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THE
MAGNA CARTA
OF HUMANITY

SINAI'S REVOLUTIONARY FAITH
AND **THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM**



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must ponder deeply: *The phenomenon of Western secularism is unique in history, but its leading cause is its revulsion against corrupt and oppressive state churches in Europe. Secularism stands as a parasite on the best of Christian beliefs and a protest against the worst of Christian behavior.* That same implacable secularist hostility to the Christian faith is blazing again today, not least in America, where it was once considered foreign, and it crucially affects the way any Christian proposal will be heard. A church unworthy of its faith in God will always blight the appeal of its message and stand as the main roadblock to anyone open to considering her faith in God. Confession, the willingness to acknowledge our sins and go on record against ourselves, is essential to Christian advocacy—and humility—today.

OUR CUT-FLOWER CIVILIZATION

Second, the same anti-Christian and antireligious animosity is a window into the current crisis of Western civilization. In *The Will to Power*, the notes published by Nietzsche's sister after his death, Nietzsche argued that “the time is coming when we shall have to pay for having been *Christians* for two thousand years.”⁶ Nearly a century and a half later, many more would say the opposite—the West is paying for the loss of its Jewish and Christian roots. Until 1789 it was commonplace and historically accurate to describe the West as a “Christian civilization,” regardless of whether any nation had a formally “established church” or not. After the First Amendment in 1791, for example, there was no established church in the United States at the federal level, but there is no question that America understood itself as part of Christian civilization and no less so than Europe.

Many who made such claims about Christian civilization were prominent Christian spokespersons, so their assertions can be heavily discounted for their bias. In 1920, for example, Hilaire Belloc wrote that “the Faith is Europe and Europe is the Faith” (by which he meant strictly Catholicism and not even Orthodoxy or Protestantism).⁷ Others, such as US Presidents Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill could hardly be described as Christian spokesmen, yet they routinely referred to “Christian civilization” on numerous occasions as a noncontroversial reference. Historically, Western civilization owes much to the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans, but the West outgrew the Mediterranean world, and it was the Christian faith that was decisive in founding first Europe and then the wider West.

Today, such claims would be dismissed instantly. They are controversial at best and reactionary and prejudiced, if not worse—a “dog whistle,” it is said, for “White privilege,” “Eurocentrism,” “racism” and “colonialism.” The cultural revolution of the 1960s has triumphed, and the “long march through the institutions” has succeeded. Famously, the European Union refused to acknowledge its Christian roots at the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, and even in America ideas and attitudes that were at the heart of the French Revolution have ousted ideas and attitudes at the heart of the American Revolution. The infamous cry of the Stanford protesters in 1987 has become the mantra of many in the educated classes of the West. “Hey, hey, ho, ho. Western Civ has got to go!”

Needless to say, what matters is not the label “Christian civilization,” but the substance of the beliefs behind it. What is to become of notions such as human dignity, human freedom, and human rights if the Jewish and Christian truths that once made them powerful are abandoned? What will happen as our world becomes not only post-truth but post-rights? Ever since the 1930s critics such as Malcolm Muggeridge have charged that left-wing intellectuals in Europe were cutting off the branch they were sitting on. Nowhere is that more consequential than over human rights. Human rights are the direct reflection of our views of humanity, but with no foundational basis for human dignity, we have moved from what was once considered the *natural rights* of the Universal Declaration to the *antinatural rights* of abortion and euthanasia, and are now moving to the *transnatural rights* of transgenderism and the eugenics of tomorrow. The folly of cutting off the branch is now true of the West as a whole. The West has become a cut-flower civilization. It is living off the whiff of an empty bottle, and the pretense that we can count on everything staying the same as before is wearing dangerously thin. For a culture that was once literally God-given, in the sense that its ideas flowed from its faith in God, to jettison that faith cannot but be consequential.⁸

There is no more important alliance at this hour than between Jews and Christians, for the strength or weakness of the Bible in the West is the key to the survival of the West. As Rabbi Heschel said to Christians after World War II, “Nazism has suffered a defeat, but the process of eliminating the Bible from the consciousness of the Western world goes on. . . . Both of us must realize that in our age anti-Semitism is anti-Christianity and that anti-Christianity is anti-Semitism.”⁹

The tangled relationship between the West and the Jewish and Christian faiths has immense consequences. It currently poses as profound a question for America as it once did to Europe. In Europe the measure of the influence of the Jewish

and Christian faiths was both the measure of the reactions to them in the nineteenth century and the measure of the scale of the ideologies that replaced them in the twentieth century—supremely the communist and Nazi totalitarianisms, which were in essence monotheism-sized antireligious ideologies. Yet because of the disastrous history that followed, Europe today is somewhat wary and to some extent immune to the return of such dangerous fanaticisms.

America, in contrast, had the good fortune to avoid such ideologies in the past, mainly because of the positive strength of the biblical faiths in its earlier history. But the more recent weakening of those same faiths leaves America exposed and without the benefit of any immunity from the lessons of history. Thus today, when American secularism is more militant and the progressive left is roundly repudiating the Jewish and Christian faiths as “the single god religion of White privilege,” America has a weakened immunity to fanaticism and anti-Semitism. The paradoxical result is that “the land of the free” is now the Western nation most vulnerable to ideology, fanaticism, and authoritarianism.

WHEN WORDS BREAK DOWN

Third, the anti-Christian and antireligious animosity of the French Revolution is a warning as to how not to settle differences today. When inequities soar and words break down, violence is never far away, and the costs of violence are often out of all proportion to the original cause. The strongest claims can provoke the most furious responses, and the most important debates are often settled in the worst ways. With ideas there are always choices and consequences. But as history demonstrates and the modern world underscores again, it is a travesty for humanity when disputes between different visions are settled with bludgeons, bayonets, bullets, bombs, and bloodshed rather than through conversation and debate.

In their day it was the French revolutionaries, and today it is their socialist and Marxist heirs who are the leading source of the rise in hostility toward religious believers in today’s world. The troubling record of the revolution is a solemn warning about the current breakdown in the use of words in public discourse. Unless there is a halt to the downward spiral, today’s inflamed rhetoric will be the precursor of tomorrow’s open violence and then scapegoating, and even assassination. (After all, the attitude of the left is clear: if elections go the wrong way and investigations and impeachments also fail, what is there left but assassination? “The scapegoat must always die.”) Plainly, there has to be, and there is, a better way to live with our deepest differences and settle them peacefully.

GOING FOR THE JUGULAR

Fourth, and most importantly for the heart of this chapter, the vehemence of the animosity to faith in God is a backhanded compliment to the importance of faith in God. There is no question that God is central to Exodus and its story of liberation. But there is also no way around the equal fact that to start a discussion of freedom by referring to God is a bridge too far for many people today. Those who feel like that are free to skip to the next chapter, though at the very least thinking people should always be interested in what other thinking people see as supremely important for their thinking—especially if what others believe is considered crucial to the common quest for freedom and human flourishing. According to the Exodus account, there is no greater freedom than demonstrated in this story, and God is not simply part of the story but absolutely, inextricably, and indispensably essential to the freedom shown. The attack on God, or the complete refusal to consider what God means to those who believe in him, is therefore an assault on what is central to faith in God and to beliefs that have been among the most consequential in human history.

Sociologist Rodney Stark declares that radical or ethical monotheism—the belief in a single, sovereign God—is the “single most significant innovation in history.”¹⁰ “Had the Jews been polytheists,” he continues,

they would today be only another barely remembered people, less important but just as extinct as the Babylonians. Had Christians presented Jesus to the Greco-Roman world as “another” God, their faith would long since have gone the way of Mithraism. And surely Islam would never have made it out of the desert had Muhammad not removed Allah from the context of Arab paganism and proclaimed him as the only God.¹¹

Having embraced monotheism, Stark concludes, “these faiths changed the world.”¹²

Current secularist rejections of such a claim have been swift, savage, and sometimes just plain ludicrous—all of which is revealing. Not long ago, the US Department of Veterans Affairs put on a display in New Hampshire that included a small Bible carried by a soldier throughout World War II—the book that more than any other created Western civilization. It drew an instant response from secularists that displaying the Bible was nothing less than an “outrage.” The book that made the Western world, they claimed, was “a repugnant example of fundamentalist Christian triumphalism, exceptionalism, superiority, and domination, and it must not stand.”¹³

At a more serious intellectual level, Gore Vidal, in the Lowell Lecture at Harvard College in 1992, displayed the same animosity. He argued that monotheism is “the great unmentionable evil” at the heart of America.¹⁴ In the same vein, Christopher Hitchens delivered a sharp response to President George W. Bush’s claim that Iran, Iraq, and North Korea formed an axis of evil. The real axis of evil, Hitchens declared repeatedly was Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But no one has been more hostile and more deliberately offensive than Richard Dawkins. In his celebrated opening attack on the God of Sinai in *The God Delusion*, he writes,

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.¹⁵

Make no mistake. These frontal attacks, designed and launched to be an unanswerable blitzkrieg on faith, are the greatest compliment and invaluable help to thinking through the examined life. They focus on the essential issue. There is no way around the truth that, according to the Abrahamic faiths, God is the final and foundational factor for faith. The ultimate issue is neither Israel nor the Christian church nor the failings of either. All humans fail. Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics would all have to confess betrayals of their beliefs and principles. But in taking aim at the person and character of God, critics are going for faith’s jugular. They are right to do so. Jews and Christians are no more special than atheists and Buddhists; what is special and admirable is the faith of the Bible. Both the Jewish and Christian faiths stand or fall according to whether God is truly there, whether God is who he says he is, and whether God can be known the way Jews and Christians say they have encountered him from the beginning and throughout their respective histories.

