

TIMELINE OF JEWISH HISTORY

YEAR	EVENT	CHAPTER #
3761 B.C.E.	Creation of Adam; beginning of civilization	#1
1812 B.C.E.	Time of Abraham begins	#3 #4, #5
MESOPOTAMIAN AND EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATIONS REIGN		
1712 B.C.E.	Time of Isaac begins	#6
1652 B.C.E.	Time of Jacob begins	#6
1544 B.C.E.	Joseph sold into slavery	#7
1522 B.C.E.	Joseph welcomes his family to Egypt	#8
1428 B.C.E.	Israelites enslaved in Egypt	#9
EGYPTIAN CITIES OF PITHOM AND RAMSES ARE BUILT		
1392 B.C.E.	Time of Moses begins	#9
1312 B.C.E.	Exodus	#10
1312 B.C.E.	Torah is given at Mount Sinai	#11, #12
CANAANITE TRIBES OCCUPY PROMISED LAND		
1272 B.C.E.	Conquest of Promised Land. Time of Judges begins	#13, #14, #15
PHILISTINES OCCUPY COASTAL AREA OF ISRAEL		
879 B.C.E.	Saul anointed king	#16
877 B.C.E.	Time of King David begins	#17, #18
836 B.C.E.	Time of King Solomon begins	#19
825 B.C.E.	First Temple completed	#19
ASSYRIAN EMPIRE RISING IN THE NORTH		
796 B.C.E.	Israel split into two kingdoms	#20
555 B.C.E.	Assyrians overrun northern Israel; Ten Tribes are lost	#21
547 B.C.E.	Sennacherib attacks Jerusalem	#22
BABYLONIANS TAKE OVER ASSYRIAN EMPIRE		
422 B.C.E.	Babylonians conquer Israel and destroy the Temple	#23
PERSIANS TAKE OVER BABYLONIAN EMPIRE		
370 B.C.E.	Jews return to Israel from Babylonian exile	#24
355 B.C.E.	Miracle of Purim	#24
352 B.C.E.	Construction of Second Temple begins	#25
347 B.C.E.	Time of the Great Assembly begins	#26
GREEKS TAKE OVER PERSIAN EMPIRE		
331 B.C.E.	Greeks enter Jerusalem	#27
245 B.C.E.	Torah is translated into Greek; Greeks persecute Jews	#28
138 B.C.E.	Revolt of the Maccabees	#29
135 B.C.E.	Miracle of Hanukah	#29
ROMANS TAKE OVER GREEK EMPIRE		
63 B.C.E.	Romans invade Israel	#30
37 B.C.E.	Herod the Great begins his rule	#31
32 B.C.E.	Time of Hillel and Shammai	#32
34 C.E.	Death of Jesus; beginnings of Christianity	#39
66 C.E.	The Great Revolt of Jews against Rome begins	#33
70 C.E.	Jerusalem conquered by the Romans, 17 th of Tammuz	#34
70 C.E.	Temple destroyed by the Romans, 9 th of Av	#35
132 C.E.	Rebellion of Bar Kohba	#36
136 C.E.	Rabbi Akiva martyred	#37
190 C.E.	Mishna compiled by Rabbi Judah HaNasi	#38

TIMELINE OF JEWISH HISTORY (CONTINUED)

YEAR	EVENT	CHAPTER #
325 C.E.	Constantine: Roman Empire becomes Christian	#40
FALL OF ROME & RISE OF BYZANTINE EMPIRE / RISE OF ISLAM		
638 C.E.	Islamic Conquest of Jerusalem	#41, #42
1040	Time of Rashi begins	#43
1096	Time of Crusades begins	#44
1131	Time of Maimonides begins	#43
1144	First blood libel	#45
1263	Time of Nachamanides; the Great Disputation	#46
1348	The Black Plague	#46
1478	The Inquisition begins	#47
1492	Jews expelled from Spain. Columbus discovers America	#47
OTTOMAN EMPIRE TAKES OVER THE MIDDLE EAST		
1517	Protestant Reformation; time of Martin Luther	#49
1567	Jews invited into Poland	#48
1570	Time of the Ari and the Kabbalists	#50
1648	Chmielnicki Massacres in Eastern Europe	#48
1676	Death of Shabbetai Tzvi, false messiah	#50
TIME OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT		
1654	First Jews arrive in America	#54
1700	Time of the Ba'al Shem Tov, founder of the Hassidic Movement, begins	#51
1772	Time of the Mitnagdim and Vilna Gaon	#51
AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND FRENCH REVOLUTION		
1791	Emancipation of the Jews begins in Europe	#52
1791	Jews herded into Pale of Settlement in Russia	#55
1810	Reform Movement begins in Germany	#53
1881	Jews made scapegoats for murder of the Czar	#56
1882	First aliyah (large migration) to Israel	#61
1887	Conservative Movement founded in America	#57
1894	Dreyfus Affair in France	#58
1897	First Zionist Congress	#62
WORLD WAR I / FALL OF OTTOMAN EMPIRE		
1917	Balfour Declaration	#63
1920	British Mandate for Palestine begins	#63
1933	Hitler comes to power in Germany	#59
WORLD WAR II		
1942	Final Solution formulated by the Nazis	#60
1947	Partition of Palestine by the UN	#64
1948	State of Israel declared	#64
1948	War of Independence	#65
1964	PLO founded	#65
1967	Six Day War and Reunification of Jerusalem	#65
1973	Yom Kippur War	#66
1982	First Lebanon War	#66
2006	Second Lebanon War	#66
2008 ISRAEL CELEBRATES ITS 60TH BIRTHDAY		

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A word about conventions:

The Bible

All references to the Bible apply to the Hebrew Bible which in the Jewish tradition is called the *Tanach*. The word *Tanach* is an acronym for its three essential parts — *Torah*, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). The *Torah* includes the Five Books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. *Nevi'im* include the works of the prophets such as Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. *Ketuvim* include other writings such as Psalms, Proverbs, the Book of Esther, the Book of Ruth, etc.

