



THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MOSES

Devar Torah by Dr Menashe Tahan



The outstanding and unique achievements of Moses have often been challenged by those who claim that his religious ideas and legal code were inspired by the ancient civilizations of Egypt and the near-East. These claims present a direct challenge to our faith and to the Mosaic Law i.e. to the Torah itself. It is, therefore, most appropriate, now at Passover, to recount and celebrate Moses' achievements.

The Establishment of Monotheism

The establishment of monotheism was Moses' most important achievement. Without doubt, worship of the Divine Name, as we know it now, was first introduced and established by Moses alone. Even our Patriarchs did not know the Divine Name. This fact is clearly stated in the book of Exodus (6: 2-3) where God told Moses: "*and I appeared to Abraham to Isaac and Jacob by the name of El-Shaddai, but by my name, The Divine Name (The Tetragrammaton), I was not known to them*".

There has been speculation that Moses' monotheistic ideas were derived from the sun-cult of the Pharaoh Akhenaten. It is well known that this Pharaoh (1364 – 1347 BCE, almost a century before Moses) led a religious coup in Egypt, promoting the solar disk (the Aten), to the official position of the supreme god of the land, while outlawing all the other gods of Egypt. The question is whether the worship of the Aten was truly monotheistic? I submit that it was not: it was

not an inspired sudden revelation but just a promotion, as worship of the sun god (Re) was already known in Egypt hundreds of years before; the promotion of the Aten was, in essence, a political move against the priests of the god Amun in Thebes, who became so powerful as to constitute a threat to the rule of the Pharaohs; Akhenaten shared divinity with the disk describing himself as "*the son of god*" who was issued from the body of the Aten but at the same time he appointed a high priest to himself and he was worshipped as a god by his followers. This religion of the sun-disk was a short lived phenomenon which lasted just about 15 years and was abolished by his son, Tutankhamun, shortly after the death of Akhenaten.

It is important to note that the sun-disk religion lacked ethical values and moral imperatives. It lacked, also, any interest in social justice and the welfare of society and this religious coup constituted no fundamental change from the old Egyptian paganism.

In marked contrast, the Mosaic monotheism was *absolute* and *ethical*. The God of Moses is not a part of nature, like the sun-disk, but outside and above nature and is the supreme moral being in the universe.

The monotheism of Moses was not merely an original innovation but a total religious and social revolution, a great turning point in the history of mankind and most probably the greatest of them all.

The Mosaic Law

There was no written law in ancient Egypt but there is speculation that the source of inspiration for Moses is the Near-Eastern laws, especially those of Mesopotamia. The ancient Mesopotamians had, indeed, a tradition of issuing codes of law long before Moses. Five of their codes have been discovered and analysed. The most important one was the code of Hammurabi, the king of Babylon, which was issued near the end of the 18th century BCE.

Mosaic Law differs, fundamentally, from them all in its spirit and its purpose. The core difference is that the Mesopotamian codes are *property-centred* - issued by kings in order to safeguard the interest of the upper classes, of land owners and slave masters. As such, they are all *changeable, revocable, corruptible and secular*.

In sharp contrast, the Mosaic Law is *God-centred*, aimed at ensuring equality and justice for all. It denies to kings the power of legislation. No one can issue laws but God, the God of justice and morals. As such, the divine Mosaic Code is not alterable, not revocable, not corruptible and it is both religious and secular, without distinction between civil, criminal and moral law. All breaches of law offend God. All crimes are sins and all sins are crimes. Offences are absolutely wrong and beyond the power of man to pardon or to expunge. Making restitution to the offended person is not enough. The offender must also answer to God and that could be much more difficult.

Where in the whole ancient world could a law be found to match this law? Depriving kings of the right to issue laws constitutes a worldwide revolution; indeed, the Mosaic Code is a revolutionary law, which sets the process of abolishing the ancient order of human society forever. Consequently,



from this major difference, other differences follow. In marked contrast to the Torah, the Mesopotamian laws impose the death penalty on offences involving property, impose vicarious judicial punishment, i.e. impose the punishment, not on the offenders themselves, but instead, on their relatives, exercise brutal bodily punishment, permit immoral intimate relationships, protect the institution of slavery, and show no concern for the disadvantaged in society. These laws do not grant a weekly day of rest, a **Shabbat**, which remains unique to Israel with no parallel in the ancient world.

