



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

In the Eyes of the Nations

VA'ETCHANAN · 5768

In Moses' day the Israelites must have appeared to an outside observer as a small, undistinguished people, children of slaves, who did not yet possess a home. Even many generations later, after they had conquered the Land, appointed a King, and built the Temple, they were a minor power compared to the great empires around them. They never reached the scale or prestige of Mesopotamia or Egypt, Assyria or Babylon.

Yet Moses was convinced that something had happened to them of world-transforming significance. They had been touched, adopted, chosen by God for a great task, one that would affect not only them but also those who came in touch with them. The God of Israel was not like the gods of other nations. The faith of Israel was not like the religions of other people. Of this Moses was sure. He knew with a certainty that comes only from prophecy of the highest order, that what had happened to Israel would reverberate far beyond Israel:

Observe [this Law] carefully, for this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this Law I am setting before you today?

According to Nachmanides, the meaning of this passage is that 'the statutes and ordinances have the great benefit that they will bring honour from others to those who observe them. Even their enemies will praise them.'

Other nations will admire Israel's way of life. Sforno interprets it differently: through the Torah 'you will be able to refute a heretic by intellectual proofs.' It is not so much that others will admire Israel as that they will acknowledge the Divine source of its laws. The Jewish people will be living proof that God exists and has communicated with mankind.

R. Shmuel David Luzzatto, writing in a later age, sees the text from a different perspective. 'This is a refutation,' he writes, 'of those who say that the statutes Moses gave Israel were adopted from the Egyptians and the other peoples of his time. Moses' contemporaries would have known far better than we do if this had been the case.'

How then could Moses have been so foolish or presumptuous to say to the Israelites that the nations, when they heard of these statutes, would say that Israel is a wise and understanding nation? Rather they would say that Israel is a foolish and inferior nation, because its laws were stolen from others.' Moses, suggests Luzzatto, knew that there was something different about the laws of Israel. This could not have been the case if Israel had simply adopted or adapted the practices of its time.

Whichever interpretation we take, the implication of Moses' words is clear. The Torah would have an impact far beyond the boundaries, literal or metaphorical, of Israel. At no time in the biblical era could this be said to be true, but it did come true nonetheless. The Greeks, struck by the intensity with which Jews studied Torah, called them 'a nation of philosophers.' Then came Christianity and Islam, two faiths tracing their ancestry to Abraham and drawing much of their inspiration from the Hebrew Bible. Already in the twelfth century, Moses Maimonides could write (in a passage long censored and only recently restored):

The whole world is already filled with the words of [the Christian] Messiah and the words of the commandments, and these words have spread to the farthest islands and among many unenlightened peoples, and they discuss these words and the commandments of the Torah.

The effect of Christianity and Islam was to spread the Jewish message – albeit in ways with which Jews could not fully agree – throughout the world. Today these religions represent more than half of the six billion people on the face of the earth. The 'Judeo-Christian ethic' and the Abrahamic

faiths have shaped much of the civilisation of the West. The Torah really did become ‘your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations.’

I want to examine one example of this influence – touched on briefly in last week’s study, namely the politics of covenant.

The book of Devarim / Deuteronomy is the great text of covenantal politics – the idea of a nation linked together in an explicit bond, a foundational text or constitution of mutual responsibility. It is a highly distinctive form of politics. Unlike the politics of power or organic development, it is predicated on the equal dignity and freedom of all its citizens. It involves a narrative – the story of the origins of the people and how they came to join together in collective enterprise to pursue the common good.

One of its most distinctive features is that it is essentially moral. It sees the nation as charged with a mission, a set of values, a destiny and responsibility. The health of the nation is directly related to the degree with which it is true to its vocation. John Schaar, writing about the political beliefs of Abraham Lincoln, summarises the idea well:

We are a nation formed by a covenant, by dedication to a set of principles and by an exchange of promises to uphold and advance certain commitments among ourselves and throughout the world. Those principles and commitments are the core of American identity, the soul of the body politic. They make the American nation unique, and uniquely valuable, among and to the other nations. But the other side of the conception contains a warning very like the warnings spoken by the prophets to Israel: if we fail in our promises to each other, and lose the principles of the covenant, then we lose everything, for they are we.

This serves as a good introduction to the proposition I want to argue here, namely that the single greatest experiment in covenantal politics in modern times has been the United States. From the beginning, its founders saw themselves as the children of Israel of their day, escaping from Egypt (=England) and a cruel Pharaoh (England’s kings), across the Red Sea (=the Atlantic) to what George Washington called ‘the almost promised land.’

In his 1849 novel *White-Jacket*, Herman Melville set out the connection between the American dream and the story of Israel:

We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours.

