A Theology of Jewish Social Justice[1]

Sid Schwarz

Among the most defining characteristics of American Jewry is its deep commitment to progressive social change. In the American Jewish community this activity is often labeled as *tikkun olam*, literally "the work of repairing a world [that is broken]." There are numerous examples of this brokenness: the growing gap between the rich and the poor, intolerance between members of different groups fueled by growing religious extremism and ethnic tribalism, oppressive political systems that do not respect basic human rights of persons within their borders, the subjugation and abuse of women in societies that continue to view women as chattel, environmental degradation exacerbated by human inattention to sustainable patterns of living, human trafficking that has become a multi-billion dollar international "industry." Unfortunately, the list can go on and on. Indeed, any cursory study of the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the field of human rights, and more recently the gay rights movement and environmentalism, will reveal that Jews have played leadership roles as thought leaders, as funders, and as the activists who have done important work in advancing the goals of these movements. Many opinion surveys conducted among Jews reveal that some version of "making the world a better place" usually ranks first, second, or third as the most defining feature of Jewish behavior.[2]

In this essay, I will explore the historical and theological roots of this phenomenon. In the American Jewish setting, the social justice phenomenon that I will be discussing has become synonymous with

the Hebrew expression *tikkun olam*. It is an evocative term that means "the repair of the world," suggesting that the world we have inherited is broken. The mere fact that this Hebrew expression has become one of a handful of Hebrew terms widely familiar to American Jews already suggests the appeal of the concept. But whether we call it *tikkun olam* or social justice, the questions remain: Why is it that, even as Jews have moved up the socio-economic ladder in America and gained entry to the top corridors of power in American society, there has been a close correlation in Jewish voting patterns, attitudes, and activism with those of marginalized minority groups? What is it about the history, culture, and values of the Jewish people that have made so many of them champions of social justice for the most vulnerable in society?

From Slavery to Freedom

The national consciousness of the Jewish people was forged in the context of slavery. The story of the Jewish enslavement in Egypt, recounted in the biblical book of Exodus, is seared into the memory of Jews via the annual observance of Passover. A Jew need not be learned nor frequent a synagogue to know the story of his or her enslaved ancestors building the pyramids of Pharaoh, until they escaped under the leadership of Moses—an experience that the Israelites saw as a redeeming act of God.

Part of the genius of the rabbinic sages was to take the central parts of the Jewish historical narrative and concretize them in annual festivals replete with memorable rituals, symbols, liturgy, and pageantry. The holiday of Passover is one of the most beloved and observed festivals in the Jewish annual cycle. The rituals and melodies of the Passover *seder* are especially designed to captivate the attention of children, forming memories that last a lifetime. There are several ways that Jews are affected by the Passover story:

First, it sets the stage for the motif "from slavery to freedom" (*mei-avdut l'ḥeirut*), which runs throughout Jewish history. Whenever the Jewish people experienced persecution, oppression, or expulsion, they re-lived the experience of their ancestors in Egypt. Precisely because the Exodus story concludes with the redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, Jews throughout history—especially those who found themselves in the most dire of circumstances—believed that they too would ultimately be redeemed from their suffering.

Second, because the motif "from slavery to freedom" played itself out in Jewish history over and over again, Jews came to see the trajectory of their history as essentially redemptive or messianic: there would always be a better tomorrow. For religious Jews, this was an article of faith. God's hand was active in history, and so the redemption of Jews from a specific circumstance was a sign of divine love for God's chosen people. When Jewish suffering persisted, that suffering was understood by the rabbis as a divinely ordained punishment. Since all of history was understood to be under God's dominion, then it must be the case that God was punishing the people for a reason: presumably, because they had not been faithful to the covenant at Sinai. And yet, that very theology fortified the belief that, in the end, evil would be vanquished and the world would come to enjoy a state of peace and harmony.[3] This sense of hope, deeply embedded in the soul of the Jew, is reflected in the national anthem of the State of Israel, called Hatikvah, "the hope."

Third, the Jewish people have internalized the message of Exodus 23:9: "You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This commandment is reinforced again and again in the Jewish tradition, leading Jews to have a particular concern for the "stranger in their midst." This sense of being outsiders is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Jewish people and has served as a powerful force impelling Jewish activism toward social justice.

The Jew as Outsider

The status of Jews as outsiders is based on more than just the biblical origins of the Jewish people. In the year 70 C.E., the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem and Jews effectively lost their political sovereignty. Banished from the Land of Israel, Jews needed a survival strategy. In a remarkable historical transformation, credited in the Talmud to Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, the Jews set up an academy outside of Jerusalem, in Yavneh, and began the process of making their national identity portable. In the centuries following the fall of Jerusalem, the rabbinic sages—through their interpretations of the laws of the Torah—provided Jews with a carefully defined way of life. This body of Jewish law, called *halakhah*, provided specific guideposts for daily life. In addition, a corpus of non-legal material (popularly called *aggadah*) came to undergird and inform the ritual practices that became the defining hallmarks of Jewish existence. Both of these bodies of literature were used as a prism through which Jews of every generation understood their individual and collective existence. It tied them not only to generations of Jews that had preceded them, but also to Jews across the globe, in their own generation. This expanded body of Torah provided Jews with the tools to survive an exile that lasted almost 2000 years.

