

COVENANT / CHOSENNESS

Before we discuss the patriarchal narratives, it would help if we had an understanding of what covenant and chosenness mean in relation to those narratives. The following readings hopefully will serve as entry points for a broad discussion of the topic. The first two articles are taken from Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman, editors. Oxford University Press. New York. 1999. Citations for the other essays are to be found with those essays. I chose to lead off with Novak because virtually everyone else who writes about the topic—including in the essays that follow his—quote him. Pay particular attention, however, to Raphael Jospe’s essay, which begins on Page 22. Also, you might want to read what the Encyclopaedia Judaica has to say. That article begins on Page 65.

The Election of Israel

David Novak

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Creation and Election

In the narrative of Scripture, the election of Abraham, the progenitor of the covenanted people of Israel, comes suddenly and without warning. It seems to catch us unprepared.

The Lord said to Abram: “You go away from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation and bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse. Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed. And Abram went as the Lord had spoken to him.” (Genesis 12:1-4)

In this elementary text there seems to be no clue as to why God elects Abraham and his progeny or why Abraham obeys the call to respond to being elected by God. Unlike in the case of Noah, who is elected to save humankind and the animal world from the Flood “because I have seen that you are righteous (*tsadik*) before Me in this generation” (Genesis 7: 1), and who obviously responds to God’s call because of the biological drive for self-preservation, there is no reason given here for either God’s choice or Abraham’s positive response to it. Any righteousness attributed to Abraham is seen as subsequent, not prior, to God’s election of him. It is thus a result of, not a reason for, election. And unlike Noah, Abraham does seem to have the alternative of staying where he already dwells. He

seems to have a reasonable alternative to obedience to God's call. From the text of Scripture itself it seems as though Abraham could have stayed home. In his case, there is no destruction like a universal flood on the imminent horizon.

Simply leaving the matter at this mysterious level, is not speculation about the deeper meaning of the covenant established by this election and its acceptance thereby precluded? In the case of God's reason for electing Abraham and the people of Israel his progeny, the answer seems to be yes. At that side of the covenant, Scripture itself seems to imply "My thoughts are not your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8) when it states,

For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God; the Lord your God chose you to be unto him a treasure people from out of all the peoples on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more numerous than all the other peoples that the Lord desired you and chose you, for you are the least of all the peoples. It was because of the Lord's love for you and his keeping the promise he made to your ancestors. (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

Of course, taken by itself this statement is a tautology—God loves you/chooses you/desires you because God loves you/chooses you/desires you—for there is no reason given as to why he made his promises to Abraham, and to Isaac and Jacob in the first place. And the people of Israel themselves cannot claim any inherent qualities that could be seen as reasons for their election by God.

This is consistent with the logic of creation. In Scripture, unlike other ancient sagas, we are not told about any life of God prior to creation. Indeed, only the God to whom "all the earth is mine" (Exodus 19:5), to whom "the heavens and the highest heavens" (Deuteronomy 10: 14) belong, only this God has such absolute freedom from any natural necessity to create a singular relationship like the covenant with Israel. There is nothing that could be considered a divine *a priori* from which one could infer the possibility of a non-divine world, much less the reality of any such world. All of God's relations with the world are, therefore, *a posteriori*. From revelation we learn some of the things God wants to do with the world, most especially what God wants his human creatures to do with the world along with him, but we do not learn why he made the world the way he did in the first place or, indeed, why he made it at all. So, too, we do not learn why God chose the people of Israel or, indeed, why he chose any people at all. All we learn, *a posteriori*, is what God wants to do with this people. "The secret things are for the Lord our God; but the revealed things are for us and our children forever: to practice all the commandments of this Torah" (Deuteronomy 29:28).

However, on the human side of this relationship of election, it is not only Abraham who is to respond to election. *Election is primarily generic and only secondarily individual. Abraham is elected as the progenitor of a people. Every member of this people is elected by God, and every member of this people is called upon to respond to his or her generic election. [Emphasis added.]* So, even if Abraham's individual reasons for accepting God's call could well be left alone as his own private and inscrutable business, speculation about his generic reasons for accepting it is our business, as well, inasmuch as his response is archetypal for all of us who follow after him. For a communal response is a public matter, one whose reasons have to be rooted in continuing common experience before they can enter into personal reflection. This, then, calls for our reflection on our own human situation and what conditions in it enable us to respond to God's electing presence without caprice. Projecting our own reflection on the human conditions for election back to Abraham retrospectively is essential midrashic thinking. Without it, we would lose our singular connection to the text of Scripture. It would become merely a datum among other data rather than the datum for us.

Of course, at the most original level, the prime reason for obeying God is that God is God. In

Scripture, God's original presence is explicitly normative: his first contact with humans in the Garden is set forth in the words: "The Lord God commanded the humans" (Genesis 2:16). Norms are a necessity for human life because humans are beings who must consciously order the conflicting parts of their experience if they are to survive and cohere. That ordering requires a primary point of authority. (One can only be a moral relativist when looking at someone else's choices from afar, not when one is required to make his or her own choices at hand.) A human life without an ordering hierarchy of authority could only be that of an angel: an infallible life without conflict. So it follows that any rejection of God's norms presupposes the substitution of God's authority by the authority of one who is not-God being made into God. The prime authority wherever is always taken to be God. There can be no normative vacuum. That is why the first temptation to disobey God is the temptation that "you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). You, not God, will become the prime authority. Without absolute authority, the creator would no longer be the creator; he would be forced to abdicate, as it were.

The relationship with God the creator at this original level is essentially negative, however. It only consists of prohibitions that function as divine limitations of human illusions of self-sufficiency and autonomous authority. So far, there is nothing positive between humans and God. It is with Abraham's call that we begin to see the establishment of a substantive relationship of humans with God. And in order for any such positive relationship to be sustained, there must be the discovery of positive reasons by humans within themselves for them to want to accept and maintain this relationship. Thus, whereas resistance to the idolatrous temptation to substitute the authority of not-God (the world or the human person) for God involves the affirmation of truth, the response to the covenant involves the desire for good. By obeying God, what good did Abraham desire? What did his response intend?

The covenant itself must be the object of human desire. This desire for it as good is an essential component of it. Hence in presenting the positive covenantal norms, Moses appeals to the desire of the people for what is their good. "The Lord commanded us to practice [*la'asot*, literally "to do"] all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, which is good for us all times for our vitality, as it is today. And it will be right (*tsedakah*) for us to be careful to do this whole commandment before the Lord our God as he has commanded us" (Deuteronomy 6:25). And shortly before this passage, each one of the people is commanded to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your life, and with all your might" (6:5). But can there be any love without desire? And is not desire experienced, inchoately to be sure, even before its desideratum comes to it...?

It seems to me that the reasons for Abraham's answering the electing call of God, and thus the paradigm for all subsequent Jewish answering of it, can be seen in the promise made in the initial call itself that Abraham and his progeny will be the source of blessing for all humankind. Accordingly, Abraham's relationship with God is correlative to his relationship with the world. And the precise presentation of that correlation is found in Abraham's dialogue with God over the judgment of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God justifies including Abraham in this dialogue as follows:

How can I conceal what I am doing from Abraham? And Abraham shall surely become a great and important nation, in whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. For I know him, so that he will command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the

Lord to do what is right (*tsedakah*) and just (*mishpat*). (Genesis 18:17-19)¹

The question now is to determine the connection of the blessing of the nations of the earth to Abraham and his people keeping the way of the Lord to do what is right and just.

The first thing to note is that God's statement of his knowing does not seem to be a noetic prediction. The text does not say "I know that," but rather "I know him." Abraham is the direct object of God's knowing, and the result of his being aware of God's knowing him will be that he will be able to keep the way of the Lord. Without God's knowing him and his being aware of it, Abraham would not be able to recognize the way of the Lord and keep it.

Here "knowing" is not a judgment of a state of affairs drawn from the objects of past experience and then projecting from them into the future. This knowing is, rather, a relationship of direct and intimate personal contact. It is presence. Thus in the Garden the "tree of the knowledge (*ets ha-da'at*) of good and bad" is a symbol for the direct contact with all the experience the world now has to offer and which the first human pair desire. Since they were able "to judge favorably that the fruit of this tree is good to eat and delightful in appearance" (Genesis 3:6) even before they ate it, their judgment preceded their experience or "knowledge." Their judgment is in essence a prediction of what they think they will experience. This is why "knowledge" is used to designate the intimacy of sexual contact—"And the man knew (*yada*) Eve his wife and she conceived" (Genesis 4:1)—although it is not limited to sexual contact. It is something that can be judged desirable based on one's desire of it in advance, but it can only be experienced directly in the present.

In connection with the election of Israel, the prophet Amos conveys to Israel God's announcement: "Only you have I known (*rak etchem yad'ati*) of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Now, the prophet could not be saying that God is unaware of the other nations inasmuch as he himself has already been called to prophesy about them by God. What the prophet is saying is that God shares a unique intimacy with Israel that is the basis for the unique claims he makes upon her. The claims are because God cares for Israel. Since these claims are made in the context of covenantal intimacy, the prophet then says in the very next verse. "Can two walk together if they have not met each other (*no'adu*)?" Israel is intimately known by God and is to act based upon her intimate experience of that knowing. The relationship here is not a noetic relation of a subject and an object. It is the divine I reaching out to embrace a human thou who then chooses to be so embraced. Thus at the very beginning of God's regeneration of the covenant with Israel in Egypt, Scripture states:

And the children of Israel groaned from their toil and cried out, and their cry reached up to God from out of their toil. Then God took notice of His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And God looked with favor at the children of Israel and God cared. (Exodus 2:23-25)

As for Abraham's response to God's election, it is initially a response to being in intimate contact with God. That is what he desires. That intimacy is, as we shall soon see, the main characteristic of the covenantal life of the Jewish people in the present. Those commandments of the Torah that specifically celebrate the historical singularity of the covenantal events give that life its rich substance.

What we must now see is how the experience of being known by God leads Abraham and his progeny to practice the way of the Lord. That can be better understood if we remember that the act

¹ An alternate translation for *tsedakah u'mishpat* is "equitable and just."

of election is first a promise. Thus the covenant itself is founded in a promise. But why does Abraham believe the promise of God? Is his response anything more than a “leap of faith”?

In terms of the sequence of the biblical text itself, it is important to remember that the promise of God to Abraham is not the first promise God has made. After the Flood, God promises that “I shall uphold my covenant with you...and there will be no further deluge to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11). The Rabbis were very astute in insisting that unconditional divine promises are made as oaths. Any oath made by God could not be annulled by God thereafter inasmuch as the annulment of an oath can only be done by a higher authority than that of the one who made it. But there could be no higher authority than God to annul it. God must keep His own word, then; if not, His credibility would be totally undermined. Moreover, the connection between the promise made to Noah and the promise made to Abraham is explicitly made by Deutero-Isaiah. “For this is to me like the waters of Noah: just as I promised that the waters of Noah would never again pass over the earth, so do I promise...that even if the mountains be moved and the hills be shaken, my kindness shall not be moved and my covenant of peace shall not be shaken—so says the Lord who loves you” (Isaiah 54:9-10). Furthermore, we learn that God’s relation to the world is the correlate of his relationship with Israel, and Israel’s relationship with the world is the correlate of her relationship with God.

I think that one can see the inner connection of these two promises in the term used to characterize the “way of the Lord” that Abraham is to teach his progeny: “what is right and just” (*tsedakah u-mishpat*). But this requires that we look upon the two words in the term as denoting two separate but related acts. The usual interpretations of them sees them as denoting one single act, namely, correct justice, which is the standard whereby the distinction between the innocent and the guilty is consistently maintained in adjudication. This interpretation of the term is appropriate to the immediate context of the dialogue between God and Abraham in which Abraham indicates that consistency in judgment is the bare minimum to be expected from God, who has chosen to be “the judge of all the earth” (Genesis 18:25). This interpretation concentrates on the ethical issues in the text. However, looking at the even deeper theological issues in the text, one can take *tsedakah* as one term and *mishpat* as another. Along these lines, one can interpret *tsedakah* as the transcendent aspect of God’s relation to creation and *mishpat* as the immanent aspect of it. The elect people, then, are to imitate both the transcendent and the immanent aspects of God’s relation to the world.

Tsedakah is the transcendent aspect of God’s relation to creation because it is something totally gracious. God’s creation of the world is an act of grace; there is nothing that required that there be something created rather than nothing. And after the Flood, the renewal of creation in the covenant with the earth is even more gracious inasmuch as God’s human creatures—made in His own image—were so ungrateful for the gift of their existence and that of the world.

God’s *tsedakah* is the ultimate explanation of the contingency of existence. As such, it could only be expressed in a promise, which extends from the present into the future. For the past by itself never guarantees any continuity or permanence. Its immanent order is itself contingent. So, to use a current metaphor, reliance on this order in itself might be nothing more than “arranging deck chairs on the Titanic.” But a primary promise in and of itself has no antecedents; indeed, if it did, it would be the process of making an inference and then a prediction based upon that inference. It would, then, designate a relation within the world already there. A primary promise, conversely, is infinitely more radical, infinitely more originating. Accordingly, it could not come from the world itself, whose real existence (rather than its abstract “Being”) is no more necessary than real, mortal, human existence. It could only come from the One who transcends both the world and humankind.

Yet despite its ultimate contingency, worldly existence has structure and continuity. The primal event of creation founds existence as an orderly process. That is because the divine promise is itself covenantal. The structure and continuity of existence, its essential character, is what is meant by *mishpat*. It is through *mishpat* that existence coheres. Minimally, that coherence is seen in the principle of contradiction, by which things maintain their distinct identities in relation to each other. Abraham's challenge to God that the judge must act justly and consistently distinguish between the innocent and the guilty is the biblical presentation of this basic principle of all reason. *Mishpat*, then, is the standard whereby the boundaries between things and between acts are maintained. *Mishpat* is violated when those boundaries are not respected. That is why *mishpat* is basically negative. It functions as a limit. Indeed, it is not inappropriate here to use Spinoza's formula: *determinatio negatio est*². *Mishpat* is that fundamental *determinatio* that makes an ordered approach to existence possible. Nevertheless, *mishpat*, precisely because it is essentially negative, can never guarantee the facticity³ of existence; it always presupposes that existence is being maintained by God's *tsedakah*. Expressions of *mishpat* are always ultimately conditional, namely, if there is a world, then it must have certain structures to cohere. As Jeremiah puts it, "Without My covenant by day and by night, I would not have put the laws (*chukot*) of heaven and earth in place" (Jeremiah 33:25). Essence in biblical theology follows from existence, but existence is never derived from essence.

That is why truth (*emet*) is God's faithfulness before it is external correspondence and before it is inner coherence. Truth is first God's faithful promise that created existence will abide. "He makes heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, keeping faith forever" (Psalms 146:6). Only when nature is "Your faithful seasons" (Isaiah 33:6) can it function as a standard to which human judgment can truly correspond. And human judgment and action can only cohere fully, can only "do justly and seek fidelity" (Jeremiah 5:1) when it is aware of the coherence of cosmic *mishpat*. That complete awareness only comes when the Torah functions as the "true witness" (Proverbs 14:25) of creation and its order in both nature and history.

The world until the time of Abraham was certainly aware of cosmic *mishpat* and the necessity to practice it in society. Thus after the Flood and the reconstruction of human life on earth, the basic moral law prohibiting bloodshed and establishing its commensurate punishment—"one who sheds human blood shall have his blood shed by humans" (Genesis 9:6)—is directly preceded by the affirmation of the cosmic order: "For as long as the earth endures, there will be seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, they shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22). That cosmic order, in which both the human and the nonhuman participate, is its *mishpat*. Thus Jeremiah employs an analogy between human and nonhuman *mishpat* to make the following point: "Even the stork in the sky knows her seasons, and the turtledove, the swift, and the crane keep the time of their coming; but my people do not know the law (*mishpat*) of the Lord" (Jeremiah 8:7). Clearly, the "seasons" of the stork and the regular cycles of the other birds are their *mishpat*.

Mishpat, however, is known only as a negative, limiting force. Because of that, the violation of it is considered a denial of the fear of God, which is in effect restraint before the highest authority, the

² It means "determination is a negation."

³ Yes, it is a word. It means the quality or condition of being fact. Sorry, but he has too many degrees to simply use the word "fact."

epitome of *mishpat*, the pinnacle of cosmic justice. Thus when Abraham assumes that there is no respect for the boundaries of the marital relation in the Philistine city of Gerar, specifically assuming that his wife Sarah will be abducted into the harem of the city's ruler Abimelech, he justifies his lying about Sarah being his wife by saying, "surely there is no fear of God in this place" (Genesis 20:11). In other words, there is no *mishpat* there. 31

What is not recognized, though, until the time of Abraham, is the reality who is the source of this cosmic order, this *mishpat*, the reality who created and sustains the cosmos in which *mishpat* is to be operative as its norm. But the philosophical questions to be asked now are: What difference does it make whether we know or do not know the source of this cosmic order? Indeed, why does it have to have a source at all to be appreciated theoretically and implemented practically by us? And, furthermore, why does this source have to reveal His presence to Abraham, which is simultaneously an act of election, as biblical revelation always is? And if there is such a cosmic source, why can't this source be discovered by ratiocination, which is universal in principle?

Only when the cosmic order is perceived by those who suffer enough philosophical unrest can the most basic existential question be asked authentically: What is my place in the world? That question lies at the heart of Abraham's desire for God's presence.

This question arises from our experience of the phenomenal order of things we immediately and regularly experience around us through our bodily senses. What we soon learn from this order is our own mortal vulnerability, our superfluity in the world. When we "eat of the tree of knowledge of good and bad" (Genesis 2:17)—which is the acquisition of worldly experience—we simultaneously discover the imminence of our own death. "Dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). "All is futile. What advantage is there for man in all his accomplishments under the sun? One generation goes and another comes and the earth remains the same forever" (Ecclesiastes 1:2-4). Therefore, throughout human history, perceptive persons have become aware that their place is not immanently available as an animal-like instinct. As a result of this existential predicament, the transcendent desire that goes beyond immanent need arises.

The first possibility is for us to discern with the intellect a higher noumenal⁴ order undergirding the phenomenal order initially perceived by the senses. Our motivation is to subordinate ourselves to this order. It alone offers us a transcendent end for our participation. This is the attitude of scientific (understood as *scientia* or *Wissenschaft*, that is) *homo spectator*. The second possibility is for us to despair of ever finding the higher noumenal order "out there" and thus to look within our human selves for an order of our own device with which to use and control as much of the world as we can. This is the attitude of technological *homo faber*. The third possibility is for us to cry out for the person who stands behind this cosmic order to reveal himself to us; since the presence of persons can never be inferred from something non-personal, it must always be self-revelation. This is the attitude of *homo revelationis*, the person of faith. For the Bible, Abraham is the first *homo revelationis*.

In the biblical narrative preceding the emergence of Abraham, we find hints of both the first and the second possibilities and their attendant human attitudes. And both are seen as being in essence

⁴ This is a term that comes from Kant (sorry about that); it means a thing as it really is, rather than as it appears to be.

idolatry.

As for the first possibility, Scripture notes that during the time of Enosh, the grandson of the first couple, “the name of the Lord began (לְהוֹחַל, *hu-chal*) to be invoked” (Genesis 4:26). Rabbinic interpretation notes that the word for “begin” is etymologically similar to the word for “profane” (לְחֹל, *chol*). Thus it sees the time of Enosh as the beginning of idolatry, not the worship of the true God. The question here is: If this interpretation is accepted, what did the idolatry consist of?

Maimonides, in introducing his comprehensive treatment of the specifics of Jewish tradition concerning idolatry, speculates that at this time human beings were so impressed with what they perceived, namely, the cosmic order, the highest manifestation of which is the astronomic order, that they forgot who so ordered it. Their worship, then, was transferred from the creator to his most impressive creations. In an earlier discussion of the essence of idolatry, Maimonides speculates that the worship of the cosmic order itself inevitably leads to a situation where some people understand this order much better than others by virtue of their greater powers of discovery. As such, they translate their noetic power into political power by convincing the masses that they should be given absolute authority, being the effective conduits of that cosmic power. They alone can channel it for the public weal. Here we have the rule of the philosophical guardian. In Maimonides’ reading of Scripture, tyranny is the practical result of theoretical idolatry.

As for the second possibility, Scripture is more explicit. During the time of the Tower of Babel, humankind despaired of ever discovering the cosmic order, much less making peace with it in order to live within its limits. The cosmic order is now the enemy to be conquered by technological means. “And each man said to his neighbor, ‘come let us make bricks and fire them in a kiln...; come let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower with its head into heaven, and we will make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth’” (Genesis 11:3-4). In response to all this, the Lord says, “this they have begun to do, and now nothing they are plotting to do will be withheld from them” (Genesis 11:6). An important thing to note here is that in the preceding passage, dealing with what we might in modern terms call “heteronomous⁵ idolatry,” the name sought is still something external to humans themselves. Here, however, dealing with what we might in modern terms call “autonomous idolatry,” the name sought is one of human making.

The connection between this idolatry and political tyranny is even more obvious. Here we have the rule of the technocrat. Here the exercise of power becomes an end in itself. There is no longer even the pretense of a higher justification and purpose for the exercise of human power. Thus in rabbinic interpretation, Nimrod is the true founder of Shinar, the place where the Tower of Babel was built. About Nimrod it is said, “He began to be a mighty man on earth. He was a mighty warrior⁶ before the Lord” (Genesis 10:8-9). And in rabbinic tradition, Abraham’s quest for God quickly challenged the tyranny of Nimrod and was taken as a mortal threat by Nimrod....

As for the third possibility, which is the cry for the person behind the cosmic order to reveal himself, we only have our speculation that God’s call to Abraham is in truth a response to an existential question. And there is a long tradition of speculation about just what this question is. In this tradition, Abraham begins his career as a philosopher. The error, however, of many in this

⁵ Meaning subject to a law or standard external to itself.

⁶ Or “mighty hunter,” which would seem the better translation.

tradition was to assume that Abraham found God through what is called “the argument from design,” namely, that the perception of order leads one to conclude that there is an orderer who brought it about. But as many philosophers have argued, no such conclusion is necessary. One can take the order itself as ultimate. And if there is such an orderer, then the most one can rationally conclude is that the orderer and the order are essentially identical, and that the orderer cannot be understood as transcending his order in any way, as in Spinoza’s view of God as *causa sui*, as we have already seen. In other words, the orderer need not be taken as a person, that is, one consciously engaged in transitive acts, let alone mutual relationships.

Abraham’s cry for the Master of the Universe to reveal Himself, to follow the speculation of a well-known midrash, is not an exercise in inferential thinking. Without the revelation whereby God personally elects him through a promise and establishes a perpetual covenant with him and his progeny, without that, Abraham’s cry would have been the epitome of futility, an unheard cry in the dark, a dangerous gamble, an exercise in wishful thinking. The free choice of God, His liberty to be when He will be, where He will be, with whom He will be, cannot in any way be the necessary conclusion by any inference whatsoever. The most Abraham or any human person can do is to prepare himself or herself for the possibility of revelation, to clear the ground for God, but without any immanent assurance that God will ever come.

