

# Reform Judaism: The Shock of Freedom

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The ultimate challenge to human freedom is the condition of finity. In its essential nature, the condition of human finity is that the person is not a self-sufficient *causa sui*. He does not possess of himself, within the limits of his own being, the power either to maintain his life or attain meaningful existence. The human person cannot live without air, or survive without water, food, and shelter. He is born and nurtured through interpersonal relations, and without such relations, even beyond the evident dependence of childhood, life has little meaning. Consequently, if the human person is to exist, or exist in a meaningful state, he must act to acquire sustenance and relationship from outside himself. Hence the ability of the person to be free, to determine his own actions, is conditioned by a basic need for things and other persons. The human person cannot do just anything; being finite, in need of the external world, he must act so that the external world responds to and satisfies the deficiencies of his condition.

If it were the case that humans always willed voluntarily those actions that bring from the external world the physical and psychic necessities they require, the condition of finity would not limit their freedom. Experience teaches us that reality is otherwise. Often a

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person will wish to pursue one course of action, but discover that should he choose to do so, he would lose from the external world that which he needs to receive. Finiteness is, therefore, an ever-present threat to human freedom. The dependence upon the external world finiteness generates leads to the most profound internal conflicts, between the desire of the human to choose as he wishes and determine his own actions, and the desire to meet the terms laid down by the external world for it to satisfy the needs of his existence. When the conflict is resolved by surrender to the demands of the external world, the challenge of finiteness has been successful, and human freedom has been defeated.

The conflict between the human desires to be free and yet to satisfy the needs of finiteness is a pervasive theme of the Jewish religious enterprise. For traditional Jewish systems, the classic and authoritative formulation of this conflict appears in the Pentateuch, in the history of humanity that it presents from the Garden of Eden to the revelation at Mount Sinai.

In the beginning, the Pentateuch states, there existed a deity who was not only possessed of infinite existence, but also of the power to give existence and life to other beings. Accordingly, the deity, whose name is given as Yahveh, created the heavens, earth, and all living creatures. Among the creatures was Adam, the archetype and future progenitor of the human species. As described by Scripture, Adam was created finite. His finiteness generated needs of two general kinds, for other finites, and for the infinite. Adam required among finites, things, such as water and food, and persons, such as the woman, with whom to enter into relationship. Of the infinite, Adam required the power to overcome death. Adam was created structurally destined for annihilation, and nothing in the world of finites could keep him from the death for which he was predetermined. The creator God, Yahveh, Scripture says, provided Adam with all that his finite condition required for life and meaning. Yahveh placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, where water and food abounded; He gave him the woman, Eve, with whom to enter into relationship; and He granted him the ultimate gift, life without death.

And the god Yahveh planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there He

put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground made the god Yahveh to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; . . . And the god Yahveh took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. . . .

And the god Yahveh said: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him." . . . And the god Yahveh caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the place with flesh instead thereof. And the rib, which the god Yahveh had taken from the man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man.<sup>1</sup>

Deity did not satisfy the needs of Adam and Eve generated by their finite condition without demanding that a price be paid. Adam and Eve must surrender the freedom to do as they wish. In the Garden of Eden are two trees from which they are commanded not to eat under pain of death.

And the god Yahveh commanded the man, saying: "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."<sup>2</sup>

Finity has taken from Adam and Eve the right of self-determination. They cannot have both the freedom to do as they wish and the perfect security that comes from divine providence in overcoming the limits of finity.

In time, Scripture states, a conflict between the desires for freedom and security develops within them. Despite the satisfaction of their needs by the Garden of Eden and Yahveh's care, Adam and Eve want the freedom to act as they wish. In face of the terrible punishment of which they have been warned, they choose freedom, and disobey the command of deity not to eat of the tree of knowledge.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one

wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.<sup>3</sup>

Yahveh responds swiftly and severely to Adam's and Eve's acts of freedom. He withdraws the special providence they had received which gave them complete protection from the vulnerabilities of their finite condition. Travail, uncertainty, failure, pain, and death now enter human experience. No longer would water, food, and a completely sheltering environment be specially and unfailingly provided the humans. Adam will have to toil in an indifferent, uncertain, and frequently hostile world for what he receives. Eve is condemned to subservience to her husband. She will be the one to bear children, in pain. Finally, the ultimate fate of finity is decreed. Adam and Eve, having been created from the finite, "dust," will now pursue their natural end, to die and return to the dust.

