

**A Reply to David Hartman’s “Sinai and Exodus:  
Two Grounds for Hope in Jewish Tradition”**

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David Hartman (1931-2013, United States and Israel), a powerful progressive voice in Modern Orthodoxy, contrasts two models of hope in Jewish thought and history: Exodus, requiring what he calls a “rupture in history,” and Sinai, based on the fulfilment of Jewish law:

... [T]he memory of the Exodus from Egypt provides a theological model where man is basically helpless before God. Men in no way warrant their redemption nor do they cooperate prominently in their deliverance...[S]omething totally new balloons unforeseen and unexpected. Nothing in the observable process of history offered one reason for anticipating this unprecedented redemptive moment. The Exodus account describes how God chose to act after man’s efforts had failed. The empirical situation was totally bleak and indicated no ground for hope, dream, or redemptive expectation.<sup>1</sup>

Hartman contrasts this with *halakhic* hope, which involves the gradual struggle to improve the world by following the precepts of Jewish law:

The giving and acceptance of the Torah does not present a picture of God’s single-handed redemption of powerless slaves, nor of unilateral divine fiat ordering primal chaos. Rather, the experience of Sinai is one in which God speaks and man responds. ... Hope need not be fueled by romantic dreams; it can be nurtured by feelings of adequacy to bear the responsibility of becoming a spiritual man, and by the knowledge that, in spite of failures, I am given a task.<sup>2</sup>

Although Hartman sees the possibility of both models’ co-existing, and one or the other’s being more relevant, depending on the circumstances, he fundamentally believes that a choice is necessary: “a person sometimes must ask himself in which model does he invest most of his spiritual energy.”<sup>3</sup>

The issue is not whether Jewish law can provide a powerful source of hope that can lead to incremental, yet critical, improvements in the world. Of course it can. The problem is Hartman’s depiction of the Exodus as an exclusively God-driven event that encourages human passivity and the proclivity to wait for divine intervention.

I prefer to think of the Exodus as involving a divine/human partnership—parallel to Hartman’s view of a dialogue between God and the Israelites at Sinai—in which both parties play an essential role. If you look closely, you can see this throughout the story. For example, God only enters the Exodus story *after* the midwives defy Pharaoh. “These women create possibilities for God’s way into the future with this people that might not have been there otherwise.”<sup>4</sup> A quick read might lead you to see only God’s hand in the plagues. But Midrash Tanchuma’s more

nuanced view points to a completely different conclusion: “Three of the plagues came through the agency (*al yedei*, literally, “by the hands of”) of Aaron, three through Moses, three through God, and one through the united efforts of all three.”<sup>5</sup>

Let’s consider one more illustration. The Egyptians are bearing down on the Israelites at the Red Sea:

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to YHWH. And they said to Moses, “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?” . . . Then YHWH said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? *Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you, lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it*, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground” (Ex. 14:10-11; 15-16).

God stands ready to help, but only after Moses and the Israelites take the first step.

Hartman also argues that the Israelites did nothing to merit redemption. As we’ve seen, Rabbi Akiva attributed the redemption to the merit of the women of that generation. Other sources link the redemption to Israel’s fulfillment of specific commandments before they left Egypt. Here’s one example from the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael (third century CE):

The Holy One . . . assigned them two duties, the duty of the paschal sacrifice and the duty of circumcision, which they should perform so as to be worthy of redemption . . . For one cannot obtain rewards except for deeds.<sup>6</sup>

The essential laws of Passover were given in Egypt, not at Sinai, and carrying them out demonstrated significant commitment—to put it mildly. The circumcision of adult males speaks for itself. After the fourth plague, swarms of insects, Pharaoh agreed to let the Israelites make sacrifices to God *in* Egypt. Moses rejected this, fearing the Egyptians would stone the Israelites should they sacrifice animals the Egyptians worshipped as gods (Ex. 8:21-22). God required the Israelites to take this very risk before they left Egypt.

Finally, on the question of human agency and the Exodus, we should consider the view of Maimonides, upon whom Hartman often relies in making the case for the superiority of the halakhic hope of Sinai:

It is a mitzvah to inform one’s sons even though they do not ask, as [Ex. 13:8] states: “You shall tell your son.” A father should teach his son according to the son’s knowledge: How is this applied? If the son is young or foolish, he should tell him: “My son, in Egypt, we were all slaves like this maidservant or this slave. On this night, the Holy One, Blessed be He, redeemed us and took us out to freedom.” If the son is older

and wise, he should inform him what happened to us in Egypt and the miracles wrought for us by Moses, our teacher; everything according to the son's knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

To properly assess the hopes embodied in Sinai and Exodus, neither of these archetypal events should be caricatured. Sinai cannot be reduced to mindless legalism, nor can Exodus be dismissed as an exaltation of divine action and human passivity. Sinai and Exodus both provide arenas in which God and humanity work as partners, the hopes of one supporting the hopes of the other.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hartman, "Sinai and Exodus: Two Grounds for Hope in Jewish Tradition," *Journal of Religious Studies* 14, no. 3 (Sept. 1978): 380. A similar version of this essay appears in Hartman's *From Defender to Critic: The Search for a New Jewish Self* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2012), 147-52.

<sup>2</sup> Hartman, "Sinai and Exodus," 381-82.

<sup>3</sup> Hartman, "Sinai and Exodus," 385.

<sup>4</sup> Terrence E. Fretheim, "Issues of Agency in Exodus," in *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Craig A. Evans, and Joel N. Lohr (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 596.

<sup>5</sup> Midrash Tanchuma (Warsaw), *Va'era*, chapter 14, on Ex. 8:16. See also Exodus Rabbah 12:4.

<sup>6</sup> *Mekhilta de'Rabbi Ishmael*, vol. 1, Pische 5:1 (34).

<sup>7</sup> Maimonides, *The Laws of Chametz and Matzah*, 7:2, translated by Eliyahu Touger (New York: Moznaim, 1988). For an analysis of Maimonides' understanding of Moses, see A. L. Ivri, "Isma'ili Theology and Maimonides' Philosophy," in *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, and Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). Hartman's depiction of the Exodus is closer to that of the Haggadah than the Bible. But even the Haggadah includes subtle but important allusions to the human role in the redemption from Egypt. For more on the Haggadah's view of Moses and the human role in the redemption from Egypt—including its minimization of Moses and of women—see David Arnow, "The Passover Haggadah: Moses and the Human Role in Redemption," *Judaism* 55, no. 3 (2006): 4-28.