One can speculate, from philosophical reflection on the human condition itself, that Abraham could not accept the first and second approaches to the cosmos (that of *homo spectator* and that of *homo faber*) because neither of them could establish the cosmos as the authentic dwelling-place for humans. Abraham the bedouin is looking for his home.

To regard order itself as ultimate, as does *homo spectator*, is to regard humans as souls from another world, souls whose task is to “escape and become like God.” And in this view, God is eternal and immutable Being. But there is no relationship with Being; there is no mutuality between Being and anything less than itself. There is only a relation to Being. God dwells with Himself alone. That is why in this view of things, the highest achievement of humans is to reach the level where they can only silently gaze on that which is eternal. The philosopher, like God, is ultimately beyond human community and beyond the world. And to regard the cosmic order as mere potential, a resource for its own use, as does *homo faber*, something to be ultimately outsmarted, is to regard the cosmos as ultimately disposable. All being is engulfed by human *technē*.⁷ There is, then, no authentic being-at-home in the world. One is in constant struggle against the world. Humans dwell with and among themselves alone, but that brings them no rest. For the struggle against the world is extended into their struggle with each other for mastery. For *homo faber*, there is not enough trust of either the world or one’s fellow humans for him to be able to enjoy the vulnerability of a Sabbath.

Only an authentic relationship with the creator God who made both world and humankind enables humans to accept the world as their dwelling-place. Without that, the world becomes either our prison that we are to escape from, or our prison against whose walls we battle, striving to tear them down. “For so says the Lord, the Creator of Heaven, He is the God who formed the earth, who made it and established it, who did not create it to be a void (*tohu*), but who formed it to be a dwelling (*la-*

⁷ Greek word often defined as craft or art, but in the wonderful world of philosophy means “the set of principles, or rational method, involved in the production of an object or the accomplishment of an end.”

*shevet*⁸)” (Isaiah 45:18). “God brings the lonely homeward” (Psalms 68:7). All true dwelling-in is a dwelling with more than ourselves. But it is only the case when we prepare the world from our singular place for God’s descent into the world to dwell with us therein in covenantal intimacy. “They shall make for Me a holy place and I shall dwell in their midst” (Exodus 25:8). “Surely the Lord is here in this place....It will be the house of God” (Genesis 28:16, 22).

Here the propensity for tyranny we noticed in the first and second human approaches to the cosmos (that of scientific *homo spectator* and that of technological *homo faber*) is less. For here is where everyone in the covenant is to be directly and equally related to God. Even the quintessential modern apostate from Judaism, Baruch Spinoza, was impressed by this political aspect of the covenant, as we saw earlier. Here is where the prophet can say, “O were it so that all the people of the Lord would be prophets, that the Lord would place his spirit upon them” (Numbers 11:29).

Thinking along these lines, one can see why Scripture requires the people of Israel, when they are at home in the land of Israel and satiated with an abundant harvest, to remember their bedouin origins by declaring about Abraham (and perhaps the other patriarchs too): “a wandering Aramaean was my father” (Deuteronomy 26:5). Indeed, even in the land of Israel, which is at the same time as Abraham’s election itself elected to be the homeland, the dwelling-place of his people, this people is reminded in Scripture that “the land is Mine, that you are sojourning tenants with Me” (Leviticus 25:23). Indeed, the purpose of a home is to be the location for persons to coexist, a place for authentic *mitsein*⁹. It is not a part of them and they are not parts of it, as is the case with the first two attitudes we have detected above. Although God dwells with the people of Israel wherever they happen to be, the most complete dwelling-together of God and his people is only in the land of Israel. The rest of the earth is created; the land of Israel like the people of Israel is elected in history. It is selected from among multiple possibilities.

On the basis of this theology, time and space are to be constituted as abstractions from event and place. Time is ordered by the events in which Israel is elected and the covenant with her given its content. These events are the prime point of temporal reference; they are not in time, but all time is related to them. As Scripture puts it in the first creation narrative itself: “And God said, ‘let there be light in the expanse of the sky to divide between day and night, and to be for signs and seasons, for days and for years’” (Genesis 1:14). And space is ordered by its relation to the land of Israel. It is the *axis mundi*, the prime point of spatial reference. It is not in space, but all space is related to it. As Scripture puts it just before the people of Israel entered the land of Israel: “When the Most High gave nations their homes and set the divisions of man, He fixed the boundaries of peoples in relation to the numbers of the children of Israel” (Deuteronomy 32:8).

Getting back again to Abraham’s keeping of “the way of the Lord to do what is right (*tsedakah*)

⁸ The root-word *shev* (שב) in the biblical lexicon always connotes permanent residence, whereas *gur* (גור) denotes temporary residence. This will come up often in the Genesis chapters that follow.

⁹ Don’t bother looking it up; most dictionaries don’t list it. It’s a German word (also found in Yiddish), which means “be with” (*mit zein*). It’s used in philosophy, especially when discussing the work of Martin Heidegger, who first coined it for such use.

and just (*u-mishpat*),”¹⁰ we are now in a better position to discern the reason for his—and our—acceptance of God’s election. It must be immediately recalled that Abraham’s concern with *tsedakah u-mishpat* is in connection with the nations of the world which are to be blessed through him. Indeed, his concern here is that justice be done to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, whom Scripture shortly before described as “exceedingly wicked sinners against the Lord” (Genesis 13:13). Abraham is concerned that justice be done to these people as the due process of law that even they deserve, whether the final verdict be guilt or innocence. His response to his being known-and-chosen by God is to want to imitate in microcosm the way God relates to the whole world in macrocosm. Both God and Abraham are now concerned with the earth and especially with all the peoples in it. Thus Abraham’s concern is that *mishpat* be done. That in itself is an act of justice; he acts as their defense attorney seeking some merit in them. And the very fact that he involves himself in their case, when he owes them nothing, is an act of *tsedakah*. Knowing that he is known by God, Abraham is now in a position to act truly as *imitator Dei*. His being known by God is not only something he enjoys and can celebrate; it is something he can act on.

As *homo revelationis*, Abraham desires to dwell with God in and for the world. Conversely, the desire of *homo spectator* is for absorption into God outside the world; and the desire of *homo faber* is to be God against the world. Only the right relationship with God founds one’s rightful place in the world. And only the acceptance of one’s rightful human place in the world prevents one from intending either absorption into God or the replacement of God.

Finally, in the covenant, the relation of existential *tsedakah* and essential *mishpat* is not only one of originating event and subsequent process. Sometimes, *tsedakah* is subsequent to *mishpat* and not just the origin behind it. *Mishpat*’s world is never so tightly constructed that *tsedakah* cannot on occasion intrude into it. Indeed, the contingency of created existence would be eclipsed if even God’s *mishpat* were to be taken as an impermeable total order, as a system perfect in itself. There always remains the possibility of miracle. *Tsedakah* can be directly experienced at rare times in history/nature (time/space). For a miracle is the unpredictable exception to ordinary, normal order, and it is beneficial to those for whom it is performed. In fact, outside the singular experience of the faithful, illuminated by revelation, a miracle can soon be explained by more mundane categories. Thus the splitting of the Red Sea for Israel was seen by them as the “great hand” (Exodus 14:31) of the Lord. But precluding the presence of God, one could see the act as that of “a strong east wind” (Exodus 14:21). Israel’s redemption from Egyptian slavery illumined by revelation is because “the Lord took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand” (Deuteronomy 26:8). But precluding the presence of God, one could see it as an escape by fugitives: “It was told to the king of Egypt that the people had escaped” (Exodus 14:5).

The election of Israel is assumed to be the greatest intrusion of divine *tsedakah* into the usual order of nature and history.

You have but to inquire about bygone ages that came before you, ever since God created humans on earth, from one end of the heavens to the other: has anything as great as this ever existed or has it ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have and are still alive? Or has God ever so miraculously come to take for

¹⁰ Tell the truth, folks; either you thought that he forgot what his actual point was for this essay, or you forgot. For me, it was both. ☺

Himself one people out of another? (Deuteronomy 4:32-34)

This notion of intrusive *tsedakah*—miraculous grace—became the background for explaining how God can mercifully cancel the inevitable consequences of sin by forgiveness and atonement. For the Rabbis, the world could not be sustained if strict justice (*mishpat as din*) were always maintained consistently by God. And the covenantal community could not be sustained without periodic infusions of grace by those in legal authority, at times ruling “deeper than the limit of the law (*lifnim m’shurat ha-din*).”¹¹ The theological import of all of this is enormous.

Also, in terms of our philosophical retrieval of the biblical doctrine of election, no philosophical reflection can ignore the outlook and findings of its contemporary science. At this juncture in history, the outlook and findings of Quantum Theory can be helpful. For unlike earlier modern science, where a totally interconnected universal causal model was required, Quantum Theory only requires a statistical model. Here phenomena in general, but not each phenomenon, have a causal explanation. Furthermore, here the intrinsic role played by scientific observers themselves makes the total abstraction of scientific objects impossible. Thus Quantum Theory constitutes a physical universe in which the unusual and the subjective are not precluded in principle. And it is the unusual datum plus the integral role of the one for whom it is performed that is the ontological *sine qua non* for a philosophical acceptance of the possibility of miracles. It is not that Quantum Theory “proves” any miracle or even engenders the concept of miracle at all. What it does for us, however, is to present a natural science that does not contradict what revelation teaches about miracles. That is enough for our theology.

¹¹ This halachic principle (which literally means “*within* the line of the law”) allows decisors and judges to make decisions outside the letter of the law, honoring intent rather than literalness.

The Body of Faith

Michael Wyschogrod

Michael Wyschogrod—the Berlin-born, Brooklyn bred, YU-Columbia-City College educated retired University of Houston philosophy professor—has spent a lifetime developing a comprehensive religious philosophy, heavily influenced by the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. He is best known for his book The Body of Faith, a comprehensive interpretation of Judaism in which the following essay originally appeared. Wyschogrod’s thesis is easily summed up: God’s love for the people Israel is free and irrevocable, and through Israel, His love extends to the world as a whole.

Love and Election

- Why does God proceed by means of election, the choosing of one people among the nations as his people?
- Why is he not the father of all nations, calling them to his obedience and offering his love to man, whom he created in his image?
- More fundamentally, why must the concept of nation intrude itself into the relation between God and man?
- Does not God address each individual human being as he stands alone before God?

Because those questions are so fundamental, we must answer them with caution. We must avoid an answer that does too much. Any answer that would demonstrate that what God did was the only thing he could have done or that it was the right thing to do would be too much of an answer. God must not be subject to necessity or to a good not of his own making. He is sovereign and his own master, and must not be judged by standards external to him.

Much of religious apology misunderstands this fundamental point and therefore defeats itself just as it succeeds because it limits God’s sovereignty as it proves that he could not have done anything other than what he did or, more usually, that what he did measures up to the highest standards of morality. Having thus succeeded in providing the best possible reasons for God’s actions, the apologist does not realize that he has subjected God to judgment by criteria other than his free and sovereign will and that, however much he has justified God’s actions, he has infringed his sovereignty and is therefore no longer talking of the biblical God.

We must avoid this sort of justification at all cost and therefore begin our answer to the questions posed by noting that God chose the route of election, and of the election of a biological instead of an ideological people, because this was his free choice. He could have acted otherwise. He could have dispensed completely with election, or he could have constituted the elected group in some other way, and had he done so, we would have praised those choices as we now praise these.

Rarely has any theology come to grips with the contingency that follows from God’s freedom. Christian theology has rarely conceded that God could have decided to save all men without the need for an incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. The vast preponderance of Christian thought makes it seem that given man’s fall, only the sacrifice of God’s only begotten son could have served as atonement for man’s sin. The Christian faith ought to contend that the way of the incarnation was the way chosen by God, though he could have chosen another. Correspondingly, we will assert the

same of the election of Israel, dispensing with all claims of necessity or that this was the best possible course for God to take.

Having said this much, we must also permit the praise of God. There is hardly any literary activity more prevalent in the Bible than the praise of God. The Bible is first and foremost the word of God, in which man is told what God wants him to know. But the Bible is also the word of man as man responds to the word of God. This response takes a number of forms. There is the direct response of those, like Abraham, Moses, and others, whom the Bible reports as being addressed by God and whose responses are reported as part of the dialogue. There is the biblical Wisdom literature most prominent in Proverbs, which, in a sense, is the form that most closely resembles philosophy because it seems to consist of the insights of human experience distilled over the centuries. There is also the praise of God that we find in Psalms as well as many other places in the Bible.

The human encounter with God that is expressed in praise is the one response most difficult for modern man, and particularly for the contemporary Jew, to understand. For post-Auschwitz Jewry, it is the voice of Abraham contesting the justice of the divine decree against the corrupt cities of man that speaks most recognizably of the human condition. There has crept into our consciousness a profound anger at God, and this anger is shared by all Jews, even those who will not permit this anger to become conscious.

Yet we must recognize that there was a time when men in general and Jews in particular were overwhelmed by a deep emotion of gratitude for the wonderful favors bestowed by God. In Psalms, this is rooted in David's unshakable faith in his election and the divine protection that insured triumph over those wishing God's anointed ill. Praise of God is thus rooted in gratitude and wonder at the complexities and beauty of creation.

Most important for our purpose is the recognition that praise does not involve measuring God's creation and conduct by external standards and declaring them good because they live up to those standards. Praise is an act of gratitude that is totally focused on God to whom we are grateful. Gratitude rises in the human soul when an act of love is bestowed that is felt not to be deserved. It is difficult to be grateful for what is owed one. When, however, man is dealt with kindly without deserving it, it is natural for him to be grateful. In gratitude, there is a feeling of loving dependence on the other because gratitude makes it necessary for man to feel his vulnerability, in the absence of which he would not need the favor that has been bestowed on him. Israel must therefore praise God. This will not justify God's election of Israel, but it will enable us to express our wonder and gratitude for the election of Israel.

All this [is] preliminary to our discussion of election, which we will not justify but which we might come to understand somewhat from the standpoint of praise. The question we asked was, Why does God proceed by election rather than by being the impartial father of all peoples? Behind these questions lurks the pain of exclusion. If God elects one individual or group, there is someone else whom he does not elect and that other is left to suffer his exclusion. With exclusion comes envy of the one elected and anger, perhaps even hatred, of the one who has done the exclusion. David's love for God reaches great peaks because he is so deeply grateful for his election, but the modern reader finds it difficult not to have some sympathy for his enemies, whose downfall is so certain because they have not been chosen and have dared to conspire against the elect of God. We begin to feel the pain of exclusion and ask why it was necessary for pain to be caused by love. Would it not have been better for God not to have favored Israel, so as not to hurt the other peoples of the world?

This leads us to think about the wonder of love. Western man has, as we have seen, distinguished between *eros* and *agape*¹. *Eros* is sensual love, the love of man for woman, where jealousy is a possibility. In *eros* the other is a means toward the pleasure of the self, so that *eros* is really self-love. *Agape* is the love of parent for child. Sometimes this love is distorted where children are made into appendages of the parents and used for self-gratification. True *agape* demands nothing in return because it is a love truly directed to the other, to his welfare and prosperity, to what is good for him rather than the pleasure of the one who loves. *Agape* is thus charity in the purest sense but without condescension and any sense of superiority. The love of the Greek world, it has further been said, is *eros*, while that of the Judeo-Christian, *agape*. The question we have posed is thus a question about *agape*. God's love for man is surely *agape* rather than *eros*. How, then, can it exclude? Does a parent who loves one child exclude another? Is not equal love of all children the essence of parental love?

There is something wrong about the distinction between *eros* and *agape*. It resembles the distinction between body and soul. *Eros* seems to be a bodily love and *agape* love of and by the soul. Such a distinction would be valid if the distinction between body and soul were. But in the biblical view, body and soul are aspects of the one being that God created in his image. Human love, correspondingly, must not be bifurcated into the *agape-eros* mold or any similar scheme. There is no doubt that there are imperfect examples of human love, as there are imperfect human beings. But it is simply not true that love as charity applies equally to all and makes no distinctions as to person. This would be conceivable if charitable love were primarily an emotion within the person who loves, with the recipient of the love being a dim image at the periphery of consciousness serving as an occasion for the activation of love.

If this were the case, we would be dealing with an I-It relationship in Buber's sense, hardly the model of true love in charity. Love that is in the realm of the I-Thou is directed toward the other who is encountered in his being and on whom we do not impose our preconceptions. Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or what not. History abounds with example, such fantastic loves directed at abstract creations of the imagination. In the names of these abstractions men have committed the most heinous crime against real, concrete, existing human beings who were not encountered in their reality but seen as members of a demonic species to be destroyed. Both the object of love and that of hate were abstract and unreal, restricted to the imagination of the lonely dreamer who would not turn to the concretely real persons all around him.

Unlike such fantasies, the divine love is concrete. It is a genuine encounter with man in his individuality and must therefore be exclusive. Any real love encounter, if it is more than an example of the love of a class or collectivity, is exclusive because it is genuinely directed to the uniqueness of the other and it therefore follows that each such relationship is different from all others.

But difference is exclusivity because each relationship is different, and I am not included in the relationship of others.

And it also follows that there must be a primacy of relationship. The authentic person is open to

¹ No, not *agape*, but *ah-GAH-pei*, an originally Greek word turned into a theological one, and meaning Christian love as distinct from either the erotic kind or the simple affection variety.

all. When he is with a particular individual, he devotes himself to that person completely, listening with all of his being to the presence of the other. Such listening cannot be a technique that succeeds equally in all cases at all times. The counterfeit of such listening could presumably be standardized and applied with regularity to person after person. But it would then clearly not be a real encounter but a clever imitation of real relationship.

In any true I-Thou encounter, nothing can be controlled, no certainty of result can be preordained. It is for this reason that those who live with the possibility of meeting find that it happens with some and not with others. Instead of lamenting this fact, they pray for the continuing possibility of meeting, while recognizing the inherent exclusivity of those meetings that have happened. There is no denying a dimension of guilt in the knowledge that the primacy of relationship with a few cannot be repeated with many others who thus remain strangers. Even among the small circle of persons with whom there is an ongoing relationship, some are loved more than others because each is who he is and because I am who I am. The only alternative is a remote, inhuman love, directed at universals and abstractions rather than real persons.

Our praise of God expresses our gratitude that he loves man in a human way, directing his love to each one of us individually, and that by so loving he has chosen to share the human fate such love involves. The election of Israel is thus a sign of the humanity of God. Had he so willed it, he could have played a more godly role, refusing favorites and loving all his creatures impartially. His love would then have been a far less vulnerable one because impartiality signifies a certain remoteness, the absence of that consuming passion that is a sign of need of the other. Herein resides the inhumanity of *agape* and the humanity of *eros*. *Agape* demands nothing in return. It asks only to give, never to receive. However noble this sounds at first hearing, it must quickly be realized that it also implies an incredible person of strength. To be able only to give, never to need, never to ask for anything in return for what we give, is a position that truly befits a God. And to need something from the other, to need the body of the other for my satisfaction, is the misery of human being. Human being is need, the state of incompleteness within myself and therefore the longing for what the other can give. The *eros* of Don Juan is therefore a more human condition than the *agape* of the saint who needs nothing and no one and distributes his gifts from the height of his Olympian self-sufficiency.

The truth is that human love is neither *eros* nor *agape*. Both are caricatures because reality is a combination of the two, which are not different kinds of love but aspects of human love with a constantly changing composition of elements. No human love is totally indifferent to the reaction of the other. If the relationship is a human one, if the person loved is not perceived as an object to which things are done but a person to whom one speaks and whose answer one awaits, then the response received must be an important element in the direction of the developing relationship.

This does not mean that a rebuff necessarily results in the termination of concern or even love. It is possible to love—and here is the truth of *agape*—in spite of rebuff or absence of response. But such absence is never a matter of indifference and plays an important role in the relationship because response is always sought, needed, and hoped for. Similarly, there is no erotic relationship without an element of concern. The sexual, even in its most exploiting and objectifying form, reveals a glimmer of gratitude and affection. If totalitarian states find it necessary to repress the sexual, it is because they are dimly aware that the person to whom the sexual is a reality is a person whose humanity has not been totally deposited with the state and who is therefore untrustworthy for the purposes of a system whose presupposition is dehumanization.

All this is not to deny that there are loves in which *agape* predominates and those in which *eros* does. But none is exclusively one or the other because man is created in the image of God as a being constituted by need who gives and also asks to be given in return.

The love with which God has chosen to love man is a love understandable to man. It is therefore a love very much aware of human response. God has thereby made himself vulnerable: he asks for man's response and is hurt when it is not forthcoming.

For the same reason, God's love is not undifferentiated, having the same quality toward all his children. God's love is directed toward who we are. We are confirmed as who we are in our relationship to God. And because God is so deeply directed toward us, because his love is not self-love (in spite of Plato, Neoplatonism, and the tradition flowing from these) but true meeting of the other (and there is an other for God; this is the mystery of creation), there are those whom God loves especially, with whom he has fallen in love, as with Abraham.

There is no other way of expressing this mystery except in these terms. God's relationship to Abraham is truly a falling in love. The biblical text tells us this when it fails to explain the reason for the election of Abraham.

The rabbis, of course, were aware of this omission and perplexed by it. They supplied reasons, making of Abraham the first natural philosopher who saw through the foolishness of the idol worship of his time and reasoned his way to the one God. In the Bible, it is not Abraham who moves toward God, but God who turns to Abraham with an election that is not explained because it is an act of love that requires no explanation. If God continues to love the people of Israel—and it is the faith of Israel that he does—it is because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved. God's anger when Israel is disobedient is the anger of a rejected lover. It is above all jealousy, the jealousy of one deeply in love who is consumed with torment at the knowledge that his beloved seeks the affection of others. To much of philosophical theology, such talk has been an embarrassment in urgent need of demythologization. But theologians must not be more protective of God's dignity than he is of his own because God's true dignity is the sovereignty of his choice for genuine relation with man.

What, now, of those not elected? Those not elected cannot be expected not to be hurt by not being of the seed of Abraham, whom God loves above all others. The Bible depicts clearly the suffering of Esau. The Bible is, after all, the history of Israel and could therefore be expected to be partial to the Jewish cause. And yet, in recounting the blessing of Jacob and the exclusion of Esau, no careful reader can fail to notice that the sympathy shown Esau is greater than that for Jacob. God shows Esau compassion even if Jacob does not. The consolation of the gentiles is the knowledge that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness. The choice, after all, is between a lofty divine love equally distributed to all without recognition of uniqueness and real encounter, which necessarily involves favorites but in which each is unique and addressed as such. If Abraham was especially loved by God, it is because God is a father who does not stand in a legal relationship to his children, which by its nature requires impartiality and objectivity. As a father, God loves his children and knows each one as who he is with his strengths and weaknesses, his virtues and vices.

Because a father is not an impartial judge but a loving parent and because a human father is a human being with his own personality, it is inevitable that he will find himself more compatible with

some of his children than others and, to speak very plainly, that he love some more than others. There is usually great reluctance on the part of parents to admit this, but it is a truth that must not be avoided. And it is also true that a father loves all his children, so that they all know of and feel the love they receive, recognizing that to substitute an impartial judge for a loving father would eliminate the preference for the specially favored but would also deprive all of them of a father.

The mystery of Israel's election thus turns out to be the guarantee of the fatherhood of God toward all peoples, elect and non-elect, Jew and gentile. We must, at the same time, reiterate that none of this amounts to some sort of demonstration of the "necessity" of election in any sense. It can be understood only from the point of view of man's gratitude for the fatherhood of God, since only the invocation of the category of "father" and the divine permission we have to apply this category to God enable us to begin to fathom the mystery of election. When we grasp that the election of Israel flows from the fatherhood that extends to all created in God's image, we find ourselves tied to all men in brotherhood, as Joseph, favored by his human father, ultimately found himself tied to his brothers. And when man contemplates this mystery, that the Eternal One, the creator of heaven and earth, chose to become the father of his creatures instead of remaining self-sufficient unto himself, as is the Absolute of the philosophers, there wells up in man that praise that has become so rare yet remains so natural.

National Election

There still remains the problem of the national election of Israel. Even if we see the election of Abraham as flowing from the fatherhood of God, we can still remain in the darkest of puzzlement in regard to the election of a whole people, the seed of Abraham, unto all eternity. What is the meaning behind the spontaneous emergence of the nation at the moment God enters into romance with Abraham? What is the "great beast" of national existence (to use Simone Weil's phrase) doing in the inner sanctum of man's relationship with God? Is this not properly the domain of the "single one," the man who stands alone before God and is able to hear God only because he has escaped the power of the crowd, which drowns out the voice from above? Finally, and perhaps above all, why a covenant with the carnal instead of the spiritual seed of Abraham? Is it physical relationship that is essential? Are there not those who are Abraham's children in the spirit who are more dear to God than a crass, perhaps unbelieving, Jew who is related to Abraham in the flesh but whose spiritual illumination is quite dim? Are not the real elect the aristocrats of the spirit, who derive from all peoples, cultures, and races?

These are the questions that are hurled at Israel. Most often, they are not real questions because no answer is expected, since none is thought possible. The faith of Israel is dismissed as pre-spiritual, a carnal and early phase of human consciousness destined to be outgrown in the maturation of the race. Christianity's self-understanding as the new Israel of the spirit expresses this conviction and so does, though proceeding from sharply different premises, modern historical scholarship, which is determined to find early and late stages in everything, with the early always inferior to the later.

Against all of these, Israel reaffirms its election in its physical descent from Abraham, a physical bond every Jew who is not totally alienated from his being experiences every day of his life as he moves among men, all of whom are his brothers—in whom he perceives the image of God—but all of whom are not Jews—in whom he perceives a family kinship unique to Jews. It is this that we must try to understand.

The nature of God is spiritual. This is the almost unanimous, and not untrue, wisdom of most religions, East and West. As spirit, God's natural kinship is with the spiritual man, with his soul and mind, which is uniquely capable of grasping the reality of the spiritual God. Man's relationship with God therefore comes to be centered in the spiritual and, more particularly, in the ethical, which is spiritualized by the elimination of law and the substitution of love as the dominant theme.

The difficulty with this spiritualization of the God-man relationship is that it is untrue to man's nature, which is largely carnal. The division of man into the spiritual and the material is itself an act of abstraction that has a limited validity but that must not obscure the basic unity of human existence. This unity must not be conceived as a coupling of the spiritual and the material because any coupling presupposes an original separation, which is simply not warranted. Man is not a coupling of the spiritual and material, but a creature who thinks and runs, grieves and cries, is amused and laughs. He is, in short, what he is: a being with an identity and a world in which he lives.

Here, again, God could have played a godly role, interested in certain features of human existence, the spiritual, but not in others, the material. He could even have assigned man the task of wrenching himself out of the material so as to assume his spiritual identity, which is just what so many religions believe he did. Instead, the God of Israel confirms man as he created him to live in the material cosmos. There is therefore no possibility of a divine requirement for the discarding of a part of human existence. Instead, there is a requirement for the sanctification of human existence in all of its aspects.

Israel's symbol of the covenant is circumcision, a searing of the covenant into the flesh of Israel and not only, or perhaps not even primarily, into its spirit. And that is why God's election is of a carnal people. By electing the seed of Abraham, God creates a people that is in his service in the totality of its human being and not just in its moral and spiritual existence. The domain of the family, the most fundamental and intimate human association, is thereby sanctified, so that obedience to God does not require hate of father and mother.

It is also true that simple, undialectical attachment to the natural can be incompatible with a hearing of the divine command. Abraham is commanded to leave his land, birthplace, and father's house and follow God to a place that he will show him. The man who hears God's word is therefore wrenched away from his natural setting, from the bonds that tie him to his parents, brothers, sisters, and the whole world into which he was born and that gives man his natural security. If the divine command went no further, if it merely instructed him to leave his birthplace and then preach a moral vision or religious discovery, then the natural would have been slain once and for all and Kierkegaard would be right in saying that a real relation with God excludes real relations with human beings. But the divine command does not stop there. After commanding Abraham to leave his father's house, it promises to make a great nation of his seed. The natural is now reinstated, projected into the future instead of rooted primarily in the past, and, above all, sanctified as a natural community. The divine does not, therefore, destroy the natural but confirms it by placing it in its service.

And very much the same is true of the national order. Simone Weil is far from wrong in speaking of society and the nation as the "great beast" to which men sacrifice their individuality, so that they never dream it possible to become a "single one" before God.

No one who has read the prophets of Israel can be unaware of the extent to which Israel's faith fears the arrogance of the collective. But the question is, What to do? Shall the domain of the state be written off as the domain of the Devil, beyond the hope of sanctification, or shall it be seen as the

most difficult challenge of all, which must be won for the holy precisely because of its remoteness from it?

Israel attempts to sanctify national existence in obedience to the divine election, which is a national election. And it is a national election precisely because the nation is most remote from God and is therefore commanded to be the most proximate. To believe that the individual can be lifted out of his nation and brought into relation with God is as illusory as to believe that man's soul can be saved and his body discarded. Just as man is body and soul, so man is an individual and member of a nation. To save him as an individual and to leave the national social order unredeemed is to truncate man and then to believe that this remnant of a human being is the object of salvation.

The national election of Israel is therefore again a sign of God's understanding of the human predicament and the confirmation of and love for that humanity. By sanctifying the nationhood of Israel, God confirms the national order of all peoples and expresses his love for the individual in his national setting and for the nations in their corporate personalities.

In the case of Israel, the relationship that started with Abraham, the individual, soon becomes a relationship with a nation that becomes the elect nation. The promise of salvation is thus not held out to man as an individual but as a member of his nation. It is held out to the complete man and therefore to all nations, without which we have a part rather than all of man. In addition, by taking the national order seriously, redemption of the historical order becomes a possibility. History pertains to nations and if only the individual is real, history is not real. Purely spiritual religions, those that do not hesitate to address only the spiritual in man, do not take history seriously.

This tendency is pronounced in early Christianity, which distanced itself from the political order because its citizenship was in the heavenly city that was not of this world. The salvation that Israel awaits must occur in the historical order, and it therefore is forced to continue to wait as long as that order is unredeemed. Israel cannot believe that in the midst of an unredeemed world there is an island of redemption, the Church, to which men can flee from the sorrows of the world. But this tenacity in its hold on reality flows from God's confirmation of that reality in refusing to exclude from the promise of redemption those structures that the spiritual religions have no hesitation in discarding but that, because they are real, defeat their purely spiritual visions.

We were led into an exploration of Jewish existence as a national family from our discovery that philosophy has played a less central role in Judaism than in Christianity. Judaism, we said, was not first a set of ideas but an existing people on whom commands are imposed and from whom ideas are generated, but whose own being is the existential soil from which everything else emerges. Before we can explore this relationship between soil, or ground, and idea, we must allude to another fundamental reason for the different roles played by philosophy in Judaism and Christianity. Christianity sees before it a completed salvation history. Creation to resurrection constitutes a totality of promise and fulfillment that is available to viewing and therefore to thought. Israel's story is incomplete. It is replete with great peaks and deep disappointments, but it is, above all, incomplete. The redemption implicit in the very first promise to Abraham is still in abeyance. The Exodus, Sinai, the Temple are all peaks and previews of what is in store for Israel and humanity in the fulfillment. But that fulfillment has not yet occurred, and we are therefore dealing with an uncompleted tale whose outcome we know because of our trust in the source of the promise. Nevertheless, however great our trust, we must not confuse promise with fulfillment, especially for man, who lives in time and for whom the future is shrouded in darkness.

Because this is so, the philosophical cannot now be central for Judaism. Philosophy demands a revealed and therefore knowable object that it can investigate. It requires stable categories by means of which it can grasp its object. Philosophy, as a form of knowledge, is therefore most comfortable with the past and least secure with the future, about which it knows little.

Because Judaism—though this is often forgotten—is so much a venture into the future, the mode of knowledge will never be as natural to it as to a faith that is fulfilled. It is by no means a coincidence that Maimonides, the greatest Jewish philosopher, is also the man who had the most profound problems with the resurrection and the messianic idea as a whole. In regard to the resurrection, it is the materiality of it that causes him difficulty. With the Messiah, it is the apocalyptic dimension that must be toned down, so that the future not be made too dissimilar to the past.

All these are expressions of the incompatibility of the philosophic standpoint with a genuinely transformed future whose dissimilarity to the past is a premise of prophetic thinking. A Judaism that remains true to its messianic faith can only place provisional trust in categories of thought derived from an unredeemed world destined to pass away. If the future is decisive, reason must be prepared to see itself transcended by developments that cannot yet be dreamt of. But no reason worthy of itself can be that modest, since it would then be untrue to its essence, which consists in confidence in the power of its illumination. In its own way, reason participates in the illusion of redemption for which Judaism is prepared to hope but the reality of which it is not prepared to proclaim. Because it is therefore still on the way, Judaism cannot easily express itself in the philosophical idiom, much of which is rooted in a metaphysics of completion.

Chosenness: Some Conceptions, Misconceptions, and Comparisons

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The concept of the “chosen people” has been widely misunderstood, by Jews and Gentiles alike. It has, in addition, been one of the focal points of Jewish-Christian dispute, going back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, with Christians claiming to have supplanted the Jews as *Verus Israel* (“the true Israel”), while the Jews continued to regard themselves, and themselves alone, as maintaining Abraham’s special covenantal relationship with God.¹

The concept of chosenness is clearly closely connected or correlative to this concept of covenant (*berit*). What I shall attempt to demonstrate below is that chosenness means neither privilege nor any innate Jewish superiority, whether explicit or implicit. Rather, what the biblical and post-biblical sources emphasize is an internally-directed Jewish responsibility to live in a certain way, based on the Torah, and the promises of divine blessing are conditioned upon Israel’s fulfilling those covenantal responsibilities.²

Because of the centrality of the concept of the Chosen People to much of Jewish religious experience, and because of its having been the focus of so much animus in Jewish-Christian relations over the centuries, I believe that the concept merits serious reconsideration and reevaluation in our day. Besides the obvious historical factors, our generation, which has witnessed both the murder of one-third of the Jewish people in the Holocaust and the renewal of Jewish nationhood in the state of

¹ In Romans 11, Paul employs the imagery of the native (i.e., Jewish) branches broken off of the olive tree, with alien (i.e., Gentile) branches grafted in their place. For interesting Christian and Jewish statements on *Verus Israel*, cf. *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter*, ed. Frank E. Talmage (New York, 1975), Part I.

² Space does not permit citing, let alone explicating, the myriad texts, from the Bible on, asserting or referring to chosenness. The consistent theme, however, is that Israel’s covenantal obligations involve loyalty to God and observance of the Torah’s commandments. Only then does Israel qualify as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:54). Chosenness is thus explicitly correlated to the Torah. In the words of the liturgy, God “has chosen us from all the nations and has given us his Torah”; “You have chosen us from all the nations, you have loved us and desired us, you have raised us above all tongues and have sanctified us by your commandments; you have brought us close to you, our king, to serve you....” The mutual obligations of the covenant are discussed below.

Israel—the poles of Jewish national powerlessness and power—needs to reassess what meaning chosenness can have in our lives as Jews and in our relations with non-Jews in general and Christians in particular.

I single out the Christians here for two reasons without implying in any way that other religious traditions, especially Islam, are less worthy of serious consideration and recognition by Jews.³ Nevertheless, Islam does not specifically posit a concept of chosenness, and the concept of the Chosen People has therefore not been the focal point of Jewish-Islamic dispute, as it has with Christianity. Moreover, whereas in recent decades we have been witness to an increasingly open and frank relationship between Jews and Christians, at least in some parts of the world, the same cannot, regrettably, be said of Jews and Muslims. The unavoidable involvement of religion in the Jewish-Arab dispute, which is primarily national rather than religious per se in nature, and the growth of militant Islamic fundamentalism,⁴ by and large preclude the kind of dialogue between Jews and Muslims to which many Jews and Christians have become accustomed.

This paper attempts “an interpretation” of some dominant themes, and does not intend to present an account of how the concept of the Chosen People is dealt with in Jewish literature and thought, from the Bible down to our own day.

Let me note at this point that while chosenness as a specifically theological notion may well be unique to the Jewish people (and to those Christians who see the Church as somehow supplanting or supplementing the Jews as *Verus Israel*), in a broader sense we find parallels in other cultures. The Jews are not the only nation to see themselves as distinctive and special, as being challenged with exemplary moral tasks or as being obliged to fulfill a unique historic destiny.

The Greeks took understandable pride, however arrogant from our point of view, in their accomplishments, and their regard for the nations they encountered and conquered as *barbaroi*⁵ was not always unwarranted.

Consider, for example, the funeral speech of Pericles (d. 429 B.C.E.) in ancient Athens. As reported by the historian Thucydides in Book II of *The Peloponnesian War*.⁶

Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbors. It

³ Cf. my article, “Christianity and Anti-Semitism: Some Reflections,” in *Forum on the Jewish People, Zionism and Israel*, No. 59, Summer 1986, pp. 53-64. Franz Rosenzweig (Germany, 1886-1929) argued that Christianity is the way for the pagans, but the Jewish people do not need “the way” because they are eternally “with” God. It is one thing for Christians to claim that theirs is the “one way” to God. It is something else for Jews to endorse that claim. I see no reason for Jews to recognize Christianity as the only legitimate or effective way to God for non-Jews, to the exclusion of Islam and other religions.

⁴ Some argue that the term “fundamentalism,” as a Christian technical term, cannot properly be applied to other traditions, in this case Islam. I concede the technical point, but know of no better term to describe the phenomenon.

⁵ The term originally was linguistic, denoting a foreigner who did not speak Greek; later it took on the connotations of someone uncultured, uncivilized, in Psalm 114:1, the Hebrew term *lo’ez*, meaning a non-Hebrew speaker, is translated as *barbaros* in the Septuagint (and in the Vulgate following it). Interestingly, the Aramaic Targum also uses the Greek term here, whereas the Syriac Peshitta retains the Hebrew root.

⁶ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Baltimore, 1954), Book II, Ch. 4, pp. 117-119.

is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority, but of the whole people....This is one point in which, I think, our city deserves to be admired. There are also others....Again, in questions of general good feeling there is a great contrast between us and most other people....We are unique in this....Taking everything together, then, I declare that our city is an education to Greece.

The Romans took over from the Greeks much of this sense of historic superiority, including its corollary notion of a kind of noblesse oblige. As Virgil (70-19 B.C.E.) put it in the *Aeneid* VI:851:

You, Roman, remember to rule the peoples by your power (these being your arts), to impose the way of peace, to spare the conquered, and to put down the proud.

The Jewish notion of chosenness cannot necessarily be translated outside the context of biblical monotheism into pagan Greek and Roman terms. But the pagan mind could, in a sense, go even further than claims of divine election, by believing in the divine descent of the nation.⁷ Aeneas was, after all, the son of Venus and the Trojan Anchises, and Romulus and Remus were the sons of Mars and the priestess Ilia.

Modern nations have not necessarily employed ancient religious terminology and imagery to express their feelings of historic mission and destiny, but how different are the Greek attitude toward the *barbaroi* and the Roman concept of *Pax Romana* from the British imperialism of Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), when he wrote:

Take up the White Man's burden. Send forth the best ye breed. Go, bind your sons to exile.

To serve your captives' need; To wait in heavy harness On fluttered folk and wild—Your new-caught, sullen peoples, Half-devil and half-child.

In this context, one might also consider the 19th-century American doctrine of "Manifest Destiny," or in the 20th century, the Periclean echoes resounding in Woodrow Wilson's call that "the world must be made safe for democracy,"⁸ and again in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address.

These calls differ substantively, in their idealistic spirit and democratic intent, from classical and European imperialism, but they have in common, at least formally, the idea that this particular nation was historically destined to play a greater role and to lead other nations toward universal goals.

Whatever formal similarities may, then, exist between the concept of the Chosen People and the claims of other cultures to national preeminence, there is one clear essential difference. Whether because Jews have, for most of their history, lacked the power to impose their will or religious way of

⁷ Biblical references to Israel as God's son (*ben*) or first-born (*b'chor*) do not imply such a national claim of divine descent, which in any event would contradict the creation story and genealogies of Genesis. The reference in Exodus 4:22 is clearly rhetorical. Moses is told by God to warn Pharaoh—a king claiming divine personal status—that if he does not release "my first-born son Israel," then "I will kill your first-born son." According to Martin Buber, "only an act of divine favor can be meant. For not only can God elevate a person to be His 'son' by an act of divine adoption (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7), He can also make him His 'first-born' (Ps. 89:28), with special duties and privileges—and so likewise His people." Cf. Martin Buber, "The Election of Israel: A Biblical Inquiry," in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1982), p. 84.

⁸ Woodrow Wilson, Address to Congress, April 2, 1917, asking for a declaration of war.

life upon their non-Jewish neighbors,⁹ or whether they found no such impulse mandated in the Torah, the belief in chosenness has rarely, if ever, been translated into domination or coercion of non-Jews.

Moreover, although the medieval poet and philosopher Judah Ha-Levi (1085-1141) proposed what we would categorize as a racial theory to explain the historic anomalies of Jewish national survival and distinctiveness, his theory cannot be considered racist, in the sense of asserting that the Jews should conquer or dominate other groups. In fact, his theory has the opposite intent.¹⁰ It is offered as an attempt to provide a natural-scientific explanation of what Ha-Levi considered to be anomalous but indisputable historic facts, and he emphasized that, on moral and intellectual grounds, there are no differences between Jew and non-Jew.¹¹ Even the appropriation (or, to my way of thinking, misappropriation) of Ha-Levi's theory in later mystical and chasidic thought down to our own day, does not propose racist domination such as we find in Kipling.¹²

As I understand them, therefore, the Jewish sources do not support interpreting chosenness to mean some kind of Jewish racial superiority. Nevertheless, in terms of social-psychology, the notion of spiritual superiority, however inaccurate academically, may have been valuable for the survival of a minority consistently oppressed for some 2,000 years. Whereas, by contrast, black Americans in recent decades have had to overcome the indoctrination of racial inferiority by white American culture, a Jewish spiritual or moral "superiority complex" can only have been reinforced by oppressive and coercive behavior on the part of the majority culture. After all, Jews thought, if the Christians or Muslims really represented religious truth, as they claim, why cannot they persuade us of it, and why do they have to resort to force? The more desperate the oppression, the more the oppressors reinforced the Jewish view that they, the victims, were the true Chosen People, and that the oppressor religions were all the more morally and spiritually bankrupt.

⁹ Exceptional periods, when Jews did have the power to control their neighbors, would include the united monarchy, in the time of David and Solomon, and during the time of the Second Temple, the reign of the Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.E.). Judah Ha-Levi raises the question of whether Jewish meekness is a virtue assumed voluntarily, or whether, given the power, Jews would also kill. Cf. *The Kuzari* 1: 113-115.

¹⁰ Similarly, in the passage cited in note 9 (*Kuzari* 1:113-115) Ha-Levi argues that the Jews, in effect, practice what the Christians and Muslims (who wage wars) preach, namely, meekness. Jewish suffering is essentially voluntary, because by merely uttering a word Jews could escape persecution and convert to Christianity or Islam, whereas a convert to Judaism must undertake to observe all the rigorous responsibilities of Jewish law.

¹¹ Cf. Judah Ha-Levi, *Kuzari* 2:48 and 3:7. For Ha-Levi, the historic anomaly, i.e., that prophecy was limited to only certain people, cannot be explained by the rationalist view (of Sa'adia Ga'on, Rambam, and others) that prophecy is fundamentally a function of reason, since reason is universal. Although I agree with those who argue that Ha-Levi's racial theory is not racist as the term is currently understood (see, e.g., Lippman Bodoff, "Was Yehudah Halevi Racist?," *JUDAISM*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Spring 1989, pp. 174-184), we cannot honestly deny that Ha-Levi's racist theory has the potential for racist misappropriation. See the next note.

¹² A classic case of such misappropriation of Ha-Levi's theory may be found in the first chapter of the *Tanya* ("Teaching") or the *Likkutei Amarim* ("Collected Sayings") of Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813), founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement of chasidism.

However useful a “superiority complex” may therefore have been in social-psychological terms, it is inaccurate and unjustified by the classic Jewish sources of chosenness.

2. Chosenness and Salvation: Inclusive or Exclusive?

The concept of the Chosen People may be clarified if we first attempt to understand what it is not. In this context, the first point which cannot be over-emphasized is that chosenness does not imply any exclusivity of salvation.

For our purposes, the precise conception of salvation—this-worldly or other-worldly, collective or individual, naturalistic or supra-naturalistic—is immaterial. What is significant in this context is that the concept of the Chosen People does not imply that only Jews benefit from such salvation.

Unlike much of classical Christianity, which claims that the only way to salvation is through Christ¹³ (“I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me,” John 14:6), or the Christian Church (*Nulla salus extra ecclesiam* [no salvation outside the church]), the Jews claim no such exclusivity of salvation. To the contrary; the view which became normative and was codified by Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204), is that *chasidei ‘umot ha-’olam yesh la-hem chelek ba-’olam ha-ba’*, “the righteous of the nations of the world have a portion in the world to come.”¹⁴

A study of the pertinent rabbinic sources makes it apparent that, despite the lack of a systematic theory, the criteria applied by the rabbis for salvation were generally moral, not national or partisan¹⁵: wicked Jews are denied, and righteous Gentiles are granted, a portion in the world to come. For example:

Rabbi Eliezer says: None of the Gentiles has a portion in the world to come, as it says: “The wicked will return to the grave (*she’ol*), all the nations forgetful of God” (Ps. 9:18). “The wicked will return to the grave,” these are the wicked of Israel. Rabbi Joshua said to him: Had Scripture said, “The wicked will return to the grave, all the nations,” I would have been silent, and I would have agreed with you. However, Scripture said, “forgetful of God”; there are righteous people among the nations, and they have a portion in the world to come (*yesh tzadikim ba-’umot she-yesh la-hem chelek la-’olam ha-ba’*).¹⁶

¹³ Cf. note 3.

¹⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Repentance* 3:5.

¹⁵ On the other hand, some of the instances of Jews excluded from the world to come, in rabbinic sources as well as in Maimonides’ code, are various heretical categories. Nevertheless, even in such instances, as with the biblical objection to idolatry, whether the offense is primarily theoretical—heterodox belief per se—or practical, i.e., unacceptable behavior resulting from such heterodoxy. Maimonides’ insistence on opinions as well as proper behavior is based on two philosophic considerations. First, he regarded the Torah as an ideal system of divine law leading to the ultimate human perfection, namely, that of the intellect, i.e., knowledge of the truth. For Maimonides, the Torah thus leads to *tikkun ha-nefesh*, the welfare of the soul, and not merely to *tikkun ha-guf*, the welfare of the body. Second, Maimonides’ concept of immortality (i.e., “a portion in the world to come”) is also intellectual, and follows the Aristotelian identity of the subject, and object of intellection in the actual intellect. I do not see how this scheme can be regarded as somehow analogous to “justification by faith” in Pauline Christianity, as some have suggested.

¹⁶ Tosefta, Sanhedrin 13:2, ed. M.S. Zuckermann and Saul Liebermann (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 434. Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105a.

In other words, whereas Rabbi Eliezer believed that wicked Jews and all Gentiles have no portion in the world to come, Rabbi Joshua pointed out that Rabbi Eliezer was misreading the verse in Psalm 9:18. The Psalmist did not refer simply to “all the nations,” but to “all the nations forgetful of God.” The criterion for exclusion from salvation (“a portion in the world to come”) is, therefore, not national; the Gentiles per se are not excluded. The wicked are excluded, be they “the wicked” of Israel or “the nations [=Gentiles] forgetful of God.”

Christianity, with Paul, extended itself beyond the bonds of what it saw as “carnal” Jewish peoplehood and was willing to include in its midst only believers in its message, the new “spiritual Israel,” while excluding from salvation everyone else. Rabbinic Judaism could not possibly include in the Jewish religion people who were not members of the Jewish nation¹⁷, but had no reason to exclude from salvation the righteous of other nations. In short, whereas Christianity is much more inclusive in this world, it is much more exclusive in the next, while Judaism is much more exclusive in this world and inclusive in the next.

As I understand them, both the Jewish and Christian positions on salvation developed logically and consistently, based on radically different presuppositions about reality and readings of Genesis.

In the classical Christian view,¹⁸ because of Adam and Eve’s original sin in the Garden of Eden, all people ever since have been, and are, in a state of sin. Sin is the ultimate and inevitable human condition. No person can therefore be so perfect in his or her deeds, so blameless in his or her behavior as to merit divine salvation or favor. Therefore, with Jesus as Christ, a new opportunity for salvation was presented to people.

The prophet Chavakuk had said: *ve-tzadik be-’emunato yihyeh*, “the righteous will live by his faithfulness” (Hab. 2:4). The term *’emunah* in biblical usage does not mean “faith” in the cognitive sense of “faith” or “belief” in something. Rather, like the English terms “faithfulness” and “fidelity” (as well as the Greek term *pistis*, which the Septuagint uses here), the term indicates trust, loyalty, honesty, much as it does in a marital context. It does not mean to “believe in” (such as the cognitive statement, “I believe in God,” i.e., I acknowledge as true the proposition that there is a God), but to “believe” (as when a person says, “Believe me”), i.e., to trust. The term *’emunah* in this passage means that the righteous person should live faithfully, i.e., he should live a trustworthy, honest life; or, alternatively, that the righteous person should live by his, i.e., God’s, faithfulness (since the pronomial suffix “his” here is unspecified).¹⁹

¹⁷ Consider the telling as well as beautiful words of Ruth to Naomi: “Do not ask me to abandon you, to turn away from you; for wherever you go, will I go, and wherever you lie down, will I lie down; your nation is my nation, and your God is my God” (Ruth 1:16). Had Ruth, the archetypal proselyte in Jewish tradition, not now been a member of the Jewish nation, then the God of Israel would not have been her God.

¹⁸ I am aware of diverse Christian opinions and interpretations on these matters, today and historically. I use the term “classical” to mean the majority or normative views over the centuries, in those churches which consider themselves “Orthodox” (such as the Western Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communions), as well as in significant trends within modern Protestantism. It is obviously not the place of a non-Christian to determine which Christian opinions are “true” or “Orthodox,” as opposed to “heterodox” or “heretical.”

¹⁹ It is precisely in this sense that the term *’emunah* is used in the central daily prayer, the *’Amidah*, where God is described as *mekayyem ’emunato li-shenei ’afar*, “fulfilling his fidelity to mortals.” *’Emunah* is thus often attributed to God. Cf. Psalms 92: 3.

In any case, whatever Chavakuk originally meant here, the verse was taken by Paul, and by subsequent Christian thought (especially that of Martin Luther, for whom this Pauline doctrine was of cardinal importance), in an entirely different direction. As Paul construes it, it is through faith (*pistis*), rather than through deeds, that the righteous person will attain the eternal life of salvation.

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." (Rom. 1: 16-17)

Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for "He who through faith is righteous shall live." (Gal 3:11)²⁰

Classical, i.e., Pauline, Christianity thus develops a logically consistent reading of Genesis. According to this Christian view, salvation, in the sense of justification before God, cannot be merited on the basis of one's deeds; original sin precludes such perfection. Salvation can be attained only by the unmerited grace of God, on the basis of faith in Jesus as Christ.

Recognizing the consistency of the Christian reading does not, however, constitute agreement with its interpretation of Genesis or its understanding of human life.

The Hebrew term for sin is *chet*, from the verb *chata'*, which literally means to miss the mark (as when shooting at a target). As such, it does not indicate a condition or state of being, but acting improperly, in a wrong direction. Therefore, Martin Buber, whose fine insights into the nuances of the Hebrew language permeated his biblical interpretations, suggested that sinning is turning away from, rather than turning toward, the other.

The Christian concept of "original sin" accordingly follows neither from the text of Genesis nor from human nature, as understood Jewishly. Sin is not inevitable. Genesis 4:7 does not state that a person will inevitably or necessarily sin, but only that there is always the opportunity to sin: "If you do not do well, sinfulness lies at the door." The door is always there—but the verse in no way implies the inevitability of passing over that moral threshold. To the contrary, the verse continues to assert that the person can control the sinful impulse: "Its desire is for you, but you can rule over it." At least from a Jewish perspective, this verse cannot be construed as suggesting the doctrine of original sin.

Similarly, Genesis 8:21 also has been construed by Christians as teaching the doctrine of original sin. There are Jewish interpretations which understand "the nature (*yetzer*) of man's heart is evil from his youth (*mi-ne'urav*)" as meaning that man has an evil impulse from the time he is born (cf. Rashi), although they, too, do not thereby conclude that sin is inevitable, let alone caused by Adam and Eve's original sin. A more creative interpretation is offered by Ramban (Moses Nachmanides, 1194-1270), who suggested that the particle *mi* be understood not as "from" but as indicating causation ("on account of"), so that the verse means that "the nature of man's heart is evil on account of his youthfulness," i.e., the impetuous immaturity of the human being.

However the textual difficulties presented by these verses should be resolved, the main point is clear. The stories of Genesis are not usually understood as teaching the notion of original sin. As Martin Buber has put it, we sin not because Adam and Eve sinned, but as they sinned.

Even those Jewish interpretations which do draw some kind of causal connection between what

²⁰ Quotations from the New Testament are according to the Revised Standard Version.

Adam and Eve did and how we behave, do not, and could not, possibly thereby conclude that, because of original sin the “works of the Law” are to be replaced by a system of faith as the basis for salvation.

Christianity’s exclusive view of salvation and Judaism’s inclusive view are both consistent theories based on diametrically opposed readings of the text of Genesis and the human condition. From a Jewish perspective however, the exclusivity of the Christian scheme of salvation is inconsistent with the justice of God, Who cannot be conceived as condemning to damnation the bulk of humanity (who lived before the time of Christianity or who never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel). In the words of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786):

Inasmuch as all men must have been destined by their Creator to attain salvation, no particular religion can be exclusively true....A revelation that claims to be the one and only road to salvation cannot be true, for it is not in harmony with the intent of the all-merciful Creator.²¹

Who, then, are the righteous Gentiles recognized as sharing in the world to come? According to Rambam,²² they are non-Jews who follow what the rabbis called “the seven commandments of the children of Noah.” The seven commandments of the children of Noah, which the rabbis deduce from Genesis, include (1) the prohibition of idolatry, (2) the prohibition of blasphemy, (3) the prohibition of murder, (4) the prohibition of incest and adultery, (5) the prohibition of theft, (6) the prohibition of eating a limb of a living animal, and (7) the requirement to establish a legal system of justice.²³

Regardless of how these laws were specifically deduced by Jewish tradition and whatever their precise meaning and authority, what is clear is that they are consistently regarded not as Jewish laws but as universally applicable. They were given to Adam and Noah, the respective progenitors of all of humankind. Their universal priority to the national laws given to Israel in the Torah is thus both logical and chronological. They are, in basic terms, the laws upon which any just and ethical society must be founded, and they provide the standard to which all people are expected to adhere.

A clear corollary of one’s attitude toward the inclusivity or exclusivity of salvation is one’s attitude toward proselytism. The missionary impulse, which is so central to certain types of Christianity and is so widely resented, if not feared, by many Jews and other non-Christians, is a logically consistent

²¹ Mendelssohn, Letter to Prince Karl-Wilhelm, in *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, ed. Alfred Jospe, pp. 126-127. Cf. the translation by Eva Jospe, *Moses Mendelssohn: Selections From His Writings* (New York, 1975), pp. 116-117.

²² *MT Book of Judges*, Laws of Kings 8:11.

²³ Maimonides’ theory of the Noachide commandments is complicated by the fact that he requires not only that the non-Jew obey the seven commandments, but recognize them as being divine commandments which are taught in the Torah, rather than simply doing them on the basis of his reason and conscience. There are also textual difficulties in this critical passage, and it is not definitely clear whether Rambam stated that a person who accepts the Noachide commandments on the basis of rational decision or conscience “is not one of the righteous Gentiles nor (ve-lo) one of their sages,” a reading followed by many Jewish traditionalists based on the printed editions, or that such a person “is not one of the righteous Gentiles but rather (‘ela) one of their sages,” a reading justified by some manuscripts and followed by many in the academic community. Cf. Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven, 1980), p. 455.

outgrowth of Christian exclusivism. If a person truly believes that he or she has the exclusive keys to salvation, basic human decency and morality, as well as logic, dictate that those keys be shared with, or at least offered to, one's fellow man, who will otherwise perish in damnation.

The missionary impulse, then, need not be at all insidious. Even in the Middle Ages, there were Popes and other Church leaders who recognized that coercive methods are not only wrong in principle but practically counter-productive. And in our post-Holocaust day, many sensitive Christians recognize that overt missionary activity aimed at the Jews is out of the question, theologically, politically, and as a matter of good taste and friendly relations. Some today, for example, argue that the only way to teach the Gospel is to live it, not to preach it. Nevertheless, the logical dilemma for Christians remains. If there is only one way to salvation, how can the Jews not need that way? And if, conversely, the Jews do not need that way, why does anyone else?

Whereas Christian exclusivism logically leads to proselytism, whether active or passive, Jewish inclusivism need not lead in any such direction. In fact, although proselytes are accepted in Judaism, they are generally not actively encouraged (and often are actively discouraged in at least some circles). As Rambam wrote:²⁴

Moses our teacher only bequeathed the Torah and the commandments to Israel...and to those of the other nations who wish to convert....But one may not coerce a person who does not wish it to accept the Torah and the commandments. Moses was commanded prophetically to compel all humans to accept the commandments enjoined on the children of Noah...

Since all the righteous share in salvation, there is no inherent reason for a non-Jew to take on the additional burdens of being a Jew. The non-Jew, as we have seen, must fulfill the seven Noachide commandments; in simple terms, he must be a decent, moral human being. No more is required of him for salvation. The Jew, however, has the obligation to live according to the laws of the Torah, which contains, according to rabbinic tradition, 613 commandments.

According to the logic of Christian exclusivism, when a person accepts Jesus, he thereby gains the key to salvation by faith. But there is no parallel logic in Jewish inclusivism. Since all people who are morally upright can attain salvation, why take on the heavy obligations of the Torah's 613 commandments?

There were times in history when Jews engaged, or are said to have engaged, in active proselytism. However, for much of Jewish history in the past 2,000 years such proselytism was strictly prohibited, and severely punished, in Christian and Islamic countries. Regardless of the particular historical circumstances, there simply is no logical impulse to encourage actively, let alone to seek, proselytes....

The concept of the Chosen People thus does not imply any exclusivity of salvation. To the contrary, it implies no additional benefits, but only additional responsibilities—the regimen of the 613 commandments of the Torah. Proselytes who wish to take on the responsibilities of living according to the Torah may join the Jewish people, but they have no obligation to do so.

Chosenness thus implies no requirement for Jews to impose their will, to dominate or rule the non-Jews (as we saw in the first section of this paper); nor does it provide them with any inherent reason to seek to convert them (as we have seen in the second section of this paper).

²⁴ *MT Book of Judges, Laws of Kings 8:10.*

3. Chosenness: A Mutual Covenant

According to a famous ditty: “How odd of God/To choose the Jews.” To which the response is: “It’s not so odd/The Jews chose God!”

Chosenness is mutual; the chosen people is also the choosing people. There are those who argue that, logically and chronologically, God must have initiated the choice, and that the alternative is to preempt the divine initiative and to force God’s hand, as it were. Even then, God’s choice of Abraham and his descendants would have been meaningless had it not been reciprocated. David Novak proposes such a view in a forthcoming study:²⁵

The election of Israel involves not only the free act of God but, also, the free act of Israel. The fact of election designated by the word “covenant” (*b’rit*) is not a bilateral pact mutually initiated by God and Israel. It is, rather, an historic reality created by God. Nevertheless, this historical reality would have no human meaning without Israel’s free acceptance of it and participation in it.

The covenant could not function in the human world if Israel had not, does not, and will not respond to God’s election of her. However, the response is an acceptance of the prior event of God’s choice. When Israel does not respond—which is all too frequent—God reiterates the choice again and again and again. The covenant is always initiated by God, not by Israel, even when Israel’s reiteration of it comes centuries after the initial covenantal event.

Novak’s position is well reasoned and certainly is in harmony with many of the traditional sources. However, as might be expected, other views may be found in the literature. Let me touch on two radically differing medieval views, both of which reverse the logic and chronology of election.

Judah Ha-Levi, as has been mentioned above, developed a theory that the Jews possess a divine biological faculty enabling them to communicate prophetically with God. Just as animals have faculties of sensation and voluntary locomotion lacking in the vegetable kingdom, and as only the human species, among the entire animal kingdom, possesses the faculty of reason, so there is one nation endowed with this “divine power” (Arabic: *amr ilahi*; Hebrew: *‘inyan ‘elohi*). Adam was created with this faculty, and it was transmitted among certain individuals over the generations down to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, after which it became transmitted to all of Jacob’s children and all their descendants. Ha-Levi makes it clear that this faculty is biological; it is not the Torah which enables the Jews to attain the “divine power.” Rather, because they are born with it, they, and only they, could receive the Torah in divine revelation.

The implication for our purposes, therefore, is simply this. Ha-Levi’s theory means that one cannot argue that God chose Abraham and his progeny. Rather, because only Abraham, and subsequently the Jewish people, were already endowed with the biological capacity to receive divine communication, God could reveal the Torah to them. This is not to say that the Jews first chose God. It means that God could choose only them to receive the Torah because they alone had the prior capacity to receive it. The Jews did not choose God, but it was the Jews who made God’s choice possible.

The approach taken by Rambam in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:63 differs fundamentally from that of Judah Ha-Levi. Nevertheless, we have here an even clearer case for the initiative of the Jews,

²⁵ David Novak, “The Election of Israel: Outline of a Philosophic Analysis,” pp. 3 and 19.

specifically their ancestor Abraham, who, Rambam suggests, arrived at a rational understanding of God through “speculation and reasoning” (Arabic: *nazar wa-istadal*; Hebrew: *‘iyyun u-mofet*):

At those times everyone who claimed to be listened to either claimed, like Abraham, that speculation and reasoning had come to him indicating to him that the world as a whole has a deity, or else he claimed that the spirit of a star or an angel or something similar had descended upon him. Yet that an individual should make a claim to prophecy on the ground that God has spoken to him and sent him on a mission was a thing never heard of prior to Moses.²⁶

In his earlier code, Rambam described Abraham as weaning himself from the prevailing idolatry and contemplating the cosmos, without the benefit of any teacher, until, at the age of 40,

he attained the way of truth and apprehended the right line by his correct reason, and he knew that there is one God who governs the sphere and created everything, and that in all existence there is no God besides Him.²⁷

Whereas Judah Ha-Levi had argued that the philosophical concept of the impersonal “God of Aristotle” is intellectually inferior to, and less existentially compelling than, the biblical concept of the personal “God of Abraham,” Rambam in effect is arguing that the God of Abraham is the God of Aristotle.

Returning now to the question of chosenness, whether or not we find Rambam’s portrait of Abraham as a philosopher or protophilosopher persuasive, the interesting thing is that the initiative is entirely Abraham’s. God did not choose Abraham; rather, Abraham discovered God.²⁸

The issue of chosenness is further complicated by a certain ambivalence in Jewish tradition regarding Israel’s willingness to become God’s covenantal partner. There are two opposing trends in Jewish tradition regarding how the Jews received the Torah. According to the one view, God first offered the Torah to other nations. However, only Israel was ultimately willing to accept the covenantal relationship with God: Moses “took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of

²⁶ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:63, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), p. 153.

²⁷ *MT Book of Knowledge*, Laws of Idolatry 1:3.

²⁸ Interestingly, the Torah does not provide any explicit rationale for God’s choice of Abram (he was not yet Abraham). The bare existential fact is all that we are given, when God commands Abram to leave his homeland and to go “to the country which I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), and in the reaffirmation of that choice in “the covenant between the pieces” (*b’rit bein ha-b’tarim*) in Genesis 15. Subsequently, God again reaffirms his covenant in order “to be your God and of your seed after you” (Gen. 17:8), but why Abraham and his progeny are more worthy than others of divine trust and choice below: “I have known him, in order that he might command his children and his household after him, that they observe the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). Therefore, it is through Abraham that “all of the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The Midrash attempts to fill in where the biblical text is silent, and suggests that Abraham, from the very earliest age, recognized the absurdity of idolatry and acknowledged the one God. While obviously not suggesting that Abraham was a philosopher, the Midrash thus sets the stage for Rambam’s interpretation....After the Exodus, the Israelites could regard the covenant with Abraham as an established historic fact, requiring no further explanation or justification, but obligating them to fulfill its conditions: “Now, if you obey me and observe my covenant, you will be a treasure for me of all the nations” (Exod. 19:5).

the people; they said, ‘Whatever the Lord has spoken we will do and we will obey (*na ‘aseh ve-nishma’*)’ (Exod. 24:7).²⁹ The other traditional view, which is equally authentic, is that God held Mount Sinai over the heads of the Israelites, and threatened to drop it on them if they did not accept the Torah.³⁰

Whether the divine or human partners are seen as having initiated the covenant, and whether Israel is seen as having agreed to the terms of the covenant freely or under coercion, there can be little doubt that the subsequent relationship between God and Israel was seen as a mutual partnership.

The term *b’rit* is etymologically obscure, but at least according to some scholarly opinion it is derived from the root *b-ch-r*, to choose. The *b’rit* thus means that the partners choose to establish an ongoing relationship, and the biblical usages of the term denote what we would call a treaty, alliance, or constitution. The story of the “covenant between the pieces” (*b’rit bein hab’tarim*) in Genesis 15 suggests why the term for establishing or formalizing such a *b’rit* is *karat*, meaning to cut.

The mutuality of the covenantal relationship between Israel and God is expressed, implicitly or explicitly, throughout the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, and perhaps most clearly in Deuteronomy. In its most basic terms, Israel’s responsibility is to be loyal to God alone and to obey the divine law. God, in turn, promises Israel continued protection, national success and prosperity in the Promised Land. In addition, when Israel will receive drastic but deserved punishment, God will not permit his promise to their ancestors to be broken by allowing them to be completely destroyed. They will suffer, but ultimately they have the reassurance that they will be restored to their former position.³¹

God’s promises, however, are conditional upon Israel’s fulfilling its obligations. It is ultimately, therefore, how the Jews behave that will determine their fate. The covenant confers upon them no privilege or license. To the contrary, it imposes upon them heavy responsibilities.

As the sign of the covenant, Abraham is given the commandment of circumcision, which is accordingly called *b’rit milah*, “the covenant of circumcision.”

This is my covenant which you shall observe between me and you and your seed after you: circumcise for yourselves every male. Be circumcised on the flesh of your foreskin, that it become a sign of the covenant between me and you. At the age of eight days shall each male for all your generations be circumcised...so that my covenant may be in your flesh as an eternal covenant. As for any uncircumcised male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has violated my covenant. (Gen. 17:10-14)

²⁹ For the collected rabbinic statements in English translation, cf. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1955), Vol. III, pp. 80-82.

³⁰ Cf. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 3, p. 92.

³¹ Thus, the national *tochechah* (rebuke, warning, admonition) in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 promise dire punishment, but not total destruction, as a consequence of the failure to obey Israel’s covenantal obligations. However, aside from general and perennial questions of theodicy, our generation must reevaluate our understanding of the meaning of the *tochechah*. As Irving Greenberg has pointed out, in the Holocaust Jews suffered calamities far more horrifying and extensive than whatever the Torah threatens for disloyalty to the covenant, as a consequence of their or their parents’ or even their grandparents’ loyalty to it, by identifying, even however minimally, as Jews.

In addition to the play on words here (whoever fails to “cut” the covenant by circumcision will be “cut off”), I think it is particularly significant that the “covenant of circumcision” is established just at the moment when Abraham has been promised progeny that his name and ideas would survive. The promise of national survival, physical and spiritual, is thus inscribed onto the flesh of the organ of procreation.

The “covenant of circumcision” is so fundamental in Judaism that it takes priority over other laws of the Torah, such as the Sabbath. That priority is both logical and chronological. It is chronological because it is the first specifically Jewish commandment (before it there are only the seven Noachide commandments as well as the general commandment to Adam and Eve, to “be fruitful and multiply”). As such, it precedes by several hundred years the commandment to observe the Sabbath, which the Jews received after the Exodus from Egypt, as they entered the Sinai wilderness. The Sabbath, then, is the second “sign” of the covenant:

The children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath for their generations an eternal covenant. It is eternally a sign between me and the children of Israel. (Exod. 31:16-17)

Circumcision is also logically prior to the Sabbath, because it is performed on the male child by virtue of the simple fact of his being a Jew, of his very Jewish identity. It is not dependent, as is the Sabbath, upon any particular subsequent affirmation or observance. One is a Jew, and is marked as such in infancy. The Sabbath, on the other hand, is an obligation consequent upon that prior existential fact.

