

WHEN DID WE BECOME A NATION?

JEFFREY M. COHEN

One of the tantalizing questions in Israel's history (as in the history of many other ancient peoples) is: At what precise point did the children of Israel become a nation?

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines "nation" as "a distinct race or people, characterized by a common descent, language or history, usually organized as a separate political state and occupying a territory." But such a definition engages the subject only at the advanced stage in its development, when the so-called "nation" has already merited that definition by reason of its acquisition of the various prescribed attributes and accoutrements of nationhood – language,¹ history, political structure, and territory.

The question in this enquiry concerning Israel is not merely when its independence was declared, its language took shape or the features of its culture delineated, or when the boundaries of the country the Israelites came to possess were demarcated and the first glorious, expansionist battles recorded. For the normal nation, the need to "belong" is apparently closely associated with the notion to "be long" in a territory, to feel proud of the connection with a land, a people, a heritage. That, in turn, provides a strong measure of personal security. The unspoken belief is that the longer one's sojourn in a land, the less likely it is that one's presence there will be challenged or one's title to it disputed. The Jews know, however, that this belief is unfounded.

It is such notions that have always prompted the curiosity of other ancient peoples as to their origins and ancestry, and the desire to trace back their history to identifiable people and families with character traits that eventually shaped their own national character. Hence, the Babylonians' myth *Enuma Elish* and the Romans' tale of Romulus and Remus, for example.

As far as Israel is concerned, the matter is complicated because it has experienced a number of cohesive climaxes. Does the national mission trace back to the birth of Abraham, or to the revelation of the One God to him at the Covenant Between the Pieces? Or, to the moment Israel left Egypt and

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gained independence? Or was the nation born at Sinai, when the Torah was received as the charter of the national character? Perhaps it is none of these moments, however significant and nationally supercharged they may have been. Perhaps they were only milestones along the highway to nationhood, at the entry into the Promised Land, and maybe not even then, but only a century later when the land of Canaan was finally conquered. But a nation has to have a recognized capital, so how could Israel be regarded as a nation until David built the city of Jerusalem? Moreover, if Israel's nationhood is inextricably bound to its spiritual mission (see Ex. 19:6), how can it be defined as a nation before Solomon built the Temple around 970 BCE?

Actually, it is none of the above. The Torah resolves this dilemma by clearly highlighting the defining moment in history when Israel actually became a people. Its definition is truly startling and shot through with moral significance. At the beginning of Deuteronomy 11:26, God states that He is giving Israel a cornucopia of blessings: a blueprint for a life of law and order, morality and ethics, on the one hand; on the other, a compendium of curses.

The children of Israel are told that, as soon as they cross the Jordan and secure the two mountains of Gerizim and Ebal, a great and dramatic proclamation of these blessings and curses will take place on these two mountains. The priests and Levites shall stand in the valley below and in a loud voice proclaim the blessings and curses to all Israel. The curses are presented as a list of actions and crimes whose perpetrators undermine the very foundations of society, who will consequently attract a heavenly "curse" or censure.

In Deuteronomy 27:12-14, the details of the confrontation are announced. Those on Mount Gerizim will hear the blessings: *Blessed be the man who does not serve idols . . . who reveres his parents . . . who respects his neighbor's landmarks. . . who guides the blind along the paths . . . who promotes the cause of the stranger, the orphan and the widow . . .* The remaining tribes on Mount Ebal will hear the curses upon the perpetrators of actions diametrically opposite. And all the Israelites on Mount Ebal will cry out "Amen" after each curse.

This is the dramatic way Moses and the levitical priests charged the people to listen to these instructions: *Silence! Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of the Lord your God (27:9)*. When the Israelites answered 'Amen!' to the curses, they became a nation.

Standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, the people had accepted the Torah in general terms; indeed, they had expressed their compliance almost impatiently,³ calling out even before listening, '*Whatever God says we will do!*' (Ex. 19:8). At that time, the children of Israel had been – both physically and metaphorically – *at the foot of the mountain*, cowed by the mountain and the spiritual awe of what was taking place on it.⁴ At Gerizim and Ebal, however, they were given the advantage. Here Israel stood confidently on the heights, with God's representatives down below in the valley, looking up and appealing to them to accept not just the generality, but the specifics of the Torah's ethical and moral discipline.

When Israel shouted "Amen" the people became a nation, but a unique one. Like other nations, a distinct people, characterized by a common descent, language and history, as the dictionary insists. Like other nations, today it occupies a definite territory. However, Israel has always defied and transcended this definition. Other nations, though socially committed to the promotion of good and countering of evil, do not view this as having any bearing on their national self-definition. But for Israel, promoting goodness and righteousness expresses the core and essence of its identity as a nation. This was true in the times of the prophets, in the times of exile, and, it is to be hoped, in these days of national restoration.

NOTES

1. Language as a specific national characteristic is, however, dubious, inasmuch as many different nations share the same basic language.
2. Rashi on Deuteronomy 5:24
3. Hence the rabbinic notion that God suspended Mount Sinai over the Israelites' heads and threatened to drop it upon them if they refused to accept the Torah (T. Shabbat, 88a.)

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