

PARASHAT HA'AZINU

Deuteronomy 32:1–52

Parashat Ha'azinu is a prayer-poem that Moses presents to the people of Israel just before he ascends Mount Nebo, where he will die. In these verses, Moses declares that God's "deeds are perfect . . . and just," and God is "never false" but always "true and upright." He warns against those who act dishonestly against God. He tells the Israelites to "remember" their history and their special relationship with God, who guided their ancestors and cared for them despite the many times they turned to idolatry. God, Moses declares, could have obliterated the Israelites many times for their disloyalty but decided against doing so lest their enemies assume Israel's destruction was their doing rather than God's punishment. Indeed, says Moses, it is God who constantly saves Israel from destruction. It is God "who deals death and gives life." God, Moses concludes, will bring vengeance upon Israel's enemies. Moses warns the people to "take to heart" all of the Torah and its laws and to teach the laws to their children. "The Torah is your very life," he tells them, and "through it you shall long endure. . . ." Moses is then told to climb Mount Nebo from which he will be able to see the Land of Israel. There he will die, without entering the land, punishment for his anger at the Waters of Meribath-kadesh.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Moses prays that his words of poetry will be heard by all the Israelites. "Give glory to our God," he tells them, for "God's deeds are perfect . . . all God's ways are

just. God is faithful, never false, always true and upright. . . . God creates and sustains" all human beings and the people of Israel.

· 2 ·

He urges them to "remember your history" and advises them to ask their parents to inform them



about their past and their relationship as a nation to other peoples. He then recounts how God found the Israelites in a desert region, “guarded [them] as the pupil of God’s eye,” and cared for [them] as an eagle cares for its young.

God, Moses says, “set the Israelites on the highlands to feast on the yield of the earth, fed them honey and the milk and meat of the best herds.” The people “grew fat” and spoiled, and they turned against God and worshiped idols.

God threatened to forsake them, to punish them by sending enemies against them. But God, explains Moses, did not do so lest their enemies conclude that “our own hand has prevailed; none of their defeat was brought about by God.”

Moses declares that God alone will punish the

people for turning away and bring them back so they understand “there is no God beside Me. I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal.”

• 3 •

After reciting his poem, Moses declares: “Pay attention to all I have told you today. Teach it to your children that they may observe faithfully all the terms of the Torah . . . for it is your very life, the guarantee that you will endure on the land that you will occupy across the Jordan River.”

Moses is then told to climb Mount Nebo from where he can view the Land of Israel. This is where he will die.

THEMES

Parashat Ha'azinu contains two important themes:

1. God and evil.
2. The importance of history.

PEREK ALEF: *If God's Ways Are Just, What about Evil?*

Moses stands before the people of Israel as an old man. He has led them for forty years; he has been their liberator and their teacher. Now, he is about to die. The people will follow Joshua, his successor, into the Land of Israel. One can imagine Moses' agony as he ponders the question: What shall be my final message to my people?

The Torah presents his answer in a powerful poem. It begins with a plea that his thoughts be heard.

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;
Let the earth hear the words I utter!
May my discourse come down as the rain,
My speech distill as the dew,
Like showers on young growth,
Like droplets on the grass.
For the name of *Adonai* I proclaim;
Give glory to our God!

(Deuteronomy 32:1-3)

Moses continues his poem, offering within it his understanding of God. His words are carefully chosen. They portray God in a number of significant ways. He tells the people:

The Rock!—God's deeds are perfect,
Yes, all God's ways are just;
A faithful God, never false,
True and upright is God.

(Deuteronomy 32:4)

God is the Source who created you,
Fashioned you and made you endure!

(Deuteronomy 32:6)

. . . God wounds and heals. . . .

(Deuteronomy 32:39)

. . . Those who reject God will be punished.

(Deuteronomy 32:41)

Those who harm Israel will be punished.

(Deuteronomy 32:43)

Moses' portrait of God is complex and raises a number of important questions: What does Moses mean when he calls God "perfect," "just," "faithful," "true," and "upright"? Can God be "just" and "faithful" and "wound and heal" at the same time? How can we understand God's justice?

Interpreters of Torah have constantly struggled with such questions. From ancient to modern times, human beings have asked in the midst of their pain and suffering, "Where is God? If God is 'perfect,' why is the world that God created so imperfect? Why do people hurt one another? Why does a God of justice allow hunger, war, and disease? Why does God permit loving and generous human beings to be tortured by disease or cruelty or innocent children to be abused, starved, or killed? Can we really say that 'God's deeds are perfect . . . just . . . never false, true and upright?'"

Despite the anguish they have experienced, many Jews like the prophet Isaiah maintain the faith expressed by Moses that *Adonai* is a God of justice. (Isaiah 5:16) In his time, the Psalmist articulates the same determination: "Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; Your judgments are like the great deep. . . ." (Psalms 36:7) For centuries, even in the darkest times of persecution, many Jews have declared their faith in the ultimate justice of God.

Others go even further. For them, God's justice is tempered with the equally powerful claim of God's mercy and love. They, too, base their view on Moses' experience and testimony within the Torah. Just before receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, Moses experiences and defines God as "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin." (Exodus 34:6-7) Reflecting this view of God,

the Psalmist (Psalms 119:64) comments that “the earth, *Adonai*, is full of Your mercy,” underscoring the conviction that while God may judge the world and all its creatures and even punish them for their sins, God also cares for them and loves them.

Rabbinic commentators teach that God’s “power for justice” (*midat ha-din*) and “power for mercy” (*midat ha-rachamim*) are always combined. Without their interconnection, the rabbis argue, the world cannot endure. It will be out of balance and incomplete, resulting in destruction. Only by simultaneously exercising justice and mercy, say the rabbis, can God create and sustain the world. “Mercy or justice alone is insufficient.”



Zugot

This idea that justice and mercy are blended is both suggested and extended by Hillel. He claims that when judging human beings or the world, “God weighs the scale of judgment toward the scale of mercy.” God actually favors the “power for mercy” over the “power for justice.”

Rab, a later sage, agrees, portraying God at a moment of judgment as saying, “Let My power of love overcome My power of anger.” This view that God’s powers of mercy and justice are blended with a tendency toward mercy allows rabbinic interpreters to accept Moses’ claim that “God’s deeds are perfect . . . God’s ways are just.” (*Genesis Rabbah* 12:15; *Tosefta, Sanhedrin* 13:3 and *Berachot* 7a)

How, then, can we account for the suffering of the innocent, of good people? How does this blending of justice and mercy apply to their situations? How can one maintain that “God’s ways are just . . .” when, at times, they appear to be cruel?

Early rabbinic commentators commonly answered these questions by claiming that while righteous human beings may suffer in this world, they will be rewarded by God in the *olam ha-ba*, or the “world to come.” Pain in this world is temporary and brief. The righteous may suffer at

the hands of cruel human beings or, in the case of illness or disease, because of the inability of human beings to find a cure. Such pain is identified by the rabbis as *yisurim shel ahavah*, or the “sufferings of love,” and God, the *Dayan ha-emet*, or the “Judge of truth,” rewards those who endure these sufferings with mercy forever in the *olam ha-ba*. (*Ta’anit* 11a)

This concept of God as *Dayan ha-emet*, balancing justice and mercy in this world and in the *olam ha-ba*, became a standard explanation for the reason bad things happen to good people. For rabbinic commentators it justified Moses’ claim that “God’s deeds are perfect, and all God’s ways are just. God is faithful, never false, true and upright.” For them, God’s justice and mercy might not be apparent in the lives of victims of pain and evil in this world, but—in the *olam ha-ba*—God’s justice and mercy eventually will prevail.

With this belief in mind, the rabbis prescribe that, at the death of a loved one, a person should recite the words: “Be praised, O *Adonai* our God, Ruler of the universe, *Dayan ha-emet*,” affirming that God, the “Judge of truth,” will consider each life according to its deeds and dispense the appropriate reward in the *olam ha-ba*.

It is this faith in God’s ultimate justice and mercy that strengthened Jews throughout the centuries when they were faced with persecution, torment, and death. It is said that when Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradyon, his wife, and daughter were taken by the Romans to be put to death after the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 C.E., they publicly declared God’s justice in the words of Moses: He boldly told his tormenters, “God’s deeds are perfect”; she said, “God is faithful, never false!” Their belief that God had not forsaken them, even in the midst of their torture and death, but would reward them in the *olam ha-ba* provided the courage and faith they required to face their enemies with strength and pride. (*Avodah Zarah* 18a)

No good without evil

The Koretzer Rabbi taught that human beings cannot be consciously good unless they know evil. They cannot appreciate pleasure unless they

have tasted bitterness. Good is only the reverse of evil, and pleasure is merely the opposite of anxiety. Without the evil impulse human beings do no evil, but neither can they do good. (Louis I. Newman, The Hasidic Anthology: Tales and Teachings of the Hasidim, Schocken Books, New York, 1963, p. 97)



Rambam (Maimonides)

In his book *The Guide for the Perplexed* (3:22–23), Moses Maimonides raises a serious objection to the view that trials and suffering are sent “as an opportunity for achieving great reward” in the *olam ha-ba*. He argues that this is not what Moses had in mind when he declared that “God’s ways are just. . . .” Using Job and his loss of wealth, property, and children as an example, Maimonides argues that there are no explanations for the suffering of innocent people. We cannot understand the mysterious and miraculous ways in which God brings the universe to life. “We should not fall into the error of imagining God’s knowledge to be similar to ours or God’s intention, power, and management comparable to ours.”

According to Maimonides, if we appreciate, as Job finally did, that God’s ways are not our ways and God’s knowledge is not our knowledge, we will find suffering more bearable. “We will not be filled with doubts about God. Instead, our faith will increase our love of God.”

Maimonides’ view that God’s powers of justice and mercy are beyond human understanding is not shared by Jewish mystics. They believe that evil enters the world at creation. Rabbi Isaac Luria teaches that God created the world out of a clash between the powers of mercy and judgment. In that collision, sparks of light and love were lodged into dark shells that make up all the substance of the world. We suffer, Luria maintains, because so much is still locked in such shells. The human responsibility is to liberate the light, to free goodness and healing. God’s will is

for justice, truth, and mercy. God, dependent upon human beings, is waiting for them to break the dark shells and release God’s power for mercy and love.

Modern philosopher Martin Buber amplifies this mystic insight about evil. He writes: “What we call ‘evil’ is not merely in human beings; it is in the world . . . ; it is the uncleanness of creation. . . . We know what has been proclaimed by the anonymous prophet whose words stand in the second part of the Book of Isaiah: like light and darkness, good and evil have been created by God . . . the abyss of the absence of light and the struggle for light . . . [have been created by God].”

For Buber and for Jewish mystics, evil is real. It is embedded in the “dark shells,” the material of the universe. Since God could not create the universe without such “material” or “potentials,” human beings, like all other forms of life, must be subjected to evil and its awful consequences. Nevertheless, Buber adds that we have the power to liberate the good and diminish the evil. “Everything wants to be hallowed, to be brought into the holy . . . everything wants to come to God through us. . . . God wills . . . man for the work of completing creation. . . . God waits for us.” The task of humanity is to reduce evil and its suffering in the world. God, whose ways are just, true, and merciful, depends upon us. (*The Way of Response: Selections from His Writings*, Nahum N. Glatzer, editor, Schocken Books, New York, 1971, pp. 134, 148, and 151)

Controlling the yetzer ha-ra, or the “evil inclination”

The rabbis tell the story of the people who capture the yetzer ha-ra, or the “source of evil.” They are about to destroy it when they are warned that if they do, they will also destroy the world. Instead, they put it in prison. Three days later, they notice that the world about them is changing in dangerous ways. No eggs are being hatched anywhere. Fearful that the world and they will not survive, they decide to liberate the yetzer ha-ra and seek ways to control it. (Yoma 69b)

God's power against evil

I believe . . . the only intellectually satisfying answer that has been given to the Holocaust: God "allowed" it because God didn't have the power to stop it. God was not strong enough yet to prevent this torment, and we did not use our moral capacity to compensate for God's weakness.

The same may be said of other evils we face. God is doing all the good [that] God now can do. We cannot blame our suffering on a God who, like ourselves, does not have all power. (Eugene B. Borowitz, Liberal Judaism, UAHC Press, New York, 1984, p. 203)

Evil is chaos

Evil is chaos still uninvaded by the creative energy; [it is] sheer chance unconquered by will and intelligence. . . . In the measure that human beings learn to release their potentialities for good, they transform and transcend evil and associate themselves with the divine energies that inhere in the universe. . . . (Mordecai M. Kaplan, The Meaning of God, pp. 72-79)

Rabbi Robert Gordis rejects the views of both Jewish mystics and Martin Buber. "The suffering of the innocent in painful disease, the death of a child, the cutting off of genius or talent before its fulfillment—all these categories of evil are too agonizing to yield to such views." Like Maimonides, Gordis argues that there are some forms of suffering and evil we can understand, but many others are "beyond all the resources of the human intellect.

