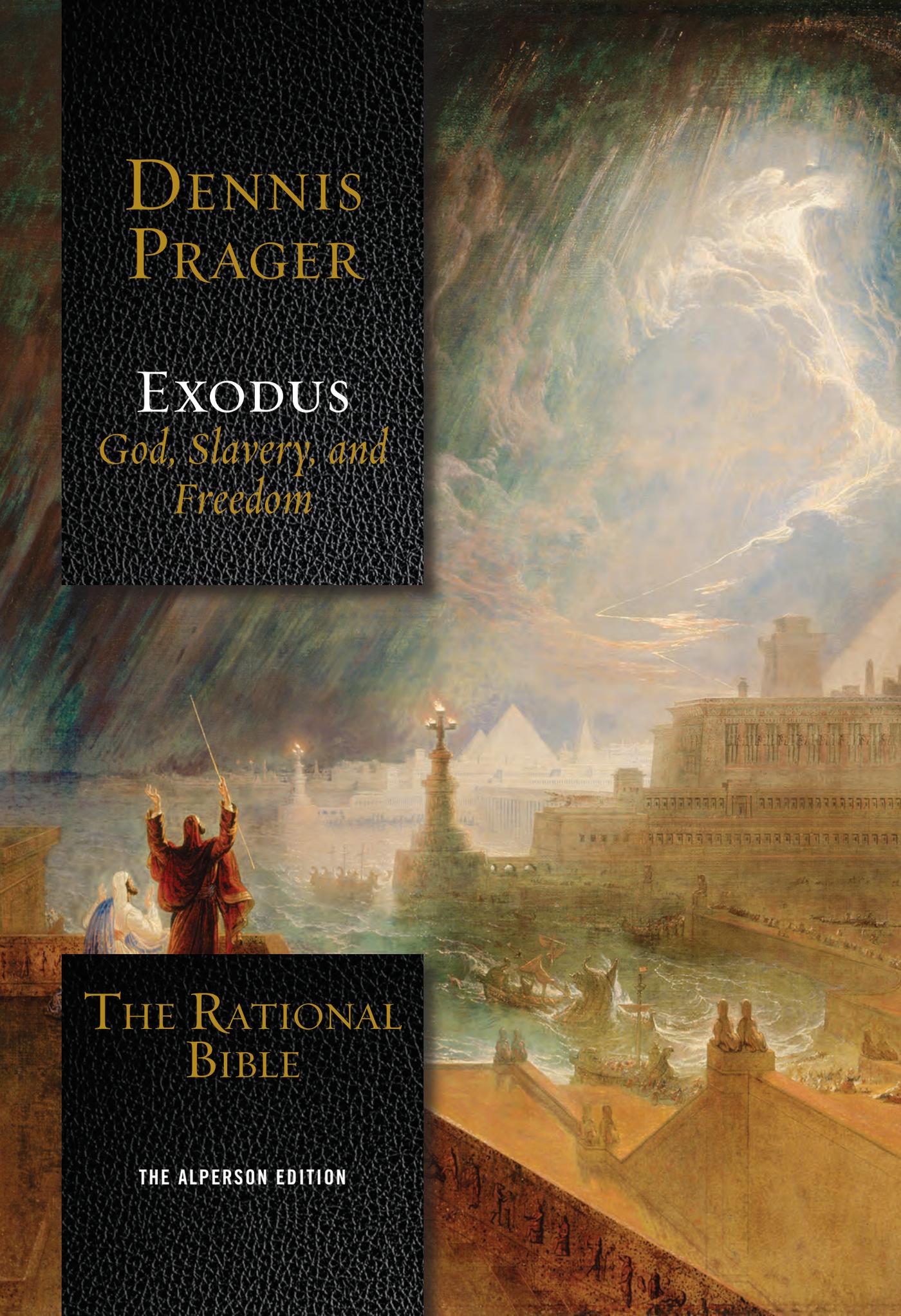


DENNIS
PRAGER

EXODUS
*God, Slavery, and
Freedom*

THE RATIONAL
BIBLE

THE ALPERSON EDITION



THE RATIONAL BIBLE: EXODUS

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BIBLE

EXODUS

God, Slavery, and Freedom

DENNIS PRAGER

EDITED BY JOSEPH TELUSHKIN

THE ALPERSON EDITION



REGNERY
FAITH

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To Sue

*“It is not good for man to be alone.
I will make him a helper who is his equal.”*

—Genesis 2:18 (literal translation)

INTRODUCTION

To the reader: Reading this Introduction will greatly enhance your understanding and enjoyment of this commentary.

MOST PEOPLE—ESPECIALLY IN THEIR YOUNGER YEARS—PASS THROUGH A DIFFICULT time with one or both of their parents. In my teen years and twenties, I was one of them. But no matter how I felt, there was never a time I did not honor my parents. For example, from the age of twenty-one, when I left my parents' home, I called my parents every week of their lives.

I treated my parents with such respect because I always believed God had commanded me to do so: “Honor your father and mother” (Commandment Five of the Ten Commandments). The Torah—as the first five books of the Bible have always been known in Hebrew—commands us to love our neighbor, to love God, and to love the stranger; but we are never commanded to love our parents. We are commanded to honor them (and we are not commanded to honor anyone else).

Why do I begin this introduction to a Bible commentary with this personal story?

Because it encapsulates why I have devoted so much of my life to explaining the Torah: because its central message—that God is good and demands we be good—is the only belief that will enable us to make a good world.

WHY THIS COMMENTARY?

I have been teaching the Torah for much of my adult life and have devoted decades to writing this explanation of, and commentary on, the Torah.

I have done so because I believe if people properly understand the Torah and attempt to live by its values and precepts, the world will be an infinitely kinder and more just place.

All my life I have been preoccupied—almost obsessed—with the problem of evil: people deliberately hurting other people. At the age of sixteen, I wrote in my diary that I wanted to devote my life “to influencing people to the good.” That mission has animated my life. In a nutshell, I love goodness and hate evil. My favorite verse in the Bible is “Those of you who love God—hate evil” (Psalms 97:10).

Because of my (and the Torah’s) preoccupation with evil, in this commentary I frequently cite the two most recent examples of mass evil—Nazism and communism. I assume all readers of this commentary have some acquaintance with Nazi evil. Tragically, however, relatively few people have much knowledge of communist evil. So, I should note here that communist regimes murdered about 100 million people and enslaved and destroyed the lives of more than a billion. If you hate evil, you must confront what Nazis and communists wrought in the twentieth century (and what others wrought before them and are doing at this time).

I have had one other mission: to understand human beings. The two missions—promoting goodness and attaining wisdom—are linked, because it is almost impossible to do good without wisdom. All the good intentions in the world are likely to be worthless without wisdom. Many of the horrors of the twentieth century were supported by people with good intentions who lacked wisdom.

Here, too, because it has so much wisdom, the Torah is indispensable.

However, we live in an age that not only has little wisdom, it doesn’t even have many people who value it. People greatly value knowledge and intelligence, but not wisdom. And the lack of wisdom—certainly in America and the rest

of the West—is directly related to the decline in biblical literacy. In the American past, virtually every home, no matter how poor, owned a Bible. It was the primary vehicle by which parents passed wisdom on to their children.

In the modern period, however, people have increasingly replaced Bible-based homes and Bible-based schools with godless homes and with schools in which the Bible is never referred to. As a result, we are less wise and more morally confused. As I show in my discussion of secular education as a potential “false god,” the best educated in the West have often both lacked wisdom and been among the greatest supporters of evil ideologies and regimes.

Given the supreme importance of goodness and the indispensability of wisdom to goodness, the Torah, the greatest repository of goodness and wisdom in human history, is the most important book ever written. It gave birth to the rest of the Bible, to Christianity, and to Western civilization. It gave us “Love your neighbor as yourself,” the Ten Commandments, a just and loving God, and every other bedrock of humane civilization.

WHO IS THIS TORAH COMMENTARY FOR?

I have written this book for people of every faith, and for people of no faith. Throughout my years teaching the Torah, I would tell my students, “The Torah either has something to say to everyone or it has nothing to say to Jews.” The idea that the Torah is only for Jews is as absurd as the idea that Shakespeare is only for the English or Beethoven is only for Germans.

That is why, over time, half the people taking my Torah classes—at a Jewish university no less—were not Jews.

Nevertheless, I would like to address some groups specifically.

TO JEWISH READERS:

Because the Torah has formed the basis of Jewish life for 3,000 years, there are very many Jewish commentaries, a good number of which have passed the hardest test: the test of time. However, the modern world poses intellectual and moral challenges that did not exist when the classic Jewish commentaries—most

dating to the Middle Ages—were written. Therefore, most modern Jews read neither those commentaries nor the Torah. I hope this commentary will address nearly all the intellectual and moral objections of these Jews.

In general, it has not gone well for Jews (or the world) when Jews ceased believing in the Torah. Belief in the Torah as a divine document has probably been the single most important reason Jews have stayed alive for 3,000 years and it has formed the core of Jews' moral values. When Jews abandoned belief in the Torah, they or their offspring almost always ceased being Jews; and, too often, they created or joined social movements with non-Torah, or even anti-Torah, values.

To Jews who already believe in the Torah as a divine document: I hope this commentary gives you *chizuk* (strengthened faith). And I hope it encourages you to go into the world to teach Torah-based values. To all other Jews, I hope this commentary leads you to an intellectual appreciation of the Torah's unique greatness and consequently causes you to at least entertain the possibility that God is its ultimate author.

TO CHRISTIAN READERS:

One cannot be a serious Christian without being familiar with the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament, as the Christian world named it). Nor can one understand Jesus, a Jew who was not only observant of Torah law, but asserted he came not to change “a jot or a tittle” of it.

For the many Christians who already believe the Torah embodies the word of God, I hope this commentary strengthens your faith in the Torah. As Maimonides, the greatest Jewish philosopher, wrote 900 years ago, his differences with Christian theology notwithstanding, it is Christians who have been primarily responsible for disseminating knowledge of the Torah to so much of the world.

