



MEANING IN JUSTICE

IT IS TO A REMARKABLE GROUP OF MEN whom we call the Prophets more than to any others that Western civilization owes its convictions (1) that individuals are responsible not only for their face-to-face dealings, but for the social structures of their society; and (2) that the future of any people depends in large part on the justice of its social order.

Etymologically, a prophet is someone who speaks for, or on the authority of, another. In the biblical period it was used to refer to a distinctive group of persons who spoke for God.

A review of the prophetic movement shows it not to have been a single phenomenon. Moses stands in a class by himself, but the prophetic movement passed through three stages in each of which Yahweh worked differently.

The first was the stage of the Prophetic Guilds. Here we do not encounter individual prophets, for prophecy was a field phenomenon; a form of collective, self-induced ecstasy. With the help of music and dancing, itinerant prophetic bands would work themselves into fever-pitches of possession. Its members would lose their self-consciousness in a collective sea of divine intoxication.

Ethics was of no concern at this stage; it was only the ecstatic states of consciousness that came over these prophets that made them assume (along with the people among whom they moved) that they were divinely inspired. Ethics arrived with the second stage of the prophetic movement, that of the Individual Pre-Writing Prophets. At this stage the prophetic guilds launched individuals like rockets from their midst – Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, and others – but as prophecy was still in its pre-writing stage, no books are attributed to them. They stayed in touch with their support groups while being

less dependent upon them. Divine visitations could come to them while they were alone, and Yahweh voiced his concerns through them.

The story of Naboth shows how prominently justice figured in those concerns. Because Naboth refused to turn over his family vineyard to King Ahab he was framed on false charges of blasphemy and stoned; blasphemy being a capital crime, his property would then revert to the throne. When news of the incident reached Elijah, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “*Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel. Say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord. You have killed and taken possession. In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.’*”

The story carries revolutionary significance for human history, for it is the story of how someone without official position took the side of a wronged man and denounced a king to his face on grounds of injustice. One searches history in vain for its parallel. Elijah was not a priest. He had no formal authority for the terrible judgment he delivered. The normal pattern of the day would have called for him to be struck down by bodyguards on the spot. But the fact that he was “speaking for” an authority not his own was so transparent that the king accepted his verdict as divinely decreed.

The third and climactic phase of the prophetic movement arrived with the great Writing Prophets: Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and others. They continued to be ecstatics, and the ethical note that the Pre-Writing Prophets struck was likewise retained, but with an important addition. Whereas Elijah registered God’s displeasure over an individual act – King Ahab’s – the Writing Prophets discerned Yahweh’s disapproval of injustices that were embedded in the social fabric.



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The Writing Prophets found themselves in a time that was shot through with inequities, special privilege, and injustices of the most flagrant sort. These threatened the internal stability of the Jewish nation, but the Writing Prophets saw them as threatening the international standing of the Jews as well. Israel's corruption, they heard Yahweh telling them, would result in attack by Assyria, Egypt, Syria or Phoenicia, its mighty neighbors.

We could easily miss the originality of the prophetic perception here, so it will be well to state it explicitly. The standard view of the time saw international relations as governed by might – if not the might of the states themselves, then the might of the gods that backed them. For the Jews, though, gods and nations were pieces on Yahweh's game board. Victory would go to the nation that conformed to God's unthwartable intent, which was to see that *"justice rolled down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."* Here again we find the Jews opting for the position that induced the most creative response. If the fate of peoples turns solely on power politics, there is little a small nation can do. But where others saw only power plays, the prophets heard God's warning to shape up or suffer the consequences. Clean up your national act or be destroyed.

In abstract terms the Prophetic Principle comes to this: The prerequisite of political stability is social justice, for it is in the nature of things that injustice will not endure. Stated theologically, the point reads: God has high standards. Divinity will not put up forever with exploitation, corruption, and mediocrity.