Jews were able to survive the loss of their ancestral land because, wherever they lived, they clustered in communities that accepted the authority of the rabbinic sages. The sages used halakhic decisions and aggadic teachings to connect the Jews of their generation with the master narrative of Jewish history. In addition, Jews developed communities that had well-developed social structures, addressing a wide range of individual and communal needs. In many ways, Jews were living out the biblical observation that they were "a nation that dwells apart" (Numbers 23:9). Jews throughout the Middle Ages enjoyed an advantage that many non-Jews did not enjoy: within their semi-autonomous communities, and with their own political,

judicial, and social welfare systems, they were able to create both the intellectual and social structures that gave them a sense of purpose and a way to survive.

Jewry in Freedom

As much as these semi-autonomous communities helped Jews negotiate less-than-hospitable host cultures during the Middle Ages, it was a system that would not survive the transition to modernity. Just as feudalism and the system of guilds gave way to the emergence of the modern nation–state in Christian Europe, so too did the communal governance system of Jewish communities need to adapt to new circumstances.

A seminal moment in Jewish history took place in 1807 when Napoleon Bonaparte convened an assembly of rabbis from across Europe and dubbed it, in the grandiose way that only an emperor might, "the Sanhedrin." Napoleon wanted to use the Sanhedrin and the authority it might exert on European Jewry to advance his own imperialistic agenda. Though the ancient Sanhedrin had not actually met since the fifth century C.E. (when its last head, Gamliel VI, died), there was a method to Napoleon's madness. Desperately wanting to unite Europe under his political authority, he needed to break down the medieval feudal system under which clergy, nobility, artisans, and peasants each had their own separate arrangements with local authorities. Laying the foundations for the modern nation–state, Napoleon understood that effective governance over a vast territory would require laws that applied equally across the spectrum of the subject population. He was willing to grant the subject population certain rights, in exchange for their political loyalty and their fulfillment of certain financial obligations to his empire. The Jews represented a political entity that functioned semi-autonomously throughout the empire, and thus stood in the way of

Napoleon's ultimate design. Napoleon did not love the Jews; rather, the Sanhedrin was Napoleon's clever ploy to break down Jewish separateness and to make the Jews like everyone else.

Nevertheless, his offer was not an ungenerous one. In return for defining Jewish identity as a faith (rather than as a separate national or ethnic community, with loyalties different from those of other people in the empire), Jews would acquire full citizenship and the rights attending that status. It was the Jews' ticket out of the ghetto, an entry-pass into the emerging, modern European nation–state. It was also a break with almost 2000 years of diaspora Jewish history. If Judaism represented a creative tension between holy apartness and an expectation that Jews would be fully engaged in the world that they inhabited, medieval Europe had effectively denied Jews the opportunity to achieve the second part of that mandate. But the new arrangement offered by Napoleon to the Jews held out the possibility that they might engage more fully with gentile society—in a way that had happened only rarely in their history.

The rabbis of Napoleon's Sanhedrin were given a series of questions that clearly had right and wrong answers from Napoleon's perspective. The Sanhedrin gave the emperor the answers he wanted, and they did so in a way that carefully respected existing halakhic norms. The following are included among the rulings issued by the Sanhedrin: polygamy was prohibited; a religious bill of divorce (get) was required, and had to be accompanied by a prior civil divorce; a mixed marriage would be binding on Jews from a civil/legal perspective, even if not recognized by Jewish law; Jews were required to regard their country of residence as their fatherland, living by its laws as full citizens and pledging loyalty to its political authority; Jews were called on to treat their fellow (non-Jewish) citizens according to universal laws of moral conduct, treating them as they would fellow Jews in all business matters—including the exacting of interest on monetary loans. Effectively, these rulings set the groundwork for full Jewish participation in the modern nation–state.

Ever since Napoleon's historic Sanhedrin, Jews have wrestled with the trade-off represented by these rulings. Was Judaism simply a profession of faith, or were there national and historical elements to Judaism that ensured that the Jews would always be "a people apart"? If Jews were being offered an opportunity to join the international brotherhood of humanity, free from all of the limitations and disabilities that had characterized their diaspora existence for centuries, should the offer be spurned—for the sake of exclusivist Jewish historical consciousness and group identity? Could Jews engage with gentile society without losing their distinctiveness? Might this new status be the messianic "end of days" foretold by the Bible, or was it a modern "golden calf"—that is, a false idol that appeared to offer redemption but was, in fact, a betrayal of the biblical mandate that Jews remain a people apart?[4]

It was not until the twentieth century that theories of democratic and cultural pluralism emerged in the United States, which changed the model for social and political integration that had been introduced by Napoleon. These new ideas suggested that a democracy did not require all cultural, religious, and ethnic identities to be relinquished. America, it was argued, was a cultural mosaic and not a melting pot. But even before these theories gained prominence in America, laws guaranteeing the separation of church and state and the free exercise of religion had allowed the United States to forge a society far more hospitable to Jews than had ever been the case in Europe. This new "social contract" allowed Jews to attain levels of prominence and prosperity in America that had been unprecedented in any other country of their historical experience. But it also opened the door to the highest level of assimilation in Jewish history.

