

Purim 2017

Written by Daniel Spiro

It starts in early childhood, when we think of our parents as infallible. Soon, we're off to school and we're looking up to some beloved teacher. Or perhaps there is an athlete, rock star or actor who becomes for us the epitome of cool. As we get older, we recognize that everyone is flawed, but we still have our favorites. We grow attached to our spouse or our children, whom we adore more even than ourselves. And let's not forget our political parties, religious communities, nation-states, and maybe even our employers. We become loyal to those as well. We are nothing if we are not biased.

Throughout our lives, we enjoy learning about our heroes. That becomes our comfort food. It's why we can watch the same movie or read the same book over and over again. But as much as we appreciate testimonials to our heroes, that's how much we detest seeing them criticized. We call such treatment a "hatchet job." We tend to avoid such books and programs like the plague.

Do you want to know why Donald Trump is President of the United States? It's because Democrats, whose loyalty to the Clintons has been on display for a quarter century, couldn't listen when mid-America expressed its allergy to Hillary and, even more importantly, to the status quo she came across as embracing. To be loyal is to be closed-minded, or so it appears.

Personally, I pride myself on being loyal but also open-minded. That dichotomy invariably causes cognitive dissonance, especially in my role as coordinator of the Washington Spinoza Society. For the 15 years since the organization's inception, I've served as Defender of the Faith. Whenever the topic turns to Spinoza's God, I become the philosopher's attorney – explaining what he meant, how we can apply it to our lives, and why it has stood the test of time. I don't doubt that others can see me as a partisan, but I love Spinoza's teachings too much to care about what they think. I owe to those teachings the theological foundation of my adult life. And I find it to be the hallmark of loyalty – not to mention religiosity – to honor our greatest benefactors. Spinoza is clearly one of mine.

But there is more to life than loyalty. Too much of it, in fact, can be poison to the life of the mind. Recognizing this, I embarked this past summer on an odyssey through a portion of Spinoza's writings that had long bothered me, though in the tradition of excessive loyalty, I had largely ignored. I'm referring to Spinoza's views about traditional Judaism and the Jewish Scriptures. On my website, you can find the results of my analysis, an essay entitled "Spinoza and Contemporary Judaism." The essay began and ended in a way you might expect from a Defender of the Faith. I paid tribute to the nobility of Spinoza's personal life and moral compass, and implored progressive Jews to embrace him as a quintessentially Jewish

philosopher, not just as a philosophical Jew. The essay ended with the statement that “[b]y choosing not to embrace such a thinker, contemporary Jews risk their own religious vitality and their grandchildren’s Jewish identity.” So there you have on display the voice of loyalty, the voice of partisanship.

But in the middle of the essay, I let Spinoza have it. I entitled that middle section, “How Some of Spinoza’s Words Can Aptly be Associated with Garden-Variety Anti-Semitism.” And I chronicled one instance after another where Spinoza was invidiously comparing the Jewish Scriptures or the Jewish people to such Christian heroes as Christ and Paul. Spinoza portrayed the latter as enlightened philosophers who attempted to instill purity of heart and wisdom. By contrast, Spinoza’s Jews were neither philosophical nor especially religious, at least not by contemporary, progressive standards. Their Scriptures taught them above all else to obey, and to do so out of fear, rather than love. What emerged from those Scriptures was a people whose servitude continued well beyond Egypt, for they were slaves to the rules that they dared not violate, and their wisdom was as stunted as their freedom.

You can imagine my pain in researching and writing that portion of the essay. But I never doubted that this was an odyssey I had to take. Whether you’re a student or teacher, a devotee of philosophy is always obliged to follow the truth wherever it leads. For as hallowed a virtue as loyalty is, the virtue of open-mindedness is even more sacred. Loyalty, you see, is a virtue of the tribal. Open-mindedness is a virtue of the universal. And while tribalism must always be given an honored place at the table – that, in of itself, is a universalist value – such a place must never be at the front of the table. The universe, or should I say the Divine, deserves better.

With that as prologue, let’s move up in time several months. I found myself going through a similar exercise, only this time not with my favorite philosopher but with my favorite religion. I had purchased a tome by Everett Fox entitled *The Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings*, which offered not only a new translation of these Biblical books but also plenty of footnotes and commentary. My immediate reaction upon beginning Fox’s tome was that I was about to go through the same experience a second time. For just as the Spinoza essay caused me to analyze portions of his writings that his Jewish followers like to keep in the closet, the books of the early prophets are among the parts of the Tanakh that progressive Jews speak about the least. Cynics would not be too far from the truth if they encapsulated these books with this simple message: if the Jewish community, and especially its leaders, doesn’t obey God’s laws and commandments, there will be hell on earth to pay, for the Jewish God is nothing if He is not ruthless and vengeful. It is exactly that message that has fueled anti-Semitism among gentiles and zealotry among Jews, both of which are anathema to progressives like me.

