

The Uniqueness of the Jewish People and Jewish Thought

Quotations

‘Anyone who doesn’t believe in miracles isn’t a realist.’¹ ‘In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.’²

-- David Ben Gurion

‘The story of Jewish identity across the millennia against impossible odds is a unique miracle of cultural survival. Where are the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians today? And though we recognize Egypt and Greece as still belonging to our world, the cultures and stocks of those countries have little continuity with their ancient namesakes. But however miraculous Jewish survival may be, the greater miracle is surely that the Jews developed a whole new way of experiencing reality, the only alternative to all ancient worldviews and all religions. If one is ever to find the finger of God in human affairs, one must find it here.’³

Morality and Ethics

‘All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it might have been a much emptier place.’⁴

‘No ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest. The God who made the universe and rested bids us do the same, calling us to a weekly restoration of prayer, study, and recreation (or re-creation). In this study (or Talmud), we have the beginnings of what Nahum Sarna has called ‘the universal duty of continuous self-education,’ Israel being the first human society to so value education and the first to envision it as a universal pursuit – and a democratic obligation that those in power must safeguard on behalf of those in their employ. The connections to both freedom and creativity lie just beneath the surface of this commandment: leisure is appropriate to a free people, and this people so recently free find themselves quickly establishing this quiet weekly celebration of their freedom; leisure is the necessary ground of creativity, and a free people are free to imitate the creativity of God. The Sabbath is surely one of the simplest and sanest recommendations any god has ever made; and those who live without such septimanal punctuation are emptier and less resourceful.’⁵

Time as Linear, not Circular

‘All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly cyclical. The assumptions that early man made about the world were, in all their essentials, little different from the assumptions that later and more sophisticated societies, like Greece and India, would make in a more elaborate manner. As Henri-Charles Puech says of Greek thought in his seminal *Man and Time*: ‘No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once...; every event has been enacted, is enacted, and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear, and will appear at every turn of the circle.’ The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, so much that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.’⁶

¹ David Ben Gurion, quoted by Roman Frister, *Israel: Years of Crisis, Years of Hope* (McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 45

² David Ben Gurion, interview on CBS, (5 October 1956)

³ Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p.260

⁴ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), p.585. See also Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein, *Defending the Human Spirit: Jewish Law’s Vision of a Moral Society* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2006), especially ch.1, ‘The Vulnerability Principle’

⁵ Cahill, p.157 – 158

⁶ Cahill, p.13 – 14

Time and Hope

'If we had lived in the second millennium B.C., the millennium of Avram, and could have canvassed all the nations of the earth, what would they have said of Avram's journey? In most of Africa and Europe, where prehistoric animism was the norm and artists were still carving and painting on stone the heavenly symbols of the Great Wheel of Life and Death, they would have laughed at Avram's madness and pointed to the heavens, where the life of earth had been plotted from all eternity. His wife is barren as winter, they would say; a man cannot escape his fate. The Egyptians would have shaken their heads and disbelief. 'There is none born wise,' they would say, repeating the advice of their most cherished wise men. 'Copy the forefathers. Teach him what has been said in the past; then he will set a good example.' The early Greeks might have told Avram the story of Prometheus, whose quest for the fire of the gods ended in personal disaster. Do not overreach, they would advise; come to resignation. In India, he would be told that time is black, irrational, and merciless. Do not set yourself the task of accomplishing something in time, which is only the dominion of suffering. In China, the now anonymous sages whose thoughts would eventually influence the *I Ching* would caution that there is no purpose in journeys or in any kind of earthly striving; the great thing is to abolish time by escaping from the law of change. The ancestors of the Maya in America would point to their circular calendars, which like those of the Chinese repeat the pattern of years in unvarying succession, and would explain that everything has been comes around again and that each man's fate is fixed. On every continent, in every society, Avram would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lao-Tsu, and Siddhartha would one day give their followers: do not journey but sit; compose yourself by the river of life, meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow – on all that is past or passing or to come – until you have absorbed the pattern and have come to peace with the Great Wheel and with your own death and the death of all things in the corruptible sphere.'⁷

'Since time is no longer cyclical but one-way and irreversible, personal history is now possible and an individual life can have value. This new value is at first hardly understood; but already in the earliest accounts of Avraham and his family we come upon the carefully composed genealogies of ordinary people, something it would never have occurred to Sumerians to write down, because they accorded no importance to individual memories. For them only impersonal survival, like kingship, like the harvest, mattered; the individual, the unusual, the singular, the bizarre – persons or events that did not conform to an archetype – could have no meaning. And without the individual, neither time nor history is possible. But the God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov – no longer your typical ancient divinity, no longer the archetypal gesturer – is a real personality who has intervened in real history, changing its course and robbing it of predictability.'⁸

'For the Jews, history will be...always something new: a process unfolding through time, whose direction and end we cannot know, except insofar as God gives us some hint of what is to come. The future will not be what has happened before; indeed, the only reality that the future has is that it has not happened yet. It is unknowable; and what it will be cannot be discovered by auguries – by reading the stars or examining entrails. We do not control the future; in a profound sense, even God does not control the future because it is the collective responsibility of those who are bringing about the future by their actions in the present. For this reason, the concept of the future – for the first time – holds out promise, rather than just the same old thing. We are not doomed, not bound to some predetermined fate; we are free.'⁹