4. Chosenness and Moral Responsibility

Chosenness cannot legitimately be construed to indicate some kind of privilege or license. It certainly does not mean that Israel, in fact, is better than, or superior to, any other nation. This is most clearly enunciated by the prophet Amos in two passages that, at first glance, appear contradictory.³²

In Amos 9:7 we find God reaffirming human equality; even the Exodus from Egypt is not unique: “Children of Israel, are you not like the children of the Ethiopians to me, says the Lord; have I not brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Crete, and Aram from Kir?” This would seem to contradict Amos’s earlier statement, “Only you have I known among all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2).

The earlier statement, however, does not grant the Jews, in fact or in theory, any superiority. The term *yada’* (know) in biblical usage does not refer to abstract cognitive knowledge, but to an intimate experiential knowledge, which is why the term also means—and is not a “euphemism” for—sexual intercourse.³³

God and Israel have an intimate relationship. This grants to the Jews, however, no special rights or privileges. On the contrary, the verse continues: “Therefore I will inflict upon you all of your transgression.”

³² Cf. Martin Buber’s interesting discussion of this in “The Election of Israel: A Biblical Inquiry,” in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1982), pp. 80-92.

³³ Cf. Genesis 4:1.

It is precisely because of the special, intimate relationship that Israel has with God that it can be held accountable for its wrongdoing. Others may seek to excuse their behavior because they did not realize what they were doing. Israel can make no such excuse; the Jewish people should know better.

Putting it differently, transgression is always inherently wrong. However, for a Jew, who, as Amos suggests, should know better, that transgression is a double wrong, because it is simultaneously a violation of the covenant. Any human being has the basic obligations of the seven commandments of the children of Noah. The Jew has the broader range and higher standard of the 613 commandments of the Torah. The covenant grants no special privileges; it imposes special responsibilities.

This perspective on chosenness can perhaps be understood in terms of the standard that parents apply to their children. When the child comes home from school or play, and the parents see the child has done something wrong, they ask: "You know that's wrong; why did you do it?" To which, if the child doesn't say, "I don't know," he or she often responds: "But everyone was doing it." Typically, then, the parents will reply: "It doesn't matter what everyone else was doing. You are our child, and—having taught you what is correct—we expect more of you."

The point here is not that the child is, in fact, better than the other children. The parents are telling the child that, because they love him or her, and care especially about him or her, they therefore expect more; whatever others may do, they expect their child not to betray their love and trust, but to do what they know is right.

Moral responsibility is the basis of the covenant from its very beginning with Abraham. This is evident not only in the later rabbinic and philosophic literature, but in the biblical literature; and within biblical literature, it is evident not only in the later writings of the prophets, but in the Torah itself.

Consider the fact that the fulfillment of God's covenantal promises to Abraham and his descendants (possession of the land, national victory, success and prosperity, etc.) is conditional on Israel's behavior.

The ethical imperative of the covenant clearly underlies the story in Genesis 18 of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah:

The Lord said, Shall I cover up from Abraham what I am about to do? For Abraham will become a great and mighty nation, through whom all of the nations of the earth will be blessed. I have known him, in order that he might command his children and his household after him, that they observe the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice (*la'asot tzedakah u-mishpat*). (Gen. 18:17-19)

Then Abraham, who later (in Genesis 22) would respond *hineni* ("Here I am") when God called him to sacrifice his son Isaac, protests and argues with God. Noah, it will be recalled, uttered no protest when he was informed of the impending destruction of the whole world. Abraham, by contrast, protests the destruction of a town infamous for the wickedness of most of its citizens:

Forbid it to you, to do such a thing, to kill the righteous together with the wicked, so that it would be the same for the righteous and for the wicked. Forbid it to you. Will not the judge of all the earth do justice? (Gen. 18:25)

What gave Abraham the right to argue with God? Noah had not protested a universal destruction, but now God not only accepts Abraham's challenge, he anticipates it.

In a similar vein, contrast God's acceptance of Abraham's challenge with his response to Job "out of the storm":

Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge...? Where were you when I rounded the earth? (Job 38:2-4)

Why does God resort to an *ad hominem* argument to disqualify Job's challenge, whereas he accepts and meets Abraham's challenge? The answer in both cases, I believe, is that both Noah and Job were righteous, upright men (cf. Genesis 6:9 and Job 1:1), who are described as innocent (*tam, tamim*). However, neither is a member of the Chosen People. Noah, of course, antedates the covenant. In the case of Job, there is no obvious evidence to indicate his precise national background or time, although his country 'Uz and the ethnic-geographic background of the other characters in the book are not Israelite. According to at least one rabbinic tradition, Job was the most righteous (*tzadik*) Gentile who ever lived.³⁴ The ethical dilemmas raised by Noah and especially by Job are not especially Jewish. The problems of evil, injustice and the suffering of the innocent are fundamentally human problems of universal import and application.

Abraham, however, is the founder of the Chosen People; he is not a universal figure, but, rather, is the first person with whom God had the special relationship of covenant. Abraham was the first person of whom God could use the intimate language, "I have known him, etc.," and, in turn, was the first person described as being a lover of God: "You are Israel my servant, Jacob, for I have chosen you, the seed of Abraham my lover" (Isa. 41:8).

The intimacy of the covenant permits, and the higher ethical responsibility of the covenant requires, Abraham to challenge divine injustice. God, as the source of justice, must be just.

5. Chosenness and Holiness

The covenant sets the Jews apart from other nations. They are expected to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*mamleket kohanim v'goy kadosh*), in the words of Exodus 19:6. The Hebrew term *kadosh* (usually translated as "holy") denotes something distinctive, different or special. That is why it is used, for example, as the term for betrothal and marriage (*kiddushin*), where the partners "sanctify" or "hallow" each other most basically by the exclusive nature of their relationship, in which they are "special" to each other and "different" from all others.

The ethical imperative of the covenant requires a sense of being special or distinctive: behavior which may be permitted or tolerated in others is unacceptable in someone special. Therefore, the holiness code begins with the Israelites being told: "You be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2).

Holiness, for example, is the only rationale explicitly and consistently mentioned in the Torah in connection with the system of kashrut (the dietary laws). Although some later Jewish philosophers attempted to explain kashrut naturalistically, alleging that various physical benefits accrue to those who observe it and that the Torah prohibits harmful foods, the Torah makes no such claim. The promise of "lengthening of days," found elsewhere in the Torah, is never mentioned in this context. What the Torah does say is that kashrut serves to distinguish the Jews as a "holy people...."

Not all Jews affirm this concept of distinctiveness. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that diet is an extremely effective social mechanism for ensuring distinctions.

³⁴ Midrash Deuteronomy Rabba 2:4. For the collected rabbinic views in English translation, cf. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 2, pp. 225-242.

It should be clear that the Jewish people are holy only if they obey the laws of the Torah. The holiness must be attained; it is not inherent. Even a theory such as Judah Ha-Levi's, which attributes Jewish distinctiveness to an inhering biological faculty, emphasized that this "divine power" is latent, and can be activated only under certain conditions and by correct behavior.

If, then, the Jews "observe my covenant," they will be holy:

Now, if you obey me and observe my covenant, you will be a treasure for me of all the nations, for the whole earth is mine. You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod. 19:5-6)

Again, ritual holiness fosters a sense of distinctiveness, which, in turn, inculcates the recognition of a special ethical responsibility, a commitment of *noblesse oblige*.

What we would call the ritual and ethical dimensions of the covenant are thus correlative: the ritual promotes the ethical, and the ethical is the foundation and precondition of the ritual. How can the Jew pretend to fulfill the additional, special obligations of the Torah if he does not fulfill the basic ethical requirements expected of all people in the Noachide laws?

In the words of Judah Ha-Levi:

Would that you observed the laws observed by the smallest and least important communities, i.e., of justice, the good way, and acknowledging God's beneficence. For the divine laws cannot be complete until after the social and rational laws are complete...If someone does not uphold these, how can he uphold the sacrifices, Sabbath, circumcision, etc., which reason neither requires nor prohibits? These laws which distinguish Israel are in addition to the rational ones, and through them they have the advantage of the divine power.³⁵

In fact, our very distinction between the ethical and ritual dimensions of the covenant is alien to biblical thought, which recognizes no such dichotomy. Throughout the Torah we find both kinds of commandments interspersed. They are equally commanded by God, and they are commanded together.

What cannot be over-emphasized here is that the ritual-ethical correlation in the covenant is not a later construct or interpretation, whether prophetic, rabbinic, or philosophical. It characterizes the covenant, going back to Abraham (who received both "ethical" imperatives and such "ritual" obligations as circumcision). The correlation is a fundamental feature of the most ritualistic documents in the Torah, in the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus, which epitomizes more than any other section of the Bible Jewish concern for formal, ritual behavior, begins by describing various types of sacrifices to be offered on different occasions and for various offenses. Then, in Leviticus 5:20-26 (in Christian Bibles, Leviticus 6:1-7), the Torah cites for the first time the case of an offense against another person, and stipulates that the guilty party

shall repay the principal amount and add a fifth part to it. He shall pay it to its owner when he realizes his guilt. Then he shall bring to the priest, as his penalty to the Lord, a ram without blemish from the flock, or the equivalent, as a guilt offering.

In other words, the person could not bring his guilt offering to the Lord until he first compensated the person whom he had harmed, adding a 20 percent penalty to the principal owed. Only then,

³⁵ Judah Ha-Levi, *Kuzari* 2:48. In the Hirschfeld translation, this passage is found on p. 112.

when he had righted the ethical wrong, could he begin his ritual atonement before God.

The classical prophets of Israel have often been fundamentally misunderstood, by Jews and non-Jews alike, regarding their attitude toward ritual and the formal Temple cult. What the prophets opposed was not ritual per se; to the contrary, they consistently reaffirmed the need for ritual and the centrality of the Jerusalem Temple in Jewish religious life. What they opposed and sharply condemned were the perversion of ritual and the defilement of the sacred by separating what should be organically correlated, by engaging in the empty forms of ritual, devoid of any ethical content, as if the divine image can be enhanced while human dignity is assaulted.

The same principle, that the ethical dimension is the absolute precondition for the ritual dimension of life, is also basic to the rabbis' approach to religious behavior. In their discussion of the atonement rituals of Yom Kippur, they ruled that

Regarding transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur can atone. Regarding transgressions between a person and his fellow, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until he satisfies his fellow.³⁶

As in Leviticus, we see here that when the transgression is purely ritual, i.e., "between a person and God," and involves no other people, then the atonement is also ritual. However, when the transgression is in the ethical realm, i.e., "between a person and his fellow," then before there can be any ritual atonement, the transgressor must "satisfy (i.e., compensate) his fellow." The ethical atonement must precede, chronologically as well as logically, any ritual atonement. Without that ethical precondition, the ritual is worse than ineffectual; it is a type of magic, an attempt to force natural or divine powers to do our will, without any regard for natural causality or ethical consequences. By itself, ritual is like alchemy; it deludes us into thinking that we can change the baseness of our lives into something precious, that we have been refined, whereas, in fact, we have not changed our ways at all.

6. Chosenness: Externally or Internally Directed

There are Jews today who, like their ancestors in the days of Moses or Isaiah, think that chosenness confers upon them some spiritual or other superiority over non-Jews, and that the ritual component of the covenant somehow exempts them from fulfilling their moral obligations to both Jews and non-Jews. Such abuse has led other Jews to reject the concept of the Chosen People on moral grounds.

Others, like Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), concluded that it is not only the abuse of the concept that renders it objectionable; the concept itself is objectionable. Kaplan regarded the notion that one nation is somehow closer to God than are others to be morally repugnant and theologically bankrupt, as well as fundamentally undemocratic and primitive.

It seems to me, however, that what is objectionable is not the concept of the Chosen People per se, but its externalization. As I understand the classical sources, and have attempted to present them here, chosenness is a concept properly directed internally rather than externally. Chosenness, thus understood, is not a comparative category, externally directed, to compare the Jews individually and collectively with other people and nations. Keep in mind, again, that even such an ardent nationalist

³⁶ Mishnah Yoma, Ch. 8.

as Judah Ha-Levi recognized, in all honesty, that Jews are, in fact, no better ethically and no more intelligent or wiser than any other people.

Rather, chosenness is internally directed. Chosenness does not mean that Jews are better than others. It challenges them to better themselves. It does not mean that they are better than other people, but that they should be better people.

The false notion that the Jewish people possess some unique claim to morality and truth, which would seem to have no basis in empirical fact or the literary sources, led some Jewish thinkers in the 19th century to advocate a “mission theory,” both in the Reform movement and in the Neo-Orthodoxy of Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888). According to the “mission theory,” Jews have a divine mission to go out and teach the rest of humanity the truth of ethical monotheism. This does not contradict what was said earlier about Judaism lacking a logical motive for promoting proselytism, because the mission here was to spread basic and universal ethical monotheism, not Judaism per se, with its additional requirements.

According to this “mission theory” of the Reformers and of their Neo-Orthodox opponent Hirsch, Jews should not seek a separate national Jewish life, nor the restoration of the Jewish people to Zion. The dispersion, rather than being seen as divine punishment (“on account of our sins were we exiled from our land,” in the words of the prayer book), was seen positively, as opening up new fields for the Jewish mission.

This and other externally directed views of chosenness are epitomized by the phrase, *‘or la-goyim*, “a light to the nations,” as if the Jews are in a position to enlighten the rest of the world.

Interestingly enough, however, this phrase, which one hears repeated so often that one might think it is found in the Torah or other biblical books, is not found anywhere in the Bible, and in a sense contradicts what the prophets understood Jewish chosenness to mean.

Jews have neither the right nor the ability to set themselves up as “a light to the nations.” What Isaiah challenges Israel to become is not *‘or la-goyim* but *le-‘or goyim*, “as a light of the nations.” Isaiah’s phrase (cf. Isa. 42:6-7 and 49:6) is not externally directed, that the Jews should be a light to the nations. It is an internally directed challenge: the Jews should conduct their own national life in the promised land of Zion in an exemplary manner, “as a light of the nations,” through a society that is based on justice and truth. Isaiah’s vision neither negates separate Jewish nationhood nor does it send the Jews out to enlighten the non-Jews. It calls for Jewish national life to be exemplary.

Chosenness, thus understood, demands that Jewish distinctiveness be internally directed, in fulfillment of the moral foundation and ethical goal of the Jewish people’s covenant with the God of Israel. In the words of Isaiah:

I the Lord have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and protected you; I have made you as a national covenant, as a light of the nations; To open blind eyes, to bring the prisoner out of the dungeon, and those who dwell in darkness out of prison. (Isa. 42:6-7)

I have made you as a light of the nations, to be my salvation to the end of the earth. (Isa. 49:6)

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Chosenness: Commentary to Exodus 19:5-6

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

Rabbi Hirsch, the 19th century German rabbi who founded neo-Orthodoxy, was a biblical commentator and theologian.

V. 5. *And now* — now you have come hither to the place to which I invited you to enter My service on this Mount....If this is what you really earnestly wish, to obey Me and to carry on the bond and relationship you have started with Me, then the fundamental condition I make is that you become, more than all the nations, *segulah* to Me....[T]he use of this word for the fundamental condition which is demanded of us in our relationship to God indicates that we must become completely and exclusively His possession in every phase of our being, that our whole existence and all our desires be dependent on Him....*For all the earth is mine:* For this relationship you are to bear towards Me is really nothing exceptional, is nothing but the beginning of the return to the normal condition which the world should bear towards Me. The whole of humanity, every nation in the world, really is destined to belong to Me and will be ultimately educated by Me....

V. 6. And it is just for this ultimate destiny of the whole world that you are to become a *mamleket kohanim* and a *goi kadosh* unto Me. *A kingdom of priests:* Each and every individual of you is to become a *kohen*, a priest, inasmuch as he is to allow all his actions to be “regulated” by Me, to take the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven faithfully on his shoulders and become a true *kohen* who by his word and example spreads the knowledge of God and loyalty to Him....And a *Holy Nation*, just as, individually you are to appear priestlike, so is the impression which Israel as a nation is to make on the world to be one of holiness to God. You are to be a unique nation amongst the nations, a nation which does not exist for its own fame, its own greatness, its own glory, but the foundation and glorification of the Kingdom of God on Earth, a nation which is not to seek its greatness in power and might, but in the absolute rule of the Divine Law — the Torah — for that is what *kedushah* is.

[Hirsch, S.R., The Pentateuch: Translation and Commentary Vol. 2, Second Edition, translated into English by Isaac Levy, Pages 250-251. Gateshead. © 1989, Judaica Press, Ltd.]

The Chosen People: An Essay on Exodus 19:5-6

W. Gunther Plaut,

Rabbi Plaut, a 20th century North American Reform theologian and biblical commentator, is editor of The Torah: A Modern Commentary, from which this essay was taken.

“You shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples” (19:5). This promise of special election or chosenness has been a core factor of Jewish life for thousands of years. In times of stress, it was a source of hope and reassurance; Jewish survival might not have been possible without the conviction that Israel was indeed God’s beloved, destined for high purpose and spiritual glory. From this, some have drawn the conclusion that in fact the concept of the Chosen People was essentially a survival mechanism, and that the biblical phrase—whatever it meant in its day—became the foundation for self-exaltation, religious conceit and a false sense of superiority on the part of Jews, as well as a cause for contempt and even hatred on the part of non-Jews. Consequently, so it is held, in an age that decries inequality of every kind, the doctrine of special election has no further place and should forthwith be disavowed. It had its role, but no longer; it was productive, but has become counterproductive. Jews and Gentiles both view it with suspicion.

Even in this negative evaluation, the doctrine of election appears as a factor of surpassing importance. In the theophany as well as in the prophetic books of the Bible it provides the framework of God’s relationship with the people of Israel. God has singled them out—but also makes special demands on them. They will have to conform to a standard set for no other people, and their failure to reach it will have dire consequences....

Israel was to be a holy people, set apart for God’s service. This would entail great happiness as well as deep suffering, hope as well as despair. The privilege conferred on Israel was the privilege of dwelling in the court of the Almighty, always ready for every task, prepared to do God’s bidding. In the biblical text, therefore, the revelation is followed by laws, from the exalted rules of the Decalogue to ordinary regulations governing diverse matters. In the conceptual world of the Torah (as well as post-Torah Judaism), God is served not so much with principles and pronouncements of faith as with *mitzvot*—deeds with which to approach the ineffable Presence as being the God who hears prayers and who protects the “treasured” people.

Jewish understandings of the religious other

Ruth Langer

Ruth Langer received her Ph.D. from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati in 1994 (where she also received rabbinic ordination in 1986). She is associate professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Theology at Boston College, where she is also associate director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning. This article first appeared in Theological Studies in June 2003. In it, she offers an “on one foot” analysis of chosenness as it relates to our understanding of “the other,” including the theological implications of such understanding. She also suggests ways that it may be modified in light of new directions in Jewish-Christian relations. On the surface, it may appear that this article is a bit “off-topic,” but it is not. One way to understand the concepts of chosenness and covenant in Judaism is to understand what Judaism has to say about people who are not Jews. Most of the footnotes are hers, though some are edited and about half from the original article are not included.

Human self-identity begins with the negative definition of “self” as “not other,” spanning from the infantile recognition that parents have independent existences and extending to communal definitions of characteristics or boundaries that place some people “in” and others “out.” We all live in overlapping circles of such communal boundaries, defined by such things as family, geographic proximity, co-workers, ethnicity, and religion. While some of these social structures are informal, others are defined by codified rules determining who is “self” and who is “other.” Religious communities and national communities tend to be the most formal in defining these boundaries. Judaism, as primarily a national/ethnic community, traditionally handles these distinctions through the mechanisms of halachah, of rabbinic legislation. This halachic definition of “self” creates the underpinnings for the more theological expressions of this concept.¹

In my article I offer a preliminary survey of the traditional Jewish halachic definitions of self and other and their theological implications. I also explore some of the attempts to modify these understandings to answer the challenges presented to the traditional conceptions by the modern world. In the course of these discussions, I compare Judaism’s understandings with the Catholic position....However, there is urgent need for more intensive and serious scholarly research on this question before a more comprehensive answer can be presented. Although a few books and many

¹ This distinction between halachah and more theological modes overlaps but does not totally correspond to a dichotomy between the work of canon law and official church bodies speaking through apostolic authority on the one hand and the work of theologians on the other. Official statements of the Church often directly address theological issues, blending these modes of thought, but rabbinic halachic pronouncements rarely do. However, these same rabbis, speaking or writing in different modes (that carry less authority) may well concern themselves with theology. This halachic/theological definition also stands in significant tension with the contemporary sociological use of the term “identity.” Sociologists begin with the self-perception and self-definition of the individual based on his or her own experiences, memories and social networks, whatever they may be. The halachic/theological identity expresses an ideal that often counters the trends that sociologists document. The social sciences approach is unproductive for a theologically based, norm oriented discussion grounded in how Jews have understood self and other through their history.

articles have appeared in recent years, no one yet has seriously investigated the full range of medieval halachic rulings about permitted and restricted interactions with the Christian and Muslim worlds, particularly with an eye to understanding their underlying theological positions. Such work is a necessary preliminary for the task that many engaged in Jewish-Christian relations now recognize as urgent: the building of a Jewish theology of the religious other that will respond to the theological revolution in the Christian understanding of Judaism led by the Catholic Church.²

WHO IS A JEW?

At its most fundamental level, the definition of “Jew” is neither religious nor theological, but ethnic.³ This point is critical for understanding traditional Jewish understandings of self and other. Joseph Dan argues convincingly that the very concepts of religion and theology as the academy understands them today are Christian concepts, derived from Christianity’s early accommodations with Greco-Roman culture, resulting in a clear differentiation between the realms of church and state and between theology and philosophy. Judaism (and Islam), in contrast, have no such conceptual differentiation between the profane and the religious realms. Instead, these are cultures in which everything ideally participates in the holy, including the most mundane activities. Consequently, nothing lies outside the realm of religion; divinely ordained law governs literally every aspect of life, from the privacy of the home, to the marketplace, to the government, to matters of worship. Thus, the Jewish understanding of the non-Jew builds from an understanding of the self as a member of this holy community in contrast with an outside world that lives according to a different (or non-existent) relationship to God.⁴ Modernity has challenged many aspects of this traditional identity, but one cannot understand this challenge without understanding its predecessors.

Modern scholarship also accepts fairly unanimously that per se Judaism is not so much the religion of or contained in the written Bible as it is the religion that lives by the...Torah, as [it is] interpreted

² *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*, issued in September 2000 by the Jewish Scholars Group, sponsored by the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, and its accompanying book, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Oxford: Westview, 2000) was a first attempt at such an understanding.