The fact is, though, that it was never painful for me to analyze these Scriptural texts. Not

once did they make me ashamed, and at times, they even moved me to tears. Here's the irony: the early-prophetic books are among the texts that most bolster Spinoza's criticism of Judaism, yet it was Spinoza who taught me to read Scripture so I can embrace it at all times. From Spinoza, you see, I learned that Scripture shouldn't be read with the same mindset that we read philosophy, for the Bible is not a philosophy book. Its teachings do not always have to comport with the standards of that discipline in order to inspire thinkers and poets alike.

When I see Spinoza exaggerate Paul's virtues or Moses' limitations as teachers, I wince because I am judging Spinoza the philosopher based on how much his propositions ring true. But when I read Scripture, I know not to approach it as either a philosophy or history book. I approach it instead as a devoted member of a close-knit family who is privileged to gain access to the family lore. These family stories have been passed down from generation to generation and have forged our sense of identity, both collectively and as individuals. At best, they provide us with priceless guidance about the meaning of virtue or stir us with reminders of the power of divinity. Even when Scriptural stories seem antiquated, they provide cautionary lessons about the human condition and its limitations, lessons we ignore at our own peril.

It only makes sense that we would learn more from the Tanakh about our own limitations than about the Divine Infinity. When Heschel wrote that the Bible is God's book about man, he was simply pointing out what should be obvious -- that we, rather than God, are Scripture's primary focus. As for the Tanakh's theological value, we can derive plenty of sustenance from our ancestors' tributes to God's supreme *relevance*. And while literal readers may often be frustrated by what the Tanakh has to say about the meaning of divinity, we need not feel threatened if our ancestors had one type of understanding and we, 2 ½ millennia later, have evolved in our thinking. Families, no less than individuals, tend to learn over time.

But enough with the abstract; let's get a little more concrete about what we're up against here. For if we're willing to open our eyes, the truth is that we will find both horror and inspiration in the books of the early prophets. Allow me to confront these books head on, and reflect on some of the darkness and the light that resides within.

The texts at issue begin with the Book of Joshua and the story of how the Hebrews populated the Promised Land. Ostensibly, Joshua commanded the tribes. But the real Commander and Chief was the Lord. Hebrew soldiers were directed to do His bidding, and frequently that bidding was to be ruthless. In Jericho, Joshua – or should I say, God – spared only the family of the prostitute who hid some of the Hebrew messengers sent in advance of the attack. All the residents – “from man to woman, from young lad to old man, to ox and sheep and donkey “ – were destroyed “with the mouth of the sword.” Jericho's fate was hardly unique. The Hebrews left zero survivors in the towns of Liva, Lakhish, Eglan, Hevron, or Devir. After such destruction, we learn about a group of kings coming together to do battle with Israel, but

God reassured Joshua, “Do not be afraid before them, for tomorrow at this same time I myself will make all of them slain-ones before Israel; their horses you will maim, and their chariots you will burn with fire!” Indeed, in the ensuing battle of Hatzor, we are told that “No one breathing remained” after Joshua burned the city with fire.

Ostensibly, Joshua is a great hero in the history of the Jewish people. That’s why so many Jews name their sons after him. Joshua carried the baton after Moses, kept the people unified, and was nothing if not dutiful to the Hebrew God. In his parting speech, Joshua offered words of guidance that would have served the people well if taken to heart, for they go to the heart of the message that the Biblical authors are trying to convey. Consider the following excerpts:

You yourselves have seen all that the Lord your God did to all the nations before you, for the Lord your God, He is the one who does battle for you! ... You are to be very strong, in keeping and in observing all that is written in the Record of the Instruction of Moses, so as not to turn aside from it, right or left, so as not to come in among these nations that are left beside you; the name of their gods you are not to invoke, you are not to swear [by them], you are not to serve them, you are not to bow down to them.... If you should turn ... and cleave to the rest of these nations ... and marry among them, so that they come among you and you among them, you must know ... that the Lord your God will not continue to dispossess these nations from before you; they will become for you a trapping-net and a snare, a whip in your sides and barbs in your eyes, until your perishing from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.