The story began in 1630. Aboard the *Arabella* as it sailed for New England, John Winthrop articulated the vision of the Pilgrim Fathers. Speaking in conscious imitation of Moses, he invited his fellow settlers to ‘enter into a covenant’ with God and to ‘follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.’ If they failed to live up to the covenant ‘the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us,’ but if they were true to its terms, ‘The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways.’ They would then find ‘that the God of Israel is among us.’ Winthrop ended his oration by quoting from Deuteronomy:

I shall shut up this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel ([Deuteronomy 30](#)). Beloved, there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it . . . Therefore let us choose life that we and our seed may live, by obeying his voice and cleaving to him, for he is our life and our prosperity.

What is extraordinary about America is that this deeply theological way of speaking about national purpose did not end (as it did in Britain) with the 17th century. It has continued to this day. One of the least well known, yet sustained commentaries to the book of Deuteronomy is the collected inaugural addresses of American presidents, from George Washington to George W. Bush.

In the first inaugural in 1789, George Washington declared, 'It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe,' and warned that 'the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.' In his second inaugural (1805), Thomas Jefferson compared the story of America to the exodus: 'I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life.'

More than a century and a half later, in 1961, John F. Kennedy was still using the same biblical cadences:

I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago. The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God . . . With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

Succeeding the assassinated Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson spoke of 'the American covenant' in language resonant with undertones of Exodus and Deuteronomy:

They came here—the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened—to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish . . . Under this covenant of justice, liberty and union we have become a nation – prosperous, great and mighty. And we have kept our freedom. But we have no promise from God that our greatness will endure.

We have been allowed by Him to seek greatness with the sweat of our hands and the strength of our spirit.

In 2001, the vision still drove George W. Bush:

[W]e are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image . . . Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves . . . We are not this [nation's] story's author, who fills time and eternity with his purpose. Yet his purpose is achieved in our duty, and our duty is fulfilled in service to one another.

No other country in the West uses this intensely religious vocabulary. It is particularly striking in view of the fact that the American constitution, in the form of the First Amendment, formally separates religion and state.

It was the great French writer, Alexis de Tocqueville, who in the 1830s, in the course of his classic *Democracy in America*, explained the paradox. There is a separation between religion and state, but not between religion and society. 'Religion in America,' he wrote, 'takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions.' What he meant was that, though it had no power, it had enormous influence. It sustained families. It bound communities together. It prompted people to join voluntary organisations for the promotion of the common good. It was the basis of a shared morality which, precisely because it was upheld by faith, did not have constantly to be enforced by law. 'In France,' he noted, 'I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. In America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.'

We owe to Robert Bellah the idea that America has a 'civil religion' – a set of beliefs and a shared faith that underlie its public and political life. A public theology has been part of America's political culture from the very beginning. That public theology is based, as Bellah himself notes, on the Hebrew Bible, above all of the book of Deuteronomy/Devarim. American presidents speak of

Divine Providence and the sovereignty of God. They refer to covenant and the moral bonds by which societies are sustained. The liberty of which they speak is biblical rather than libertarian: a matter less of rights than responsibilities, not the freedom to do what one likes, but the freedom to do what one ought, thus contributing to the common good. The “American story” is essentially that which Moses articulated at the end of his life. America is the promised land to which successive generations of immigrants have come to find freedom from oppression and build, in John Winthrop’s famous phrase, ‘a city upon a hill.’

The story of the Hebrew Bible is intensely particularistic. It tells of how one people, long ago, experienced oppression and were led to liberty through a long and arduous journey across the desert. Yet no story has had greater impact on the political development of the West. Moses knew that the events of his time had a significance that went far beyond those days and that people, and that they would eventually become an inspiration to others. So it came to be. When black Americans sang, ‘Let my people go,’ when South American liberation theologians in the 1960s based their work on the Hebrew Bible, when Nelson Mandela called his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, each was adopting Israel’s story and making it their own. ‘Since the Exodus,’ said Heinrich Heine, ‘Freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent.’

It is a disservice to Judaism to see its teachings as meant for Jews alone. Moses knew that God had summoned Israel to be more than just one other nation among the many that have surfaced in the course of history. It was to become an example, a role model, a living tutorial in what it is to construct a society built on the idea of the equal dignity of all as the image, and under the sovereignty, of God. As Paul Johnson put it in his *History of the Jews*:

It seems to be the role of the Jews to focus and dramatise these common experiences of mankind, and to turn their particular fate into a universal moral.

That is what Moses meant when he said: “This is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations.” It was a supreme challenge then. It remains so now.