God

Within the Bible, God is referred to by several different names. The holiest of these is the Tetragrammaton, which is the four-letter name of God that Jews are forbidden to pronounce. Whenever this name of God appears in prayer, Jews substitute the word *Adonai* (meaning “Lord”). When this name is cited in other contexts, the Hebrew word *HaShem* (meaning “the Name”) is used. Throughout this book, I have opted to use the more familiar God or Lord.

Jews

Throughout this book, I use the term “Jews” to refer to the people known by that name today, although this was not always so. The earliest biblical references use the term “Hebrews,” meaning “those from the other side,” and later, “Israelites” or “Children of Israel.” (The patriarch Jacob was renamed “Israel”

and thereafter his descendants bore his name.) When the Kingdom of Israel split after the death of King Solomon, ten tribes — later to be known as the Ten Lost Tribes — were situated in the north and their kingdom was still called Israel, while the remainder, living in the south, were called by the name of the royal tribe, Judah. From it comes the name “Jew,” which first appears in the Book of Esther and which has stuck to this day. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew root of Judah means “thanks,” and so the Jews could be called “the grateful people.”

Dates

This book relies on the traditional Jewish dating system for ancient history — that is, for the dates “before the common era,” or B.C.E. The Jewish dating system and the Christian dating system vary by as much as 164 years for the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian periods, but by the time we get to the Roman period (i.e., the Christian year 1) the discrepancy disappears.¹ Why?

While it is beyond the scope of this book to present a detailed explanation of the various chronologies of the ancient world, I will explain briefly the dominant dating systems used by modern historians.

The Jewish dating system is taken primarily from a book called *Seder Olam Rabbah*, dating back to the second century C.E. and attributed to Rabbi Yosef ben Halaftha. The sources for the dates in this book come from rabbinic traditions recorded in the Talmud, as well as from numerous chronologies recorded in the Bible.

It is also essential to remember that traditional Jewish chronologies (since the beginning of the Jewish calendar almost 6,000 years ago), have always been based on absolute and highly accurate astronomical phenomena: the movement of the moon around the Earth (months) and that of the Earth around the sun (years). A combination of an unbroken tradition of the Bible and an accurate, astronomical, time-based system gives traditional Jewish chronology a high degree of accuracy, especially when it comes to the major events of Jewish history.

Contrary to what one might think, the chronology used by modern historians is far from exact. It was not until the twentieth century that the entire world recognized a universal calendar system — the Christian calendar (also known as the Gregorian calendar). If we go back in time, however, the calendar situation was far more chaotic. Accurate historical records were almost unheard of, and every empire used its own calendar system which was often based on totally different criteria. With no unbroken historical traditional and no universally

accepted standard for how to calculate time, there is no non-Jewish equivalent to *Seder Olam Rabbah*, nor to the Jewish calendrical calculation system passed down from antiquity.

So how do we get the chronology that historians use today?

Historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries worked backwards and pieced it together. Data from records of ancient Rome, Greece, Mesopotamia, and Egypt (including chronicles of major events such as battles between empires) were combined with archaeological finds and major astronomical phenomena such as solar eclipses, and dates were then calculated by applying various scientific dating methods.

Because there are margins of error in virtually all of these dating systems and much is open to interpretation, significant debates erupted among various scholars that continue to this day. Therefore, the chronologies used by modern historians are by no means 100 percent accurate, and we often find disagreements as to the exact dates of major ancient events and dynasties.

Because this book is written from the traditional Jewish perspective, and because Jewish chronology makes a stronger case for historical accuracy, I have chosen to use modern equivalents of the traditional Jewish dates.²

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1.

OVERVIEW

This book is designed as a basic overview of Jewish history — all 4,000 years of it.

Usually, when someone mentions the word “history,” people break out in a cold sweat. They remember their days in high school, and they associate history with the memorization of names, dates, places, and events necessary only for exams and then promptly forgotten. This is probably why Mark Twain said, “I never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

So, before we actually begin talking about Jewish history, let’s talk a little bit about why we need to learn history in the first place. What is history? What purpose does learning history serve?

History is, first of all, the testing ground of ideas. In the words of the eighteenth century English statesman, Lord Henry Bolingbroke: “History is philosophy with examples.” We can talk in theory about ideas, but the passage of time clearly shows us which ideas are right or wrong — what works and what doesn’t. So, for instance, a hundred years ago a communist and a capitalist could debate which system would dominate the world, but recent history has shown us that communism has failed and capitalism — although it has taken some lumps — continues unabated (even in communist China).

There are many great lessons that can be learned from history. As the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are destined to repeat it.”

So the basic reason to learn history, in general, is that people tend to remain the same. Empires rise and fall, technology changes, geopolitical realities of

the world alter, but people seem to do the same stupid things over and over. And unless we learn the lessons of the past and apply them to the future, we're destined to get stuck in the same rut and repeat the same mistakes time and again.

This we also learn from the Bible:

Remember days long gone by. Study the years of each generation. Ask your father and let him tell you, and your grandfather, who will explain it.³

But there is more. Since its earliest beginnings, Judaism has looked at history with a different eye. In fact, it has introduced to the world a number of highly revolutionary concepts — for one, the idea of God who acts in history, and for another, the idea of history as a process leading to a destination.