LYING IN THE BED WE HAVE MADE

One way to underscore this point is to stand back and compare the three different families of faiths or ultimate beliefs. A gigantic fact shines through all the comparisons. The difference between the world’s ultimate beliefs pivots on the difference between what they each believe is the ultimate source of reality. Is it the impersonal ground of being of the Hindus and Buddhists? Is it the eternal and

ever-changing random universe of Epicurus, Lucretius, and their modern secularist heirs? Or is it the personal and infinite God who disclosed himself to Moses at the burning bush and to Israel at Mount Sinai, and then, Christians believe, through Jesus of Nazareth? It will not do to translate the notion of God into any other category—as if *God* is only another term for love, ethics, community, or any human ideal. No. If the claims of the biblical faiths are correct, God is God, the final and foundational Presence, the reality underlying all existence, including our own.

That, ultimately, decisively, and forever, is the question that decides our view of life, the world, existence itself—and of course freedom. It means simply that behind the Jewish and Christian claims to truth and the power and influence of the biblical faiths at their best, as well as the vehemence of the repudiation of either faith at its worst, lies the foundational belief in the God who discloses himself and speaks in the Bible. Utterly unique and profoundly consequential, the character of the God of the Bible must be taken with deep seriousness if anyone is to understand the singular view of life and humanity that the Bible introduces and empowers.

Jump ahead in the argument for a moment. There is no question that the God who reveals himself in the Bible has been the direct source of three striking features of human existence at its most attractive: first, the highest humanism in history—*humanism* in the sense of championing the supreme human dignity and worth of the human individual; second, the surest grounds for founding and developing human freedom, both personal and political; and the third, the greatest and most sustained critique of the abuse of power in history.

Those are strong claims. They are anything but trifling pieties, and they stand in sharp, polar contrast to critical theory and the ideas of the radical left. What makes them possible is the majesty and mystery of the difference of God and the difference he makes. By all means “crush the loathsome thing,” as Voltaire proposed, or “murder God,” as Nietzsche claimed had happened in his time. But such assailants are driving a stake through the heart of the highest and most awesome of human aspirations and thereby reducing life to a different and far more dismal affair. The very vehemence of the hostility toward faith in God betrays the significance of the meaning of God and heightens the importance of understanding how people encountered God in the first place.

Thomas Jefferson, America’s third president and the author of the Declaration of Independence, is often attacked for his moral hypocrisy. At the very time that

he wrote the famous words “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” he was attended by two slaves in Philadelphia, and he owned sixty slaves at home in Monticello, and six hundred slaves over the course of his lifetime. He also rebuffed William Wilberforce’s plea to form a “Concert of Benevolence” between Britain and America to lead the world in getting rid of slavery. But surprisingly for such a giant of the mind, Jefferson also displayed an intellectual inconsistency to match his hypocrisy. He referred to the slaves in a letter, “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people shall be free.”¹⁶

Written in the book of fate? Fate has never freed anyone and never will free anyone. Fate is antithetical to freedom, and freedom has everything to do with faith, not fate. Slavery is the norm in history and abolition is the exception. The moral triumph of the abolition of slavery was promoted by Quakers such as John Woolman and evangelical Christians such as William Wilberforce, while Jefferson did nothing. It was a tribute to their passionate faith, and it was in direct and persistent opposition to the age-old fate of the slaves. Freedom and fate are irreconcilably opposed. It was no “book of fate” but Exodus, the book of faith and freedom, that made possible the liberation of the Israelite slaves, the later liberation of the African American slaves, and the emergence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. Slavery, after all, is the long-held human tradition, while liberation and abolition are the novelty.

ABLAZE BUT NOT BURNED UP

The entire story of the great liberation of Exodus flows from three direct and immediate encounters with God at the very outset of the account. They are decisive for the whole story of the exodus. Importantly, God encounters human beings and addresses them. The initiative is his. Thus God, who is at the heart of the Abrahamic faiths, is utterly different from any other conception of God, starting with the fact that we humans meet God when he reveals himself to us. He is emphatically not the fruit of brilliant human reflection, the finding at the end of a patient philosophical quest, the QED (that which was to be demonstrated) written to conclude any line of reasoning or the proof established by any repeatable scientific experiment.

Encountering the God of the Bible is therefore completely and utterly different from all the fruits of human reflection. It is quite different from what Gautama Buddha claimed to have discovered beneath the Bodhi tree, what any philosopher

has ever found at the end of a long and arduous search for the meaning of life, or what any scientist has concluded after looking through the most powerful telescope or microscope. The God of the Bible encounters and addresses humans in history and through events. He speaks to us as persons and breaks into our experience in life. It may be possible to think of God as an idea, a theory, or an abstraction, and some people may be content to speak about him as such, but no one meets God himself like that. We meet God as the Supreme Presence, the reality of a living presence who addresses us as persons with presence. He discloses himself. He reveals himself to us. In the famous words of Blaise Pascal's "Night of Fire" on November 23, 1654: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not the god of philosophers and scholars."¹⁷

Faith is more about God's search for humanity than humanity's search for God. Just such an encounter, indeed no less than three such encounters, lie at the heart of Exodus. Together, they form the pivot on which the whole story turns and from which the Bible as a whole surges forward with power. Exodus is the story of God encountering and liberating his people. Exodus is nothing if it is not the story of God. The first of those encounters is so central and so famous that many people do not realize that there are two other equally decisive encounters. The first is when God addresses Moses at the burning bush on the slopes of Mount Sinai. Tending his father-in-law's flock, Moses is arrested by the remarkable sight of a bush that was somehow ablaze with fire but not burned up.

Sitting under his Bodhi tree in Varanasi, Buddha concluded that the reality of this world was all illusion and impermanence, and he led his millions of followers down the same sad path. Standing before the bush that was burning but not burned up, Moses came to the complete and utter opposite conclusion—he came face to face with a Presence that meant *permanence* and *ultimate reality*. We humans tire, grow old, and die. Civilizations decline and fall. Entropy touches the whole of nature. The second law of thermodynamics operates everywhere. What burns, burns up. What fire destroys stays destroyed. But here, in this nondescript desert bush, was something burning that did not burn up, something as dynamic and destructive as fire that did not run down and did not destroy. What on earth could it be, and what could it mean?

In our day Peter Berger has described such an experience as a "signal of transcendence," an experience that punctures our given sense of reality and points beyond, creating wonder and curiosity. Turning aside, Moses suddenly found himself addressed by God who introduced himself as the God of Moses'

fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and announced that he was sending Moses back to Egypt to liberate his people from their slavery.

Probably nothing was further from Moses' mind at that moment than freeing his people. Hebrew born but raised a prince of Egypt, he had once thought he might make a stand on behalf of his people, but his rash attempt to do so had been a fiasco, and he had fled for his life. Now, with the passing of time and his position as a shepherd in a foreign country, any thought of a rescue operation in Egypt was ludicrous. Moses therefore ducks and weaves to evade the commanding pull of God's call. Who was he to do it, and how could he possibly do it? He was inarticulate. But then, if the sons of Israel were to ask him for his credentials and inquire as to who had sent him, what was he to say to them?

God's answer stopped Moses in his tracks, just as it has stopped every thoughtful person who ponders what God said. The answer is three words in Hebrew, and they are often translated as "I AM WHO I AM . . . I AM has sent me to you" (Ex 3:14). The words come out of the silent desert air like a thunderclap. There is no preparation and no elaboration. Understood that way, the God who calls and commissions Moses names himself as the one who simply, finally, and foundationally is God—HE WHO IS. That is the beginning and end of it. God is God. All that exists, all that is there throughout the vast universe is only there because it is created, and it stands before God as creation stands before its Creator. There is no one and nothing higher than God, and it makes no sense to think of anyone or anything before God or behind God. Moses has met the Supreme Presence, the ultimate reality, the source of permanence, or more accurately, the Supreme Presence has encountered Moses and humanity has never been the same.