³ The word “Jew” derives primarily from the Greco-Roman designation of the inhabitants of Judaea, the designation of the land of Israel derived from the larger tribe, Judah (the other being Benjamin), of the surviving southern kingdom. Although the term has an authentic Hebrew origin—*yehudi*, meaning “Judahite”—it is never the preferred term of Jewish self-designation in its own languages of learning, Hebrew and Aramaic. There, following biblical usage, the people are most commonly designated individually and collectively as Israel, *Yisra’el*, or the children or people of Israel, *B’nei Yisra’el* or *’Am Yisra’el*. However, it is common in English to reserve “Israelite” for the people of the Hebrew Bible, and “Jew” for the people of the last two millennia. The Hebrew cognate for “Judaism,” as the abstract term for the religion of these people, appears first in medieval philosophical Hebrew, and even there it applies more generally to all aspects of Jewish culture. Note that it is only in this period that Hebrew develops a term for the concept of religion, adapting the meaning of the late biblical *dat* (meaning there, “law,” and appearing only in *Esther*, *Ezra*, and *Daniel*). The separation of Jewish religion (Judaism) from other aspects of culture is a product of modernity and the integration of Jews into Western societies (largely on its terms).

⁴ Joseph Dan, *On Sanctity: Religion, Ethics, and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), especially chap. 1, “Sanctity and Sanctification: Between Judaism and Christianity.”

by the traditions of the rabbinic “Oral Torah.” The Oral Torah is the ongoing process of interpretation and application of the received written text—embedded in which are infinite possibilities of meaning—so as to sanctify all aspects of life. As such, biblical conceptions are formative, but not always directly normative.... From the latter centuries of the first millennium C.E., the Talmud and texts based upon it have been much more determinative of actual Jewish interactions with the non-Jewish world than has been the Bible itself. Hence, our discussion here will refer only obliquely to the biblical period.

By the emergence of rabbinic Judaism in the late Second Temple period, anyone born to a Jewish mother was automatically considered a Jew..., a citizen of *‘Am Yisra’el*, the people Israel, and a participant in Israel’s covenant with God. (9)

At its most fundamental level, this is an irrevocable status. “A Jew, even if he has sinned, is [still] a Jew.”⁵ There are innumerable longer and shorter definitions of what it means to be a good Jew, discussing fundamentals of faith and behavior, but anyone meeting this ethnic/familial/national distinction is, by definition, legally a Jew.⁶ At the same time, there are certain actions that communities at one time or another have considered such serious betrayals that they have banned or excommunicated the perpetrators. In today’s world, functionally more than officially, one is considered no longer a Jew if one willingly⁷ and positively affiliates with another religion. Formal declaration of the fundamental tenets of Islam, baptism into Christianity (even acceptance of Jesus as Messiah as in Jews for Jesus or Messianic Judaism), or active participation in any other religion or religious cult all place one sociologically and, according to some, halachically, outside of the people of Israel. In other words, one need not accept any element of a creedal statement of Judaism,⁸ but one may not affirm the cardinal beliefs of other religious communities where they contradict Jewish teachings.

Examination of the requirements for one who wishes to become a Jew through conversion points

⁵ BT Sanhedrin 44a, cited with reference to apostates explicitly in numerous medieval sources. In times of forced (or highly encouraged) baptisms, this was an important internal principle, both regarding the ability of Jews to renounce their baptism and return, and regarding the legal status of their familial and business obligations.

⁶ This is somewhat parallel to defining Christian identity solely by baptism. Renunciation of baptism, from a Christian perspective, is similarly problematic. However, there is no ritual that makes the child of Jewish parents a Jew. Ritually circumcising a baby boy marks only his entry into God’s covenant with Abraham. Failure to do so places his parents and him (upon his majority) in a situation of sin, but does not exclude him from the community. It is important to note, however, that, at the level of popular religion, circumcision does “make him into a Jew.”

⁷ Responses historically have been different to those who converted to avoid persecution, confiscation of property, or expulsion (all recurring tropes of the Jewish experience in Christian Europe) than to those who converted out of conviction. Rarely is the first group understood to have lost their status as full members of the Jewish community.

⁸ Judaism has no official creed. Various creedal statements have been formulated over the centuries, the most well-known of which is the Thirteen Principles of Faith crafted by Moses Maimonides in the 12th century. It is found in declaratory form (I believe with perfect faith in ...) and in poetic renditions for daily recitation in traditional prayer books, but it is not among the obligatory prayers.

to a requirement of stricter conformance with communal ideals. In the traditional world,⁹ this entails a process of learning to live like a Jew and committing oneself to an observant lifestyle. The ritual of conversion begins with a formal examination of one's commitment to live a life according to the Torah and its commandments. While this does not directly address one's theology, it is hard to accept the obligations of Torah observance without also accepting, in one way or another, their divine source. Liberal conversion curricula are less focused on dietary laws and Sabbath observance, devoting instead more energy to general knowledge about Judaism, including theology and history. Thus, while failure to live the life of a "good" Jew does not change the legal status of a born Jew, joining the community does require affirmation of cardinal theological concepts. After examination by the rabbinical court, the actual ritual of conversion involves ritual circumcision (for males—and here it is a critical part of "making a Jew"), immersion in the ritual bath (*mikveh*), and taking on a Jewish identity through a Hebrew name. This name consists of a given name of choice, but instead of the born-Jew's identification as the child of his or her birth parents, the convert is now known as a child of Abraham our father and Sarah our mother, the primeval parents of the nation. Thus, one becomes part of the people Israel, a sort of legal adoption or naturalization.

We know now that in pre-Constantinian late antiquity and even after, Judaism was extremely attractive to a substantial percentage of the Greco-Roman world....On the other hand, the Mishnah (ca. 200 C.E.) contains no direct dedicated discussion of proselytism or conversion, suggesting that the topic was not of central concern. With the Christianization of the Roman empire (and later under Islamic rule also), it became dangerous for Jews to proselytize. Early rabbinic texts teach the obligation to discourage potential converts, accepting candidates only if they demonstrate sincerity by their persistence....

In other words, converts are welcome, but only if they willingly and knowingly accept the implications of their decisions....

THE NON-JEWISH WORLD THROUGH TRADITIONAL JEWISH EYES

In the view of the Bible and consequently in subsequent Jewish literature, the world consists first of "us," Israel, and then of "them," everyone else, the nations (*goyim*). These categories are mutually exclusive and are expected to remain so for the foreseeable future. In the biblical world, these nations were uniformly idolatrous. While the Bible may grant these nations some elements of distinct identities based on their historical political and military interactions with Israel, theologically they are all total outsiders, uniform in their failure to recognize Israel's God. Struggles to wean Israelites from the attractions of idolatrous worship...fill large sections of the historical narrative of

⁹ "Orthodox," "Conservative," "Reform," etc., are modern designations, arising only in the mid-19th century. While non-Orthodox groups do have some degree of institutional identity through their various rabbinic and congregational organizations and seminaries, the Orthodox world is diverse and without central institutions. For our purposes here, it is generally more useful to designate the ends of the spectrum of contemporary Judaism as "traditional," referring to those groups who see themselves in total continuity with 2000 years of rabbinic Judaism, and "liberal," referring to those groups who do not accept the authority of this system in part or in full. Thus, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, as well as parts of the Conservative world can be considered "liberal" (and new groups such as Renewal, New Age, Humanistic Judaism) while the rest from the more conservative end of the Conservative Movement through the ultra-Orthodox and chasidic may be termed "traditional."

the Bible and provide fuel for prophetic ire. But the biblical command [against idolatry] is clear....

The rabbis of the Talmud understood that, during the Second Temple period, Jews had ceased to be tempted by idolatry.¹⁰ However, they were also very aware that much of their contemporary surrounding cultures' ritual practices, many aspects of which were very attractive to many Jews, still met the Bible's definition of idolatry. The rabbis absolutely prohibited any interaction with Gentiles that might involve a Jew in idolatry, even indirectly. They prohibited Jews not only from directly and deliberately practicing idolatry themselves, but also even from accidentally behaving in any way that might be interpreted as the practice of idolatry¹¹ or from indirectly causing a non-Jew to perform an act of idolatry.¹² The rabbis wanted to create significant barriers to social and economic interaction between Jews and non-Jews, idealizing and intensifying their sense that Israel, for self-preservation, needed to stand apart.¹³ Although rabbinic influence in these areas may have only gradually shaped actual Jewish life, increasing religious, political, and economic marginalization of Jews by Christian rulers may well have helped Jews to accept this rabbinic view of their ideal relationship to the world. In other words, the available tradition became a way of understanding and justifying an unpleasant reality.

On the other hand, the economic health of the Jewish community, also a rabbinic concern (as part of the sanctification of all aspects of life already discussed), demanded that Jews be able to function within the greater societies in which they lived. The rabbis were cognizant that if their interpretations of Torah became overly restrictive, to the point that people could not possibly prosper, Torah would no longer be a source of life, contradicting the meta-halachic principle derived from Deuteronomy 30:15 that a choice to live by Torah must be a choice that promotes life. Thus, theoretical theological positions and reality exist in an acknowledged tension that generates creative applications of (biblical) principles so as to ameliorate Torah's restrictions. In our case, almost from the beginning, while establishing firm restrictions on dealings with idolaters, the rabbis find ways to exclude the Gentiles among whom they live from this category, particularly where it affected the economic life of the Jewish community. The theological position never really changes: traditional halachah retains a rather broad definition of "idolatrous" religious practices in which Jews may not

¹⁰ BT Yoma 69b and parallels. This assertion is hard to support, except from the lack of diatribes against Jewish idolatry in the Second Temple period. See "Idolatry," Encyclopaedia Judaica.

¹¹ For instance, the Mishnah prohibits entering a place—a city or a part of a city—in which there is idolatry (Avodah Zara 1:4); the talmudic comment on this warns against any temptation to bend over, even to remove a splinter from one's foot, to take a drink of water, or to pick up spilled coins, in the presence of an idol, lest it appear that one is bowing to it (BT Avodah Zara 12a).

¹² Classic examples of this include the prohibition on doing business with Gentiles on the days prior to their festivals, lest they give thanks to their gods on their festival for their profits (Mishnah Avodah Zara 1:1-3) and a prohibition on business dealings that might generate an oath in which the pagan invokes his gods (BT Bechorot 2b; BT Sanhedrin 63b).

¹³ Archeological evidence from the Land of Israel as well as non-Jewish literary evidence suggests that this was more a rabbinic ideal than the social reality. Current scholarship suggests that Jews and Romans, and later, Jews and Christians mixed fairly freely into at least the fourth century. See, for instance, the summary of evidence in Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1999), especially his introduction.

participate in any way. However, the rabbis come to understand many Gentile religious practices as permitted, i.e., not idolatrous, for the Gentiles themselves, thus easing the restrictions on at least economic relationships between Jew and Gentile.

NON-JEWS AS NOAHIDES

Their interpretation of the Bible also led the rabbis to another, potentially more positive, understanding of the non-Jew. According to Genesis, all humanity is descended not just from Adam and Eve, but more specifically, from Noah and his sons. Therefore, all humanity, Jews and non-Jews, are of common descent, biologically (and hence spiritually) distinguished from any other creation by their creation in the divine image. The rabbis understood that God had communicated a specific set of expectations to this pre-Israelite humanity, expectations that hold for all its descendents. The nations (*goyim*) fulfill God's will and are considered righteous when they accept what the rabbis term the seven Noahide laws. Israel's distinctiveness within this humanity consists in the fact that first under Abraham and then under Moses, she received further promises and covenants from God, making her responsible for a more complex and demanding set of responsibilities, conceptualized as 613 commandments. Israel's chosenness is thus not a chosenness for reward or special salvation, but a chosenness for special, loving, service to God...

David Novak points out that this tradition represents a new situation in which there is no longer an intermediate status, like the Second Temple period "god-fearer" or "resident stranger" (*ger toshav*), between Jew and Gentile. Jews are subject to all of Torah; Gentiles are subject to this shorter and older list of commandments. Jews and Gentiles are differently commanded in their paths to holiness.¹⁴

How can we understand this concept? It is critical to state here the obvious: the concept of Noahide laws operates according to the most fundamental theological category of rabbinic Judaism and applies this *modus operandi* to the rest of the world. This is a functional equivalent to the Christian assertion that all people, even if they do not know it, are saved only through Christ—Christianity's fundamental theological category.

For Jews, proper behavior before God is defined first and foremost by the terms of Israel's covenant with God, the Torah. The terms of that covenant are spelled out in the details of the mitzvot, given by God and ideally obeyed from a love of God. These commandments structure an individual and communal existence in which God is a partner; the parameters of the resultant culture set the terms of Jewish theological discourse. Because God gave the Torah specifically to Israel and not to the rest of the world, Judaism cannot suggest that God wants the rest of the world to be bound by all its terms. However, God's pre-Sinai demands of humanity did contain a shorter list of commandments, which include prohibitions of the cardinal sins of murder, sexual immorality [meaning incest and adultery], and idolatry.¹⁵ These, then, set the standard of proper behavior, the mitzvot, for the rest of humanity—and Judaism easily finds such legal directives in the teachings of most world religions. Thus, the traditional Jewish view of the non-Jew emerges from the categories

¹⁴ Novak, Image 25-34. Novak's historical reconstruction of the emergence of this concept is inconsistent with the understanding of...others that the real separation of the communities only occurred in the third or fourth centuries, a date not inconsistent with the redaction of the Tosefta text.

¹⁵ All other commandments are negotiable in order to save a human life.

of Judaism's own understanding of its relationship with God. To pre-modern Jews, this understanding of the world was self-evident and usually subconscious. It is only in our times that we can question whether the conceptual categories framing the Noahhite laws impose a cultural construct that is incomprehensible or inappropriate for our non-Jewish neighbors. However, these laws remain a critical part of Jewish heritage. The challenge is to reinterpret them today.

From an internal Jewish perspective, these Noahhite laws had the practical effect of creating a yardstick by which to categorize the nations and assess the degree of possible Jewish co-existence with them. People who accepted upon themselves these commandments were *ipso facto* righteous and their communities civilized. This created the possibility of economic and political cooperation as well as, possibly, cultural exchange and dialogue. Most Gentiles with whom Jews lived easily met four of these requirements. They had governments with a system of justice; they considered murder, robbery, and sexual immorality to be criminal activities. More critical were the questions of idolatry and its attendant crimes of blaspheming God and making offerings from living animals.

As Novak points out, there are two ways of understanding the Noahhite laws. Either they are a system that Jews use for governing other nations, or they represent a philosophical-theological ideal that nations should fulfill of their own choice. Obviously, there have been very few occasions in the past two millennia in which the first was anything more than a theoretical consideration, as Jews were not a sovereign nation from the Roman conquest until 1948, and even the contemporary state of Israel is fundamentally a secular state, governed by religious law only on questions of personal status for Jews....Thus, in any practical, non-eschatological terms, these laws need to be considered under the second category, as something akin to natural law.¹⁶

But this concept did have a practical effect. In their centuries living as a minority group, where economic issues were concerned, Jews were able to overcome the halachic prohibitions against interacting with idolaters by understanding their neighbors to be operating within categories permitted to Noahhides. The talmudic rabbis themselves understood pagan Romans to be merely participants in ancestral custom, and not actual believers when participating in ostensibly idolatrous rites. Because they were understood to intend worship of God through these rites, they were not true idolaters.¹⁷ Current state of the evidence does not allow us to determine whether rabbinic Judaism developed a more specific theological response to the increasingly dominant Christianity. Rabbinic texts consistently present the Byzantine Empire as "Rome," making no distinction based on religion. The Gentile nature of Pauline Christianity, the development of Trinitarian theology, particularly with the concomitant emergence of a rich iconography, made it difficult for Jews to accept Christians as monotheists and non-idolaters. Jews probably felt no need to develop a new

¹⁶ Novak develops this theme in detail in his *Natural Law in Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University, 1998) especially chap. 6, "Noahhite Law and Human Personhood," 149-73.

¹⁷ Novak, *Image* 124-29. There is no question that this category applies to Christians and Muslims, the peoples with whom Jews have had the most significant interactions historically. Asian religions, with the exception of some forms of Buddhism, potentially provide much deeper challenges because of their polytheism and idolatry. It is likely that were significant centers of Jewish civilization to come to have regular contact with adherents of these traditions, ways would be found to define them as Noahhides, too.

category to accommodate Christian reality.¹⁸

The Jewish encounter with Islam's radical monotheism probably created opportunity for the expansion and increased importance of the concept of the Noahhides. In the Muslim world, from Persia to Spain, Jewish cultural interactions with their Muslim neighbors reached enormous heights. The coincidence that the administrative center of the Muslim world moved to Baghdad in 762, near the leading rabbinic academies dedicated to study and teaching of talmudic law, contributed greatly to the world-wide dominance of the now codified Babylonian Talmud's understandings of Judaism, including its teachings about the Noahhides and idolatry.

As Jews in medieval Europe gained in intellectual sophistication and simultaneously began to interpret these talmudic traditions to fit their world, leading rabbis confronted the challenge presented by Christianity.¹⁹ On the surface, it remained obvious that Christianity was idolatrous. But it was an economic and social necessity that Jews in Europe be able to do business with Christians without concern that Jews might cause Christians to perform idolatrous actions forbidden to them as Noahhides. Therefore, acting on the principle that Torah cannot mean to force people into abject poverty and that it was their mandate to find new interpretations, leading rabbis of the 12th century and later sought a new understanding of Christianity that would circumvent talmudic restrictions.²⁰ Rabbenu Tam taught that Christian religious imagery was not itself an object of worship, and that prayers directed to saints or even the Trinity were ultimately really directed to God—just in a mediated fashion that, while forbidden to Jews, could be allowed for Gentiles. Therefore, causing someone to swear an oath invoking these names did not constitute the forbidden act of indirectly encouraging idolatry.²¹ As oaths were a central aspect of medieval business practice, this ruling had

¹⁸ A full exploration of this statement requires understanding the complex interactions between Jews and Christians in the first three or four centuries of their evolutions into mature religious systems. Undoubtedly, they did influence one another, positively and negatively, and we know that, on the one hand, there was sufficient social and cultural intermingling to elicit strident opposition from both the rabbis and persons such as John Chrysostom, and, on the other hand, significant scholarly interchanges by men such as Origen and his rabbinic contemporaries. However, theological understandings of the “other” do not always play out on the street, for better or for worse.

¹⁹ Literary records from the Rhineland indicate that serious engagement with talmudic traditions began there at the earliest in the tenth century—and these records indicate a reasonable struggle against the Babylonian geonic authorities who stood behind the Talmud. These schools dominated Christian Europe until the massacres of these communities in the First Crusade. A leading student of these schools, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi, d. 1105) had fortuitously founded his own school in northern France, in Troyes, a generation earlier. His grandsons began the Tosafist movement which sought to resolve contradictions between talmudic teachings and actual European practice, including the rulings which cast Christians into the category of idolaters.

²⁰ On the Tosafist methodology on this question, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Progress and Tradition in Medieval Ashkenaz,” *Jewish History* 14 (2000) 300. It must also be asked to what extent Jews transferred to Christian Europe patterns of interaction they had come to cherish in the Muslim empire. [FYI: Kanarfogel is rabbi of Congregation Beth Aaron here in Teaneck, in addition to being a prominent member of the Stern College/YU faculty.]

²¹ Tosafot, BT Sanhedrin 63b, s.v. “asur” and parallels. See the discussion of this passage in Novak, *Image* 130-35; and *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* 42-53.

significant economic implications in a world where Jewish sources of income were increasingly restricted by church (or church-encouraged) policies. This ruling also created the foundation for even more open acceptance of Christians as full, moral, law-abiding Noahhides in later medieval thought.²²

Up to this point, the categories I have discussed do not distinguish, in theory, between one “nation” and another. However, some influential sages do acknowledge positively both Islam’s pure monotheism and Christianity’s use of the Old Testament. Maimonides (d. 1205, Cairo) taught in a passage censored by the Church because it begins by discounting any chance that Jesus was the Messiah:

All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite who came after him, only served to clear the way for the king Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord....Thus the Messianic hope, the Torah and the commandments have become familiar topics...[among] many peoples uncircumcised of heart and flesh.²³

Thus, Maimonides understood that God sent Jesus (and Muhammad) as part of the preparation for the Messianic age, the period of salvation in which righteous Noahhides would participate.

To balance this survey, brief mention must be made of the fact that, where Christian censorship allowed, Jewish portrayal of Christians and Christianity (and to a lesser extent Muslims) was overwhelmingly negative, including the occasional, mostly passing, mentions in the liturgy. This arose as a response to living in a world where the Christian Church marginalized, denigrated and persecuted Jews, to the point of expulsions, massacres, limitations on livelihood, and constant pressure to convert. There was no incentive for pre-modern Jews in Christian lands to develop a positive theology of the religious other....

JEWISH ESCHATOLOGY AND THE NON-JEW

The...fundamental question by which...much of Christian teaching judges the religious “other” is: “Does that religion’s structures and beliefs create the conditions for the salvation of its adherents?” As we have seen, traditional Judaism’s fundamental question is instead: “Does the religion’s structures allow its members to fulfill God’s commandments, the Noahhide laws?” If so, and if the adherents of such a religion follow its teachings, then they are among the *chasidei ‘umot ha’olam* (the righteous/saintly of the nations of the world)²⁴ i.e., they are good, moral human beings before God. Consequently, (1) we can live together productively in this world; and less importantly, (2) the righteous, Jew and non-Jew, can expect to have a “share in the world to come.” This, translated into Christian terminology, means that righteous Noahhides will be saved.²⁵ There is, thus, no necessary

²² Menahem Ha-Meiri acknowledges that Christian acceptance upon themselves of the obligation to follow additional commandments of Torah beyond the Noahhide laws is legitimate positive religious expression.

²³ MT Law of Kings, chap. 11, end. See Novak, *Images* 134-42 who discusses all the relevant Maimonidean texts.

²⁴ Those non-Jews who helped save Jews during the Holocaust are celebrated officially in Israel today as “righteous Gentiles.”

²⁵ Because of its heavy Christian overtones, English discourse about Jewish eschatology tends to avoid the word “save” and its cognates, substituting “redeem” and its cognates. Hebrew does employ at least three separate terms for this concept, the roots *Y-SH-’* (from which comes the name *Yehoshua*, Joshua, and its

connection between Israel's chosen status and salvation, although most theories about the nature of salvation do visualize it in Judeocentric terms.