Unto the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy travail; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

And unto Adam He said: "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying: Thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. . . . In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, to insure that Adam and Eve do not thwart the decree of death, they are exiled from the Garden of Eden. For in Eden grows the tree of life, which bestows immortality upon those who eat of it. Lest the humans, therefore, through another act of freedom, eat of the tree and thereby acquire infinite existence independent of the power and wishes of deity, Yahveh decrees that Adam and Eve are to be expelled from the garden and never again allowed to return.

And the god Yahveh said: "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever." Therefore the god Yahveh sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence

he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life.<sup>5</sup>

Following their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve procreate, and begin thereby the subsequent generations of the human species. Every human is born finite, left to cope with the vicissitudes of a neutral and often unfriendly world, without the special providence of the creator God. One person does appear, according to Scripture, who receives an extraordinary measure of divine care. This is Noah, who is saved from the cataclysm of the flood that deity brings to punish humankind for its wickedness. After Noah, however, special providence is again withdrawn from humankind, although deity promises never again to inflict another global catastrophe such as the flood.<sup>6</sup>

It is with Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, the Pentateuch asserts, that special providence again enters history to assist humans with their finite condition. Two steps primarily mark the return of special providence: a covenant made by Yahveh with Abraham; and the expanded restatement of this covenant in a revelation to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The covenant with Abraham is made after a sudden revelation by Yahveh in which he establishes a relation with Abraham. In essence, the covenant states that Yahveh will be the god of Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, if they will be his people. As god of Abraham and the Israelites, Yahveh will exercise special providence over them to enable them to cope successfully with their finite condition; and as Yahveh's people, they have an absolute obligation to obey his commands.

And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee. . . . And as for thee, thou shalt keep My covenant, thou, and thy seed after thee throughout their generations.<sup>7</sup>

At Mount Sinai, the Israelites under the leadership of Moses reaffirm the covenant with Yahveh. Immediately prior to the Sinaitic

revelation, the obligation of the people to obey Yahveh is emphasized. Yahveh will provide his special care only if his commands are obeyed.

And Moses went up unto God, and Yahveh called unto him out of the mountain saying: "Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself. Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine." . . . And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which Yahveh commanded him.<sup>8</sup>

It is of critical importance to understand clearly what the commands of Yahveh are that the Israelites must obey in order to keep the covenant and obtain special providence. The point might first be stressed what they are not. They are not vague, general suggestions that a person do good as the heart prompts. On the contrary, Yahveh's commands are particular, precise, and pervasive rules that control human life in all its spheres of activity. They dictate the beliefs that must be held, the rituals that must be observed, and the morals that must be practiced.<sup>9</sup> Thus the covenant into which the Israelites enter with Yahveh is essentially similar to the agreement implicit in the relation that existed between Yahveh and Adam. Special providence is granted the human person to enable him to overcome his finite condition, but only if the person surrenders his freedom. In the words of the Israelites, the human must affirm: "All that Yahveh hath spoken we will do."

In essence, then, Sinai is Eden regained. The journey of humankind had gone full cycle, from Eden to exile and back again. The special providence that was withdrawn with the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden is now attainable by those who keep the covenant made at Sinai. In return for surrendering their freedom and for obedience to Yahveh, the faithful are protected from the indifference and harshness of the ordinary world. The similarity between the condition of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and that of the Israelites who obey the commands of the Sinaitic covenant is seen in

the description of the environment that the latter will enjoy. The world of the faithful is as responsive as was Eden to the needs of the finite person.

