

לע"נ

הרב יעקב צבי ב"ר דוד אריה ז"ל

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## The Idea that Changed the World

### Va'etchanan

It is one of the great stories of all time, and Moshe foresaw it three thousand years before it happened. Here he is speaking in this week's parsha:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are about to enter and possess. Take care to keep them, for this will be 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!" For what other nation has decrees and laws as just as this Torah that I am setting before you today? (D'varim 4:5-8)

Moshe believed that there would come a time when the idea of a nation founded on a covenant with God would inspire other nations with its vision of a society based not on a hierarchy of power but on the equal dignity of all under the sovereignty and in the image of God; and on the rule of justice and compassion. "The

nations" would appreciate the wisdom of the Torah and its "righteous decrees and laws". It happened. As I have argued many times, we see this most clearly in the political culture and language of the United States.

To this day American politics is based on the biblical idea of covenant. American presidents almost always invoke this idea in their Inaugural Addresses in language that owes its cadences and concepts to the book of D'varim. So, for instance, in 1985 Ronald Reagan spoke of America as "one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream onto a waiting and hopeful world."

In his Inaugural in 1989, George Bush prayed: "There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us to remember it, Lord. Amen."

In 1997, Bill Clinton said: "The promise we sought in a new land we will find again in a land of new promise."

George W. Bush in 2001 said: "We are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image."

In 2005, as he commenced his second term as President he declared: "From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because

they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth."

In 2009 Barack Obama ended his speech with these words: "Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations."

This is explicitly religious language, without parallel in any other democratic society in the world, and it reads like a sustained Midrash on D'varim.

How did it happen? It began with the invention of printing by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz in 1439, followed in England in 1476 by William Caxton. Books became less expensive and more accessible. Literacy spread. Then in 1517 came the Reformation, with its emphasis on the individual rather than the Church, and on sola Scriptura, the authority of "Scripture alone."

Then came the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. We tend to forget that the Hebrew Bible is a subversive work. It is not a book that preaches submission. It speaks of prophets unafraid to challenge kings, and of Saul who lost his throne because he disobeyed the word of God. So the authorities had good reason for the Bible not to be

available in language people could understand. Translating it into the vernacular was forbidden in the sixteenth century. In the 1530s the great Tyndale translation appeared. Tyndale paid for this with his life: he was arrested, found guilty of heresy, strangled, and burned at the stake in 1536.

However, as contemporary tyrannies have discovered, it is hard to stop the spread of information that new technologies make possible. English Bibles continued to be printed and sold in massive numbers, most notably the Geneva translation of 1560 that was read by Shakespeare, Cromwell, Milton, and John Donne, as well as by the early English settlers of America.

The Geneva Bible contained a commentary in the margin. Its comments were brief but sometimes explosive. This applied in particular to the story of the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah (Sh'mot 1) - the first recorded instance of civil disobedience, the refusal to obey an immoral order. Pharaoh had instructed them to kill every male Israelite child, but they did not. Commenting on this, the Geneva Bible says "their disobedience in this was lawful." When Pharaoh then commands the Egyptians to drown male Israelite children, the Geneva Bible comments: "When tyrants cannot prevail by deceit, they burst into open rage."

This was nothing short of a justification for rebellion against a tyrannical and unjust king.

The Tyndale and Geneva Bibles led to a group of thinkers known as the Christian Hebraists, of whom the most famous - he has been called Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi - was John Selden (1584-1654). Selden and his contemporaries studied not only Tanach, but also the Babylonian Talmud, especially tractate Sanhedrin, and Maimonides's Mishneh Torah, and applied Judaic principles to the politics of their day.

Their work has been described in a fine recent study, *The Hebrew Republic*, by Harvard political philosopher Eric Nelson. Nelson argues that the Hebrew Bible influenced European and American politics in three ways:

First, the Christian Hebraists tended to be republican rather than royalist. They took the view - held in Judaism by Abarbanel - that the appointment of a king in Israel in the days of Sh'muel HaNavi was a (tolerated) sin rather than the fulfilment of a mitzva.

Second, they placed at the heart of their politics the idea that one of the tasks of government is to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, an idea alien to Roman law.

Third, they used the Hebrew Bible - especially the separation of powers

between the king and the Kohen Gadol - to argue for the principle of religious toleration.

It was this historic encounter between Christians and the Hebrew Bible in the seventeenth century that led to the birth of liberty in both England and America. The Calvinists and Puritans who led both the English and American revolutions were saturated in the politics of the Hebrew Bible, especially of the book of D'varim.

In fact, the modern world offers as near as history comes to a controlled experiment in liberty. Of the four revolutions that mark modernity, two, the English (1640s) and American (1776), were based on the Hebrew Bible, and two, the French and the Russian, were based on secular philosophy, Rousseau and Marx respectively. The first two led to liberty. The second two ended in the suppression of liberty: in France in the Reign of Terror (1793-94), in Russia in the form of Stalinist Communism.

Appreciating the contribution of the Hebrew Bible to liberty, John Adams, second President of the United States, wrote:

"I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist, and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained

the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilising the nations." (John Adams' letter to François Adriaan van der Kemp, 16 February, 1809)

The irony is, of course, that there is nothing like this in the political discourse of the contemporary state of Israel. The politics of Israel is secular in its language and ideas. Its founders were driven by high ideals, but they owed more to Marx, Tolstoy or Nietzsche than to Moshe Rabeinu. Meanwhile religion in Israel remains sectarian rather than society-building.

To be sure, there are those who fully realise the significance of Sefer D'varim and the politics of covenant for the present State. The pioneer was the late Professor Daniel Elazar, who devoted a lifetime to rehabilitating Judaic political theory. His work is continued today, by among others, the scholars of the Shalem Center.

The significance of this cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Whenever in the past Jews lost their religious vision, or when religion became a divisive rather than a uniting force, eventually they lost their sovereignty also. In four thousand years of history there has never been, in Israel or outside, a sustained secular Jewish survival.

How ironic that the political culture

of the United States should be more Judaic than that of the Jewish state. But Moshe warned that it would be so. Keep the Torah's laws carefully, Moshe said, "for this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations." Moshe knew that Gentiles would see what Jews sometimes do not see: the wisdom of God's law when it comes to sustaining a free society.

Israeli politics needs to recover the vision of social justice, compassion, human dignity and love of the stranger, set forth by Moshe and never, in all the intervening centuries, surpassed.

### **Around the Shabbat Table:**

- (1) **How did Moshe believe the Torah's laws would impact how other nations viewed the Israelites?**
- (2) **In what ways do you think the Hebrew Bible influenced the political ideas of the early American settlers?**
- (3) **Why do you think it's important for Israeli politics to reconnect with the principles of the Torah?**

**Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH**