Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I. Reading Exodus Philosophically (0:15 – 32:59)

Bill Kristol: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined again today by my good friend, Leon Kass. We've had a couple of conversations, one with Leon and his late wife, Amy, on education and courtship, as I recall. And a second on a variety of topics, natural science, religion, Athens and Jerusalem, both of which I highly recommend. And those were a few years ago. So I'm very glad we're able to get Leon to return and discuss his new book on Exodus called *Founding God's Nation*.

And not just discuss his book, but discuss Exodus and issues raised by the the biblical book of Exodus. But everyone should read *Founding God's Nation*, which is now out from Yale Press. And they should also go back and read Leon's book on Genesis, of course, *The Beginning of Wisdom*. Then you can go read the rest of the works of Leon Kass. And we can come back in a couple of years — If you have nothing to do for the next two years read them with the care they deserve — and then come back and we'll talk. Anyway, Leon, thanks for joining me.

Leon Kass: Bill, thanks for having me. Nice to be with you again.

Bill Kristol: It's great to have you. You wrote on Genesis. That's hard to believe it was about 16-17 years ago that book came out. And now you've written on Exodus. And so, why, I guess? But also what have you learned in your long, in your many years of really careful study of this amazing book of the Bible?

Leon Kass: Well, I went to Exodus partly because I wanted to see what happened next. I mean, in Genesis, we see how after treating all human beings, all humankind united, God sets out to find a toehold for his preferred way of

life for human beings with Abraham. And it barely survives through the three patriarchal generations. And at the end of Genesis, the children of Israel are down in Egypt and it's going to be in Egypt where they go from family to nation and where the foundations of the nation are laid. So I started reading Exodus in the hope of trying to see what is this national founding. And because I read the texts sort of philosophically and not just historically, I'm reading it for its possible wisdom on the question of what makes a people, a people? What forms its communal identity? What holds it together? What guides its life? What do the people look up to? What should they aspire to?

And it was with those sort of questions of political philosophy that I undertook the study of Exodus, like the Genesis book, it was also a teaching book. I learned most of what I learned from teaching it in class 10 weeks, four hours a week, line-by-line. And I learned some answers to those questions, but I got some new questions and learned some surprising things that I never expected that I would learn from Exodus. Maybe we can talk about some of those.

Bill Kristol: I'd love to. Yeah. No, it's one of the great — And just reading your book, and I don't know Exodus well, but there were so many questions raised that were, as you say, as important in a sense as whatever tentative conclusions one might come to. Well, I'll just mention, you mentioned God seeks a toehold for his nation, and then you describe your interest in Exodus as being sort of lessons for the founding of a nation of a people. But how much are these lessons generalizable? I mean, how much is this about Israel? Which is a pretty special people in the Bible's account, at least.

Leon Kass: Yeah.

Bill Kristol: A holy nation and so forth. And how much is it a applicable beyond? And what's the relation of the particular and the universal? Maybe that's something to begin with.

Leon Kass: That's a large question. We should get in the deep water right away. I mean, my view is, and it's supported by the text itself, my view is that Israel is a particular nation, but with a universal teaching. And it's deliberately that way. When God takes up with Abraham to begin with, he says to Abraham, "All the nations of the world will be blessed in you." So that, although this is a beginning project — up until that point, God had worked with all humankind united — there was a way of sort of simple innocence in the garden. There's anarchy and the regeneration of Cain and Abel after the world descends into violence, you have a covenant with Noah. Restricted law, but that sort of falls apart. And then you have the great universal human city of Babel, which turns out to be not the right way.

And it's after that, that God gives up working with all humankind united and starts just with Abraham. But he hasn't abandoned his universalist intention, even though he's going about this, at this point, a man at a time. Also, there are a couple of other things that also point in this universalist direction. Late in the Torah, Moses will say to the children of Israel about speaking about their law, "This is your wisdom in the eye of the nations. And any people who hears about this law will say that this is a wise and goodly nation." I mean the view is that this is, it is for Israel, but somehow

Israel is to be a model. They are said to be, they're called to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” It's not clear that they're to be proselytizers, but in some way that there is something emblematic and something exemplary here that's to go forward.

And in a way, the last — This is simply speaking from the text; we can then argue about whether it's turned out that way or meant to turn out that way. But one of the striking things that I never paid attention to before is, yes, the beginning of Exodus is a plan to get Israel out of bondage in Egypt, where they have been enslaved almost from the beginning of Exodus. But the path taken for getting them out through this extensive contest with the plagues is not so much for liberation, but as God says himself, so that the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.

And that in a way, the whole project is that not just Israel, but Egypt, and through Egypt, the rest of the known world, and through the book all the readers shall somehow know the supremacy of the God of Israel. And presumably his being the guiding light of a way of life for humankind generally. That would be the internal evidence in the book that there's something more than just the parochial exercise taking place here.

And the other thing to say is at least, I mean, for centuries, people looked to the Hebrew Bible for its political wisdom. People saw here the foundations of teachings of universal natural right and of natural law. They saw here the basis for the reform of certain monarchic politics. I'm thinking of John Selden, Peter Quineus, People like Machiavelli and Rousseau studied the case of Moses as law giver. And Rousseau says famously that the law of Israel has more — the law of Moses has more to teach us than the law of Greece and Rome combined. So there was an invitation at least to see what's here that's exportable and not just parochial.

