

COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

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THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA FROM THE CHIEF RABBI

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יב תמוז תשס"ט



חוקת-בלק
Chukat-Balak

A people that dwells alone

G-d does not appear only to Jews, members of the covenantal nation. Nor does He answer only Jewish prayers.

One of the most profound and influential comments ever made about Jewish destiny was made by the pagan prophet Bilaam in this week's sedra:

As I see them from the mountain tops,
Gaze on them from the heights,
Behold it is a people that dwells alone,
Not reckoned among the nations. (Num. 23: 9)

To many - Jews and non-Jews, admirers and critics alike - that has seemed to epitomise the Jewish situation: a people that stands outside history and the normal laws governing the fate of nations. For Jews it was a source of pride. For non-Jews, it was all too often a source of resentment and hate. For centuries, Jews in Christian Europe were treated, in Max Weber's phrase, as a "pariah people." All agreed, though, that Jews were different. The question is: how and why? The biblical answer is surprising and profound.

It is not that Jews alone knew G-d. That is manifestly not the case. Bilaam - the very prophet who uttered these words - was not an Israelite. Nor were Abimelekh or Laban, to whom G-d appears in the book of Genesis. Abraham's contemporary, Malkizedek, king of Shalem (the city that later became Jerusalem) is described as a priest of the most high G-d. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Midianite high priest, yet the sedra that contains the supreme moment of Jewish history - the revelation at Mount Sinai - bears his name. Even the Pharaoh who ruled Egypt in the days of Joseph said of him, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of G-d?"

G-d does not appear only to Jews, members of the covenantal nation. Nor does He answer only Jewish prayers. At the dedication of the Temple, King Solomon made the following request:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to Your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your name -- for men will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm-when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears Your Name.

The sages continued this great tradition when they said that "the righteous of the nations of the world have a share in the world to come." Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, contains the names of more than 20,000 righteous gentiles who saved lives during the Holocaust years.

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Nor is it that G-d's covenant with the children of Israel means that they are more righteous than others.

Malachi, last of the prophets, has striking words to say on the subject:

Jews are the only nation whose very identity is defined in religious terms.

From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honoured among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name, for My name is honoured among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it . . . (Malachi 1: 11-12)

Nor did any of the major strands in Jewish thought ever see Jewish chosen-ness as a privilege. It was, and is, a responsibility. The key verse here is the famous prophecy of Amos:

You alone have I singled out
Of all the families of the earth -
That is why I will call you to account
For all your iniquities. (Amos 3: 2)

Where then did Jewish singularity lie? The clue lies in the precise wording of Bilaam's blessing: "Behold it is a *people* that dwells alone." For it was *as a people* that G-d chose the descendants of Abraham; as a people that He made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai; as a people that He rescued them from Egypt, gave them laws, and entered into their history. "You will be to Me," He said at Sinai, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Judaism is the only religion to place G-d at the centre of its self-definition as a nation. Jews are the only nation whose very identity is defined in religious terms.

There were many nations in the ancient world who had national gods. There were other religions - Judaism's two daughter faiths, Christianity and Islam - that believed in a universal G-d and a universal religion. Only Judaism believed, and still believes, in a universal G-d accessible to all, yet peculiarly manifest in the way of life, fate and destiny of a single and singular people:

You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen . . .
You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am G-d. (Isaiah 43: 10-12)

Israel, in its history and laws, would be G-d's witness. It would testify to something larger than itself. So it proved to be. The historian Barbara Tuchman wrote:

The history of the Jews is . . . intensely peculiar in the fact of having given the Western world its concept of origins and monotheism, its ethical traditions, and the founder of its prevailing religion, yet suffering dispersion, statelessness and ceaseless persecution, and finally in our times nearly successful genocide, dramatically followed by fulfilment of the never-relinquished dream of return to their homeland. 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 purpose or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate.

Why, if G-d is the G-d of the universe, accessible to every human being, should He choose *one nation* to bear witness to His presence in the human arena? This is a profound question. There is no short answer. But at least part of the answer, I believe, is this. G-d is wholly Other. Therefore He chose a people who would be humanity's 'other'. That is what Jews were - outsiders, different, distinctive, a people who swam against the tide and challenged the idols of the age. Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of mankind.