GOD IN THE FUTURE TENSE

But that is not how Rabbi Sacks and many Jews understand the three words in Hebrew. They put the accent on the future tense, not the present, and translate them as "I will be who I will be." The danger in the first translation lies in taking the absoluteness of God in a Greek direction and making God into the "god of the philosophers," the "pure being," or the "ground of all being" who does not, cannot, and will not change or feel anything. But viewing God as static, changeless, and unfeeling is wrong. God, as he reveals himself at Sinai and afterward, is faithful and unchanging (and not the god of process theology), but he is passionate and he is always on the move. Faith in God is always a journey, not an

achievement or a condition. God is active and moving toward the future of his will and his design. As Rabbi Sacks points out, in this very disclosure God announces that he is about to enter history and intervene in an unprecedented way to liberate his people. God as Lord is the God of surprise. He can never be put into a box. He is not confined by human expectations. He is sovereign over the future as over the present. “He will be who He will be.”

Ponder just two of the titanic consequences of this disclosure. First, the absoluteness of God as the Supreme Presence means that *who God is* is ultimate in the universe and therefore determines how we can view the universe itself. The immensity of this truth is staggering. Is the universe indifferent to us, as Richard Dawkins, the new atheists, and most naturalistic scientists believe? (Chance and necessity are behind everything.) Is the universe hostile to us, as most pagan religions have believed? (Those whom the gods love die young.) No, the Bible declares. God simply and absolutely is the Supreme Presence. Back of everything is God, and God reveals himself as a God of love and mercy and compassion and truth and justice, so love, mercy, compassion, truth, and justice are ultimate in the universe. Yes, there is brokenness, and certainly there are contradictions in the universe as we know it now, but they are humanly caused, and they are not ultimate and will not be final. Life is neither absurd nor tragic, but essentially good (though gone wrong). Our trust in God is therefore anchored surely. God is greater than all. God may be trusted in all situations. Those who know God have faith in him and need have no fear.

Second, the absoluteness of God in the future tense means that faith in God is future-oriented, forward-looking, and truly revolutionary. God is sovereign and always moving toward his purposes. “He will be who He will be,” and he cannot and will not be stopped. Sacks’s comments soar. The freedom of God underwrites human freedom, it transforms history into an arena of change, it calls into question every status quo, and it gives faith its future-oriented thrust as hope, and it holds out its messianic vision of the golden age that does not recede into the past (like that of most religions and societies) but beckons always from ahead in the future.

Like Moses, even as we ponder the immensity of what we have heard, we are on holy ground. *God’s name says it all.* From that momentous disclosure onwards Jews have revered the four-letter name of God and held it to be holy and unpronounceable. Only once a year was the name YHWH said out loud and then only by the high priest in the holy of holies at the climax of Yom

Kippur, the Day of Atonement. For the remainder of the year, and for everyone else, people referred only to “the Name” (*Hashem*), and the actual name YHWH was passed over in silence.

When the Jews refer to YHWH, Lord, only as *Hashem*, “the Name,” they express their reverence for God and remain silent before the majesty and reality of God as God most fully is in himself. As Rabbi Sacks explains, there is a difference between proper names and descriptions. “*Things* have descriptions, but only *people* have proper names.”¹⁸ YHWH or *Hashem* is the proper name God revealed to Moses to tell him what he needed to know as to who he is. It is therefore the word used when we encounter God existentially in a personal relationship with him—as in Martin Buber’s famous description of I-Thou relationships or C. S. Lewis’s famous prayer before prayer: “May it be the real You that I speak to, and may it be the real Me who speaks.”

YHWH, as God’s own self-revelation, is revered as the name that is singular, unique, and used only of God. By contrast, the term *God—Elohim*—is generic and used in the Bible both of other gods besides God and of God when speaking to people who do not know God in himself. As the name we treasure because God revealed it to us himself, YHWH is the name reserved for God as we encounter him in revelation, whereas *Elohim* is the name for God as we meet him in creation.

Rabbi Heschel was a philosopher, but he constantly stressed the difference between the name of God and the notion of God. He told of the time he was asked to speak at a conference on “the Jewish notion of God.” He rejected the title at once.

The God of Israel is a name, not a notion. . . . A notion applies to all objects of similar properties. A name applies to an individual. “God of Israel” applies to the one and only God of all men. A notion describes, defines; a name evokes. A notion is derived from a generalization; a name is learned through acquaintance.

The more appropriate title, Heschel said, should have been, “The Jewish Experience of the Collapse of all Notions in Relation to God.”¹⁹ After the burning bush, YHWH is a name and not a notion.

For people of faith, the “great revelation” means that the first principle of freedom, as for all human thinking and living, can only be the absolute authority and centrality of God whom we meet and come to know. *Faith* and *nonfaith* are

entirely different modes of being. To move to faith in God from whatever form of nonfaith or other faith we were once in is therefore a life-changing experience and an epochal boundary crossing. God in his sovereignty is free, and for those who know him as he is, all discussion and experience of freedom begin and end at that point. From then on both Moses and his successor, Joshua, speak of God, in contrast to idols and all the human projections of the forces of the universe, as “the living God.” What starts as a description of God becomes the name of God as he speaks and acts freely in his universe (Deut 5:25; Josh 3:10). At the very heart of the Jewish and Christian faiths, at the very center of all that Jews and Christians think and do, and therefore at the very core of human freedom is “the living God.” Freedom begins with God.

WHEN THE DARKNESS WAS WORST

This awe-filled revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai lies at the heart of the experience and understanding of radical monotheism, the belief in the Supreme Presence, the “one true God” who is central to the three Abrahamic faiths. Yet that is only the first of three such disclosures by God in Exodus. The second and less-mentioned revelation is to Moses in connection with his meeting with the elders of Israel at the very lowest point of their slavery. Moses, together with his brother Aaron, had announced that God had sent them to free the Israelites, only to find that his attempt had made things worse. Slavery and a slow genocide (extermination of the male babies) were bad enough, but Pharaoh responded to their request for freedom by piling extra demands on them that were humanly impossible—the same quota of bricks but no straw to make them with. The Israelite foremen complained bitterly to Moses. Not only had he made them odious in their overseers’ eyes, but he had also put a sword in their hand to make their lives intolerable.

Naturally, Moses went back to God, anguished. Hadn’t he done exactly what God told him to do? But the situation had become far worse, not better. And God had not done what he said he would do. In fact, he had done absolutely nothing. So why had God sent him and then left him to twist in the wind? But that is the moment, at this lowest point in the entire story, when God reveals himself for the second time—first to Moses and then for him to relay to the Hebrew elders. “Now you shall see what I will do,” God says (Ex 6:1).

That declaration is followed by an extraordinary passage that is not as appreciated by most Christians as it deserves to be because we mostly do not know Hebrew. I am told that in Hebrew, the words “I am the LORD” are repeated three

times, and they form a framework for the passage, coming at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. The first mention of “I am the LORD” is followed by fifty words in Hebrew, and then “I am the LORD” is repeated, followed by a further fifty words, ending in “I am the LORD” a third time (Ex 6:2, 6, 8). Such a carefully crafted style of literary expression is called a *chiasmus*, and it follows the pattern of A-B-C-B-A, with the second half of the passage mirroring the first half. It serves to highlight the three “I AM” declarations that frame it. The first fifty words are in the past tense, referring back to God’s promises to the patriarchs, and the second fifty words are in the future tense, detailing God’s promises to Israel. Now, God declares, he will free Israel.

Curiously, the passage also includes a fourth mention of the name YHWH, which has caused much comment. “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but *by My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them*” (Ex 6:3). Was the name YHWH entirely new, as many people interpret this verse—in contrast to *Elohim*, the generic word for God? Not at all. The name YHWH appears 165 times in Genesis, beginning with the story of creation, where both words are used. God addresses both Abraham and Jacob by his name YHWH (Gen 15:7; 28:13). The key to understanding the word probably lies in the meaning of the verb “to know.” Knowing in Hebrew is anything but detached intellectual assent. The word is also used to mean sexual intercourse, and it contains the idea of “knowing in experience” or “experiencing in reality.” Thus earlier generations may have known that God was YHWH, but they had not experienced God in living reality, in decisive and dramatic rescuing power, as the Israelites (and Pharaoh) were about to know him.

UNIQUE AND UNBEARABLE

The third great revelation in the story of the exodus is all-decisive for the Jewish people. God comes down to address the Israelites at Mount Sinai once they have escaped from Pharaoh and crossed the Red Sea. The titanic drama of the experience constitutes them as God’s people and becomes the founding event in their long and celebrated history. Yet Christians commonly read the account (Ex 19) and miss its momentous import. Many fail to understand the third revelation because it tends to be overshadowed, first by the drama of the surrounding events—the giving of the Ten Commandments and the rebellion of the golden calf; and second, by their focusing on the dramatic example of God’s call to individuals rather than to the Jewish people as a nation.

Yet therein lies the uniqueness of the third revelation. God's call to Moses at the burning bush was to an individual, his call to Moses and the Jewish elders at their low point was to an elite group, his call to Isaiah in the temple in Jerusalem has rarely, if ever, been duplicated, and his call to Saul on the road to Damascus was in a highly unusual manner. *But what happened at Mount Sinai is unique: God addresses an entire nation in one place and at one time—men, women, and children—for the first and only time in human history up till now—* which by itself deserves pondering. Moses describes what that day was like to the next generation but then highlights its immensity as unique and unprecedented. “Has anything as great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?” Moses' questions are rhetorical, of course, and he hurries on to call on the whole of history to be his witness. “Has any god tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation?” (Deut 4:32-34 NIV).

