# Contents

Introduction vii

A Note on the Text xvii

1. God Is *Echad* 1
2. God Is Power 19
3. God Is Person 33
4. God Is Nice (Sometimes) 53
5. God Is Not Nice (Sometimes) 65
6. God Can Change 83
7. God Creates 97
8. God Reveals 115
9. God Redeems 129

Conclusion: What It Means to Be Jewish 145

Notes 147

Glossary 151

Suggestions for Further Reading 163
To Redeem Is to Save

One day as I was working on this book, I was confounded by the fact that my word processor had decided to ignore all my commands. As I was banging my head in frustration, a student knocked on my office door. I immediately realized that, like all of my students, he really knew word processing. As he walked in, I exclaimed, “I know that my redeemer lives!” I was quoting Job (19:25), admittedly in a slightly more trivial setting than Job’s, but at that moment I totally identified with Job’s situation. I was in deep trouble, and this student was going to rescue me. He did, in about thirty seconds.

To redeem means to rescue or to save. The Jewish claim that God redeems, has redeemed, and will again redeem Israel and all of humanity means that God has, and will, save or rescue us—but save or rescue us from what?

In the earliest Jewish sources, the answer to that question was slavery in Egypt; this was the founding event in Jewish history. The original manifestation of God’s rescuing was on behalf of the Jewish people; its focus was national. However, since every event in Jewish history was understood to have a religious dimension as well, and since Jews believed that it was precisely God who had redeemed the Jewish people from oppression, that redemption was understood to be a religious
claim as well as a national one. There simply was no distinction between the national or political dimension of Jewish history and its religious dimension. Eventually, because the God of Israel was the God of all humanity, God’s redemptive power soon acquired a universal dimension. God was, at least potentially, the redeemer of all humanity—indeed, of the world as a whole.

The Exodus from Egypt served as the prologue for God’s everlasting covenant with Israel, later to be sealed at Mount Sinai. The very opening words of that covenantal statement in Exodus 20 identify the God who now enters into that covenant as “the Lord Your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2). There follows an implied “Therefore,” and the rest of Torah flows from that initial identification. The Exodus and the revelation at Sinai were actually one single transformatory event that created both the Jewish people and Judaism as we know it to this day.

Jews are commanded to remember the day of their departure from the land of Egypt every day of their lives (Deuteronomy 16:3), which is why the theme appears in the third paragraph of the Shema liturgy (Numbers 15:37–41), which Jews recite at least twice daily, morning and evening. The concluding words of the Redemption benediction, which follows the recitation of the Shema as the Creation and Revelation benedictions precede it, praises God, “Who redeemed Israel.”

**From Ancient History to End Times**

After the teachings of the Torah, Jewish sacred and liturgical texts have made it clear that God’s national, political, and religious act of rescuing Israel from bondage in Egypt became the guarantor for God’s repeated rescuing of Israel from all its
future travails. Not unexpectedly, that guarantee appears explicitly in the text from the Passover haggadah, the liturgy that is used for the Passover seder, the home celebration each year when we tell the story of the Exodus. Its specific source is the tenth chapter of Mishnah Pesachim, which outlines the rituals and liturgies to be followed on Passover eve.

At the seder, when our children or our guests ask why we observe Passover, we are to explain, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt” (Exodus 13:8). The Mishnah is not at all explicit on the precise details of how we are to tell the story, but it does make one stipulation: we are to “begin with the disgrace and end with the glory” (10:4). More colloquially, we are to begin with the bad news and end with the good news. The Passover haggadah that we use today, dating at the earliest from the ninth century C.E., suggests various versions of the bad news: Egyptian bondage, the idolatry of Abraham’s ancestors, and Jacob’s persecution at the hands of his uncle, Laban. It is unanimous about the good news: the redemption from Egypt.

The Mishnah (10:6) also stipulates that we conclude the telling of the story with this benediction—dubbed, appropriately, the geulah, or Redemption benediction: “Blessed are You God, Lord of the universe, who redeemed us and redeemed our ancestors from Egypt, and has enabled us to reach this night whereon we eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs.”

