

American Judaism, Spirituality and Democracy

Session 2: Structures of American Judaism

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Creation

Worship

Sacred Strategies 75, 76

Both denominations seek worship that is meaningful. But what does meaningful mean? Cultural historian Thomas R. Cole puts it well when he differentiates scientific questions from existential ones:

"The scientific questions about meaning are part of the human attempt to develop logical, reliable, interpretable and systematically predictive theories. The existential questions about meaning are part of the human quest for a vision within which one's experience makes sense. [Meaningful means being able] to connect the world of public understandings with the inner struggle for wholeness."

Science and religion explore alternative worlds of human experience. What experiments are to science, worship is to religion. Science tests its hypotheses by their predictive capacity. Religion does the same thing by the symbolic success of its rituals. In both cases, we, the subjects, need convincing: scientists compare prediction with result; worshipers seek to be moved while in prayer and to emerge from it with a sense of wholeness and purpose. Science reveals what we are willing to take as realities in the world, insofar as we come in contact with nature; worship unveils similar realities in human consciousness, insofar as we come in contact with God.

Music:

“The Vocation of the Cantor,” in The Insecurity of Freedom. Abraham Joshua Heschel, FSG, 1957, 245.
Song, and particularly liturgical song, is not only an act of expression but also a way of bringing down the spirit from heaven to earth. The numerical value of the letters which constitute the word *shirah*, or prayer is equal to the numerical value of the word *tefillah*, or prayer. Prayer is song. Sing to God, chant to God, meditate about all the wonders (1 Chronicles 16:9), about the mystery that surrounds us. The wonder defies all descriptions; the mystery surpasses the limits of expression. The only language that seems to be compatible with the wonder and mystery of being is the language of music. Music is more than just expressiveness. It is rather a reaching out toward a realm that lies beyond the reach of verbal propositions. Verbal expression is in danger of being taken literally and of serving as a substitute for insight. Words become slogans, slogans become idols. But music is a refutation of human finality. Music is an antidote to higher idolatry.

“Music as a Spiritual Practice,” Joey Weisenberg, Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas, April 1, 2014

When our hearts are opened through music, we are more vulnerable, but we are also more receptive to insight. . . . Opening the heart is the process of becoming curious, of wondering what might come next, of discovering and then softening the boundaries of our beings. Music helps that story of wonder unfold. For most people, turning away from cynicism, quieting discomfort (and their iPhones), and allowing insight to enter is more difficult.

Revelation

Scripture Study

The Way into Torah, Norman J. Cohen, Jewish Lights, 2000, 25-26

When we are able to immerse ourselves in the fabric of the biblical narrative—as the modern critic James Kugel has written, “finding some way of dwelling, as it were, in biblical reality”—then the meaning of the text can bring out that which has been previously sealed in us. Reading our sacred texts forces our self-involvement and self-reflection. Thus, with every story we study, we learn not only about the text we are reading but also about ourselves. In deciphering a text, we bring to the fore elements of our own being of which we may not always be conscious. We respond to our own questions and dilemmas. This can happen because the Torah addresses common core experiences that occur in the lives of all human beings at different times.

A Living Covenant, David Hartman, Jewish Lights, 1997, 9

The word of God, mediated through the prophets and filtered and expanded by generations of halakhic teachers, must be heard ever anew as one brings today's historical context into the process of covenantal renewal. I take this to imply that one should not be paralyzed by feelings of inadequacy in contrast to those previous generations. No generation in covenantal history can account itself closer to God merely because it is closer to the time of Moses, if a generation's spiritual health is measured by its ability to renew the covenant and reapply the Torah in its own time. The Talmud contradicts the idea that “later” means “spiritually inferior” when it insists that the rabbinic sage is superior to the prophet.

To accord the Talmud equal status with the Bible is to augment revelation not merely with a particular body of literature or school of teachers but with a method of interpretation that emphasizes the open ended possibilities of learning from the received word. The covenant as reflected in the creative Talmudic style of interpretation enables Jews to feel free to apply their own human reason to the understanding and application of Torah.

Jonathan Rauch, The Constitution of Knowledge, Brookings, 2021, 113-114, 115.

Science is a great thing, but scientism—the idea that science does or should govern every domain of life—is a mistake, and the Constitution of Knowledge does not imply it. In fact, it implies the opposite.

The reality-based community is *a* community—not *the* community. And because it is a liberal community, it embraces limits on its own authority. There is room, in liberal societies and in liberal science properly understood, for tradition, identity, rootedness. There is room to be our own personal, spiritual, embodied selves, each with our own lived experience and subjective outlook. (113-114) (*italics in the original*)

The Constitution of Knowledge needs supremacy in the realm of public knowledge, but not in the realm of private belief. It decides what appears in academic journals, newspapers, school textbooks, university curricula, government reports, legal briefs, intelligence briefs. It requires reality-based professionals to follow its rules in their professional lives. But it does not require each of us to go around all the time behaving like a scientist or reporter, and if it did, it would fail.