The period between the emancipation of Napoleon until the end of World War II was a time of great ferment in the world, bringing many new forms of Jewish identity to the Jewish community. Reform Judaism was born in Europe, as an attempt to provide the kind of faith that would preserve essential parts of the Jewish religion but

without the national and historical dimensions that would stand in the way of full integration of Jews into their European host countries. Conservative Judaism would emerge as a reaction to Reform, trying to balance some of the stringencies of Orthodox Judaism with the demands of living as members of multi-religious societies. Even large segments of the Orthodox community underwent a change of worldview under the banner of Neo-Orthodoxy, the watchword became *torah im derekh eretz*, "being faithful to observance but consistent with the ways of modern society." The revolutionary political movements of Eastern Europe included many Jews, who were seeking to find secular ways to advance a messianic vision of society. And within those revolutionary movements existed the kernel of the idea for Jews to create a society of their own, an idea that would give birth to the Zionist movement.[5]

History, however, does not run in straight lines. The opportunity provided by modernity for Jews to integrate themselves into European society was intoxicating, and many Jews seized it. Some went so far as to convert to Christianity. But the Holocaust turned back the historical clock, tapping into the Church's demonization of the Jews that dated to the first centuries of the Common Era.[6] Cutting the cancerous Jews out of the European body politic was an idea that found ready acceptance among many in Christian Europe.

In the years after the Holocaust, the debate over Jewish identity re-emerged. If Zionism was an alternative for Jews seeking to escape persecution, could there be another form of Jewish identity for those Jews living in relative freedom? The Zionists were convinced that Jews would disappear, either through physical annihilation in countries where anti-Semitism raged (such as the Soviet Union) or through assimilation in societies that offered Jews full embrace (such as much of Western Europe and the United States). Indeed, there is much in the history of the Jewish communities of the world since World War II that bears out this analysis. At the same time, it is hard to ignore the thriving Jewish communities around the world

today that provide a wide array of Jewish identity options. It is here that probing the meaning of the twin impulses of Jewish identity—Exodus and Sinai—will prove illuminating. These impulses have a direct bearing on the Jewish affinity for tikkun olam.

Exodus: Political/Ethnic Consciousness

Nations search their past for symbolic starting-points to define the master narrative of a people. America may be said to have several such starting-points: as part of Western civilization, America's origin can be traced to Columbus' discovery of the New World; as a nation free of European control, it can be dated to the victory of the colonies against Britain in the Revolutionary War; as democracy, America traces its origin to the framing of the United States Constitution.

The Jewish people's narrative also has several possible starting-points. While Abraham is the first Jew, insofar as bringing the idea of monotheism into the world is concerned, it is the Exodus story that represents the beginning of Jewish national consciousness. A group of slaves shared a common predicament (slavery) and a common oppressor (the Egyptians). What shaped the national consciousness of the people that the Bible will call "the Children of Israel" (*b'nei yisrael*) is the pairing of that enslavement experience with the people's subsequent escape to freedom. Their consciousness was forged not only by an experience of common suffering but, more importantly, by a shared experience of redemption. Immediately after the Israelites' redemption at the Sea of Reeds, Moses impressed upon the people the significance of what they had just experienced: "Remember this day that you went out from the house of bondage; by virtue of the strong hand of the Eternal were you redeemed" (Exodus 13:3).

This verse will be used again and again in the Bible, in rabbinic writings, and in the liturgy that Jews recite in worship. Its power to shape the consciousness of the Jewish people cannot be

overestimated. The experience of the Exodus is passed down through the generations, not only in the celebration of Passover. The sacred literature of Judaism uses that experience as the foundation for Jewish peoplehood. It is impossible to know what elements of the Exodus story, as passed down in the biblical account, were known to those who were enslaved. The biblical account is a theological interpretation of those events, recorded centuries after their occurrence. And even if it were a contemporaneous account, it is unlikely that the average slave would have been aware of the high drama being played out between Pharaoh and his upstart nemesis, Moses. But what could not have escaped the notice of the common slave was this truth: the political regime that had overseen their enslavement was being challenged by some combination of a spokesperson for the enslaved (Moses), environmental calamities (the plagues), and perhaps even by a God who was more than a match for the deities of Egypt. By the time the slaves followed Moses out of Egypt and escaped the pursuing Egyptians, they were well on the road to nationhood. The Bible records the moment as follows: "When Israel saw the wondrous power that the Eternal employed against the Egyptians, the people were in awe of the Eternal, expressing their loyalty to God and to God's servant, Moses" (Exodus 14:31).

All the elements of political consciousness were now in place: a common history (Egyptian slavery), a founding myth (being redeemed from the Egyptians by a God more powerful than any other), and a leader (Moses). The Exodus dimension of Jewish existence would remain at the very core of Jewish consciousness throughout the Jews' long history. For a time, it would play itself out in the form of political sovereignty, as it did with the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In the twentieth century, the Exodus impulse would manifest again with the creation of the modern State of Israel.

But the Exodus consciousness described here transcended conventional political arrangements. The Jewish people manifested this consciousness during their wandering in the desert, in their early

settlement in the Land of Israel arranged by tribal affiliation, and during the two millennia that Jews lived in the Diaspora. Exodus consciousness caused Jews to identify with each other regardless of the fact that they might be living thousands of miles apart, under different political regimes, speaking different languages, and developing different regional variations on the practice of Judaism, which often synthesized elements of traditional Jewish practice with the specific gentile culture in which they lived. This consciousness also meant that Jews took care of one another—not only when they lived in close proximity to each other, but even when they became aware of Jews in distress in other locales. During the time that Jews lacked political sovereignty, they became a community of shared historical memory and shared destiny. They believed that the fate of the Jewish people, regardless of temporal domicile, was linked. This is what explains the success of the Zionist movement, the historically unprecedented resurrection of national identity and political sovereignty after 2000 years of dispersion. The Exodus consciousness of the Jewish people was the glue that held the Jewish people together; it was the secret to Jewish survival.