The prophets of Israel and Judah are one of the most amazing groups of individuals in all history. In the midst of the moral desert in which they found themselves, they spoke words the world has never been able to forget. They came from all classes. Some were sophisticated, others as plain and natural as the hillsides where they lived. Yet one thing was common to them all: the conviction that every human being, simply by virtue of his or her humanity, is a child of God and therefore in possession of rights that even kings must respect. The prophets lived in a vaster world than their compatriots, a world wherein kings seem small and the power of the mighty is as nothing compared with purity, justice, and mercy. So it is, that wherever men and women have gone to history for encouragement and inspiration in the age-long struggle for justice, they have found it most pointedly in the proclamations of the prophets.

Left: *"The Prophet Jeremiah,"* by Marc Chagall. *The prophets of Israel and Judah brought a passion for social justice into a world where only might had ruled before.*



MEANING IN SUFFERING

FROM THE EIGHTH TO THE SIXTH CENTURIES B.C. during which Israel and Judah tottered before the aggressive power of Syria, Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon, the prophets found meaning in their predicament by seeing God as serious in demanding that the Jews be just. *"Because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, your strongholds shall be plundered"* (Amos). To see things this way required moral energy, for it would have been easier to give up in defeat or assume that God would stage a last minute rescue. The climax, though, is yet to come. Defeat was not averted. In 721 B.C. Assyria wiped the Northern Kingdom from the map forever; and in 586 Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was likewise conquered, though her leaders survived and were taken captive to Babylonia. If ever there was a time when meaning seemed to be exhausted, this was it. The Jews had had their chance and had bungled it. Surely now the prophets might be expected to cap their people's downfall with a self-serving "I told you so." This retort, though, was not in the prophets' vocabulary. The most staggering fact in the Jewish quest for meaning is the way in which, when meaning had been exhausted at the deepest strata of experience they had thus far plumbed, the prophets dug deeper to uncover an entirely new vein. Not to have done so would have amounted to accepting the prevailing view that the victors' god was stronger than the god of the defeated, a logic that would have ended the bib-

lical faith and the Jewish people along with it.

The rejection of that logic rescued the Jewish future. A prophet who wrote in sixth century Babylonia where his people were captives argued that Yahweh had not been worsted by the Babylonian god Marduk; history was still Yahweh's province. This meant that there must have been a point in Israel's defeat, and the challenge was again to see it. The point that Second Isaiah saw was not this time punishment. The Israelites needed to *learn* something from their defeat, but their experience would also be *redemptive* for the world.



On the learning side, there are lessons and insights that suffering illumines as nothing else can. In this case the experience of defeat and exile was teaching the Israelites the true worth of freedom which they had taken too lightly. Lines have come down to us that disclose the spiritual agony of the Israelites as displaced persons – how heavily they felt