Redemption

Michael Waltzer, Exodus and Revolution, Basic Books, 1985 12-13

Since late medieval or early modern times, there has existed in the West a characteristic way of thinking about political change, a pattern that we commonly impose upon events, a story that we repeat to one another. The story has roughly this form: oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, new society (danger of restoration). We call the whole process revolutionary, though the events don't make a circle unless oppression is brought back at the end; intentionally, at least, they have a strong forward movement. This isn't a story told everywhere; it isn't a universal pattern; it belongs to the West, more particularly to Jews and Christians in the West, and its source, its original version, is the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. My purpose in this book has been to retell the story in its original version, to give a reading of the Exodus that captures its political meaning—and then to reflect upon the general character and internal tensions of Exodus politics.

This is not, of course, the only way of reading the biblical account. It is an interpretation, and like all interpretations, it highlights some features of the account and neglects or suppresses others. But I am not reading Exodus in an idiosyncratic way. I am following a well-marked trail, moving backward from citation and commentary to primary text, from enactments to acts or, at least, to stories of acts. The Exodus may or may not be what many of its commentators thought it to be, the first revolution. But the Book of Exodus (together with the Book of Numbers) is certainly the first description of revolutionary politics.

The Exodus, or the later reading of the Exodus, fixes the pattern. And because of the centrality of the Bible in Western thought and the endless repetition of the story, the pattern has been etched deeply into our political culture. It isn't only the case that events fall, almost naturally, into an Exodus shape; we work actively to give them that shape. We complain about oppression; we hope (against all the odds of human history) for deliverance; we join in covenants and constitutions; we aim at a new and better social order. Though in attenuated form, Exodus thinking seems to have survived the secularization of political theory. Thus, when utopian socialists, most of them resolutely hostile to religion, argued about the problems of the "transitional period," they still cast their arguments in familiar terms: the forty years in the wilderness, write the Manuels in their chapter on Robert Owen, were "a deep . . . cultured memory and the death of the old generation [was] an archetypal solution." (It was even a solution for "scientific" socialists like Marx or, in this century, Lincoln Steffens.) This sort of thing is never merely a matter of rhetorical convenience. Cultural patterns shape perception and analysis too. They would not endure for long, of course, if they did not accommodate a range of perceptions and analyses, if it were not possible to carry on arguments inside the structures they provide. I don't mean to defend an essentialist view of revolution or of radical politics generally. Within the frame of the Exodus story one can plausibly emphasize the mighty arm of God or the slow march of the people, the land of milk and honey or the holy nation, the purging of counterrevolutionaries or the schooling of the new generation. One can describe Egyptian bondage in terms of corruption or tyranny or exploitation. One can defend

the authority of the Levites or of the tribal elders or of the rulers of tens and fifties. I would only suggest that these alternatives are themselves paradigmatic; they are our alternatives. In other cultures, men and women read other books, tell different stories, confront different choices

But we in the West also have a second way of talking about political change, a second pattern, the intellectual offspring, as it were, of the Exodus, though unlike it in crucial respects. The second pattern is, in Jacob Talmon's phrase, "political messianism." Messianism is the great temptation of Western politics. Its source and spur is the apparent endlessness of the Exodus march. The long drawn-out tale of human progress is shadowed by error and catastrophe wrote the young Ramsay MacDonald in a book called *The Socialist Movement*, "by wearisome journeys in the wilderness, by Canaans which, when yet lands beyond the Jordan, were overflowing with milk and honey, but which, when conquered, were almost barren. . . ." MacDonald professed himself bound to continue the march, but one might well decide to give it up (as he eventually did)—or, alternatively, to opt for a far more radical hope. Why be content with the difficult and perhaps interminable struggle for holiness and justice when there is another promised land where liberation is final, fulfillment complete? History itself is a burden from which we long to escape, and messianism guarantees that escape: a deliverance not only from Egypt but from Sinai and Canaan, too. It may seem odd to expect such a deliverance from politics—even from revolutionary politics and apocalyptic wars. Theological or philosophical arguments in defense of that expectation are always complex, invoking divine purpose or history's providential course along with this or that political program, just as the Book of Exodus does. What is important here, however, is that the messianic program is very different from the one adopted by Moses in the wilderness and at Sinai.

Mishkan Tefilah, p 157 (adapted from Waltzer)

Standing on the parted shores of history
we still believe what we were taught
before ever we stood at Sinai's foot:

that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt
that there is a better place, a promised land;
that the winding way to that promise
passes through the wilderness.

That there is no way to get from here to there
except by joining hands, marching
together.

Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus" (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"