside in this land* [Gen. 47:4]. (Genesis Raba 40:6)

And so on through a long series of linguistic and substantive parallels between Abraham's fate and the later experience of the Israelites. The



exiles of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are, in other words, prefigurations of what would later happen to their descendants. It is as if the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people had *rehearsed in advance* the fate of their children, not necessarily knowing they were doing so, but nonetheless *laying the foundations of future hope*. The Israelites, exiled and enslaved, would be liberated and redeemed, not only because God said so, but because He had *done so* in the past. He had already shown, several times in different ways, that He was with the ancestors of the nation, protecting them and bringing them safely back.

By the time we open the Book of Exodus, we already know something of immense significance. History is full of unpredictable reversals. Joseph had given the Israelites a haven in the land of Egypt, but there was always the possibility of "a new king who knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). A protected minority can become a vulnerable minority. There is nothing in the Bible or Jewish faith that speaks of historical inevitability. To live in time is to be exposed to the hazards of time. But Israel knows from its own history that however long it may seem to be delayed, redemption is at hand. God will bring deliverance in the future because He has done so in the past.

It was this that, at a later stage in Jewish history, formed the basis of the vision of hope that is shared by all the prophets. Israel might suffer exile again, but it would return. "They will come speedily," prophesies Hosea, "flying like birds out of Egypt" (11:11). "I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel," says Amos in the name of God. "They shall rebuild deserted cities and live in them, they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, make gardens and eat their fruit" (9:14). Moses himself, in one of his darkest visions, ends with the unshakable assurance: "Even so, when they are in the land of their enemies I shall not reject them and shall not detest them to the point of destruction, to the point of breaking My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God; I shall remember for them the covenant of the early ones, those I took out of the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, in order to be their God: I am the Lord" (Lev. 26:44-45). Micah said it simply: "As in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them My wonders" (7:15). What was would be again.

The Exodus was more than an event in the past. It was a precursor of redemption in the future. Israel, as Moses warned, would not dwell



securely in its land. It would forget its moral and spiritual vocation. It would be attracted to the pagan culture of its neighbors. By so doing it would lose its reason for existence and find itself unable, at times of crisis, to summon the shared vision and collective energy needed to prevail against neighboring imperial powers. It would suffer defeat and exile; it would undergo its dark night of the soul; it would, as Ezekiel said, utter the fateful words *avda tikvateinu*, "our hope is destroyed" (37:11). But despair would never prevail. In the past, God had brought His people from slavery to freedom and from exile to the land, and therefore He would do so again. The Jewish people never completely lost faith in God, because its prophets knew that God would never completely lose faith in His people. History intimated destiny. What happened once would happen again. That is what lies behind the words with which the Haggada begins: "Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now – slaves; next year we shall be free." The Jewish people kept the vision alive. It is not too much to say that the vision kept the Jewish people alive. It is difficult at this distance in time to realize the depth of the crisis represented by the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE, and the later suppression of the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolt (132–35 CE). The very foundations of Jewish existence had been destroyed. There was now no Temple or Jewish sovereignty. There were no kings or priests or prophets. Jerusalem had been razed to the ground and rebuilt as a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina, in which Jews were forbidden to live.

More than six centuries earlier, following the destruction of the First Temple, the people had come close to despair. A psalm from that period has left us with an indelible record of their mood: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept as we remembered Zion.... How can we sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?" (137:1–4) That moment, though, brought its own consolation. There were prophets of the stature of Jeremiah and Ezekiel to assure the people that they would return. The exile would be finite, temporary. It would last, at most, a single lifetime; and their intuition proved correct. There was no such assurance in Roman times. To be sure, figures like Rabbi Akiva were confident that redemption would come. But his hopes were invested in Bar Kokhba, and when that uprising failed, so too did any hope that Israel's fortunes would be restored in the foreseeable future.



A midrash on Jacob's dream of a ladder and angels tells us something of the mood of those times:

The Holy One, blessed be He, showed Jacob the angel of Babylon ascending and descending, the angel of Media ascending and descending, the angel of Greece ascending and descending, and the angel of Rome ascending [but not descending]. Jacob was afraid. He thought: Is it possible this one will never descend? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: *Fear not, My servant Jacob* [Jer. 46:27]. (Tanḥuma, *Vayetzeh* 2)

Every other exile had a finite duration, but the fall of Israel under Rome seemed to extend indefinitely into the future.

What happened next is one of the great, if quiet, dramas of history. The Jewish people, so bound to time and space – seeing God in history and its home in a specific land – reconstituted itself as a nation *outside* time and space. Prayer took the place of sacrifice. The study of Torah replaced prophecy. Repentance became a substitute for the great ritual of atonement performed by the high priest in the Holy of Holies. The synagogue – a building that could be anywhere – became a fragment of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish people itself, once a nation in its own land, became a virtual community scattered through space, bound now by a mystical sense of collective responsibility (Israel, said Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, is “like a single body with a single soul: when one is afflicted, all feel the pain”). In exile everywhere, Jews were at home in a text. The Torah, said the German poet Heinrich Heine, became “the portable homeland of the Jew.”