Bill Kristol: Yeah. For me, as someone who's interested in politics, that was so striking in the book that people either tend to focus on liberation, “let my people go,” and that's of course, very important in Exodus, but it's not the bulk of it really. And it's certainly not the only thing, as you stress. And then if one is more inclined to be to the religious side, one focuses on Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah, but there's a huge kind of in-between, I don't know if that's the right way to say it, political realm that's also discussed. That's not simply, “you must follow these 613 commandments to be pious, to be an observant person,” on the one hand. Or the Zionist teaching, let's call it, “the people should be free of oppressive slavery,” on the other hand.

And I think you develop that in so many interesting ways. I mean, you mentioned in passing something that you had learned or that surprised you. I mean, talk a little bit more about that. You knew the book pretty well when you began writing it. Obviously, you'd studied the Bible and written about it. But what did you learn, if I can put it that way, from your already pretty high level to a much deeper level of engagement as you went through this?

Leon Kass: Yeah. I guess two majors sort of things. It's quite funny because when I had my first conversation with Bill Frucht, who's the editor at Yale, to whom I was presenting on the phone, just a short version of what I had done. I'd done this commentary. It grew out of my teaching. It goes line-

by-line, beginning to the end. So he said to me, "So what have you learned from the book of Exodus?" And I was astonished because I hadn't asked myself that question, really. Because you do a commentary, you're trying to explicate the text, rather than to come away with your own exportable teaching. But I had to say something on the phone and I improvised truthfully, and this is what I said. I think it turns out to be the heart of it.

I was very much interested in the politics of Exodus. I was interested in, how do you take this rag tag group of ex slaves and begin to make a people out of them? And it turned out that I had seen that there were two parts of this people-forming project that the book of Exodus laid bare. First, was the importance of the national story of enslavement and deliverance so that they would both know the experience of having been on the bottom and know to whom they owed for their deliverance. And that they would come out with a disposition of gratitude. Remembrance and gratitude. And we have to talk about that some more, because as you say, it's not just, “Let my people go.” But it was, “Let my people go so that they may serve me.” And that it's one form of servitude for another kind of service, which is in fact enhancing and elevating.

The second thing was you go from slavery to a condition of anarchy. And the people, they need some kind of law and they need some kind of mores. And so the second pillar on which Israel is founded, apart from the national story of enslavement and deliverance, is the giving of the law at Sinai. And this is a comprehensive law. They are the founding principles in the Ten commandments. There are three chapters of detailed ordinances. It's not a complete civil code, but you get the rough idea of what this law cares about. And if you compare this to existing ancient near-Eastern law, you begin to see some of the distinctive features of the Israelite law and what God has in mind for a kind of humanistic, as opposed to despotic, politics of the sort that they knew in Egypt.

What I had never paid much attention to was in fact, the third of the book that's devoted to the building of the tabernacle. In Hebrew, the Mishcon. Which is really the last third of Exodus. And I always thought that this was a kind of concession to human wildness, to the passions that erupted in the golden calf. The people have to have sacrifices. There's a kind of Dionysiac element, which is cabined and contained in the tabernacle. But in a way like Moses, I looked down on it. It was, maybe they need it, but —

Bill Kristol: They sort of needed a visual representation.

Leon Kass: They need a visual representation.

Bill Kristol: That was a concession to the kind of weakness that was —

Leon Kass: It was a kind of weakness. And by the way, that's sort of shown forth. Moses is up there for 40 days and 40 nights enjoying his conversation with God. And on the split screen, the people think Moses is gone forever. They need a replacement. And sure enough, they get a gorgeous golden statue of a bull, of a young bull, and they have orgiastic celebration around it. And you have both the Apollonian and the Dionysiac passions are sort of erupt there in Moses' absence, while he's getting the instruction for the alternative. Which we'll have room for that, it will be a

beautiful place and there will be sacrifices, but the order of business in great precision and all kinds of mathematical detail prescribed from on high, you're not on your own.

And what I didn't appreciate really was the way in which the tabernacle answers, not just to these wilder impulses, but that those impulses are themselves an expression of the human need and the human desire to be in touch with what's highest. That a law that restrains mutual wrongdoing or regulates the calendar, that's okay, but it's not enough. And that if people don't have some answer to their higher longings, they're going to fill it with woke politics and various other kinds of stuff, which doesn't ultimately satisfy. And then the thing that really just blew me away was a sentence, in the midst of the boring instructions about the building of the tabernacle, God says to Moses, "The reason I took up with them in the first place was that they should know me and that I should abide in their midst." As if the tabernacle is not just for the people and that the people need to be in touch with something higher, but that the completion of God's project of the whole creation is that he should be known by his people, by the creature made in his image. And not just once in awhile at Sinai, but through ritual communication on a daily basis. So that the divine presence in ordinary human life and for ordinary people is both a kind of completion of their aspirations, but also of what the creation was meant to be: A hospitable world, with a given law, to a grateful people, who actually can on a daily basis commune together in what they regard as the indwelling presence of the divine.

Maybe I was not ready for that at an earlier age. Maybe things about my present life opened me to the possibility of seeing that. But it now seems to me that the founding of Israel, and then as a philosophical question, maybe any long-lasting human polity, rests really on a national story that people adhere to and which identifies their past. It rests upon a shared morality and law and mores and calendar. And it rests on some kind of ritualized expression in which they seek out contact with something that will lift them above concern just with their comfort, prosperity and safety.