And it shall come to pass, because ye hearken to these ordinances, and keep, and do them, that Yahveh thy God shall keep with thee the covenant and the mercy which He swore unto thy fathers, and He will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee; He will also bless the fruit of thy body and the fruit of thy land, thy corn and thy wine and thine oil, the increase of thy kine and the young of thy flock, in the land which He swore unto thy fathers to give thee. Thou shalt be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle. And Yahveh will take away from thee all sickness.<sup>10</sup>

And thou shalt keep the commandments of Yahveh thy God, to walk in His ways, and to fear Him. For Yahveh thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. And thou shalt eat and be satisfied, and bless Yahveh thy God for the good land which He hath given thee.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore shall ye keep all the commandments which I command thee on this day, that ye may be strong, and go in and possess the land, whither ye go over to possess it; and that ye may prolong your days upon the land, which Yahveh swore unto your fathers to give unto them and to their seed, a land flowing with milk and honey.

For the land, whither thou goest in to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out, where thou didst sow thy seed, and didst water it with thy foot, as a garden of herbs; but the land, whither ye go over to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water as the rain of heaven cometh down; a land which Yahveh thy God careth for; the eyes of Yahveh thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.<sup>12</sup>

Still the condition of the Israelites after Sinai, even if they should keep the covenant, is not identical in one essential characteristic to

that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Pentateuch says nothing of restoring to humans the life without death that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the garden, and we may reasonably conclude that the ultimate consequence of the finite condition, death, was not removed by Sinai. This conclusion is disagreed with by talmudic and rabbinic Judaism, which maintain that a “world-to-come,” or afterlife of perfect peace and meaning, is promised in the Pentateuch.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the merit of this view, it invites an interesting observation. The “world-to-come” in talmudic and rabbinic literature, and in general usage as well, has the alternative name of Garden of Eden (*Gan'-eden*).<sup>14</sup> For talmudic and rabbinic Judaism, then, the history of humankind turns full cycle in every detail. The person who observes the Sinaitic covenant literally returns to the condition of fully secure existence that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the pristine innocence of the first days of creation.

Analyzing the pentateuchal view of the history of humankind from Eden to Sinai, two states of human existence can be distinguished, one of which may be termed *autarchy*, the other *heterarchy*. In the state of autarchy, the human person's stance is that he possesses ultimate authority over himself, and the consequent freedom to believe and act as he wishes, according to truths and values he himself determines. In the heterarchic state, the person's stance is that some other entity (or entities) possesses ultimate authority over him, with the consequent right to determine the person's beliefs and actions for him. Adam and Eve, when content and obedient in Eden, accepting Yahveh's ultimate authority over them, existed in a heterarchic state. After their exile from Eden, Adam and Eve, living without the commands and guidance of deity, and necessarily, therefore, exercising ultimate authority over themselves, may be taken to exemplify existence in an autarchic state.

The pentateuchal view clearly is that autarchy and true security are opposites. Human persons cannot both live in an autarchic state and enjoy a meaningfully secure existence. The reason, according to the Pentateuch, is that humans are finite beings, and finites cannot attain secure existence either through their own powers or those of other finites, whether persons or things. True security can come only from the infinite, from the perfect providence of the creator God,



Yahveh. Since Yahveh will not bestow such providential care unless humans first surrender to him their freedom, as was the case with Adam and Eve, Scripture maintains that secure existence can be attained only by a person existing in a state of heterarchy, in which the right to self-determination has been transferred to deity.

The pentateuchal view that humans cannot at the same time be autarchic and enjoy a meaningfully secure existence is widespread. Consideration of the characteristics of the autarchic state explains why this is the case. Human finity entails limited mental powers, in the person's ability to apprehend truth as well as values. This limitation places the stamp of fallibility and doubt upon all human knowledge, intellectual and moral. Consequently, no human can of himself know for sure whether the object of his belief is real or the action he takes is right. He cannot know with certainty what the future will bring, or whether his morality will prove to be immorality. Yet the autarchic person, limited though his knowledge is, must ultimately base his life decisions upon that which he personally judges reality and goodness to be. To surrender such ultimate determination to any other entity is to abandon freedom and the autarchic state. The insecurity of finite existence that must base ultimate decisions and actions regarding its destiny upon fallible and uncertain knowledge is evident. In a heterarchic relation with an infinite deity, however, such insecurity is dispelled by the conviction that the knowledge and commands upon which life's decisions are based come from a perfect divine mind and are infallible.