There is no single understanding of salvation in Judaism. Neil Gillman succinctly summarizes one classic view as follows:

... that at the end of days, the dead will be resurrected and come before God to account for their lives on earth, that the righteous will be rewarded and the evil punished; that Jews, free from the yoke of the exile, will return to their homeland, rebuild it, and become masters of their own destiny; that they will rebuild the Temple and reinstitute the Temple cult; that the nations of the world will flock to study Torah with the Jewish people; that peace and justice will rule; that “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Isaiah 11:6); and that all people will come to know and worship the God of Israel. Finally, this entire scenario will be brought to pass through the initiative of a charismatic or quasi-divine figure called the Messiah (literally, “the anointed one”).²⁶

Gillman does not mention “the world to come,” likely because rabbinic texts use two discrete sets of language and their point of overlap is ambiguous. The Messiah will come at the “end of days”—the prophetic terminology—and this will spell the beginning of end of “this world,” i.e., human history as we know it. This will usher in an idyllic period on earth in which rightful political and religious structures will flourish in Israel at least, probably preceded by resurrection and judgment. Gentiles participate in this scenario as Gentiles; but as Noahhides, they are in relationship with God. It is not clear that this scenario will extend into eternity. Some understand the “world to come” to be the eternity that follows the messianic age; others understand it to be the reward of the individual after death (and before resurrection).

Note too that “sin” has not entered our discussion. Judaism understands that those same aspects of humanity that make them capable of sin are also those aspects that drive humans to necessary and good achievements. The human task is to channel this “evil inclination”—to sexuality and love, to acquisition—so that it is productive and not sinful. Any outside or divine intervention that changed this structure would also destroy civilization, for people would cease to marry and reproduce, build homes, or conduct business.²⁷ Thus, humans who strive for righteous living and repent when they err can presume that they will be rewarded in the eschatological scenario.

Although eschatological hopes permeate Jewish liturgy and are ever present, particularly in times of trouble, eschatological discourse drives little of non-mystical Judaism. The rabbis often threaten that particular actions will guarantee or deny someone a place in the world to come, but their purpose is consistently to spur people to proper behavior in this world, rather than to make any real statement about eternity. God has redeemed Israel in the past, from Egypt, and promises future redemption. Its details have not been given to us, while Torah's definitions of how to live in this

Greek cognate Jesus, *Yeshua* for short), G-'-L, and less commonly, P-D-H. All appear biblically, rabbinically, and liturgically with reference to God's actions at the Exodus and with reference to God's future saving/redemption of Israel.

²⁶ *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997) 21-22.

²⁷ Genesis Rabbah 9:7 (and parallels), in a commentary on the application of “very good” to the creation of humanity.

world have. To the extent that redemption is dependent on human behavior, then, our responsibility is to determine precisely how to live according to God's will in this world. Therefore, the most privileged mode of discourse in traditional Judaism is halachic.

MODERNITY'S CHALLENGES TO THIS STRUCTURE

However, to be accepted into Western society, Jews were asked to (and many sought to) break down many of their own barriers to intermingling with Christians and to lose their distinctiveness. In response, new forms of Judaism emerged, some of which challenged the very presuppositions of traditional Jewish life. In its most radical form, Reform Judaism, coming into its own in Germany by the mid-19th century, taught a pure ethical monotheism, a prophetic Judaism, in which Jews understood themselves as commissioned by God to set an example of moral behavior, but not to structure their lives by incomprehensible commandments that prevented their full participation in greater society.

If their world was no longer governed by mitzvot, categorizing non-Jews by their performance of them, even if they were all "ethical commandments," made little sense. However, theological rigor has rarely characterized Reform decisions and it developed no new theology of other religions.²⁸ In the 20th century, Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, explicitly rejected concepts of Jewish chosenness. In both these movements, among secular Jews, and to a certain extent among Jews even further along the continuum towards traditional practice, Torah and its commandments, or the traditional understanding of these concepts, no longer set the parameters of the culture that defined Jewish identity. In generations where Jews, while participating in the cultural diversity of Western society, have simultaneously felt their very survival as a people threatened by anti-Semitism, genocide, assimilation and intermarriage, there has been significant discussion of how to construct Jewish identity. However, the experience, particularly of anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust and of Israel's constant struggles for existence in a hostile Arab world, has not generally encouraged interest in the development of positive theologies of the religious other.

However, the contemporary situation is substantially different from the medieval world. In spite of a burgeoning anti-Semitism, especially in Europe and in the Muslim world (as of this writing), many Jews, especially in America, rarely experience the Christian as truly other. Religion is marginalized in our secular society, and for virtually the first time in the history of Christianity, there are essentially no challenges to economic and social interchange, or even to intermarriage.²⁹ Most significantly, official theological statements of the Catholic Church (beginning with *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 and further refined in a series of additional documents) and various Protestant churches have begun the process of revising the Christian theology of Jews and Judaism.³⁰ But much work remains to be done in the implementation of this new theology at all levels....[T]he implications of these changes have

²⁸ See my article, "Theologies of Self and Other in American Jewish Liturgies," forthcoming in the CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly. This article documents the utter confusion on this issue in Reform liturgies.

²⁹ Intermarriage with non-Jews is not accepted in traditional Judaism and is not officially condoned by any movement. However, in the freedom of American society, the intermarriage rate approaches 50%, indicating a broad social acceptance of the phenomenon.

³⁰ The most up-to-date collection of these documents, from both international and national church bodies, can be found at <http://www.bc.edu/cjlearning>.

not been internalized at the highest levels of the Church.

Of these documents, only *Dominus Iesus*, perhaps because it received so much media attention, elicited significant Jewish response³¹. The outcry among those participating in dialogue with Catholics has resulted in a series of clarifications, including from various cardinals,³² clarifications that would have been unnecessary had the original document(s) been framed with the fruits of almost 40 years of theological revision in mind. These clarifications make explicit that for Catholic theology, Judaism is not an “other religion,” but rather a religion based on God’s biblical covenant with Israel. If God promised Israel salvation, and if divine promises are true, then the religion of Israel is a true religion and a source of salvation for its adherents. This effectively removes Judaism from the realm of discourse of these documents.³³

These changes in the Catholic and broader Christian worlds now challenge Jews to respond. A serious inner-Jewish dialogue on constructing an appropriate theology of other religions and

³¹ FROM SHAMMAI: *Dominus Iesus [Jesus the Lord]: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* was written in main part by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in 2000, who then headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the renamed Holy Office of the Inquisition. Ratzinger, of course, is known today as Benedictum XVI. In its first iteration, it was pretty much a reaffirmation of the doctrine of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* (“no salvation outside the Church”; this doctrine is discussed by Jospé; see page 26). Among other things, it says that non-Christians are “in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.” As for non-Catholic Christians, they had “defects.”

³² See the articles by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (“The Heritage of Abraham: The Gift of Christmas,” *Osservatore Romano*, English edition, December 29, 2000); Edward Cardinal Cassidy, “The Future of Jewish-Christian Relations in the Light of the Visit of Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land,” address delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, Jerusalem, March 13, 2001; and Walter Cardinal Kasper, *Dominus Iesus*, no. 2, address delivered at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, New York, May 1, 2001. The articles are posted at www.bc.edu/cjlearning.

³³ The document “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” issued jointly in August 2002, by the United States Bishops’ Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues, articulated these issues, for the first time, in a formal manner. Discussion of the issues raised there is still in its infancy. See the document itself and Cardinal Kasper’s response to it (November 6, 2002) at www.bc.edu/cjlearning. However, this document does not present any precedents of value for developing a positive Catholic theology of the other religions of the world. Particularly, because I think that a theology of other religions in general must be prior to specific theological understandings of individual religions, I am not entirely satisfied with the theoretical underpinnings (as opposed to the practical effects) of this Catholic move. A Jewish theology cannot fully mirror this sense of special relationship beyond an acknowledgment of the biblical foundations of Christianity.

particularly of Christianity is only in its infancy.³⁴ A group of Jewish scholars took a critical step to enlarge this discussion with the publication in September 2000 of a brief text called “*Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*,” accompanied by a book of essays, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*.³⁵ At conference after conference over the past several years, leading thinkers have called for the development of rigorous theological statements.

At this point, I can only tentatively suggest some of the points and issues that such a theology might address. No doubt, others will disagree, but only with discussion can a consensus begin to emerge. For better or worse, Judaism lacks structures of authority that can demand broad deference and impose theological change. The emerging theology of the religious other builds on and reinterprets the traditional understandings outlined above.³⁶

The starting point remains that Judaism itself is the specific relationship with God of a particular community, the people of Israel.³⁷ God, the creator of all humanity, without compromising divine truth, enters into relationship differently with different nations. Therefore, a people’s salvation, or their moral status in this world, is never dependent on their becoming Jews, but rather on their coming to God through their own paths.³⁸ Not all aspects of these paths are appropriate or permitted for Jews, for we cannot jettison the traditional, biblically generated concerns about Jewish participation in idolatry—but we can build on the medieval understanding that some behaviors that are permitted to Noahides are nevertheless idolatrous for Jews.³⁹ Within this, Jews understand

³⁴ Note, too, that there are essentially no positive premodern systematic statements of Jewish thought on this issue. The sources cited above are mostly isolated comments. In part, Christian censorship limited the ability of Jewish writers to publish anything substantive about Christianity, particularly if it contained a whiff of criticism. Most texts known today have been recovered from long-lost medieval manuscripts. In part too, systematic theological reflection, compared to halachic discussion and exegesis of text, was not a particularly privileged mode in much of the Jewish world. Maimonides’s prestige arose from his halachic writings, not from his philosophical (and controversial) *Guide of the Perplexed*.

³⁵ The statement can be found in the book and, with its signatories, at www.icjs.org. Critical discussion of the statement has begun too. See Jon D. Levenson, “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *Commentary* 112:3 (December 2001) 31-37 and the ensuing letters in the March 2002 issue. See also the October 2002 articles by David Berger and Michael Signer on the document, posted at www.bc.edu/cjlearning.

³⁶ Consensus demands this, for traditional Jews reinterpret but do not make radical ideological breaks from tradition.

³⁷ Secular Jews may object to this definition, but a theology cannot exclude God. Because most other religious communities do not understand themselves as ethnic communities, it is the religious aspects of Judaism that must be in dialogue with them. Failure to acknowledge this (on both sides) has been a source of friction in the relations between the secular state of Israel and the Vatican.

³⁸ This language is consistent with kabbalistic understanding attributed to the 16th-century Rav Isaac Luria [a/k/a “the Ari Ha-kodesh”] that Jews too, based on their tribal heritage, have their own proper paths to God. This justifies, in this tradition, the existence of varying liturgical rites.

³⁹ For instance, praying to God through any intermediary, be it a saint or even Jesus, with or without the presence of an image, is unquestionably forbidden worship (under the biblical category of idolatry) for

their tradition of “chosenness” not to imply superiority or an exclusive relationship to God, but to be a definition of their particular relationship to God among many others.⁴⁰

This allows us to broaden our concept of the Noahhite commandments, understanding it to be only the minimum standard of morality for all humanity. Judaism can value, positively, that the teachings of individual world religions exceed this minimum. This, then, allows for Judaism to differentiate between the various religions, to grant them their own theological uniqueness, to recognize them in their individuality in a way not systematically possible when all religions are categorized as generically “Noahhite.” At the same time, the relativism of this theology does not compromise divine Truth, for Judaism makes universalist claims only about the existence of God, the Creator, and God’s fundamental demands of humanity as expressed in the Noahhite laws. God apparently values human diversity!

Thus, Judaism’s starting point as the specific relationship of God with a specific group of people allows for significantly different teachings about the theological status of other peoples than does Christianity’s teaching that its way is the universally true path to salvation. From a Jewish perspective, such an assertion is actually a limitation on God’s omnipotence, a suggestion that God can only operate in a single way in the world. Judaism can understand other religions, and especially Christianity and Islam, also to be God’s communications of divine will to the world. As long as their adherents behave morally to other human beings, to God, and to themselves, they “have a share in the world to come.”

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Jews—but medieval Jews determined that Noahhides were forbidden only to worship other gods, without limitations on how they could worship God.

⁴⁰ On this, see Raphael Jospe, “Chosenness in Judaism: Exclusivity vs. Inclusivity” in *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, ed. Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University; 2001) 173-94.

Abraham's covenant, chosenness, and the binding of Isaac

Lippman Bodoff

Lippman Bodoff has made understanding the Akedah (or understanding it anew) his mission in life and we will return to him at that time. This article, despite its title, is not about the Akedah itself, but about the meaning of chosenness and, to a greater degree, covenant, and how both played a role in the Akedah. His biography is attached to his article on Chapter 11 (Genesis, Chapter 11, that is; for all I know, being that he is a lawyer by profession, he may have written one about the other Chapter 11, as well.) This article originally appeared in Midstream, which you probably would have guessed from its opening words. I have spared you most of his footnotes.

Readers of Midstream are, by now, aware of my position about, the correct understanding of The Binding of Isaac (*Akedah*) in Genesis 22....I reason that for Abraham, it was clear that the all powerful Creator and eternal God, in whom Abraham believed, was—by the very Divine essence and attributes—incapable of suspending His own universal and eternal moral and ethical principles. Therefore, I concluded that Abraham had neither the intention nor the expectation that he would sacrifice Isaac....

//

...For the purpose of this article, I [further] propose that a fundamental reason for Abraham's faith that God would not, and could not, really intend that Abraham sacrifice Isaac was the covenantal relationship that already had been established and ritually and formally concretized between God and Abraham. Let us review the relevant background.

God tentatively chooses Abraham to father a great nation, after Abraham indicates that he has no faith or belief in pagan gods, their powers or their values. Before that, God had no reason to choose Abraham, and there was no other human who thought of an all-powerful God of Creation. God's choice was made permanent after Abraham demonstrated by his conduct...that he was not only a monotheist, but an ethical monotheist.

At this point, we can put together the basic elements of a covenantal relationship, which I would like to describe. This comprises: a relationship

- 1) between two or more parties—in this case, one Divine (but not always necessarily so)¹ and the other, by definition, not Divine;
- 2) in which the parties inevitably come to realize that each needs and depends on the other in very important ways and for very important objectives;
- 3) for a prolonged, indefinite, undefined, and inherently indefinable period (a “non-transient” relationship);
- 4) a relationship which will necessarily be tested in the future in different ways, places and times that cannot be specified, defined and spelled out and agreed to in advance;

¹ The best discussion on God as a necessary party to a covenantal relationship, may be found in David Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), esp. Ch. 2.

- 5) requiring a commitment by each to the other to maintain that relationship into the indefinite future and to find ways to continue it and resolve future questions or issues between (or among) them in ways consistent with the covenant's original, broad, important objectives.

The basis for this analysis of the elements of a covenantal relationship can also be found in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, which calls out its objective to "form a more perfect union." It can also be found in an economic analysis of what drives organizations to merge with each other organizationally and functionally rather than remain, continuously and repeatedly, in an adversarial relationship over an indefinite future. In these and similar situations, the future conditions of that relationship, its varying contexts and the correlative varying responses by the parties necessitated by those changing contexts cannot be specified and agreed to in advance—at least not without spending so much time trying to predict the future in all its uncertainty that reaching such an agreement would take forever—and, moreover, would be impossible.

Can you imagine Moses spending all the time necessary to understand from God, and then explain to the Israelites and obtain their consent, as to 1) the myriad ways human history would develop; and 2) all the religious legal questions to which these would give rise, and their Divine answers? They would still be at Mount Sinai—they or their children—listening to someone (who? Joshua or one of his progeny?) explaining all the questions, and their answers, that would or could arise in the future.

One way of understanding the nature of a covenantal relationship and how it arises, is to examine its workings in the sphere of industrial organization.

For example, we can find it recognized, on a smaller scale, by one of the "BIG 3" automobile companies many years ago, when it found itself every year at the mercy of the company it hired to produce its new car designs for the coming product year. As that year approached, the design firm came into sole possession of the knowledge of what had been achieved and what remained to be done for design completion. As a result, the car manufacturer increasingly was at the mercy of the design firm regarding the price and completion date of the car designs as they evolved. In this relationship, one party controlled too much information and possessed too much bargaining power. Inevitably, the automobile manufacturer decided to bring the design function "in-house." Of course, holding up the manufacturer also allowed the latter to hold up the designer, to the detriment of both.

In such a case, where each party needed the other—the designer needed a car to be produced to be paid, and the manufacturer had the same need in order to make any sales—what was required was a merger of their corporate and functional identities. The design and manufacturing functions had to be integrated into one company, perhaps one as a subsidiary or division of the other for industrial, "cultural" or organizational purposes. Each side or function had to share recognition of their mutual need. "I need your designs, and you need my production." The result was a need to operate in a covenantal relationship of mutual trust and subordination of interests to the overall goals of the total enterprise. This required a covenantal structure where all future decisions and answers to problems would be resolved quickly and amicably as well as for the greater good of both functions, product design and manufacture....

The existence of a similar situation, where a covenantal relationship required a unique form of organization, caused a large auto manufacturer and its principal union to agree that all future union-management disputes would be resolved in a binding manner by a single, permanent arbitrator, who would be designated to deal equitable justice in each and all disputes for the mutual, immediate and

long-term needs and goals of both parties.²

III

If we examine God's development of a covenantal relationship with Abraham and, through him, with his progeny, we will see the elements I have described emerge.

First: As to mutual need. It is clear, even axiomatic, that man needs God. And the talmudic Sages, in their midrashic filling in of the origins of Abraham's relationship with God, note that it did not start with God choosing Abraham to bring the message of eternal monotheism to the world throughout history. Abraham—insofar as the biblical text discloses—never showed any particular worthiness to be chosen for this mission. The Sages, however, tell us that Abraham came to realize, on his own, that the order of nature and its complexity and harmony required a Divine Creator, and God needed a new people to represent His message of a world based on a similar order of peace and harmony, for mankind.³ This involved justice in the world, and not the moral void and the arbitrariness characteristic of pagan deities and their societies. Justice, in turn, required kindness among humans, to inspire trust and engender peace and order.

It was for this reason that God appeared—not so suddenly or arbitrarily after all—to Abraham and chose him among all of humanity to leave his father's pagan community, and to travel to a new, unspecified land to which God would guide him, if Abraham trusted Him to do so, a place for a new religious community for Abraham's progeny, to spread to humanity this new message of ethical monotheism.

So we have mutual need; Abraham needs God and God needs Abraham. For how long? Forever, clearly: God, definitely and forever; and Abraham, also, as the founder of a new religion, through his progeny and those who would decide to join Abraham and his progeny in this new nation and faith.

"Go to a new place," God instructs him, "to the land that I will show you." Already we see the element of uncertainty and a requirement of Abraham's mast in God's instruction because of the element of a future, a time delay. Abraham must trust God because God cannot really show him the land as it will be, but only as it soon will appear to him, and not as it will appear centuries later to his progeny while still inhabited by the Canaanites (Genesis 12:1). "I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). Again, in the future. "I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you" (12:3), became I need you to carry my message, My goals for humanity, to present them in belief and deed as a livable reality. "And you [Abraham] need Me to be blessed." So Abraham took his wife and family to the land of the Canaanites, the land which God showed to him (Genesis 12:6). And God promised this land to Abraham's progeny, long after Abraham's death (Genesis 12:7).

And the land that Abraham and his nephew, Lot, occupied could not support both of them and their families. So Abraham said, in kindness, to Lot: "You decide where you want to settle, and I will settle (for) elsewhere, so we can avoid conflict between us and between our herdsmen" (13:7-11).

² This system was used for many years by Ford Motor Company and the United Auto Workers; my teacher, Professor Harry Shulman of Yale Law School, was their impartial arbitrator.

³ The liturgy on Yom Kippur specifically asks for God's forgiveness for His sake, because God needs a people to represent His message in the world.

Lot, it should be noted, chose the richer land despite its occupancy by a more degenerate society (13:12-13). Abraham, in his relations with Lot, is ethical in the highest degree.

At this point, a war breaks out between two groups of Canaanite kings. One group captures the other, including Lot and his family. Abraham, with his retinue, gives chase, and frees the conquered kings as well as Lot and his family (Genesis 14:1-17). At this point, the king of Jerusalem, a “priest of God,” presumably a monotheistic follower of Abraham (Genesis 14:18-20), greets Abraham and praises God for his victory. The victorious Canaanite kings offer Abraham the war booty in exchange for the captives, but Abraham refuses the offer of any booty; only God can be allowed to lay claim to bringing Abraham riches (Genesis 14:23). Of course, Abraham wanted to protect the captives from the victorious (and evil) king of Sodom, and especially Lot and his family. Abraham once again is ethical in the highest degree. He has earned God’s confidence, no longer provisional and confined to Abraham’s beliefs only, but now fully based on his deeds—a confidence that he can father a great nation, that will be a carrier of the message of ethical monotheism, for which mission God and Abraham, and his seed, will forever be bound together.

We are now ready for the formal establishment of the eternal covenant between God on the one hand, and Abraham and his progeny on the other.

Events have already established their mutual need for each other. The formal covenant will establish that this will be a continuing need far into the future, because such is the nature of history, which is part of God’s plan. Following is the formal sequence of the *b’rit*, “The Covenant Between the Parts,” the covenant that binds Israel and God together eternally, no matter what may come (Genesis 15).

- 1) God promises Abraham that there is no need to fear the past, including leaving his family; going to war and necessarily killing innocents; fooling Pharaoh into thinking that Sarah was his sister (thereby exposing her to Pharaoh’s sexual desire to protect Abraham from being killed—Genesis 12:11-20); and promises Abraham a great reward as the father of a new religion.
- 2) Abraham protests that he is already wealthy: “What else can you give me? I am already too old for a child (15:13),” but God assures Abraham that he will be inherited by a child from his own loins, and his progeny will be “like the stars of heaven” (15:4-5). And Abraham trusts God, despite the evident impossibility of this promise, “and [God] counted this faith as righteousness” (15:6).
- 3) In a vision, Abraham asks God: [Given my age of 75, without children,] “How will I know that I will inherit the land” [of Canaan, as you have promised me?] (15:7). God now asks Abraham to take three heifers, three goats, three rams, a turtle dove, and a young dove, to cut them in the center, and to place each opposite its counterpart, but not the birds. Birds of prey come down upon the carcasses, but Abraham drives them away. Abraham then falls into a deep sleep. God then promises Abraham that his offspring [which he will, indeed, have] will be aliens among strangers, in a land that is not theirs, who will enslave them and oppress them for 400 years. But the nation that enslaves them “I will judge, and afterwards they [your

offspring] will leave [that country] with great wealth” (Genesis 15:15-16).⁴ “But you will go unto your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. But the fourth generation after the beginning of the exile will return to this land.”

“And it now came to pass that the sun set, it became very dark, and a torch of fire passed between the pieces. On that day, God made a covenant with Abraham, saying: ‘To your descendants have I given this land ...’” (15:18).

I have posited that covenant presupposes a relationship, an exchange of promises, that will play out over a long period of time between two parties, who depend on each other to survive and thrive for their mutual benefit despite the ups and downs of history. Here, God predicts for Abraham, in advance, a crucial, disturbing, threatening event in his progeny’s future, into which God will providentially intervene to perpetuate Abraham’s progeny, and—by clear implication, later confirmed in the restatement of the covenant in Deuteronomy 29-30—do so continually throughout history as an essential element of God’s covenantal role. In all other respects, the covenant with Abraham is silent as to the history of the relationship of Abraham’s offspring with God thereafter. Mutual dependence requires mutual trust, by each party of the other, that each will play their role for their mutual benefit, throughout the uncertain nature of the future.