During two thousand years of dispersion, Jews were the only people who, as a group, refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith. They suffered as a result - but what they taught was not for themselves alone. They showed that a nation does not need to be powerful or large to win G-d's favour. They showed that a nation can lose everything else - land, power, rights, a home - and yet still not lose hope. They showed that G-d is not necessarily on the side of great empires or big battalions. They showed that a nation can be hated, persecuted, reviled, and yet still be loved by G-d. They showed that to every law of history there is an exception and what the majority believes at any given moment is not necessarily true. Judaism is G-d's question-mark against the conventional wisdom of the age.

It is neither an easy nor a comfortable fate to be "a people that dwells alone", but it is a challenging and inspirational one.

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Religion teaches us that we are part of the whole

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People esteem those who make sacrifices for the sake of others. This, in Darwinian terms, doesn't seem to make sense at all, and he knew it.

the heart of his system. If evolution is the struggle to survive, if life is a competition for scarce resources, if the strong win and the weak go to the wall, then everywhere ruthlessness should prevail. But it doesn't. All societies value altruism. People esteem those who make sacrifices for the sake of others. This, in Darwinian terms, doesn't seem to make sense at all, and he knew it.

The bravest, most sacrificial people, he wrote in *The Descent of Man* "would on average perish in larger number than other men." A noble man "would often leave no offspring to inherit his noble nature." It seems scarcely possible, he wrote, that virtue "could be increased through natural selection, that is, by survival of the fittest."

It was Darwin's greatness that he saw the answer, even though it contradicted his general thesis. Natural selection operates at the level of the individual. It is as individual men and women that we pass on our genes to the next generation. But civilization works at the level of the group.

It's ironic that Darwin's disciples tend to be antireligious, because Darwin himself gave us one of the great arguments for religion. It's a story worth telling because it is so little understood. It began with a paradox Darwin noticed at

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themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection." How to get from the individual to the group was, he said, "at present much too difficult to be solved."

But that of course is precisely the function of religion. G-d is the voice of the other within the self. It is G-d who taught us to love our neighbours as ourselves, to welcome the stranger, care for the poor, the widow and the orphan, heed the unheeded, feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, and temper justice with compassion. It was Nietzsche, Darwin's younger contemporary, who saw most clearly how unnatural these things are. Nature is the will to power. Faith, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is care for the powerless.

Without fully realising what he had done, Darwin was pointing us to the central drama of civilization. Biological evolution favours individuals, but cultural evolution favours groups. So, as Judaism and Christianity both knew, there is a war within each of us as to which will prevail: self-regard or concern for others, egoism or altruism. Selfishness is advantageous to individuals, but disastrous to groups, and it is only as members of a group that we can survive at all. As Darwin himself put it, "Selfish and contentious people will not cohere, and without coherence nothing can be effected."

There are three ways of getting individuals to act in a way that is beneficial to the group. One is power: we force them to. The second is wealth: we pay them to. The disadvantage of both is that they leave selfishness untouched. They use external incentives. The danger is that strong individuals will outwit the system. They will use power or wealth for their own advantage.

The third alternative is to educate them to see that the welfare of others matters as much as their own. No system has ever done this more effectively than religion, for an obvious reason. Religion teaches us that we are part of the whole, a thread in the fabric of G-d's creation, a note in the symphony of life. Faith is the ability to see ourselves as joined to others by G-d's love.

Not only does it teach us this. Through story and ritual, celebration and prayer, it weaves it into our personalities, affecting all parts of the almost infinitely complex labyrinth of the human brain. No wonder then that religion has survived, and that we need it if we are to survive. And it was Charles Darwin who pointed the way.

Religion binds people into groups. It creates altruism, the only force strong enough to defeat egoism. Selfishness is good for me and my genes but bad for us and therefore bad for my descendants in the long run. In *Homo sapiens* a miracle of nature meets a miracle of culture: religion, which turns selfish genes into selfless people.

As he put it, "a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice

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