Bill Kristol: Yeah, that's so interesting. I'm obviously not familiar with 98% of the commentary on Exodus and certainly not the rabbinical ones, but I do think the importance of the tabernacle, or the *mishkan*, is something you certainly in the modern things I've skimmed, it's not emphasized and it is treated just normally as, they are kind of boring, very detailed instructions. Maybe the priests were interested in this because the priests were busy, had to actually implement this, so to speak, and so there's a whole bunch of priestly stuff there at the end after all the exciting stuff with the plagues and the Red Sea and Mount Sinai and the tablets and so forth. But that's interesting. And that would make sense, right?

That, I mean, Lincoln says this in the same speech. It's not enough to have the principles as it were, or you need the actual memories of the revolution and those actual memories are embodied in, I don't know if he mentioned battlefields, but certainly Gettysburg, he very much suggests that, and obviously just in our actual existence here in the US, we have places we visit where the Constitution was, the Declaration of Independence was written and so forth, and as I say, Revolutionary and Civil War battlefields. D-Day is a fantastic thing, but it's more fantastic if you go to the D-Day cemetery and see the cliffs and so forth. So I guess that makes a certain amount of sense.

Leon Kass: No, it certainly does, and eventually, there's this big glorious temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem, but the tabernacle, or mishkan, was portable and they were to move at each place and they had to put it up. So first of all, God is the architect, not Frank Lloyd Wright or I.M. Pei. Second, very much like the arc that Noah built, God gave the instructions, but Noah built it according to the instructions. Here, it's God's instructions, the people erect it, they take it down, they put it up wherever they are. It's also the communal place of gathering and they gather really, on the one hand, to communally and personally express gratitude or to seek atonement, and they constitute themselves in this place, renewing over and over again their self-definition in relation to the memory of old, to the law that was given, but somehow to the continuing presence of the source, to which they owe.

Lincoln talked about making reverence for the law our "political religion," and I'm not sure that he meant this as a substitute for biblical religion. He was speaking about the needs of American politics in a time when the memory of the founding was declining. The founding generation had gone to rest. People were taking the law into their own hands. The decent people were in danger of being disaffected because the law wasn't being upheld, a serious problem still with us. But the reverence for the law may not be sufficient. And that's, I think, an interesting question for us today.

And you know this better than I, but when Tocqueville comes to visit America, what strikes him in the point of departure of the Americans is that in America, the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion are alive and well. And unlike in Europe where they were at odds, in America, he found them mutually complimentary and each in need of the other. The American religions saw that God had left room for popular self-government, and that the American founding was human beings taking this invitation for self-government. But self-government requires the kind of moral teachings that simply the institutional arrangements of the constitution don't provide. These were provided really by Christianity and the spirit of religion in the various communities; and that was, for a long time, in balance. It's not clear to me that we have this balance now, and what will be if that balance continues in its extreme secularization.

Bill Kristol: Yeah. But I do think that the existence of the tabernacle, as you say, way before the temple, maybe not before the temple in terms of the people, whoever wrote the book of Exodus, but it does suggest also you don't need the temple. Perhaps you need something though. You need concrete embodiment, so to speak, even if you're an [inaudible]. That's actually been true, I think, if you think of the synagogues and the art and so forth, the instruction, traditions of certain kinds that went beyond just saying certain things.

Leon Kass: Yeah, exactly.

Bill Kristol: Now Exodus is unusual because, and you stress this and others have too, that in its account of the liberation from Egypt, there is very intrusively, I would say, and somewhat surprisingly, stuck in there a command to "remember this," or how does it go exactly? "Tell your children about this."

Leon Kass: "Tell your child on that day this is because of what the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt."

Bill Kristol: So it's an Exodus that anticipates it's becoming a national memory, so to speak. Or not just anticipates, but instructs that it should become one. And it's very striking — say a word about where that occurred. Don't they have other things on their mind? They're busy getting out of there and the whole thing's interrupted, “Oh incidentally, you need to tell your kids about this generations later.”

Leon Kass: It's even more than that. Even before they go out. I mean, part of the instruction is after the Exodus, about “the tell your child on that day.” But even before they go out, they're told that ever after, they will celebrate this holiday, this Passover holiday by eating flatbread and not eating leaven bread, and it will be forever and whoever doesn't do this will be cut off from his people, will declare themselves outside. And it's almost as if it's — I mean, there are two possibilities. Do we sort of eat matza and tell the story to our children because God took us out of Egypt? Or did God take us out of Egypt so that we would eat matza and tell our children to keep the memory of this beneficence alive from generation to generation? As if the knowledge of this story was indispensable to people formation.

And they go out of Egypt with their children and their children's children on their mind and with the need to keep this memory and to serve in the forefront. The word “freedom,” by the way, and the word “liberation,” it occurs in the Haggadah and the holiday is known as “z’man heyruteinu,” “the season of our freedom,” but in the Bible, it's not spoken of. The word “freedom” doesn't occur. It really is from “service,” understood as slavery and servitude to Pharaoh, to a different kind of service to God, the service to whom will turn out to be a new kind of self-governance, a new kind of liberation from the internal passions that enslave us from within. But the text doesn't use our — This text has been used everywhere as a kind of model of national liberation, but that's not in the book.