While reading the next book of the Bible, the book of Judges, I wrote the following note, “Because the Jews broke their covenant with God and bowed down to the Baals and Astartes, God stopped killing the gentiles and made the Jews share the land with them.” So there you have the supreme punishment for disobedience – God stopped killing the gentiles and animals who lived where *we* wanted to; instead, we had to share the land with them, perish the thought.

From the standpoint of contemporary, progressive Judaism, this is monstrous stuff. And we are not talking about one or two versus but an entire current of Scriptural writing. I am reminded of the story of King Saul in the Book of Samuel, whose terrible sin in the eyes of God was that he failed to obey the commandment to “go and strike down Amalek ... [and] put to death [everyone], from man to woman, from child to suckling, from ox to sheep, from camel to donkey!” Fortunately, the pious Prophet Samuel was available after Saul spared Amalek’s King Agag, and Samuel “slashed Agag [to pieces] in the presence of the Lord.” Time and time again, Hebrew leaders are admonished for *sparing* human lives, rather than for taking them. As for animal lives, we learn how much our ancestors valued those by the fact that when King Solomon dedicated the Temple of Jerusalem, he offered in the name of peace the sacrifice of 12,000 oxen

and 120,000 sheep. If that was considered a “shalom offering,” I’d hate to see what sacrifice would have been offered in the name of milchama (war).

These books also give us one of our first memorialized ethnic slurs, the term “Foreskinned Ones.” It was used at different times, including by King David in reference to Goliath the Philistine. Speaking of the Philistines, did you know that the name of the Promised Land was dubbed “Palestine” by the Greeks and Romans, meaning “the Land of the Philistines”? That’s yet another reminder of how emotionally charged these tribal conflicts once were, and are again.

In reading these texts, I can’t help but see the roots of why so many Orthodox Jews are mistrustful and uncompromising when it comes to their Palestinian neighbors. We Jewish two-staters can cite plenty of Scripture in fighting for compromise and reconciliation. But when we’re busy arguing against our own zealots’ perspective, we shouldn’t deny that they too have their own Scriptural verses to cite.

Another point we ought to appreciate is that, from the perspective of those who wrote these ancient texts, the arch-nemesis of the Hebrews wasn’t any particular nation-state or ethnic group; it was the concept of idolatry. In Exodus, we are told that the Lord “does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.” In the books of the early prophets, we see that more often than not, such a punishment is meted out because of the sin of idolatry. It is because of that sin that God gave the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians and later gave the Southern Kingdom of Judah (including Jerusalem) to the Babylonians. Perhaps because idolatry was depicted as so supremely dangerous, our Lord became the enemy of religious freedom. Kings who did not worship idols themselves were admonished merely because they failed to prevent others from doing so. As for the Ark of the Covenant, the tangible symbol of the true God, merely touching this object – even by mistake – merited the death penalty. Apparently, this is not just a jealous God, but a God who needed to be recognized as transcendently great.

And therein lies, for me, what are both the most and least compelling aspects of ancient Jewish theology. On the one hand, this God-figure became the brutal Commander and Chief, constantly intervening in nature in order to punish, and sometimes punishing the sinner’s descendants even more than the sinner. On that side of the ledger, the notion of God’s transcendent greatness was a reminder to be afraid, be very afraid, if you fail to follow the path that the prophets of this all-seeing God have set out for you. But I must ask, is this really God, or is it a Leviathan? Sometimes reading these books, it’s difficult to tell the difference. For the so-called omnibenevolence of this deity is belied by His cruel, and often arbitrary, judgments. You can see why, to a lover of philosophy like Spinoza who grew up in a 17th century Orthodox community, this God-concept would be antithetical to our freedom of thought, and to be a

follower of such a Lord would indeed be a form of servitude.

Thankfully, though, there is a second hand to all this Jewish-God worship. Stated simply, we 21st century thinkers are not imprisoned by the God-concept of our ancient ancestors. We can embrace their idea of monotheism – their notion of an Ultimate One who reigns supreme over all of reality -- and we can choose for ourselves a God-concept that works for us. We can also take pride in the fact that this notion of monotheism, which rings throughout this great work, has stood the test of time in culture after culture throughout the world. In proclaiming Adonai transcendently great, our Bible recognized what it has taken scientists and philosophers millennia to appreciate – that we human beings are, to use Spinoza’s metaphor, like the tiniest of worms in a bloodstream when compared to the greatness of nature, or God. As such, we can’t possibly understand the deepest essence of this eternal, infinite deity, but what we can do is give a name to the Divine. We can proclaim the greatness of that name. We can devote our lives to honoring that name and all that is associated with it, including our fellow human beings and all the other so-called creatures of God. You see, underlying all the primitive tribalism – or for that matter, sexism -- in this book, the core of ethical monotheism shines through in eternal beauty. And we in the 21st century have the opportunity to further develop this cornerstone principle of ethical monotheism, all the while dispensing with the bigotry that many of our ancient ancestors may have associated with it.

