

1948 as Israel's Mt. Sinai

Source Sheet by Jeremy Winaker

Shabbat 88a:5

The Torah says, “And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; **and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount**” (Exodus 19:17). **Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said:** the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse **teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Ya’akov said:** From here there is a **substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfill the Torah.** The Jewish people can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding. **Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written:** “The Jews **ordained, and took upon them,** and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them” (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews **ordained what they had already taken upon themselves** through coercion at Sinai.

שבת פ"ח א:ה'

”וַיִּתְּצֵבוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הָהָר,” אָמַר רַב אַבְדִּימִי בַר חָמָא בַר חֲסָא: מְלַמֵּד שְׂכַפְפָּה הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטָב, וְאִם לֹא — שָׁם תִּהְיֶה קְבוּרַתְכֶם.

אָמַר רַב אַחָא בַר יַעֲקֹב: מִכָּאן מוֹדְעָא רַבָּה לְאוֹרְיֵיתָא.

אָמַר רַבָּא: אַף עַל פִּי כֵן הַדּוֹר קִבְּלוּהָ בִּימֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ, דְּכִתְיִב: ”קִיְּמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הֵיהוּדִים” — קִיְּמוּ מֵהַ שְׂקִיבְלוּ כְּבָר.

Dahlia Lithwick, *Sefaria Torah Talks: Shavuot 5781*

To what end would the rabbis tell a story in which the end result weakens [...] free choice? The free choice feels like it's been extorted or coerced or blackmailed. So, why would you tell a story in which Bnei Yisrael (the Children of Israel) make the right choice for the wrong reason, when particularly on Shavuot, you want them to be making the right choice for the right reasons?

Dahlia Lithwick, *Sefaria Torah Talks: Shavuot 5781*

If both parties to every marriage had a fully realized prenup with full information, like, "I'm going to leave my socks next to the bed and I'm going to forget that you're trying to sleep and I'm going to go downstairs and drum with the boys at 11:30 at night" -- if we had full and complete information and total disclosure from both parties, we would never enter into any agreement...**If we had complete balance and also complete information we wouldn't have the aspirational idea of why we would enter into this relationship in the first place**, which, despite all of that, we're going to do it because that's what love is and commitment is...Even absent the bowl hanging over our heads, do we want full information? I don't know, maybe not. **What we want is the confidence and the certainty and the aspiration that even without full information, this thing is going to work.**

Dahlia Lithwick, *Sefaria Torah Talks: Shavuot 5781*

It's such a nice counterpoint to the tradition that every generation away from the revelation is a little more degraded. It's a little bit more occluded. We didn't see it and we're farther and farther away...This [text] runs counter to that idea because it says even though we didn't have the magic of the revelation -- there's no thunder, there's no lightning, there's like no tub upside our heads scaring us -- what we're actually redoubling, in making this legal commitment is more profound. That as **you move away from the magic and the fear, you're actually entering -- re-entering -- every generation into the contract absent the coercion, absent the imbalance** with more information.

https://danielgordis.substack.com/p/what-the-fires-dont-mean?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=cta

Yet just as a litany of America's wars does not come close to capturing the essence of America, neither do Israel's wars tell us much about what Israel *is* or is meant to be. We'll get back to that in future columns. But even now, in the midst of the present crisis, it's worth pointing very briefly to some of the recent developments inside Israel that have gone virtually unmentioned. Israel has been changing right in front of our eyes, and all too often, we just don't see it.

- Until the violence erupted this week, Israel was on the verge of a non-Netanyahu government. Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett had hoped to announce their coalition before Shavu'ot. And if the Bibi era was ending, why was that? It was because with the results so evenly split, a handful of votes makes all the difference. And now, Ra'am, the Arab party that had won a handful of seats and which had been vigorously courted by Bibi, had decided to side with the "change bloc", as it's called. In this little Apartheid state (as Rashida Tlaib **referred to us** again this week), **the nature of Israel's next government was effectively going to be decided by Israel's Arabs**. That's how democracy works.
- Few people noticed or mentioned that in a Lapid-Bennett government, Israel was going to have (in Bennett) its first Prime Minister from the religious-Zionist camp. **Israel has never had a kippah-wearing Prime Minister before**. **Menachem Begin** wore one ceremonially, but though instinctively traditional, he was not "observant" in the classic sense. Bennett would have been (will be?) the first. But following Bennett, Lapid was to serve as Prime Minister. Lapid would have been (will be?) Israel's first Prime Minister who attends a Reform synagogue. Those two developments speak volumes about Israel; is anyone talking about it?

- Many people love to claim that Israel is moving consistently rightward, and indeed, Bennett is much more hawkish than Bibi. But Lapid would presumably have blocked him on critical moves like annexation. Lapid is more of a centrist but would not have been able to move without Bennett. Is that a rightward move, or a decidedly centrist one? How many people have noticed that unlike some other democracies, **Israel has a robust political center?**
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- **Seismic shifts are taking place in the ultra-Orthodox world here.** Talk to their leaders, as our students did this week, and you will hear some of them acknowledge that they are in crisis. For decades, they have prided themselves on believing that their way of life was essential to Israel's thriving, that though they are accused of being parasitic, they are actually a rich resource for Israel's spiritual needs. Now, though, as one admitted to our students, after the way they comported themselves during Covid, some acknowledge that they have become "a burden" to Israeli society. For some, at least, their sense of mission, is cracking. Others focused on what happened at Mt. Meron on Lag Ba'Omer. "Because we have the political power to keep the state at bay," they said, "we end up killing ourselves and each other. It's not the state that has to change, it's us." What might that mean for Israel's future?