Bill Kristol: Yeah. That's interesting, but it's amazing that — So the instruction to remember, and to remember by means of eating matza or flatbread or whatever, precedes the what's normally taken these days at Passover seders as the reason for eating the matza, which is we had to hurry out and we didn't have time for the bread to rise. I mean, so that's very interesting, very much a sort of almost purposeful indication that there's more to it than that, so to speak.

Leon Kass: Yeah. Look, I mean, in the Passover seder itself and the way the Haggadah sets it out, it sort of recapitulates the entire story because at the beginning, we say “this is the bread of affliction, which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.” And there, the matza symbolizes poor man's bread, slaves' bread. By the end, “this is the matza we ate on the eve of our deliverance,” and it therefore symbolizes the deliverance, the redemption. But I don't think you could find anywhere in the history of the world that people get their first law to commemorate an event that hasn't yet happened and that is laid down in a way as foundational. You know that's foundational even before you get to be in a position where you can put that foundation down and it's really stunning because —

Bill Kristol: That is amazing. And I guess that's somewhat unique among the Jewish holidays too. In the sense that we have a lot of holidays that recognize things that happened in the Torah, and sometimes the Torah sort of says this should be recognized as a holiday, I guess, but not, so to speak, in the midst of the action. It doesn't seem to me that there's something

similar, so strikingly a command to remember, and not just remember, but tell.

Leon Kass: To remember and to tell, and to tell, it's — In that formulation, it's I think Exodus 13:8. “You shall tell your child on that day this is because of what the Almighty did for me when I went out of Egypt.” So it's a reenactment and it's a reenactment with the sense that we're not yet out of Egypt altogether. I mean, we're out of physical Egypt, but getting the slaves out of Egypt is the easy part. Getting slavishness, or being Egyptian, out of the delivered Israelites is an eternal project so that we somehow remind ourselves and we say, this year, we are slaves. Next year, may we be free men? It shouldn't be with the kind of self-satisfaction. That's not our problem. We still have — The journey continues and the summons to serve properly and to deliver ourselves from ourselves is a lasting project.

The other thing about the uniqueness of the holiday, which you alluded to, this is the only one of the holidays that has a biblical food connected with it. None of the other holidays you're told what to eat or not to eat, and what you're told not to eat is as important as what you're told to eat. You're not supposed to eat Egyptian adulterated luxurious bread, puffed up stuff. So the alternatives are before you vividly there.

But at the beginning of the instructions about Passover, God says, "this will be for you the beginning of months." So there's a whole revision of the calendar so that you no longer think of the calendar as given by the natural cycles. The year is the sun, a gift of the sun. The months have to do with the moon. The week, the reader of Genesis learned, has to do with the seven days of creation and not the phases of the moon. Nobody in the story learns that until the Ten Commandments.

The reader has inside information that there's a seven day cycle having to do with six days of creation and the seventh day of divine rest, but the Passover and the month of Aviv or Nisan takes the spring festival, the resprouting of the earth, the time of planting and gives it not a cyclical meaning, but a forward-looking historical, meaning: this for you will be the beginning of time, the beginning of your year, and what you're commemorating here is not spring, but you're commemorating this story, which I give you this new year to tell year after year after year after. So the reconfiguration of the calendar, the reconfiguration of memory, the reconfiguration of how you stand in the world now with gratitude, but with remembrance of what it means to be at the bottom, really quite well thought out in terms of nation building right at the start.

II. Moses, Remembrance, and Gratitude (32:59 – 1:08:56)

Bill Kristol: Yeah, that's so interesting. I want to come back in a second to what Egypt means, Mitzrayim, and all that going forward, but I also was struck, but I don't remember exactly where this was, that the Haggadah makes such a big deal of, or seems to, with questions at the beginning of, you're instructed to tell young people. It's sort of almost a priority of the youth, you might say, contrary to many other things in Judaism and other religions where the elderly get a certain kind of deference. But that actually is in Exodus itself a little bit, right? Isn't it stressed that — I can't remember how it's — Go ahead. Yeah.

Leon Kass: No, absolutely, several times. This is the child-centered holiday and the importance, the great weight is placed on the telling of the story and the telling of the story, again, as if it's still our story, that if that hadn't happened, we would still be slaves in Egypt. And in a certain way, the whole construction of the book of Exodus, it sort of hints at the problem with the Canaanites where they're going. The Canaanites represent a different kind of human alternative, eternal human alternative. But Exodus basically says to the children of Israel, look, you have really two alternatives. You could either live in relation to me and keep my covenant and follow my commandments, and if you do that, you're going to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Or you can live in this land of good and plenty and wind up being slaves to Pharaoh who rules in his own interest.

Those seem to be the two alternatives. So you're constantly reminded of the alternative that was rejected. And the child has to hear this year by year. And it is the annual return with greater and greater knowledge and sophistication. And it's not only the telling of the story, but there is sort of the visual element of the table. There are the kinesthetic elements, there's the wine, there's a whole way in which the childhood memories become sort of ingrained and the attachment to this holiday, I think, is second to none in Jewish tradition, precisely because the children are made somehow the center of it. They get to ask the questions they're mostly addressed and so on.

