Book Review of Dennis Prager: The Rational Bible: Numbers

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By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Numbers* (Regnery Faith, 2024)

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 and theological revolution of the Torah and the vitality of its 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 variety of scholars and thinkers, as well as from his personal experiences. As in my previous reviews of his volumes on Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, I will focus exclusively on the former, as it is here that Prager's commentary makes its greatest contributions.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/review-dennis-prager-genesis.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/review-dennis-prager-exodus.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-dennis-prager-deuteronomy.

In Numbers chapter 9, several Israelites who are ritually impure approach Moses, wondering how they can bring the Passover sacrifice if they are impure, but feeling excluded if they may not participate in this nationally vital offering. God responds that they may not offer the sacrifice on the usual date since they are impure, but God creates a makeup date one month later so they may participate.

Prager uses this passage as a springboard to discuss the balance between having standards and being compassionate. God upholds the law that ritually impure people must not bring offerings, while compassionately creating a makeup date to include these individuals. Prager laments that "we live during a time when compassion is frequently regarded as more important than standards. For example, at this time, compassion has led some people to advocate that no students be given a failing grade. But if widely adopted, this would inevitably destroy academic standards." If we abandoned the highest physical standards and training for firefighters, more people would die in fires. It is compassionate to *have* moral standards for society, as everyone benefits.

Western society also must continue to uphold its family standard—promoting the ideal of a nuclear family consisting of a married man and woman and their children. Numerous studies have demonstrated the palpable benefit to the children and society when this standard is met on a widespread level. In the name of compassion toward singles, single-parent homes, and same-sex relationships, many today attempt to eradicate the family standard as the ideal. However, we should instead insist on this standard in the macro, while showing compassion in the micro for the many people who for

different reasons do not have a nuclear family (95-97).

Prager explores the central significance of rituals in a different essay. He addresses the frequent but undefined threat of *karet*, excision, in the Torah for various severe sins. Regardless of God's method for meting out punishment, Prager focuses on a tangible, human interpretation of *karet*: One who abandons central rituals cannot transmit our values or identity to the following generations. This is true for Jews and Judaism, and also for American identity. Large sectors of American society are poorly educated in American history and values. For many, Memorial Day is little more than a day off, instead of a day to honor the memories of the members of our armed focuses who gave their lives for our country. Columbus Day has all but disappeared. Many schools no longer have their students recite the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of the school day. This widespread abandonment of these and other central American rituals leads many American children to be "cut off" from their American identity (98-101).

A seemingly bizarre feature of the Numbers narrative is when the Israelites long for a return to Egypt (e.g., in chapter 11). Although they were indeed fed "for free" while in Egypt (11:5), that came at the expense of back-breaking slavery, oppression, and the murder of their infant sons. Prager explains that in fact, most people value free things more than freedom. The Torah teaches that God wants us to be free, but liberty is a value that needs to be taught, rather than a human instinct. Prager cites a study which concludes that more Russians look back upon the Soviet Union with nostalgia, not disdain. This despite the fact that the Soviet Union deprived its citizens of all freedoms, and murdered tens of millions of them. The Torah stresses liberty as a core value. It builds the greatest society, and enables people to grow up and take responsibility for their own lives (116-117).

Miriam and Aaron envied Moses' exalted level of prophecy (Numbers chapter 12). The rebel Korah insisted that all Israel was equally holy (Numbers chapter 16). Prager explains that healthy envy prods people to work harder to achieve higher levels. Unhealthy envy involves coveting what the other person has, or even harboring a desire to deprive the other of what you do not have yourself.

The Torah insists that all people are created equal, in God's image. Such equality lies at the heart of the American Revolution. America's three great values are "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." All people are created equal, but cannot be regarded as equal regardless of what they do. When we view all people or cultures as equal, we fail.

In contrast, the French Revolution was thoroughly secular, and placed at its highest values “Liberty, *Equality*, Fraternity.” The demand for equality of result almost inevitably leads to confiscating money and the pursuit of power. America believed that human rights derive from God. France believed that human rights derive from the state. “One of the first things the French regime did after the French Revolution was massacre priests and destroy churches. One of the first things America’s first president did was send a note of appreciation to a synagogue.” Tellingly, the iconic symbol of the American Revolution is the Liberty Bell. The iconic symbol of the French Revolution is the guillotine. When France built the Statue of Liberty, they gave it to America.

“In the twentieth century…more people were murdered, tortured, and deprived of human rights in the name of equality than in the name of anything else. Communism, whose greatest goal was equality, resulted in the murder of more than a hundred million human beings and the enslavement of over a billion.”

Prager concludes that “Human beings are not, as Korach and modern egalitarians would have it, ‘all equally holy.’ Some people do indeed achieve greater holiness than other people. Holiness is earned through holy, moral, and ethical behavior. Moses earned it. Korach did not” (130-133, 207-213).

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