

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Pekudei, Exodus, Chapters 38-40

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The Tabernacle and the Scandal of Jewish Particularity

The wisest man on earth was perplexed. The Almighty had endowed King Solomon with insight and understanding beyond anyone on earth; and, utilizing his divinely bestowed brilliance, Solomon had overseen the construction of a Temple in Jerusalem, a permanent dwelling-place for God. Yet even as he did so, he articulated the apparent incomprehensibility of his project. How can God dwell within a finite abode?

For will God dwell on the earth? Behold the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have built? (1 Kings 8:27)

One would not expect the God of all earth, Solomon notes, to dwell within a home in Jerusalem. Yet the Bible states, and Solomon confirms, that this is precisely what He does:

And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord. Then spoke Solomon, The Lord said that he would dwell in the thick darkness. I have surely built thee a house to dwell in a settled placed for thee to abide in forever. (1 Kings 8:10–13)

By dwelling in Jerusalem, the Almighty sanctifies and singles out the city for all time; and this mystery, that a God who created the world would single out one sacred site, reflects another miraculous event, one that occurred earlier. Thousands of years after Solomon spoke in Jerusalem, Norman Podhoretz visited the very same city, and said:

In wondering about this singling-out of one city from among all the cities in the Land of Israel, I find myself ineluctably led into its larger and even more mysterious context, which is the singling-out of one people from among all the nations of the world.

Podhoretz wryly recalled how this mysterious fact has attracted the ire of many throughout history, citing the caustic comment of Norman Ewer, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.”



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Podhoretz added:

Ewer, incidentally, was not only an anti-Semite; he was also, it has emerged from recently declassified files of MI5, a Soviet agent.

Nevertheless, as Podhoretz notes, God does indeed choose the Jews. The unique relationship He has with Jerusalem is an embodiment of the unique relationship He has with His people; it is, Podhoretz explained, a reflection of what non-Jewish theologians have called the “scandal of Jewish particularity.” And to this one might add that before God dwelled in Jerusalem, He chose to dwell among His people in a space even smaller than Solomon’s edifice, thereby signaling His eternal relationship with the chosen people. In rabbinic description, this metaphysical phenomenon amazed Moses just as it did Solomon; and it is a miracle made fully manifest in our *parashah*.

The notion of God dwelling amidst the Jewish people first appears earlier in Exodus, after Sinai, when the construction of the Tabernacle is commanded, and its purpose is made clear:

And they shall make for me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell among them. (Exodus 25:8)

Yet following the sin of the golden calf, God, in sorrow and anger, informs Moses that while He will allow Israel to enter the Holy Land, He will not dwell among them, as He finds their sinfulness intolerable.

The Lord said to Moses, Depart, go up hence, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, To your descendants I will give it. And I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you in the way, for you are a stiff-necked people. When the people heard these evil tidings, they mourned; and no man put on his ornaments. (Exodus 33:1–4)

Moses then insists that God must join Israel on its journey, or it could no longer be considered a chosen nation:

And he said to him, If your presence will not go with me, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from all other people that are upon the face of the earth? And the Lord said to Moses, This very thing that you have spoken I will do; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name. (Exodus 33:15–17)

Moses thus argues, and God agrees, that inherent in the notion of Jewish chosenness is the fact that God, in some very real sense, dwells among His people. For the Jews in the desert, the locus of this indwelling is the Tabernacle:

There [in the Tabernacle] I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory; I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate, to serve me as priests. And I will dwell among the people of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that



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I am the Lord their God, who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God. (Exodus 29:43–46)

Finally, in our reading, this promise is fulfilled. Much of the *parashah*, like the last one, describes the construction of the Tabernacle based on the blueprint that Moses had received in previous readings. But when the construction is complete, its purpose is made manifest and God dwells amid a cloud and a flame. It is with this moment that the book of Exodus, and our *parashah*, conclude, highlighting that this was, in part, the very purpose for which the liberation from Egypt occurred:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would go onward; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not go onward till the day that it was taken up. For throughout all their journeys the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel. (Exodus 40:34–38)

God dwells among Israel in the Tabernacle as He later did in Jerusalem. In rabbinic writings, this is compared to a marriage: the Tabernacle is nothing less than the *huppah*, the wedding canopy through which God enters into spatial communion with His people, maintaining a closeness with them that is eternal.