Autarchy further breeds insecurity for humans because it demands aloneness. To act in freedom and take ultimate responsibility for decisions regarding truth and values requires a separation of self from all other beings. Decisions that are ultimately one's own must come from thoughts and feelings drawn from the depths of isolated personal being. To a finite being, vulnerable to inquiry and subject to death, aloneness, psychic or physical, is inherently a threat to its existence.

To the human person, accordingly, the state of autarchy is an awesome one. For a finite being, limited in knowledge and power of existence, it is a fearful challenge to live with the aloneness of ultimate responsibility for self. The quality of autarchy is even more

vivid when viewed alongside the heterarchy of life in the Garden of Eden or with the covenant of Sinai. The uncertainty of self-authority is contrasted to the certainty of divine authority; the insecurity of finite human existence is contrasted to the security of existence with the infinite deity. For the person who has lived in a state of heterarchy, the terror of a journey to autarchy is sharply portrayed in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. Their journey beyond Eden confronts Adam and Eve with the life of autarchy and the shock of freedom. It is this shock of freedom and challenge of autarchy that Reform Judaism presents to the modern Jew and the modern age.

The reason why Reform Judaism requires autarchy of its adherents becomes clear upon considering the conditions necessary for heterarchy. In the state of autarchy, the human person is himself his own authority and the ultimate source of his beliefs, desires, feelings, and actions. This is not to say that a person in the autarchic state cannot and does not seek information and advice from others, rather that the autarchic person retains ultimate authority over himself, and makes the final decisions regarding what he will think and do. In a heterarchic state, however, the person surrenders ultimate authority over himself to some external entity that then has the right to command the person what he is to believe, desire, feel, and do. Needless to say, for a person to surrender his freedom to an authority that commands him what to think and do, such an authority and its commands must exist. Simply because persons may desire heterarchic existence does not mean they can have heterarchic existence. They must live in a world that provides the authority and commands necessary for authentic heterarchy, and it is this world that Reform Judaism has destroyed.

To see a world in which authentic heterarchic existence is possible, we need only look to Sinai. In the Sinaitic world, as we have seen, there is an infinite deity, Yahveh, who, the Pentateuch states, has made a covenant with the Israelites. He promises the Israelites special providential care in return for their obedience to his commands. These commands were explicitly revealed to the Israelites, according to the Pentateuch, which represents itself as the infallible source of these same divine commands until the present day. One may then, if he accepts the pentateuchal portrayal of a Sinaitic world, live in a

heterarchic state, by following, in unconditional dependence and obedience, the commands of the deity Yahveh. To accept Sinai, however, and surrender one's freedom of self-determination to the Pentateuch, it is necessary to trust the Pentateuch's absolute infallibility. From the viewpoint of Reform, though, such trust is not possible. The reason is that Reform Judaism rejects, and of logical necessity must reject,<sup>15</sup> the infallibility of the Pentateuch. More simply put, in Reform Judaism there is no way to know what is true or not true in the Pentateuch. As the Pentateuch presents itself, judged critically and scientifically,<sup>16</sup> it is certainly not true, and no test exists to determine what in it is true, if anything. The individual Reform Jew must make this decision for himself. As is evident, once ultimate decision-making is required of the individual, he is thrown, of necessity, into a state of autarchy, regardless of whether he wishes it or not. In the following passage, taken from the Pittsburgh Platform of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the exercise of autarchic freedom in Reform is demonstrated. The Pentateuch does not determine what is valid in Reform Judaism, rather, Reform Jews determine for themselves what is valid in the Pentateuch.

We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of Divine Providence and Justice dealing with man in miraculous narratives. We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.<sup>17</sup>

The central importance in Reform Judaism of the state of autarchy, in which humans possess the freedom of self-determination,

requires a new evaluation of autarchy in religious life. Historically, the Jewish religious enterprise, in common with Western religions generally, has been bitterly opposed to autarchy and the view that freedom is a fundamental privilege of humankind. The position has been that a claim by the finite person to the ultimate right of autarchy is sinful hubris, and rebellion against the creator God. Certainly, the Pentateuch, and Scriptures generally, Jewish and Christian, present this view. As great as the opposition of the Western religious tradition has been to autarchy, so in equal measure has it been partial to the state of heterarchy. Heterarchy, the Western religious tradition maintains, in which the human person surrenders his freedom to deity, is the only moral position. Moreover, the Western tradition holds, heterarchy is the only state through which the finite person can attain soteria,<sup>18</sup> intrinsically meaningful existence. This view of Western religion, that autarchy is immoral and irreconcilable with soteria, is not based upon experience but prejudice, which may be termed the heterarchic prejudice. The heterarchic prejudice is incompatible with Reform Judaism, and in general, with the religious outlook of many persons in the contemporary world.

