



# OPENINGS

## Are We Promoting An Exodus from One Religion to Another?

Much of the current brouhaha about the Exodus, roiling the Jewish community in Los Angeles for the past several weeks, has percolated up from this year's publication of *The Bible Unearthed*, a tour de force of recent archaeological findings and their meaning vis-à-vis the narrative of the Hebrew Bible.

The authors, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, offer a challenging vision and scientific framework for assessing the biblical narrative.

Their book's sub-title, however, is "Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts"—and we would do well to take the authors at their word. This is a "new vision," full of theoretical possibilities, but not a statement of final proofs in a controlled scientific experiment.

In fact, it may more accurately represent an exodus from one religion to another, because the authors' scientific

vision incorporates an implicit *theology*, the acceptance of which is necessary to negate the historicity of the biblical narrative.

At the outset we are informed that "the historical saga contained in the Bible . . . was not a miraculous revelation, but a brilliant product of the human imagination."

The idea is that the biblical conception was created centuries after the Exodus itself. The archaeological evidence is that ancient Israel did not attain full development until sometime near the end of the eighth century BCE. Thus the substance of the biblical narrative is said to be a product of King Josiah's reign, and the Exodus and other biblical stories are not history but "creative expressions of a powerful religious reform movement that flourished in the kingdom of Judah in the Late

Iron Age."

The authors ask: "Is there any evidence that the patriarchs . . . actually lived?" They answer that ". . . the search for the historical patriarchs was ultimately unsuccessful." They tell us, "archaeology *completely disproved* the contention that a sudden, massive population movement [from Mesopotamia toward Canaan] had taken place at that time." [Our emphasis.] As for the 40 years in the wilderness, we learn "there is simply no such evidence at the supposed time of the Exodus in the thirteenth century BCE" and "the conclusion—that the Exodus did not happen at the time and in the manner described in the Bible—seems irrefutable. . . ." They similarly characterize the evidence for the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites.

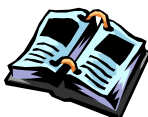
*(Continued on page 3.)*



## Mark Your Calendar: June 1 & 15 (11 & 25 Sivan)—Friday Services & Torah-Drama

Kehillat Kharakim will offer Friday night Shabbat services at the Westside JCC on June 1 and June 15.

Services begin at 6:30 with a young people's service that includes a costumed skit by Khulda and Rabbi



Moshe called "Here Comes Moses," followed by the "Animal of the Week" devar Torah. Both the skit and the devar Torah encourage young people to participate by answering questions.

The Congregation's minhag (custom) is to have young people present the regular devar Torah in the

form of a readers' theatre Torah drama.

After services there is a blessing of the children, a vegetarian-dairy potluck dinner, and zemirot (table songs).

Parking is available in the WJCC parking structure. Call (323) 934-2925 for more information.

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### Otzar—Treasure

*Festivals, Sabbaths, and all days of moment in Israel have this "remembrance" for their object and basis; therefore the deliverance from Egypt is mentioned in connection with such days. Truly, this "remembrance" is the foundation and root of the whole Torah; the basis of all the commandments and of the real faith of Israel.*

—Zohar, Shemot 2

# For Young People: Animals and the Torah

The Torah teaches that we are to be vigilant about lost animals. But what does “vigilant” mean?

The Torah helps us to understand vigilance when it says, “You shall not see your neighbor’s ox or his sheep”—or any of his animals—“go astray and hide yourself from them; you shall surely bring them back to your neighbor.” What do you think it might mean to “hide yourself” from seeing that an animal has gone astray?

Have you ever actually seen an animal that was lost? How did you know it was lost? How would you know that a goat in the middle of a field was *not* lost? How would you know that a dog without a leash in a busy shopping area was *not* lost?

Suppose you find an animal that *is* lost: what should you do? First, be very careful not to do anything until you’re sure that the animal is not dangerous. Then you might look to see if the animal is injured or sick. You might offer water to the animal if you

think it’s thirsty. Then, of course, you could look for the owner or call the humane society or the police.

Have you ever seen a chipmunk or a robin that was lost? What’s the difference between them and a dog or cat, or between them and a cow or horse?