These developments did not happen overnight. In a sense, Jews had been preparing them ever since the Babylonian exile. It was then, beginning with Ezra, that a succession of scribes, scholars, and sages began to reshape Israel from the people of the land to the people of the book. The result was that Jews succeeded in doing what no other people has ever done. They sustained their identity and way of life through almost two thousand years of exile. Despite the hostility showed to them – Max Weber once described them as a “pariah people” – they kept their dignity and self-respect. And through some of the worst sufferings ever experienced by a group, they preserved their hope: “Next



year in Jerusalem; next year free." There is nothing remotely comparable in history. It was the triumph of faith over circumstance.

But there was a price to be paid, namely the almost complete depoliticization of Judaism. To be sure, from the first to the nineteenth centuries, Jews had self-governing powers. They ran their own communities, arbitrated internal disputes, and created not just synagogues but also remarkable educational and welfare institutions. But the disastrous failure of the two rebellions against Rome, in 66 and 132 CE, left their mark. Jews did not thereafter fight for their independence. They did not mobilize for their return to Israel. They had learned at great cost that these initiatives were likely to backfire, bringing devastation in their wake. Instead, following the advice of the prophet Jeremiah in an earlier age, they sought "the peace of the city to which they were exiled" (29:7), waiting patiently for God to bring His people back to Zion.

The tension of waiting was sometimes unbearable, and this gave rise throughout the Middle Ages to a series of messianic movements in which a would-be savior appeared, promising deliverance. The most famous of these – Shabbetai Tzvi in the seventeenth century – was in fact only one of many (Maimonides mentions several in his father's lifetime alone). But these movements, beginning in fevered hope and ending in disillusionment, only served to underscore how dangerous it was to "force the end." Jews believed they would return to Israel, but there was no natural, nonmiraculous route from here to there. Throughout the Middle Ages, individual Jews made the journey to the Holy Land, among them Judah Halevi and Nahmanides. There was always a Jewish presence there, though sometimes small and in dire circumstances. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, followers of both the Hasidic movement and their opponents, disciples of the Vilna Gaon, made their way to Israel in significant numbers. But they came to wait for redemption, not to initiate it.

Three factors changed Jewish attitudes in the course of the nineteenth century. The first was the rise of European nationalism. If the Italians could win their independence, why not the Jews? There was ferment in the air following the French Revolution. A new political era seemed to be dawning, with messianic possibilities. It was no less a figure than Napoleon who, setting out to conquer the Middle East in 1799, issued a call to Jews: "Israelites, arise! Now is the moment which may not return



for generations to claim back the rights you have been deprived of for thousands of years, to live again as a nation among nations." How serious an offer this was was never put to the test. Napoleon was forced to abandon his military campaign. But a note had been struck and it was echoed, not least in Britain, during the course of the nineteenth century. Figures like Lord Shaftesbury and Colonel Charles Churchill began to advocate Jewish settlement in the Holy Land, partly as a way of advancing British interests in the region, but also, and no less, out of a deep belief in the biblical prophecies and a sense that the time was right. The English novelist George Eliot made the rebirth of Jewish nationalism a central theme of her book *Daniel Deronda* (1876). The Damascus Blood Libel of 1840, in which Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolf Cremieux, the lay leaders of British and French Jewry, successfully intervened, demonstrated for the first time the possibility of international Jewish diplomacy. It was in this context that two rabbis, Yehudah Alkalai and Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, began to outline a religious Zionism, based less on a state than on agricultural settlements. What was novel in their work was the suggestion that though, ultimately, redemption rested with God, the preliminary steps should be taken by Jews themselves.

The second development was a certain secularization of Jewish history. I use this word with some trepidation, but there is no other. It began with Spinoza, a Jew who broke with Judaism, but who in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) first raised the possibility that Jews might take hold of their fate and reestablish a Jewish state. Spinoza did not believe in a God of history, and thus thought about religion in purely natural terms. No less significant was the influence of the nineteenth-century historian Heinrich Graetz, whose writings did much to stimulate Jewish interest and pride in the past. Hess, Pinsker, and Herzl were part of the legacy of this process. Seeing themselves as secular Jews, they did not feel constrained merely to wait and pray for Jewish liberty. The earliest of them, Hess, was also the most insightful. He guessed what Herzl later discovered, that support for Jewish nationalism would come not from the culturally integrated Jews of the West but from the religious heartlands of Eastern Europe. It was the meeting of secular and religious that brought about what neither could have done on their own.

