Review of Dennis Prager on Exodus

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Book Review

Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Exodus* (Regnery Faith, 2018)

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

This review is a sequel to my recent review on Dennis Prager's volume on Genesis, at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/review-dennis-prager-genesis.

Dennis Prager is far better known as a political commentator than a Bible Scholar. Nonetheless, he is animated by his belief in the Torah and its enduring moral messages for humanity. His commentary, as the book's title suggests, is rooted in a rationalist approach to the Bible.

Whether or not one agrees with all of his politics or individual interpretations of the verses, Prager's commentary is strikingly relevant when he emphasizes the moral revolution of the Torah and the vitality of its moral teachings to today's overly secularized Western world. Rather than serving as bastions of moral teachings and American values, universities are increasingly at the vanguard of attacks against God, the Bible, family values, Israel, and the very notion of an objective morality. Prager pinpoints several of the major differences between the Torah's morality and the dangerous shortcomings of today's secular West.

Throughout his commentary, Prager makes his case for belief in God, providence, the divine origins of the Torah, and the eternal power of the Torah's morality. He also offers a running commentary on the Torah, bringing insights from a wide variety of scholars and thinkers, as well as from his personal experiences. In this review, we will focus exclusively on the former, as it is here that the commentary makes its greatest contributions.

The God of the Torah is the most important idea of human history. Among its revolutionary contributions: The God of the Torah brings universal morality to the world. Good and evil are not merely societal opinions, but objectively real. God and morality give humanity hope for a better world. People have infinite worth and dignity and can elevate their lives in holiness. We aspire to universal brotherhood and human equality. There is a non-physical reality outside of nature, giving ultimate purpose to the universe. Human beings have free will and can and should make moral choices (93-97). These transformative ideas offer humanity the chance for redemption.

Belief in one God is emphatically not identical to belief in the God of the Torah. The God of the Torah judges the moral behavior of every human being by the same moral standard. "A god in whose name believers cut innocent people's throats, behead them, burn them alive, and rape girls and women—as is being done at the time of this writing by Islamist terrorists in the name of 'the one God'—cannot be the same god as the God of the Torah, the God who gave the Ten Commandments, who commanded His people to 'Love the stranger,' and demanded holy and ethical conduct at all times. Likewise, those Christians who in the Middle Ages slaughtered entire Jewish communities in the name of Christ also clearly did not believe in the God of the Bible…" (132-135).

Prager maintains that without the God of the Torah, there is no way of demonstrating that murder is objectively wrong. The twentieth-century atheist philosopher Bertrand Russel admitted that he could think of no better argument against wanton cruelty than, "I don't like it." We need God to declare murder as an absolute wrong, and not merely "I don't like it," or "I think it is wrong." A common contemporary argument posits that murder is wrong on utilitarian grounds: We don't murder others because we don't want others to murder us. However, this argument is an abject failure. Most murderers do not want to be murdered. They murder nonetheless because they think they can get away with it. For suicide terrorists who do not mind being killed in return, the argument becomes entirely irrelevant. Finally, evil ideologies can overrule the utilitarian

argument. For example, Hitler insisted that the Nazi extermination of Jews was for the betterment of the human species. Prager concludes, “In sum, it is unlikely there has been even one would-be murderer in history who decided not to murder because of the argument, ‘We don’t murder others because we don’t want others to murder us’” (258-260).

Prager cites Thucydides’ fifth-century BCE *History of the Peloponnesian War* . Athens and Sparta were at war, and Athens pressured the island of Melos to support their war efforts. The Melians wanted to remain neutral, so Athens threatened Melos with destruction. “Is this your idea of fair play?” the Melians asked. The Athenians answered, “So far as right and wrong are concerned, there is no difference between the two. The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.” Athens went on to besiege and destroy Melos, murdering the men and selling the women and children into slavery. Prager notes that 2400 years later, the nineteenth-century atheist Friedrich Nietzche wrote with contempt of those who sympathized with the Melians’ moral appeals. The God of the Torah combats this idea (322-323).

The Torah constantly emphasizes the significance of remembering our past. Remembering teaches us gratitude and wisdom. Remembering also connects us to the past and reminds us that we are part of an ongoing people and ideal. Pharaoh’s first act is to forget Joseph (Exodus 1:8). He therefore has no gratitude to Israel and instead wickedly enslaves them and decrees the murder of their baby boys. The Torah treats memory as an essential component of identity and morality. Prager extends this lesson to modern times. “Nations, too, are their memories. A nation that doesn’t remember its past…ceases to be the nation it was. This may be happening now in a number of Western European nations that teach their young people to consider themselves ‘world citizens’ or Europeans rather than members of a specific nation. It is also happening in the United States, where the level of ignorance of the American past among young Americans is unprecedented” (5-6).

In our society, intelligence and knowledge are valued far more than wisdom. One terribly mistaken believer in secular education as a replacement of religion for moral values was Sigmund Freud, who naively wrote in 1927, “Civilization has little to fear from educated people and brain-workers. In them, the replacement of religious motives for civilized behavior by other secular motives, would proceed unobtrusively” (*The Future of an Illusion*). Knowledge and intelligence are useful for technology and science. However, societies need wisdom far more than intelligence or knowledge. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union,

North Korea, and Iran all had or have intelligence and knowledge, but abused them for evil purposes. While the failure of German Christianity during the Holocaust (with a few notable heroic exceptions) is almost universally acknowledged, the moral failure of secular education and secular intellectuals in Germany is almost universally ignored (46, 136-138, 229-230).

The commandment to honor one's parents is the guarantor for the civilization to endure. Parents transmit culture, religion, and ethics. The breakdown of the family ensures the breakdown of the civilization. A standard feature of totalitarian regimes is to shift children's loyalty from their parents to the state or ideology. Strong families serve as bulwarks against totalitarianism (258).

Pharaoh initiated the ruthless slavery, but the entire Egyptian society went along with him. The same can be said of Nazi Germany, where most Germans were not as evil as Hitler. These and so many other similar stories teach that you do not need a great number of truly evil people to carry out massive evil. You need only: 1) Ordinary people who allow themselves to be indoctrinated by the truly evil people; 2) People who benefit from the evil; and 3) A paucity of courageous good people. Prager laments, "I am convinced courage is the rarest of all good traits" (9).

The heroic midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, may not have been Israelites. Their inspiring morality lies in their fear of God (1:15-21). Fear of God is a necessary ingredient to build a society of moral individuals. Of course there are individual good atheists as there were good pagans. And there are numerous people who practice religion who are wicked. However, a universal moral code from a universal God who judges all humanity is the only way to build a moral society (10-11).

Through these and so many other religious-moral teachings, the Torah was a revolution in world history, and continues to bring relevant teaching to the modern world.