This means that not only do we want to learn history to avoid the mistakes made in the past, but also because we have a place to get to. That's an incredibly empowering idea — that we're going somewhere, we have a goal, there's a finish line. And this gives us another reason not to make the same mistakes — we want to get to that destination as quickly and as painlessly as possible.

So, therefore, in this book we are not going to focus as much on names, dates, places — although these are very important to know, and there are plenty of them here — but the emphasis will be on the patterns and lessons.

The history we learned in school is the history of power. The big battles, the big empires, the people who made the big noise. But Jewish history is not the history of power. It's the history of ideas. It's subtle history, below the surface, behind the scenes.

When we look at history from the viewpoint of ideas, we see things in a totally different way. This perspective doesn't change the facts, it only changes how we understand them. It's very important to keep this in mind throughout this book as we examine the causes and effects underlying the events.

Cycles in History

Another profound Jewish contribution to the understanding of history is the idea of cycles in time. For thousands of years, the ancient Greek view of time held sway: time has neither beginning nor end, it has always existed and it goes on forever. The ancient Greeks (and other pagan cultures) also believed that various gods needed humans to serve them. Humans were putty in their hands with no control over their destiny. In ancient Greek literature, the underlying

theme of all tragedies is the futility of fighting against your fate.

If you combine these two concepts (the infinity of time and fatalism), you come up with a very negative and un-empowering view of history and destiny; you're on a treadmill going nowhere, and nothing you do really matters.

The Jewish take on history and destiny is radically different. If we were to draw it, it would look like a giant Slinky, an image that suggests the idea of repetition that is not static. This is how historical cycles work, according to the Jewish world view.



This model also applies to Jewish holidays. While other peoples' holidays are purely commemorative of past historical events, Jewish holidays, while commemorating the past, are also opportunities for the future. Each holiday in the yearly cycle has a unique spiritual power associated with it. For example, Pesach is the holiday of freedom, and it focuses on free will; Sukkot is the holiday of joy, and it demonstrates how to properly relate to the physical world. As we travel through this yearly cycle and encounter the holidays, we are supposed to grow in our understanding of the concepts they communicate. It's a bit like getting a yearly software upgrade. But if we miss the opportunity, we have to wait until it comes around again next year.

This is also how the cycle of history works. Unlike the fatalistic Greeks, Judaism believes that we have free will, our decisions matter, and we control our destiny. Because our destiny is in our hands, we have to earn our forward progress — whether individually during our lifetime, or collectively during the course of human history — it is up to us to make the right decisions and move forward. Because we have to earn our forward progress through our own efforts, we are constantly cycled through challenges that enable us to use our free will to make the correct decisions and move forward. If we don't decide, or make the wrong decisions, we will be re-cycled through the same challenge again until we get it right. So how do we know what the right decisions are? There are two possibilities: trial and error (which can be a very long, painful process), or learning from the past, by using the guidebook that is history.

It is precisely for this reason that we must learn and understand Jewish history. The great thirteenth century Jewish scholar, Nachmanides said, “The actions of the fathers are a sign for the children.” This is a very famous Jewish saying, and Nachmanides was not the only one who said it. What does it mean?

On the microcosmic level — within the stories of Genesis relating earliest Jewish history — we see that what happened to the ancients was repeated by their children. On a macrocosmic level, the personalities and interactions of the patriarchs and matriarchs are a model for all of Jewish history and human history as well.

This is why we have to pay extra special attention to what's going on at this early phase of the Bible, because here is where the patterns are set. In these early narratives lies the map to the future. The destiny of the Jewish people, their strengths, weaknesses, and relationships with non-Jews — all of this is revealed in the early Jewish history of the Bible. Jewish history is Jewish destiny. Learning from the past is the key to making the right decisions about the future.

Additionally, we must remember that the Jewish people are arguably the oldest surviving people on planet Earth. And because they have been spread out all over the world, we have to pay attention to all of human history. In fact, to learn Jewish history means to build a great deal of general knowledge of the history of the world at large, as we shall see.

Part I

A MAN, A FAMILY,
A NATION



2.

THE BIBLE AS HISTORY

It's generally assumed that people have always recorded and studied history, but that's not true. As a matter of fact, if you go back more than a couple of thousand years, you'll find people had no interest in history. The first historian in the Western world is usually considered to be Herodotus, a Greek who lived in the fifth century B.C.E., who has been given the title, "Father of History." Columbia University historian, Joseph Yerushalmi, author of a highly praised book called *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, says that "If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews."⁴

This is a profound idea.

The first of the stories that we will examine in this book predates Herodotus by about 1,300 years. It is the story of Abraham, and it takes place some 3,700 years ago.

In reality, Jews were recording history long before Herodotus, but while Herodotus might have recorded events, the Jews looked at the deeper meaning behind the events. That deeper meaning can be found most importantly and most significantly within the stories of the Bible itself.

Now, don't make the mistake of thinking the Bible is a history book, even though it does contain history within it. For example, when Abraham first appears in the Book of Genesis, he is already seventy-five years old. He's one of the most significant figures in Jewish history, and yet the Bible doesn't tell us anything about him as a child or as a young adult — we pick up his story when he is already an old man.⁵

This is because the Bible is not concerned with giving us all the details of Abraham's life. It is interested only in history as a means of teaching us the important lessons of life — it's a book of theology, and it sets forth the Jewish worldview first and foremost. Therefore, it focuses on the basic information that we need to know to understand reality.

How Accurate Is the Bible?