I should also add I have greatly benefited from reading Christian Bible scholars.

At the same time, the Bible scholar who most influenced my understanding of Genesis and Exodus was a Jew, the late Professor Nahum Sarna, chair of the department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University. His Jewish Publication Society commentaries on Genesis and Exodus are masterful. And my understanding of Leviticus and Numbers was deeply influenced by the late great Jewish Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom, who was also a dear friend.

TO NON-RELIGIOUS READERS:

I have had you most in mind when writing this commentary. With every passing generation in the West, fewer and fewer people believe in God, let alone in the Bible. This is a catastrophe for the West, and it is a tragedy for you. Having God, religion, a religious community, and a sacred text in one's life enables one to have a far deeper and richer—not to mention wiser—life. If you keep an open mind when reading this commentary, that life will, hopefully, become appealing to you.

To readers outside of the West, the Torah has as much to say to you as to anyone in the West. I look forward to your reactions. They will surely influence my writing of the subsequent volumes.

In writing this commentary, I have no hidden agenda. My agenda is completely open: I want as many people as possible to take the Torah seriously, to entertain the possibility it is God-given, or, at the very least, to understand why so many rational people do.

Nor do I have a parochial agenda. I am a believing Jew, but neither God, nor the Torah, nor later Judaism ever obligated Jews to make non-Jews Jewish. Jews have always welcomed—and until prohibited from doing so, even sought—converts; but what God and the Torah obligate Jews to do is to bring humanity to the God of the Torah, to His basic moral rules, and to the Torah's values and insights. People can and have lived according to the Torah's moral values as Christians, members of other faiths, or simply as non-denominational believers in God (such as the American founder Benjamin Franklin).

THE TORAH IS NOT MAN-MADE

For reasons I develop throughout the commentary, I am convinced the Torah is divine, meaning God, not man, is its ultimate source. The Torah is so utterly different—morally, theologically, and in terms of wisdom—from anything else preceding it and, for that matter, from anything written since, that a reasonable person would have to conclude either moral supermen or God was responsible for it.

To cite just a few examples of what the Torah introduced to the world:

- A universal God (the God of all people): This began the long road to human beings believing that with one “Father in Heaven,” all human beings are brothers and sisters.
- An invisible, incorporeal God: Therefore, the physical is not the only reality. Life is infinitely more than the material world in which we live during our brief lifetime on earth.
- A moral God: All gods prior to the Torah’s God were capricious, not moral. A just and moral God meant, among other things, ultimately justice will prevail (if not in this life, in the next). It also meant human beings, imbued with a sense of justice, can argue with, and question, this just God (the name “Israel” means “wrestle with God”).
- A God beyond nature: God made nature, and is therefore not natural. This led to the end of the universal human belief in nature gods (such as rain gods). And sure enough, as belief in the Torah’s God declines, nature worship seems to be returning.
- A God Who loves and Who wants to be loved: This was another world-changing concept introduced by the Torah to the world.

- Universal human worth: Every human being is “created in God’s image.” Nothing like this had ever been posited prior to the Torah.
- Universal human rights: Another world-altering consequence of universal human worth.

Another major reason I am convinced the Torah is not man-made is it so often depicts the people of the Book, the Jews, in a negative light. Had Jews made up what is, after all, their book and their story, they would never have portrayed themselves as critically and even negatively as the Torah (and the rest of the Hebrew Bible) often does. There is no parallel to this in any ancient national, or any religious, literature in the world.

A contemporary Jewish thinker, Rabbi Saul Berman, stated his position on the divinity of the Torah in words as close to my own as I could imagine:

The more I study the Torah, the more I am convinced that it is the revealed word of God. The more I study ancient cultures, the more I see the absolutely radical disparity between the values of pagan civilizations and the values which Torah brought into the world. Torah was God’s weapon in the war against idolatrous culture; and war it was.

I would only add that the Torah’s battle, and sometimes war, with many of the dominant ideas of our time is as great as it was with the cultures of three millennia ago, when the Torah came into the world.

MAN-MADE OR GOD-MADE: WHY IT MATTERS

What difference does it make if the Torah is man-made or God-made?

The first difference has already been noted: There is no comparison between “God commanded” and “Moses (or anyone else) commanded.” If I believed

the Ten Commandments were written by men, I would not have honored my parents as much as I did during periods of emotional ambivalence. Those who believe God is the source of the Torah's commandments are far more likely to obey them than those who believe they are all man-made.

A second difference is that only because I believe the Torah is God-made have I worked to understand and explain difficult passages of the Torah. If you believe the Torah is man-made, when you encounter a morally or intellectually problematic verse or passage, you have an easy explanation: Men wrote it (Ancient men, at that). And you are then free to dismiss it. But those of us who believe God is the source of the Torah don't have that option. We need to try to understand the verse or passage morally and intellectually.

Let me offer one of many examples. There is a Torah law that says if you have a particularly bad—a "wayward"—son, you may take him to the elders (the court) of your city; and if they find him guilty, they are to stone him to death. When modern men and women read that, they dismiss it as morally primitive: "What do you expect from something people wrote 3,000 years ago?"

But since I don't believe it's "something people wrote," I don't have that option. Consequently, I have had to look for rational explanations for seemingly irrational laws and passages and for moral explanations for seemingly immoral laws and passages.

And I have almost always found them. In this case, for example, I came to understand this law was one of the great moral leaps forward in the history of mankind. In this law, the Torah brilliantly preserved parental authority while permanently depriving parents of the right to kill their children, a commonplace occurrence in the ancient world and even today (for example, "honor killings" in the Muslim world). The law permits only a duly established court ("the elders")—not parents—to take the life of their child. And we have no record of any court in Jewish history ever executing a "wayward" son.

My belief in the divinity of the Torah led me to seek a moral explanation of what appears to us to be an immoral law, and it was solely because of that belief I found one. This has happened repeatedly regarding seemingly immoral or irrational laws, verses, and passages.

A third difference is that only those who believe in the text as God-given will continue to live by it, carefully study it, and try to impart its wisdom generation after generation. There will always be a few individuals who believe the Torah is man-made who will nevertheless diligently study it. But it is doubtful their grandchildren will. If Jews long ago believed the Torah was man-made, there would be no Jews today.

I would go further: If you believe in God, but you don't believe in any divinely revealed text, how do you know what your God wants of you? How do you know what God wants of humanity? Of course, you or your society can make up laws and values, including some good ones the Torah would approve of. But if God told us nothing, we would become our own gods when it comes to determining moral values.

HOW WAS THE TORAH TRANSMITTED?

I take no position on how God revealed the Torah. What concerns me most is not how God transmitted the Torah. *Who* wrote the Torah is infinitely more important than *how* it was written.

REASON, TORAH, AND GOD

The title of this commentary is, “The Rational Bible.” There are two reasons for this.

First, my approach to understanding and explaining the Torah is reason-based. I never ask the reader to accept anything I write on faith alone. If something I write does not make rational sense, I have not done my job. On those few—thankfully, very few—occasions I do not have a rational explanation for a Torah verse, I say so.

Second, reason has always been my primary vehicle to God and to religion. My beliefs—in God, the revelation at Sinai, the Torah, etc.—are not rooted in faith alone. *We Have Reason to Believe*, the title of a book written in 1958 by the British Jewish theologian Louis Jacobs, had a deep impact on me.

The title has an important double meaning. The obvious one is that reason can lead one to religious faith. The less obvious meaning of the title is the one I cherish: we human beings have the faculty of reason—and are to use it *in order* to believe.

Of course, there is a faith component to my religious life. The primary example is the foundation of this commentary—my belief in the Torah as a divine document. It is reason that has led to this belief, but I acknowledge there are a few verses or passages that challenge this belief. Whenever I encounter such passages, however, I am not prepared to say, “‘Love the stranger’ is divine, but this difficult part is man-made.”

Once one says that, the Torah not only ceases to be divine, it ceases to be authoritative. As I put it in a number of public dialogues with a secular Jewish scholar, Professor Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School: “I think I can sum up our basic difference this way: When Professor Dershowitz differs with the Torah, he thinks the Torah is wrong and he is right. When I differ with the Torah, I think the Torah is right and I am wrong.” Professor Dershowitz agreed with that summation.

My approach is to abandon neither faith nor reason. I neither abandon the claim of reason because of the dictates of faith, nor abandon the faith claim because of reason. In the Torah, faith and reason nearly always live together in harmony. And when they do not, I do not deny either.

Moreover, there is a faith component to everyone’s life, including atheists’ lives. Any atheist who believes good and evil really exist, or life has a purpose beyond one he or she has made up, or that free will exists, or, for that matter, that science alone will explain how the universe came about, or how life arose from non-life, or how intelligence arose from non-intelligence, has suspended reason in favor of faith.

WHY READ THIS COMMENTARY?

Why should people devote time to reading my explanation of the Torah?

Here is my answer: I have devoted more than fifty years to studying and teaching the Torah. That includes a life-long immersion in Torah Hebrew—both its grammar and its vocabulary. I could not have written this commentary without this extensive knowledge of Hebrew. But most importantly, I have sought to make the Torah completely relevant to my life and to the lives of others. And by “others,” I mean—literally—millions of others. Every good teacher learns from his or her students, and I am no exception—the thinking and experiences of myriad people inform this commentary. But I have been blessed to have something very rare among teachers or scholars: millions of students—and of almost every nationality, ethnicity, religion, and philosophy.

For over three decades, I have been a radio talk show host, broadcasting for more than half of that time on radio stations throughout America and on the Internet internationally. This has enabled me to discuss virtually every subject imaginable with a large number of people—live on the radio and through many thousands of emails. It also has enabled me to dialogue about religious matters with many of the leading theologians and scholars of our time and to debate many contemporary leading atheists. I have been able to bounce ideas off, and learn from, lay people and scholars of every background.