Morality, Conscience, and Dignity of Each Individual Person

'Over many centuries of trauma and suffering they came to believe in one God, the Creator of the universe, whose meaning underlies all his creation and who enters human history to bring his purposes to pass. Because of their unique belief – monotheism – the Jews were able to give us the Great Whole, a unified universe that makes sense and that, because of its evident superiority as a worldview, completely overwhelms the warring and contradictory phenomena of polytheism. They gave us the Conscience of the West, the belief that this God who is One is not the God of outward show but the 'still, small voice' of conscience, the God of compassion, the God who 'will be there,' the God who cares about each of his creatures, especially the human beings he created 'in his own image,' and that he insists we do the same... We can hardly get up in the morning or cross the street without being Jewish. We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes. Most of our best words, in fact – new, adventure,

⁷ Ibid., p.74 – 75

⁸ Ibid., p.106

⁹ Ibid., p.142 – 143

surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice – are the gifts of the Jews.’¹⁰

‘We can say that the Bible represents a revolution in which the original Earth goddess was supplanted by newly aggressive warrior males and their heavenly projections of themselves, but this hypothesis is itself a projection, a sort of feminist wish fulfillment without substantial confirmation in the archaeological record. Our best evidence suggests strongly that the aboriginal great god was always ‘in heaven’ – that is, as completely Other as human imagination could make him – and that, because he acted on earthly life as the seed-giver, he was imagined as male...All religions are cyclical, mythical, and without reference to history as we have come to understand it – all religions except the Judeo-Christian stream in which Western consciousness took life.’¹¹

‘We can read the Bible (as do postmodernists) as a jumble of unrelated texts, given a false and superficial unity by redactors of the exilic period and later. But this is to ignore not only the powerful emotional and spiritual effect that much of the Bible has on readers, even on readers who would rather not be so moved, but also its cumulative impact on whole societies. The Bible’s great moments – the thunderous ‘lekh-lekha’ spoken to Avram, the secret Name of God revealed to cowering Moshe, Miryam’s song on the far shore, God’s Ten Words, David’s Good Shepherd, Isaiah’s Holy Mountain – are hard to brush aside as merely human expressions with no relationship to the deepest meanings of our own individual lives. Nor can we imagine the great liberation movements of modern history without reference to the Bible. Without the Bible we would never have known the abolitionist movement, the prison-reform movement, the antiwar movement, the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the movements of indigenous and dispossessed peoples for their human rights, the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, the Solidarity movement in Poland, the free-speech and pro-democracy movements in such Far Eastern countries as South Korea, the Philippines, and even China. These movements of modern times have all employed the language of the Bible; and it is even impossible to understand their great heroes and heroines – people like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Mother Jones, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Helder Camara, Oscar Romero, Rigoberto Menchu, Corazon Aquino, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Charity Kaluki Ngilu, Harry Wu – without recourse to the Bible.

‘Beyond these movements, which have commonly taken the Book of Exodus as their blueprint, are other forces that have shaped our world, such as capitalism, communism, and democracy. Capitalism and communism are both bastard children of the Bible, for both are processive faiths, modeled on biblical faith and demanding of their adherents that they always hold in their hearts a belief in the future and keep before their eyes the vision of a better tomorrow, whether that tomorrow contains a larger gross domestic product or a workers’ paradise. Neither ideology could have risen in the cyclical East, in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, or Shinto. But because capitalism and communism are processive faiths without God, each is a form of madness – a fantasy without a guarantee. Democracy, in contrast, grows directly out of the Israelite vision of individuals, subjects of value because they are images of God, each with a unique and personal destiny. There is no way that it could have ever been ‘self-evident that all men are created equal’ without the intervention of the Jews.’¹²

Justice

‘A sojourner you are not to oppress...This bias toward the underdog is unique not only in ancient law but in the whole history of law. However faint our sense of justice may be, insofar as it operates at all it is still a Jewish sense of justice.’¹³

‘In a cyclical world, there are neither beginnings nor ends. But for us, time had a beginning, whether it was the first words of God in the Book of Genesis, when ‘in the beginning God created heaven and earth,’ or the Big Bang of modern science, a concept that would not have been possible without the Jews. Time, which had a beginning, must also have an end. What will it be? In the Torah we learn that God is working his purposes in history and will effect its end, but in the Prophets we learn that our choices will also affect this end, that our inner disposition toward our fellow human beings will make an enormous difference in the way this end appears to us.

‘Unbelievers may wish to stop for a moment and consider how completely God – this Jewish God of justice and compassion – undergirds all our values and that it is just possible that human effort without this God is doomed

¹⁰ Ibid., p.256 – 257

¹¹ Ibid., p.260 – 261

¹² Ibid., p.256 – 257

¹³ Ibid., p.169

to certain failure. Humanity's most extravagant dreams are articulated by the Jewish prophets. In Isaiah's vision, true faith is no longer confined to one nation, but 'all the nations' stream to the House of YHWH 'that he may teach us his ways' and that we may learn to 'beat [our] swords into plowshares.' All who share this outrageous dream of universal brotherhood, peace, and justice, who dream the dreams and see the visions of the great prophets, must bring themselves to contemplate the possibility that without God there is no justice.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., p.265 – 266