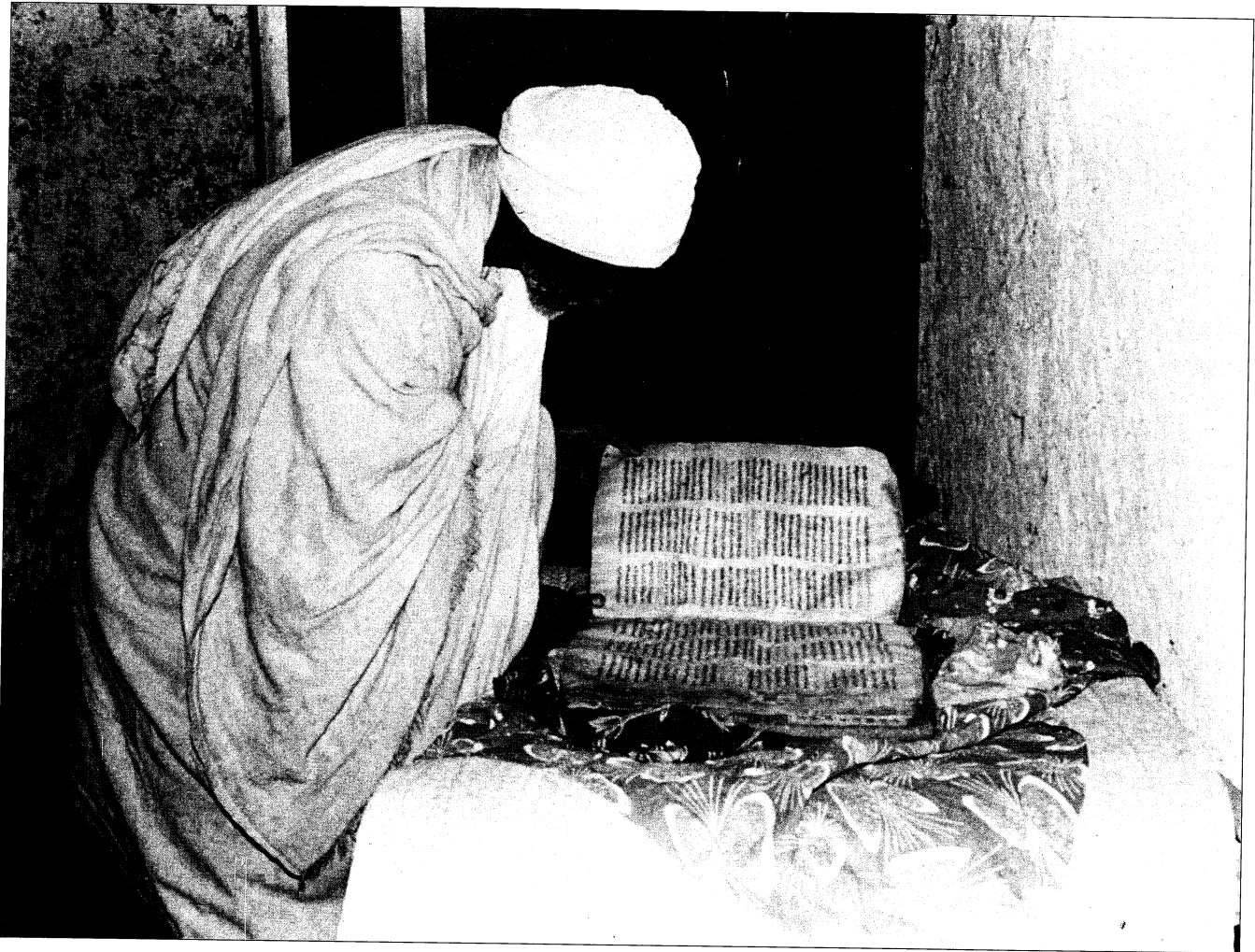
the yoke of captivity, how fervently they longed for their homeland. *"By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion."* But what the Jews might themselves learn from their captivity was not the only meaning of their ordeal. God was at the same time using them to introduce into history insights that all peoples need, but to which they are blinded by complacency. Specifically, Yahweh was burning into the Jews

Above: Detail of a silver platter showing the oppression of the Jews in Egypt. Right: Star of David painted in the surrealist manner, marked by symbols central to the Jewish faith.



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through their suffering a passion for freedom and justice that would spread to all humankind.

*I have given you as a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

(Isa 42:6-7)

Stated abstractly, the deepest meaning the Jews found in their Exile was that of vicarious suffering: meaning that enters the lives of those that are willing to endure pain that others might be spared it.

An Ethiopian Jew reads the scriptures. In Judaism, holiness and history are inseparable.



MEANING IN MESSIANISM

THOUGH THE JEWS were able to find their suffering meaningful, meaning climaxed for them in Messianism.

We can work our way into this concept by way of a striking fact. Historical progress is a Western idea — other peoples have now assimilated it, but it originated in the West. There is an explanation for this. The outlooks of other civilizations were forged by ruling classes who tend to be satisfied with the way things are, whereas during most of their formative period the Jews were either oppressed or displaced. They were underdogs, and underdogs have only one direction to look: up. This upward tilt of Jewish hopes and imaginings impregnated the Western mind. A better tomorrow is possible, if not assured.