Bill Kristol: And I think if I recall in the actual Exodus, the Bible says that the young and the old, something like that, shall leave, or there's some formula, there's some sentence where the young, slightly unusually, are specified almost as having to go and almost coming before the old. So I think even there, there's a kind of interest in the young and the future.

Leon Kass: Yeah. I'm not sure that I'm remembering the passage you're alluding to, but what is important is in the course of the negotiations with Pharaoh, as the plagues increase in their severity, Pharaoh, at some point says, "You may go, but you'll keep your women and children here." And Moses says, "Nothing doing. All of us are going." And one could say that the brunt of the teaching of Genesis in so far as there is a teaching, has to do with the primacy of families, and avoiding the ever-present dangers in families of incest, patricide, fratricide. Fratricide in the Hebrew Bible, big problem. And it's narrowly avoided. Cain and Abel tells you the universal story of brothers absent instructed, rivalry to the point of fratricide and all three of the patriarchal generations barely escape fratricide. Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Genesis begins to get the family principle right.

Exodus gives us the national principle, but without abrogating the family principle, because the family remains the vehicle of transmission. On Passover night every household, household by household engages in the Pascal sacrifice, marks their own door posts, eats their own meals with their neighbor if they're too poor to have a lamb of their own. So you have the family, you have the national principle, but with the family absolutely really central to it. Why? Because the essence of this people is the transmission of a way of life, fathers to sons and daughters by teaching, by ceremony, by ritual observance, by the calendar.

Bill Kristol: Say a word about Egypt and the Canaanites. I think that's a very interesting theme.

Leon Kass: Yeah. This was the other discovery, big discovery that I made apart from the three pillared structure of the Israelite founding. It's if you're reading historically well, at the beginning, the Mesopotamians were a big deal in Genesis. Abraham is a man out of Mesopotamia, et cetera. But the political founding has to be in, out of, and against Egypt. And Egypt is the great political alternative. And if you read it historically, you can say, "Okay, there was Egypt," and you might wonder why did it have to take place in Egypt? And then you think about it awhile, you say, "Egypt is not just an ancient alternative. The essence of Egypt is recurrent human possibility."

What's Egypt? Egypt is a place that first of all is the fertile place. It's the gift of the river as Herodotus says. You don't depend upon rain. It doesn't rain there. The water comes from the Nile, it overfloods the land and it's a land of good and plenty without having to pray for rain. It's a land because it's an agricultural paradise that worships the sun. It's a place where all kinds of natural powers are revered. And yet the human animal does not have special or dignified standing, as does the biblical teaching where man alone among the creatures is elevated in the image of God. On the one hand, the people worship natural deities, but inside the palace, Pharaoh has his magicians and sorcerers working to do things to nature to make it even more hospitable. And while they sort of revere the river and the sun, they're obsessed with mortality and decay, that everything from their hieroglyph to shaving their bodies, to embalming their dead, the Egyptians want to make time stand still.

And you have finally the rule of one man, who is a god who rules in his own interest. And with the help of Joseph's teaching on administration, you have a technological and administrative state, bent on conquering mortality and making nature more hospitable to human needs, but in which human dignity is not terribly well-respected. And what you see here is the possibility of techno despotism and preoccupation with long life, absence of decay, immortality. And the moral practices, or the respect for human dignity, goes out the window.

The Canaanites are earth worshipers. The Canaanites are given over to the pleasures of the flesh and eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. They're exuberant. They don't respect the distinctions. They believe in merging alcohol — I mean, it really is a Dionysiac culture. That's a permanent human possibility. Not to insult the city of your birth, but if you look closely, Egypt and Canaan are alive and well in Gotham City. And we see these things in the broader culture, want to see them for a long time.

So you then begin to wonder, are the Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Canaanite alternatives, are these not only the permanent human possibilities, but maybe the great alternatives dressed up, and each age will have their different formulations? And then you ask the question, can one rely either on technological progress in administration and prosperity on the one hand? Or can you rely on, "I'm okay. You're okay. Let's let it all hang out and give over our repressions and enjoy life," on the other hand. And if we want to bring the Mesopotamians back in here, can we build the universal city of man and man will become a god to man, are those the

alternatives for us? Can those alternatives produce a people that is well governed and long-lasting? I'm doubtful.

Bill Kristol: Yeah. That's so interesting. I think maybe New York is more the Canaanites and Silicon Valley would be the Egyptians, the sort of conquest of nature and so forth and a conquest of death, or I don't know, maybe not. And then I guess the UN would be the Mesopotamians, right?

Leon Kass: Yeah. The UN stands really for that hope, for that hope, yeah.

Bill Kristol: Yeah. So that's very interesting. And I've not heard that really. I think the notion that Egypt is a permanent alternative is a little more common maybe in the tradition and the commentators. But I hadn't heard that ever before, maybe others have noticed this, about the Canaanites. So that's, yeah, that is interesting.

And this isn't a big deal, but just on that one point, I want to get to one other thing. That is the 40 year avoidance of the Philistines, isn't that — I mean, your teacher Leo Strauss makes a point of this in a somewhat interesting way, and at the end of an essay, that's not really about this, that it was very important that the instruction to not go the easiest way, which would take you through the land of the Philistines, is very important, seems to be important for the Israelites' formation. That would be a mistake to get tempted by that too fast, I suppose.

Leon Kass: If I'm not misremembering the text, the way of the Philistines, which is along the Mediterranean coast was shorter to the Promised Land.

