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Freedom of thought and religion. Religious and secular issues in today's world

THE COVENANT BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

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Abstract

The theologian and biblical scholar investigates and deepens the meaning of the “*emuna*” (God's perennial faithfulness to man) through the *berit*/covenant. Defined by André Chouraqui «the privileged metaphysical place of the encounter of Being and beings», this category is the axis around which the entire Torah revolves and its undisputed importance which consists in affirming that God's faithfulness to man is the institution of man's faithfulness to every other man, promoting justice, law and mercy. Asymmetric fidelity: one perennial, the other frail because it is entrusted to the freedom and unchangeable responsibility of man. Which makes Neher write that man, in history, is the risk of God.

1. EMUNA AS GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

The term *emuna*, together with *berit*, is one of the fundamental categories of the Hebrew-Christian biblical lexicon (First Testament and Second Testament), playing a particularly important role in articulating the relationship between freedom of thought and religion on one hand and, on the other, the relationship between the State and belonging to a faith community. Hence the two moments of reflection:

1. the meaning of the term *emuna*;
2. the *berit*/covenant as the modality through which the biblical God acts in history.

Deriving from the verbal root *'aman* (from which comes the adverb *amen*, familiar to all), the noun refers to everything that is and remains firm and stable, founded on rock or stone. From the basic meaning of the verbal root—“to be firm and stable”—one moves to that of “to support and uphold”: both in a material sense, referring to the pillars of the temple; in an anthropological sense, to indicate nannies, nurses, guardians, or caretakers; and especially in a theological sense, to indicate that the characteristic defining God is His being with human beings and for human beings. Considering the verbal root *'aman*, the most coherent Italian translation of the term—faith—is, for the most part, *faithfulness*.

But what does it mean in the biblical text to which the three monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—refer, even if in different modalities and nuances?

In chapter three of the book of Exodus we read that, while Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian, God manifested Himself to him saying: **“I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings. I have come down to deliver them from the power of Egypt and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey [...]. Look, the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.”** (Ex 3:9)

Here we find the most original and surprising definition of the biblical God. Not an unmoved mover like Aristotle’s God—an impersonal and universal principle; nor like the Egyptian or Babylonian deity who identifies with and embodies the figure of the king, legitimizing his power. Instead, a God who, as the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber puts it, is a personal relationship, manifested as a *Thou* who addresses human beings as *Thou*, not tolerating their oppression and suffering—here represented by the Israelite minority oppressed by the Egyptian sovereign—and who breaks in to liberate them, take care of them, and promise them a fertile land in which to live together. Note that it is not the oppressed who call upon God to be liberated, but God who takes the initiative. This means that, for the Bible, God is not an invention of human beings—of their desire, fear, will, or illusion—but is a will for good that, by pure grace—meaning gratuitously—takes care of His creatures.

What is even more surprising is that, in His will to liberate the oppressed Israelites, God associates Moses as His collaborator. Immediately after revealing Himself and telling him that He has “seen the misery of His people in Egypt” and “heard their cry because of their taskmasters,” He immediately continues: **“Now go! I am sending you to Pharaoh. Bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt!”** Even here, an important detail must be noted: God does not use Moses as a tool in His hands, as masters use servants, but addresses him by calling and appealing to him. The relationship between God and human beings, in the Bible, is therefore not that of an efficient cause (as in the case of air, water, or the sun through which God sustains life on the planet) but that of a dialogical and calling word.

To the divine command Moses objects, doing everything he can to refuse: **“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”** God listens, understands, and reassures him: **“I will be with you. And this will be the sign for you that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”** But Moses persists and resists: **“Look, I will go to the Israelites and say to them: ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ They will ask me: ‘What is His name?’ What shall I answer them?”**

This time God answers Moses by revealing His Name—the ineffable Name on which rivers of ink have been spilled: **“I AM WHO I AM.”** And He adds: **“You shall say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”**

On the interpretation of this definition that God gives of Himself, rivers of ink have indeed been spilled. The Septuagint, translating the Bible from Hebrew to Greek in Alexandria in the 2nd century BCE under the reign of Ptolemy, interpreted it ontologically: God would have defined Himself as the fullness of Being—the One Who Is—unlike everything else that exists, which participates in Being and points back to Being. But such an interpretation is difficult to sustain, as the metaphysics of Being is foreign not only to the Bible, but to the entire ancient Near Eastern world. The meaning of the divine self-definition is in fact simpler and more profound. To Moses, who wants to know the Name as a guarantee for accomplishing what he has been commanded, God responds that he has nothing to fear because God Himself is there, and His Name means *Being-there*—being near and beside, like a mother or father at the side of their child. God is the Presence (in the etymological sense of “being-before”), the “here and now” who sustains, protects, guides, encourages, and liberates. A God whose *deitas* is forever His being for human beings and with human beings—each and every one of them.

