



Tazria

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

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LEARNING TO LET GO

*Janet R. Kirchheimer is the author of *How to Spot One of Us*, (Clal, 2007) and *Seduction: Out of Eden*, co-authored with Jaclyn Piudik (Kelsay, 2022).*

The Angel of Death has come four times for my father.

Once in Dachau, the other times in the hospital.

But the Angel has not found him. Perhaps, my father is good at hiding.

A friend tells me that this is the time of my life

that family will start to die,
tells me to get ready.

The training wheels are off, I am ten. My father lets go of the back of my bike, and I begin to pedal on my own.

“Keep looking straight ahead, don’t look down, or you’ll fall.

When you stop and turn around, you’ll see how far you’ve gone on your own.”

Editor’s Note: This article was originally published in April 2020.

COULD IT HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT? HISTORY ACCORDING TO THE RABBIS JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK

David Curwin is an independent scholar, who has researched and published widely on Bible, Jewish thought and philosophy, and Hebrew language.

In Genesis 15:13-16, as part of the *brit bein ha-betarim* (“Covenant Between the Parts”), God informs Abraham what will happen to his descendants in the generations to come. He tells

Abraham that his descendants will be “strangers in a land not theirs” and “enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.” In the end, they will “go free with great wealth” and the “fourth generation” will return to Canaan.

This prophecy is one of the most familiar in the Torah. It seems to clearly predict the slavery of Israel in Egypt and their subsequent redemption. Yet Egypt is not mentioned explicitly in the text of the verses.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), “the Rav,” addressed this issue in his lecture, “*The Selling of Joseph and the Guilt of Shomron*.”¹ He describes how events developed from God’s promise that Jacob would return to Eretz Yisrael after the confrontations with Laban and Esau, to his family’s eventual descent to exile in Egypt. The Rav wonders, could things have been different?

He begins by quoting Rashi on Genesis 37:1,² “Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan.” Rashi, quoting a *midrash*³, writes, “Jacob wished to live at ease, but the trouble in connection with Joseph suddenly came upon him.”

¹ This sermon was published in Hebrew in the book *Divrei Hashkafah*, ed. Moshe Krone (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1994), 25-30. The Rav presented this idea on a number of occasions. Versions of it are quoted in essays by Rabbi Daniel Tropper (published in *Opening The Week*, ed. Naftali Rothenberg (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot, 2001), 157-172) and Rabbi Ari Kahn (in his book *Explorations*, excerpted [here](#)), as well as in *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, ed. Arnold Lustiger (New York: OU Press, 2013), 273. It was also

The Rav writes:⁴

In order to understand these things, it is necessary to return to the issue of the *brit bein ha-betarim*.... In exchange for the land, they would be enslaved for several hundred years. Eretz Yisrael is not mentioned explicitly. Even Egypt is not mentioned, only “a land not theirs...”

But here a question can be raised: Haran was also a “land not theirs.” Why was Eretz Yisrael not given to Jacob after he was enslaved for more than 20 years in Haran? In regard to the slavery in Egypt, it is customary for us to say that God “calculated its end” (*Haggadah Shel Pesah*). So why did He not calculate the end regarding Haran? Why did the slavery have to be fulfilled specifically in Egypt? For Jacob dwelled in Haran, and it would have been possible to calculate the end, and shorten the

quoted by Rabbi David Fohrman in video 14 of his [series on the Joseph story](#) (“Rabbi Soloveitchik’s Theory”).

² Rashi’s comment appears in most printed editions, but not all. In those where it does appear, it is on Genesis 37:2, but is discussing 37:1.

