



Judaism Inside Out

Reclaiming the Promise
of Israel

by Joshua Chasan

calendar of Israel. Ethnicity, for thousands of years a protector of Israel's survival, may have exhausted its usefulness in the unfolding of the mystery of Israel.

The transmission of the calling of the people of Israel is a process that can be studied, but not fully understood. The unfolding of Israel's story is a mystery whose secrets only very slowly are revealed, if they are revealed at all. It would be better for Israel to return to worship of the source of this mystery than to bow down at the altar of self pride.

Non-linear Israel

Throughout the history of Israel, the identity of parents was a key part of a person's identity. If you were born to Israelites, you were an Israelite. The issue revolved around the identity of your father in biblical times and of your mother in rabbinical times. Family was and remained the primary teacher of Israel's identity.

In its essence, however, Israel is called beyond lineality. Israel is a spiritual nation, and the spirit defies lineage. Moses must be free to sit and listen in Rabbi Akiba's classroom. Elijah must be present at every Passover *seder* and *brit milah* (ritual circumcision). *Talmud Torah*, the learning of the ancient rabbis, is not lineal.

Israel certainly knows the harsh realities of time. The children of Israel were exiled from the land of Israel in time. The Allies failed to bomb the railroad tracks to Auschwitz in time. Israel still is not able to pray in peace in Jerusalem. The words of Israel's prophets insist on justice in time.

Israel is humanity wrestling with its demons in time. Yet, what has enabled Israel to persevere is its knowledge of the spiritual flow of the universe that is beyond time. The people of Israel now are called to reaffirm this spiritual understanding, even as, out of their own painful experience, they sound the alarm for humanity, warning *homo sapiens* that, as a species, we are at the edge of oblivion.

The threats to Israel and to humanity are the same. When humanity considers the prospects of a universe without human beings, Israel's knowledge of the unconditional spiritual flow of God is challenged. The myth of Israel is a story of an extended family of human beings struggling to remember that their opportunity to live freely on Earth depends upon their recognition that there is a source of life that transcends material existence; and that humanity is responsible for living in

this light.

As a spiritual people, Israel knows the bankruptcy of international competition; the folly of one nation thinking itself superior to another. Two thousand years ago, the ancient rabbis taught that "just a single person was created in the beginning so that no one could say to another: 'My father was greater than your father.'" The only true lineage of humanity is its connection to the spiritual source of its existence. The ancient Hebrew word for clan, *mishpahah*, is related to the idea of pouring, effusion. Israel's understanding of family transcends the transmission of blood, of genes. The family of Israel is fed by the effusion of the spirit, the flow of the divine through life.

The name of a child of Israel is a composite of a given name and parents' names. For example, a male is called *Yitzhak ben Avraham v'Sarah* (Isaac son of Abraham and Sarah); a female, *Dinah bat Yaakov v'Leah* (Dinah daughter of Jacob and Leah). All converts to Judaism traditionally take the parental names of Abraham and Sarah. The idea is that, when one becomes a Jew, one inherits the seed of Israel, going back to the first Israelites, Abraham and Sarah. The fact that Judaism historically has had mixed feelings about converts perhaps accounts for the tradition of signaling out converts as son or daughter of *Avraham avinu v'Sarah imanu* (Abraham our father and Sarah our mother). It is a practice rejected by many rabbis today, who prefer the understanding that a Jew is a Jew, regardless of how he or she came to be a Jew.

As we have seen, already a thousand years ago, Maimonides understood this seed to be a spiritual inheritance rather than a matter of biology. What is the substance of this spirituality if not the historic teaching that Israel's is a story of an extended family of human beings struggling to remember that their opportunity to live freely on Earth depends upon their recognition that there is a source of life which transcends material existence. The uncompromising optimism of this teaching is the essence of the synagogue liturgy created by the ancient rabbis. As ever, the fate of Israel depends upon its grasping and teaching the hope of this unconditionality of God's love for Israel (humanity).

The spirit is tough. The Psalmist says, "For God's loving kindness endures forever." (Psalm 118:1). The spirit is tough enough to exist for eternity. Human freedom is predicated on this hope. Life is a fire unconsumed.

"Everything is foreseen," Rabbi Akiba taught, "and free choice is given." The primary danger for the people of Israel is thinking that their

survival is in their own hands. Israel would then make the mistake which threatens humanity as a whole. In a world in which *The Secrets of the Protocols of Zion* continues to circulate, Israel has cause for concern about threats from without. But the greatest threat always is Israel's forgetting its own spiritual source.

Just as human arrogance threatens to break the bonds of the covenant between human beings and God, the people of Israel need to rediscover the depths of their historic gratitude for being, so that they, once again, are able to share the gift of eternity inherent in knowing the unconditionality of the spirit. Instead of worrying about the parameters of its peoplehood, Israel needs to be focused on the fire at its core.

Israel recognizes the wellspring of humanity through its experience of telling and retelling the stories of Israel's redemption by God. The return of the people of Israel to the land promised to Abraham and Sarah was epochal, and it is dangerous to underestimate its value. But there is a limit to what Israel can learn from reestablishing itself on its historic land. Martin Luther King, Jr., who loved the story of Israel, reminded all of us that "(s)alvation is being on the right road, not having a destination." At no time in its history more than now, Israel is realizing that its journey does not end with a return to Canaan. As long as Israel breathes, there is the task to discover the right road, and find it over and over again.

The Jews of the State of Israel teach the world that Judaism is not about victimhood. This lesson goes deeper even than the self respect of self defense. All over the world, the people of Israel need to breathe in and out the air of freedom. Before the death of the last survivor of the camps, however, the people of Israel owe to all who suffered, particularly to the memory of those who perished, a radical regeneration of the gratitude that grows naturally at Israel's heart.

Torah reports that when the matriarch Leah gave birth to her fourth son, she named him *Yehudah* (Judah), from the Hebrew root meaning "to praise." In Hebrew, a Jew is *yehudi*, one who is grateful.