God's address to Israel at Mount Sinai beggars description. But as Rabbi Sacks points out, two things are clear from the accounts in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. First, the audience was unique. God spoke to the entire nation rather than to a single leader or a group of elders, as he did in the first two revelations. Second, the experience was unique. “The sound was of almost unbearable intensity. The Israelites clamored around Moses begging him to ask God to stop. ‘You speak to us and we shall listen, but let God not speak to us, lest we die’” (Ex 20:19).²⁰ In the Middle Ages some writers interpreted the fact that the revelation was to the whole nation as a guarantee of its veracity. If nearly a million people heard the same voice at the same time, it must have been certain. Today, the stress is on the political significance. The politics of freedom was born at Sinai. Israel, not the United States, was history's *first new nation*. The people of Israel, rescued by God and addressed by God, were to be a new and free people for him.

In sum, God's revelations in Exodus are decisive in history and decisive for the politics of freedom. As Rabbi Sacks points out, Sinai preceded Athens. Sinai has outlasted Athens. And Sinai, not Athens, was decisive in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of modern freedom. And as I shall argue as we explore these issues further, Sinai's vision of freedom is vastly superior to that of Athens (and London, Philadelphia, Paris, Saint Petersburg, and Beijing)—*and all because of who God is*. According to the Bible's view, there can be no understanding of freedom apart from understanding God.

LET GOD BE GOD

In this chapter and those that follow we are exploring a series of seven foundational truths that are at the heart of Exodus and essential for maintaining freedom today. Each truth contains numerous possible implications, and we can only be selective. That is emphatically the case with the great revelation of God in the Bible. The difference of God from all other gods and all other authorities and allegiances is the ultimate difference that makes the most far-reaching difference in countless areas. An entire book might be written on this point alone, but certain implications are vital for the understanding of freedom and human rights.

First, if God is who he reveals himself to be in the Bible, then God, and not reason, nature, or science, must be central to the thinking and living of all who come to know God—and certainly to their entire understanding of freedom. Coming to know God as he reveals himself is the ultimate Copernican Revolution in human life and thinking. Other authorities such as reason, nature, science, and tradition are highly important in their place but no longer central and all-important. *Revelation*, in the sense of the way we have encountered God and who God has revealed himself to be, is now central and essential to all thinking. All other ways of thinking and living must be decisively reoriented to be ordered and shaped by the truth and the experience of God's revelation. How we see God must shape how we see and live life. The response of all who come to know God, experience God, and trust God as he reveals himself must be unequivocal. From the moment of coming to know God, all who have encountered God in such undeniable reality must say to themselves, *Know before whom you live, and think, and act, and see life.* In the magnificent phrase attributed to Martin Luther, the heart and soul of faith is to “let God be God.”

People of other faiths and worldviews and those who have not encountered God like this will doubtless find these words strange or even repellent. The chasm between Sinai and Paris, for example, is vast at this point. Sinai begins and ends with the ultimate Presence, so that faith rests on conviction and assurance that are rocklike. Paris and critical theory, on the other hand, build on sand. They glory in their bid for revolutionary freedom by attempting to reject what they see as the oppressive confines of categories, the words and labels that pin people in place like butterflies on a board—binaries such as male and female, for example. In the process they set out to dismantle all categories, blur all boundaries, dissolve all clarity, and erode all certainties, only to end in a skepticism, incoherence, chaos, and anxiety that is not so much free as unlivable.

At the very least, people who claim complete disinterest in God should try to understand what Jews and Christians believe and how they view life—above all because the implications for notions such as human dignity and freedom are so crucial for our life together. But let there be no misunderstanding or caricature of this position. Those who have encountered God in this way prize the importance of reason highly (just as they prize the important place of nature, science, and tradition). They do not for a second think that faith is irrational. Reason is absolutely vital, but rationalism, the *ism* based on reason alone, is wrong and dangerous because it represents the overreach of reason. Reason by itself can neither justify itself nor explain or sustain the meaning of life. When it is asked to, it inevitably collapses into irrationality as modern philosophy demonstrates.

The same is true of other good things that, good as they are, cannot carry the full weight of life. Thus, those who have encountered God prize the place and importance of science and the scientific method, but science can never replace faith because it speaks to the *how* question and not the *why*. Technology can be an extraordinary force for good. As it advances it presents us with ever more power and countless blessings, but it cannot advise us on how to use it well. Market economics is history's most successful way of creating wealth, but by itself it falls short. It opens up unprecedented choices and lifts more people out of poverty than ever before in history, but it is mute as to which choices would be wisest and best. The liberal constitutional and democratic state may be vastly superior to its rivals, above all in offering us freedoms of one sort or another, but it cannot supply the basis on which to use them well.

To let God be God is the heart of revolutionary faith, and that is what makes faith revolutionary. God's presence calls into question every status quo. That is why true faith must never become reactionary, and why faith must never simply bolster the status quo or provide religious legitimacy for cultures under stress. Revolutionary faith begins with a call to break with the status quo of the time each generation lives in, a conversion from all other ways of thinking and living, a radical turning and a revolution at the very center of all our thinking and living. Conversion in this sense is the ultimate defection from all other ways of thinking and living, the ultimate about-face, and the micro revolution that is the natural beginning of the revolutionary faith that faith in God leads to. Those who come to know God have their lives turned upside down and become his junior partners in the great project of turning the world the right way up again.

Just as the earth goes around the sun rather than the sun around the earth, so all thinking must do justice to the primacy and centrality of God and displace the false centrality of humanity and reason by itself. Thinking that begins and ends with human reason may be brilliant in its coherence, but it will necessarily be limited and reductionist. All that such thinking is doing is confining the world to the small circle of its own understanding, and like people wrapped up in themselves, that makes for a very small parcel. Thus, contrary to Protagoras, “Man is not the measure of all things,” and reason most certainly isn’t. Utterly brilliant though Leonardo da Vinci was, his *Vitruvian Man* is wrong—not, as the feminists say, because he is a man and young, handsome, and European rather than a woman, but because he is a human at the center where God alone should be. Only God is the measure of all things. Man as the measure of all things reduces humans, and reason as the measure of all things reduces them further. (Just remember the role of the will, freedom, and the unconscious.) Only if God is the measure of all things is Man both reminded that he is small but raised to be truly great.

As we shall see in chapter two, Jewish and Christian understandings converge at this point to form the highest humanism, but the secret begins here. The ancient Greeks and the modern secular humanists agree over the starting counsel “Know yourself.” But not knowing God, they always try to understand human beings in relation to nature or to themselves, and they always end in reducing humanity to the level of nature or an animal or a machine. The Bible in contrast understands humanity *upward*, not *downward*. The grand premise of biblical faith, as Rabbi Heschel insists, is that humans are able to surpass themselves. Faith begins with the call to “lift up your eyes and see” (Gen 13:14), “know your God” (1 Chron 28:9), and “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10), and not surprisingly it ends with the highest view of humanity. Humanity understood solely on its own terms will always be smaller than humans know themselves to be in experience. Only as humans transcend themselves, as they are called or questioned by their cosmos and supremely by their Creator, can they rise above themselves and become the creatures they were created and called to be. “There is no self-understanding without God-understanding.”²¹ Only if God is at the center can reason and human thinking be liberated to be wide-ranging enough to engage the full reality of the universe and the rich wonder of life and existence.

The Greeks reported that after Plato defined man as “a two-legged animal without feathers,” Diogenes plucked a rooster and brought it into the Academy.

A “featherless animal,” a “naked ape,” a “selfish gene,” “a gene’s way of making another gene,” the “toolmaking animal”? Human attempts at defining humanity go on and on, and the failures mount. Created in the image of God, human beings must be defined upward. They will never be defined downward to their own satisfaction.

Ludwig Wittgenstein described his work as a philosopher as helping the fly get out of the bottle. The fly buzzes around the bottle and never looks up to the neck and the open air above it. Eventually, it falls exhausted from its futile efforts and dies. By themselves, reason, emotions, nature, science, and tradition can do no better for our thinking and living. Vital though they are, not one of them is sufficient by itself, in isolation. Only when we encounter God and understand them under God do they come into their own. Only when we “let God be God” can human thinking and living be true, satisfying, and provide the foundations for genuine human flourishing.

To understand the universe fully we have to look for meaning that is outside the universe, and to understand ourselves fully we have to surpass ourselves and rise to the call of our Creator. The alternative for our relationship to the universe is to understand things downward, to make all knowledge a matter of power and end in exploitation and the ruin of the earth. The downward alternative for humanity is to see ourselves only as toolmakers, to make all knowledge a matter of causation and expediency, and to end in reductionism, determinism, fate, and alienation.

