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*Surplus Powerlessness: The Psychodynamics of Everyday
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Transformation*

The Socialism of Fools: Anti-Semitism on the Left

Tikkun Anthology (editor)

JEWISH RENEWAL

A PATH TO HEALING
AND TRANSFORMATION

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CHAPTER FOUR

SOMETHING HAPPENED

SINAI AND TORAH

Something happened.

It may not have been a specific day or a single moment in which the revelation of God's will to the Jewish people took place. The Torah may have been compiled by a redactor in Ezra's time (circa 400 B.C.E.) rather than written by one prophet at the time of the Exodus. It may itself be the product of conflicting traditions and derive from alternative sources. Yet what it records, buried in the myths of a people trying to recount its own development, is an event monumental and transparently true: that at some point in our history as a people we "got" it. We together received and accepted a message that we have a special obligation to live in accord with a transcendent view of the world.

This "getting" it was not simply the enlightenment of a single soul or a small group of special enlightened gurus, philosophers, artists, wise men or women, spiritual seers, or mystics. The remarkable claim of Torah is that an entire people got it at the same time, and in a sense all stood at Sinai together. And as the Midrash wisely adds, not only those living at that historical moment, but also all future generations were at Sinai, so that all of us heard the message together, and all of us can remember how we heard it.

Had only a small spiritual elite been enlightened, it might be easy to fudge the story. But here we have an entire mass of people claiming that they've been through something together. Moreover, they tell it to their children with energy and commitment and veracity so intense and special that those children in turn tell the story to their children, who in turn tell it to their children, so that one generation tells the next for three thousand years (or maybe "only" twenty-four hundred years). And they tell the story in a way that is very different from mythic history: They tell it with the details preserved, with the faults of the people preserved, with every betrayal and failure and human weakness preserved.

The very way that this story has been told from generation to generation is good evidence that something happened, and that something happened to an entire people, not just to a few people.

But there is another way to look at the story: that the something that happened was the telling itself. The very fact that this kind of story has been told, has taken root, and has held the moral and spiritual imagination of a people for twenty-four hundred years is itself the story of a revelation. The ability of a people to grasp, hold, imaginatively transform, and yet remain loyal to a story of liberation may be the very thing that happened.

Speculation about the historical details of the Exodus has led some scholars to develop an alternative account to that found in the Book of Joshua. Biblical scholar Norman Gottwald suggests that most of the tribes living in the hills of Judea never experienced the Exodus. Rather, they were engaged in creating a relatively independent life for themselves, free from the oppressive order of the established cities that dominated much of the land of Canaan. At some point a group of nomads from the Sinai desert entered the land and eventually succeeded in uniting these different tribes in a struggle against the city-states that had previously oppressed them. This group of nomads, largely the tribe of Levi, had a set of Moses stories that eventually became the dominant stories of the other tribes that joined in a loose federation to struggle against the city dwellers. Eventually the tribes succeeded in conquering the cities, and slowly the Moses stories became the dominant stories of the entire people.

If some variant of this account were true, would it undermine our claim that "something happened"? Not at all. Not only would we still maintain that the Moses group got it and that event was Sinai, but also we would say that the other tribes who accepted the telling of Moses'

story got it too. This process might have taken place over the course of five hundred or eight hundred years, but eventually a very large number of people got it.

Now *what* they got was very different from, say, an account of miracles or plagues, although that may have been a part. Unique about this claimed revelation is that these people and their descendants personally understood something about the world that obligated them in a deep and lasting way—obligated them to become witnesses for the possibility of transformation in the name of a God of transcendence. Whenever they got *that* understanding, we call it Sinai. All who read Torah and hear within it the voice of God commanding them to join the Jewish people's efforts to live lives committed to healing and transformation have similarly received the revelation, and can reasonably tell their children that they too were at Sinai.

But how can we convey what really happens in these revelatory moments? What we can do, at best, is speak about the human experience of revelation, what it felt like to us, or what kinds of language we attempted to use in describing an experience which wasn't like other experiences, didn't fit into the words or categories we normally have. The dominant metaphor developed from that experience was hearing. We heard something, and what we heard we attempted to write down.

The central mantra of the Jewish people is not "Read, O Israel" or even "Study, O Israel"—though both of these are very important elements in the process. It is "Hear, O Israel." Listen. The command implies that still one can hear, that the revelation is still happening. So when the Midrash says that each person heard it differently, the message is that we will not all hear it in the same way. Nevertheless, each of us is hearing the real thing. And *that* has very profound consequences—because it empowers each of us in a way that challenges every orthodoxy, including the orthodoxy of the Jewish religion.