For thousands of years, humanity accepted the traditional Jewish view as to the authorship of the Bible. According to this view, the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) were dictated by God to Moses during the forty years the Jews wandered in the desert after their flight from Egyptian bondage. However, during the nineteenth century, a philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment attacked this traditional view. Enlightenment scholars created what they claimed was a more “rational” approach to the issue of authorship of the Bible. The basic theme of this modern theory (called Higher Biblical Criticism) was that the Five Books of Moses were primarily a collection of myths and folklore, passed down orally for generations and eventually written down at a later point in history. According to this view, the great figures of the Bible (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses) were folk heroes who probably never existed, and the events described in the text were at best folklore and at worst complete fantasy.

While the Enlightenment's theories of authorship were largely based on debatable textual analysis and speculation, the one source of possible hard evidence could come from comparing the biblical text to the archaeological remains of the period. If the traditional view is correct, then it should be supported by archaeological finds. Of course, in the nineteenth century archaeology was in its infancy. It took a while to unearth any evidence, and the archaeological quest continues.⁶ Although the topic of authorship of the Bible is beyond the scope of this book, it is definitely worth a little time to discuss the historical accuracy of the text. So what does archaeology have to say about the accuracy of the Bible?

The definition of archaeology is “the discovery and interpretation of the physical remains of previous civilizations and peoples.” Note that within the very definition of archaeology is the word “interpretation.” How one archaeologist interprets the meaning of a particular find can be very different from another archaeologist's assessment of the same find.

Archaeology is not a hard science. It is not like math where one plus one

clearly equals two. In archaeology, the subjectivity of the archaeologist can play a huge role in the conclusion he or she draws.

When archaeologists find a chiseled stone, a shard of a vessel, or a chunk of a building, they try to decide what it means — often they disagree. The find has no label on it, unless it's a written document, and even written documents are open to interpretation. So when people make definitive statements about what archaeology does or doesn't say, you have to be very careful, because the archaeologists' bias affects how they interpret the information.

As far as the early books of the Bible are concerned, there is little direct archaeological evidence for the characters described there.⁷ There is, however, a huge amount of indirect or circumstantial evidence — names, places, business contracts, marriage contracts, migratory patterns. That is as far as the early books of the Bible are concerned. But once we get to later books — for example, the Book of Kings from 2,800 years ago — there is excellent direct evidence, including the written records of other empires. Unfortunately, the early events exist, more or less, in a historical vacuum and also in an archaeological vacuum.

Keep in mind that the same thing that applies in a court of law applies to archaeology: lack of evidence is no evidence of lack. The fact that we haven't found Abraham's camel saddle doesn't mean Abraham didn't have a camel or a saddle.⁸

Another point to consider is how little has actually been excavated to date. If archaeologists had excavated the entire Land of Israel, from south to north, and found no evidence to support the Bible, then we could make a more definitive statement about what the archaeological record supports. But this is not the case. Until today, dozens and dozens of sites remain totally unexplored, and even the sites which have been excavated (for example, Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Lachish, and even Jerusalem) have only been partially excavated. It is probably safe to say that at least 90 percent remains to be unearthed.

Archaeology doesn't definitively prove the Bible, but it certainly doesn't discredit it. In fact, the more we find, the more we see that there's a tremendous amount of historicity in the text.⁹

In summary, the Bible is not a book of history, yet it contains quite a bit of information about ancient history and culture, and this information is more or less borne out by archaeology. The Bible is, first and foremost, a book of teachings, and it is the ideal way to learn the patterns of history. And if we understand that we're learning history to discover these patterns so that we won't repeat them, then we have to pay extra special attention to what is going on in the Bible.

Professor Adam Zartal, chairman of the department of archaeology at the University of Haifa, put it up thus:

After years of research, I believe it is impossible to explore Israel's origins without the Bible. At the same time, the research should be as objective as possible. The Bible should be used cautiously and critically. But, again and again, we have seen the historical value of the Bible. Again and again, we have seen that an accurate memory has been preserved in its transmuted narratives, waiting to be unearthed and exposed by archaeological fieldwork and critical mind work.¹⁰

3.

DAWN OF CIVILIZATION

Using the Bible as a guide, we begin counting the Jewish Year One from the creation of Adam, who is seen as the physical and spiritual pinnacle in terms of the creation of the world.

As the Book of Genesis relates it, God created man at the very end of the creation process — after He created darkness, light, water, sky, earth, oceans, continents, sun, moon, fish, birds, insects, and animals. And man was unique among the other creatures inhabiting the earth, not just because he gave rise to an amazingly innovative group of descendants (i.e. us), but because he was created *b'tzelem Elokim*, “in the image of God.”¹¹ This means he had a soul — a higher, spiritual, intellectual essence — a divine spark we human beings all have.

There is a profound lesson rooted in the idea of starting the Jewish calendar from the creation of Adam. Just as the movie director starts the cameras rolling when the big actors show up on the set (even though years of preparation may have gone into the project before the actual filming starts), so, too, does God start His Earth clock when Adam — the first human being — appears on the scene.

Once Adam was completed, God took off His cosmic watch, so to speak, handed it to Adam, and said, “Now we switch to Earth time.” A day became a revolution of the Earth on its axis, a year the Earth’s trip around the sun, etc. According to Jewish chronology, God took off His watch about 5,770 years ago.¹² In the way the Western world counts time, this coincides with the dawn of civilization. The earliest civilizations in the world, according to most opinions, began in the Middle East, in an area called the Fertile Crescent.

The Fertile Crescent

The Fertile Crescent encompasses the area that starts in the south at the Nile Delta in Egypt, and extends through the Levant (the middle section where Israel is located), up to the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in today's Iraq.