Given this uncommon, if not unique, background, after much soul-searching, I decided to write this commentary from the first-person perspective where appropriate. I became convinced that showing how the Torah’s ideas and values have played themselves out in one individual’s life makes the commentary more interesting, more real, and more relevant.

Shortly before finishing this first volume—on Exodus—I had the great honor of being invited to speak about my Torah commentary to the Bible faculty and students of Israel’s religious university, Bar-Ilan University. They did not invite me because they thought I know more than, or even as much as, any one of them about the Torah. They invited me because they believe I bring a fresh understanding of the Torah. That is why I wrote this commentary.

DID THE EXODUS HAPPEN?

Many scholars believe the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. Many do not.

There are strong logical and historical arguments for the Jews having been enslaved in Egypt. One I find particularly compelling was offered by the distinguished scholar Professor Richard Elliott Friedman in his commentary on the Exodus. He notes the Torah repeats one law more than any other: to love the stranger and not to oppress him. And in every case the Torah adds the words, “because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Why, Friedman asks, would the Torah make repeated reference to the Israelites having been strangers in Egypt if they were never there? Why would one of the greatest of the Torah’s moral innovations—a law to love the foreigner—be based on a premise no Israelite could relate to?

Similarly, why would any people make up origins so lowly as being slaves? No other nation did. And why would the Israelites in the wilderness complain that they ate better in Egypt if they were never there? Of course, one could argue that was also made up out of whole cloth. But if it never happened, why bother making it up?

A FEW DETAILS

Why Exodus Is Volume 1

The primary reason I began my commentary with the second book of the Torah, Exodus, and not the first, Genesis, is that Exodus contains the Ten Commandments, the most important moral code in world history, and the central moral code of the Torah. If people lived by those ten laws alone, the world would be almost devoid of all man-made suffering.

In addition, Genesis is almost all narrative, while Exodus is, in equal parts, narrative, laws, and theology.

BC or BCE?

Some readers will wonder why I use the letters “BCE” rather than the more familiar “BC” in dates. I struggled with this issue because I have no problem

with “BC.” But virtually all academic works and many general works now use “BCE.” BCE stands for “Before the Common Era,” but any reader who prefers to read the letters as “Before the Christian Era,” is certainly welcome to—that is, after all, what “Common Era” denotes.

God as “He”

I refer to God as “He” because that is how the Torah refers to God. As the Torah was the first religious work in the world to completely desexualize God and religion, the Torah needs no defense in this matter.

Using “He or She” would not only be dishonest to the text, it would also incline people to think of God in gender terms. “She” always refers to a female, but “he” or “man” frequently refers to both sexes. “The rights of man” means “human rights”; the word “mankind” includes women; and so on. And using “It” would render the God of the Torah something else entirely, akin to Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover. One does not pray to, love, or otherwise relate to an “It.”

Moreover, as I will explain at length in another volume of this commentary, rendering God a “He” taught generations of males that to be compassionate and loving is part of being masculine.

On How to Read This Commentary

The reader can benefit from reading this commentary in any way he or she desires. It can, of course, be read straight through, or be used as a reference work for one’s own study of the Torah. But those are not the only ways to read it. Readers can equally benefit from choosing to read any subject heading that strikes them as interesting. And that is made easier by simply perusing the table of contents to see the subjects covered here.

The Use of Post-Biblical Jewish Sources

I frequently cite post-biblical Jewish sources—most especially, the Talmud—because they aid greatly in understanding various laws and texts. The Jews, after all, had the Torah for more than a thousand years prior to the rise of Christianity. The Talmud is the encyclopedia-sized compendium of Jewish law and

philosophy that reflects those thousand-plus years of Jews' studying and living the Torah.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the most difficult part of this introduction because so many people have influenced me with their insights into life and the Bible that I am certain to unwittingly omit names that should be included.

I attended yeshivas (all-day religious Jewish schools) from first grade until twelfth; and I continued formal study thereafter as well. That formal education made my Torah teaching possible. Two teachers at the Yeshiva of Flatbush High School in Brooklyn, New York who particularly influenced me were the principal, Rabbi David Eliach, and my Torah teacher Rabbi Amnon Haramati.

In my late twenties and early thirties (1976–83), as the director of the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, a Jewish educational center in California, I had the unique opportunity to meet and have extended dialogues with most of the influential Jewish thinkers of the time—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and secular, from North and South America, Europe, and Israel. They included (in alphabetical order) Yehuda Bauer, Eliezer Berkovits, Saul Berman, Eugene Borowitz, Emil Fackenheim, Norman Frimer, Martin Gilbert, Arthur Hertzberg, Louis Jacobs, Norman Lamm, Julius Lester, Hyam Maccoby, Jacob Milgrom, Pinchas Peli, Jakob Petuchowski, Gunther Plaut, Emanuel Rackman, Richard L. Rubenstein, Uriel Simon, David W. Weiss (the Israeli immunologist), and Elie Wiesel.

From 1982 until 1992, I was given another unique opportunity—a true gift—to discuss religion for two hours every Sunday night with clergy and spokesmen of virtually every religion in the world. I was the moderator of a radio show, “Religion on the Line,” broadcast on the ABC radio station in Los Angeles. This constituted a decade-long immersion in religious conversation with people who devoted their lives to their respective religions—Reform,

Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist rabbis; mainstream and evangelical Protestant ministers; Roman Catholic priests; Eastern Orthodox priests; Mormon bishops; Muslim imams; Seventh Day Adventist ministers; Buddhist priests, and others. It was a life-shaping and life-changing experience. I ended up speaking in at least a hundred synagogues, in scores of churches, and at the largest mosque in the Western United States.

I not only learned from all these people: I was also able to test my religious beliefs with lucid minds of all faiths. And of no faith; I regularly invited atheist and humanist spokesmen on the show as well.

After 1992, I continued to routinely raise religious issues on my daily radio shows and to discuss religious matters regularly with highly knowledgeable Jewish friends such as Izzy and Rita Eichenstein, Allen and Susan Estrin, Rabbi Leonid Feldman, Rabbi Mordecai Finely, Rabbi Michael and Jill Gotlieb, Dr. Stephen and Dr. Ruth Marmer, Rabbi Eyal and Tzippy Ravnay, Rabbi David Wolpe, and Rabbi David and Beverly Woznica. I would be particularly remiss if I did not mention the role Chabad rabbis the world over have played in my religious life. I would like to mention all of them, but I must at least mention my family's four Chabad rabbis and their wives at whose homes my sons and/or I have spent many Shabbat evenings talking about God, the Torah, and just about everything else—Rabbi Simcha and Shterny Backman of Glendale, California, Rabbi Moshe and Matty Bryski of Agoura Hills, California, Rabbi Berl and Chani Goldman of Gainesville, Florida, and Rabbi Yosef and Chana Lipsker of Reading, Pennsylvania.

Special mention must be made of a man who combines uncompromising intellectual honesty, Jewish religious faith and practice, and extraordinary biblical scholarship. Professor Leor Gottlieb of the Department of Bible at Bar-Ilan University. His contribution has been indispensable.

Likewise, knowledgeable and wise Christian friends such as Father Gregory Coiro, Joshua Charles, Gregory Koukl, Dr. Wayne Grudem, Pastor John Hagee, Eric Metaxas, Msgr. Jorge Mejia, Michael Nocita, and Dr. Hugh Ross have helped me form my thoughts on the Bible and religion generally.

Two Christians, Joshua Charles and Holly Hickman, were among the few individuals who read large parts of this commentary. They provided important insights for which I am deeply grateful.

Ilana Kurshan, a prominent writer and serious thinker, edited the hundreds of hours of tapes of my eighteen-year teaching of the Torah verse-by-verse. She was instrumental in making this commentary a reality. I cannot thank her enough. She was indeed an editor of this commentary.

Then there is Joel Alperson. Aside from being a close friend since 1982, when we met at a speech I gave in Kansas City, Kansas, I want to first acknowledge that without Joel there would be no commentary. It was Joel who found the company to transcribe my Torah tapes, resulting in the creation of 5,000 pages of text. Debbie Weinberger was one of the transcriptionists who did a magnificent job and this work is written in her memory. Joel then searched for an editor and ultimately found Ilana Kurshan, whose work he carefully reviewed.

Joel was determined that my Torah commentary be put into print. But I knew, as it stood, even after Ilana's superb editing of my lectures, I had much more to say. So, one day, Joel, not one to ever give up, put the question to me directly: "What would it take for you to complete and publish the commentary?"

I told him I would do so under one condition—that Joseph Telushkin serve as editor. He is a fount of biblical, rabbinic/Talmudic, and historical knowledge; no one knows my thinking on the Torah as well as Joseph and we had already written two books together. If Joseph worked with me, I would put all other writing aside for years to write this commentary.

I did not think that would happen, but Joel makes things happen. He brought Joseph on board to work full time for three years on this commentary. And even after this, Joel managed all of the business affairs and carefully read through every draft of this volume. Thank you, Joel. And thank you as well for your intellectual input and your constant insistence that I always live up to the name of the commentary—the name you came up with—The Rational Bible.

Joseph Telushkin and I met in our second year of high school at the Yeshiva of Flatbush. We met one day after school at a nearby bookstore. We both loved

books because we loved ideas—we wanted to understand life. That was an immediate bond. And there was one other: Neither of us did almost any schoolwork. Instead, we read books and magazines (and, in my case, attended classical music concerts and studied scores).

At the age of twenty-six, we wrote and published our first book, *Eight Questions People Ask about Judaism*, which was soon thereafter expanded and published as *The Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism*. The book became one of the most widely read introductions to Judaism and remains in print nearly forty-five years later. Working with him on this commentary was a reminder of the joy we experienced when we wrote our first two books together at the outset of our careers. Joseph constantly contributed information that influenced and deepened my arguments—even on those occasions when we disagreed.

From the earliest days of our friendship, people would often say about Joseph and me: “They’re as close as brothers.” And we have always responded: “Would that all brothers be that close.”