³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:3

⁴ The translation is mine.

years of slavery there, just like was later done in Egypt! What is the difference between 21 years in Haran and 210 years in Egypt? For God has, so to speak, his own special method of calculating years. (27)

According to the Rav, since the location of the exile of Abraham's descendants is not made explicit in *brit bein ha-betarim*, it could have applied to Jacob's time in Haran. Jacob was a stranger in a land not his own⁵ and an indentured servant⁶ to his uncle Laban who oppressed him,⁷ and he left Haran with great wealth.⁸ Jacob began his return to Canaan after the birth of Joseph, who was the fourth generation from Abraham.⁹ And while the prophecy states that the oppression will last 400 years, even according to the understanding that the *brit bein ha-betarim* refers to the exile in Egypt, the 400 years were not to be taken as literal. The Rav references the opinion¹⁰ that the actual amount of time the Children of Israel spent in Egypt was 210 years. Therefore, if 400 years in "God's time" could be calculated as 210 years, they could also be counted as one tenth of that – the twenty-one years Jacob spent

⁵ In Genesis 32:5, Jacob says of his time with Laban – *garti*. This word uses the same root as the word for "stranger" (*ger*) in the prophecy.

⁶ Genesis 31:41 – "I served you."

⁷ Genesis 31:42 – "God has seen my affliction."

⁸ Genesis 30:43 – "So the man grew exceedingly prosperous."

in Haran.

Why in the end did Israel go down to Egypt, become enslaved, and eventually redeemed? The Rav continues:

"Jacob wished to live at ease" – and he did not want to advance in accordance with the divine plan ... If Jacob had stayed in Eretz Yisrael, no nation in the world could have uprooted him from there, the exile would never have occurred, and there would have been no need for redemption. Providence would have woven a different fate for the Nation of Israel. But after Joseph was sold, the path to redemption became very long, and an entirely different tapestry was made... The sale of Joseph set Jewish history in a new direction. (28, 30)

According to the Rav, when Jacob chose not to follow the divine plan,¹¹ history was changed forever. Had that alternate timeline come to be, and had Joseph's brothers not sold him to the

⁹ For an extensive linguistic and thematic comparison of Jacob's stay in and escape from Haran with Israel's slavery in Egypt and the Exodus, see Jonathan Grossman, *Jacob: The Story of a Family* (Hebrew) (Rishon Letzion: Yediot, 2019), 305-309.

¹⁰ Rashi on Exodus 12:40.

¹¹ In the essay, the Rav implies that in the same way that Esau conquered Seir, Jacob should have conquered Eretz Yisrael. The message of the *midrash* that Rashi quotes, therefore, is that Jacob wanted to live in Eretz Yisrael in

traders who brought him to Egypt, the story of Israel would have been radically different. There would be no further exile, and no need for later redemption.¹²

The Rav's approach is fascinating and innovative. The premise that history could have unfolded differently may not appear to be theologically controversial.¹³ The future is not yet written, and we can all choose our own path for good or for bad. However, there are concepts in Judaism such as predictive prophecy, supernatural miracles, and divine providence (*hashgahah peratit*) that indicate that there is a divine plan that must be followed. Some thinkers have expanded these ideas and proposed a theory that would limit human involvement in history.

Take, for example, the *Beit ha-Levi*, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1820-1892), the Rav's great-grandfather and eponym. He wrote a polemic against those who claimed to understand the historical context of the commandments and could therefore decide on their own whether they

peace, but wasn't willing to conquer it. While Jacob delayed the conquest, the strife between the brothers grew, which eventually led to a new descent into exile.

¹² The Rav takes a similar approach to Jewish history in his famous *derashah* on *Parshat Beha'alotkha*, transcribed [here](#). Just as he describes above a hypothetical scenario in which the final redemption could have occurred in Jacob's time, in this *derashah* he says that the same fate could have transpired in the generation after the Exodus. But the events in that *parshah* are "a tragic story which changes Jewish history completely, from top to bottom... If that march [into Eretz Yisrael] had been realized, the coming of Mashiach would have taken place then and Moshe would have been the *Melekh ha-Mashiach*. It was quite optional – the Jews could have reached it, they lost it so Moshe is not

were still relevant. His *derashah* expounds Exodus 13:8, which records, "On that day, you must tell your child, 'It is because of this that God acted for me when I left Egypt.'" After acknowledging the explanation in the *Haggadah* that we eat matzah because the dough of our ancestors had not fermented, he continues:¹⁴