For the Israelites, however, there was a dimension of national identity that transcended political consciousness. It would be an encounter with sacred purpose that would create a direct connection between the slaves who experienced the Exodus from Egypt and the vision that drove the patriarch, Abraham.

Sinai: Spiritual/Religious Consciousness

Scholars, clergy, and lay readers alike can debate the veracity of the Bible's account of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, but none doubts its mythic power. If the Exodus gave the slaves who left Egypt a sense of a common past and a shared destiny, it was the experience at Sinai that made it abundantly clear that the people

Israel were expected to live out a higher calling. If the Jewish people thought that their redemption from bondage was "a free ride," the covenant entered into at Sinai was a rude awakening. It made many demands on the Jewish people, and they would often be judged to fall short of those demands. The Book of Exodus relates God's words to the fledgling nation: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples….You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:4–6). God thus reminded the people that they were redeemed from slavery in order to be God's treasured people—on the condition that they obey God's laws and live faithfully in accordance with the covenant.

Throughout the centuries, part of the Jewish people's loyalty to the covenant manifested itself in their observance of ritual laws. Over time, the level of ritual observance would wax and wane. But the ethic of Sinai had greater resonance and staying power than the observance of any particular ritual law. It conveyed to Jews throughout the generations that their task was to replicate, in the temporal world, the kingdom of heaven. While in some religious traditions this phrase would take on otherworldly meanings, Jews have generally understood it to bespeak a rich body of core values that guided their behavior in this world. Jews thus became a people of compassion: they were guided—both by their history of persecution and by their understanding of the revelation at Sinai—to lend their hands and their hearts to the most vulnerable members of society, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The Talmud states: "If anyone has compassion on all created beings, then it is certain evidence that he or she is from the seed of Abraham, our ancestor."[7] Compassion for others defines the Jew.

Classical rabbinic commentators focus on the Israelites' response to the giving of the Ten Commandments and the laws that follow in the Book of Exodus. Repeatedly the Israelites proclaimed that

they will obey all that God has asked of them, culminating with the famous phrase *na·aseh v'nishma*, "we will do and obey" (Exodus 24:7)—which the commentators take as a sign of ultimate obedience. The commitment to follow the laws, even before they were fully revealed, represents the highest form of religious obedience. It is the standard that God and Moses demand and expect.

There are other significant aspects of the Sinai moment that make it so central to the essence of Judaism and to the consciousness of the Jewish people. First, the revelation is given in the desert, in a place lost to history. The sanctity of the revelation will not inhere in any physical place, but rather in the message. Second, the revelation is given to the entire nation, and not merely to a subset of its priests; it is thus the possession of the entire people of Israel. Third, the covenant is entered into by a free people in an act of volition. The Hebrew word *avodah* carries two meanings. It is can mean "slavery," experienced by the Israelites in Egypt, but it can also mean "serving God," behavior that will be demanded of the Israelites at Sinai. The difference between the two is that "slavery" (or servitude) is coerced, whereas "service" is an offering of the hearts of the faithful.

The German–Jewish philosopher Leo Baeck beautifully articulated the concept of a people with a sacred purpose when he wrote:

> A difficult task was assigned this people [Israel] in history. It is so easy to listen to the voices of idols, and it is so hard to receive the word of the One God into oneself. It is so easy to remain a slave, and it so difficult to become a free man. But this people can only exist in the full seriousness of its task….Man lives within the universe and within history. This people [Israel] understood that history and the universe testify to a Oneness, and reveal a totality and order. One word has dared to be the one expression for that which keeps everything together: "covenant."[8]

Baeck's characterization typifies Jewish self-perception from the earliest stages of Jewish history. He is describing what we are calling here "Sinai consciousness." Even if we cannot establish the historicity of God's revelation to the Jewish people at Sinai and the divine "choosing" of the people Israel, the fact that the people lived with a belief that they were the chosen people led them to conduct themselves in such a way that they more than earned the label. In other words, the Jewish people lived at a higher moral level, in order to live up to the expectation of the covenant.

It must nonetheless be noted that whatever combination of gratitude, fear, and/or religious ecstasy evoked the full-hearted response of obedience from the Israelites at Sinai, they would soon stray far from that commitment. The further they got from their enslavement in Egypt and from the revelation at Sinai, the more they complained about the conditions of the wilderness and the more they fell short of meeting their covenantal responsibilities. One of the themes of this early history of the Israelites is unworthiness, and it provides the traditional theological justification for all subsequent travail of the people: the forty years in the desert, the problems that beset the early Israelite monarchies, the chastisements of the prophets, the military defeats at the hands of Israel's neighbors, and ultimately the loss of Jewish sovereignty and the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel.[9]

The contemporary political philosopher Michael Walzer, in his seminal work *Exodus and Revolution*,[10] points to the gap that almost always exists between the vanguard of a revolution, on the one hand, and the masses who are supposed to benefit from the change in political circumstance, on the other. While the vanguard is filled with high theory about the ultimate meaning of the revolution and the ultimate destiny of those who are to be liberated, the masses are driven by more basic concerns: Will we eat better? Will we enjoy better living conditions? Will we be able to raise our families in relative peace and security? Perhaps this explains why the promise

of bringing the Israelites to "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8) is mentioned even before the struggle with Pharaoh commences. The willingness to engage in revolution is based on the people's belief that it will lead them to a better life.[11]