Finally, a word about the person to whom I have dedicated this book—my wife, Susan. She was the final editor of every word of this book, not just for grammar and syntax, but primarily for her specialty: logic. She is trained as a lawyer, but her ability to think rigorously is an innate gift—as rare a gift as perfect pitch is to the few musicians who have that innate ability. The number of less than clear assertions she uncovered is so great I am almost embarrassed to think this book might have been published without her input. And that is only one of the many reasons everyone who knows Sue knows how blessed I am to have her in my life.

I will end with a thank you to the people I mentioned at the beginning of the introduction. My parents, Max and Hilda Prager, raised my brother, Kenneth, and me to take the Torah and God seriously. My love of the Torah is in no small part due to them. And, the aforementioned difficulties notwithstanding, I loved them. I wish I could hand deliver this commentary to them.

Dennis Prager
January 2018

PREFACE

Joel Alperson

I'VE ALWAYS TRIED TO FIND THE ANSWERS TO THE BIG QUESTIONS OF LIFE.

When I was all of nine years old, after a close friend showed me some magic tricks, I found the magic book he had read so I could perform the same magic he showed me.

Later, as a college freshman, I discovered Plato, who addressed many of the “big questions” I deeply cared about, with arguments that were linear and well thought through. Later, as a college senior, I studied one-on-one with a professor who told me of a legend which held that Plato had written a book on “the good.” I was so excited. I thought if I could only read this book, I could learn “the secret” of leading a good life. Unfortunately, the legend also held that this volume had been lost in a great fire. So, my search for “the good” began and ended in the span of that one-hour study session.

Who would have guessed that decades later I would not only find myself reading a brilliant explanation of what I have come to regard as the greatest book ever written, but that I would also have helped to make this work possible? My Sunday school and Hebrew school teachers certainly would not have guessed. Given my awful grades and even worse behavior, they'd be shocked. My grandfather, an Orthodox rabbi, would also be shocked. He had given me a five-volume set of the Torah when I was a teen, but whenever he would open one of those volumes, he would hear the binding crack. He knew I hadn't even touched the books.

My story is hardly unique. The majority of those living in the West have dismissed the Torah and the rest of the Bible as little more than ancient religious

fairy tales. And why not? Ten plagues? The creation of the world by a supernatural God? A giant flood wiping out virtually all of mankind? Ten Commandments from 3,000 years ago? Why would people choose to study, let alone think their lives could be transformed by, such stories?

I certainly didn't.

Then, one weekend in 1982, I heard Dennis Prager speak at a retreat outside of Kansas City. I remember arguing with him all weekend. But he had answers. And they stayed with me. So began my long journey of realizing that the Torah had more meaning than I ever imagined.

Eventually, Dennis taught the Torah to a class in Los Angeles, line-by-line, over the course of eighteen years, and I started listening to recordings of those classes in my car as I drove around my hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. Realizing that I couldn't focus on the material and driving at the same time, I asked him if I could transcribe some of those recordings. That was in 2002. Little did I know at the time his agreement would start the process of creating this remarkable work. I was able to enlist the help of Ilana Kurshan, a very talented student of the Torah. For one year she took approximately 5,000 pages of Dennis's Torah class transcripts and converted them into a first draft of this commentary. Her work was excellent and enormously helpful.

It was also our very good fortune that Rabbi Joseph Telushkin was available to help with this project. For all the reasons Dennis listed in his introduction, no one else could have added to this great work as Rabbi Telushkin has. The finished product, as Dennis is the first to acknowledge, was made possible because of Rabbi Telushkin's passionate involvement.

Helping Dennis Prager author this work has been an honor for me. I helped the wisest man I know comment on the wisest book ever written. Having carefully and repeatedly listened to Dennis's Torah lectures, I expected this book to be an edited version of all the wonderful ideas he offered over the years. But I was surprised by the many new and important insights he added to this project. I think even he was surprised. This work captured him. It was obvious from his tremendous investment of time, thought, and research

that this was not another book. This is arguably his greatest work, and his legacy. You have only to read a few essays or a single chapter to see the profundity of his writing.

Dennis has repeatedly said how grateful he is to me for helping to make his, as he likes to put it, “magnum opus” possible. He says it is one of the greatest gifts he’s ever received. Ironically, after working so closely with him over so many years, I believe the greatest gift I’ve given was to myself.

I’ve come to realize the book on “the good” was not lost in a fire.

It’s here for you to read.

Acknowledgments: This remarkable project could never have been completed without the help of so many wonderful and devoted individuals. In addition to Dennis’s acknowledgments, I would like to thank some of those individuals with whom I worked. I can’t possibly give them all the credit they’re due, but these individuals’ efforts were indispensable in creating this book:

Talia Gordis, Emily Sirotkin, Helen Lin, and Katrina Chen devoted many hours to reviewing lecture transcripts to identify and organize the essay topics which were used throughout this commentary.

Thanks to Scott Dugan for carefully and accurately accounting for the expenses related to this commentary.

Thanks to Pete Sirotkin whose great work at our office in Omaha allowed me the freedom to work on this book. He is an exemplary human being and exemplary Christian—and he believes this is the greatest Bible commentary he’s ever read.

While many people were involved in transcribing hundreds of Dennis’s Torah lecture recordings, one transcriptionist stands out. Debbie Weinberger lived in Israel and transcribed much of Dennis’s work. Very sadly, this young woman died of cancer in 2007. Her feelings about being remembered in this work were expressed in the following email:

“When he said it was Dennis Prager on the line, I think my heart stopped for a nanosecond! We had a lovely conversation and we agreed that our biggest

prayer is that I get to see or receive a copy of Leviticus personally—in other words, that I stick around. . . . So very touched deep in my soul that Dennis wants to add a note about me and my working on the project/book.”

When I was struggling to decide whether to devote the necessary time and expense to this commentary, my dear friend Ron Carson asked how I would feel on my deathbed if this book were never published. Thank you, Ron, for helping me to make the right decision.

To my dear friend Dr. Howard Gendelman (Howie), who constantly amazes me with his tremendous courage, passion, and persistence. His life has been a *Kiddush Hashem* (a sanctification of God’s name).

To my dear friend Dennis Prager: There is no one else on the planet for whom I would have involved myself so deeply in such a project. It is your life-changing ideas and the promise they hold of making so many people better human beings that continue to inspire and excite me. What greater goal could one have and how many others could make such a goal attainable? Thank you for allowing me to share in your remarkable dream.

And finally to Conny—my beautiful wife and the mother of our children. Thank you so much for your encouragement, for listening to me endlessly discuss the details of this work and for celebrating its many successes with me. As I’ve told you so often, no one’s support and enthusiasm means as much to me. How can I possibly thank you for your endless love, kindness, and devotion? May we spend many happy hours teaching our children the lessons contained within this great work. And may our children teach them to their children.

Joel Alperson
January 2018

THE STORY THUS FAR

THE FIRST FIVE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN KNOWN AS THE TORAH, which is Hebrew for “Teaching” or “Law.” Exodus is the second book. The first book, Genesis, begins with a description of the creation of the world. Every nation and religion in the world had a creation story, but the creation story in Genesis was unique in important ways. Only one God created the world; there was no sex and no violence involved in creation, and God was not part of nature—God created nature. As you will see, each of those unique things will play a huge role in the Torah’s transformation of the world.

One other unique element in the Genesis creation story is that although the Torah is, among other things, the story of the Jewish people, it is probably the only national history ever written that begins with the creation of the world. One reason is the subject of the Torah is all mankind, not just the Jews. That, too, is a major feature of the Torah and this commentary.

After the Creation, Genesis describes how the human race immediately descended into evil (good and evil are another preoccupation of the Torah). God is so angered by humans hurting one another He destroys the world, saving but one man, Noah, and his family. Noah is saved solely because he is a good man (in other flood stories, the hero is usually saved because he is good looking, and the gods like him).

Eventually God reveals Himself to the father of the Jewish people, Abraham. God says that through Abraham and his offspring, all the families and nations of the earth will be blessed. Abraham is the father of Isaac, and Isaac is the father of Jacob. The latter is renamed “Israel,” which, the Torah explains,

Even an atheist who doesn't believe that either the Exodus or the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai actually occurred would have to acknowledge that the Western world has been largely shaped by the belief that these events did occur.

means “struggle with God.” Very early on, the Torah makes it clear people are allowed, indeed expected, to argue with God—another major theme of the Torah.

One of Israel's (Jacob's) twelve sons was Joseph, whose story is the second longest biographical story in the Torah (the first is Moses). Joseph's brothers, intensely jealous of their father Jacob's love for him, abandoned their brother to die in a pit. But Joseph was saved by a passing caravan, then sold as a slave, and eventually wound up in Egypt. There he deciphered the Pharaoh's dreams, saved Egypt from a seven-year famine, and arose from slave to viceroy of Egypt, second in power only to the Pharaoh himself. Joseph's brothers, who went to Egypt from famine-stricken Canaan looking for food, met with their brother Joseph. That

meeting may be the most dramatic scene in Western literature.

And that brings us to the first verse in Exodus.

CHAPTER I

1.1 These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household:

1.2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah;

1.3 Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin;

1.4 Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

1.5 The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt.

1.6 Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation.

The “sons of Israel” (*b'nei yisrael*) is how the Israelites are referred to in the Torah. *Israel* was the name given to the Jewish patriarch Jacob after he wrestled with an angel (Genesis 32:29). As noted above, “Israel” means “wrestle (or struggle) with God.”

Why should non-Jews care about the story of one of the smallest nations on earth? Because the Israelites' move to Egypt set the stage for two of the most important events in world history: the Israelites' Exodus from Egyptian slavery and the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

Even an atheist who believes neither event occurred would have to acknowledge that the Western world—and those parts of the non-Western world

influenced by the West—has been largely shaped by belief that these events did occur. For example, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, two of the founders of America, neither of whom believed in a literal reading of the Bible, commissioned a design for the Great Seal of the United States of America which depicted the Israelites leaving Egypt. (Franklin proposed the scene be sur-

Nations, like people, are their memories. A nation that doesn't remember its past, like the man who fell on his head, ceases to be the nation it was.

rounded by the words, “Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.”) Not only did these men deem the Exodus to be civilization-defining, they also believed America was founded in a second Exodus—of people leaving Europe and establishing the United States.

