



Beyond belief

The notion of literature as a witness that cannot be denied testifies to the fact that generations of Jews have believed what is found there

IN RECENT years I've come to think of myself as an atheist. This is something of a paradox, because at the same time, like two lines running parallel but never touching, I've also felt a deepening of my identity as a Jew.

Obviously there is a failure of logic here, a paradigm which does not stand up to rational analysis. Judaism is based on belief in God's laws as they appear in the Torah. If one doesn't believe that they were given by a higher power, on what is one's Jewish identity based? Given this skepticism, it was a strange and somewhat disturbing experience to revisit the *Nitzavim* and *Vayeilekh* Torah portions. The text seems, to me, so obviously man-made.

Any writer knows what it is to attempt to create a story or a poem, or a book. The men who shaped such powerful and profound sentences such as: "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law"; (Deut. 29:28) and "See that I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil, in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God..." (Deut. 30:15-16) must have worked long and hard on this text. What gives one pause is that whatever one thinks about the existence of God, many of the events described and predicted in the chapter have, as the Torah likes to phrase it, come to pass.

Everything is there in writing. God will bring the Children of Israel into the land flowing with milk and honey. They will "eat their fill" and "wax fat." But the Children of Israel will break the Covenant. They will "rise up and go astray after the foreign gods of the land." God's anger will be kindled against them. He will forsake them and hide his face from them. And then, the Children of Israel will "be devoured," and many "evils and troubles" will come upon them.

Reading through it closely, there is something else that catches my eye – the witnesses. God backs up his description of what is going to happen by calling up some very unusual witnesses. "...then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them, that this song shall testify before them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed" (Deut. 31:21). For me, and perhaps for other atheists, this notion of literature as a witness that

cannot be denied testifies not to the uttering of these words, but to the fact that generations of Jews have believed them.

But the burden of testimony does not rest on the song alone. Other witnesses are called up as well. "Take this book of the Law," Moses tells the Levites, "and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee (Deut. 31:26). And also, "Assemble unto me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth to witness against them" (Deut. 31:28).

A song. A book. The enigmatic "Heaven and Earth." How paltry these witnesses seem in the face of what is to come. Centuries will pass. The nation of freed slaves will struggle to keep their unique beliefs in the face of conquest, destruction, banishment. They will be exiled from their land and spread over the face of the earth. They will be begged, through libraries of rhetoric, and forced, through ridicule, exclusion, and violence, to abandon the beliefs and values of their communities. Empires, full of disdain for them, will

rise and fall and still this stubborn people will endeavor to make a contribution to all of them. Cast unwillingly in the role of a "chosen" people, they will endure all the scorn that this provocation implies.

And still the story of the Jewish people continues. The more encouraging part of the prophecy, the part where God says that there will be a return, a gathering up from all the peoples, and that He will bring the Children Israel back to the land, has an uncanny resemblance to the events of the 20th century. For a believer, this is positive proof of the undeniable veracity of the words of the Torah. It is a reason to keep as many *mitzvot* as possible, to believe, to obey. For the rest of us though, the doubters, agnostics who make themselves a home of not knowing, and atheists who can believe only in not believing, there are only the witnesses. A song. A book. Heaven and Earth – the silent, cryptic witnesses of the lives of our ancestors. And of our own. ■

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