These three great rivers contribute mightily to the fertility, and consequent desirability, of this area. The Nile is an incredible river, the largest in the world. Without the Nile, Egypt would be a desert. In ancient times, 3% of Egypt was arable land and 97% was desert. Also the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers are mighty rivers that run from Turkey into Iraq. Historians have dubbed the area between them “Mesopotamia,” which is Greek for “in the middle of two rivers.”

There is some debate among scholars whether the first civilization sprang up in Egypt or in Mesopotamia (specifically in the section of Mesopotamia called Sumer), but we can be fairly sure that the first hallmark of civilization — writing — originated in the Fertile Crescent.

Though we take it for granted today, writing was a tremendous invention. It began with pictographs. You drew a stick figure and that stood for “man”; you drew a square and that stood for “house”; you drew an oval and that stood for “eye.” Later those pictures evolved into more abstract symbols which stood for phonetic sounds, until eventually there came about a system of three “letters,” each representing a sound and combining together to make a word that conveyed an idea. (To this day, Hebrew is based on a three-consonant root system.)

Writing, the single greatest human invention, is the hallmark of civilization. All the technology and knowledge of today depends on the collective accumulation of accurately transmitted information, which now comes so fast we can't keep up with it.

From the Jewish perspective, the ability to express oneself — whether through writing or speech — personifies what human beings are all about. The Book of Genesis states that when God created the first human being, Adam, He “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul.” The Hebrew phrase *l'nefesh chayah*, “living soul,” can also be translated as “a speaking soul.”¹³

The Hebrew

Of the two earliest civilizations that developed in the Middle East, Egypt is unusual because it is surrounded by desert and so it is virtually unapproach-

able. Egyptian civilization lasted almost 3,000 years. This is an incredibly long period of time for a civilization to survive. Why did Egypt survive for so long? Because of its isolation, it was very difficult to invade.¹⁴ It took the Greeks — specifically, Alexander the Great — to finish Egypt off, and then it became a Greek colony.

Mesopotamia had no such natural defenses — no mountains, no deserts — and it was a very desirable, fertile land. Basically, it was a giant flood plain sitting in the middle of the great migration route of many ancient peoples. Any conqueror who came out of Asia or out of Europe usually set foot there. Not surprisingly, this land changed hands many times as it was conquered by each new rising civilization — the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and then, of course, the Muslims.

This tumultuous place is where our story begins — at the bottom of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, in the cradle of civilization. This was the logical place for civilization to begin in terms of the development of agriculture and culture. And it was also a logical place for Abraham to appear. Since Abraham's destiny was to change the world, he had to be at the center of civilization. If he were born an Eskimo or a Native American, all of human history would have been different.

Abraham appears when civilization is already well under way, at a period of time commonly known as the middle period of the Bronze Age, around the eighteenth century B.C.E. Early civilizations are characterized by the metals they predominantly used and the middle period of the Bronze Age in the Middle East extends from 2200 B.C.E. until 1550 B.C.E. (from about 4200 to 3550 years ago).

The history of the world up to this time had been one long tale of woe, as the Bible tells us. First Adam severed his relationship with God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, thus bringing mortality into the world. Murder, violence, and idolatry followed, with society organized along the principle of “might makes right.” Humanity forgot about God who had created them, worshipping nature — the sun, the moon, the trees, etc. and a whole legion of gods they invented. When it seemed like things couldn't get any worse, God decided to “clean up” the world via the great Flood, sparing only the family of Noah, who was the one decent guy at that time.

But the second time around proved no better, and humanity continued to decline spiritually and morally until the Tower of Babel. At that time people united for the wrong reason — to rebel against God.¹⁵ It seemed as if another “clean up” was imminent. But, when all seemed lost, along came one man who

changed the course of history. That one man would be known as the man who stood alone on the “other side” — the meaning of the word *Ivri* (i.e., “Hebrew”) that describes him. He stood on the other side, alone against the entire world.

So this is how our story begins — a man against the world. The place is the Middle East, specifically ancient Mesopotamia. And the man is named Abram, soon to become Abraham.

4.

ABRAHAM

More than one hundred years ago author Mark Twain pondered the enigma of the Jews and posed a fascinating question:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning, are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all ages: and has done it with his hands tied behind him. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.... All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?¹⁶

The answer to his question can be found in the remote beginnings of the Jewish people — in the earliest stories in the Bible. Just as these early stories define the paradigm for future events, so too, the earliest personalities in Genesis define the model for the collective nature of the Jewish people throughout history.

If this is the case, then from the Jewish perspective, the most important biblical character to understand is Abraham — the first Jew, or perhaps more accurately, “the proto-Jew.” Abraham personifies everything that could be characterized as the “Jewish personality.” His kindness, sense of mission, and idealism — and most importantly his strength of character to stand alone against the world — are reflected in all the generations of the Jewish people that have come after him.¹⁷

In an almost entirely polytheistic world that had completely lost its way, using only the power of his intellect, Abraham chose to see the reality of one God. When we first meet Abraham in the Book of Genesis,¹⁸ he is already seventy-five years old, and God tells him to leave everything familiar behind and go on a journey. As far as we know, this was the first time that God spoke to him, and until that point Abraham had lived his whole life without any kind of outside confirmation that his ideology of monotheism was correct. This says a lot about Abraham’s dedication to truth.¹⁹

Abraham was the ultimate truth-seeker. Can you imagine being the only person in the world to believe in an idea that no one else can comprehend or accept? How many would have the courage to even whisper it to their best friend?