Hope has more purchase on the human heart when it is concretized, so the Jews personified their hope in the figure of a coming Messiah, or Chosen One. During the Babylonian Exile they looked to this Messiah to effect the “ingathering of the exiles” to their native homeland. After the second destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the Messiah was expected to reverse the diaspora that ensued.

Thereafter the concept grew complex. Always fired by hope, the Messianic idea came to have two sides: a politico-national side (which foresaw the triumph of the Jews over their enemies and their elevation to a position of importance in world affairs), and a spiritual-universal side (in which their political triumph would be attended by a moral advance of universal proportions). Different scenarios were scripted in which hope fluctuated between these two versions.

A second difference concerned the way the Messianic age would arrive. Some expected an actual Messiah,

while others foresaw God dispensing with a human agent and intervening directly to institute an age of universal harmony.

A third tension reflected the restorative and utopian impulses in Judaism. Restorative Messianism looked for the re-creation of past conditions, typically the Davidic monarchy as idealized. But Messianism also accommodated Judaism’s forward looking impulse by envisioning the Messianic Age as a state of things that never before existed.

Finally, Messianists differed concerning whether the new order would be continuous with previous history or would shake the world to its foundations and replace it (in the End of Days) with an aeon that was supernaturally different in kind. As the power of the Jews dwindled in the face of a rising Europe, apocalypticism overtook hopes for military victory and they banked increasingly on a miraculous redemption. The Messianic Age would break in at any moment, abruptly and cataclysmically.

In all four of these polarities the alternatives were deeply intertwined while being contradictory in nature. The Messianic idea crystallized (and retained its vitality) out of the tensions created by its ingredient opposites. The vitality of the idea proved to be infectious. Christianity reshaped it into the Second Coming of Christ; seventeenth century Europe into the idea of historical progress; and Marx into his dream of a coming classless society.

But whether we read the Messianic idea in its Jewish, its Christian, its secular, or its heretical version, the underlying theme is the same. There’s going to be a great day!



REVELATION

WE HAVE FOLLOWED THE JEWS in their interpretation of the major areas of human experience and found them arriving at a profounder grasp of meaning than any of their Mediterranean neighbors. This raises the question: What produced this achievement? The Jews answer with a disclaimer: they were not its source. The truths were revealed to them.

Revelation means disclosure; as a theological concept, it means divine disclosure. The Jews recorded Yahweh's disclosures to them in a book, the Torah, and commentaries on it. This, though, puts the cart before the horse, for the scriptures chronicle actions, and it was through those actions that God initially revealed himself. The most decisive of these actions was the Exodus, an incredible event in which God liberated an unorganized, enslaved people from the mightiest power of the age. This event not only launched the Israelites as a nation. It was, in addition, the first clear act by which Yahweh's character was disclosed to them.

That God was a direct party to their escape from Pharaoh, the Jews did not doubt. By every known sociological law, they should never have become a people, let alone survived. Yet here was the fact: A tiny, loosely-related group of people who had no real collective identity and were in servitude to the great power of the day had succeeded in making their getaway, eluding the chariots of their pursuers. It seemed impossible to the Jews that their liberation was their own doing. It was a miracle. *"I am the Eternal your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt"* (Ex 20:2).

Vividly cognizant of God's saving power in the Exodus, the Jews proceeded to read earlier history in the light of this divine intervention. As their libera-



tion had obviously been engineered by God, what of the sequence that led up to it? The Jews saw God's initiative at work in every step of their journey. It was no vagabond impulse that prompted Abraham to leave his home in Ur and assume the long, uncharted trek toward Canaan. Yahweh had called him to father a people of destiny. So it had been throughout. Isaac and Jacob had been providentially protected, and Joseph exalted in Egypt, for the express purpose of preserving God's people from famine. From the perspective of the Exodus everything fell into place. From the beginning God had been leading, protecting, and shaping his people for the decisive Exodus event that made of the Israelites a nation.