That these two events—the Exodus and the giving of the Ten Commandments—are the two seminal events (other than Creation itself) of the Torah means liberty and morality are the twin pillars of the Torah. They

became the twin pillars of America as well, which is not surprising, given that America was, outside of Israel, the most Bible-based (particularly the Hebrew Bible) country ever founded.

ESSAY: THE JEWS: A SECOND CREATION

1.7 But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly,

Professor Nahum Sarna, the author of important commentaries on Exodus and Genesis, points out the language used in this verse— “multiplied and increased”—echoes the opening chapter of Genesis, in which God instructs all living creatures to “multiply and increase” over all the earth (Genesis 1:28). Just as the world was created by God in the beginning of Genesis, a new creation is now taking place with the formation of the Jewish people as a nation.

THE JEWS: GOD’S THIRD ATTEMPT TO CREATE A MORAL WORLD

The Exodus followed by the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai and the subsequent writing of this Torah may be considered God’s third attempt to create a moral world.

God's first attempt to make a good world was creating human beings with a conscience. That didn't work: Cain, the firstborn child of the first couple, Adam and Eve, killed his brother, Abel. After this, a general moral deterioration of humanity followed, and God came to regret creating human beings (Genesis 6:5-6).

Consequently, God sent the flood, destroying all mankind except for one particularly good man—Noah—and his family. Since the human conscience was insufficient to make a good world, God then *revealed* some basic moral laws and principles such as not to murder, to take the life of those who deliberately murder, to have children, not to consume the blood of any creature, and every human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 9:1-7).

Once again, people murdered and plundered and engaged in other evils. God, therefore, initiated a third effort to morally improve mankind by revealing Himself to one specific group who would be charged with spreading ethical monotheism to the world. This group was first known as Hebrews, then as Israelites, then as Jews. They descended from a man named Abraham to whom God revealed Himself and His desire that the entire world be blessed through Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham's descendants were enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years. The process by which they became enslaved begins in this chapter, and is followed midway in the book by the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

WHY DIDN'T GOD GIVE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS TO THE FIRST HUMAN BEINGS?

Of course, one might ask, why would God have to keep trying? Doesn't God know what works and what doesn't? Why didn't He just begin the world with the Ten Commandments or with a Chosen People as conduits of His moral will?

I would offer three responses:

First, in creating a being (the human) with free will, it is arguable that God could not predict what this creature would always do. Genesis 6:6 says that, after seeing how much evil men do, "God regretted that He had created man on earth." That verse implies God did know how man would turn out.

Second, God made these multiple attempts at having people act decently to show why revelation was necessary, and why specifically the revelation at Sinai and the Torah were necessary. Precisely because prior attempts—the making of the human conscience and basic moral “Noahide” principles—did not work, God gave the Ten Commandments and the Torah.

Third, this third attempt at making a good world establishes the *raison d’être* of the Jewish people—“to be a nation of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) and to bring the world to the Ten Commandments and ethical monotheism.

WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THERE ARE SO MANY JEWS IN THE WORLD?

1.7 (cont.) so that the land was filled with them.

The words, “the land was filled with them” imply that although the Israelites were granted permission to live in an area of Egypt known as Goshen (Genesis 45:10), the Egyptians perceived them as everywhere. Throughout history, Jew-haters—and even many non-Jews sympathetic to Jews—have often wildly overstated the number of Jews in their country. I remember once, in my early years of lecturing, sitting next to a non-Jewish woman on an airplane on the way to Louisville, Kentucky. She asked me why I was visiting her city. I told her I was going to speak to the Jewish community there. As the conversation continued—on the subject of Jews—it became apparent to me this woman thought there were far more Jews in Kentucky than there actually were.

I told her (at that time) there were 280 million Americans, and then asked her, “How many of them do you think are Jews?”

She thought for a moment, and responded, “About fifty million.”

When I told her there were about six million Jews in America, she was clearly startled. She pondered this, and then said, “I guess they must all live in Kentucky.”

As of this writing, there are about fourteen million Jews in a world population of about seven and a half billion. That means that about .0018 percent, or fewer

than two out of every thousand people in the world, are Jews. But few people would guess this—because the influence of the Jews has always been so great. *And the reason for that influence is this Torah, its God, its Ten Commandments, and its Exodus story.* In short, the stories and values of this Book of Exodus have transformed the world.

THE INDISPENSABLE IMPORTANCE OF REMEMBERING

1.8 A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.

Joseph, about whom more is written than any other figure in the Torah except for Moses, was the Israelite who rose from slavery, followed by imprisonment, to become the second most powerful man in Egypt. He is credited with saving Egypt (from famine). Given that Joseph’s role in Egyptian history was so profound, the words “who did not know Joseph” are extraordinary.

One of humanity’s most common character traits is ingratitude—people either not acknowledging the good another does for them or quickly forgetting that good. The latter is what this verse describes.

Human beings tend to much more quickly forget the good others have done *for* them than the bad others have done *to* them. That’s human nature. It is, therefore, one of the very many reasons that to become a good person involves fighting one’s nature—a theme developed often in the Torah, in the rest of the Bible, and in this commentary.

The American writer Bruce Feiler has an additional insight into this verse—the recurring emphasis on remembering in the Torah and specifically the Book of Exodus:

“The story begins with forgetting. The pharaoh does not remember how a son of Israel saved Egypt from famine. The rest of the Five Books of Moses becomes an antidote to this state of forgetfulness. God hears the groaning of Israel and ‘*remembers* His covenant’ (Exodus 2.24). Moses leads the Israelites from Egypt and urges them to ‘*remember* this day’ (Exodus 13.3). The Israelites are ordered to ‘*remember* the Sabbath day’ (Exodus 20.8), and to observe Passover as a ‘day of *remembrance*’ (Exodus 12.14). Moses’s goal is to build a

counter-Egypt...to construct a society that offers an alternative to ignorance and unknowingness. He must devise a community that *remembers*”¹ (emphases added).

Remembering—the good others have done, the evil others have done, and one’s moral obligations—is an indispensable aspect of a good and meaningful life.

Who are we, if not our memories? I once interviewed a man who, as the result of a fall on his head, had lost virtually all long-term memory. He did not even remember who his wife and children were. In the interview he acknowledged that, for all intents and purposes, because of his loss of memory, the man he had been had died.

The same holds true for nations. Nations, too, are their memories. A nation that doesn’t remember its past, like the man who fell on his head, ceases to be the nation it was. This may be happening now in a number of Western European nations that teach their young people to consider themselves “world citizens” or Europeans rather than members of a specific nation. It is also happening in the United States, where the level of ignorance of the American past among young Americans is unprecedented.²

What can be stated for certain is a major reason for the survival of the Jewish people has been memory. The Jewish religion is replete with prayers and rituals that reinforce that memory, the most obvious being the Passover Seder, the retelling of the Exodus in Jewish homes for over 3,000 years.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND MASSIVE EVIL

1.9 And he [Pharaoh] said to his people,

Samson Raphael Hirsch, a nineteenth-century German Jewish thinker, pointed out it was the Egyptian leader, not the Egyptian people, who initiated the campaign against the Israelites that ultimately came to include attempted genocide.

This is a profound insight.

The terrible truth is individuals are capable of inflicting massive evils—because individuals are far more capable of doing great evil than great good.

Were it not for Lenin, it is unlikely communism would have taken over Russia and ultimately the Soviet Union, where it enslaved over 150 million people and murdered tens of millions. The same holds true for Mao Zedong in China. This one man was responsible for the deaths of over sixty million Chinese men, women, and children. The same can be said of Kim Il-Sung, who created the most totalitarian state in human history, North Korea. And were it not for Adolf Hitler, the Holocaust would almost certainly not have taken place.

Understandably, people are very uncomfortable with acknowledging how much evil one individual can perpetrate. That is one reason people concoct and believe conspiracy theories. The assassination of the American President John F. Kennedy in 1963 is one example. The overwhelming evidence is that one man, Lee Harvey Oswald, an American Communist, murdered Kennedy. But the assassination had so many destructive consequences and was so emotionally difficult for Americans to accept that many came to believe there was a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy. They simply could not believe so much damage could be done by just one person—a pathetic misfit, no less. Oswald proves the unhappy truth that you don't even have to be particularly talented to do great evil.

1.9 (cont.) “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.

Pharaoh refers to the Israelites using the rare phrase *am b'nei Yisrael*, which literally means “the nation of the children of Israel.” There are two words for “nation” in biblical Hebrew—*am* and *goy*. *Am* refers to a nation defined by blood ties, a common ancestry, history, and language (see, for example, the book of Esther 8:9) as opposed to *goy*, which refers to a nation defined as a political unit (see Isaiah 2:4). In using “am,” Pharaoh is saying, in effect, the purity of the Egyptian people is being threatened by an alien presence, the children of Israel, who are of a different bloodline.

Throughout history, blood beliefs have been a great source of cruelty: Those who are not part of the right group are deemed worthy of persecution. The Torah, in contrast, did not place much value on blood ties. As Joseph Telushkin

points out, Jacob is regarded as the third patriarch of the Jewish people, but his twin brother, Esau, who did not share Jacob's religious beliefs, is not even

Human beings tend to much more quickly forget the good others have done for them than the bad others have done to them.

regarded as a Jew. In Exodus (19:6), God tells the Jews to be a holy *goy* (national unit), not a holy *am* (blood-group or ethnicity).

The Hebrew Bible holds, and later Judaism held, that anyone of any blood can become a Jew—just like the first Jew, Abraham, who was not born a Jew but became one late in life. Likewise, centuries later, Ruth, a Moabite woman, becomes a Jew, and subsequently becomes the ancestor of Israel's great king, David (Ruth

4:13-22), the man from whom, according to Jewish (and Christian) tradition, the Messiah will descend.