But the foundational essence of this commandment, why the commandment is such, is not because of what happened in Egypt. For the Torah preceded the world, and even before the world existed there was the Torah, and written in it was the commandment of matzah. And Abraham our father, and all the patriarchs, kept the entire Torah before it was given. And therefore, on the night of 15 Nissan, Abraham ate matzah and maror, even though this was before the Egyptian exile. And therefore it

the *Melekh ha-Mashiach* and the distance between them in time is long and far." The text of the Torah itself was changed: "there was no need for an inverted Nun at the beginning and for an inverted Nun at the end (see Numbers 10:35-36), it would have been the climax of the whole story. Had this come true, nothing had happened, the whole Jewish history would have taken a different turn."

¹³ For further discussion of this view, see Rabbi David Fohrman, "God, Moses and the Worst-Case Scenario" in [The Exodus You Almost Passed Over](#) (New York: Aleph Beta Press, 2016), 265-274. Rabbi Fohrman writes, "As a general matter, the notion that events in the Torah need not have occurred precisely as they did seems self-evidently true."

¹⁴ The following translation is mine.

must be that these commandments did not sprout from the redemption from Egypt, but rather the opposite. From the merit of the commandments of the Passover sacrifice, matzah, and maror, their redemption from Egypt sprouted on that very night.

The *Beit ha-Levi* is claiming that despite the simple assumption that we eat matzah because of the events of the Exodus, the essence of the commandment is the opposite: we left Egypt because of the pre-existing commandment of matzah. He brings proof from the *Haggadah's* understanding of “because of this” – because of the matzah, God acted for us.¹⁵ He adds that we should not tell our children that

“Because I left Egypt, I perform this commandment” but rather the opposite: “Because of these commandments, the Exodus from Egypt came about.”

He writes that this approach applies to all of the commandments. They are not historically contingent, dependent on how a particular event turned out. “Rather because of the

¹⁵ There is debate among the medieval commentaries as to the understanding of “because of this.” Saadiah Gaon, Rashbam, and Ramban write that the verse should be understood as saying, “because of that [which] God did for me when I left Egypt” I keep the commandments. Rashi and Ibn Ezra, however, say it should be read as “because of *this*,” with “this” referring either to the commandments of Passover kept in Egypt (Ibn Ezra) or those that will be kept in the future (Rashi). The *Beit ha-Levi* goes further than either Rashi or Ibn Ezra by saying that the redemption was

commandment, came the reason.” And since the commandment precedes the reason, no one can ever claim, “because the reason was invalidated, the commandment is no longer valid.”

Not only were the commandments of Passover kept by the patriarchs, but the entire Torah was observed by them. How is this possible? Because the Torah existed before the world. It is completely independent of historical events – both those before and after the giving of the Torah at Sinai. This timeless, “pre-Creation” and “pre-Sinai” Torah was kept by the forefathers in Genesis. Abraham ate matzah on the 15th of Nissan, Passover eve, centuries before the Exodus. So eating matzah was not, as one might assume, a reaction to the historical circumstance of the bread not rising when Israel left Egypt. Rather, Israel left Egypt in such a way as to reflect the pre-existing commandment of eating matzah on Passover.

Therefore, the *Beit ha-Levi* would not agree with the Rav’s approach that history could have taken a different path in Genesis. The events of the Torah, as embodied by the commandments, were carved in stone well before any human could make a choice that would have led to any change.¹⁶ For is that not the essence of the

not merely a response to Israel’s actions, but was for the sake of the commandment itself. For further discussion of the interpretations of this phrase, see Nechama Leibowitz, [*New Studies in Shemot*](#) (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1996), 210-215.