But Abraham didn’t care what anyone else thought. He chose to lay his life on the line for the ultimate cause — bringing humanity back to God. This also helps explain the concept of “the chosen people.” Abraham, in effect, said to God, “I choose to live with the reality of You and to bring all of humanity back to that reality.” God then said to Abraham, “Then I choose you and your descendants.”

The Chosen

What were the Jewish people, as descendants of Abraham, chosen for? They were given the responsibility to repair the world — what in Hebrew is known as *tikkun ha’olam* — to elevate the world to the highest moral and spiritual level possible. This is the national-historic mission of the Jewish people.

Because the Jews have undertaken this special responsibility, they will never be allowed to be like anyone else. Balaam, the evil prophet who sought to curse the Jews without success, said it best: “It is a nation that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the other nations.”²⁰

If we look at the values of the world at the time the Jewish people make themselves first known as a force for change, we see that it was a world riddled with

cruelty. There was little regard for human life, a conquest mentality dominated, rights belonged to a privileged few, and there was no pity for the have-nots. The Jews brought into this world the heretofore unknown values of respect for life and family, social responsibility for the poor and downtrodden, the concept of justice, equality, peace, and free education²¹ (values which, incidentally, have since become part and parcel of liberal democracy). They had nothing personally to do with inventing these groundbreaking concepts — and they would be the first to admit it. The Jews have always insisted that these values came from God and that they were merely the people chosen to disseminate them worldwide as part of their *tikkun ha'olam* mission begun by Abraham.

To take on such a mission, to dedicate yourself heart and soul to a cause greater than you, takes tremendous strength of character. And so, it is not surprising that the one attribute that stands out more than any other about Abraham is his uncompromising drive. This drive truly epitomized the essence of what Abraham was about, and it can be seen manifest in every generation of the Jewish people as an indelible mark of the collective Jewish character.

It is because of this drive that the Jews have historically been tremendous overachievers and have stood at the forefront of virtually every major advance, cause, or social movement in world history. (Jews have not only been awarded a disproportionate number of Nobel prizes for their intellectual contributions, but have led movements such as Communism, socialism, feminism, civil rights, labor unionization, etc.)²²

Notes social philosopher Ernest Van den Haag:

Asked to make a list of the men who have most dominated the thinking of the modern world, many educated people would name Freud, Einstein, Marx and Darwin. Of these four, only Darwin was not Jewish. In a world where Jews are only a tiny percentage of the population, what is the secret of the disproportionate importance the Jews have had in the history of Western culture?²³

The Jews have invented more ideas, have made the world more intelligible for a longer span and for more people than any other group. They have done this indirectly, always unintentionally and certainly not in concert, but nevertheless comprehensibly...Jews may call themselves humanists or atheists, socialists or communists...they may even dislike their Jewishness and deny it in scientific terms. But, rarely do they refuse to carry it.... They won't give up being Jewish even when they consciously try to — when they change their names, intermarry and do everything to deny Jewishness. Yet they remain aware of it, and though repudiating

it, they cling to it; they may repress it, but do act it out symptomatically. Their awareness of their Judaism is shared by others simply because their denial is so ambivalent. Unconscious or not, at least some part of every Jew does not want to give up its Jewishness.²⁴

Unconscious or not, at least part of every Jew does not want to give up the legacy of Abraham. As Van den Haag concludes:

Jews continue to feel the yoke, the task, the moral mission of being Jews — of preserving themselves as such, and to the surprise, scorn, and at times hatred of the rest of the world, of refusing to become anything else.²⁵

The moral mission of the Jews was called into action when God spoke to Abraham (then called Abram) and sent him on a journey of a lifetime — a journey which still continues for his descendants:

God said to Abram, “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”²⁶

Abraham’s Journey

We know that the Bible isn’t like the writings of Charles Dickens. Dickens got paid by the word, and he would be as verbose as possible. In the Bible, God did the exact opposite. Rather than fill the text of the Bible with pages of details, He limits the narrative to the bare minimum, giving us only relevant information that we need to know. So the question we have to ask is, Why does God, who uses words so sparingly throughout the whole Bible, state this command so emphatically and seemingly repetitively? “Go forth from your land” and “from your birthplace” and “from your father’s house.”

If you grew up in a specific house for a specific period of time, that would be home for you. Whenever you would think of home — no matter where you’ve lived after that and how comfortable you’ve been — that would be the place to come to mind. Connection to home is very deep and fundamental. So God is saying to Abraham: “Don’t just leave your land and your hometown, separate yourself from it all on the most basic emotional level.”

More importantly, from the macrocosmic, historical perspective, God is saying to Abraham, and therefore to the Jewish people, his descendants: “Separate yourself completely and go in a different direction.”

The journey that God is directing Abraham to undertake is not just a physical journey, it's a journey through history that is going to be different from anyone else's. Abraham is going to become a father to a unique nation with a unique destiny: "A nation that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the rest of the nations."²⁷ This concept of the Jews as a unique nation manifests itself in the double standard constantly applied to modern Israel.

This is the first unique characteristic of Jewish history.

In this command to Abraham, we see God directing him not only to leave his homeland, but to go to a specific piece of real estate which will later be known as the Land of Israel. This is the initial promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants, which will be repeated by God several times thereafter. From this point on, we will see that there is a special relationship between the Land of Israel and the Jews.

This special relationship is the second unique aspect of Jewish history. (We will discuss this relationship in more detail in the next chapter.)

The third unique aspect of Jewish history we see in the next verse:

"I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be a blessing."²⁸

This verse conveys God's promise that He will be actively involved in Jewish history: "I will make you...."

