

What if the Exodus Never happened?¹

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A few years ago, I had the privilege of participating in a rabbinic fellowship program sponsored by CLAL -- the Center for Jewish Learning and Leadership. Some of us were pulpit rabbis; others worked in Hillels; still others taught or were administrators in Jewish schools. The program brought us to the Katz Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania for four gatherings at which we explored how to take ideas and insights that Judaic scholars were focusing on and share them within our respective environments. It was fascinating and worthwhile.

I'll never forget the most fascinating and truly unexpected of all of the seminars, with **Professor Steve Weitzman**, the Director of the Center.

He asked us a really strange question: **What would Judaism be like if the Exodus wasn't a part of it?** That is, if we had no collective memory of ever being in Egypt, and ever leaving it.

Now, I believe that the session (like the essay on which it was based) was entitled: **"What if the Exodus had never happened?"** But that isn't really what Dr. Weitzman was exploring.

Whether or not the Exodus *actually happened* is an interesting question. Scholars differ on that.

¹ This dvar torah is based on an essay by Steven Weitzman, PhD:
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/what-ifs-of-jewish-history/what-if-the-exodus-had-never-happened/01728AFA2B395149EF00696A7EE4B22B> . See also: [\(PDF\) What if the Exodus Had Never Happened.pdf | Steven Weitzman - Academia.edu](#) .



Professor Weitzman was asking a different question: What if, as part of our understanding or our memory of where we came from, there was no Exodus from Egypt? That's a different question. It doesn't focus on the *historicity* of the story of the Exodus -- part of which we read today. It focuses instead on the lessons Jews and Judaism have drawn from it.

It seems impossible to conceive of Judaism without the Exodus, doesn't it? I mean, let's leave aside the obvious: No Exodus? Presumably, no Passover! No eating matzah for a week in the spring, right? No cleaning our homes of *hametz*, right? (As we'll see in a minute, that isn't necessarily the case, but it is an intriguing thing to contemplate.) For that matter, probably no Sukkot, for if we didn't leave Egypt, then we didn't wander in the wilderness for forty years. And what about the Torah? Where did we get that, if not at Mount Sinai which, for much of Jewish history, was understood to be in the Sinai desert, not in the land of Israel?²

Before we go down that rabbit hole, let's ask ourselves: Why was Professor Weitzman asking the question? He was asking it because he had studied one particular Biblical book that seems to be **oblivious** to the Exodus. That book is one which I feel fairly certain no one in this room has read from cover to cover: It's the book of Chronicles -- part one and part two.³

(Incidentally, just the other day, I learned that many people are not sleeping well these days -- which scientists are attributing to the effects of living during a world-wide pandemic.⁴ I have some advice: Just keep a Bible by your bedside, and if you wake up in the middle of the night, just start reading Chronicles. I promise that you won't make it to the end before you fall asleep again.)

² But see: [Is That a Burning Bush? Is This Mt. Sinai? Solstice Bolsters a Claim - The New York Times](#) .

³ Note that originally I Chronicles and II Chronicles comprised one long book, which was apparently eventually divided in two because of its length. The same is true of I and II Samuel and I and II Kings.

⁴ See: [How COVID-19 has affected our sleep](#) .

OK. So the Book of Chronicles does not make for scintillating reading. But examining what its author (the “Chronicler”) was trying to accomplish is fascinating.

Chronicles is a book that scholars believe was written several decades after the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Jews to Babylonia in 586 BCE. It is, in essence, a revision of the books of Samuel and Kings that had been written centuries before. When we read that revision, and compare it to the earlier version presented in the books of Samuel or Kings, we find something very fascinating: the story of the Exodus is missing. Not only is it missing, but it seems deliberately to have been erased.

Let me give you a few examples.⁵

In the Book of Kings, at the beginning of chapter six, in describing Solomon building the Temple, the text says that this took place in the 480th year after the Jews left Egypt, in the fourth year of the king’s reign. In Chronicles, it says that Solomon built the Temple in the fourth year of his reign. It says nothing about the Exodus.

Psalms 105 praises God for all that he’s done for us. It talks about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the descent into Egypt, and Moses and the plagues, and the Exodus, etc., etc. That psalm is quoted verbatim in Chronicles -- but only up to the verses dealing with Jacob. It stops short just before the verse talking about Joseph going down to Egypt, and it says nothing about the Israelites being slaves in Egypt or being freed from slavery.

Here’s a third example: The book of Chronicles describes how, during the reign of King Josiah, the people began again to observe the holiday of Passover. That story appears earlier in the Bible in II Kings 23. But in Chronicles, in describing the observance of Passover, there’s nothing in there about the Israelites having been slaves! Nothing about the Exodus! Nothing at all.