The redemption from Israel is not simply an event in the past, not just history; it is also contemporaneous, an event in our present. Not only were our ancestors redeemed, but so are we, so are all generations of Jews. The Exodus did not happen then; it happens today, every day, to us as well. A similar claim is made by all cultures with regard to the great transformative events in their histories. These events inhabit a perpetual present. For example, on Easter Sunday Christians do not say, “Christ
arose!” but rather “Christ is risen!” This claim is not disingenuous; in other words, Christians mean exactly what they say. The great events in the life of a community have a perpetual, ongoing resonance. They remain eternally present. Just as, for the Christian, “Christ is risen!” also means “Christ is alive in me” and/or “Christ is risen right here among us,” so, too, for me as a Jew on Passover, I can say, “Today, I came out of Egypt.”

The Mishnah identifies the author of this Passover haggadah text as Rabbi Tarfon, a mid-second-century C.E. rabbi. At that time, the Jewish people were again suffering through a period of oppression, this time at the hands of the Roman empire. Jerusalem and the Second Temple had been destroyed (in 70 C.E.), and the Jews had begun to scatter into exile. The Mishnah is not content with Rabbi Tarfon’s statement, so it suggests an addition in the name of his contemporary, Rabbi Akiva (10:6):

Therefore, O Lord our God and God of our ancestors, bring us in peace to the other forthcoming feasts and festivals, while we rejoice in the rebuilding of Your city [Jerusalem] and in Your worship; and there, may we [again] eat the sacrifices and the Passover offerings…. We will [then] chant a new song to You for our redemption and for our deliverance. Blessed are You who has redeemed Israel.

Today Jews recite both texts consecutively. The historical memory of God’s initial deliverance becomes the basis for a plea for God’s further deliverance from oppression. The final step in the evolution of the doctrine of divine redemption is the expectation of some ultimate act of deliverance that will destroy all manner of oppression, this time forever.
Three Dimensions of God’s Redeeming Power in the End Times

God’s redemptive power is the centerpiece of Jewish eschatology (from the Greek: eschaton = last things; logos = discourse), the umbrella term for the body of teaching that describes the events that will occur at the end of days, at the culmination of history as we know it. Jewish eschatology, like Christian eschatology, is a singularly complex and imaginative body of teachings because it purports to discuss events that no human eyes have ever witnessed. In its fully developed form, dating from the talmudic period, it describes events that will take place in three dimensions: a universal dimension (events that will affect the entire cosmos), a national dimension (affecting the Jewish people), and an individual dimension (affecting each individual). In one way or another, each of these scenarios describes God as the initiator of the drama. They then proceed to describe how at the end of time God will transform the flawed into the perfect. All speak of a God who saves, rescues, and delivers people or, ultimately, the cosmos as a whole, from an imperfect state.

God Redeems the World

In the universal dimension of Jewish eschatology, our deeply flawed state of affairs is a world where injustice, warfare, oppression, and social evils of all kinds govern human relations. At the end of days, Jews believe, God will abolish all of these and create a new world order in which peace, justice, and compassion will pervade all human relationships. Idolatry will be abolished, and all the nations of the world will acknowledge the God of Israel as their God.

This is the most ancient statement of Jewish eschatology,
and its power persists to this day. It is the impulse that inspires every movement that challenges us, our governments, and our social structures to improve the lot of the oppressed in our midst. It is implicit in one of the central themes of all prophetic literature, the biting prophetic critique of social evil. Its earliest statement is in fact in prophetic literature—for example, in this memorable vision of the sixth-century B.C.E. prophet whose writings are included in the Book of Isaiah, recited appropriately as the prophetic reading for the fast day of Yom Kippur. The prophet describes the “fasting” that God really desires above all. God speaks:

No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness…
To let the oppressed go free;
To break every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him
And not to ignore your kin.

—Isaiah 58:6–7

In the vision of the opening chapter of the Book of Isaiah, the very first chapter in the collection of prophetic writings, God again speaks:

Wash yourselves clean:
Put your evil doings
Away from My sight.
Cease to do evil:
Learn to do good.
Devote yourself to justice;
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;  
Defend the cause of the widow.  

—Isaiah 1:16–17

These are the flaws that pervade our social structure and that cry out for redemption. In the next chapter of Isaiah, the juxtaposition is not at all coincidental; there follows the noble prophetic vision of the ideal age to come. A society that embodies the prophet’s moral vision will lead the world into an age in which the greatest of social evils, warfare, will even disappear.