1.10 Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”

THE GUILT OF THE EGYPTIAN PEOPLE

1.11 So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor;

The Torah indicts the Egyptians four times in the next four verses:

The Egyptians set taskmasters over the Israelites (verse 11).

They ruthlessly impose hardships on them (verse 13).

They make them perform harsh labors (verse 14).

They make life bitter for them (verse 14).

The Torah is emphasizing the collective guilt of the Egyptians. Even though it is Pharaoh who initiates the slavery and annihilation campaign, the Egyptian people are the ones who execute it. Individuals initiate mass evil, but they need the collaboration of many people to carry it out. This explains the collective national punishments the Egyptian people will experience.

1.11 (cont.) and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses.

1.12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.

1.13 The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites

Most Egyptians were not as evil as Pharaoh, just as most Germans in the 1930s and 1940s were not as evil as Hitler. There are relatively few truly evil people in the world. However, you don't need a great number of truly evil people to carry out massive evil. You only need:

- 1) ordinary people who have allowed themselves to be indoctrinated by the truly evil;
- 2) people who benefit from the evil (to cite one obvious example, during World War II, not only were six million Jews murdered, but their assets were stolen as well; and these assets enriched large numbers of Europeans;
- 3) a paucity of courageous good people.

I am convinced courage is the rarest of all good traits. There are far more kind and honest people than there are courageous people. Unfortunately, however, in the battle against evil, all the good traits in the world amount to little when not accompanied by courage.

Two verses later, the Torah depicts precisely this trait—courage.

1.14 the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

WERE THE MIDWIVES WHO DISOBEYED PHARAOH EGYPTIANS OR HEBREWS? I

1.15 The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives,

The Torah emphasizes Pharaoh's direct order to the midwives to highlight their courage in defying his edict. The meaning of the Hebrew phrase *m'yaldot ha'ivriyot* is ambiguous: it may be translated either as "the Hebrew midwives" (meaning the midwives were Hebrews), or as "midwives of the Hebrews" (meaning the midwives could have been of any nationality). But there are several clues

in the text (which shall be noted) that clearly suggest that the women were not Hebrews. The most obvious clue, however, is not rooted in the text but in common sense: Given that Pharaoh intended to murder every male Hebrew baby, it is unreasonable to expect he would rely on Hebrew women to murder their own.

THE TORAH GIVES THE MIDWIVES' NAMES, BUT NOT THE PHARAOH'S

1.15 (cont.) one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,

In listing the names of the heroic midwives, the Torah is making a powerful moral point. We tend to remember the names of villains, but not of the truly good. The Torah wants to correct that and to ensure the names of moral heroes are also remembered. Thus, Shifrah (the modern spelling) and Puah are mentioned by name, yet the Torah never mentions the name of the evil Pharaoh. To this day the names of two lowly midwives are better known than the name of the demigod Pharaoh. Moreover, Shifrah remains a common name for Jewish girls (Puah, less euphonious, is rarely used).

1.16 saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”

ESSAY: THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FEARING GOD

1.17 The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

The Torah does not say the midwives saved the babies because they could not bear to harm them, nor does it say the midwives saved the Hebrew babies because they loved God. They saved the babies because “they feared God.”

Fear of God—when that God is the moral God of the Torah, the God of the Ten Commandments, the God Who commanded, “Love your neighbor as yourself”—is necessary to make a society of moral individuals. Of course, there are moral atheists, just as there were moral pagans, and moral individuals in even the worst

cultures. But you cannot build a good world with a handful of individuals who happen to be good people. You need a universal moral code from a universal God Who is the source of that moral code, and this God must judge all people accordingly. Consequently, “fear of God” is as inevitable as it is necessary. If God judges how moral we are, of course there will be fear of Him—just as there is of a human judge. Conversely, if God does not judge people, there is no reason to fear Him.

There is another important moral aspect to fear of God. People fear those who are more powerful than they are. Therefore, the only way not to fear powerful people is to fear God. Thus, in the instance recorded here, those who feared God saved Hebrew babies, while those who feared Pharaoh helped drown Hebrew babies.

Remember, it was not love of God that prompted the midwives’ moral heroism. In our time, many people invoke the commandment to love God but ignore or even disparage the commandment to fear God. While many God-believers will engage in heroic self-sacrifice out of love of God, most God-believers are moral on a day-to-day basis because they believe they will be judged by God. That’s why, for example, in traditional Western societies, the finest people were routinely described as “God-fearing,” not “God-loving.”

It was the midwives’ fear of God that liberated them from fear of the Egyptian tyrant. This point is often overlooked: Fear of God is a *liberating* emotion, freeing one from a disabling fear of evil, powerful people. This needs to be emphasized because many people see fear of God as onerous rather than liberating.

This fear is what gave the midwives the strength to carry out what is, as far as we know, the first recorded act of civil disobedience in history. Indeed, fear (and sometimes love) of God explains why a disproportionately high number of dissidents in totalitarian societies have been believers in God. When I visited the Soviet Union in 1969, I smuggled out a Soviet Jewish dissident song whose lyrics included the words: “I fear no one except God, the only one” (“*Nye byusa nikovo krome boga odnavo*”).

Those words were all the more remarkable in that the vast majority of Soviet Jewish dissidents were not religious. But they understood the simple moral and logical fact that if one “fears no one except God,” one can muster

the courage not to fear a totalitarian state. And these simple words also explain why totalitarian states like the Soviet Union so feared and fought against belief in God. Because belief in God posits there is something higher than the Party,

Those who feared God saved Hebrew babies.

Those who feared Pharaoh helped drown Hebrew babies.

it constitutes a fatal threat to secular totalitarian societies (that’s why North Koreans have been horribly punished for owning a Bible).

In the Torah, the term “fear of God” is generally used when describing non-Jews. For example, when Abraham worries Sarah will be mistreated in Gerar, he explains: “there is no fear of God in this place” (Genesis 20:11). Thus, the use of this phrase to account for the

midwives’ behavior provides yet another indication that the midwives were likely not Hebrews.

Finally, it is important to point out that the Torah’s account of the moral heroism of the midwives is part of a pattern present throughout the opening chapters of Exodus—the depiction of both non-Jews and women as moral heroes (see commentary on Exodus 2:1). This is another of the many examples of the Torah’s uniqueness. Other holy works have rarely portrayed either people of other nations, other religions, or women—let alone women of other nations and religions—as the moral heroes of their epic stories. This unique aspect of the Torah—one of so many examples of such—is among the many reasons why I do not regard the Torah as man-made.

WERE THE MIDWIVES WHO DISOBEYED THE PHARAOH EGYPTIANS OR HEBREWS? II

1.18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?”

The fact that Pharaoh seems puzzled by their behavior is yet another indication the women were not Hebrews: His question, “Why have you done this thing...?” suggests that he is truly mystified by their behavior. It is unlikely he would have been so perplexed had the women been Hebrews. Even a Pharaoh

would understand why women might not want to kill the babies of their own people.

Surprisingly, Pharaoh does not kill the midwives for disobeying him; he simply pleads with them like a plaintive husband whose wife has not done what he has asked of her. There is a parallel to the Holocaust here. Just as the midwives were not killed or even punished for refusing to participate in the murder of all Jewish boys, the few German soldiers who refused to participate in the Holocaust were also neither killed nor persecuted by the Nazi regime; they were either assigned other tasks or sent to the front (admittedly a very perilous option). Often standing up to great evil leads to death—as, for example, Poles who were caught hiding Jews during World War II—but it also often does not.

This does not, it should be emphasized, in any way reduce the moral greatness of those who did resist Hitler or other tyrants, many of whom suffered terribly, or—like Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer—were executed for their moral courage. It is only to note that there are also times when standing up for the good does not lead to terrible persecution.

WHEN LYING IS MORAL

1.19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.”

The midwives lie to Pharaoh, offering as an excuse the supposedly rapid nature of Hebrew women’s manner of giving birth. This passage offers guidance to all people confronting criminals or evil political regimes. The midwives want to save the infants, but they don’t want to die; so they don’t tell Pharaoh what they are really thinking: *We fear God more than you and therefore have disobeyed you and your evil decree.*

We can infer from this episode that one is not obligated to speak truthfully to murderers and die—or have other innocents die—as a result. Rather, we are not only permitted, but morally obligated, to lie to the evil in order to save ourselves or other innocents. The notion that it is always immoral to lie is itself immoral.

To explain why this is so—why lying is sometimes moral and telling the truth is sometimes immoral—it is necessary to explain the concept of moral absolutes.

ESSAY: MORAL ABSOLUTES, MORAL RELATIVISM, AND SITUATIONAL ETHICS

Many religious people think that if you believe in moral absolutes, you cannot believe in situational ethics; they think situational ethics and moral relativism are synonymous.

This is a serious mistake. Moral relativism and situational ethics are not at all the same. In fact, if you believe in moral absolutes, you must also believe in situational ethics.

The doctrine of moral absolutes—or “objective morality” or “moral truth”—means there is an objective moral standard that transcends personal or societal opinion. To cite three examples, murder, the sexual abuse of a child, and lying are morally wrong not because many people or even an entire society believe they are wrong but because they *are* wrong—in the same way two plus two equals four, not because many (or even all) people think they equal four, but because they do equal four. There are moral truths just as there are mathematical, scientific, and historical truths. (However, there is one big difference:

Courage is the rarest of all the good traits. There are far more kind and honest people than there are courageous people.

unlike scientific and historical truths, moral truths require God—because while scientific and historical truths can be proven, moral truths cannot be proven. You can argue murder is wrong, but you cannot prove it is wrong the way you can prove, for example, the earth is round. Moral truths depend entirely upon the existence of a Moral Source higher than mankind. Murder is wrong because God says so. If there is no God, all notions of right and wrong are subjective opinion.)