"The universe is a work of art, the pattern of which cannot be discerned if the spectator stands too close to the painting. Only as one moves back a distance, do the scales and blotches dissolve and does the design of the artist emerge in all its fullness. In the world that is our home, we are too close to the pattern of existence, too deeply involved in it, to be able to achieve the perspective that is God's alone. . . . Perhaps the truest word was spoken by a third-century sage, Yannai: 'It is not in our power fully to explain either the well-being of the wicked or the suffer-

ing of the righteous.'" (*A Faith for Moderns*, Bloch Publishing Co., New York, 1960, pp. 187-189)

Not so, says Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Rescued from Europe when Nazism began to rise, Heschel draws a distinction between the evil of natural catastrophes or diseases and the evil perpetrated by human beings. God, he argues, gives us commandments for justice, truth, goodness, and love. Human beings are unfaithful to them and unfaithful to God. They bring the evil upon themselves, and then they bitterly turn on God like selfish children looking for someone to blame, crying out: "Where are You?"

Quoting the chasidic teacher Ba'al Shem Tov, Heschel observes: "If people behold evil, they may know it was shown to them in order that they learn their own guilt and repent; for what is shown to them is also within them." Continuing, Heschel declares: "We have profaned the word of God, and we have given the wealth of our land, the ingenuity of our minds, and the dear lives of our youths to tragedy and perdition. . . . We have failed to fight for right, for justice, for goodness; as a result we must fight against wrong, against injustice, against evil. We have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; thus we offered sacrifices on the altar of war." Such evil is done by human beings.

Heschel agrees with Moses' declaration of faith that "God's deeds are perfect . . . all God's ways are just. . . . God is faithful, true, and upright." God, says Heschel, abhors evil and, therefore, demands of us deeds that are *perfect, just, faithful, true, and upright*. God "has not created the universe that we may have opportunities to satisfy our greed, envy, and ambition. We have not survived that we may waste our years in vulgar vanities." Our task, concludes Heschel, is to use our energies and gifts to banish all evil from the world. "God will return to us when we shall be willing to let God in. . . . God is waiting constantly and keenly for our effort and devotion." (*Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*, Scribner, New York, 1954, pp. 147-151)

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz offers a philosophy about God and evil slightly different from that of Heschel. "I believe . . . the only intellectually satisfying answer that has been given to the

Holocaust [is] God 'allowed' it because God didn't have the power to stop it. God was not strong enough yet to prevent this torment, and we did not use our moral capacity to compensate for God's weakness."

Borowitz here breaks with traditional Jewish theology, which sees both good and evil as flowing from God. For him, evil emerges because God is limited in power and cannot do anything to stop it. God's will is for goodness, mercy, justice, and peace, but God requires our help and, at times even with our help, may not prevail.

"The same," argues Borowitz, "may be said of other evils we face. God is doing all the good [that] God now can do. We cannot blame our suffering on a God who, like ourselves, does not have all power." God may want a world without anguish and injustice, but, like that of a human being, God's will is limited by the harsh realities of available resources, by the unexpected flurry of opposing forces, and by the failure of human beings to cooperate. Evil happens because God cannot yet prevent it, not because God plans it. (*Liberal Judaism*, p. 203)

Why is there evil in this world created by a God of justice, mercy, and love? Why do some people suffer and others live long lives of happiness and peace? What does Moses mean by his claim that "God's deeds are perfect . . . are just . . . true and upright"?

Jewish commentators offer a variety of views in response to these difficult questions. They challenge us to formulate our own answers and integrate them into our lives. Perhaps the very process of struggling to understand the meaning of evil is the means through which God triumphs over evil. Some debates, say the rabbis, are truly for the sake of God. Confronting the power and temptations of evil in God's world may be one of them.

PEREK BET: "Remember the Days of Old": The Importance of History

In his poetic declaration to the people of Israel, Moses tells them: *Zechor yemot olam*, "Remember the days of old,"/ *Binu shenot dor va-dor*, "Consider the years of ages past. . . ." Are these the words of an old man fearful of being forgotten

by his people, or is this statement an important piece of wisdom?

Modern historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes that while "memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, sometimes treacherous," the Torah has "no hesitations" in commanding it. He points out that "the verb *zachar* [remember] appears in its various forms in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times." The people of Israel are commanded to remember and are warned not to forget.