The revelation's sound waves are still reverberating through the universe. In Psalms it says that a thousand years are like a moment in God's eyes—something that must be true when we recognize the billions of years that have elapsed since the universe began to expand. If so, we are really living only a few moments after Sinai, still living in a moment when we can experience the aftershocks of the first sound waves, when the universe is still pulsating with that revelation. If we check the history of the human race, we find that in this same historical period, from approximately 1200 to 200 B.C.E., many other peoples

had sages arise who claimed to have gotten a new revelation or a new way of understanding the world. In their own ways, other peoples may have been picking up on the same event in the life of God that the Jewish people call Sinai. The Midrash unintentionally makes this point when it says that the revelation went out in seventy different languages.

Something happened, and it shook the Jewish people very deeply. It turned us into a group that would play a vanguard role for much of subsequent history. Out of the experience of Exodus and Sinai would emerge a small group of people whose descendants would take these insights and spin off other religious traditions, including Christianity and Islam; and later, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and other liberatory traditions of the modern world. Something happened to make this group conceive of itself in such a way that it would make a contribution to the world out of proportion to its numbers, a contribution that would build upon the realization that the oppression and evil in the world could be overcome.

So, for our purposes, let us call whatever happened the revelation at Sinai.

The central insight at Sinai is this: the God of the universe is the God of freedom and transcendence; the God that has made possible the liberation from Egypt; the God that ensures that the way things will be need not be the way they have been; the God that enables us to break the chain of negativity and pain that links the generations.

The specific way Torah insists that human beings can break the chain of cruelty is in our treatment of the powerless, the widow, the orphan, and most particularly the stranger. The thought repeated, in various formulations, more frequently than any other is this: When you come into your land, do not oppress the stranger; remember that you were a stranger in the land of Egypt.

Why would we be tempted to oppress the stranger? Precisely because the children of Israel function psychologically like all other human beings, by repeating the behavior generated by earlier traumatic events, but now from the position of being the agent who is inflicting it rather than suffering from it.

But as in the Akedah (Abraham's story, discussed in chapter two), Torah says, "No! don't do it! You don't have to do it. You can break the chain of suffering, you can transcend it. You do not have to pass on the pain that was delivered to you to the next generation, or to the people over whom you have power, or to the people with whom you have contact. You do not have to recreate Egypt! The logic of oppression that

selves. Mutual recognition valued by Torah, far from weighing us down, liberates us, makes us joyful partners with one another and with God.

And this point was recognized by the rabbis of the Talmudic period, as was written in *The Ethics of the Fathers* (Pirkei Avot 6:2): "As it says, 'The tablets are the work of God, and the writing is the writing of God engraved (*harut*) on the tablets.' Don't pronounce it *harut* [engraved] but *herut* [freedom], for no one has freedom but one who is engaged in Torah." The deepest freedom is precisely to act in accord with our highest understandings of the truth of the universe.

Capitalism extols itself because it has made possible an endless array of choices for consumption, and each of us gets to make whatever choices we want as long as we have the money to back up the choices. The underlying assumption is that the more choices we have, the freer we are.

But being free to be who we really are is a very different conception of freedom, because we really are, according to Torah, beings created in the image of God, who have received a certain revelation about the world. Once having seen the world in a particular way, we are stuck with a certain kind of recognition that shapes and determines our consciousness. We are *not* free to choose any morality we wish, because we have come to see that there is a right way for the world to be and that we have the task of making the world that way.

In short, the kind of covenant we have entered into with God is not like the choices offered to us by the capitalist market. Our freedom is constrained by our being. Or, to put it another way, our highest freedom is our ability to recognize who we really are, to recognize our relationship with God, and to open our ears to hear God's revelation; and by being open to God, we learn what God requires of us. Hence, the strange rabbinic imagery of us entering freely into a covenant while the mountain of Sinai is being held over our heads. This conception of liberation has little in common with countercultural fantasies of endless opportunities to gratify one's desires. It stands at odds with postmodern attempts to deny an objective foundation for ethics, though it need *not* deny the postmodern description of the way the self has been fragmented so that we find it harder to experience ourselves as commanded by anything that transcends the media-induced tastes of the moment.

We are not trading one form of slavery for another.³ To understand that we are servants of YHVH—the Force that makes transformation of the world possible—and that we have an obligation stemming from the fact that we are created in this God's image and that we have heard this God's commands for love and justice, is not to reduce us to yet another form of slavery.

When Torah tells us that we are slaves to YHVH, this is *not* a claim analogous to announcing that Pharaoh X has been substituted for Pharaoh Y.

To be subjugated to this God is the deepest freedom, because this kind of subjugation is a joining and participation in the process of transforming and healing the world. The conservatives seek reassurance that the punishing parent is still in place, that the distortions in the world are really ontological, and that some system of oppression and unequal power is really necessary. But Torah's conception of God's kingship tells us just the opposite: that the only real power governing our lives is the Force that makes it possible for us to leave systems of oppression and start over, creating something fundamentally different and new. Torah insistently warns us not to go back to Egypt, and not to repeat the ways of Egypt—yet that is precisely what Jewish conservatives think is the only mature path.