Bill Kristol: Right. It was easier, but you're not supposed to take it. Right, right.

Leon Kass: But you weren't supposed to take it, not because it was soft and cushy, but because the Philistines were armed and they would be afraid and they would say, "Let's go back to Egypt where it's at least safe and we'll get, we have meat in the pots, and we have ..." And by the way, they backslide all the time. I mean, they murmur against Moses and so on. But it is arranged so that the Amalekites come after them. And quite miraculously, they win a victory there, they fend off the Amalekites who come after them, after they get liberated, delivered from Egypt. So they do acquit themselves in battle after having seen God drown the Egyptians in the Sea of Reeds and Moses sings the song and says, “the whole world is afraid of you now.” So he sort of sung them courageous, and maybe then they can stand up for themselves.

Bill Kristol: No, that's a good correction of memory, but it's a correction in the direction, which I think is true throughout the Exodus, and maybe the Bible as a whole, the kind of hardheadedness that you do need to be able to defend yourself, and you do need to be able to fight, and you need to be, take tough actions sometimes.

And speaking of that, so you mentioned actually Moses, just two minutes ago, which I think was like the Haggadah, like the Seder, we had managed to go this entire discussion without mentioning Moses, he's kind of such a character in the book. And I, I mean, that part is so interesting obviously, and you really have so many interesting things to say about it at different moments where God speaks to Moses, Moses speaks to the

people, Moses correctly or not so correctly reports God's words down to the people.

He does some things on his own, he does some things that God tells him to do. I mean, this is a much thought about, obviously in comments and on this topic in general, including by the people you mention, Machiavelli and Rousseau and so forth, but I don't know. What did you learn about, any striking discoveries or moments? For me, I'll just say, and then I'll let you talk. I hadn't really realized, I guess, it hadn't really occurred to me until a few years ago, I'm embarrassed to say, it shows how little I've studied this, I suppose, or maybe just my lack of imagination, how amazing it is that Moses dashes the tablets, destroys them when he comes down the first time from Mount Sinai, apparently on his own volition, not ordered to do that by — and these are tablets that God has written.

Leon Kass: Yep.

Bill Kristol: Not Moses has written, unlike the second ones, right? So this is pretty — on his own, he does this. He's not punished for doing so. In fact, it seems somehow to fit into a broader plan, even perhaps that he, or at least he's not, maybe it was necessary to do that. So that does just bring home how much Moses is a character and not just a mouthpiece or a transmitter, so to speak, middleman here between God and the people, at least for me it did, yeah.

Leon Kass: Yeah. That's lovely, Bill. And I mean, one could talk for days about Moses. And he gets on-the-job training, and there are times when he ad-libs and he gets bollocksed up, but eventually he sort of learns which way the wind is blowing, what direction he's supposed to follow. He takes increasing initiative. And it's rather important that he take increasing initiative because several times God says he's arranging these things, including the big spectacle on the mountain. When the Ten Commandments are given, God says, "I'm going to make all this big spectacle. So the people will trust in you forever." So that God is somehow building Moses up, because first of all, God can't do everything. The authority has to somehow be given somewhat to Moses. And eventually Moses himself has to disappear into his law so that once things get set up properly, the people will be ruled under God's law that Moses has somehow helped deliver them and set them up for.

So we have a spirited young man, we have a guy with an Egyptian, princely education. We have a fellow whose curiosity and wonder turns to awe at the burning bush. He never gives up his desire to want to know God's name or his essence. He gets on-the-job training with Pharaoh so that he is by the end, it says, "and this man, Moses's reputation was very great in Egypt." So he's being built up. He has a great deal of disdain for the people. They murmur against him. He says they're going to stone him. He complains. He really has sort of contempt for them, until the episode of the golden calf. And I'm going to come to the, very quickly, to the point that you raised about the tablets.

I think that this episode of the golden calf had to come sooner or later. God gets Moses out of the way. He's up on the mountain. The people have the gold and silver that God told them to take from the Egyptian citizens as they're leaving. And that gold and silver can go to the mishkan

or the tabernacle, or they could use it for some other nefarious purpose, which they do. If, when Moses is absent, the people wait their time and wait for him to come back, fine. If they get into idolatry, it's important to find out quickly, what's going to be the consequence of abrogating this covenant, because they were told, up to this point, what will happen if they keep the covenant, but there hasn't been anything said about what happened if they disobey.

And especially if they disobey in the founding principle, “I'm the larger God who brought you out of Egypt, the house of bondage.” So he tells Moses, "By the way, you better get down there. The people have made themselves an idol," and Moses starts to, and he says, "Leave me alone in my anger that I may decide how to destroy them." And that's bait for Moses. Leave me alone. Moses isn't going to leave him alone. Moses gets in their close and argues God out of destroying the people. He promises he won't destroy them. Then Moses goes down and he sees and hears what's going on. And then he gets enraged.

Bill Kristol: Having criticized or chastised God almost for being himself angry, right?

Leon Kass: Yeah, he basically says, he makes a case, "Aren't you going to be embarrassed in front of all the people that you made this promise, and now you're going to destroy them?" I mean, he uses God's own words against him. Look, that whole discussion between God and Moses before and after the golden calf, it's absolutely stunning. It's sort of in six moments, you see Moses's rhetoric in persuading God to do what I think God wanted Moses to persuade him to do, because for the first time Moses owns this people and talks about them as “we”, rather than as “your people” or “that people.” Moses has never before said, “we” in talking about the Israelites.