Yerushalmi explains that, within the Torah, "remembering" functions within "two channels: ritual and recital." Each of the festivals celebrates a historical event. Pesach and Sukot tell the tale of the people's liberation from Egypt and their wandering through the Sinai desert. Shavuot, during the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, becomes a celebration of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The recital of history, the encounter with memory, takes place with each ritual. Every Shabbat *Kiddush* over the wine includes the phrase *zecher li-tziat Mitzrayim*, or "a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt."

Calling the creation of Israel's history "an astonishing achievement," Yerushalmi concludes that while "biblical history has, at its core, a recital of the acts of God, its accounts are filled predominantly with the actions of men and women and the deeds of Israel and the nations. . . . The result was . . . history on an unprecedented scale." (*Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1982, pp. 1-26)

Why recall or study the past? Why recite it at festival times?



Rashi

Rashi suggests that one should "remember" and "consider" history "in order to be conscious of what may happen in the future." He explains that understanding how God created the heavens and earth, spread human beings throughout the world, made a covenant with Abraham, divided peoples into lands, and gave the Torah with its

laws to the people of Israel helps to promote an appreciation of God's power and presence in human life. The knowledge of what God has done encourages faith in what God will continue to do. Knowing about the past, says Rashi, promotes the truth that "God has the power to bring good into human life and will one day bring the world to a messianic time of justice and peace." (Comments on Deuteronomy 32:7)



Peli

Modern commentator Pinchas Peli sees another value in "remembering." He quotes a statement by the great chasidic master Nachman of Bratzlav, which is inscribed in huge stone letters at the entrance to the Yad va-Shem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem: "In remembering is the secret of redemption." Peli argues that "recalling the past and understanding it help us put events into their proper focus." Retrieving the past, he says, enriches us. "Even though we may think of ourselves as wise, resourceful, and technologically advanced, we are brought to realize that there is still much we can learn from our parents, and even our grandparents have much that is worth sharing with us."

Peli also believes that knowing about our past provides an important source of "constructive pride." Jews emphasize the "pride to be derived from getting to know their roots. This pride was not aimed at inflating one's sense of importance. . . . On the contrary, it was reason for imposing more obligations and restrictions. There is a short but very meaningful Yiddish expression that is invoked on such occasions: *s'pa'ast nisht*. It does not suit a person of distinguished lineage. . . . Being proud and getting to know the roots of one's culture is not just a hobby or pastime," Peli concludes, "but a delicate and sophisticated business." It is the means through which we adopt and absorb ethical values and standards into our behavior. Considering and understanding our past provides a proud set of models, guidelines, and goals. (*Torah Today*, pp. 239-241)

Studying and recalling history, however, can

sometimes be very painful, teaching lessons that are often difficult to accept. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize-winning author Elie Wiesel points out that people often are resistant to dealing with what the past teaches. After years of writing about the Nazi attempt to destroy the Jewish people, Wiesel feels "discouragement and shame." Society, he says, "has changed so little."

Hatred, prejudice, and anti-Semitism continue. "So many strategists are preparing the explosion of the planet and so many people willingly submit . . . so many still live under oppression and so many others in indifference, only one conclusion is possible: namely, the failure of the black years has begotten yet another failure. Nothing has been learned. Auschwitz has not even served as warning. For more detailed information, consult your daily newspaper."

Why follow Moses' advice: "Remember the days of old,/Consider the years of ages past"?

Wiesel argues that we must study history because we owe it to those who perished and to new generations who will need to know "where they come from, and what their heritage is." Remembering the past is critical in forming the future. "We need to face the dead, again and again, in order to appease them, perhaps even to seek among them, beyond all contradiction and absurdity, a symbol, a beginning of promise."

To demonstrate the importance of passing memories from one generation to another, Wiesel relates how the famed Jewish historian Simon Dubnow encouraged those about him as they walked to their death, telling them: "Open your eyes and ears, remember every detail, every name, every sigh! The color of the clouds, the hissing of the wind in the trees, the executioner's every gesture: the one who survives must forget nothing!"

As a result Jews wrote plays and poems describing the agony, torture, and degradation of those who perished in the death camps. "Jews," says Wiesel, "went without sleep, bartered their food for pencils and paper. They gambled with their fate. They risked their lives. . . . They did not write them for me, for us, but for the others, those on the outside and those yet unborn. There was then a veritable passion to testify for the future, against death and oblivion, a passion

conveyed by every possible means of expression.”