¹⁶ The *Beit ha-Levi* makes the same argument in his *derashah* on Exodus 31:13. After bringing a *midrash* that says that the commandment of the Red Heifer came to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf, he remarks that this

prophecy itself? God told Abraham what would happen in the future. That is the divine plan!

The disagreement between the Rav and the *Beit ha-Levi* is clear. The *Beit ha-Levi* believed that the commandments preceded the historical events. But according to the Rav, had the prophecy of the *brit bein ha-betarim* been fulfilled in Jacob's lifetime, there would presumably have been no need for the commandment of eating matzah, since that wasn't part of the experience of the historical event of leaving Egypt. If historical events are not predetermined, those events must precede the associated commandments.

One may argue that the *Beit ha-Levi* allowed for some degree of human involvement in the history that led to the commandments, but the details of the commandments were not set in advance. However, it seems clear to me from his words that the *Beit ha-Levi* believed that the Torah that existed before the world was the same literal Torah that Israel received at Sinai ("and written in it was the commandment of matzah").

midrash does not reflect the true reason for the commandment, since that commandment existed before the sin of the Golden Calf, and even before the world was created. In the *derashah* I quoted above (on Exodus 13:8), the *Beit ha-Levi* also makes reference to the Red Heifer. The Passover sacrifice, like the Red Heifer, is called a *hok*, indicating that its reason is unknown. Therefore, in the time of the patriarchs, Passover was observed, but was considered a *hok*, since its reason was not yet understood.

¹⁷ For example, *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1; *Pesahim* 54a.

¹⁸ For example, Mishnah *Kiddushin* 4:14; *Yoma* 28b; Rashi on Genesis 26:5.

The *Beit ha-Levi's* approach makes sense if the Torah – as a collection of commandments – literally preceded the world. But for the Rav, that option is untenable. Lighting candles on 25 Kislev during the First Temple period or singing Hallel on 5 Iyar in 1848 would be meaningless. The events being celebrated hadn't occurred yet.

However, following the logic of the *Beit ha-Levi*, events can be destined to happen all along – they must follow one path of history. If a prophet told someone in 1848 that there would be a State of Israel in 1948, it might seem strange to anyone on the outside, but it wouldn't be pointless from the point of view of the believer.

The idea that the Torah preceded the world (and served as the blueprint for the world),¹⁷ and that the Patriarchs observed the entire Torah¹⁸ is popularly accepted today. But Rambam did not adopt this approach,¹⁹ First of all, it requires the belief that something existed before the world. Rambam maintains that only God and His name existed before the world,²⁰ excluding everything

¹⁹ Rambam's son, Avraham, in his commentary to Genesis 35:4, explicitly denies that the patriarchs kept Shabbat or ate matzah on Passover. For a detailed discussion of Rambam's approach to this issue, see Menachem Kellner, "Rashi and Maimonides on the Relationship between Torah and the Cosmos," in [Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis](#), ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 23-58.

²⁰ [Guide for the Perplexed](#) 1:61; *Laws of Repentance* 3:7; and the fourth principle of his 13 principles of faith (Introduction to his commentary on Chapter 10 of *Sanhedrin*).

else - even the Torah. But additionally, it conflicts with the principle of free will, which is of prime significance for him.²¹ If an event – the Exodus from Egypt or the establishment of the State of Israel – is destined to happen, there is no incentive for man to be involved with it. Removing the impetus that free will entails undercuts moral responsibility.

It seems that the *Beit ha-Levi* adopted the approach that emphasized the immutable divine plan, while the Rav stressed the importance of human agency and action in determining history.²²

How did the Rav come to disagree with his distinguished great-grandfather? Why did he believe that man's actions can cancel, or confirm, a divine plan, when others in his family did not? Perhaps these beliefs persuaded him to identify with Zionism, a movement that championed the idea of human intervention in history. Therefore, an examination of the Rav's justifications for becoming a Zionist can help explain his approach in general to the question of the importance of human activism in history.

