



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Pesach 5769—Changing the World, With God **By Chancellor Arnold M. Eisen**

The Torah takes great pains, long before the Exodus narrative, to make clear to its readers that it wants far more than merely our interest or attention. It wants our active engagement. We are not here to *read* the story but to *live* it; the point of rehearsing the story of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt year after year is to carry that story forward. Redemption happened once, but it can—and should—happen again, with our help. That is the main point to be learned. Redemption, this time around, requires *us*. God needs human partners to the covenant to take risks, get to work and use their open hearts and political wisdom to perform acts of redemption in the world.

Suffering, persecution, even genocide, did not end with Pharaoh. We read about them in the news every day. If the story teaches us that redemption requires our partnership, our responsibility is clear. The hard part, then, is not deciding *whether* we have an obligation. The question facing us, rather, is, "What shall we do to further God's pursuit of justice?" How are we to know what action to take in response to the Torah's demand? The rabbis declared two thousand years ago that we dare not heed self-declared prophets and their "heavenly voices." What voices shall we heed, then? How shall we know what to do? Where shall we find the wisdom to do it well? Abraham Joshua Heschel put the problem this way: "Infinite responsibility without infinite wisdom and infinite power is our ultimate embarrassment."

The portions of the Torah that frame the Exodus story provide four guidelines for action that depend for their application upon our reason and our experience, our compassion and our wisdom. Note that they are guidelines only, not specific directives. History is fluid. God, who enacts new phenomena in the world, apparently needs us to carry out new acts as well, lest God's teachings grow irrelevant in changed conditions. The proper application of the principles will always be subject to argument and doubt. But the principles themselves seem clear.

1. The world must be perfected in righteousness. History matters. We must never doubt this, though it is beyond logical proof. The standard for action is justice and compassion, the major attributes ascribed to God in the Torah. The world will be judged by its achievement of these virtues. So shall we. In pursuit of justice and compassion we, too, must heed the groans of the oppressed, liberate them from bondage, conduct them to freedom.
2. We are only human. We do not always will the good, cannot always identify it correctly and certainly do not always perform it. The Torah is therefore by and large a reformist rather than a revolutionary book. It knows that human nature remains the same mixture of good and less-than-good that it has always been, and it therefore provides laws to guide and constrain our conduct at every point. There are times when great change must be accomplished swiftly because evil is clear and must be stopped—genocide is a prime example of this. Most of the time, the Torah seems to prefer gradual change. Either way, it urges us to act with our eyes open to the consequences, including those we do not intend. For these, too, we are responsible.
3. When in doubt as to the proper ends of political and social reform, heed the prophets. The poor must be fed. The homeless must be housed. Murder must be stopped. The planet and its species (a newly relevant imperative) must be protected. Again, it is up to us figure out how best to do these things,

weighing one injustice against another and justice against compassion. Our world is such a mess. We are tempted sometimes to do nothing or to wait for God to fix it for us. But this our tradition forbids—and besides, so much that needs doing *is* entirely clear. The prophets repeated the agenda over and over: Feed the poor, house the homeless, stop murder and genocide, free slaves, guard the Earth.

4. Above all, keep the promise to life that God made to humanity after the Flood. It is up to us to safeguard God's creatures and especially those who bear God's image. We are fulfilled as individuals, the Torah teaches, to the degree that we redeem the promise for good stored up in every one of us. The imperative is "not in heaven," not across the sea, not beyond understanding: "Choose life!"

I find great comfort in this clarity, as well as great discomfort—the latter because we can never do enough, we are never "off the hook;" the former because the Torah is clearly meant for us, and teaches us, fallible human beings, what we must do for the world. We know, too, that a life spent doing it is infinitely worthwhile.



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