One more way to describe the existence of moral absolutes is “universal morality.” This means that just as two-plus-two-equals-four is universally true, so, too, moral truths are universal. If it is a truth that murder is wrong, it is wrong for all people. Moral relativism holds the opposite. It holds that morality is not universal but determined by each individual or each society: “what you think is wrong is wrong—for *you*; and what I think is wrong is wrong—for *me*.”

There are moral truths just as there are mathematical, scientific, and historical truths.

“Situational ethics” is not at all the same as moral relativism. Situational ethics does not mean every individual determines what is moral; it means *only by knowing the situation can we know whether an act is moral or immoral*. This should be clear to anyone who gives it a moment’s thought. Take, for example, killing a person. Is that morally wrong? It depends entirely on the situation. If it is done in self-defense or to defend other innocents, or in a moral war, it is a moral act. Otherwise it is not “killing,” but “murder.” And murder, by definition, is immoral killing.

Or, take sexual intercourse. That act can be the most beautiful form of physical human bonding, but the same exact act can be the evil act known as rape. What determines whether sexual intercourse is beautiful and even holy or evil? The answer is—the situation.

The situation is what makes it possible for us to determine what the moral absolute is. Very few acts are in and of themselves morally wrong. It is the situation that enables us to determine what is right and wrong.

Lying is another example. The situation enables us to determine whether lying is wrong. If a murderer asks you where his intended victim is hiding, and you know the answer, it is not only alright to lie to the murderer, it is morally imperative to do so—because saving an innocent person’s life is a greater moral good than refraining from lying.

That is why the midwives' lie was moral. And the biblical proof that this is what God wanted is two verses later when God rewards their behavior. God approved of both their conduct and their lie.

MORE ON THE MIDWIVES: EGYPTIAN OR HEBREW? III

Ilana Pardes, professor of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University, noted the words translated here as “they are vigorous” (*ki chayyot hei-nah*) also mean “they are animals.” In this instance, the latter translation makes more sense. The midwives understand Pharaoh, like most slave-owners, had a racist view of the enslaved people, and was therefore willing to believe the Hebrews were like animals. So he was readily convinced that, unlike the refined women of Egypt, the Hebrew women—like animals—could give birth without requiring assistance.

Ironically, it was Pharaoh's racism that enabled him to accept as true the lie the midwives told him.

This verse is another indication the midwives were not Hebrews. They speak of Hebrew women in the third person—“they.”

1.20 And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.

1.21 And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

God rarely rewards people so immediately and directly—or even rewards many people at all in this life. The preeminent Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), in a discussion of divine intervention in individuals' lives (known in Hebrew as *hashgacha pratit*, literally “divine supervision”), posits that God generally intercedes only in the lives of those who involve themselves with Him, and/or those whose lives are involved in something much greater than themselves. The midwives met both of these criteria, which may account for their divine reward. Or, perhaps their rewards are cited to show how unequivocally God approved of their behavior.

1.22 Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile,

The whole Egyptian people are now implicated in the cruel treatment of the Israelites. Cruel as Pharaoh is, he could not have carried out murder on this scale alone; and the Torah once again reminds us it is only through the cooperation of the masses that massive evil is committed.

1.22 (cont.) but let every girl live.”

We do not know for certain why the Pharaoh ordered newborn boys killed, but not newborn girls. But we can speculate.

One likely explanation is offered by a Midrash (a rabbinic story that illuminates a biblical story), which relates that Pharaoh was warned by his sorcerers and astrologers that a male savior of the Israelites was about to be born. This would also explain why Pharaoh only sought to kill the newborn male infants, and why Moses’s older brother, Aaron, though only three years old at the time, was not considered a risk. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is only Moses whom their mother feels the need to hide.

It is also possible Pharaoh spared the girls because in a patriarchal society they would not be able to cause as much trouble as boys. Pharaoh likely presumed if the Hebrew males were eliminated, despite any racial misgivings he had, the girls would eventually marry Egyptian or other non-Hebrew men and assimilate, and the Hebrew people would disappear.

CHAPTER

2

2.1 A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

The “house of Levi” refers to one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the Levites.

The Torah does not mention here the names of this husband and wife—which is remarkable given the monumental role they played as the parents of Moses, the most important figure in the Hebrew Bible and one of the most important figures in world history. They are named later in Exodus 6:20. One possible reason is the Torah’s desire to emphasize that Moses was born to ordinary people, not to illustrious, famous, rich, or even particularly holy parents. The most likely reason is to focus attention exclusively on the child, not the parents.

The Torah also wishes to emphasize that Moses’s birth was in no way miraculous. God chose Moses to lead the Jews out of Egypt because of his exceptional moral and leadership traits (see, for example, comments on verses 13 and 17). He was not preordained to lead and he was a normal mortal.

THE PREEMINENT ROLE OF WOMEN IN MOSES’S LIFE— AND IN THE TORAH

It is Moses’s mother who played the critical role in saving him. Indeed, women played central and heroic roles in the early chapters of Exodus:

The midwives, who defied Pharaoh’s edict to drown the Hebrews’ male babies; Pharaoh’s daughter, who, we will see, saved Moses;

The preeminent role of women in Moses's life, like the prominent role of women in Genesis, is striking, particularly in light of the common dismissal of the Torah as a sexist document.

Miriam, Moses's sister, who intervened with the Egyptian princess to have Moses's mother, Yocheved, appointed to nurse and care for Moses until he was weaned;

Zipporah, Moses's Midianite wife, who saved either Moses or their son (the text is not clear) from God's deadly wrath by circumcising their baby (Exodus 4:24-26).

The preeminent role of women in Moses's life, like the prominent—and occasionally preeminent—role of women in the founding of the Jewish people in Genesis, is striking, particularly in light of the common dismissal of the Torah as a sexist document. Some laws in the

Torah inevitably reflected the patriarchal culture of its time, but the Torah often portrays women as playing a more important role than men. It is adamant about the equal value of women and men—as reflected in its stories, in the woman as the final act of creation (all creation is in ascending order of sophistication and complexity), in the equal role of mothers and fathers, and elsewhere.

THERE IS NO MIRACLE IN MOSES'S BIRTH

2.2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months.

The Torah continues its mundane description of Moses's birth. This is in keeping with the Torah's profound desire to prevent Moses from being regarded as divine and therefore worshipped by the Jewish people after his death (or even while alive). This is also the probable reason—as we shall see much later—why Moses is not allowed into the Promised Land, and why his burial place will forever remain unknown.

WHY MOSES WAS SAVED IN THE SAME TYPE OF VESSEL NOAH WAS SAVED IN

2.3 When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket [*tevah*] for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch.

In order to show a relationship between the stories of Noah and Moses, the Torah uses the same Hebrew word, *tevah*, to refer both to Moses’s basket and to Noah’s ark (despite the vast discrepancy in size between them).

This is another example of the Torah communicating that the Exodus (which includes the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai) begins a new creation. Just as God saved Noah in a *tevah* set in the water, He will save Moses in a *tevah* set in water. Just as in Genesis, God started a new world with Noah, He is, in effect, starting a new world with Moses and the Jews. And just as God attempted to morally improve the world by revealing moral laws to Noah (i.e., all humanity) after the flood, He will attempt to do the same by revealing specific laws to humanity through Moses and a particular people.

2.3 (cont.) She put the child into it

In the face of this early attempt at genocide, Moses’s mother gave up her child to save his life.

2.3 (cont.) and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.

2.4 And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

THE DAUGHTER OF THE ISRAELITES’ KILLER SAVES THE MAN WHO WILL SAVE THE ISRAELITES

2.5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it.

2.6 When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, “This must be a Hebrew child.”

The Torah specifies that Pharaoh’s daughter is aware the baby is a Hebrew to emphasize her moral greatness—she takes pity on the baby knowing he is a Hebrew boy, the group her own father has targeted for annihilation.

If one believes the Torah narrative, how remarkable it is the daughter of the man who set out to annihilate the Hebrews is the one who saves them—and

how remarkable of the Torah to relate that fact. If one does not believe the Torah narrative, the Torah, in making up such a story, is even more impressive in its lack of racism, ethno-centrism, and hatred of Egyptians.

In any case, the message is clear: though Pharaoh had a genocidal hatred for the Israelites, his daughter was a great humanitarian, the very person who thwarted her father's evil campaign. Biology is not destiny; you can be the child of an evil person and be a good person.

2.7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse

Moses's sister, Miriam, demonstrates considerable courage and boldness: She is not afraid to come forward and make a suggestion to the daughter of the king, even though she is a lowly slave girl.

2.7 (cont.) to suckle the child for you?"

It is only natural to suggest finding a Hebrew wet-nurse for a Hebrew child. Among other reasons, presumably an Egyptian woman would not (any more than a white woman in the nineteenth-century American South would) have breastfed an infant black slave child. Moreover, because of the killing of the Hebrew infants, there were many Hebrew women who still had milk in their breasts. Miriam was, of course, eager to restore the baby to his mother, though she could not share this with Pharaoh's daughter.

2.8 And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

2.9 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it.

In another extraordinary display of decency, Pharaoh's daughter offers to pay wages to a slave.

2.10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."

The name Moses comes from the root of the Hebrew word *m'shi-tihu*, "I drew him out." Moses is also an Egyptian name, and presumably Pharaoh's daughter

chooses the name for an Egyptian reason rather than a Hebrew one. The Torah is providing a Hebrew explanation for a name most likely chosen for its Egyptian significance (which we do not know).

2.11 Some time after that, when Moses had grown up,

We do not learn anything about Moses’s upbringing or his relationship with either his adopted or birth mother. The Torah was not written in the age of psychology; it is less concerned with the inner lives of its characters than with imparting moral teaching and wisdom to its readers.

2.11 (cont.) he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen.

Despite being raised an Egyptian, Moses apparently recognized he was (also) a Hebrew. Children in the ancient world were often nursed until three years of age, and Moses’s mother would have likely wanted to maximize her time with him. It is quite possible she taught him he was a Hebrew. Perhaps he also had some continuing contact with his sister, since the Torah makes it clear he knew his brother Aaron (Exodus 4:14).