In the days to come,  
The Mount of the Lord’s House  
Shall stand firm above the mountains....  
And the many peoples shall go and say:“Come,  
Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord  
To the House of the God of Jacob;  
That He may instruct us in His ways,  
And that we may walk in His paths.”  
For instruction shall come forth from Zion,  
The word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
Thus He will judge among the nations  
And arbitrate for the many peoples,  
And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares  
And their spears into pruning hooks:  
Nation shall not take up  
Sword against nation;  
They shall never again know war.  

—Isaiah 2:2–4

Reflecting on this passage, my teacher, the late Abraham Joshua Heschel, once said:“No other thinker in all
of antiquity ever dreamed of an age when there would be no more war.” That vision continues to exert its power to this very day.

**God Redeems Israel**

The national dimension of Jewish eschatology extends the theme of God’s redemption of Israel from Egypt: God will once again rescue Israel from the oppression of foreign nations, and Israel will return to its own land, freed from the yoke of the exile and as the master of its own destiny. Jerusalem and the Temple will be rebuilt, and the ritual of animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple will be restored. Israel will also teach the nations to worship the God of Israel.

One of the earliest statements of this theme appears in prophetic literature, this time in the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is commonly understood to be a prophet of doom, but his work includes this striking prophecy of consolation that will follow God’s imminent destruction of Jerusalem:

> For thus said the Lord…:
> I will bring them [Israel] from the northland,
> Gather them from the end of the earth—
> The blind and the lame among them,
> Those with child and those in labor—
> In a vast throng they shall return here….
> I will turn their mourning to joy,
> I will comfort them and cheer them in their grief….
> Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me,
> A child who is dandled!
> Whenever I have turned against him,
> My thoughts will dwell on him still.
That is why My heart yearns for him;
I will receive him back in love.

—JEREMIAH 31:7–20

The subsequent evolution of this national dimension of Jewish eschatology is considerably more complicated than the universal one. The Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed in 586 B.C.E., just a few short years after Jeremiah’s prophecy, and Israel was exiled to Babylonia, but Jeremiah’s prophecy of redemption was soon to be fulfilled. Israel did return from that exile, but the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed again, centuries later, by Rome. Once again Israel experienced exile, and that exilic experience lasted until our own day with the reestablishment of an independent Jewish state in 1948. Jews who read modern Jewish history in religious terms view this event as the beginning of a renewed redemptive process. In that spirit, the prayer for the State of Israel, recited in many synagogues today, asks that God bless the State of Israel, “the first flowering of our redemption.” But contemporary secular Jews—American and Israeli—along with the more extreme religious Jews who do not recognize the modern state as fulfilling God’s will, do not recite this prayer.

God Redeems from Death

On the individual level, God will rescue human beings from the ultimate flaw that pervades human existence: death. Human bodies will be resurrected from their graves and reunited with their souls. Thus reconstituted, as we once were on earth, all of humanity will come before God in judgment. Death itself will die at the hands of God, whose sovereignty and power will now be ultimate.

This final aspect of Jewish eschatology was the latest to
enter into Jewish thought. In most of the Bible, death was understood to be final. Only in the middle of the second century B.C.E. do we find a biblical text that suggests that God will raise the dead from the graves: “Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence” (Daniel 12:2). The doctrine of bodily resurrection became canonized in Jewish liturgy in the second benediction of the amidah, which praises God as one “who resurrects the dead” or “gives life to the dead.” In the modern age, many Jews have found this doctrine to be repugnant. Reform movement prayer books, for example, replace these words with the more neutral phrase “who gives life to all things” or “source of life.” In place of the doctrine of bodily resurrection, many modern Jews have embraced an equally ancient Jewish doctrine that originated in Greek philosophy: the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. At death, our souls leave our bodies and join with God; this constitutes human immortality.¹

As for the ultimate death of death, that theme emerges in the concluding stanza of the Passover hymn Chad Gadya (“One Single Goat”), with which we conclude the Passover seder. In this stanza, the Holy Blessed One is portrayed as slaughtering the angel of death. God’s power will then be unchallenged, even by death.

This entire eschatological drama is to take place under the aegis of either a singularly endowed human king or, in other traditions, a divine or semidivine being who came to be called the Messiah (in Hebrew, mashiach, or “anointed one,” because in antiquity, and even in our own day, sovereigns are crowned by anointing them with oil). It is God who, in God’s own time, will send the Messiah. Until then, we simply await the Messiah’s coming.