On the heels of the Exodus, the Israelites are filled with gratitude and they have good reason to expect that all of their self-interested needs will be met. They promise Moses and God anything and everything ("we will do and we will obey"). But the covenant at Sinai requires a people that is deeply committed both to justice and to holiness. Sinai consciousness can only be fulfilled over the course of many generations, for the proof of fulfillment is revealed only to the extent that the people who accept the challenge "teach the words diligently to their children" (Deuteronomy 6:7). From a theological perspective, the history of the Jewish people is about bridging the gap between the materialist and self-interested longings of the people and the sense of sacred purpose commanded by God and conveyed through Moses.

Exodus/Sinai in Historical Perspective

Central to the understanding of Judaism and the Jewish people is the tension that exists between being the people of the Exodus and being the people of Sinai. The two aspects of Jewish self-conception are by no means mutually exclusive; in fact, they are meant to be complementary. Yet time and again, history has shown that one impulse conflicts with the other. Specifically, every nation is challenged to find a way to survive. To do so, nations find ways to organize themselves socially, economically, and politically. They acquire a piece of territory that they defend against others who covet it. They develop a particular culture unique to themselves. All of these are the elements of nationhood. And just as with other nations in history, the elements of the Jewish people's unique culture—which

includes their Sinai consciousness—comes to be subservient to the demands on the nation to ensure its physical survival.

To be the "holy nation" of Exodus 19:6, the Jewish people will adopt practices that will set them apart from the rest of the world. But to fulfill God's charge to Abraham, *la-asot tzedakah u-mishpat* (Genesis 18:19)—literally meaning "to do righteousness and justice," but more liberally understood as meaning "to extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world"—will require that the Jewish people become fully engaged with the world around them, with Jews and non-Jews alike.

Through the course of Jewish history, Exodus impulses and Sinai impulses are often at odds with each other. Yet, examples can be found in the Jewish tradition where this tension is engaged creatively and productively. Despite the fact that Abraham brings into the world a theology that forces him to leave his father's house and forge an uncharted religious path, the rabbinic commentators admire Abraham for the fact that he does not wall himself off with his own clan. The nineteenth-century commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch reflects the standard rabbinic perspective on Abraham. Admiring Abraham's behavior in his appeal for the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, Hirsch writes: "A righteous person who lives in an atmosphere like Sodom is not permitted to abandon the nation and to close himself off in his own world, thinking that he will fulfill his obligation just in order to save himself and his family."[12]

The tension between Exodus consciousness and Sinai consciousness and can also be found in the early history of Zionism. The early Zionists saw two threats to the future of the Jewish people. One was the allure of assimilation in those Western countries that granted the Jews a certain level of political emancipation. What would keep the Jews committed to any group consciousness without the hostility and rejection of the host culture? The second challenge was the deep-seated anti-Semitism of Europe, a culture that would never fully tolerate Jews in their midst, the Zionists were certain. The

response of the political Zionists, led by the likes of Theodore Herzl, was to solve the problem by founding a Jewish homeland.

A small but influential group of thinkers who were contemporaries of Herzl had another answer. These "spiritual Zionists" were as concerned about the future of Judaism and the soul of the Jewish people as they were about saving Jewish lives. They, too, sought to establish a Jewish homeland for the Jewish people, but their priority was focused on the establishment of a society that fulfilled the highest ethical and moral principles of Judaism. Some, but not all, of these spiritual Zionists were Orthodox. The most prominent of this group was Aḥad Ha-am (Asher Ginzberg), who was steeped in traditional Jewish learning but was effectively a secular Jew who considered himself part of the Jewish enlightenment movement that came to be known as the *haskalah*.[13]

As the Zionist movement evolved, and even after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, it is easy to see these two strands of thought—political and spiritual Zionism—competing with one another. Though it is easy to admire the idealism of the proponents of spiritual Zionism, the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust made the strategies and approaches of the political Zionists seem far more appropriate. Jews were being slaughtered; they needed to be saved. Instinctively the Jewish people went into Exodus mode, engaging themselves in the task of bringing a beleaguered remnant from slavery to freedom. There was no time to debate the extent to which one or another element of the *yishuv* (pre-state Israel) was consistent with the highest ideals of Sinai consciousness.

Many in Israel continue to argue, even today, that the principles of spiritual Zionism need to be more fully heeded. In fact, there are numerous examples of how Israeli society has tried to live by core Jewish values and principles. Yet most would admit that such concerns are virtually always relegated to secondary status, taking a back seat to concerns about Israel's safety and security. It would be admirable if the Jewish people could live in the world solely as the

people of Sinai, but for as long as the world presents threats to Jewish survival, history seems to demand that Jews continue to be a people of the Exodus as well.