Bill Kristol: Interesting.

Leon Kass: So this is a setup for Moses to plead for the people and then somehow to own them and take responsibility in God's name. He comes down and he breaks the tablets. The people have destroyed the covenant by their deed. Moses literally destroys it, in fact, by smashing the tablets, which are its embodiment. And you could say, why does he do this? He's acting as God's fury. He's in a way assuaged God's anger, he's now taking that anger on himself. Or he feels personally betrayed, or he recognizes, "I'm somehow responsible. I didn't leave the right people in charge. I took Joshua halfway up the mountain and I was enjoying myself too much up there having this conversation with God," Or Bob Sachs has a nice thought: Moses is angry because he's discovered the tabernacle is just a substitute for this golden calf. That all of this is just about this people's Dionysiac wild element. But I think there's something larger.

Moses, like a kind of good commander destroys the tablets, and in a way becomes as guilty as the people. He, in a way takes the people's guilt upon himself. They've destroyed the covenant. I, your leader, will own up too. I'm going to own you, but I'm going to own up to your deeds from now on." And he destroys the covenant and he restores the condition of anarchy, which he now has to fix. And that's one of the hard-headed — Here's Moses all by himself with Joshua, 600,000 men displayed in an orgiastic celebration about this idol. What in the world is he going to do? He's got to re-establish order with the people before he can go plead with

God to give them another covenant. And he says at the gates, "Who is with the Lord, with me?" All the Levites join him. And he tells them, making up a speech for God, “And the Lord says, ‘Each man, put your sword on your thigh and go out and slay your brother.’"

And there's a small civil war. Three thousand men are killed and Moses purges, he first destroys the calf. He makes the people drink it. He remonstrates with Aaron, but the restoration of order is this mini civil war, which purifies the camp with the sacrificial offering of 3,000 dead. And whereas Machiavelli would say “necessity justified” and let it go with that, the Bible shows you that this was unsavory. It was necessary. It was absolutely necessary for Moses to reassert his authority and re-establish the order so that when he goes back and comes down again, and the word is “you've been forgiven,” the people will build this tabernacle with enthusiasm and with their whole heart. And they will accept the covenant for the first time, really knowing what they're doing. But to do it, he had to engage in this really ugly practice, which the Torah shows you was ugly. And later, Aaron's sons pay. The iniquities of the fathers are visited upon the sons. So, this section of Moses, before and after the golden calf and in dealing with God and dealing with the people, that's really where Moses becomes Moses.

Bill Kristol: And if I'm not mistaken, so from the moment as he goes down the first time, and chooses, decides, or out of anger breaks the tablets through his instructions, is making them drink the water with the gold from the golden calf and his, as you say, chastising Aaron, and then actually launching this little purge, whatever you want to call it. That's all Moses's decisions. That's what struck me: that the degree to which God, the lesson seems to be that at some point, God's not going to do it all for you. There was a kind of human agency and responsibility in this refounding, maybe it is. And that the initial founding is a little more by God, or by Moses carrying out God's orders. But the second founding, if that's the right way to say it, is more Moses having to step up. And I guess that's a lesson for the future as God recedes and as Moses of course, himself also is no longer there.

Leon Kass: Yeah. And it's really quite beautiful. To complete this particular piece of it, when Moses comes down the second time, after a second 40 days and 40 nights, rays of light are shining from his face. The things that the tradition called his horns. But these beams of light, the divine — as one of my students put it, "I will be with you," is stamped on his face. When Moses said, "Who am I to do this?" And God says, "I will be with you,” to him early on. "I will be with you," I s now radiating from his face to the people. And it's almost as if Moses is radiating the divine light and appears before the people as if he himself were God almighty. And he veils himself, except when he's going into the tent to meet with God and comes out and reports to the people.

But this kind of new quasi, I don't want to say quasi divinity, but this new elevated status that Moses has coming down the mountain the second time, he uses immediately to give them the instructions to build the tabernacle. And not only has he been acting on his own, but now they act on their own. Now, he turns his authority to mobilize them, to carry out the building project, which is — Look, the creation was created by God, acting alone. The tabernacle is created by Israelites acting on the divine instructions to make a place where he can abide for them. And Moses

has stepped up. The people have stepped up. The artisans in whom it is said of the artisans, God implanted the *ruach Elohim*, the breath of God. It's exactly what hovered over the face of the waters in the creation story of the first chapter. The Spirit of God is now in the artisans, is in the people. And we've seen the beginning of a transfer of authority and action from on high onto the human plane, especially with Moses, but also to begin with, in the people and in the priests.

Bill Kristol: Yeah, that's right. That's so interesting. I suppose if Moses had been more, I don't quite know what the right word to use is, conventionally pious or timidly pious, maybe is a better way to say it, or piously timid and had said as he came down the first time, "Well, gee, I can't destroy these things. They're written by God. He didn't give me authority to just crash, these things. I better explain to the people that this was unwise or something." The whole thing might not have worked. So, I'm so struck by the kind of political leadership he assumes at that moment. It was just, you say, I think in the past, he's kind of, sort of assumed, but also sort of been waiting for instructions from God, right? At different key times.