Against all the many varieties of contemporary humanism, the Bible asserts that God is the measure of all things, not humans. Worshiping God, understanding God, and bearing witness to God must all be decisively different because of the difference of who God is and the difference in the way he reveals himself. The Copernican Revolution changes thinking and living forever, and in every way. Because of who God is, it is completely and absolutely impossible for “Man” alone to be the measure of all things. To be sure, of all the life forms on earth only humans measure the world and life as we do. But those very measuring rods—reason, nature, and the scientific method—need to be measured and justified themselves, and none of them can justify themselves by themselves.

The truth, rather, is that “humanity before God” is the measure of all things, the standard for human responsibility, and the secret to a life lived well. None of us will understand or live life well until we see ourselves as individual women and men in relation to the One who is our Father, our Creator, and our judge.

Such is the power of the sun that the earth goes around the sun, and not the sun around the earth. Faith in God is a revolutionary faith with a calling to turn the world the right way up.

FREEDOM'S FOUNDATION

Second, the centrality of God as he reveals himself means that the sovereign freedom of God must be central to thinking about human freedom. Freedom requires authority, a source that authorizes it, and for the Bible and the biblical family of faiths, the authority and the source for freedom is God. He who says, “I am who I am” and “I will be who I will be” is the Lord who is sovereign and free. All freedom therefore stems from him and needs to be understood in his way. In God’s sovereign freedom he can express and exert his will despite all interference and resistance. The Supreme Presence and final reality is not fate, chance, or necessity. Thus, when God says, “Let my people go,” God in his freedom is working to free his people to worship him freely and to live together in freedom before him as freely as he intended them to live, as people created in his image and likeness.

Other philosophies and ultimate beliefs will rely on other authorities, such as reason, nature, science, and tradition and make them primary in their thinking. But for the biblical family of faiths, such is the great revelation of God at Sinai that no other authority is needed or desired. Freedom is the beginning and the end, the summary and the soul of the entire book of Exodus. And that freedom flows directly from the character and will of the sovereign God, who expresses and exerts his will despite all resistance and interference.

It so happens that, in the case of human freedom, no other philosophy or authority has been able to provide the foundation needed for freedom. At the height of the French Revolution, Robespierre and his colleagues made a determined bid to ground freedom without God. They tried to replace the worship of God with the worship of Dame Nature. To do so symbolically, they replaced the high altar of Notre Dame with a “mountain” of earth from which an actress, dressed in white, delivered a “Hymn to Liberty”—“Descend, O Liberty, daughter of Nature.”²² Daughter of nature? That is absurd, and the attempt was futile. Liberty is not the daughter of nature and never can be, even if we spell nature with a capital N and personify nature as Gaia or Mother Nature. Neither nature alone, nor reason and science alone, has ever given us the grounding for human freedom. Each of them leads not to freedom but to determinism. Freedom is

the gift of God. It does not, cannot, and will not come from reason, science, or nature alone.

The truth is that modern science underscores determinism and undermines freedom with relentless insistence. The human claim to be free is a fiction. The only surprise is that this bleak candor is not taken more seriously. B. F. Skinner stated it unambiguously in the title of his bestselling book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. (“What is being abolished is autonomous man . . . the man defended by the literature of freedom and dignity.”)²³ He argued that while the traditional Jewish and Christian view of humanity supported Hamlet’s exclamation “How like a god!” this new Pavlovian view supports the statement “How like a dog!” Skinner did not consider that statement a setback for humanity but an advance, because it is the truth that science tells us. More recently, new atheist philosopher Sam Harris came to the same conclusion. “Free will *is* an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. . . . We do not have the freedom we think we have.”²⁴ Yuval Harari summarizes how, according to this secularist view, science has driven nails into “freedom’s coffin.”

To the best of our scientific understanding, determinism and randomness have divided the entire cake between them, leaving not even a crumb for “freedom.” The sacred word “freedom” turns out to be, just like “soul,” a hollow term empty of any discernible meaning. Free will exists only in the imaginary stories we humans have invented.

But of course this bleak judgment represents a challenge not only to freedom but to liberalism. The ungrounded freedom that liberalism affirms is a pretense and an illusion, which is why establishment liberalism in America and many Western countries has folded so weakly when confronted by the radical left. “However,” Harari continues, “over the last few decades the life sciences have reached the conclusion that this liberal story is pure mythology. The single authentic self is as real as the eternal soul, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny.”²⁵

Rabbi Sacks counters this bleak conclusion decisively. The so-called scientific dismissal of human freedom says more about the limits of science than about the nonexistence of human freedom. The fact is that a fallacy has dominated the scientific study of humankind.

Science searches for causes; a cause always precedes its effect; therefore science will always proceed to explain a phenomenon in the present by

reference to something that happened in the past—anything from the genome to early childhood experiences to brain chemistry to recent stimuli. It will follow that science will inevitably deny the existence of human free will. The denial may be soft or hard, gentle or brutal, but it will come. Freedom will be seen as an illusion.²⁶

The fallacy, of course, is not the fault of science itself but of *scientism* or the purely naturalistic vision of science that presumes to be able to use the scientific method to explain everything. The fallacy is simple, Sacks notes.

Human action is always oriented to the future. I put the kettle on because I want a cup of coffee. I work hard because I want to pass the exam. I act to bring about a future that is not yet. Science cannot account for the future because something that has not happened yet cannot be a cause. Therefore there will always be something about intentional human action that science cannot explain.²⁷

Martin Seligman argues in *Homo Prospectus* that the great mistake of Sigmund Freud and many others has been to focus only on the past and the present—on an individual's history, genetic makeup, and present drives, emotions, and stimuli and so to overlook everything that is forward-looking. The future, of course, cannot be measured, so the inevitable result of the naturalistic way of thinking is that we are each determined, caught in a web of causes, “a prisoner of the past and present.”²⁸

Once again, faith in the God of Sinai—“I will be who I will be”—always includes a future tense and a strong sense of vision, hope, and anticipation. Faith in God is forward-looking, future-oriented, progressive, and truly transformative and revolutionary. It is not simply caused, it causes. Karl Marx famously charged that religion is the “flowers on the chains” that decks out and disguises human captivity. Certainly, religion can be and often has been reactionary. Over the centuries, it has been corrupted again and again in order to bolster the status quo. Secularist ideology is easily corrupted too. Ironically, Marx started with the claim that the beginning of all criticism was the criticism of religion, only to end with a political religion that has ended all criticism.

The revolutionary faith of Exodus is quite different. It is all about freedom, change, transformation, and the future—the very freedom that science by itself cannot justify and revolutionary socialism has never achieved. Sacks quotes the

nineteenth-century Jewish philosopher Herman Cohen: “What Greek intellectualism could not create, prophetic monotheism succeeded in creating. . . . For the Greek, history is oriented solely toward the past. The prophet, however, is a seer, not a scholar. The prophets are the idealists of history. Their seerdom created the concept of history as *the being of the future*.”²⁹ Sacks concludes with the hauntingly beautiful summary of Harold Fisch, a literary scholar, who referred to “the unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled.”³⁰

Later we will see how forgiveness is linked inseparably to freedom, and how together they open up a future that can be different from the past. In Exodus the free and sovereign God frees his people to worship him freely and to live freely together before him. Revolutionary faith is uniquely the foundation and fulfillment of the highest human freedom and the dynamic for the deepest human transformation. Rabbi Sacks states the Jewish view boldly: “Judaism is a religion of freedom and responsibility. Against all the many determinisms in the history of thought—astrological, philosophical, Spinozist, Marxist, Freudian, neo-Darwinian—Judaism insists that we are masters of our fate. . . . We can choose.”³¹

RESPECT FOR THE OTHER REQUIRES SELF-LIMITATION

A third implication is one that raises one of the greatest challenges of freedom: *Any and all recognition of freedom means recognizing the integrity of the equal freedom of others.* The mutuality and reciprocity of freedom is easy to say and commonly said. (“A right for one is a right for another, and a responsibility for both.” “Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere,” and so on.) Yet this reminder is all too often reduced to a cliché and then quickly overridden in practice. From one side, extreme individualism turns freedom into the unbridled self-assertion of some individuals with no serious concern for the equal freedom of other individuals. From another side, postmodernism recognizes only the principle of power, so we are each encouraged to assert ourselves until we hit the natural limits to our own power in the face of powers greater than our own. In short, the victory once again goes to the strong, and the weak go to the wall.

For Jews and Christians that situation is the breeding ground of injustice and abuse of power. For these two faiths too, the barrier against that temptation lies in the character of God as just, and an essential principle protecting the mutuality of freedom lies in the way God himself treats others. It comes from understanding how God, in his sovereign freedom, relates to humans created in his

image, with their own significant freedom. *God so respects the integrity of humans created in his image that he limits his freedom in regard to the freedom of the human heart and conscience—and so should we.* This principle is rooted in the Jewish notion of *tzimtzum*, the idea of divine self-limitation. As Rabbi Sacks explains, “If God is everywhere, how can anything else exist?” The answer is that “the very act of creation involved a self-limitation on the part of God.”³² The one place God does not invade or override is the human heart and conscience. Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk, the Kotzker, replied to students who argued that God was everywhere. “You have not understood. God lives *where we let him in.*”³³ Rabbi Sacks expresses the same point simply: “Though God can create universes, He cannot live within the human heart *unless we let Him in.*”³⁴ Or again, “In miracles, God changes physical nature but never *human* nature. Were He to do so, the entire project of the Torah—the free worship of free human beings—would have been rendered null and void.”³⁵

This principle (the humility of God’s respect for the integrity of his creation) has immense significance in both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures. It is vital too for political notions such as freedom of conscience and religious liberty. God respects the integrity of the human heart, so he will not make us believe in him, and he will not force us to be moral. That truth lies behind religious freedom and behind a reliance on persuasion rather than coercion. Both are based on respect for freedom of conscience. To believe or not to believe and to choose to be moral or not is our responsible choice.