All these differences demonstrate how humane the Mosaic Law is compared to others. It is a man-centred law just because it is a God-centred code of law.

The Ten Commandments (called also the Decalogue).

The Ten Commandments are the core of the Mosaic Law which reveals the will of God conveyed by Moses to the children of Israel. They comprise the minimal moral imperatives essentials to maintain a just, holy, ethical and ordered society. They fall, naturally, into three groups: commandments 1 to 4 deal with relations between God and man; 6 to 10 deal with relations between men, while the 5th commandment acts as a bridge between the two, dealing with parents and children. The striking feature of the Decalogue is the absence of specific penalties for violating the commandments. They declare, in essence, that there are certain God-given values and behavioural norms that are absolute. Morality is the expression of the divine will. The motivation of observing the Law is not the fear of punishment but the desire to conform to the will of God. Thus, The Decalogue became a self-enforcing code which appeals to conscience and not to self-interest. Its enforcing mechanism is the spiritual discipline and the moral fibre of the individual and not the threat of punishment imposed by the coercive power of the state.

Moral imperatives exist, of course, in every society. However, as a comprehensive summary of right conduct towards God and man, offered to, accepted by and engraved upon the hearts of an entire people, there was nothing in antiquity remotely comparable to the Ten

Commandments. They are absolutely unique to Israel.

The Covenant

What is unique about the Sinai covenant is that it was concluded between God and the entire people of Israel. According to the Covenant, the whole society of Israel merged its interest with God and accepted him as an absolute ruler whose wishes governed every aspect of their life. In return, God would protect Israel and establish them as his *treasured possession* and as a *kingdom of priests and holy nation*. These are the terms but because God himself dictated the terms, because he is eternal, and because Israel has no capacity to rescind them, the Covenant is, therefore, an eternally binding pact between God and the people of Israel, according to which, God and Israel are inextricably bound to one another by a vital and indissoluble bond.

The Covenant was also an unparalleled innovation that had far reaching implications for Israel. The whole of Israel was now regarded as one entity. The obligation to keep the Covenant was, therefore, national and communal, as well as individual. Wrong deeds were a breach of the Covenant and undermined the whole of society. The welfare of society and the integrity of its fabric were contingent upon the observance of the Law. The masses of Israel must, therefore, study the Law. It became incumbent on Israel to pursue a life of continuous self-education, an obligation which implied turning Israel into an educated and legally minded people.

The Establishment of New Type of Society

This is the last but not the least of the achievements of Moses. The principle that man was conceived in the divine image was again a revolutionary concept, which became the source and foundation of all morality and civilization. It is, in fact, a declaration of equality between men, as they were all created in the sacred image of God.

Israel accepted the Covenant and, therefore, the Law of God ruled Israel. But the people of Israel, like the rest of mankind, were also equal before God and that meant that the Mosaic Law ensured both the *rule of law* and *equality before the law*, two great merits, which were essential to

establish a society of justice and equality. The Jewish historian of the first century, Josephus Flavius, called the ancient Israeli society, which he knew first hand: "theocracy" and justly defined it "as one which places all sovereignty in the hand of God". In addition to that, the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, also in the first century, termed that society: "democracy" which he described as "the most law-abiding and best constitutions". They were both right. The Mosaic Law had set for Israel the foundation for the establishment of a new type of society, a *theocratic democracy*, a divinely ruled democracy the like of which the ancient world had never known.

Conclusion

All these astonishing innovations came about just after the appearance on the stage of history of the towering personality of Moses, son of Amram. History and tradition has left us no other name but his. He was the hinge around which all turned. He was the instigator, because he was the giant conduit through which the divine radiance and ideology poured into the hearts and minds of the people. He knew how to translate that most intense idealism into practical statesmanship and the noble concepts into details of everyday life, so that, even in the desert, he was capable of astounding achievements. There, he managed to mould a frightened mob of slaves into a distinctive nation with purpose, destiny and a noble message to the world; to create a moral order, much superior to that of the ancient civilisations. Thus, the world was turned upside down for the better and for good.

Moses was beyond the human mind to invent. He lived and reshaped human society at large. His impact on the spiritual and social life of mankind has been paramount for the last three thousand years. Moreover, his influence will continue to live. It will never cease and he will always live in the hearts and minds of his people Israel and in the hearts and minds of all the enlightened humanity everywhere on the face of the globe.