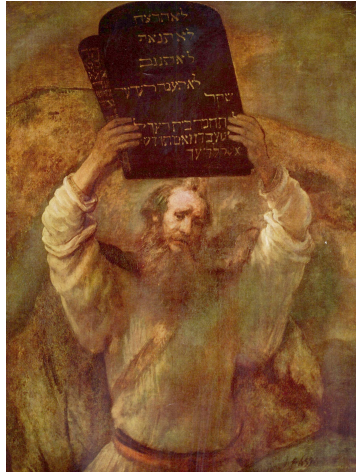


Am Yisrael Chai!

# “Shema Yisrael - What Judaism Has Taught The World”

Lincoln Square Synagogue, Shvat 5784, Jan. 2024

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## Introduction

Certainly, the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place. Humanity might have eventually stumbled upon all the Jewish insights. But we cannot be sure. All the great conceptual discoveries of the human intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they had been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of human person; of the individual conscience and so a personal redemption; of collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without Jews it might have been a much emptier place."

Paul Johnson, 'A History of the Jews'

In modern times, the abundance of unearthed Ancient Near Eastern writings—myths, laws, treaties, temple inscriptions, prayers, wisdom instructions—has provided us with a wealth of information about the gods and their interrelationships with the world and its inhabitants. To be familiar with all of these writings is an impossible task, as much material remains still unread! Nonetheless, certain key universal characteristics about these gods can be confirmed from published discoveries:

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- The gods are *natural* beings. In that sense, they are no different than humans. They eat, drink, sleep, fornicate, make war, are born, and even die (or can be killed). They are part and parcel of nature. However, while they are not supernatural, they *are* superhuman in such characteristics as strength, longevity (some can even be resurrected), and other powers.
  - While possessed of superhuman powers, the gods are not omnipotent. As natural beings, they are affected by nature. They also are subject to time, magic, divination (trying to ascertain the gods' plans that will affect humans, often in order to circumvent them), and destiny.
  - Ethically the gods are capricious. Sometimes they behave justly, and sometimes they don't. Nor do these texts view the gods as ethical paragons. Their attitudes toward humans are notably problematic. On the one hand, Mesopotamian kings see their divine charge as ensuring justice in society. On the other, humans are created to be slaves to the gods and to enable them to rest, as befits their divine royalty.<sup>1</sup>

#### Jeremiah Unterman, "Justice For All; How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics"

Far different is the outlook of Genesis. One of its seemingly naive features is God's pleasure at His own artistry, the repeated declaration, after each completed act of creation, that God saw how good His work was (1:4 etc.). Following the creation of living things, we meet with the climactic observation that God saw all that He had made and found it to be "*very good*" (1:31). But this naiveté of idiom cloaks a profundity of thought that marks off the mood of Hebrew civilization from that of Mesopotamia in a most revolutionary manner. The concept of a single directing Mind behind the cosmic machine, with all its ethico-moral implications, emancipated Israel from thralldom to the vicious cycle of time. In place of a fortuitous concatenation of events, history has become purposeful and society has achieved direction. A strong streak of optimism has displaced the acute awareness of insecurity. The all-pervasive pagan consciousness of human impotence has given way to a profound sense of the significance of man and the powers he can employ. Contemplating the awesome majesty of cosmic phenomena, the Psalmist can yet extol the glory and dignity with which God has adorned man and the authority He has placed in his hands.<sup>39</sup>

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This basic belief in the essential goodness of the universe was, of course, destined to exert a powerful influence upon the direction of the religion of Israel and to affect the outlook on life of the people. It found its expression in the concept of the covenant relationship between God and His people and ultimately achieved its most glorious manifestation in the notion of Messianism—two uniquely Israelite contributions to religion. The God of Israel, being a deity whose will is absolute and incontestable and whose word is eternal, was able to give assurances that human strivings were decidedly not in vain. Israelite society did not suffer from “overtones of anxiety.”

Nahum Sarna ‘Understanding Genesis’

However, what is really striking and what is totally stunning is the third metaphor – which is so beautiful, so powerful, that frankly I am overwhelmed by it. It reaches expression in the great literary prophets, in Isaiah, Jeremiah and, above all, in Hosea and which understands the relationship between God and humanity. God and humanity, although very specifically God and Israel, but I really believe it is between God and humanity. As a matter not between Master and slave, not between *Adon* and *eved*, not between an *avi* and a *ben*, a parent and a child, but between husband and wife. This is the really explosive, stunning image which marks the Jewish understanding of the human-Divine relationship as unique and totally without analogue anywhere else.

Rabbi Sacks.

Jewish Sabbath (or “Ceasing”). No ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest. The God who made the universe and rested bids us do the same, calling us to a weekly restoration of prayer, study, and recreation (or re-creation). In this study (or *talmud*), we have the beginnings of what Nahum Sarna has called “the universal duty of continuous self-education,” Israel being the first human society to so value education and the first to envision it as a universal pursuit—and a democratic obligation that those in power must safeguard on behalf of those in their employ. The connections to both freedom and creativity lie just beneath the surface of this commandment: leisure is appropriate to a free people, and this people so recently free find themselves quickly establishing this quiet weekly celebration of their freedom; leisure is the necessary ground of creativity, and a free people are free to imitate the creativity of God. The Sabbath is surely one of the simplest and sanest recommendations any god has ever made; and those who live without such septimanal punctuation are emptier and less resourceful.