But the same principle also carries profound practical implications for freedom and the politics of freedom. Freedom is the freedom to be our individual selves and therefore to be properly self-assertive in expressing and exercising our wills—freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of speech, and freedom of association. But the full right of such freedom should also be marked by humility, responsibility, the self-limitation that is respect for others—and a willingness to sacrifice. Sacrifice and self-limitation are closely linked, for *sacrifice is simply self-limitation at a price.* Respect for the freedom of others is the fruit of respect for the integrity of others in themselves. Self-assertion at the expense of others is an abuse of power, but self-limitation is an expression of respect for another, just as sacrifice is an expression of love for another, whether for a family or a country. To recognize this truth and limit oneself is the beginning of humility, responsibility, freedom, and love.

WORDS MAKE WORLDS

A fourth implication of the great revelation in Exodus concerns the importance of words, and the importance of words for freedom—*God created the world through a word, and God reveals himself in words. Words are therefore essential for creating bonds and building a world of freedom, so all who know God and love freedom must be champions and guardians of words.*

The lofty Sinai view of words bears on today's situation in two main ways. First, and more generally, Sinai's high view of words stands in strong contrast to the way the advanced modern world simultaneously inflates, trivializes, weaponizes, and demeans words. In the great age of the visual, words play second fiddle to photos, graphics, and icons. In the world of consumerism words are mere lackeys to products, and in the realm of the social media words are no more than weapons with which to blaze back with hasty opinions and emotional counter-retorts. Rarely have words been so grandiose and so belittled. The F-word is near universal, and adjectives such as *awesome*, *wonderful*, and *terrific* are now synonymous and interchangeable with *cool* and *neat*. In the Babel of our media and social media, words have been hyped, worn out, and left threadbare. In Rabbi Heschel's telling description, words "turn waif, elusive, a mouthful of dust. Words have ceased to be commitments."³⁶

Second, the Sinai view of words agrees yet crucially disagrees with Paris and critical theory over the importance of words. As we shall see in chapter seven, critical theory takes words very seriously. It analyzes discourse and the way in which speech expresses what a society takes to be truth and knowledge. The aim is to expose the power relations in a society as expressed in words, and it does that to identify where there is oppression and who are the victims. The deconstruction of speech is therefore a prime tool for liberating the oppressed and the marginalized. But the problem is that in both its theory and its practice everything is negative and there is no positive. There is ceaseless deconstruction, but no reconstruction. The dismantling is never followed by rebuilding. The result is a generation of "ever-offendables," hypersensitive to microaggression and "trigger words," and a steady erosion of freedom of speech through speech codes and political correctness. The outcome is the culture of grievance, the "cancel culture," the silence of the cowed, the rage of the crowd, and an overall shift from one oppressor to another.

In strong contrast, the Bible's stress on the importance of words is on behalf of the positive—the true, the good, and the beautiful in the service of trust,

freedom, and justice. The power, the beauty, and the grandeur of the cosmos were called into being by a word, the dignity of humans was created by a word and is respected in words, and the freedom, justice, and peace of human community are all sustained by words. Thus gossip and slander are “evil speech” destructive of community as a murderous assault on the name and character of a fellow human made in the image of God. Lying too is prohibited as a lynching of truth and a violation of the bonds of the community.

Words make worlds and words destroy worlds. How then are we to relate to each other, and how are we to relate to God if we only have words? Is it meaningful to speak to God or to speak of God in any way? What does it mean to say that God is awesome, majestic, sublime, mysterious? Each of the encounters in which God disclosed himself defies description. Together, the experiences threaten to strain the power of words to the breaking point. Even at their most superlative, all the words we could ever use of God would always only be an understatement. Yet that is also the wonder of words. Words can be cheapened into clichés. Words can be twisted into lies and used to defame and destroy. Words can falter when called on to capture sublime experiences, and words can be leapfrogged by music when there is a summons to say the unsayable. (The Jewish sages say that the ram’s horn, *shofar*, has a strange and heart-piercing sound before which “even the angels tremble.”)³⁷ But at the end of the day words well spoken regain their power in a second. There is no substitute for words, and words are essential for human freedom as they are for communication of any kind. Nothing compares with the power of words to convey truth, make promises, build trust, negotiate with integrity, demonstrate loyalty, and so to sustain the rich ecology of a world of truth and freedom—not just between humans and other humans, but between God and humans. Words make worlds. No words, no worlds. Bad words, bad worlds. True and respectful words, a free and a human world.

Rabbi Sacks raises two foundational questions about human life, the first of which is, How do we humans relate to each other and to God? (“What is the bond between human beings and God?”)³⁸ That question lies behind an obvious question that confronts the reader exploring the opening books of the Bible. If God is truly transcendent as the story describes, how could such a God ever communicate with human beings? And how could humans ever grasp someone who is ultimately mysterious, completely beyond, and utterly other, let alone talk to him in response?

There is no such problem for other religions. What they call gods are merely the personification of the forces of nature, so they are visible and easily represented in images—the sun, the moon, the stars, the rain, the storm, and so on. But YHWH as creator of all these forces transcends them. He is above and beyond them all and therefore invisible. No visible representation is either adequate or right. All images, icons, statues, and paintings are idolatrous because they reduce God to the level of the other gods and the forces of nature. So *revelation* poses a problem that is not a problem for the pagan religions. The challenge, then, is not simply communication between humans and other humans. The ultimate challenge is communication between God and humans. How can we relate to someone so awesome and so utterly beyond us, and how does God relate to us?

The Bible's answer to both questions is simple and straightforward but mighty: *words*. God is invisible, but he is not inaudible. Without words God would be incomprehensible to us, and we to each other. But words express the inner and the invisible. They make the deepest bonding possible. In revelation, God speaks and we listen. In prayer, we speak and God listens. And in our words to each other, we say in words what they could otherwise never know. The answer to God's mystery, Rabbi Sacks says,

astonishing in its beauty and its simplicity, is that the meeting between us and God is like the meeting between two persons, myself and another. I can see your body, but I cannot feel your pain. How then can I enter your world? Through words. You speak, I listen. I ask, you answer. We communicate. Language is the narrow bridge across the abyss between soul and human soul. So it is between us and the Soul of the universe. Revelation takes place through speech. That is what happened at Sinai. Infinity spoke and the world trembled. In the silence of the desert the Israelites heard the voice of God.³⁹

“God is close, but encountered not in things seen, but in words heard.”⁴⁰

NO FORM, ONLY A VOICE

Words, not storm, thunder, and lightning, are the sound of Sinai. This high place of words is at the heart of all three revelations in Exodus, particularly the first and the third. The whole drama of Mount Sinai, Sacks says, lies in the fact that “there is only one man, Moses, and the divine voice, as if to say that this is how

history is changed, by the inner dialogue between a single soul and the God of freedom and dignity.”⁴¹ But the same high place of words is absolutely unmistakable in the third encounter, when God spoke to all Israel at Sinai and then centuries later to the prophet Elijah at the same mountain.

The mountain burned with fire as the Israelites camped before it. There was darkness, cloud, and dense gloom everywhere. But that was not the communication they were assembled to hear—any more than God’s message was in the wind, the earthquake, and the fire that Elijah witnessed years later after his great contest with the false prophets on Mount Carmel. Then God spoke, as Moses recounted the scene forty years after Sinai, and God spoke with words, only words—and speaking to Elijah, as a single person, rather than the entire nation, he spoke in “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12 KJV). Only in the silence of the desert, Sacks concludes, when the people were “hyper-sensitized to sound” could “the sound beneath sound be heard.”⁴²

There was absolutely no visible form and no image to be seen at Mount Sinai, Moses said—only a voice. And when he recounted the terrifying Sinai experience to the next generation, he underscored the point. “Remember the day you stood before the LORD at Horeb. . . . Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice. . . . So watch yourselves carefully since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire” (Deut 4:10, 12, 15).

No form, only a voice. From that day on, Jews, and later Christians, have been the people of the Word and words supremely so among all the peoples of the earth. As we shall see, *Shema* (“hear” or “listen”) becomes Israel’s central way of knowing and loving God, and Judaism becomes “a culture of listening rather than seeing, of the ear rather than the eye.”⁴³ Words, reading, reading aloud, reciting, listening, paying attention, and remembering are at the heart of faith, whereas the Bible links sight, images, and appearances to temptation, sin, idolatry, and disloyalty. Not sight but sound. Not images but words, even in our grand modern age of images when the graphic is king and words have been humiliated to the rank of *verbiage* and *words, words, words*.