In the seventeenth century when Blaise Pascal, the great French philosopher of the Enlightenment, was asked by Louis XIV for proof of the supernatural, he answered, "The Jewish people, Your Majesty." Why? Because he realized that the survival of the Jewish people up to the seventeenth century violated all the laws of history. Can you imagine what he'd say if he knew that the Jews have made it to the twenty-first century?!

Jewish history is a supernatural phenomenon. The Jewish people should never have come into existence. Abraham's wife Sarah was barren, and that should have been the end of the story. Abraham would have died childless, and his mission would have died with him. But it didn't. A miracle happened.

Besides Pascal, many scholars and well-known personalities have taken note that Jewish history is in fact unique and that it violates all the laws of history. Writes the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev:

[The Jews'] destiny is too imbued with the "metaphysical" to be explained either by material or positive historical terms.... Their survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon, demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by special predetermination.... The sur-

vival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions and the fateful role played by them in history; all these point to the particular and mysterious foundations of their destiny...²⁹

The Jewish people came into being miraculously and survived all of human history miraculously, outlasting even the greatest empires. Things have happened to the Jews that haven't happened to other peoples. This is so because the Jews are a nation with a unique mission, a nation with a unique history — a nation whose role is so essential that it cannot be allowed to disappear.

To live for 2,000 years as a nation without a national homeland is not normal. It's unique in human history. To reestablish a homeland in the place that was yours 2,000 years ago is not normal. It's unprecedented.

A Blessing

Other unique aspects of Jewish history are spelled out in God's communication to Abraham. The fourth is found in the latter half of the verse quoted earlier: "and you will be a blessing."

The tiny Jewish nation that should never have come into existence and should certainly never have survived will profoundly impact all of humanity.³⁰

More than 3,700 years after the birth of Abraham, there is no doubt that the world has been profoundly blessed by the Jews. In the words of John Adams, second president of the United States:

I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation.... They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of mankind, more and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern.³¹

You can see the incredibly positive impact the Jews have had on the world. The most basic of all is that the Jews have contributed the values that are now linked with democracy — the values that come from the Torah — such as respect for life, justice, equality, peace, love, education, social responsibility etc.

And finally, the fifth unique aspect of Jewish history:

"I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and through you will be blessed all the families of the earth."³²

God is saying here to Abraham that he and the Jewish people, his descendants, will be under God's protection. The empires, nations and peoples that

are good to the Jews will do well. Empires, nations, and peoples that are bad to the Jews will do poorly. And He repeats that the whole world is going to be changed positively by the Jewish people.

You can literally chart the rise and fall of virtually all the nations of the Western world and the Middle East by how they treated the Jews. Consider, for example, Spain, Turkey, Germany, Poland, United States of America, etc. (Ironically, most nations have treated the Jews both benevolently and malevolently. It is an oft-repeated pattern that the Jews are first invited into a country and later persecuted and expelled from the same country. We will see this pattern time and time again as we go through the history of the Jews in Diaspora.)

Part of this phenomenon, by the way, is not so supernatural, because if you have a group of people living within your country — an educated, driven, dedicated, loyal, creative, well-connected people — and if you're nice to them and you allow them to participate and contribute in a meaningful way, your country is going to benefit. If you crush those people and expel them, you're going to suffer, because of the economic fallout. But, of course, there's much more going on than just that. In the words of Thomas Newton, the Bishop of Bristol, who lived in the late 1700s:

The preservation of the Jews is really one of the most signal and illustrious acts of divine Providence...and what but a supernatural power could have preserved them in such a manner as none other nation upon earth has been preserved. Nor is the Providence of God less remarkable in the destruction of their enemies, than in their preservation.... We see that the great empires, which in their turn subdued and oppressed the people of God, are all come to ruin.... And if such has been the fatal end of the enemies and oppressors of the Jews, let it serve as a warning to all those, who at any time or upon any occasion are for raising a clamor and persecution against them.³³

So we have a final pattern — the rise and fall of nations and empires is going to be based on how they treat the Jews, which is an amazing idea, and one you can clearly see demonstrated in human history.

From these three verses in Genesis we perceive the key patterns underlying all of Jewish history.

Abraham's journey is the paradigm. His personal life (and the life of his immediate descendants) is going to be a mini-version, a microcosm, of what Jewish history is all about.

5.

THE PROMISED LAND

The early history of the Jewish people begins in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Genesis, when God first speaks to Abraham, and continues through the next thirty-eight chapters, ending with the death of Jacob and Joseph. This segment can best be described as the development of the “family” of Israel, which in the Book of Exodus will become a “nation.”

We have already learned that Abraham was born in Mesopotamia, specifically in Ur Kasdim (in today’s Iraq) then moved with his father to Haran (in today’s southern Turkey), and that is where God instructed him to go to “the land that I will show you” — which turned out to be the land then known as Canaan, later as the Land of Israel.

This particular piece of real estate came to be known as the Promised Land, because promises regarding it are repeated several times in the Book of Genesis. For example:

On that day, God made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the Euphrates. The land of the Kenites, Kenizites, Kadmonites, the Hittites, Perizites, Refaim, the Emorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Yevusites.”³⁴

“And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your temporary residence, all the land of Canaan as an eternal possession and I will be a God to them.”³⁵

We say that Judaism encompasses three core ideas: God, Torah, and the

Land of Israel. The Land of Israel is not a pay off. God did not say to Abraham: “Support me and if monotheism spreads throughout the world, I will give you a good piece of real estate for your own.” God gave Abraham and his family the Land of Israel as a unique homeland where his descendants are supposed to create the model nation for the world.