As Wiesel notes, those writing history under such circumstances recorded it for those in the future. It was their last gift, a testimony of pride and faith, of courage and determination. Those about to die in gas chambers or be shot at the edge of mass graves or be beaten to death sealed their memories in documents so they would live again in those who read about their experiences. This “historic consciousness,” writes Wiesel, provides Jews with a solidarity with other Jews “and those who survive within you.”

Studying Jewish history, therefore, bonds Jews to a “collective memory,” a legacy reaching back to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, through Moses and all the prophets, poets, philosophers, and Torah commentators. It means, concludes Wiesel, “choosing to be a link between past and future, between remorse and consolation, between the primary silence of creation and the silence that weighed on Treblinka. . . . To be a Jew today means to bear witness to what is and to what is no longer.” (*One Generation After*, pp. 9, 11, 38–39, 168–174)

Modern philosopher Emil L. Fackenheim also addresses the importance of memory and history. For him, Moses’ command to “remember . . . and consider the years of ages past” is not a suggestion that Jews have the right to accept or reject. Fackenheim points out that, before the Holocaust, Jews sought to live by the 613 commandments (mitzvot) of the Torah. Following the Holocaust, an additional commandment has been added to Jewish practice.

Jews, Fackenheim writes, must “remember” their history. They must study it carefully, know all its details, celebrate their traditions, teach them to their children, and do everything possible to assure their regeneration and growth as a people. That is the only way they will triumph over Hitler whose policy of extermination was designed to put an end to Jewish memory and existence. “*The authentic Jew of today*,” explains Fackenheim, “is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.” (*The Jewish Return into History: Reflections on the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem*, Schocken Books, New York, 1978, pp. 19–24)

Jewish history and purpose

A robust sense of identity has not prevented this people from sending the repercussions of its influence far and wide into the oceans of universal history. It is when historic Israel is most persistently distinctive that its universal vocation is enlarged. The lesson of history is plain. There is no salvation or significance for the Jew except when he aims high and stands straight within his own authentic frame of values. (Abba Eban, My People, p. 522)

Making history

Human beings make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past. (Karl Marx)

Ignoring history

Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it. (George Santayana)

The choice of confronting and embracing Jewish history in very personal terms does not apply only to being, in Wiesel’s terms, “a witness” or, in Fackenheim’s formulation, an instrument in the “triumph over Hitler.” For many Jews, “remembering” and “considering” the Jewish legacy is a means of recapturing Jewish identity.

Modern writer Paul Cowan grew up without a Jewish education, without Jewish celebrations, and with almost no experience with his Jewish relatives. He recalls suffering bitter moments of anti-Semitism, while attending a private school where he hid his Jewish identity. “I never told anyone. I felt guilty about it, as if I were personally responsible for my plight.”

In his thirties, Cowan began a writing project about Jewish socialism as it had flourished on the Lower East Side of New York. The research led him to questions about his own family, where they had come from, why some bore the name Cohen and others Cowan. Soon he was enmeshed in reclaiming his Jewish heritage. Explaining his motivation, Cowan writes, “For my

part, I am reacting to the rootlessness I felt as a child—to the fact that, for all the Cowan family's warmth, for all its intellectual vigor, for all its loyalty toward one another, our pasts had been amputated. We were orphans in history."

Cowan explains that when he met people who made Judaism attractive, "I was faced with a clear choice—a choice, indeed, about history, though I never knew how to articulate it until my sister Holly furnished the words. Should I explore Judaism, the real, living link with my ancestors and the six million? Or should I reject it and be another conscious participant in the obliteration of five thousand years of history? Put that way, of course, it wasn't really a choice." For Paul Cowan, carrying out Moses' commandment to "remember the days of old,/Consider the years of ages past" was the means through which he retrieved his legacy as a Jew. (*An Orphan in History: Retrieving a Jewish Legacy*, Doubleday, New York, 1983, pp. 3–21)

What about a convert to Judaism? Is Moses' command also applicable to Jews-by-choice? If one has not been born a Jew and is, therefore, not related to generations of Jews by birth, how can one feel a part of the Jewish past?

Lydia Kukoff, herself a convert, offers some important insights into such questions. She comments: "When I became a Jew, my husband and I lived far away from our extended Jewish family. Fortunately, however, I found some friends who were quite Jewishly literate. We started a study group and met regularly to learn, to cook together for holidays, and just to be together. These friends gave me a great deal of support. I had a comfortable environment in which to learn and ask questions, while gradually becoming part of a Jewish community. By doing and learning I began to build my own Jewish past."