SOUND VERSUS SIGHT

The same truth is evident long before Sinai, starting with the world’s first sin when Eve trusted the lure of her senses and overrode the clear voice of God. Or again, the patriarch Isaac went wrong when he trusted his other senses rather

than hearing. Being almost blind, he could not see Jacob's face so he was vulnerable to Jacob's impersonation of Esau. The sound of Jacob's voice suggested Jacob, but the taste of the food, the feel of the goats' hair on his arms, and the smell of the outdoors world suggested it was Esau. Isaac ignored his hearing, went with the other senses, and he was taken in.

Here is an immense difference between Jerusalem and Athens, Sinai and Paris, or between Matthew Arnold's Hebraism and Hellenism. And here too is an immense difference between the Bible and the modern world. As Sacks comments, classical Greece and its rediscovery in Renaissance Italy represented unsurpassed excellence in the visual arts—art, sculpture, theater, and architecture. The Jews excelled in none of these things, but they gave rise to “a culture not of the eye but of the ear.”⁴⁴ In our modern word world too, Sacks notes, understanding is commonly linked to sight. (We speak of “insight,” “foresight,” “hindsight,” “observation,” and we say “look” when we want someone to pay attention.) In the Bible, by contrast, “instead of saying that someone thinks, the verse will say that ‘he said in his or her own heart’” (thought being a form of speech, not sight).⁴⁵

The significance of the difference between a listening culture and a seeing culture is profound. In the words of another rabbi quoted by Sacks, “From a human perspective it often appears as if seeing is a more precise form of knowledge than hearing. However, hearing has greater power than seeing. Sight discloses the external aspect of things, but hearing reveals their inwardness.”⁴⁶ In pagan cultures, Sacks continues, they *saw* the gods—the sun, the rain, the sea, the storm, and the earth. These forces were both visual and impersonal. They could be captured in ceremonies and rituals that were spectacles for the eye. YHWH, by contrast, could never be seen, but he could be heard.

Words, hearing, and listening were appropriate to the encounter between God and humans and between humans and humans because words are not the end in themselves. Words represent what is beyond them and point us toward the reality they represent, whereas images, symbols, and ceremonies have to do with the eye, so it is easy and natural to stop short and be content with them. What is heard points beyond what we hear; what is seen satisfies us by itself, and sends us no further. Sacks concludes, “That is why the key word of Judaism is *shema*. God is not something we see, but a voice we hear.”⁴⁷ Judaism is “a person-centered civilization—and persons communicate by words.”⁴⁸

SOCIAL MEDIA AND EVIL SPEECH

This stress on the Word, and on all words, bears directly on freedom. It lies at the heart of the discourse of a free society, and it underscores the Bible's devastating judgment of "evil speech" (*lashon hara*), which in the Bible covers gossip, ridicule, and slander, and in today's world such things as trolling. Such speech, Maimonides insists, is "the evil tongue, which refers to one who speaks disparagingly to his fellow, *even though he speaks the truth*."⁴⁹ This is a principle that we should reflect on in the age of social media when, from political leaders and Hollywood celebrities down, cyber insults and cyberbullying have become instinctive and utterly degrading. Are Americans too caught up in their own pride and power to recognize that American public discourse has degenerated to the level of a verbal slum ruled by the vicious gang lords of the Twitter world?

Gossip is prohibited in the Torah (Lev 19:16), and Proverbs tells us that life and death are in the power of the tongue (Prov 18:21). Astonishingly, Rabbi Heschel reminds us, the Hebrew word *bloodshed* means both murder and humiliation, and the Talmud insists that it is better "to throw oneself alive into a burning furnace than to humiliate a human being publicly."⁵⁰ Rabbi Sacks notes that the Jewish sages regarded "evil speech" about a person as the worst of the sins, "as bad as the three cardinal sins—idolatry, murder, and incest—combined."⁵¹ The practical reason is that "it kills three people, the one who said it, the one it is said about, and the one who listens in."⁵²

The underlying reason is the place of words in creation and human experience. Anthropologists have argued that the function of language is to allow humans to cooperate in larger groups than other animals can. Rabbi Sacks writes simply, "Language is life. Words are creative but also destructive. If good words are holy, then evil words are a desecration."⁵³ "*Speech is what holds society together*."⁵⁴ Unchecked, evil speech "will destroy any group it attacks—a family, a team, a community, even a nation. Hence its uniquely malicious character; it uses the power of language to weaken the very thing language was brought into being to create, namely, the trust that sustains the social bond."⁵⁵ Can there be any doubt that the brutal incivility of American discourse is now tearing America apart? And that a massive cleansing of language is essential for both personal and political reform in America and throughout the West? Rabbi Heschel lost family members in Auschwitz, but he underscored the seriousness of shaming at other levels: "Holocausts are caused wherever a person is put to shame."⁵⁶

THE WORLD'S FIRST SOCIAL CRITICS

More positively, the stress on words and the Word is behind the elevated place Jews and Christians give to prophets. Their trademark statement, “Thus says the LORD,” said it all. They were spokesmen and spokeswomen of the Word from God (spokeswomen because there are many women prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, although there are no women priests). This transcendent standpoint shaped the prophets’ double contribution. First, it was the source of their long-term vision. As Sacks says, “A prophet is a watchman, one who climbs to a high vantage point and so can see the danger in the distance, before anyone at ground level is aware of it.”⁵⁷ Or as the Jewish sages said, “Who is wise? One who sees the long-term consequences.”

Second, the transcendent Word was the standard by which the prophets forged their social criticism. Prophets were prominent and critical in the nation of Israel as the champions and guardians of freedom and justice. They were “the voice of God and the conscience of society.”⁵⁸ Their calling was to speak the word of God, given directly by God, and to stand up for the covenant with God and thus to hold the nation accountable for its covenantal pledge. As Michael Walzer insists, they did not invent standards or obligations for the people. They were the champions and guardians of the covenant, and they simply cited the standard and obligations of the covenant.⁵⁹

Thus, Walzer argues, “The prophets were social critics, perhaps the first social critics in the recorded history of the West. It is their sense of divine calling that makes the criticism possible.”⁶⁰ Rabbi Sacks concurs, “The prophets were the world’s first social critics, mandated by God to speak truth to power and to challenge corrupt leaders. . . . Without them, a society quickly becomes demoralized.”⁶¹ Compared with the kings, the prophets had no power. “They commanded no armies. They levied no taxes. They spoke God’s word, but had no means of enforcing it. All they had was influence.”⁶² So long as the prophets were alive and active, the choice between *voice* and *exit* (or protest and withdrawal) could always be answered in strength by protest and engagement, with a view to reform and not in weakness through separation and withdrawal.⁶³ More threatened than threatening, the prophet, Walzer says, was “the embodiment of charisma without power, which is always a threat to power without charisma.”⁶⁴

In sum, people of faith take the Word and all words with supreme seriousness. A lie is an intention to deceive, but as such a lie is much worse than a mere

terminological inexactitude, as Winston Churchill famously quipped. Lies, deceptions, half-truths, clichés, propaganda, “fake news,” and trolling all work to destroy the fabric of truth and trust that undergirds freedom and a free society. Truth, words, intentions, promises, promise keeping, trustworthiness, and trust are the essence of freedom in both private and public life. Champions of freedom must be champions and guardians of words, truth, and respectful civil speech. Thus, according to the Bible and its family of faiths, existence holds its meaning and life gains its purpose because behind them stands the wisdom and the meaning of the Word who is God himself. Above, behind, around, and beneath all that is and all that ever will be stand the wisdom and the power of the Word.

SEVEN TIMES WORSE

One last implication of the great revelation in Exodus is worth drawing out at the start of our exploration. Knowing God and rejecting God are both highly consequential. An inescapable challenge rears up in the face of anyone who believes in the God of the Bible. If God is “He who is”—“I am who I am,” or “I will be who I will be,” Only, Other, and Over all, the one whose presence and reality is central, foundational and final to life and to the cosmos and existence itself—then why does it seem so easy to reject God? Can God really be God if defying him seems so inconsequential? The “humility of God” bears on the “hiddenness of God,” but does it also mean that it is easy to live as if God does not exist? The main part of the answer will come in chapter two, but one part of the answer is relevant here. The rejection of God is far from inconsequential. Those who displace God must shoulder the consequences. They must necessarily put someone or something in his place, which means substituting an idol, and doing that is never inconsequential, either for an individual or for entire societies.

Idolatry is unavoidable for those who will not believe. “Man believes in either God or in an idol. There is no third course open.”⁶⁵ The German philosopher Max Scheler stated the point succinctly. Idolatry is a central truth of the Bible that is echoed by many thinkers outside the Bible, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust, and Albert Camus. It is also powerfully demonstrated in history. Yet unquestionably, it runs directly counter to all the major currents of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. As Enlightenment thinkers see it, a cardinal doctrine of progressivism is that as the world advances and grows ever more modern, it also grows ever more secular—and has no need of God or idols.