The Torah doesn’t ask us to care for wild animals like we do for domesticated animals, those that people have bred and trained for human purposes, such as pets or work animals.

In very rare situations, we might care for a wild animal—like a small bird with a broken wing—but usually it’s not a good idea to handle wild animals. They may carry dangerous diseases, like rabies. Also, they’re not used to people and, when frightened, they may scratch or bite.

Now, back to domesticated animals.



Suppose a bully at your school has picked on you and even called you names because you’re Jewish, frightening you.

One day you and your parents are driving along near your school and you see the bully’s dog walking along the side of the street, *limping*—but your parents don’t have any idea who’s dog it is.

What do you think the Torah says is the right thing for *you* to do?

The Torah teaches us to stop and help the dog, make sure it gets treatment, and then return it to its owner—even though he has treated us badly!

Why should we stop for the dog? Partly for the dog’s sake, because the animal needs help. But partly we should help the dog to be better people ourselves. The Torah teaches us to return an animal even to someone who has been cruel to us, because in that way we turn such people into friends—and we make the world a much better place for all of us to live.

## Torah Shmooze: That You Not Bear It Alone

The people had been speaking evil. They complained of not having meat to eat, and they remembered the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic they had “for free” in Egypt. [Our emphasis.] Moses heard them, and God’s anger was great.

Moses complained to God of the burden it was to carry the people and he told God, “I am not able to bear alone all this people, because it is too heavy for me.” Then God told Moses to gather 70 men from the elders of Israel and God said to Moses: “And I will come down and speak with you there; and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you, and I will put [it] on them; and they shall carry with you the burden of the people, that you not bear it alone.”

This episode, according to Rashi, is one of the ten instances of God’s “coming down” mentioned in the Torah, each describing a manifestation of God on earth, presumably because the process of one individual’s spiritual endowment empowering others requires the active presence of the Creator in human affairs.

The verse “hints” that from that moment on, Moses would have to “share his authority. . . . [and] henceforth he would no longer be the only prophet in Israel but would have to share that distinction with the elders.” (Or Hachayim)

In regard to God’s “draw[ing] upon the

spirit” that was on Moses, the root of the word (צאצא—to *join*) suggests “withdraw” or “reserve.” Thus the effect of “drawing” might be supposed to have diminished the spirit within Moses or, alternatively, to have simply transferred its effects to others without any diminution in him. (J. Milgrom)

So on the one hand: “Perhaps . . . the purpose was for God to speak to Moses in order to assure him that he would continue to serve as God’s intermediary, despite the diminution of his spirit.” (J. Milgrom)

Or, perhaps, on the other hand: The spirit would in no way be diminished in Moses—which may be compared to “a light lying upon a candlestick, and everyone kindles (the other lights) from it, but its own light does not diminish at all” (Rashi)—and, to the contrary, because he sought to uplift others as leaders, the approbation of his own leadership would only increase.

On the question of whether or not the spirit of Moses was diminished, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch teaches: “. . . It would not mean, ‘I shall take some of the spirit that is in you and lay it on them,’ but [instead that] ‘I will keep back some of the spirit which comes upon you (when I speak to you) and lay it on them. When I speak to you I will let some of the spirit that otherwise comes over you alone, come over them too. Thereby they will become a spiritual part of your personality, will belong spiritually most intimately to you.’”

Under the circumstances, the Sforno tells

us that the leadership of those who act as Moses did shall be more readily accepted since the people will see that “the elders are with you and concur in your actions,” which the people recognize as essential because their afflictions and troubles are so numerous that many leaders are required.

“I will make great” (Rashi) the spirit that is on you to make it possible when you gather the 70 elders that My spirit shall guide you to recognize those who were afflicted for the sake of the people in Egypt, so they too shall receive the spirit. The afflictions of the people have both spiritual and material consequences—apparent in the loss of intimate family relationships, the overwhelming demands of daily work, and the withering of community life—and thus the prophetic spirit of God must be instilled in many leaders to ensure that the people is uplifted.