The philosopher Rabbi David Hartman points to this tension in the Jewish condition when he writes:

> Sinai permanently exposes the Jewish people to prophetic aspirations and judgments….Sinai requires of the Jew that he believe in the possibility of integrating the moral seriousness of the prophet with the realism and political judgment of the statesman. Politics and morality were united when Israel was born as a nation at Sinai….The prophets taught us that the state has only instrumental value for the purpose of embodying the covenantal demands of Judaism. When nationalism becomes an absolute value for Jews, and political and military judgments are not related to the larger spiritual and moral purpose of our national renaissance, we can no longer claim to continue the Judaic tradition.[14]

While the tension that Hartman highlights has existed throughout Jewish history, it became more acute when the Jewish people established the State of Israel. Situated in a region surrounded by nations sworn to her destruction, the Jewish state has been willing to use every means at its disposal to defend itself, even in the face of world condemnation. Still, rarely does a day go by in modern Israel when Jewish voices don't call out for the government to find a way to uphold the moral vision of Sinai and act with compassion, even toward those who might intend harm to the state. Indeed, this Sinai consciousness is embedded in Israel's Declaration of Independence: "The State of Israel…will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel."

The Psychology of Jewish Survival

The Exodus/Sinai continuum provides a theoretical framework that helps to explain not only how the sages of the Jewish tradition interpreted sacred texts, but also Jewish collective behavior through the course of history. To some extent, the Exodus/Sinai continuum we suggest here parallels more familiar frameworks that have been used to interpret Judaism and the history of the Jewish community, such as particularism/universalism or conservatism/liberalism. Yet those continua are often characterized by polarized thinking. A particular interpretation or communal action is seen as either particular or universal, either conservative or liberal. By applying the Exodus/Sinai analysis to Judaism and to the Jewish community, one can see how both elements are often at play at the same time. The thesis proposed here leads to a more accurate understanding of the factors that influence both Judaism and the actions of the Jewish community.

The Exodus/Sinai continuum is organic; each pole on the continuum contains elements of the other. Although the term "Exodus consciousness" suggests how Jews might act defensively, in a fashion that is protective of group self-interest (because the Exodus experience is at the core of Jewish political consciousness), the Exodus biblical narrative also contains one of the phrases that is the cornerstone for Jewish universalism: "You shall not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). Even in the present day, the tendency of Jews to identify with those who are most weak and vulnerable can be understood as the historical conditioning of a people born in slavery.

Sinai consciousness is no less complex. Although the term "Sinai consciousness" describes the way that Jews aspire to be altruistic, engaging in other-directed behavior in accordance with a pursuit of justice and a sense of sacred purpose, the holiness inherent in Sinai contains a strong impulse for the Jews to remain a people

apart. The life of holiness entails many customs that reinforce Jewish distinctiveness, which is a prerequisite for the Jewish people to be bearers of a prophetic heritage to the world. While social justice initiatives are usually aligned with the Sinai-consciousness impulse of Jewish tradition, the Jewish people would have disappeared long ago without a healthy dose of the Exodus impulse as well. It is instructive that a prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel issued by the office of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate in 1948, just after the declaration of Israel as a state (and now widely used in synagogues across the world), blesses Israel as "the first promise of our redemption." This wording recognizes that although the current Jewish state may aspire to manifest the highest ideals of Sinai, it has yet to attain goal. Each impulse—both Exodus and Sinai—is meant to be a corrective to the other.

Sinai represents the Jewish people's encounter with a moral calling and with God. The outcome from that encounter—essentially, the teachings of Judaism—are written all over the face of Jewish history. Exodus represents the Jewish people's experience with their history, moving again and again from a situation of persecution, oppression, and annihilation to a place of liberation and freedom. The Jewish people are shaped by Sinai consciousness, just as Judaism is shaped by Exodus consciousness. Both are part of a larger oneness. Judaism and the Jewish people are best served when the twin impulses are integrated and are in balance.

Tribal Versus Covenantal Identity

This understanding of the origins of the Jewish people, and the emergence of two equally compelling visions of the central mandate of Jewish life, go to the heart of the contemporary Jewish condition. The Exodus impulse informs the strong sense of tribal loyalty that exists among many Jews. The Sinai impulse informs the many Jews whose identity I would call "covenantal."

Modernity has brought into bold relief the growing gap between covenantal and tribal approaches to Jewish identity. Tribal Jewish identity is relatively easy to recognize. The State of Israel is the single largest tribal Jewish polity; one either is a citizen of the state or is not. A Jew living in the Diaspora has several ways of being considered part of the tribe. One option is to join an organization that works to raise money or political support for the Jewish state. Jews can also make a financial contribution to their local Federation, which supports a wide range of local and international Jewish needs; payment of this voluntary "tax" essentially makes one a member of the tribe. The same is true for memberships in synagogues and other Jewish cultural, philanthropic, public affairs and/or educational organizations. While the population of the State of Israel continues to grow, the affiliation numbers in the rest of the Jewish world show a steady decline—a phenomenon that leads those most invested in a strong Jewish community to have a heightened sense that the future of the Jewish people is at risk. One of the rallying cries of the American Jewish community over the past few decades has been "continuity." Those committed to the perpetuation of the Jewish people will continually be challenged to find ways to capture a larger percentage of those Jews who do not choose to belong to the tribe in any tangible way.[15]