The progressive conclusion is that Judaism, the Christian faith, and indeed all religions are becoming more marginal and less meaningful in the advanced modern world. God, gods, and the supernatural matter less and less, regardless of who they claim to be, and how they are understood. God has become irrelevant, faith trivial, and advancing modernity is hailed as the graveyard of religion. This progressive secular view is epitomized supremely in Nietzsche's confident declaration that "God is dead," and in the two-hundred-year dominance of the secularization theory put forward by Auguste Comte, Max Weber, and many others—which argues, in essence, "The more modern the world, the less religious the world." Our age, they say, has been *disenchanted* forever.

But the truth is that this once-powerful theory has lost its dominance. First, it was countered theoretically by better analysis, such as the work of sociologist David Martin, and then it was undermined empirically by the global explosion of religion, beginning with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. It is now widely admitted that many of the Enlightenment forecasts have proved wrong and require radical adjusting as well as greater honesty and humility. It was once predicted that modernization would lead to secularization. Now we see that the advanced modern world is both intensely secular and intensely religious at the same time. It was once predicted that globalization would lead to Westernization and the triumph of Western modernity over the whole world. Now we see that globalization is waking up almost the entire world, and in the process it is clear that there are multiple modernities, different ways of becoming modern, the West being only one among many. Or again, it was once predicted that the pluralization of religions ("Everyone is now everywhere") would lead to the privatization of all religion. Now it is clear that religion in the advanced modern world is both more private and more public at the same time.

The much-touted *displacement of God* needs to be seen against this backdrop. The last two centuries highlight the power and danger of two dangers—the various idols that have been erected in God's place, as well as the "demons" that have rushed into the vacuum created by his ousting. Rabbi Heschel warns that no simple human return to being merely animals is possible. The developments of science and technology have closed that option. "Mankind has reached a point of no return to animality. Man turned beast becomes his opposite, a species *sui generis*. The opposite of the human is not the animal but the demonic."⁶⁶

First, and often on the extreme political right, there is the idol of "religious nationalism," through which a nation literally comes to worship itself instead of

God. Dostoevsky warned against this idol in his novel *Demons* and described it brilliantly through the character of Shatov, an extreme religious nationalist.

If a great nation does not believe that the truth is in it alone (precisely in it alone, and exclusively), if it does not believe that it alone is able and called to resurrect and save everyone with its truth, then it at once ceases to be a great nation. . . . A truly great nation can never be reconciled with a secondary role in mankind. . . . Any that loses this faith is no longer a nation.⁶⁷

Dostoevsky raises his warning to a crescendo in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the titanic utterance of the Grand Inquisitor as he brazenly defies Jesus. The human need to worship something—whether God, an idol, or humans themselves as gods—will persist until the “end of the world, even when all gods have disappeared from the earth: they will still fall down before idols.”⁶⁸ *Either God or an idol* is the dirty secret of human nature that will forever be the fly in the ointment for naive secularists. Today, Dostoevsky’s warning is amplified through reactions to the perceived menace of the process of globalization and the philosophy of globalism. Many people are now tempted to resort to religion, whether true or false, as the best and only way to bolster their own national culture and to guard the cultural differences that they see threatened by the ironed-out uniformity of globalization. The irony should be obvious. Globalization stands simultaneously as the godfather to both secularism and polytheism, though neither appreciates the favoring of the other.

Second, and on either the political right or the left, there are the grand *political ideologies that are essentially religious* and have a godlike authority, power, and embrace. It has often been noted that when Jews abandoned their faith in God and became atheists—for example, Spinoza, Marx and Freud—they not only rejected their own monotheism but raised in its place a secular ideology with god-sized pretensions that are equal. Ever since the 1930s, Eric Voegelin, Denis de Rougemont, Arthur Koestler, Albert Camus, and others have grappled with the power of large-scale political movements such as fascism, national socialism, and Marxism and have seen in them “the form of religion” or the “functional equivalent of religion.” (When Koestler rejected communism, he used to describe it as the god that failed.) What is behind all these movements, Camus argued, is the modern metaphysical revolt against God. That is what placed “the sordid god” of Nietzsche’s Superman at the center of Nazi ideology and inspired Rousseau’s “new Gospel” of the social contract that led to the French Revolution and

its Reign of Terror. There will be no freedom and no way forward for the world, Camus warns, unless we renounce the idolatry of humanity.⁶⁹

Third, quite different and starting not in the political extremes but the middle, there is the surprising and mostly unnoticed rise of the idol of democracy, consensus, and “the other.” René Girard argues that the death of God has led to the worship of our neighbor and democracy. We are living in the grand age of David Riesman’s “other-directedness”—through television, consumerism, fashion, advertising, polling, statistics, the social media, the celebrity culture, political referendums, Facebook likes, and numerous greater and lesser forms of looking to the other for identity and approval. This, says Girard, leads to nothing less the “divinization of the other” and to “mimetic desire” (not just that we desire but that we desire what others desire).⁷⁰ With the full flush of Enlightenment confidence, Ludwig Feuerbach had predicted that *Homo homini deus* (“Men will become a god to each other”).⁷¹ On the contrary, Girard says, Hobbes’s conclusion is more likely *Homo homini lupus* (“Men will become a wolf to each other”). The constant looking to the other and to democracy as the highest expression of the will of the other will only lead to desiring the desires of others and therefore to comparisons, rivalry, envy, jealousy, hate, sadism, masochism, gossip, slander, and to countless forms of tension and strife, domestic, national, and international. As Alexis de Tocqueville warned, “Equality is a slogan based on envy. It signifies in the heart of every republican: ‘Nobody is going to occupy a place higher than I.’”⁷² This third idol lies behind the cult of sameness that, as we shall see, is a major impulse behind the tribal politics of the progressive left.

The full harvest of these three kinds of idolatry is ripening across the secular world. But for those who ponder the present in the light of its Enlightenment heritage, the outcome points toward a conclusion that the Enlightenment would find inadmissible: *Reject God if you will, but religion remains ineradicable, idolatry will prove inescapable, and in the extremes, the demonic will become inevitable.*

Tocqueville was forced toward this conclusion in the aftermath of the terrifying volcano of the French Revolution: “Men cannot abandon their religious faith without a kind of aberration of intellect and a sort of violent distortion of their true nature; they are invincibly brought back to more pious sentiments. Unbelief is an accident, and faith is the only permanent state of mankind.”⁷³

Dostoevsky stated the same conclusion earlier in *The Adolescent*. Unlike the Grand Inquisitor, who thinks he knows better than Jesus, Makar is a devout believer, but his conclusion is the same as the Inquisitor’s.

A man cannot live without worshipping something; without worshipping, he cannot bear the burden of himself. And that goes for every man. So that if a man rejects God, he will have to worship an idol that is made of wood, gold, or ideas. So those who think they don't need God are really just idol worshippers, and that's what we should call them.⁷⁴

In sum, all human beings have faith. The question is whether their faith is in God or an idol. The deepest folly is those who imagine they can empty their house of God and then relax in the comfort of their newly-won autonomy. They will be shocked at the outcome. Only the true God can cleanse the house of false gods and demons. Only the true God has the power to prevail over the emerging spirit of the Antichrist in history. Those who think they can do it by themselves, and believe they can do it by clearing out God himself, will find themselves invaded by forces that are seven times worse than anything they imagined. The Lord who is “I am who I am” and “I will be who I will be” is not mocked. God respects our freedom—even to reject him. But God is no less central, essential, and inescapable when he is rejected than when he reveals himself in the full reality of his presence.

SUPREME PRESENCE, SUPREME POSITIVE

That warning, however, cannot be the last word. It would be a travesty to end a chapter on God on a negative note, for to both Jews and Christians, the God who reveals himself in the Bible is overwhelmingly positive in every way. In speaking for his own people, Rabbi Sacks speaks for all who come to know God.

Jews were and often still are God-intoxicated people. For the knowledge of God in Judaism is not a form of theology; it is a form of love. That is what the Hebrew word “to know” means. It is inescapably an *eros* word . . . only when we love do we become vehicles for God's love. . . . For to love God is to love the world He made and the humanity he fashioned in His image. . . . To be loved by God is the greatest gift, the only one we can never lose.⁷⁵

Exodus, then, begins with first things first. *The Name says it all. The Lord is God, Only, Other, and Over all. God is greater than all. He may be trusted in all situations. Those who trust in God need have no fear, for he is love.* From Sinai on, that great revelation of God is decisive for every twist and turn of the story

of the journey to freedom that follows. Freedom flows from the primacy, the sovereignty, the authority, and the centrality of God.

America cannot endure permanently half 1776 and half 1789. The compromises, contradictions, hypocrisies, inequities, and evils have built up unaddressed. The grapes of wrath have ripened again, and the choice before America is plain. Either America goes forward best by going back first, or America is about to reap a future in which the worst will once again be the corruption of the best.

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