*What do you imagine are the most important qualities of leadership that you would be called to show as a leader?*

*What were the qualities of spirit possessed by Moses that empowered others?*

*How important is it that leaders be dedicated to the development of new leaders, which requires that they be spiritually prepared to “share their authority”?*

*In what way do you imagine it’s true that when one person spiritually empowers another it requires the “active presence of the Creator”—and what might that mean as a practical matter?*



# An Exodus from One Religion to Another (con't.)

Finally, we learn that “although these [biblical] stories may have been based on certain historical kernels, they primarily reflect the ideology and world-view of the [eighth century] writers.”

The authors assure us that the biblical narrative cannot be taken as history because over the years archaeologists have discovered the “main locales” of biblical history: “After decades of excavation, researchers have been able to reconstruct the vast archaeological context into which biblical history must be fit. . . . [and] there were too many contradictions between the archaeological finds and the biblical narratives to suggest that the Bible provided a precise description of what actually occurred.”

Why has this “new vision” of archaeology suddenly emerged in our time?

What has changed dramatically is the focus of biblical archaeology so as to “reverse the relationship between artifact and biblical text.” No longer do archaeologists attempt to confirm biblical narrative. Instead, they seek to uncover the “human realities that lay behind the text.”

What about those “older kernels of historical truth”? When were the basic stories

So there’s the “final nail in the coffin” of biblical history—but it’s also the rub with this book. With its triumphant declaration that there is no archaeological evidence of the Exodus, we have the covert introduction of a *theology* of science: the *belief* that the absence of scientific evidence proves the absence of existence.

Is it, in fact, critical that the evidence uncovered in Egypt to date fails to reveal any proof of the “Israelite” presence there before the time of the Exodus?

Why should there be any such evidence? The evidence we do have suggests that at that time Am Yisrael was *not* seen as a distinct nation but a marginal socio-economic class. Why, then, would the ancient producers of archaeological artifacts have given attention to a slave class? Moreover, the emergence of Am Yisrael—our transformation from “mixed multitude” to Israelite nation—can only be said to have occurred with mattan Torah, the giving and receiving of Torah at Mount Sinai.

Finkelstein and Silberman tell us that “the escape of more than a tiny group from Egyptian control seems *highly unlikely*, as is the crossing of the desert and entry into

existence of God, the soul, love, or whatever, must all such phenomena be said not to exist? If so, we will have made science into religion and its practitioners into high priests. In doing so we will have accepted their claim for infallibility, omniscience and omnipotence—the arrogant fiction that science knows everything or that everything can be known by science. But the last century’s scientifically driven catastrophes of mass death and the thousands of *outed science books* culled every year from library shelves, put the lie to that idea.

Isaac Asimov, the world’s premiere science fiction writer—“the greatest explainer of the age” according to famed cosmologist Carl Sagan—wrote that, “. . . In every century people have thought they understood the Universe at last, and in every century they were proved to be wrong. It follows that the one thing we can say about our modern ‘knowledge’ is that it is wrong.”

Yet the faith that some devotees of science place in the latest oracle from the bamot or “high places” of scientific inquiry (e.g., universities and research centers) suggests mindlessness comparable to that which the emerging priesthood of archae-



first written?

Finkelstein and Silberman conclude that “the main outlines of the story were certainly known long before . . .” [the seventh century]. They go on to say: “The saga of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt is neither historical truth nor literary fiction. It is a powerful expression of memory and hope born in a world in the midst of change.”

So what are we to think about our traditions in the light of archaeology’s “new vision”?

The book contains a fascinating survey of archaeological findings, which in turn is the fuel for theoretical speculation about the ancient world, speculation that largely contradicts the biblical narrative. Much of this speculation is informed by archeological evidence and plausible, suggesting the need to reformulate biblical history within the framework of archaeological discoveries.

But Finkelstein and Silberman go on to make their case through the *absence* of direct evidence—to wit: “there is no recognizable archaeological evidence of Israelite presence in Egypt before that time. . . . [and] we have no clue, not even a single word, about early Israelites in Egypt. . . .”

Canaan.” [Our emphasis.] If, however, one wanted to exclude from the history of the Jewish people any episode that failed to meet this standard of “likelihood,” it would be necessary to reject most of our history. With Jewish history, plausibility can never be the test for historical veracity.