The Land of Israel is a special place; it’s the only place on the Planet Earth where the Jewish people can achieve their mission. The model nation cannot come to be anywhere else. So, it is very important to understand the Jewish relationship with the land.

A Sensitive Place

The Land of Israel is a special place, a spiritually sensitive place, a place of tremendous potential. And so, it’s also a place where one has to behave in a special manner. As Moses told the Jews just before they were to cross its borders:

For the land which you come to possess — it is not like the land of Egypt that you left...the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the year’s end.³⁶

The Jews were only given this land because of their mission. If they abandoned the mission, they would lose the land.

This is another very important lesson in Jewish history, which is repeated time and again, and it is also one of the most oft-repeated prophecies. The Jewish people will only live and prosper in their homeland if they maintain their relationship with God and carry on the mission of Abraham:

It will be that if you listen to My commandments that I command you today...then I shall provide rains for your land in its proper time, the early rains and the late rains, so that you may gather your grain, your wine, and your oil. I will provide grass in your field for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. But beware, lest your heart be seduced and you go astray and serve gods of others and bow to them. Then the anger of God will blaze against you. He will restrain the heavens so there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce. And you will be swiftly banished from the goodly land that God gives you.³⁷

Throughout the early part of the Bible, God is constantly talking about giving the Jewish people the Land of Israel and reaffirming that commitment.

Indeed, Rashi, the great eleventh-century biblical commentator, asks a ques-

tion of the very first sentence in the Bible: Why does God begin the Bible with the creation of the universe? If the Bible is a book of theology for the Jews, why not begin with the creation of the Jewish nation and go immediately to the story of Exodus? That's when the Jews become a nation, get the Torah, and go into the land. Rashi answers that, in the future the nations of the world will accuse the Jewish people of being thieves, saying, "You have stolen the land from the Canaanite nations." God begins the Bible here, at the creation of the universe to tell the world: "I am the Creator of the universe. Everything is mine. I choose to give the Land of Israel to the Jewish people."³⁸

Virtually every nation in the world bases its claim to its land on conquest. A people came (for example, the English or the Spanish), conquered the indigenous people (for example, the Native Americans), took the land, settled it, and called it by a new name (for example, United States of America). "Might makes right" is the historical claim of almost all nations in history. "To the victor belongs the spoils" or, in this case, the land.

However, the Jewish people base their claim on God's promise. It is a moral claim because God is God, and God is, by definition, truth and morality. God gave the Jewish people the Land of Israel. Without that, the only claim the modern State of Israel can make is that it is stronger and was able to win all its wars with the Arabs.

This is an extremely important point that is often lost on modern Israeli politicians and those who seek to defend the State of Israel (which is not a religious state and often far removed from Jewish values). It is the Bible that gives the Jews their only moral claim to the land.

Indeed, the early founding fathers of the modern State of Israel, even if they were not religious, were deeply steeped in the realization of biblical heritage of the Jewish people and their connection to the land. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, had an appreciation of the necessity of anchoring a modern, even secular, Israeli state in the Bible and Jewish tradition. (We'll discuss Zionism later in the book.)

Ishmael

After Abraham arrived in the Promised Land, he was faced with a dilemma. His wife Sarah was barren, and she wanted Abraham to have an offspring. She suggested that Abraham take a surrogate wife — Hagar, who joined Abraham's camp when he passed through Egypt. Hagar was the daughter of the Pharaoh, and she had elected to travel with Abraham as Sarah's maidservant. Great peo-

ple have great servants. And so, Abraham took Hagar as his second wife and from that relationship was born a child by the name of Ishmael.

But Ishmael did not inherit Abraham's mission. He went off to establish his own lineage; this is all recorded in the Book of Genesis, chapter 16.

When we look back on history, we see that two great monotheistic faiths branched off from Judaism during the last 2,000 years: Christianity and Islam.

Islam is a religion that originated with the Arab peoples more than 1,300 years ago. The Arabs, according to their own tradition and according to the Jewish tradition, are the descendants of Ishmael. One of the great attributes of Arab culture is hospitality. And the Bible tells us that Abraham was famous for his hospitality, a trait which he clearly passed on to his son.

It seems, therefore, that even though Ishmael did not carry on Abraham's mission, he couldn't help but be great. Even though his descendants did not become the chosen people, he carried within himself some of the greatness of his father Abraham. He was blessed.

By the way, the Bible says specifically that Ishmael would be great and that he would be at odds with the rest of the civilized world:

You shall call his name Ishmael.... And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him.... Keep your hand strong on him, for I will make of him a great nation.³⁹

When it was clear that Ishmael would not carry on the mission, God told Abraham (who was then ninety-nine) that Sarah (who was eighty-nine) was going to become pregnant. And this is how Isaac was born — supernaturally.

As we noted earlier, this is one of the unique aspects of Jewish history — from its very beginnings, it's supernatural. By all the laws of nature Abraham and Sarah should have died childless, and the Jewish nation never should have come into existence.

Before Sarah conceived, God told Abraham:

Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an eternal covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael...I have blessed him and I will make him fruitful and will increase him exceedingly. He will become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish My covenant with Isaac whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year.⁴⁰

So Isaac was the person selected by God to carry on the mission of Abraham, the mission of the Jews. A rivalry which existed between Sarah and Hagar would be carried on by their children, Isaac and Ishmael. Because of this rivalry Hagar and Ishmael were sent away from Abraham's household.⁴¹

The rivalry established here would carry on for generations, and it is viewed as the metaphysical root of the modern rivalry between the descendants of Isaac (the Jews) and Ishmael (the Arabs).⁴²