But what does it mean to say that God dwells among the Jewish people? As Solomon himself admitted, it is impossible to understand. But as the theologian Michael Wyschogrod notes, even if the exact metaphysics of the matter are unclear, God's dwelling among His people is a fact upon which the Bible insists:

How are we to characterize the relationship of Israel to God? . . . God certainly dwells in the midst of His people in some special way. Perhaps it would be best to say that He does not dwell *in* the people of Israel but among or alongside them. . . . Living *in* a city does not involve fusing with its walls but residing in it, now here and later there, but all the time being an inhabitant of the city, dwelling in it. . . . [God] is not in the people of Israel the way a book is in a briefcase. Even the soul is not in the body the way the book is in the briefcase. God is in and with the people of Israel and that is all that matters.

Jewish philosophers since Solomon have puzzled over how an infinite, omnipresent God could dwell amidst a particular people, or in a Tabernacle. Some insisted that these verses cannot be understood literally. When the Bible describes the “glory of God” filling up the Tabernacle, it refers, according to Maimonides, not to God Himself, but to “the created light, which God caused to dwell in a given place in order to show the distinction of that place.” Moses Nahmanides, however, notes—convincingly, in my opinion—that Maimonides’ reading creates more theological problems than it solves, as the Jewish people bow, prostrate, and pray to the manifest Presence in the Tabernacle. In fact, Nahmanides insists, the manifest Presence of God Himself is what the Bible refers to as “His Glory,” which the rabbis call “the *Sh’kbinah*.”



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Even before these medieval Jewish thinkers pondered Maimonides' (and Solomon's) problem, it was taken up by the rabbinic sages. Is God infinite, or does He dwell in the Temple? Solomon answers "yes" to both questions, and the rabbis agree, insisting all the while that there is no contradiction. The scholar of ancient Judaism Efraim Urbach notes that the sages paint a largely consistent picture of God's presence: "The confinement of the *Sh'khinah* in one place does not imply withdrawal from another place." Urbach quotes several talmudic rabbis who give us metaphors to describe this phenomenon. First, there is Rabbi Levi, who compared the Tabernacle

to a cave situated next to the sea. The sea was turbulent and flooded the cave; the cave was filled with water, yet the sea was in no way diminished. So too was the Tent filled with the splendor of the *Sh'khinah*, yet the world lacked not a whit of the *Sh'khinah*. (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 1:2)

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A similar statement, Urbach adds, was made by the sages regarding the halakhic dictum that when a quorum of Jews gathers for prayer, "the Divine Presence is there." We are told in rabbinic writings that a Gentile once asked Rabbi Gamliel: if God is present in any gathering of Jews, and Jews gather all over the world, does this not reflect division within God? Rabbi Gamliel answered by invoking the sun:

It shines upon each individual and, at the same time, upon the world as a whole. Now the sun is but one of the thousand myriad attendants of the Holy One, blessed be He. How much more so can the *Sh'khinah* of the Holy One, blessed be He, do this! (BT Sanhedrin 39a)

God is omnipresent, but can make Himself known in particular ways, as sunlight is made manifest in particular moments of brilliance and brightness; and He wishes to be known as the God who dwells especially among the chosen people: first in the desert, and then in Jerusalem.

In rabbinic teachings, Moses, like Solomon, is described as originally perturbed by the notion that God could dwell within a tiny Tabernacle, yet the Almighty informed him that this is exactly what He would do. This rabbinic passage, which is cited at a central point of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's work *Halakhic Man*, offers a vision of how within Judaism, God can make Himself manifest in our own lives on earth:

Rabbi Yochanan said: when Moses heard from the Almighty the words "And let them make Me a sanctuary," he retreated in consternation, saying "Sovereign of the universe, lo, the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain Thee, yet Thou sayest, 'And let them make Me a sanctuary!'" In reply the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Moses, it is not as thou dost think; twenty boards to the north and twenty boards to the south, eight in the west, and I shall descend and confine My *Sh'khinah* among you upon earth." (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 2:10)



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For Judaism, God's unique relationship with His people, reflected in the mystery of the Tabernacle and Temple, embodies the way He seeks to be made known to the world. Wyschogrod describes it in the following way:

Israel is Hashem's [i.e., God's] abode in the created world. Nothing that Israel does is therefore unrelated to Hashem. . . . To say that Hashem dwells in the Jewish people does not deify the Jewish people any more than to say that Hashem dwells in the Temple in Jerusalem is to deify the stones of the Temple. The stones do not remain unaffected. Anyone who has seen Jews kissing the stones of the Western Wall knows that stones can be holy without this constituting idolatry. And if stones become holy because Hashem dwells in them or near them, how much more is this true of the people. They are not stones. They are descendants of Abraham, whom God loved and with whom he entered into an everlasting covenant.