The authors note that the escape of slaves from Egypt would require crediting “the possibility of divinely inspired miracles.” We imagine this to be barely disguised ridicule of biblical history. Possibly they mean to suggest that accepting the heart of the biblical account demands groundless religious faith in contrast to their disciplined scientific method.

Once again their theology intrudes itself: the idea that there is no existence without scientific evidence. It raises a question for every reader of this new archaeological evidence. Should we accept science not as an informative, knowledge-producing methodology with the proven potential to lift up the quality of human life, but as *religion*?

Are we prepared to accept from this theology of science that there is no power or existence beyond the reach of scientific evidence? If science has no evidence for the

ologists ascribes to anyone who credits as more than myth the 3,000-year tradition of our people.

Before we trade the old religion for the new, we also might want to ask ourselves: What wisdom, moral vision, and hope does this new religion hold out for us?

What, finally, are we confronting here? Does the recent archaeological evidence, on balance, compel those of us who accept science and reason to reject the heart of our religious tradition—the Exodus from Egypt and mattan Torah? The question is deeply disturbing because, just possibly, some of us may feel compelled by our convictions as modern people to jettison the core of traditional beliefs that define us as Jews.

But not in the remotest reaches of modern science is there any compelling argument to be made for dropping our wisdom and legal tradition. For those of us who find no inherent conflict between the scientific method and religious wisdom and law, the recent findings and speculations of archaeology would be much less attention-getting and controversial if their enthusiasts presented them as current findings and speculations rather than immutable truth.

## OPENINGS Published by Kehillat Kharakim

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## ABOUT KEHILLAT KHARAKIM—על קהלת חרפים

- Kehillat Kharakim—a congregational community of *openings*—is a family-centered congregation that meets for Shabbat services at the Westside Jewish Community Center.
  - Kehillat Kharakim Friday-evening services regularly include a devar Torah (“sermon”) in the form of a Torah-drama presented by young people of the congregation.
  - Kehillat Kharakim offers a free six-month trial membership that includes bar and bat mitzvah preparation.
  - Kehillat Kharakim’s formation is being sponsored by Gather the People (GTP), a nonprofit organization founded by a Sponsor Committee of rabbis from virtually all the major branches and movements of Judaism.
  - Kehillat Kharakim’s rabbinic leadership is provided by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, formerly the “Rabbi Team” for Congregation Beth Israel of Chico, California.
- The Kehillat Kharakim vision is to create a community of *openings*, or “kharakim,” through which family members of all ages can draw upon Judaism and congregational life to increase meaning and fulfillment in their own lives.
  - The goal is a congregation that, regardless of where one begins or ends in Jewish knowledge or commitment, encourages greater exploration, acquisition, and expression of Judaism—and regardless of where one fits religiously, treats each person with kindness and respect.
  - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is that, apart from our capacity as individuals, we also have a role as a *kehilla*, a congregational *community*. Following the example of Nehemiah, who gathered the people to rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem, we assume that we too can reduce the pressures and realize the hopes that will uplift our families. By doing mitzvot *collectively*, we can bring about change for the good in our day to day lives.
  - Kehillat Kharakim is an independent congregation, not affiliated with any of the movements or branches of Judaism.
  - Kehillat Kharakim will adhere to the Kashrut Policy of the WJCC—specifically: all food served from the WJCC kitchen must be dairy or parve; generally: packaged goods must be certified as kosher, fresh baked goods must be purchased from kosher bakeries, and home-baked goods must contain only vegetable shortening. Non-kosher food shall not be served.

Kehillat Kharakim is a project of  
**Gather the People**  
An Education & Training Resource  
for Congregational Community Development  
<http://www.gatherthepeople.org>

### PASTORAL COUNSELING AVAILABLE

Rabbi Moshe offers pastoral counseling without charge to any Kehillat Kharakim individual, couple, or family member. Pastoral counseling addresses religious and spiritual as well as psychological and emotional needs. Moshe has a Ph.D. in Social Work, was a staff member of the Adirondack Samaritan Counseling Center of Glens Falls, NY, and was trained at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. Call (323) 934-2925 for more information or an appointment.

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