

PARASHA & HERZL: From 'Then Sang Moses' to 'Then Sang Herzl'

• GOL KALEV

Herzl once contemplated expressing his Zionist ideas through writing a play about Moses inspired by “Then sang Moses” – the Song of the Sea that Moses and the children of Israel sang right after crossing out of Egypt. Moses instilled the Hebrews with a new framework through which they will relate to their collective Hebrew identity, and by which the outside world relate to them. This is very much evident in the Song of the Sea that essentially inaugurates Judaism 1.0. “The Lord is my strength of song,” the emancipated Hebrews proclaimed, celebrating their relationship with God and the international respect and fear it has generated.

Indeed, one cannot comprehend the Exodus from Egypt, without understanding Moses’ new framework for the Hebrew nation-religion. Similarly, one cannot comprehend the exodus from Europe, without understanding Herzl’s. “We indeed received Judaism to our hand,” Herzl declared as he, like Moses, planted the seeds for a Jewish transformation. 120 years later, Zionism is turning into the primary prism through which Jews relate to their Judaism, and by which the outside world relates to them.

Both Moses’ Judaism and Herzl’s Zionism were drawn only in general lines at first. Moses did not delve into details or the depth of the religion at the onset. This was done gradually later on through a monumental event in Sinai and through the 40 years in the desert that Herzl called “education through migration.” It then continued after Moses’s death.

Similarly, the details of “What is Zionism” are as murky today as the details of “What is biblical Judaism” were in the early decades after the Exodus. Perhaps the gradual nature of development was by Divine design: At the outset of the Exodus, God refuses to get into a theological discussion with Moses about his name – all we need to know is that he is the God of our fathers: “This is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.” We can leave the rest for later.

While Moses’s Judaism has indeed developed since, its primary ethos remains the Exodus from Egypt. It is the first of the Ten Commandments and reflected through the spectrum of Jewish religious life. The Exodus’s core essence is recited daily: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God”.

THE CENTRALITY of the Exodus is also demonstrated through the holiday of Passover. An astonishing 93% of Israeli Jews are estimated to participate in the Passover Seder that recounts the story of the Exodus.

Just as the Exodus from Egypt is core to Judaism, the 20th century exodus from Europe is core to Herzl’s Zionism. Both Judaism and Zionism are expressed in contrast to what we were in Egypt/Europe.

Let us be clear – Egypt and Europe are admired both in Moses’s Judaism (Judaism 1.0) and in Herzl’s Zionism (Judaism 3.0, which followed the exile era). And yet nothing can be more counter to Moses’s Judaism as the return to Egypt, just like nothing can be more counter to Herzl’s Zionism as the return to Europe – both physically and metaphorically.

The threat of such a return to Egypt dominates a significant portion of the 40 years in the desert and continues long after Moses death. Being an astute student of Moses, Herzl recognized such danger also exists in the exodus from Europe. He wrote: “In the first 25 years of our existence we need, for our development, some rest from Europe, its wars and social complications.”



THE ‘EXODUS’ ship following the British takeover, with damage to its makeshift barriers. The banner reads, ‘Haganah Ship Exodus 1947.’ (Wikimedia Commons)

On the 50th anniversary of Herzl’s inauguration of Zionism, a ship carrying Jews from Europe to the Promised Land, was engraved with the Hebrew letters: “Exodus from Europe.” As the ship approached the shores, it was intercepted by European soldiers (British), who forced the Hebrews back to Europe – to its social complications and indeed its wars. Today, some would argue that this was over 70 years ago, and so was the European genocide of its Jews, that Europe has changed, and hence it is safe to go back to Europe, physically and mentality.

It was the same with Egypt back then. The Bible clearly states that all of Pharaoh’s army died in the sea; Egypt clearly changed. So much so that over the decades Egypt became an ally of Judea. King Solomon even married an Egyptian prince. The splintered-reed doctrine adapted by successive Judean kings was centered around reliance on Egypt for military and political support.

This doctrine was the driver for King Tzidkiyahu’s decision to rebel against Babylon (disregarding his prophet Jeremiah’s advice). This proved to be a mistake; the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and exiled the Jews. Those allowed to stay, including Jeremiah,

then did something stunning: They returned to Egypt!

Moses’s fear materialized. Seven centuries after the Exodus, the long gradual cozying-up to Egypt ultimately led to the return to Egypt. This re-enslavement set the scene for a redo of the biblical story (and then another redo).

THE PASSOVER Seder, which is believed to have been instituted in its current format long after the Jeremiah-era return to Egypt, provides a powerful tool to remind the Jewish nation: Do not return to Egypt! Not physically and not mentally.

In his Utopian novel *AltNeuLand*, Herzl applied this concept: Describing the Passover Seder in the newly established Jewish state, Herzl notes that after the story of the Exodus from Egypt is recounted,

the story of the 20th century exodus from Europe is then told! Indeed, the exodus from Europe can be used as a relatable allegory to the Exodus from Egypt. Herzl emphasized that such addition only occurs after the halachic Seder is completed: “First we shall finish our Seder after the manner of our forefathers, and then we shall let the new era tell you how it was born. Once more there was an Egypt, and again a happy exodus.”

We were remembered in Europe (*pakod nifkadnu*). Now on the other side of the sea that miraculously parted for us, the current challenges of our happy exodus – our own contemporary “education through migration” – allow us in this redo to better relate not only to the original Exodus, but also to its core essence. Though this also begs the question that can only be asked in hints: Was the exodus from Egypt only a dress rehearsal? Is it now?

Herzl made his view clear. During a wild Friday in Paris, as Shabbat entered and Herzl ascended to an unexplained space up there... Herzl had the clarity to both receive and inscribe. He expressed his truth when he noted that Moses’s Exodus bears resemblance to the one he is leading from Europe in the same manner that a simple song written by a poet from the Middle Ages, relates to a complex, multi-layered, extended modern opera.

Indeed, we are still in the overture of the Zionist Opera

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