It is here that it is so critical to understand covenantal Jewish identity. Throughout the generations, the rabbis recognized that the **spirit** of Abraham's legacy was as important as were the specific behavioral commandments that later made up the substance of Jewish life and observance. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchick, one of the most widely read and highly esteemed sages in the history of American Jewry, asserts that *b'rit avot*, God's covenant with Abraham and the other patriarchs, was more important than the specific rules given in the Torah and later rabbinic codes. He was here referring to God's charge to Abraham in Genesis 18 quoted earlier: la-asot *tzedakah u-mishpat*, "to extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in

the world." That charge is the meta-goal of Judaism—which is why Soloveitchick ascribes to it a higher priority than the 613 *mitzvot*, which provide the means to the ends. The legacy of Abraham's response to God's call to righteousness and justice has shaped the values and subconsciousness of Jews for all time.[16]

In a similar vein, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who served as the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine from 1921–1935, believed that the early Zionists—who observed few, if any, of the ritual commandments of Judaism and who wore their secularism proudly—were agents for a divine plan for the Jewish people in the world. Unlike Herzl, Kook did not see a Jewish homeland primarily as a place to provide safe refuge for persecuted Jews. Rather, he believed that the settling and building of Israel was part of a divine plan to bring healing to the entire world. This more universal understanding of Jewish faith and destiny is at the core of covenantal Jewish identity. Rabbi Kook challenged the normative rabbinic reading of the verse "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) as referring only to other Jews; he believed that Jews must read the verse to refer to all humanity.[17]

It is not easy for the organized Jewish community to assess how Jews might be living out covenantal Jewish identity, when this notion is stripped of all elements of tribal association. It is easier to identify a Jew who takes on the particular details of Jewish observance and faith, than it is to identify a Jew who has no such practice but yet lives in accordance with Jewish ethical and moral principles. There is data that can tell us how many Jews belong to synagogues, how many contribute money to Federations, and how many travel to Israel—or even how many Jews keep kosher and or how many light Ḥanukkah candles. What cannot be as accurately determined however, is how many Jews *feel* Jewish.

It is here that we enter the realm of what we have called Sinai consciousness, or what the sociologist Herbert Gans calls "symbolic ethnicity."[18] Many Jews define large parts of what drives their

actions in the world in the context of the Judaic heritage, even when they have no Jewish affiliations and engage in no Jewish religious practices. These Jews typically have a hard time finding a place in the organized Jewish community, since the leaders of these institutions often view with some suspicion those who cannot "check the boxes" on conventional modalities of Jewish group affiliation. Of course, such attitudes toward marginally affiliated Jews become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jews who might otherwise be open to initiatives or programs of the Jewish community when such endeavors align with their values and ethics are effectively driven away, by an implicit attitude coming from communal institutions that they have "not paid their dues" to the tribe—not only financially, but also by dint of their failure to associate regularly with communal institutions.

The organized Jewish community is not very good at understanding and validating this kind of covenantal Jewish identity. The leadership of the American Jewish community often feels that the community is under siege or at risk. Any manifestation of anti-Semitism at home or abroad, and any threat to the security of the State of Israel, sends the community to its battle-stations. When in this mode, the Jewish community has a tendency to circle the wagons and ostracize those Jews whose opinions stray too far from the party line. This behavior is most noticeable around the issue of support for the State of Israel.

Jonathan Woocher has argued that as American Jews became increasingly secular, loyalty to Israel replaced religious observance as a yardstick for ethnic loyalty.[19] As a result, the attempts by American Jews to form organizations that challenged the organized Jewish community's uncritical support of policies of successive Israeli governments were not only met with determined resistance by Jewish leaders, but in fact with attempts to delegitimize those very organizations. This is what happened to Breira (founded in 1973), to New Jewish Agenda (founded in 1980) and to J-Street (founded in 2008). All these organizations attracted Jews who believed that the values of Judaism required them to speak out about policies of the

State of Israel that they felt were misguided, if not immoral. All three organizations could be seen as manifesting the Sinai consciousness that derives from the core teachings of Judaism. Yet all three found themselves on the defensive, facing challenges to whether they were in fact loyal to Israel and to the Jewish people. Breira closed after five years; New Jewish Agenda closed its doors after twelve years. J-Street has been far more successful than either Breira or New Jewish Agenda when measured by the size of budget, staff, and public profile. At the same time, in many Jewish communities J-Street is marginalized because, unlike the mainstream Jewish community, they are not uncritically supportive of all Israeli policies. Many rabbis who might be sympathetic to J-Street policies will not lend their names to the organization because of concerns for their careers. In 2014, J-Street was denied admission into the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

During rare moments when Israel seemed to be on the road to peace and the Jewish community did not feel besieged by outside enemies—such as during the mid-1990s—the demons became internal. Predicting "death by demography," communal leaders sounded alarm bells over the results of Jewish population studies that showed soaring rates of intermarriage and assimilation and declining patterns of affiliation. In either mode—under siege or at risk—the Jewish community tends to draw hard-and-fast lines on who belongs and who does not. And the harder the lines, the less likely it is that covenantal/Sinai Jews, whose Jewish identity is soft and ambivalent, will identify themselves with the Jewish community.