In these verses of Exodus we find one of the most important interpretive keys for understanding the biblical-theological meaning of *emuna*: God's eternal faithfulness to humanity—to every human being—whom He holds dear and never abandons because He loves them with a visceral love, like that of a mother. To those who lamented, **“The Lord has abandoned me; the Lord has forgotten me,”** the prophet responds immediately: **“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these may forget, I will never forget you.”** (Is 49:14–15; cf. Ps 27:10)

It is not without significance that one of the most recurring divine attributes in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures is “merciful,” a term that refers precisely to the womb and to maternal compassion.

2. EMUNA AND BERIT

God's eternal faithfulness does not leave human beings in passive receptivity but calls and elevates them to a threefold faithfulness:

- faithfulness to God, who asks for faithfulness to His word;
- faithfulness to one's neighbor, who stands beside us and asks to be welcomed, cared for, and protected;
- faithfulness to all neighbors—the members of the human family—who, though distant, likewise demand to be welcomed, cared for, and protected.

For the Bible, God's faithfulness enters and acts in history by associating human beings with His own faithfulness. *Berit*—covenant or pact—is the term through which the Torah articulates the extraordinary meaning of the covenant which, for André Chouraqui, **“is the privileged metaphysical locus of the encounter between Being and beings.”** This locus—which Chouraqui calls metaphysical (though in a sense different from classical metaphysics)—is the paradoxical relationship between God and human beings, where the former does not annul the latter and the latter does not fuse with the former, but both, remaining distinct, collaborate in the realization of the same goal: the establishment of *shalom*, justice, and fraternity in the world.

André Neher (1914–1988), Jewish philosopher, witness and thinker of the Shoah, and original interpreter of the Torah, writes: **“The Covenant builds a bridge over the abyss that separates God from humanity and makes them participate together in a common work. God is not absent (as in Aristotle). God is not an adversary (as in the myths). God is not everything (rejecting pantheism, which leaves no room for humanity). Everything is in God (panentheism), and it is within this everything that humanity has its privileged place as co-worker in the work of God.”**

A “privileged metaphysical locus” of the encounter between God and humanity, the covenant is founded not only on God's faithful freedom but also on human freedom as free will, endowed with the possibility of saying no, thus subverting, as Neher writes in a famous passage, the creation declared “seven times good”: **“In creating human beings free, God introduced into the universe a radical factor of uncertainty that no divine or divinatory wisdom, no mathematics, not even prayer can foresee, prevent, or integrate into a predetermined movement: the free human being is improvisation made flesh and history, absolute unpredictability, the limit against which the directing forces of the creative plan run aground... The free human being is the division, the splitting of the divine waters... In the cosmos, where every creature possesses its own law and cannot follow or receive any other than its own, humanity has as its law to be free... And this risk—the immense risk of entrusting to humanity, and to humanity alone, the keys of the**

terrible choice—is the risk God assumes each time He calls humanity, as from Adam to Abraham to Moses unfolds the trembling essence of dialogue...”

This text, rich in meaning (in Paul Ricœur’s sense of “giving much to think about”), offers a powerful clarification on the themes of freedom of thought, religion, religious neutrality, and secularism. For the Bible, God not only does not oppose human freedom—as is often thought, as if one had to choose between God and freedom—but respects human self-determination and invests it with a positive purpose: the promotion of equality, justice, and fraternity within the *polis*. Far from negating human freedom, the Torah establishes and elevates it to the level of absolute and inescapable responsibility, upon which the fate of the world depends. From this perspective, the Judeo-Christian Scriptures propose less an *orthodoxy*—believing correctly in God—and more an *orthopraxis*—acting well toward all according to justice, law, and mercy.

The giving of the tablets of the Law to Moses in the Sinai narrative does not place the ethical beneath the religious but, as Levinas claims, above the religious, making moral obligation independent of and superior to ritual religion. In support of this position, the philosopher refers to chapter 58 of Isaiah, in which certain devout observers complained that God took no notice of their fasts and sacrifices. Those who asked this question were **“pious souls, no doubt already spiritually refined enough to seek through mortification and humility not the fulfillment of some vow, but divine closeness.”** To these scandalized “pious souls,” God responds with a scathing indictment:

**“Look, on your fast day you attend to your own business,
and you oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Do not fast as you do today,
to make your voice heard on high.
Is this the kind of fast I choose,
a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it to bow one’s head like a reed,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?”** (Is 58:3–5)

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