



**SERMON PESACH:  
WHICH STORY DO YOU PREFER?**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 31 March 2018  
Finchley Progressive Synagogue

- 1 Two Jews are walking down the street. They pass a church, and a sign outside says: “Come in, convert, and we’ll give you \$10.” One of the Jews decides to give it a whirl, so in they go. The other one’s left standing on the pavement for about 20 minutes, until he sees his friend return. “Hey, Moishe, did you get the \$10?” he asked. And Moishe turns to him and says, “Is that all you Jews ever think about?”<sup>1</sup>
  
- 2 Jewish identity is a very fragile thing. Hard to define and easily lost. And yet if we had to pinpoint one pillar on which it is built, that one pillar would probably be the greatest story ever told: how the Jewish people was born – the Exodus. Four out of the five books of the Torah are entirely centred on our deliverance from Egypt. Commandment after commandment and prayer after prayer reminds us that God is the One who brought us out of slavery. Supermarkets sold out of horseradish last week, and a study by the Institute of Jewish Policy Research shows that even the most disconnected and disengaged of Jews is likely to pop their toe back into the water once a year, for a family seder.<sup>2</sup>
  
- 3 The Exodus is the founding narrative of the Jewish nation. And yet, breaking news: it almost certainly didn’t happen. There’s no archaeological evidence that there were ever Israelite slaves in Egypt, and there’s a lot of evidence showing continuous presence in Jerusalem throughout the relevant time.<sup>3</sup>



- 4 Not only that, but the Bible sheds some doubt on the matter. The two Books of Chronicles come right at the end of the Tanach and are often overlooked as a rushed and not entirely fascinating summary of the rest of the story. But there's one small element of the narrative missing from their summary: actually, one massive element. A really massive element. A five-storey element with helipad, underfloor heating and WiFi throughout. The Exodus. It's not there in Chronicles. It's as if it never happened – and, indeed, in some places there is textual evidence that phrases like “God... who brought us out of Egypt...” were deliberately removed by an editor.<sup>4</sup> Contradictions, too: Chronicles specifically says that Joseph's children spent their lives in the land of Israel,<sup>5</sup> whereas according to the Torah<sup>6</sup> they were born in Egypt.
- 5 So what's going on? We could handle archaeological proof that the Torah isn't literally true, but why would the Chronicler go out of their way to abolish this foundational story from their history of the Jewish people?
- 6 Unfortunately, we don't know for sure. The Biblical scholar Sara Japhet suggests<sup>7</sup> that “Chronicles presents a different view of history: the people's settlement in the land is portrayed as an uninterrupted continuum. The bond between the people and the land, like the bond between the people and its God, is described as something continuous and abiding. This bond cannot be associated with a particular moment in history, for it has existed since the beginning of time.”
- 7 More intriguingly, Steven Weitzman hypothesises<sup>8</sup> that the quirk is specifically built on the writer's personal prejudices and background: “In 539BCE, King Cyrus of Persia allowed Jewish exiles in Babylon to return home to Judah. The returnees almost certainly saw themselves as repeating the Exodus, forced into servitude in a strange new land but now miraculously



able to reclaim the land that had been promised to them. But not everyone may have seen the return from exile as a welcome event. Some of the people of Judah remained in the land all along; from their perspective, the return of the exiles may have been a threatening development, an incursion by haughty outsiders who looked down on the locals and were quick to take things over in a newly restored Jerusalem. It is conceivable that the Chronicler, writing sometime after this, 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 marginalisation.”

- 8 Now, myths are often really valuable. The story of Noah and the flood teaches us about conservation. The story of Jacob and Esau teaches us about the need for family harmony. And myths of national origin, like the tale of St George and the Dragon, can infuse a collective national consciousness even if not strictly true.
- 9 But it’s easy to see how the evolving historical parallel in the Chronicler’s times, the parallel between Exodus and Exile, would have frightened those who had been left living in Israel throughout the Babylonian period. And so, for them at that time, the myth of national origin no longer served a valuable purpose. It didn’t unite a nation: it divided it. Instead, the Chronicler wished to emphasise the eternal bond between land and people, the covenant of kings. That was what they needed, then.
- 10 In each generation, we can make that choice again. For ourselves. It’s our right and our privilege – and our burden and our dilemma. Do we want to be a people carrying on our backs the narrative of having been enslaved abroad and then redeemed by God? Or do we want to be a people defined by an



everlasting residency in the land of Israel, eventually scattered by empires who marched in to conquer us? Or both? Or neither? Who are we and what in our hinterland brought us to shul today?’

- 11 If Steven Weitzman’s theory about the Chronicler is correct, I think they were probably right to drop the Exodus after the return of the exiled. That return was a moment of great joy, but it was one of reunion rather than of shared journey. The Exodus would have been rather jarring to a nation divided by widely differing experiences, whereas the always-in-the-land approach split the sea that divided the people, bringing them once more together where they belonged.
- 12 But what about now?
- 13 I’m a big fan of the Exodus story. It really speaks to me as a 21st century Jew. It has messages that are valuable and needed in today’s world: love of stranger, human rights, the courage to start risky journeys and move on to new things...
- 14 There’s something about the seder that brings people in, even those who are distant or estranged from their Judaism. Ancient or not, and modern or not, the Exodus is a story for our times. True or not, the Exodus is where we, personally, as Jews, came from.

*Check against delivery.*

## **GW 31.03.18**

<sup>1</sup> Via Rabbi Colin Eimer

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Jewish Policy Research. *Data Night: four questions to make your seder night different from all other seder nights* (April 2014): <[http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.Pesach\\_Data\\_Night\\_April\\_2014.pdf](http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.Pesach_Data_Night_April_2014.pdf)>: 1.



<sup>3</sup> David Sperling. "Were the Jews slaves in Egypt?" *Reform Judaism* (Spring 2013): 56-58.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Japhet. *The ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its place in Biblical thought*. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009): 297.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Chronicles 7:20-21

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 50:22-23

<sup>7</sup> Japhet, *Ideology of the Book of Chronicles*, 301.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Weitzman. "What if the Exodus had never happened?" in *What Ifs of Jewish History: from Abraham to Zionism*, edited by Gavriel D Rosenfeld (London: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 24-42: 32-33.