Thus does the mystery of the Temple Mount—first preceded by the mystery of the Tabernacle—point to the “scandal of Jewish particularity.” The small space in which God dwelled is a reminder of the small people whose outsized impact on history points to the relationship that God has with them.

It should not be disappointing, but inspiring, that Solomon, at the apex of his wisdom, admitted to being perplexed. For at the heart of the Jewish faith is the notion that humanity is incapable of comprehending certain aspects of existence. Menachem Begin, in his memoir *White Nights*, describes his debate with a Soviet interrogator in prison, after being asked if he believes in God.

“Yes, of course I believe in God.”

“I see that in this sphere too you will need re-education. But I must say I didn't expect to hear such nonsense from you, Menachem Wolfovitch. After all, you are an educated man. How can you believe in a God?”

“I have seen university professors who believe in God. There have been great scientists who believed in God.”

“Nonsense! A scientist can't believe in God. Those that you are referring to only said they believe. They were in the pay of the bourgeoisie. Incidentally, can you tell me why you believe in God?”

“It's very hard to explain, citizen-judge. Faith is not a thing that one can explain rationally.”

“That's it. Belief in God is something that stands in contradiction to human intelligence, so how can you believe?”

“Faith does not stand in contradiction to intelligence; but man, in his intelligence, understands that there are things he cannot fathom by rationality, and so he believes in a Higher Power.”

Faith is bound up in the rational, intelligent understanding that human beings cannot explain everything. God's entering into communion with the Jewish people begins in a mystery, the miracle of the Tabernacle and the



Temple. Yet, as Podhoretz pointed out, through history, the fact of Jewish chosenness becomes more and more obvious to human reason. Several passages from Podhoretz are worth quoting in full:

True, I still find it hard to make theological or even just plain logical sense out of the election of Israel—so hard, that I cannot altogether dismiss the old view of it as an oddity to Reason and a scandal to Theology. At the same time, however, I also find myself, if a little mischievously, beginning to think that if the idea of the Jews as the chosen people is taken not as a matter of faith that can never be proved, but as a hypothesis subject to empirical verification, it actually seems to make *scientific* sense.

For consider. All of the great powers and principalities of antiquity—the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the Greeks and the Romans—all the powers that at one time or another conquered the Land of Israel and then outlawed the religious practices of its Jewish inhabitants, or executed some and banished others—all of these powers, each and every one, have crumbled to dust.

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Having outlasted all of these mighty empires by creating ways of surviving statelessness, the Jews then remained alive as an identifiable people for another 2,000 years: in spite of persecution by Christians and Muslims; in spite of forced conversions on pain

of death; in spite of the murderous rampages that periodically broke out against them; and in spite of wholesale expulsions from countries like Spain and France and England in which they had temporarily been granted refuge.

In another of these European countries, and in our very own time, there even arose a tyrant who set out to achieve a “final solution” of “the Jewish problem.” His technique was much more direct than any that had been employed before. He simply murdered as many individual embodiments of that “problem” as his forces could reach, which turned out to be a full third of the 18 million of them who were still around by the early decades of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, in yet another country, yet another tyrant was doing his best to make it impossible for the more than 3 million Jews still residing in his domains to practice their religion or maintain any other ties to their ancient traditions. And we know that only his death in 1953 prevented him from adopting even more extreme measures to push the still “unsolved” Jewish problem closer to its final solution.

Yet all this, too, failed—and the Jews, though much diminished in numbers and grievously wounded in spirit, were once more still here as an identifiable people, while Hitler and Stalin and the empires they had built crumbled into the same ignominious dust as had the long line of their predecessors.

Following all these attempts at defying Israel’s eternity, Podhoretz concludes, we see before us the birth of Israel, “the state the Jews succeeded in building after nearly two full millennia.”



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The mystery and miracle of the Jews is one that that the enemies of the Jewish people have found intolerable; yet it is one that remains more manifest and obvious today in history than ever. And as the Jewish people's enemies today will fail in their own evil aims of eradication, their very failure will make more manifest the miracle of Jewish history that was embodied in a tiny Tabernacle millennia ago.

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Additional Resources

Norman Podhoretz on Chosenness, "Jerusalem: The Scandal of Particularity," *Commentary*, July/August 2007.
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