*Biology is not destiny;
you can be the child of
an evil person and be a
good person.*

Perhaps resentful Egyptians in Pharaoh’s court regularly reminded Moses of his lowly (Hebrew) background.

And perhaps the daughter of Pharaoh, the mother who raised him, told him.

It is also possible, though less likely, Moses did not know he was a Hebrew, and the Torah’s words “one of his brothers” (translated here as “kinsmen”) is the Torah speaking, not Moses’s mind.

OUR MOTHER IS THE WOMAN, AND OUR FATHER IS THE MAN, WHO RAISES US

Regarding the role of Pharaoh’s daughter in Moses’s life, the Talmud—the holiest Jewish body of literature after the Bible, edited between the years 200

and 500, and comprising sixty-three volumes of philosophy, theology, ritual and ethical law, and stories—states: “Yocheved gave birth to Moses, Batya [the Hebrew name given to Pharaoh’s daughter, meaning ‘daughter of God’] raised him; therefore he is identified as her child.”¹

In other words, even though Yocheved gave birth to Moses and even nursed him, the Jewish tradition regards Pharaoh’s daughter as Moses’s mother. As important as birth parents almost always are (and Yocheved was), in most cases blood is less important than actually raising a child when it comes to assigning the title “mother” or “father.”

WHY MOSES WILL BE CHOSEN TO LEAD IS ALREADY APPARENT

Verse 11 alone suggests at least three reasons why Moses was the exceptional man who would be chosen to deliver the Israelites from bondage:

1. Moses fights evil. He is instinctively intolerant of suffering and injustice. As soon as he sees a slave being beaten by an overseer, he doesn’t move on, as most people in his situation (a prince) would. He does whatever he can to stop the evil. Most people, when confronted with evil directed against others, look away. They are too afraid to confront it. Moral courage, as noted, is the rarest of all good traits (see commentary to Exodus 1:13).
2. Moses will later command the respect of the Israelites in part because he was not raised among them. That made him far more worldly than people who were raised as slaves. Also, the Israelites must have admired this man who *chose* to be one of them, when he could have led an utterly charmed life as an Egyptian prince.
3. Moses does not have a slave mentality. Unlike his fellow Hebrews, who were so demoralized that they could only cry out (see 2:23, 3:7, 9), Moses does not share their demoralization and does not merely cry out; he takes action.

2.12 He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about,

Moses looks around to make sure there is no one to witness the illegal act he is about to commit. To protect a slave, let alone to kill an Egyptian, was a major transgression of Egyptian law. If he were caught, he would be executed (see verse 15).

Another possible reading is that he checked to see whether there was “a man”—someone who might intercede on behalf of the slave. Only when Moses saw there was “no man” who would, did he intervene. The Hebrew word *ish* (“man”) is sometimes used in Hebrew—as in English (“Be a man!”) and other languages—to refer to a morally upstanding individual. As the Talmud states: “In a place where there is no man, be a man [*ish*].”²

GOD APPARENTLY STRONGLY APPROVED OF MOSES’S ACT OF HOMICIDE

2.12 (cont.) he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

Moses killed the Egyptian and buried him. Many people have criticized Moses for this homicide. But what else should Moses have done? Should he have walked away? He would have been turning his back on a terrible injustice.

Should he have tried to persuade the Egyptian overseer to stop? The idea borders on the absurd. Should he have attacked the Egyptian without killing him? The Egyptian would either have fought back and quite possibly killed Moses or informed on Moses, which would have resulted in his being accused of subversion for trying to stop an overseer from punishing a slave (see commentary to verse 15).

Clearly, God approved of what Moses did. This is the first of three stories told about Moses to convey what sort of man Moses was and, implicitly, why God chose him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

To more fully appreciate what Moses did, one should see the film that won the 2013 Academy Award for Best Picture, *Twelve Years a Slave*, especially the scene in which a master whips a slave woman to the brink of death. Watching this scene, one can only wish there was a Moses-like character to do what he did here.

2.13 When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender,

The word translated here as “offender” literally means “the evil one.” The Torah does not hesitate to describe a Jew as evil. Much of the Torah’s—and the entire Hebrew Bible’s—greatness and credibility lies in its willingness to critique the Jewish people. At the same time, it is to the Jews’ credit that they canonized books so critical of them.

MOSES’S THREE RESPONSES TO INJUSTICE

2.13 (cont.) “Why do you strike your fellow?”

This is the second of three stories told about Moses before God appears to him.

In the first story, Moses witnessed injustice and responded by killing. In this second story, when he witnessed injustice, he spoke. The next time, he will simply stand.

These are the three possible responses to evil: fighting back (and killing if necessary), speaking out, and standing.

Moses is chosen by God not just because he fights against evil, but because he knows which response is most appropriate in any given situation.

2.14 He retorted, “Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known!

When Moses asked the Hebrew offender why he hit his fellow, the man did not respond to the question; instead he verbally attacked Moses. This is a classic response of guilty people when challenged about what they have done—to attack their accuser.

2.15 When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

Given that Moses was raised at the royal court, we might have thought he would be spared punishment for killing a mere overseer. But killing an Egyptian overseer and identifying with the Hebrews would have branded him a traitor and warranted the death penalty.

2.16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock;

2.17 but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock.

For the third time, Moses refuses to tolerate the evil he sees around him. This time he does not kill or speak out; he simply stands—in defense of Midianite women. This third event demonstrates Moses is not simply a Hebrew nationalist, concerned with fighting evil only when a Hebrew is the victim. And he is as offended by injustice toward women as men.

In the first instance, he intervenes when a non-Hebrew oppresses a Hebrew; in the second instance he intervenes when one Hebrew wrongs another Hebrew; and now he intervenes when non-Hebrew men oppress non-Hebrew women. All injustice infuriates him and prompts him to act.

2.18 When they returned to their father Reuel,

Elsewhere in the Torah, this man is called Jethro (see, for example, Exodus 3:1 and 18:1), on one occasion Jether (Exodus 4:18), and on another Hobab (Numbers 10:29). He was known by each of these names.

2.18 (cont.) he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?”

Apparently, the women were often detained by bullying shepherds at the well, so their father grew accustomed to their late return. Jethro and his daughters have learned to accept the shepherds’ harassment as a matter of course. Moses has not.

2.19 They answered, “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.”

The Midianites understandably identify Moses as an Egyptian, which suggests he resembled an Egyptian in speech, dress, and mannerism.

2.20 He said to his daughters, “Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread.”

Like any father who has daughters to marry off, Reuel is eager to welcome an eligible bachelor into his home, particularly one who has demonstrated such noble characteristics.

2.21 Moses consented to stay with the man,

After a long flight through the desert from a place where he was wanted for murder, one can assume Moses was overjoyed to be invited home by seven single women.

2.21 (cont.) and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife.

The Torah never states Moses loved Zipporah (or the reverse) or that he found her beautiful. We are simply told he was given her hand in marriage (in Hebrew the “Zi” in her name is pronounced “Tzee”).

2.22 She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land.”

2.23 A long time after that, the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God.

**IF GOD INTERVENED DURING THE EXODUS,
WHY DIDN'T HE INTERVENE AT OTHER TIMES?**

2.24 God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

God works according to His own inscrutable timetable. But from our perspective God never seems to step in early enough. When the Torah describes God as “remembering,” it does not mean the same as humans remembering, that He’d forgotten. God did not forget and then remember. God’s “remembering” means God has decided to act.

However, even accepting that meaning, the obvious question remains: why didn’t God decide to act earlier—whether in ancient Egypt or elsewhere since

then? Indeed, it would appear that when it comes to rescuing the just from the unjust, much of the time God doesn't act at all.

To such questions, we have no answer. Ever since the biblical Book of Job, people have asked why the God of the Bible allows the just to suffer. One can only say, as the medieval Hebrew saying goes, "If I knew God, I'd be God" (*lu yidativ, hayitiv*).

The Exodus raises an additional question however—especially, for obvious reasons, among Jews: If God intervened to stop the suffering of the Jews in Egypt, why didn't He intervene to stop the suffering of the Jews in Europe during the Holocaust? One can, of course, ask the identical question regarding other nations' mass murders: the sixty million-plus Chinese at the hand of their own communist regime; the twenty to thirty million murdered by Stalin's communist regime; the six million Ukrainians also killed by Stalin's regime; the one out of every four Cambodians killed by Pol Pot and his communist regime; the mass killings of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks; the slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda, and so many others.

But when Jews ask this question, it is often in light of a divine intervention many Jews do believe occurred—the Exodus. One possible answer to bear in

mind is God allowed centuries to elapse before intervening to stop the enslavement and mass murder of the Israelite children in Egypt. On that basis, one could argue God also intervened in Europe—though only after allowing six million Jews to be murdered. That, of course, is in no way an emotionally satisfying answer. But it does illustrate why citing God's intervention in ancient Egypt may not be a valid basis on which to challenge God about the Holocaust. A Hebrew in ancient Egypt whose son had been drowned in the Nile could just as validly have asked, "Why didn't God intervene sooner?"

The Torah does not hesitate to describe a Jew as evil. Much of the Torah's—and the entire Hebrew Bible's—greatness and credibility lie in its willingness to critique the Jewish people.

In the final analysis, regarding God’s not intervening to stop unjust human suffering, I have three responses:

First, if God always intervened to stop evil, human beings would not have free will; we would be robots.

We all want to know why God allows the just to suffer. One can only say, as the medieval Hebrew saying goes, “If I knew God, I’d be God.”

Second, the only possible answer to the problem of unjust suffering is ultimate justice in an afterlife. As I will demonstrate later, if God is good, it is axiomatic there is an afterlife. Moreover, as we will see on a number of occasions, the Torah does affirm an afterlife, despite its relative silence on the issue—because of its desire to keep us human beings preoccupied with this life.

Third, I have always been moved by an argument put forward by the late American Rabbi Milton Steinberg: The believer has to account for the existence of one thing—unjust suffering; the atheist has to account for the existence of everything else.

2.25 God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.