Honestly, if a progressive religious Jew is willing to grant the fact that the Jewish Scriptures were written without the benefit of 2 ½ millennia of human experience, even the books of the early prophets can be a source of incredible inspiration. Allow me to identify just a few of the ideas or characters who have moved me in these books.

I was moved by the figure of Solomon, a man whose prayed above all else for wisdom and discernment, and who for a time, we are told, became the wisest and most discerning man who has ever lived or ever will live. I was moved for example by Solomon’s discernment when he built the great Temple in Jerusalem. As the Tanakh’s authors reminded us, the Temple wasn’t built for God, but for God’s *name*. The greatness of the Divine is such that we cannot possibly contain divinity within four walls, however grandiose they may be. We belong to God, rather than God belonging to us. But the *name* of God, that is all ours. Every time we say the word Adonai, Allah, or Lord, we are invoking the incredible power that the *Name* has conveyed to so many for so long. That name is ours to contemplate, celebrate and liberate, or, if we prefer, to ignore, mock, or even to detest. Who we are depends largely on how we relate to that name. Solomon wanted to honor it above all things, and that, I would argue, is a testament to his wisdom.

I was additionally moved by reading about Solomon’s father, the poet-warrior, the ever pious, ever dutiful David. We read in the Book of Kings about how, for a time, the Lord was

unwilling to bring ruin upon Judah, “for the sake of David, [God’s] servant.” When the authors of that book wanted us to know that a later king was virtuous, we are told that “He did what was pleasing to the Lord and followed all the ways of his ancestor David; he did not deviate to the right or to the left.” But this is the same King David, who in the Book of Samuel, saw the married Bathsheba taking a bath, seduced her, impregnated her, and essentially murdered her husband for David’s own selfish reasons. In response, God sent a prophet to tell David directly that he acted like a chozzler. More specifically, the prophet analogized David’s conduct to that of a rich man who took it upon himself to feed a wayfarer. But instead of sharing one of his many animals to make the meal, the rich man took away from a pauper his one beloved little lamb, which the pauper had been treating like a daughter. The writing of that parable is so incredibly poignant, but it is even more profound. For if you strip away all the technicalities and cut to the chase, you are reminded that the Great King David, the role model of all Judah, was an adulterer and a murderer, just as his son, the Wise King Solomon spent his old age with 700 wives, 300 concubines, and icons of the Goddess Astarte.

And therein lies much of the beauty of these texts. They strip bare even our greatest heroes and depict them as ever-so-fallible creatures. In no other faith have I found the most accomplished and venerable leaders, not to mention the rank and file of the earliest generations, to be levelled in such a humbling fashion. Some might bristle at this treatment. But I love it. It helps us relate to our greatest of ancestors and reminds us that we, too, can accomplish incredible feats even though we are fundamentally flawed. This iconoclastic leveling is also the source of so much of our culture. Our music doesn’t soar as much as it bemoans or aspires. We speak plainly, for how can an authentic Jew put on airs and take himself seriously? Our humor cuts deeply into the human condition and especially into ourselves. But we’re not known to be shrinking violets either; in fact, even Archie Bunker hired a Jew for a lawyer. If, in our view, the greatest of men can become killers, fornicators, or idolaters, than we can at least be lawyers, doctors and bankers, right? I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the same Jew can exemplify both incredible humility and palpable pride; we gain that inspiration from our Scriptures.

The humbling treatment given to the legendary kings like David and Solomon has one other benefit that cannot be overestimated. It constitutes further reminder that *only* the transcendent, infinite God is to be worshipped as truly Ultimate. Not the greatest kings. Not the greatest prophets. And not, at least to Jewish sensibilities, any purported “son” of God. Just the infinite, eternal and mysterious One, who can neither be depicted nor essentially comprehended in any finite form.