And what was the nature of the God that the Exile disclosed? First, Yahweh was powerful – able to outdo the mightiest power of the time and whatever gods might be backing it. But equally, a God of goodness and love. Though this might be less obvious to outsiders, it was overwhelmingly evident to the Jews who were its direct recipients. Repeatedly their gratitude burst forth in song: “Happy are you, O Israel. Who is like you – a people saved by Yahweh” (Deut. 33:29). Had they themselves done

The offering of the first fruits of the harvest being carried to the Temple of Jerusalem.

anything to deserve this miraculous release? Not as far as they could see. Freedom had come to them as an act of sheer, gratuitous grace, a clear instance of Yahweh’s unanticipated and astonishing love for them.

Besides God’s power and love, the Exodus disclosed a God who was intensely concerned with human affairs. Whereas the surrounding gods were primarily nature deities, the Israelites’ God had come to them not through sun or storm or fertility but in an historical event. That realization changed Israel’s agenda forever. No longer would they be party to cajoling the forces of nature. They would attend to Yahweh’s will and try to obey it. Given these three basic disclosures of the Exodus – of God’s power, goodness, and concern for history – the Jews’ other insights into God’s nature followed readily. From his goodness it followed that he would want people to be good as well; hence Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were established as the Exodus’s immediate corollary. The prophets’ demand for justice extended God’s requirements for virtue to the social sphere – institutional structures, too, are accountable. Finally, suffering must carry significance because it was unthinkable that a God who had miraculously saved his people would abandon them completely.

We entered this chapter via the Jewish passion for meaning, but as our understanding of the religion deepens this needs to be recast. Meaning was secured, but not (from the Jewish perspective) because they sought it exceptionally. It was revealed to them. But why was it revealed to the Jews? Their own answer has been: because we were chosen. This raises a problem. The Jews had begun by thinking of Yahweh as exclusively their God, but in time they came to see him as the God of all peoples. Why, then, did he direct his revelation to them, and seemingly them only?

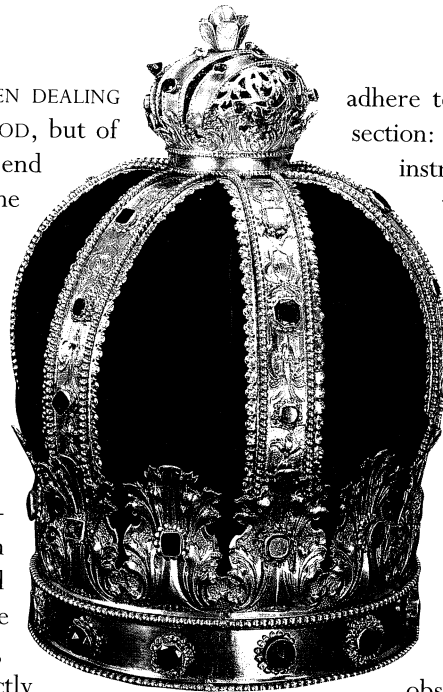


ISRAEL

THUS FAR WE HAVE BEEN DEALING WITH THE BIBLICAL PERIOD, but of course Judaism didn't end there. In 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem that the Jews had rebuilt on returning from their Babylonian exile, and the focus of Judaism shifted from the sacrificial rite of the Temple to the study of the Torah and its accompanying oral tradition in academies and synagogues. Thenceforth it was not the priests but the rabbis (literally teachers) who held Judaism together. Rabbinic Judaism grounded itself in the commandment to make the study of the Torah a lifelong endeavor, and through it Judaism acquired a distinctly intellectual flavor. The rabbinic accomplishment of keeping Judaism alive for the two thousand years of its diaspora is one of the wonders of history, but having taken note of it we shall jump two millennia to close this chapter with a look at the twentieth century.

Judaism is the faith of a people. As such it contains, as one of its features, faith in a people – in the significance of the role the Jews have played and will continue to play in human history. During the biblical period the Jews needed their identity (to keep the truths that were coming to them from being compromised by neighboring polytheisms). And in their long European ghetto period a continuing identity was forced on them. But with their emancipation by the French Revolution, the need for a continuing Jewish identity ceased to be self-evident.