Leon Kass: Yeah. The biggest contrast is when the Egyptians pursue the Israelites the morning after, pursue them to the Sea of Reeds and they're between a rock and a hard place or between a drowning and a hard place. And they complained to Moses, "Were there are not enough graves in Egypt you sent us out here to die in the wilderness?" And Moses says, "Stand still, God will provide." Basically say, pray. And God says to Moses, "What are you doing? Do what you're supposed to do. Tell the people to walk, lift your staff." Moses there was basically saying, "God will do this."

Then with the Amalekites, Moses takes a kind of intermediate thing. He's up on the mountain and when he raises his hand, the people are inspired. They think he's channeling divine power. They fight harder. By the time he finishes persuading God not to destroy these people, basically he's acquired them. You pull somebody out of the river, they're yours. So when he comes down the mountain and he sees for himself what he's only had hearsay of and he sees how bad it is, he takes over and he invents a speech for God. He breaks the tablets. He's absolutely on his own.

Bill Kristol: Yeah, that's so interesting. So we're having this conversation just a few days before Passover in March, 2021. And obviously, I guess I'll ask you what you would want people to think about as they conduct seders or participate in seders. And one thing I think I take from this is they should read Exodus and read your book on Exodus, of course, not just read the Haggadah, which is interesting as the Haggadah is, and it is very interesting, and what they choose to represent and to say, which is not the most straightforward account, you'd think if you read Exodus, that people following that instruction, you got to tell the story, would just tell the story, right? Basically read excerpts of Exodus, will be a perfectly lively account of the story. And that's really not what the Haggadah is, with all of the accounts of, “let's now talk about some rabbis who got together to interpret this.” And it's so sort of meta. Half of the Haggadah is about people telling the story about Exodus not telling — So it's so interesting in many ways, the Haggadah. But anyway, what would you want people who are watching this before Passover or during the intermediate days or next year to think about?

Leon Kass: Yeah. The Haggadah and the ceremony really is for the children. And the small ones wouldn't listen to the recitation of 40 chapters of Exodus, much less 600 pages of mine. They're going to remember the quaint things. They're going to remember the kinesthetic things. They're going to remember the wine, the dipping, the questions, the singing. It's going to be impressed in their memory for a multimedia event. But for me, the things that we talked about before, the absolutely astounding thing of this ceremony and this ritual for 3000 years more — Heschel has a remark about the Sabbath, that it's not that the Jews kept the Sabbath, but the Sabbath kept the Jews.

And we didn't talk about the law proper, but the teaching about the Sabbath is the essential teaching of the Ten commandments along with honor your father and mother. Those are the uniquely Israelite contributions, and they're absolutely indispensable to the perpetuation of the Jewish people. The Sabbath sets a day apart for gratitude. Honor your father and mother produces the climate in the household that it could be a vehicle of transmission. And what you're transmitting is a teaching that on the seventh day, you rest like God. You're invited to imitate the deity in having this day set apart. And not only do the Jews keep Passover, but Passover has kept this people alive with the remembrance of what we owe, with the anticipation of a way of life, which survives not only because it's ours, but because it's good. And because in this ritual as in so many others, we gather household by household all over the world at the same time in expressions of gratitude. And with a sense that the job isn't finished, it's for the future.

Bill Kristol: Yeah, that's really wonderful. And I guess in the Sabbath, in a way you could think of the Sabbath and Passover as bookends, somewhat different in spirit, I would say. The Sabbath, family gratitude. Passover, national liberation and more of a civic holiday. Maybe that's not adequate, that's not quite the right political holiday. But I guess in the kiddish for the Sabbath, we do say, we mention we were liberated from — We're celebrating the Sabbath, which somehow I've always assumed as basically from the seven days of creation, which I guess it is sort of. But we say that we're celebrating it in memory of the Exodus from Egypt, which is interesting because it's not obvious exactly why the Sabbath is particularly Exodus focused, or is it? Well, I guess that's where we get the commandment. That's why.

Leon Kass: We get it there. And as you say, when God gives the Ten Commandments, the reason for celebrating the Sabbath is the creation. "Six days, you shall labor, the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord because in six days, God created the world around us." When Moses repeats in Deuteronomy, Moses is the first rabbi in the sense of that he does the first oral law, and he changes all kinds of things. And in Deuteronomy, the reason given for keeping the Sabbath is because of the deliverance from Egypt.

So there's a connection between God as creator, and God as deliverer from Egypt. And the cosmological, metaphysical teaching is given a kind of political valence, just as the month of Nisan has been changed from an agricultural birth of spring to a holiday of deliverance, pointing towards law and service and worship. I'm just sort of in awe of this holiday and of the people who've kept it alive, and kept it alive, and kept it alive, under conditions of poverty, oppression, persecution. And just because we live

under privileged circumstances like Egyptians, we shouldn't take it for granted. And we should remember to whom we owe, in the beginning, and to our ancestors who've told this story, and told this story, so that we can tell this story, God willing, forever.

Bill Kristol: Wonderful note to end on. And thank you for really a terrific discussion, Leon. And about just thank you, that's all I'm going to say. So thank you, Leon Kass for joining me again for this wonderful discussion of Exodus, and I look forward to further discussions on topics, biblical and otherwise.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

Leon Kass: Thanks very much, Bill.

[END]