



## MEANING IN HISTORY

**W**HAT IS AT STAKE when we ask if there is meaning in history? Nothing less than our entire attitude toward the social order and collective life within it. If we decide that history is meaningless it follows that the social, political, and cultural contexts of life should not concern us. Our task would be to rise above them if possible, and weather them if not.

The Jewish estimate of history was the opposite of this attitude of indifference; they saw history as of towering significance. It was important, first, because they were convinced that the context in which life is lived affects that life in every conceivable way, positioning its problems, delineating its opportunities, and conditioning its outcomes. Second, if contexts are important, so is collective action; social action as we usually call it. There are times when the only way to change things is by working together – planning, organizing, and acting in concert. Third, history was important as a field of opportunity. Being governed by God, nothing within it happened accidentally. Yahweh's hand was at work in every event, fashioning it into lessons for those who have the wit to learn. Finally, history was important because the opportunities it offers are not on a par. All are important, but some – Abraham's call and the Exodus come to mind immediately – were decisive. History needed to be heeded, for lost opportunities would not return.

This last point – the uniqueness of events and decisiveness of some – was epitomized in the Hebrew notions (a) of God's direct intervention in history at certain critical points, and (b) of a chosen people as recipients of his unique commissions. Both are illustrated in the epic of Abraham. Noting history's deterioration, God was not inactive. He told Abraham to go to a new land

and found a new people. It was a watershed moment. Because Abraham answered Yahweh's call he became the first Hebrew, the first of a "chosen people."

We shall return to this "chosen people" theme, but for the present we must ask what gave the Jews their insight into history's significance. We have noted the *kind* of meaning they found in history. What enabled them to see history as *embodying* this meaning?

For India, human destiny lies outside history altogether. Israel's neighbors, for their part, kept destiny within history, but in history as currently constituted, for they thought that the social order was as unalterable as the laws of nature. The Israelites' historical outlook differed from both these views because they had a different idea of God. God would not have created nature were it unimportant; at the same time, as nature's creator he could not be reduced to it. The consequence of distinguishing clearly between God and his handiwork was momentous, for it meant that the "ought" could not be assimilated to the "is." God's will transcended (and often differed from) what was happening in history.

By this double stroke of planting man solidly in nature – and in history as nature's human stratum – but not confining him to it (because God's will constitutes a different order from nature's claims), the Jews established history as both important and subject to review. For the Jews, history was always in tension between Yahweh's intentions and man's failure to cooperate with those intentions. As a consequence, Judaism laid the groundwork for the social conscience that has been a hallmark of Western civilization. When things are not as they should be, change is required. The prophets set the pattern. Protected by religious sanctions, the Hebrew prophets were a reforming political force which history has never surpassed, and perhaps never again equaled.





*A cover for the Torah, from a 19th century Spanish synagogue.*





## MEANING IN MORALITY

**H**UMAN BEINGS ARE SOCIAL CREATURES. Without other people they fail to become human; yet with other people they often act barbarically. The need for morality stems from this double fact. Nobody likes rules any more than they like stop lights, but without constraints, human relations would become as snarled as traffic jams. The Jews compiled their law to stipulate the constraints they thought life requires. Rabbinic Law contains 613 commandments, but four will suffice for our purposes. The four ethical precepts of the Ten Commandments, they were enacted to control the four principal danger zones in human relationships, which are force, wealth, sex, and speech.

What the Ten Commandments prescribe in these areas are the minimum standards that make collective life possible. Regarding force they say in effect: you can bicker and fight, but killing within the in-group will not be tolerated, for it instigates blood feuds that rip the community apart. "Thou shalt not murder." Similarly with sex. You can be flirtatious, even promiscuous, and though we may not approve, we will not take action unless the parties are married. Then we will step in, for infidelities there rouse passions the community can't stand. "Thou shalt not commit adultery." As for possessions, you may make your pile as large as you please and be shrewd and cunning in the enterprise, but direct pilfering off someone else's pile is taboo; for this violates the sense of fair play and generates animosities that get out of hand. "Thou shalt not steal." Finally, regarding the spoken word you may dissemble and equivocate, but there is one time when we require that you tell the truth. If a dispute reaches such proportions as to be brought before a tribunal, its judges must know what



happened. If you lie then, while under oath, the penalty will be severe. "Thou shalt not bear false witness."

The importance of the Ten Commandments in their ethical dimensions lies not in their uniqueness but in their universality. They do not speak the final word on the topics they address. They speak the words that must be spoken if other words are to follow.

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*A page from an 18th century Moravian copy of the Haggadah, the traditional order of service for Passover based on the story of the Exodus from Egypt.*

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