



A unique contemporary insight into the origins of the Torah

THE TORAH – the Five Books of Moses, or the Pentateuch – is read by Jews in their synagogues all over the world, week in and week out, every week of the year, every year seemingly eternally. The text forms the basis of sermons by rabbis, as well as dissertations and books by scholars. Hundreds if not thousands of commentaries on the Torah have been written by Jews and non-Jews, and biblical scholarship has been a feature of the modern period since the 18th century.

Why, then, is there a need for a new book about the Torah, a book with the enticing title *The Book of Revolutions*?

The Jewish Publication Society, which now publishes books of Jewish interest in cooperation with the University of Nebraska Press, commissioned Rabbi Edward Feld to write this new book to explain the Torah's origins because they clearly discovered in this author an innovative and very special approach to understanding the origins of the Torah than the one we usually encounter. This book is indeed unique in intertwining biblical scholarship with concerns for contemporary Jewish spirituality and pluralism. Let me explain why.

First of all, the book is the product of a deeply creative and spiritual personality. Rabbi Feld not only had a long career as a rabbi, but he served as rabbi-in-residence for the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York for seven years (2001-2008) and is the senior editor of two magnificent contemporary prayer books for the Conservative Movement: *Siddur Lev Shalem*, the Rabbinical Assembly prayerbook for Sabbath and festivals; and *Mahzor Lev Shalem* for the High Holidays. I have used both prayer books often, and they have greatly enriched my religious experience on Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. In addition, he is the author of *The Spirit of Renewal: Faith after the Holocaust*; and *Joy, Despair and Hope: Reading Psalms*. Before this latter book was published, I studied psalms with him in a mini-course as part of a two-week seminar for rabbis at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem several years ago and enjoyed it thoroughly



NIR ELIAS/REUTERS

The Codex Sassoon, the earliest and most complete Hebrew Bible ever discovered, presented to the public at Tel Aviv University on March 22, 2023.

and learned a great deal from his teaching.

Feld's approach to *The Book of Revolutions* is unique to his personality, which combines scholarship with spirituality. He explains this succinctly in the conclusion to the Introduction:

I write as someone who is deeply committed to Jewish religious life. This book represents my own attempt to understand the nature and meaning of my religious commitments, as well as the historical sources of those beliefs... I find the pluralism that Torah demonstrates to be helpful in speaking to me at different moments, in different moods. Equally, I find that its willingness to include a plurality of perspectives is itself a template for celebrat-

ing the contemporary differences within the Jewish community.



JOSEPH KUSHICK

Rabbi Ed Feld

Both the title and the subtitle of this book are intriguing: *The Book of Revolutions: The Battles of Priests, Prophets and Kings that Birthed the Torah*. What revolutions is he talking about? Why does he see the Torah as the result of a great variety of "battles" – i.e., arguments about theology, politics, and law?

In essence, in this book Feld describes in depth three major revolutions that took place in the development of the Torah over centuries. Part of the uniqueness of this book is that it does not retell the narrative portions of the Bible, which are well known. Rather, he focuses on the three major legal codes that we find in the To-

rah – how they came to be what they are, and how they are still relevant to Jews today. Each of these three codes – The Covenant Code in Exodus; the Law Code in Deuteronomy; and the Holiness Code in Leviticus – is the product of revolutions that took place in biblical times, according to Feld. In the book, he describes in much detail the cultural and political background that led up to these developments:

One of these revolutions was accomplished through a military coup made by outsiders whose ideas proved persuasive. The first of these revolutions, spearheaded by prophets in Northern Israel, resulted in the promulgation of the Covenant Code found in Exodus, chapters 21-23. The second, in Judea, resulted in much of the book of Deuteronomy, a book authenticated by a prophetess. The third, the work of priests influenced by prophetic ideas, resulted in the work known as the Holiness Code, which occupies much of the latter half of the book of Leviticus beginning with chapter 17.

Feld does not simply give us historical analysis for its own sake. That would be the work of a historian, not a rabbi. Rather, he always adds his own personal contemporary dimension to his narrative. In examining each of these works in terms of their contents and individual theological outlook, Feld reflects on what each contributes to our understanding of post-biblical Jewish religious life. For him, what these revolutions brought to life has relevance for present-day Judaism, especially with regard to the meaning of faith in God and the way of life that such a faith should demand of us.

The first code, known as the Covenant Code, is found in the Book of Exodus. It is the oldest of the three codes. The narrative which unfolds in Exodus 24 is a collection of different versions of the story. The main point in this narrative is that this new law code is a covenant, a mutual agreement between God and the people Israel. According to Feld, this law code is distinguished from previous law codes in the Ancient Near East:

While other Near Eastern codes differenti-

ate between nobles and freemen, the Covenant Code makes no such distinction. Even slaves are treated as persons, though there is some differentiation between their status in the law and that of free men. The exhortations at the end of the code to affirm the ethical behavior demanded of each individual, even when there is no judicial enforcement. A distinction is made between the Israelite and the foreigner, especially in the slave law, but even one's 'enemy' deserves kind behavior. Even the stranger – that is, the non-native or non-citizen – should not be oppressed. Secondly, the code is not simply a civil code regulating judicial processes and everyday behaviors of people: it is a code that demands the exclusive worship of the God of Israel. Civil and religious laws are intertwined.

Moreover, Feld places this code in historical perspective, based on extensive biblical scholarship. This code is clearly the work of Northern Israel – the late ninth century BCE is probably the time of its publication. Its promulgation probably took place during the time of the dynasty of Jehu, when the tribes were already settled in the land. In this respect, Feld argues that the Covenant Code is the party platform of the new regime. Not only that, but this code, which was promulgated by the monarchy in Northern Israel, was assimilated by the Judeans in the South. Moreover, it reflects the religious and ethical principles fought for by two prophets of Northern Israel – Elijah and Elisha.

What triumphed with the revolution of Jehu was a prophetic vision: Israel stood in relation to Israel's God, Adonai; the two were attached to each other. Israel's God demanded exclusive worship, the exercise of uncorrupted justice, and the formation of society in which the least among them was cared for. In return, the people Israel would receive God's protective care.

In his "Final Thoughts" at the end of this fine book, Feld returns to the theme of pluralism. He reminds us that contradictions and opposition of ideas abound throughout the Torah, that the Torah is actually a patchwork quilt of

multiple sources, various threads that are knit together to form a coat of many colors, and that different historical eras and different cultural moments shaped the many different parts of the Torah.

In the end, Feld reminds us how pluralism in the Torah – and in its many interpretations – is relevant to contemporary spirituality:

The full embodiment of the Torah is always just out of reach. Always there is a new mid-rash, a new line of interpretation we need to write for our own time so that the paradoxes of Torah may be synthesized for us, here, now. The spiritual life that its authors uncovered continues to speak to us, and so as we implement its institutions and practices in our own time, we offer our own understandings of their meaning.

In this way, we contemporary readers and interpreters of Torah continue the tradition of diversity and dialogue which was not only inherent in the Bible itself but has been part of Judaism for centuries. ■



**The Book of Revolutions:
The Battles of Priests, Prophets and
Kings that Birthed the Torah**

Edward Feld

The Jewish Publication Society and the
University of Nebraska Press, 2022
320 pages; \$29.95