

# The Role of Time in Social Transformation

BESHALLACH · 5769

‘Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, “The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.” So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.’

So begins this week’s sedra. On the face of it, it is a minor detail in the larger story of the exodus. Yet it is the key text in one of the most fascinating chapters in medieval Jewish thought. The man who wrote it was Moses Maimonides, in his great philosophical work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

The context in which it occurs is deeply controversial. In *The Guide*, Maimonides poses a fundamental question. Why, if the sacrificial system is so central to Judaism, were the prophets so critical of it? He does not ask a second question, but we should: if sacrifices are the primary form of worshipping God, how did Judaism survive without them for 20 centuries from the destruction of the Second Temple until today?

Maimonides’ answer is that sacrifices are secondary; prayer – the uniting of the soul of the individual with the mind of God – is primary. Judaism could thus survive the loss of the outer form of worship, because the inner form – prayer – remained intact.

Maimonides recognises that this idea is open to an obvious challenge. If sacrifices are secondary, and prayer primary, why did God not dispense with sacrifices altogether and immediately? His answer – it was, and remains, deeply controversial – is that the Israelites of Moses’ day could not conceive of the form of worship that did not involve sacrifice. That was the norm in the ancient world. God is beyond time, but human beings live within time. We cannot take ourselves out of, say, the 21st century and project ourselves a thousand years from now. Inescapably, we live in now, not eternity.

This leads Maimonides to his fundamental assertion (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:32). There is no such thing as sudden, drastic, revolutionary change in the world we inhabit. Trees take time to grow. The seasons shade imperceptibly into one another. Day fades into night. Processes take time, and there are no shortcuts.

If this is true of nature, it is all the more so of human nature. There can be little doubt that from the outset, the Torah is opposed to slavery. The free God desires the free worship of free human beings. That one person should own and control another is an offence against human dignity. Yet the Torah permits slavery, while at the same time restricting and humanizing it. Looking back with the full perspective of history, we know that slavery was not abolished in Britain and America until the 19th century – and in the case of America, not without a civil war. Change takes time.

This leads to a deeper question. Why did God not circumvent human nature? Why did He not simply intervene in the human mind and make the Israelites of Moses' day see that various practices of the ancient world were wrong? Here, Maimonides states a truth he saw as fundamental to Judaism. God sometimes intervenes to change nature. We call these interventions miracles. But God never intervenes to change human nature. To do so would be to compromise human free will. That is something God, on principle, never does (One might object: what about God 'hardening Pharaoh's heart'? To that, Maimonides had an answer – in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:3 – but it does not concern us here).

To put it simply: it would have been easy for God to create a billion computers programmed to sing His praises continually. But that would not be worship. Freedom of the will is not accidental to human existence as Judaism conceives it. It is of its very essence. Worship is not worship if it is coerced. Virtue is not virtue if we are compelled by inner or outer forces over which we have no control. In creating humanity God, as it were, placed Himself under a statute of self limitation. He had to be patient. He could not force the pace of the moral development of mankind without destroying the very thing He had created. This self limitation – what the kabbalists called *tzimtzum* – was God's greatest act of love. He gave humanity the freedom to grow. But that inevitably meant that change in the affairs of humankind would be slow.

Maimonides proof-text is the verse with which our sedra begins: 'Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines'. God feared that, seeing war, the Israelites would panic and want to go back. Why did God not put courage into their hearts? Because God does not intervene in human nature. Maimonides, however, goes further. It is no accident that the generation that left Egypt was not the generation to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. That privilege belonged to their children:

**It was the result of God's wisdom that the Israelites were led about in the wilderness until they acquired courage. For it is a well-known fact that travelling in the wilderness, deprived of bodily enjoyments like bathing,**

produces courage . . . Besides, another generation arose during the wanderings, that had not been accustomed to degradation and slavery.

Guide, III:32

In other words: it takes a generation born in freedom to build a society of freedom:

It is hard to overemphasise the importance of this insight. The modern world was formed through four revolutions: the British, the American, the French and the Russian. Two – the British and the American – led to a slow but genuine transformation towards democracy, universal franchise, and respect for human dignity. The French and Russian revolutions, however, led to regimes that were even worse than those they replaced: the ‘Terror’ in France, and Stalinist communism in Russia.

The difference was that the British and American revolutions, led by the Puritans, were inspired by the Hebrew Bible. The French and Russian revolutions were inspired by philosophy: Rousseau’s in the first, Karl Marx’s in the second. Tanach understands the role of time in human affairs. Change is slow and evolutionary. Philosophy lacks that understanding of time, and tends to promote revolution. What makes revolutions fail is the belief that by changing structures of power, you can change human behaviour. There is some truth in this, but also a significant falsehood. Political change can be rapid. Changing human nature is very slow indeed. It takes generations, even centuries and millennia.

The shape of the modern world would have been very different if France and Russia had understood the significance of the opening verse of Beshallach. Change takes time. Even God Himself does not force the pace. That is why He led the Israelites on a circuitous route, knowing that they could not face the full challenge of liberty immediately. Nelson Mandela called his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*. On that journey, there are no shortcuts.