Creating a "Jewish past" takes time and discipline. Kukoff underscores the importance of Shabbat and festival celebrations in the home and synagogue, constant study, reading cookbooks, history, literature, Jewish religious thought, placing a *mezuzah* on the door, using a Jewish calendar, learning Hebrew, and acquiring synagogue skills. She advises, "Don't be impatient. You won't get it all right away. Nobody does. . . . What you are learning and doing will slowly

become internalized. You will make Judaism your own, and you will feel authentic." Studying, accumulating knowledge about Jewish history, and celebrating the traditions of Jewish life provide a convert with a Jewish memory. It is the means through which a sacred heritage is transfused into the soul. (*Choosing Judaism*, pp. 23–29)

Jewish history carries with it a distinct task, which we encounter in Moses' demand to "remember the days of old,/Consider the years of ages past." The great lawgiver and leader does not stop there. He also declares that "God's portion is the people of Israel." What does such a claim mean? How can it be understood within the context of Jewish history?

Modern interpreter Rabbi Leo Baeck sees in the study of Jewish history an extraordinary explanation for the purpose of the Jewish people. "According to an old saying," he writes, "Israel was called into existence for the sake of the Torah; but the Torah can live only through its people. . . . The Jewish right to existence was dependent upon the Jews retaining their peculiarity. All education was directed to this end: To be different was the law of existence. According to an ancient interpretation, the Jews were exhorted: 'You shall be different, for I *Adonai* your God am different. . . .' The Jew was the great nonconformist, the great dissenter of history. That was the purpose of Jewish existence."

Baeck underscores his view by observing that "often it seems that the special task of Judaism is to express the idea of the community standing alone, the ethical principle of the minority. Judaism bears witness to the power of the idea as against the power of mere numbers and worldly success; it stands for the enduring protest of those who seek to be true to their own selves, who assert their right to be different against the crushing pressure of the vicious and the leveling. . . . If Judaism did not exist," argues Baeck, "we should have to invent it. Without minorities there can be no world historic goal."

For Rabbi Baeck, Israel is "God's portion" because of its unique role in history as a community "standing alone," questioning the power of the multitude, and representing the sanctity of each human being as a child of God. Knowing

and understanding that history are crucial for every Jew and for the world. "So long as Judaism exists," Baeck concludes, "nobody will be able to say that the soul of humanity has surrendered." (*The Essence of Judaism*, pp. 260–273)

Is this what Moses has in mind when he emphasizes, "Remember the days of old,/Consider the years of ages past"? Undoubtedly, Moses was concerned with several of the considerations expressed by our interpreters on the significance of Jewish history. He must have sensed the power in reviewing history, realizing that acquiring and confronting one's past is a source of pride and identity that builds a commitment for future survival. The past leads through the present into tomorrow.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. At the death of a loved one, a Jew says a blessing: "Be praised, O *Adonai*, *Dayan ha-emet*, Judge of truth." What does this blessing acknowledge about God and human life? How does it relate to Moses' statement that God's "deeds are perfect . . . all God's ways are just"?
2. Some Torah interpreters claim that evil is a necessary part of human existence. What do they mean by this argument? How would you
3. apply their claim to the evils of sickness, dishonesty, murder, child abuse, war, and famine? Which explanation of the relationship between evil and God presented by the Torah interpreters makes most sense to you? Why?
3. In her book *Generation without Memory* (Linton Press/Simon and Schuster, New York, 1981, pp. 99–100), writer Anne Roiphe quotes a friend: "We Jews are molded together like a family; because of our incredible and unique history we have developed our own intellectual modes, the modes of logic and humor that we share with other Jews. We are a single family that traces its history back to before the Flood. Being Jewish is one of the major ingredients of my psyche. I could not live suspended in air. I need my roots, my feelings of belonging." How does a study of Jewish history create a sense of belonging to "a family"? How does such study prevent one from feeling "suspended in air"?
4. For Jews, as Torah interpreters point out, memories of the past, a shared history, are very important in the formation of a proud identity. Today, however, there are many converts to Judaism and many born-Jews who have not accumulated a "memory bank" of Jewish experiences or knowledge. If you were shaping a program meant to help them acquire such a "memory bank," what would you include?