The heterarchic prejudice pervades Scriptures. In the Pentateuch, the stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and of the Israelites' covenant made with Yahveh at Sinai, epitomize the heterarchic point of view. In both narratives, obedience to an authority other than oneself, the deity Yahveh, is accounted the highest good, and rewarded; whereas acts of freedom and self-determination are regarded as rebellion, and punished. The following passage from Numbers, in which the Israelites are commanded to wear fringes, amply illustrates the heterarchic prejudice. The reason given for the fringes is that they will serve as a constant reminder to the Israelites that they should always obey the commands of Yahveh, and forgo autarchy and their own free choices.

And Yahveh spoke unto Moses, saying: "Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them throughout their generations fringes in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue. And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments

of Yahveh, and do them; and that ye go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go astray.”<sup>19</sup>

Through the ages, untold anguish and difficulties have resulted from the heterarchic prejudice. Yet it is a viewpoint that in the light of our earlier discussion can well evoke sympathetic understanding. The finite condition of the human person, which renders his existence vulnerable and uncertain, produces in him anxiety and other negative moods that threaten to empty his life of meaning. Since the dawn of history, many persons have believed that a heterarchic relation with an infinite deity is the only way to overcome the negations of finite existence, the only path to soteria. Thus autarchy, with its freedom and aloneness, is, they fear, a threat to soteria, and as such to be condemned. It is this view of soteria, I believe, that gives rise to the heterarchic prejudice of Scriptures and of the Jewish religious enterprise, which has historically based itself upon them.

As Reform Judaism shows, however, humankind is entering into a different age, with a new religious consciousness. The heterarchic prejudice is now obsolete. Despite the shock of autarchic freedom to the human bounded by the limits of finity, it can no longer be maintained that autarchy and soteria are mutually exclusive. New insights into the human inner world, and new knowledge of the outer, make it clear that autarchy and soteria are indeed reconcilable.<sup>20</sup> Still, there is much to be done to bring the autarchic way to soteria into our religious communities. Ridding ourselves of the heterarchic prejudice is only a first step. Until this step is taken, however, we will not even have begun the great journey that lies before us.

## NOTES

1. Genesis 2: 8-10a, 15, 18, 21 f.
2. Genesis 2: 16 f.
3. Genesis 3: 6.
4. Genesis 3: 16, 17, 19.
5. Genesis 3: 22-24.
6. Genesis 8: 21 f.
7. Genesis 17: 7, 9.
8. Exodus 19: 3-5, 7 f.
9. Examples of the explicit nature of Yahveh's commands as contained in the Pentateuch extend from the dogmatic requirement of believing Yahveh is god to the prohibition of work on the Sabbath and the interdiction of adultery and homosexuality. The penalties prescribed by the covenant for disobeying Yahveh's commands, which is what constitutes a violation of the covenant, are often severe. For example, the penalty for disobeying the aforementioned commands is death.
10. Deuteronomy 7: 12-15a.
11. Deuteronomy 8: 6-10.
12. Deuteronomy 11: 8-12.
13. Sanhedrin 10: 1.
14. See, e.g., Pesahim 54a and Nedarim 39b.
15. See "Authority in Reform Judaism" in my *Elements in a Philosophy of Reform Judaism* (Cincinnati, 1976).
16. The critical method is the procedure employed in Reform Jewish scholarship to interpret the Bible.
17. Declaration of Principles, the Pittsburgh Conference, 1885.
18. Soteria is broader in meaning than usually connoted by "salvation" (Hebrew שׁוּעָה), referring to a state that can be produced naturally as well as supernaturally.
19. Numbers 15: 37-39.
20. This position will be elaborated upon in a forthcoming work that is now in progress. See generally my *Elements in a Philosophy of Reform Judaism*.