If the revolutionary aspect of Torah defined *all* of Judaism, then everyone would agree that within Judaism there lies the basis for a liberatory worldview that guides us in our struggles to heal and repair the world. But of course, the conservatives can find some supporting material for their views in the Torah. The truth is that within the Torah there are other voices that provide a basis for those who have never really been able to leave Egypt, for those who wish to carry with them the notion that some form of subordination and oppression is neces-

³Jon Levenson at Harvard University makes the most compelling case for this mistaken view in his *The Hebrew Bible: The Old Testament and Historical Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Levenson argues that the covenant is fundamentally similar to covenants throughout the Middle East, and the Israelites have merely replaced one ruler with a more powerful suzerain. He misses the qualitative difference between being slaves to a capricious human and being slaves to a God whose will is revealed in a covenantal book that is voluntarily accepted, and whose continued acceptance depends on the voluntary will of the community.

treating a wife as a piece of property or a mere object for the satisfaction of her husband's sexual desire, talmudic law may be the first legal or moral system that recognizes that when a husband forces his wife, the act is rape, pure and simple, and as condemnable and contemptible as any other rape.¹ Moreover, if a wife has agreed to sexual intercourse in one instance, the husband cannot assume that she continues to agree moments later to repeated acts of sexual intercourse, but must know explicitly that she wishes it.

Likewise, the Torah tradition insists that sexual relations between husband and wife be accompanied by loving feelings. So if a husband hates his wife, is drunk and can't pay attention to his wife's sexual and emotional needs, or even if the couple has had a fight and not yet made up after it, sexual relations are forbidden.

BEING COMMANDED

The recognition we had at Sinai created for us an obligation. Once you see things in a certain kind of way, there is no going back. As with any new level of awareness, you can hide from yourself, try to lie to yourself, but only at a very high cost and with great inner turmoil. This is the high price of any vanguard in consciousness: they cannot *not* know what they do know, and knowing what they do know always separates them in some way from those who do not share their understanding. As one Midrash recounts, it felt to us as if Sinai itself were being held over our heads, that we were coerced into the Covenant.

Knowing that the world both can and ought to be changed gave the Jewish people a sense of being commanded.² The written Torah that we have is the record of the moment in history when the Jewish people understood that their laws and conduct must embody mutual recogni-

¹Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 114.

²Contemporary philosopher Immanuel Levinas extended this insight to all our encounters with others—to encounter the other, to look at her or his face and recognize there the presence of God, is to put ourselves unconditionally in the place of the other without expecting anything in return. Martin Jay further explains that such encounters force us to suspend the sovereignty of our own egos and to enter into a nonerotic love of our neighbors that expects nothing in return.

tion. It was all an elaboration of the first commandment: the critical task is to recognize God—to recognize God in one another, God in everything—and then to act in the world in a way consonant with that understanding.

Being commanded is not a lowly condition of powerlessness, but an elevated state. Only someone capable of recognizing God can feel commanded, because being commanded is being in touch with the most profound role—being a partner with God in healing and repair. The Talmud draws this lesson explicitly: It is better to have done the good deed because one was commanded than to have done it without having been commanded. So, being focused on *mitzvot* (commandments) is not like being in an inferior state of consciousness in which one is merely acting out of fear or out of routine. Rather, it is a higher consciousness, a recognition of ourselves as our highest possible selves, as God's agents in the universe.

No wonder, then, that the Jews delight in Torah. The psalmist proclaims, "How I love your Torah, all day it's my meditation." We dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah, we proclaim our joy with Torah, we are defined through Torah. Its *mitzvot* are, in the words of the evening prayers, "our life and the length of our days." This joy in being commanded seems foreign to the contemporary sensibility, which sees command as a repudiation of autonomy and creativity. But for the Jews, our autonomy is exercised precisely in encountering the deepest truth of the universe and hearing it. Just as we are not enslaved nor our autonomy violated when we recognize the truths of science or mathematics, our autonomy is not denigrated when we recognize moral and spiritual truths. Of course, certain conclusions about how we should act necessarily follow, but these requirements are not constraints. They free us to be our deepest

Thus, the deepest truth of our subjectivity is not its "being for itself" as Sartre would have it, but rather its "being for the other." Our most fundamental self is expressed not in our ability to act in a ferocious and unguided Faustian fashion, but rather in our ability to be ethically alive responders to others, compassionate caretakers of others and of the world—to be able to achieve mutual recognition with them, so that we see them and they see us as ends rather than as means, as embodiments of holiness and deserving of dignity and freedom, as infinitely precious and sacred.