The third and decisive factor, however, was the rise in anti-Semitism in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was this that



made the return not merely possible but urgent and necessary. The irony is that this seems to have been foreseen from the beginning. In Babylon in the sixth century BCE Ezekiel had already prophesied: "You say, 'We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world' but what you have in mind will never happen. As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and outpoured rage" (20:33). The mishnaic teacher Rabbi Yehoshua predicted that an evil ruler would arise "whose decrees will be as harsh as those of Haman" and drive Jews back to their faith and land. What is common to both these teachings is the belief that Jews would not seek to return of their own accord. They might try to assimilate, but they would fail. Love of the land would not be enough to move Jews to action. The hostility of their neighbors would.

So Zionism was born. It would be hard to find any other movement that brought together so many dissonant, competing visions. There were utopian religious Zionists like Rav Avraham Kook and practical religious Zionists like Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines. Among the secularists were political Zionists like Herzl, cultural Zionists such as Ahad HaAm, Nietzscheans like Berdichevski, Tolstoyans of the caliber of Aaron David Gordon, and dozens of others, each with his own carefully wrought utopia. They clashed, at times vehemently. Yet out of their clamorous discord came one of the most astonishing achievements of all time.

The creation of the State of Israel was fraught with difficulty. Despite the Balfour Declaration (1917), in which Britain, the new mandatory power in Palestine, promised Jews a national home, there was intense opposition – from the Arab world, from other international forces, from politicians in Britain, and at times from Jews themselves. For thirty years, various compromises were proposed, all accepted by Jews and rejected by their opponents. On the day the State of Israel was proclaimed, it was attacked on all fronts by its neighbors. Since then it has lived under constant threat of war, violence, terror, and delegitimization. Yet it has achieved wondrous things.

Through it Hebrew, the language of the Bible, was reborn as a living tongue. Jewish communities under threat have been rescued, including those like the Jews of Ethiopia who had little contact with other Jews for centuries. Jews have come to Israel from over a hundred countries,



representing the entire lexicon of cultural diversity. A desolate landscape has bloomed again. Jerusalem has been rebuilt. The world of Torah scholarship, devastated by the Holocaust, has been revived and the sound of learning echoes throughout the land. Economically, politically, socially, and culturally, Israel's achievements are unmatched by any country of its age and size. The sages said that, at the crossing of the Red Sea, the simplest Jew saw miracles that the greatest of later prophets were not destined to see. That, surely, was the privilege of those who witnessed Israel's rebirth and youth. The Messiah has not come. Israel is not yet at peace. The Temple has not been rebuilt. Our time is not yet redemption. Yet many of the prayers of two thousand years have been answered. No one, reviewing this singular history, can doubt that faith makes a difference; that a nation's history is shaped by what it believes.

Judah Halevi once compared the Jewish people to a seed. In his *Kuzari*, a fictional dialogue between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, the king asks the rabbi a pointed question. How is it that, if you are truly chosen by God, you are everywhere subjected to humiliation and persecution? Where is your greatness? The rabbi replies: We are like the seed of a great tree. When first planted in the ground it appears to disintegrate. But it is actually all the while gathering strength to grow. Eventually it will put forth roots and shoots and begin to reach toward heaven.

That is what Pesah was during more than eighteen centuries of exile and dispersion: a seed planted in Jewish memory, waiting to be activated and to grow. Without it Jews would certainly have disappeared. Lacking hope of return – hope tempered by faith into a certainty like steel – they would have made their peace with their condition, merged into their surrounding societies and ambient cultures, and vanished, like every other culture deprived of a home. Pesah, like a seed frozen in suspended animation, contained the latent energy that led Jews in the twentieth century to create the single most remarkable accomplishment in the modern world, the rebirth of Israel, the land, the state, the nation, and the people. Micah's vision, and Ezekiel's, and Moses', came true.

The Irish historian Conor Cruise O'Brien once remarked that Jews who see themselves as unreligious are sometimes very religious indeed. That was true of Hess, Pinsker, Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, and many other heroes and pioneers of the return to Zion.



They were not "spiritual" nor did they observe many of the commandments. But the vision of the prophets and the covenant of Jewish history flowed through their veins. God works through people; sometimes, so the prophets taught, without their conscious knowledge and consent. It is difficult to reflect deeply on the rebirth of Israel without sensing the touch of heaven in the minds of men and women, leading them to play their parts in a drama so much greater than any individual could have executed, even conceived. The historian Barbara Tuchman writes, "Viewing this strange and singular history one cannot escape the impression that it must contain some special significance for the history of mankind, that in some way, whether one believes in divine providence or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate" (*Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour*).

Who, then, wrote the script of the Jewish drama? God or the Jewish people? Or was it, as the sages taught, an inextricable combination of both: God as He was heard by the people, and the people as they responded to God? Isaac Bashevis Singer came close when he said, "God is a writer and we are both the heroes and the readers." One thing is certain, that without Pesah, celebrated over the centuries, the State of Israel would not have been born. The prophets were right: the Exodus of the past contained within it the Exodus of the future; and I, born in the same year as the state, can only say, "Blessed are You, O Lord... who has given life, sustained us, and brought us to this time."