While the *Beit ha-Levi* died before the onset of the Zionist movement, he was a fierce opponent of the *Haskalah* and the nascent Reform movement. In his wake, his son R. Haim Soloveitchik, and many of their descendants became strongly opposed to the secular Zionist movement, and even to the Orthodox branch of Zionism. They believed that faith demanded total dependence on God. The Rav, however, believed that political redemption would arise from human choices and actions.

In the collection of his lectures, [*The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History, and the Jewish People*](#),²³ the Rav confronts the break with his family over support of Zionism in general, and the Religious Zionist movement, the Mizrachi, in particular. The first essay, "And Joseph Dreamt a Dream," and particularly the section, "Joseph and his Brothers" most strongly echoes the Rav's own life.²⁴ He describes how the Mizrachi was founded in the Hebrew year 5662, less than a year before the Rav was born. He then depicts the tension between the biblical Joseph and his brothers, and how it parallels that of "Joseph of 5662." While Joseph of 5662 certainly refers to the Mizrachi, we

²¹ In *Laws of Repentance* 5:3, Rambam writes that free will is "the great root, which is the pillar of the Torah and commandments." See also his introduction to his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* (*Shemonah Perakim*), chapter 8.

²² Certainly the Rav does not deny the existence of divine providence, and the *Beit ha-Levi* does not reject the concept of free will. But they both chose edge cases in their *derashot* that appear to negate the "opposing" tenet, presumably

because they each felt that aspect deserved special emphasis.

²³ New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2002.

²⁴ "For he who joined the Mizrachi was virtually excluded from his birthplace, and ostracized from his spiritual paternal home. We were lonely, as Joseph the dreamer was lonely among his brothers who mocked him." (25)

cannot avoid a comparison to the Rav himself, the "Joseph of 5663."

He writes:

The Biblical Joseph was not persuaded that "and Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's wanderings" (Gen. 37:1) would endure for long. The words "for your seed shall be a stranger in an alien land" (Gen. 15:13) kept tolling in his ears. (27)

Joseph was aware of the prophecy his great-grandfather Abraham had received. And yet he did not believe that the family could continue in the same path they had always followed. He anticipated economic and agricultural developments that were not compatible with the lifestyle of a tribe of shepherds. A change was needed. But he did not have the support of his family.

Joseph's brothers, however, answered him: "Why do you meddle in the secrets of the All-Merciful? Why do you get involved with the secret plans of God? We

do not know when God will execute His decree 'For a stranger will your seed be' (Gen. 15:13). (28)

The brothers felt that God's divine plan did not require human intervention. And yet Joseph argued and prevailed, "and the house of Jacob was saved from destruction only due to Joseph's dreams." (30)

And the same pattern applied to the Joseph of his time:

The Joseph of 5662 unconsciously sensed that it was forbidden to rely on a continuation of the status-quo, that great changes were about to occur in Jewish life for which we would have to be prepared. He sensed the advent of an era when there would be no yeshivot in Brisk, Vilna, and Minsk; when America would be turned into a place of Torah; and when Israel, the State of Israel, would become the core center of Torah. (31)

The Rav understood that for history to change,

people must take decisive action. Jacob missed an opportunity to further the cause of redemption; his son Joseph took actions that saved the nation of Israel. Such action is not a rebellion against the divine plan; it is the fulfillment of that very plan.²⁵ This was not the view of his great-grandfather. However, the fourth generation would support the return to the Land.

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²⁵ "The Rav's *z.t.l.* endorsement of Religious Zionism is also closely related to his belief that taking the initiative in ameliorating natural, economic, social or political conditions, far from being a usurpation of divine

prerogatives, represents a religiously mandated activity of becoming partners with God in the process of Creation." Walter S. Wurzberger, "Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy", *Tradition* 29:1 (Fall 1994): 10.