The dominating character of this saga – the sole figure who appears in every book and chapter -- is indeed Adonai. But let us not kid ourselves. These books were written by people and for people, and their overarching significance is to teach us how to live and who to be. For example, these texts drill into our heads the importance of keeping promises, and I for one am

grateful for that emphasis. Frequently, God goes out of his way to keep His promises, and so do His servants, sometimes to a fault. It is when the ancient Hebrews break their commitments – when they ignore the covenants of their ancestors – that they suffer the most. Today, we no longer believe that God will intercede on behalf of promise keepers or against promise breakers, but that makes honoring promises even more holy. Now, you see, we must honor our commitments for their own sake, and if we do so, we’ll find that we have retained a good name in our community. There are, after all, no more important qualities in the Jewish civilization than being trustworthy and reliable. I suspect that cultural trait is directly traceable to our Scriptures.

Another of these books’ fundamental teachings is that every Jew has the same basic vocation in life: to be a servant of God who honors the “laws and commandments” that have been given to us. Some might find that message stultifying; I find it liberating. It serves to remind us that moral relativism is a cop out -- that truly to believe in God is to feel viscerally *compelled* to honor the path of virtue at all times, even if another road is easier or seemingly more pleasant. Whether we find that path of virtue from the still, small voice of reason in our heads or from the dictates of the Talmudic rabbis, or both, that I believe is a decision best left up to us as individuals. But it is precisely *as individuals* that we know more often than not which path is right for us. The question is, do we feel compelled to follow it? Do we feel *commanded* to follow it? If we wish to call ourselves a real Jew, a real mensch, the answer had better be yes.

Yet another critical principle implicit in these books is the sense of human interconnectedness. We live today in a time where many a man acts like an island, adult children may have little to do with their parents, and we judge ourselves fortunate or not depending solely on our individual accomplishments and possessions. The texts I’ve been discussing provide a much different point of view. I suspect it’s a more enlightened one.

Just look at the effects of climate change. We’ll experience them together, will we not? Or look at the scourge of terrorism. Its victims are determined not by their personalities or characters but simply by virtue of being alive during a time of social insanity. Or consider what it has meant to live in a society where politicians have put party over country, and the wheels of government have largely grinded to a halt. We all suffer from this problem as well, for we all must use the same roads just as we must breathe the same air.

The texts of the Tanakh, particularly the ones we’ve been discussing, present the Jew above all else as a member of a civilization that is interconnected over space and time and that owes its existence to the One who transcends us all. Now, by contrast, each generation seems to think that this planet belongs to it and not to its descendants, let alone to God. When we march, as must, on Earth Day, April 22nd, we’ll be recognizing what any reader of Judges, Kings or Samuel would have recognized: we have a covenant with the Divine, the earth’s ultimate

benefactor, and no matter how virtuous we may be as individuals, our descendants will suffer the direst of consequences if we do not come together right away and honor that covenant.

In that last case, obviously, I'm speaking about all the people of the world, not merely the people of Israel. It is incumbent first and foremost to recognize the supreme importance of our common humanity, rather than that of our tribe or our country. But as I said earlier, there is room in this world for tribalism, just as there is room for individuality. It would be a monotonous world indeed if we all lived in a homogenous melting pot, where everyone subscribed to the majority view and lived basically the same lifestyle. One of the most beautiful aspects of the prophetic books is precisely that they do provide a place not only for tribalism but also for individuality. Just look at the prophets themselves, the Jewish moral exemplars par excellence. Are they not isolated individuals? Are they not full of self-doubt? And yet, are they not resolute in the need to walk the path of virtue, while honoring God and their own names in the process.

Reading these books, I felt proud to be Nathan Spiro's grandson. My grandpa's namesake was the prophet who got in the face of King David, cited him for despicable greed, and told him that "the sword shall not depart from your house for the ages because you despised [God] and took the wife of Uriyya the Hittite to be a wife for you!" So there you have the great Jewish king admonished because of the way he treated a Hittite, and his royal family had to pay the price for the ages. To be a Jew, a real Jew, is to admire David for his poise, piety, and poetry, but it is to admire even more the prophets like Nathan who serve not so much as our leaders but as our *conscience*. We are at bottom a people of ethical obligations, a people whose greatest prophet was so selected because of his unparalleled humility, and a people who have never been promised eternal happiness either here on earth or in the hereafter. Our challenge is to pursue the commanded path because virtue is its own reward, because we owe it to our Lord who has given us everything, and because our people – indeed, all people -- need to follow that path before it is too late.

I'll see you on the National Mall for Earth Day. April 22nd. Year 5,777.