

## *The Exodus: A Paradigm for Revolution*

Since late medieval or early modern times, there has existed in the West a characteristic way of thinking about political change, a pattern that we commonly impose upon events, a story that we repeat to one another. The story has roughly this form: oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, new society (danger of restoration). We call the whole process *revolutionary*, though the events don't make a circle unless oppression is brought back at the end; intentionally, at least, they have a strong forward movement. This isn't a story told everywhere; it isn't a universal pattern; it belongs to the West, more particularly to Jews and Christians in the West, and its source, its original version, is the Exodus of Israel from Egypt.

The Book of Exodus together with the Book of Numbers is certainly the first description of revolutionary politics.

The Exodus, or the later reading of the Exodus, fixes the pattern. And because of the centrality of the Bible in Western thought and the endless repetition of the story, the pattern has been etched deeply into our political culture. It isn't only the case that events fall, almost naturally, into an Exodus shape; we work actively to give them that shape. We complain about oppression; we hope (against all the odds of human history) for deliverance; we join in covenants and constitutions; we aim at a new and better social order. Though in attenuated form, Exodus thinking seems to have survived the secularization of political theory. Thus, when utopian socialists, most of them resolutely hostile to religion, argued about the problems of the "transitional period," they still cast their arguments in familiar terms: the forty years in the wilderness were "a deep . . . cultural memory and the death of the old generation [was] an archetypal solution." Cultural patterns shape perception and analysis too.

The Exodus parallel was not lost on the most impressive of Zionist thinkers, Ahad Ha-am ("One of the People," the *nom de plume* of Asher Ginzberg), who published an essay on Moses in 1904. This is a powerful piece, describing a leader who imagined at first that liberation would be immediate and complete but who learned in the wilderness that it would be a long and hard

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struggle. Ahad Ha-Am repeats Maimonides: "A people trained for generations in the house of bondage cannot cast off in an instant the effects of that training and become truly free . . ." And he has Moses draw the conclusion that he himself drew with regard to his own contemporaries: He no longer believes in a sudden revolution; he knows that signs and wonders and visions of God can arouse a momentary enthusiasm, but cannot create a new heart, cannot uproot and implant feelings and inclinations with any stability or permanence. So he summoned all his patience to the task of bearing the troublesome burden of his people and training it by slow steps till it is fit for its mission.

So pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan are still with us, powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world. The "door of hope" is still open; things are not what they might be — even when what they might be isn't totally different from what they are. This is a central theme in Western thought, always present though elaborated in many different ways. We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:

- first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
- and third, that "the way to the land is through the wilderness." There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.