Thomas Cahill The Gift of the Jews

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## Torah And Law.

These innovations were presented through the narratives of the exodus and the covenant at Sinai—stories that would have made a distinct and unusual impression on the ancient mind. The ancients had no problem believing that the gods could split the seas or descend on a mountaintop in a storm of fire. In contrast, the stories of the exodus and Sinai necessitated an enormous stretch of the imagination, because they required listeners to believe in political events that were without precedent and utterly improbable, even in mythological terms. Slaves had never been known to overthrow their masters. Gods had never been known to speak to an entire people. Moreover, in propagating the story of an enslaved nation rising up and breaking its chains, the Bible also preempted claims of election and social hierarchy within the Israelite nation itself. The exodus narrative effectively disallowed any Israelite from laying claim to a “naturally” elevated status. It depicts the origin of an entire people—a seminal, emancipating, but, most important, equalizing event.

Although the account of the revelation at Sinai is usually conceived in religious terms, its political implications are no less dramatic and constitute the bedrock of the Bible’s egalitarian theology. Elsewhere, the gods allegedly communicated only to the kings and had no interest in the masses. At Sinai, God spoke to the entire people, without delineating any role whatsoever for kings and their entourage.<sup>11</sup> In fact, in light of archaeological findings now available to us, we can grasp how the Sinai narrative transformed the entire people of Israel into a collective of king-like individuals.

Prof. Joshua Berman ‘The Biblical Origins of Equality’.



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Typical of the laws of Eshnunna,<sup>34</sup> and especially of Hammurabi, are graduated penalties according to the social status of the victim. For instance, if a man strikes a pregnant woman of the *awilum*, or upper class, and causes her to miscarry, he pays ten shekels of silver as compensation for the loss of the fetus. If, however, the victim belonged to the *mushkenum*, or class of commoners, then he pays only five shekels of silver.<sup>35</sup> The Torah, on the other hand, knows nothing of social stratification in matters of adjudication. It dispenses equal justice for all, irrespective of class distinction. The sole exception is the slave, whose status will be discussed presently.

A very strange aspect of some of the laws is vicarious punishment. In several cases, the offender does not pay the penalty but someone else who stands in relation to him. For example, in the Middle Assyrian Laws,<sup>36</sup> the rape of an unbetrothed virgin who lives in her father's house is punished by the ravishing of the rapist's wife, who also remains thereafter with the father of the victim. Hammurabi decrees that if a man struck a pregnant woman, thereby causing her to miscarry and die, it is the assailant's daughter who is put to death.<sup>37</sup> If a builder erected a house which collapsed, killing the owner's son, then the builder's son, not the builder, is put to death.<sup>38</sup> Judicial vicarious punishment is unthinkable in the Torah. In fact, it is explicitly outlawed in Deuteronomy 24:16:

Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime.

Nahum Sarna 'Exploring Exodus'

*There must be a law that no imperfect or maimed child shall be brought up. And to avoid an excess in population, some children must be exposed. For a limit must be fixed to the population of the state.*

*Aristotle Politics VII.16*

*15. If a free person helps a slave of either a palace or a civil-servant escape, that person shall be executed.*

*16. If a free person gives shelter to a fugitive slave of either a palace or a civil-servant, that person shall be executed.*

Hammurabi Code

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## Judaism's Project

In other words, faced with conflicting evidence between order and chaos, between God and evil, it would have been so easy to deny the reality of one or the other. Either we deny God, in which case we have despair: or we deny evil, in which case we have consolation. Judaism refuses the premature and easy options: despair on the one hand; consolation on the other. If either of those logical alternatives were true – either there is no justice or everything in the world is just – then we could live at peace with the world. But to be a Jew is to refuse those easy answers and to live within the tension which sees evil as real and therefore rejects premature consolation, acceptance of the world. And it is also to say that God is real and therefore hope is not an illusion.

If God exists then life has a purpose. If evil exists then we have not yet achieved that purpose. Until then we must travel: *lech lecha* – like Abraham and Sarah travelled and as Jews have travelled ever since – *el ha'aretz asher are'eka* – to the land which I will show you – which is always just over the horizon which is always not quite yet.

R Jonathan Sacks.

I will insist the Hebrews have [contributed] more to civilize men than any other nation. If I was an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations... They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth. The Romans and their empire were but a bubble in comparison to the Jews. They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of mankind more and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern.

John Adams, Letter to F. A. Van der Kemp.

That is why the most profound statement of faith of all time, [Psalm 23](#), is *lo ira ra, ki ata imadi*, “I will fear no evil for Thou art with me.” That is all faith is. Very simple. That is why we call marriage in Judaism *kiddushin*, sanctification. When a *chatan* [groom] stands under a *chupah* [marriage canopy] and says *harei at mekudeshet li*, “Behold you are betrothed to me” – that is what God said to humanity and what He later said to Israel, “Behold you are betrothed to Me.”

Rabbi Sacks