Arguments for its continuation differ. Some Jews



adhere to the religious thesis of the preceding section: as God has chosen Israel to be a unique instrument for good, the shape and edge of that instrument should be retained.

Other Jews argue that cultural diversity enriches societies. Underlying both rationales is the question, what constitutes Jewish identity?

Not doctrine, for there is nothing one has to believe to be a Jew. Judaism is like a circle that is whole but divisible into sections that converge in a common center. No individual section is required, but the more sections one embodies, the more Jewish one will be.

Four sections are preeminent: faith, observance, culture, and nation. Most of this chapter has been given to the content of Hebraic faith. Jews approach that content from intellectual angles that range from fundamentalism to ultra-liberalism, but the direction in which their faith looks is much the same. This can also be said of ritualistic observance. Jews vary in their interpretation of the Sabbath, dietary laws, and daily prayer, and in the extent to which they observe such rituals. The intent of observance, though, is the same: to hallow life. As this too has been described, what remains is to say a few words about culture and nation.

Culture includes mores, art forms, styles of humor, philosophy, a literature, and much else. Here we must limit ourselves to three ingredients: language, lore, and affinity for a land.

Jewish lore is apparent, for Biblical names and stories lace Western culture throughout. To these, Jews add



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the Talmud, a vast compendium of history, law, folklore, and commentary that is the basis of post-biblical Judaism. This in turn is supplemented by the *Midrashim*, an almost equal collection of legend, exegesis, and homily which began to develop before the biblical canon was fixed and reached its completion in the late Middle Ages. The whole provides an inexhaustible mine for scholarship, anecdote, and cultural identity.

As for language and land, these are Hebrew and Israel. As it was in Hebrew and the Holy Land that Revelation came to the Jews, both are sacred for their associations. Jews conduct all or part of their prayers in Hebrew, and consciousness of the Holy Land enlivens their reading of the Torah and their study of rabbinic literature. But to speak of Israel is to enter the fourth component of total Judaism, its nation. For we live in a century when, for the first time since their compulsory dispersion in 70 A.D., Palestine has been restored to the Jews.

The reasons leading to the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 are complex. Beyond the powerful religious pull toward return, the chief contributing motifs were four.

1 The argument from security. The 1938-1945 Nazi-instigated Holocaust convinced many that Jews could not hope for security in Europe.

2 The psychological argument. Some were convinced that it was psychologically unhealthy for the Jews to be everywhere in minority status.

3 The cultural argument. The substance of Judaism was running thin and its tradition was bleeding to death. Somewhere in the world there needed to be a land where Judaism was the dominant ethos.

4 The social, utopian argument. Somewhere in the world there should be a nation dedicated to the histor-

ical realization of prophetic ideals and ethics. Long before the Holocaust, a small but determined number of Jewish dreamers made their way to Palestine to forge a life in which they would be free to ordain all aspects of their existence.

Whatever the reasons that have gone into its creation, Israel is here. Its achievements have been impressive. Its land reclamation, its hospitality to Jewish immigrants, its provisions for the laboring class, its new patterns of group living, its intellectual and cultural vitality – all have combined to make Israel an exciting social experiment.

But the twentieth century has also brought two agonizing problems for the Jews. The first relates to the Holocaust. What meaning can the concept of a Chosen People have in the face of a God who permitted this enormity? The other problem relates to the idealistic argument for the state of Israel that was mentioned. Having all but scripted the ideals of freedom and justice for Western civilization if not for the entire world, Jews now find themselves withholding these rights – forced for security reasons to withhold them, many Jews believe – from Palestinians whose territories they occupy as a result of the 1967 war.

Without presuming to answer these problems, we can appreciate the burdens they place on the conscience of this exceptionally conscientious people. Facing their gravity, they take courage in the fact that at least they are now politically free to confront their problems. As the Star of David waves over their spiritual homeland, the dominant thought in the minds of the Jews is: *Am Yisrael chai*, Israel lives! How wonderful to be living when all this is happening.

Opposite: From Bohemia, a crown for the Torah.