It is here that the organized Jewish community has created for itself a catch-22 situation. In a social milieu where fewer and fewer Jews deem ethnic affiliation a necessity, the Jewish community is nevertheless desperate to get marginally affiliated Jews to overtly commit themselves to communal institutions, either by joining Jewish organizations or by contributing money to Jewish causes. The target audience is large and growing. The 2013 Pew study of

American Jewry revealed that while 75% of American Jews had "a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people," that percentage was only 42% among Jews who identified themselves as "Jews with no religion"—a category heavily skewed towards Jews in their 20s and 30's.[20] These Jews may be open to deeper involvement in the Jewish community, but only on their own terms. They don't feel that they need it. But if inspired and convinced that it will add meaning and purpose to their lives, they are "available" for such an affiliation. The form that their commitment will take is very tentative. They are more likely to dabble in a Jewish event here or make a modest gift to a Jewish cause there, rather than becoming flag-waving, highly affiliated Jews overnight. For a Jewish organization that invests money in an outreach strategy, this is an unsatisfactory short-term return. At the same time, the language used by Jewish organizations to rally the highly committed—constantly sounding the warning bell of imminent extinction—is the least likely language to attract marginally affiliated Jews to the fold. Why would anyone join a sinking ship if they did not have to?

The divide between Exodus/tribal Jews and Sinai/covenantal Jews is wide and getting wider. The Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel were singular events for Exodus/tribal Jews. It would be hard to invent a more compelling narrative for why Jews need to band together—whether in a nation–state or through diaspora Jewish organizations—in order to protect themselves and watch out for each other in a hostile world. Yet those two experiences are becoming more remote with every passing year. They are not the life-experience of Jews born after World War II. And while Exodus Jews still see the State of Israel as a kind of biblical David—doing battle against an array of Goliath enemies in the world, and thus worthy of unqualified support—to many Jews, the narrative is much more morally complex. Israel is no longer the primary engine, driving Jewish identity or Jewish philanthropy, as it once was.

All of this brings us back to the millennial tension in Judaism between the Exodus and Sinai impulses. Every faith community is committed to the survival and perpetuation of its own, and Judaism is no exception to these tendencies. Judaism has often fallen prey to the proclivity, endemic to all groups, to see itself in parochial terms and to believe that the interests of the group supersede all else. This is especially true in times of crisis. In the modern era, this defensiveness extends to times when Israel is at risk—either from war, terrorism, or worldwide campaigns to discredit Zionism and the right of Jews to collective existence in their ancestral homeland.

Still, the Jewish tradition's universal teachings about responsibility toward all human beings and to the entire world continue to bring us back to the needed equilibrium between self-interest, as embodied in the Exodus impulse, and the interests of humanity, as expressed in the Sinai impulse. Even when—or, perhaps, especially when—the Jewish world tends toward the parochial, there are voices in our midst that call us back to our prophetic legacy: to be agents for *tikkun*, the repair of the entire world.

NOTES

[1] This chapter is adapted from my *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006) and appears here with that publisher's consent.

[2] The Pew Research Center's "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" (October 2013; online at http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey) found that 56% of Jews polled listed "working for justice and equality" among the most important elements of their Jewish identity. The Public Religion Research Institute's survey, "Chosen for What: Jewish Values in 2012," found that 84% of Jews surveyed rated "pursuing justice" or "caring for the widow and the orphan" as very, or somewhat, important. It should be noted that Orthodox Jews do not rate social justice issues as highly as non-Orthodox Jews do. Religious observance and commitment to social justice tend to be inversely correlated among American Jews. See Steven M. Cohen and Leonard Fein, "American Jews and their Social Justice Involvement: Evidence from a National Survey," Amos—The National Jewish Partnership for Social Justice (November 21, 2001), available online at the website of the Berman Jewish Policy Archives (www.bjpa.org).

[3] See, for example, Isaiah 2:4 for an eloquent statement of this sentiment: "[God] will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war."

[4] These themes are addressed well in Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation*, 1770–1870 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[5] For a good treatment of the many variations of Jewish expression that emerged in the encounter with modernity, see David Rudavsky, *Modern Jewish Religious Movements: A History of Emancipation and Adjustment* (New York: Behrman House, 1967).

[6] See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2007).

[7] B. Beitzah 32b.

[8] Leo Baeck, *This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965), p. 402.

[9] See Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), chap. 11.

[10] Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

[11] See Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, especially pp. 102–104.

[12] Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah, Vol. 1, Genesis*, trans. Isaac Levy (London: Judaica Press, 1966), pp. 324–325.

[13] The *haskalah* was the intellectual and cultural counterpart to the political emancipation that Jews were experiencing in Europe in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. It promoted the use of the Hebrew language and intensive study of Jewish history. As its objective was to help Jews integrate themselves in European society, it also advocated secular education among Jews.

[14] David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999); see chap. 15, "Auschwitz or Sinai? In the Aftermath of the Israeli-Lebanese War," pp. 259–266.

[15] Both the "National Jewish Population Survey, 2000-01" (available online at http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf) and the "Portrait of Jewish Americans" (cited at n. 2, above) found that membership in Jewish organizations and philanthropy given to Jewish causes declined with each successive generational cohort, with younger Jews being far less "connected" to such Jewish associations than were previous generations.

[16] Comment of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in Abraham Besdin, *Man of Faith in the Modern World* (New York: KTAV, 1989), pp. 67–69.

[17] Rav Avraham Kook, *Orot Yisrael*, ed. David Weitzner (Israel: Machon Har Bracha, 2008), vol. 1, pps. 288–290. For a more extensive discussion of Rav Kook's vision of *tikkun olam*, see the essay by Aubrey L. Glazer elsewhere in this volume.

[18] Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America", in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2:1 (January 1979), pp. 1–20. For a fuller discussion of the notion of "secular" Jewish identity, see Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.66 and 175.

[19] Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[20] The study is cited in note 2 above.