⁵ These examples are drawn from Dr. Weitzman’s essay. They can be viewed in their original Hebrew and in English translation here: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/33077?lang=bi>.

It's really very strange. It's as if Passover, to the Chronicler, was a very different holiday from the one we all know. In the mind of the author of Chronicles, it clearly was! Weitzman speculates that perhaps he understood it to be a commemoration of "some event from the life of Abraham such as the Akedah, the sacrifice of Isaac." (p. 32) In any event, he could have focused on the holiday's significance to shepherds and farmers, rather than the historical commemoration with which we are so familiar.

Now, it's intriguing to speculate: "Why would the Chronicler have wanted to delete the Exodus from memory?" Weitzman speculates that it has to do with what happened during his own lifetime.

A few decades after the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BCE, Babylonia itself was defeated by the Persian King Cyrus who allowed the exiles to return home to Judah in 539 BCE. The returnees almost certainly saw themselves as repeating the Exodus, forced into servitude in a strange land but now miraculously able to reclaim the land that had been promised them. [Several Biblical texts draw out] the parallel between the return from Babylonia and Israel's joyous departure from Egypt. But not everyone may have seen the return from exile as a welcome event. We know from hints in the literary and archaeological record that some of the people of Judah remained in the land all along, continuing with their lives there throughout the period of Babylonian rule; from their perspective, the return of the exiles may have been a threatening development. ... It is conceivable that the Chronicler, writing some time after the return from exile, was one of these never-exiled Israelites, and felt the need to suppress the memory of the Exodus because, for him, it was not a story of redemption but an unfortunate precedent for his marginalization, legitimizing the claims of the returnees at the expense of those who had never left. (pp. 32-33)

What Weitzman says is that if the rest of the Bible hadn't survived, and all we had was Chronicles, **we would have had no memory of the Exodus** -- even if it actually happened. Many things would have been the same. We would still have a

sense that our ancestors settled in Canaan, and eventually developed a monarchy under kings like David and Solomon. Just no memory of the Exodus.

Would that have made a difference in the development of Judaism?

The answer is simple: Of course it would! Remember: if we didn't have the memory of the Exodus, huge chunks of the Bible -- including this week's Torah portion, of course -- wouldn't exist. Yes, we could still have some of the "prophets, Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, [and] Lamentations." (p. 38) But the Torah would have been very, very short.

Yet that's trivial compared to the impact that the absence of the story would have had on us -- and on the world.

It's one thing to have a notion that there's slavery in the world, to have the understanding that it is wrong, and should be eradicated. But it was part of the unique legacy of our people to imagine, or to believe, that **we ourselves** were once slaves to Pharaoh, and **we ourselves** were freed.

After all, what does the Torah teach? "*Do not oppress the stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*" (Exodus 22:20)⁶

How do you teach empathy? It's not easy. How do you convince yourself, and the others in your community, and the children you're trying to raise, that they should care about the suffering of others? That's a big mystery; I think it's clear that there's no easy answer to that.

(I happen to be reading *Sense and Sensibility* right now. In it, there is a character who is uncaring and unfeeling, heartless and cruel. She is convincingly drawn: a

⁶ See also: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex.23:9); "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Lev.19:34); "You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut.10:19); "You shall not hate an Egyptian, for you were stranger in his land" (Deut.23:8); "Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment" (Deut. 24:22). And there are others as well.

reminder that such people do exist -- in every society -- as do, presumably, incredibly empathic characters as well.)

As difficult as it is to teach, empathy is intrinsic to the Judaism we know and love. Our way of life wouldn't be the same -- in fact, it would be **unrecognizable as Judaism** -- if we didn't have the story of the Exodus in our cultural DNA.

I just don't think it's good enough -- and I mean that in several senses -- to understand *intellectually* that we have to care about the marginalized, the persecuted, the scorned. We have to *identify* with them. That's what a Judaism with the memory of the Exodus teaches us -- and it's not clear to me that a Judaism *devoid* of that memory would be able to do that.

To get back to that question, "What would be different?": How about ... everything!

Myths abound in religious communities. But there is something else that abounds as well: what we learn from our myths. That's even more important, really.

The many lessons that we, the Jewish people, have learned -- and what people all over the world have learned -- from the story of the Exodus make clear that it is absolutely fundamental to Judaism.

As Weitzman concludes, "There is no meaningful way to imagine Jewish history without the Exodus story." It is "a tenacious piece of our cultural heritage." (p. 40)

In fact, as he puts it, "there may never have been a story in all history so resistant to being erased." (Ibid.) We Jews may dwindle in number -- but the story of the Exodus will live on. *Kein yehi ratzon!* -- So may it be God's will.

Shabbat shalom.