All we know for now is that there will be a nation of Israel, and that it will be instructed in ethical monotheism by Abraham, through his progeny (Genesis 18:19), having been instructed by God (Genesis 17:1-14) that His covenant with Abraham required Abraham to “walk before [God] and be perfect” (*tamim*). And Abraham satisfied God that he would, indeed, be sure that his progeny would be taught to “keep the way of God, doing charity and justice, in order that God might then bring upon Abraham that which He had spoken of [i.e., promised] to him” (Genesis 18:19).

I believe we have here established the ingredients of the covenantal relationship, *par excellence*, that has provided the basis of the relationship of the Jewish people, as Abraham’s progeny, with God, over the course of history. I believe, too, that these are the ingredients of all covenantal relationships where they are to be found, whether or not God is a party to them.

The consequences of one or both parties breaching their covenantal responsibilities, ignoring the covenantal rules, or abrogating or seeking to abrogate the covenant, and the extent to which that is possible where God is a party to the covenant, are matters discussed later in the Bible, especially in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.⁵ In brief, God will always remain a party to the covenant and a guarantor of Israel’s continuity in history, despite the suffering Israel may call down upon itself by ignoring its responsibilities, as God’s covenantal partner, described above. Israel is metaphorically compared to God’s wife in an eternal marriage relationship, with both parties always needing each other within the covenant.

But we should not be misled by human covenantal relationships, e.g., the covenant of marriage

⁴ God can favorably or unfavorably modify His covenantal promises, but never utterly abrogate them, because they are inherently part of an eternal scheme, or plan.

⁵ In response to any accusation that Joseph caused the permanent impoverishment of the Egyptian masses, it is worth noting that, as Divinely foretold to Abraham, those masses were able to give the Israelites [from] their immense wealth as the latter left Egypt (see Ex. 12:33-36)—presumably, as payment for 400 years of Jewish slavery.

between man and woman in marriage, or the covenant of the union among the states of America—even when some seek to secede—even when such relationships, especially that of marriage, are used by the prophets as a metaphor or symbol of God’s relationship with Israel. For, just to anticipate this subject again in the briefest way, however we may look at the terminability of human relationships where the mutual need ceases, God’s need for Israel, to state the obvious, is eternal—in some form or another. For example, even if God has proposed on occasion to start that nation over again with a new lineage from a branch of Abraham’s progeny, as God proposed to start a new nation from Moses’ progeny after the sin of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:10), the covenant with Abraham through his progeny will always remain in force...

IV

An important aspect of all covenants is the method it employs to resolve future questions and disputes. One of the best examples of a covenantal relationship in the secular sphere is the U.S. Constitution, as noted above, a union of the states that are parties to it.

In such a situation there needs to be a mechanism to resolve future differences, including differences among or between any of the parties to the covenantal relationship and the institutions, organizations, or groups that represent them. The differences are: 1) unknown; 2) unanticipated; 3) so numerous that even to attempt to anticipate them and resolve them in advance of going forward with the relationship would take, literally, forever, because—hopefully and ideally—the relationship will endure forever, subject to periodic renewals after crises where renewal is required or beneficial.⁶

Not only can future differences not be known, and specified and resolved in advance, but their future resolution must necessarily be based on conditions existing at such future time when such differences among or between the parties arise. This is so because, by definition, the comfortable continuation of the relationship will always be based on the strength of the mutual need for it, balanced against the strength of the differences that arise between or among the parties. It must always remain a volitional relationship as to each and every party.

Therefore, the mechanism to resolve questions or disputes between or among the parties must be based on striving to keep the continuing relationship alive to the extent possible and feasible given the parties respective needs.

In the context of the U.S. Constitution, this means a Supreme Court with the power to resolve disputes between and among the parties, i.e., members of the public, primarily its citizens and their institutions, e.g., corporations or partnerships, families, etc., and the institutions of national or international government established by public authority and consent.

In the context of a normative religion, governed by law or, in the Jewish context..., halachah, we again must have institutions of dispute or question resolution to which all parties to the covenantal relationship are committed—specifically, God, the ultimate authority for the laws, and the Jewish people, in its communal and individual capacities. Further, just as the Supreme Court acts as impartial arbitrator between and among contending parties to the constitutional covenant, or an arbitrator acts who is designated by an employer and union to preserve, by arbitration, a complex, prolonged relationship, so, too, does a religious covenant require such an impartial arbitrator.

⁶ See, e.g., Hosea 1-3.

At this point, the uninitiated will ask: “And who can that be? Clearly, God alone presumably knows the right answer to all questions.” But those bound to obey God for the indefinite future may not like all His answers to their disputes or questions. This may sound sacrilegious to the reader, but we know that this is not so because God Himself decided the question of who should be the arbitrator by disqualifying Himself from this role, presumably to help maintain the permanent loyalty of the Jewish people to the Covenant. First, God in His wisdom proclaimed that His covenantal partners must believe that they can—indeed must—“live by [His laws]” (Leviticus 18:5; Ezekiel 20:11, 13, 21; BT Sanhedrin 74a), which implies some participation by them in resolving disputes where they are involved.

Further, and to implement this necessity, not only does the Bible prescribe that the judges of questions and disputes shall come from the Jewish people to resolve them, but they are to be appointed by the people or their representatives, and not by God, nor by those speaking in God’s name and purporting to know His revealed instructions, e.g., prophets. The people appoint, directly or indirectly, their judges, even when questions or disputes involving God’s law are in issue (Deuteronomy 16:18, 17:8-13). And their decisions are binding even if the decisions of these judges are known to be contrary to God’s view, as the talmudic sages themselves proclaimed when one of their own members brought Heavenly support for his legal position! (BT Bava Metzia 59b).⁷ When a sage later encountered Elijah, so the story in the Talmud goes, and asked, “How did God respond when the Sages said that “the answer [even] to religious legal questions is not in Heaven,” Elijah responded: “God laughed and He said: ‘My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.’”

When you think about the nature of the covenantal relationship, it is clear that the arrangement, in which humans, not God, decide what the answers are to covenantal questions, even about God’s law, you realize that it could not have been otherwise....

Therefore, humans were given that authority by God by the act of revelation itself, in which human judges were given the authority to decide all legal issues without regard to God’s contrary opinion even if contacted. And God specifically stated in discussing the covenantal relationship that

⁷ FROM SHAMMAI, the relevant Gemara: “It has been taught: On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every argument in the world, but they [his colleagues] did not accept them. Said he to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!’ Thereupon the carob-tree was torn 100 cubits out of its place—others say it was 400 cubits. ‘No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,’ they retorted. Again he said to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!’ Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. ‘No proof can be brought from a stream of water,’ they rejoined. Again he urged: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,’ whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, saying: ‘When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what business is it of yours to interfere?’ Hence they [the walls] did not fall, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, but they also did not straighten up, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!’ Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: ‘Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him!’ But Rabbi Joshua stood up on his feet and said [quoting Deuteronomy 30:12]: ‘It [the Torah] is not in heaven.’ What did he mean by this? Rabbi Jeremiah said: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai [and so] we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because the Torah that was given at Mount Sinai already said, ‘After the majority must one incline.’” In other words, the rabbis told God that He had his say at Sinai, now it was their turn.

the law (as it needs to be interpreted) is “not in Heaven” (Deuteronomy. 30:11-14).

Moreover, to force humans to live totally and eternally by God’s understanding about how they shall live, with no input of their own, makes the covenant too one-sided. Remember, the covenantal relationship is based on mutual need. God needs humans too; it is not just we who need God. That is the fundamental explanation for humanity and human history as the epitome, the crown, the unfinished symphony, of God’s creation. Humanity cannot handle absolute truth because it is beyond its experience, just like it cannot handle absolute beauty, and absolute justice. In the end, these concepts are dependent on history to be understood, and man’s mortality prevents such knowledge, just as God’s immortality alone allows Him to understand absolutes; and this prevents Him from imposing them on humanity’s time-bound contexts. God’s judgments are just and perfect when they can be known over the fullness of time, from the standpoint of their totality. But, in isolation, such perfection is impossible. For the same reason, Jewish judges regularly point out to litigants that the highest form of human justice is compromise, and not the insistence—by parties or judges—on absolute truth or justice in each decision, which, on an ultimate scale, they are incapable of demanding or rendering....

[T]he final lesson that Abraham was to learn is that just as the new covenant called for Abraham to have faith that Israel would prevail even after facing extinction during its slavery in Egypt, so would all of Abraham’s progeny prevail, from Isaac on, even though they (or he) might be threatened with extinction—and perhaps, I venture, Abraham might have concluded—even if threatened by God’s own command.

V

Because the parties in a covenantal relationship have such a mutual need for each other, it is understandable why, where God is not a party, the parties go to such lengths either to integrate functionally, e.g., by merger, or by establishing a mechanism to resolve future disputes, especially by compromises brought about by outside parties, whether by arbitration or mediation, or forms of legal compulsion. These mechanisms, and other forms of pressure, become even more necessary when there are third parties, like the public, that are subject to grave injury when the covenantal parties have a falling out, e.g., strikes by public utility employees.

The element of mutual need also explains why the consequences are so severe where God is a covenantal party. Punishment is necessary when there is a Divine perception that Israel, as the other covenantal party, is failing to live up to its responsibilities of ethical monotheism. More often than not, the resulting dire consequences to Israel are effected by Divine disinterest in Israel’s fate—short of its total destruction—by “hiding His face” in biblical terminology, leaving Israel to survive historical forces, specifically, the hatred of those who see the message of ethical monotheism as a threat to their own power and hegemony. In such situations, where God’s providence is withheld, the consequences for Israel, spelled out in the Bible, are, indeed, dire.

However, because we can never know what is in God’s mind, as it were, we can never know the reason or purpose of human suffering, either personal, national, or international. All we have to hold on to is God’s response to Job in the whirlwind, describing the impossibility of any human attempts to measure Divine justice in human terms. I suggest that this is why the very first universal command of the Noahhite Laws is for humanity to establish its own courts of justice based on the universal, Divine standards of righteousness established for mankind after the Flood. In this respect, humanity’s fate since that time is in humanity’s hands, and Israel’s mission is to continue to hold high

the standards and message of ethical monotheism, to abide by them, and, unfortunately, to be the first one hurt when humanity begins to fail in its own ethical responsibilities.

In the end, I think that David Novak is onto something in spending so much effort in bringing to our attention the importance of understanding the nature of covenantal relationships and responsibilities which, I believe are so important in human life.

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Encyclopaedia Judaica: Chosen People

Lou H. Silberman

CHOSEN PEOPLE, a common designation for the people of Israel, expressing the idea that the people of Israel stands in a special and unique relationship to the universal deity. This idea has been a central one throughout the history of Jewish thought: it is deeply rooted in biblical concepts, and has been developed in talmudic, philosophic, mystical, and contemporary Judaism.

Bible

Narrowly viewed, one Hebrew root, b-ch-r (בחר, “to choose”), expresses with unmistakable intent the nature and manner in which the people of Israel is understood to be the people of God. This term, in addition to its secular meaning (e.g., Gen. 13:11), is used to indicate the choice of persons by God for a particular role or office, such as a priest: “For the Lord your God has chosen him and his descendants to come out of all your tribes, to be in attendance for service in the name of the Lord, forever” (Deut. 18:5, I Sam. 2:28); or a king, as David says to Michal, Saul’s daughter, “Before the Lord, who chose me above thy father, and above all his house, to appoint me prince over the people of the Lord, over Israel” (II Sam. 6:21; Kings 8:16).

This root is also used to indicate the setting aside of a particular place for the site of the sanctuary, “But look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation...; there you are to go” (Deut. 12:5; cf. *ibid.*, 14, 18, 21, 26). Just as in these usages the verb בחר indicates a role for the persons or place that have been chosen by God, so in the Deuteronomic writings it has a particular theological meaning relating to the people of Israel: “For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people” (Deut. 7:6, cf. 14:2).

The idea of election was already widespread when the Deuteronomist introduced the technical theological term “chosen” to express it. It is the essence of the covenant, which signifies the fundamental relationship between God and Israel and is referred to throughout the entire Hebrew Bible. However contemporary critical scholarship may define that covenant, and there are a number of competing theories, there is general agreement that the biblical authors viewed such a relationship as essential. Yet the relationship between God and Israel is broader than indicated by the term “to choose.” In Amos 3:2, for example, the verb *yada* (“to know intimately”) in “I have known only you of all the peoples of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities” points to this special relationship. The second half of this verse is one of the classic passages which emphasizes that the doctrine of election does not imply the conferment of special privileges, but imposes extra obligations and responsibility.

The Deuteronomic writers offered a further theological interpretation of the covenant, i.e., the status of Israel as the people of God. It was founded upon an act of divine choice motivated by love: “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because the Lord loved you....” (Deut. 7:7–8) Thus God, who chose Israel, could have chosen any other nation as well, for the whole earth belongs to Him (cf. Ex. 9:5). The Deuteronomic writers and second Isaiah emphasized the universal rule of the God of Israel, and at the same time underscored the choice of Israel.

The covenant relationship defined in this manner carries with it responsibilities, in the same way

that chosen individuals are responsible for certain tasks and are required to assume particular roles. Thus, Genesis 18:19, “For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity, to keep the way of the Lord, by doing what is just and right...” is reported in Nehemiah 9:7 as “Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose (*bacharta*) Abram...” with the obligations spelled out in the earlier verse now present by implication in the verb “choose.”

The divine choice, therefore, calls for reciprocal human response: “Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve Him...” (Josh. 24:22). Israel is obligated by this choice to “keep His statutes, and observe His Laws” (Ps. 105:45). Unlike the nonentities that the nations of the world worship, God has predicted both the marvelous victories of Cyrus that have already taken place and the miraculous restoration of Israel (led back from Babylonia to their homeland by a verdant, shady, well-watered path across the desert; etc.) that is soon to follow. Israel will convince the nations of the world that there is only one effective God who can do them any good, and so will be the agents of the planting of the true religion (Isa. 42:3a–4) and hence success and “light” (i.e., happiness) to the ends of the world (Isa. 49:6).

The whole discussion in Isaiah 49 of Israel, God’s servant, pivots on the idea of the task to which God has appointed her: that of spreading God’s salvation (cf. Isa. 49:6). The passage in Isaiah 49:1ff. has been compared to (even, it is suggested, modeled on) Jeremiah 1:4ff. But whereas Jeremiah is to be a “prophet unto the nations” only in the sense that he will announce future events to them (Jer. 1:10), Israel is to be a prophet to the nations in the sense that it will bring them the light of salvation (Isa. 49:6). This idea of election as a task even leads to the doctrine of Israel’s vicarious suffering for the nations (Isa. 52:13–53:12).

Further, although the people of Israel may not presume that God will always consider them favorably, regardless of their acts (e.g., Hos. 1:9), the thought of absolute rejection appears unimaginable: “Yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling my covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God.” (Lev. 26:44). Indeed, an important element of prophetic writings is the concern to explain why the formally deserved rejection was not affected. The fundamental motive of the choice, love, is seen as ultimately overriding the legal requirement of rejection, although not that of punishment.

Rabbinic Literature

The relationship between God and Israel described in Scripture remained a focal point of religious contemplation and theological speculation not only for the Pharisaic-rabbinic tradition, but in other movements within the community both in Palestine and the Diaspora (Jub. 2:19; 15:30–31; 16:8; Philo, *Abr.*, 98).

The rabbis themselves, while strongly upholding the doctrine of the Chosen People, insist that the election of Israel is based upon their voluntary acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. This idea, already expressed in Exodus 19:5, “If ye will hearken unto My voice, indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be Mine own treasure from among all the peoples,” is developed by the rabbis who state that the Torah was freely offered first to the other nations of the world, but all of them rejected it because of its restrictive ordinances which conflicted with their vicious way of life, and only Israel accepted it (BT Av. Zar. 2b–3a; Num. R. 14:10; Sif. Deut. 343). They go on to say that even the children of Israel accepted it only when God suspended the mountain over them like a vault, and said, “If you accept the Torah it will be well with you, but if not, here you will find your grave” (BT Av. Zar., loc. cit.). Much more prominent, however, was the view of the enthusiastic acceptance of the

Torah by Israel, even before they acquainted themselves with its contents (“*na’aseh ve-nishmah*”; Ex. 24:7; Shab. 88a), a fact for which the heathens are made to sneer at them as an “unstable people” (BT Ket. 112a). Moreover the people of Israel, the spiritually “strongest among the nations,” alone could observe the “fiery” law (Deut. 33:3; BT Beitzah 25b).

On the other hand, a special relationship of love exists between the children of Israel and God, which is made the basis of rabbinic allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs, and is expressed in such sayings as, “How beloved is Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He; for wherever they were exiled the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) was with them” (BT Meg. 29a).

Rabbinic literature evinces a concern to explain this election, and special relationship, as something other than arbitrary and to find in the character or behavior of Israel (or of the Patriarchs) some motive for the divine choice, such as exceptional holiness, humility, loyalty, or obedience. The Talmud has it that the qualities of mercy and forgiveness are characteristic of Abraham and his seed, and are a distinguishing mark of the true Jew (BT Beitzah 32b; BT Yev. 79a; cf. Maim. MT Teshuvah 2:10). Yet “even those rabbis who tried to establish Israel’s special claim on their exceptional merits were not altogether unconscious of the insufficiency of the reason of works in this respect, and therefore had also recourse to the love of God, which is not given as a reward, but is offered freely” (Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (1909), 61).

The Rabbinic conception of the election of Israel finds dogmatic expression in the Orthodox liturgy. “Thou hast chosen us from all peoples; thou hast loved us and taken pleasure in us, and hast exalted us above all tongues; thou hast hallowed us by thy commandments, and brought us near unto thy service” (Festivals Amidah, in Hertz, Siddur, 819; cf. Kiddush for Festivals, *ibid.*, 809; Aleinu prayer, *ibid.*, 209). The connection between the election of Israel and her role as guardian of God’s Torah is expressed in the blessing recited on being called up to the reading of the Torah, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast chosen us from all peoples, and hast given us Thy Torah” (*ibid.*, 191).

Medieval Thought

With the rise of Christianity, the doctrine of Israel as the Chosen People acquired an added polemical edge against the background of the claim of the Church to be the “true Israel” and God’s chosen people. In times of persecution and despair the doctrine, which was axiomatic in Jewish consciousness, was a source of great strength and forbearance. Similarly the talmudic explanation, that the willingness of Israel to accept and obey the Torah was the reason for their election, helped maintain loyalty to tradition and to halachah, in periods of stress and forced conversion to other religions (cf. J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (1961), 13–14).

In medieval Jewish philosophy the notion of the special status of the Jewish people found articulate and radical expression in Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*. The entire Jewish people, according to Halevi, was endowed with a special religious faculty, first given to Adam, and then bequeathed, through a line of chosen representatives, to all of Israel (1:95). As a result of the divine influence thus inherited, the Jewish people was uniquely able to enter into communion with God (1:47). Because of this divine influence, Israel’s election implies dependence on a special supernatural providence, while the rest of humanity is subject to the workings of the laws of nature (1:109).

While the notion of Israel as a Chosen People occupies a central position in Halevi’s thought, it plays only an incidental role in the writings of other Jewish philosophers. Saadia mentions God’s promise that the Jewish nation will exist as long as the heavens and the earth (*Book of Beliefs and*

Opinions, 3:7), and holds that only Israel is assured of redemption, and will be included in the resurrection of the dead (ibid., 7:3). Abraham ibn Daud echoes Halevi's notion that Israel alone is privileged to receive prophecy, while Halevi's theory of a special, supernatural providence which is exercised on behalf of Israel alone is repeated by Hasdai Crescas and Isaac Abrabanel. Though in the view of Maimonides, Judaism is the one true revealed religion which will never be superseded by another revelation (*Guide*, 2:39), the doctrine of Jewish election does not play a very central role.

It would seem that the more extreme, and exclusive, interpretations of the doctrine of election, among Jewish thinkers, were partly the result of reaction to oppression by the non-Jewish world. The more the Jew was forced to close in on himself, to withdraw into the imposed confines of the ghetto, the more he tended to emphasize Israel's difference from the cruel gentile without. Only thus did his suffering become intelligible and bearable. This type of interpretation reaches its height in the Kabbalistic idea that while the souls of Israel stem ultimately from God, the souls of the gentiles are merely of base material (*kelippot*, "shells"). When the Jew was eventually allowed to find his place in a gentile world, the less exclusivist aspect of the doctrine reasserted itself.

Modern Views

The Enlightenment of the 18th century, and the gradual political emancipation of the Jews of Western Europe, challenged and undermined the notion of Jewish uniqueness both directly and indirectly. The earliest of the "modern" Jews, Moses Mendelssohn, considered the intellectual content of Judaism to be identical with the "religion of reason," whose teachings coincide with philosophy. In reply to the question, "Why should one remain a Jew?" he stated that the Jews had been singled out in history by the revelation at Sinai, and thus had the obligation to remain the bearers of that revelation (cf. Leo Baeck, *Von Moses Mendelssohn zu Franz Rosenzweig*, p. 23). To a large extent this position, variously interpreted, has remained the implicit or explicit stance of a major portion of the Jewish community. Moreover, the concept was developed of the Jewish mission (especially by Reform circles). This stressed the role of the Jews as having received the special message of God which they would in turn pass on to the nations of the world—and in this mission was their chosenness.

Such a position has, however, been the object of criticism, misinterpretation, and attack from within and without. The anti-Semite has seized upon it as an unveiled claim to Jewish superiority, and caricatured it by maintaining that it is the basis of a program of Jewish world domination. It is this calumny which helped to give such virulently anti-Jewish documents as the notorious forgery "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" a semblance of credibility. The misunderstanding, and nonplussed reaction, of certain sections of the non-Jewish world with regard to the Jews' conception of themselves as the Chosen People is summed up in Hilaire Belloc's jingle "How odd of God to choose the Jews" (to which the retort was penned "It was not odd—the Jews chose God").

Even certain intellectuals have been unable to view the Jewish doctrine of election sympathetically. Arnold Toynbee wrote, "The most notorious historical example of idolization of an ephemeral self is the error of the Jews....They persuaded themselves that Israel's discovery of the One True God had revealed Israel itself to be God's Chosen People" (*A Study of History*, 4 (1961), 262). The Hebrew writer J. H. Brenner declared, "... I would blot out from the prayer book of the Jew of our day the 'Thou hast chosen us' in every shape and form" (quoted in S. Speigel, *Hebrew Reborn* (1930), 375–89), and this has been effected in the prayer book of the Reconstructionist movement which states: "Modern-minded Jews can no longer believe...that the Jews constitute a divinely

chosen people" (*Sabbath Prayer Book*, The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation (1945), xxiv).

The Church early maintained that by their rejection of Jesus the Jews had forfeited their favored position which had been inherited by the Church. Certain modern liberal Christian theologians have however denied the annulment of the election of Israel. An eloquent contemporary attempt to come to terms with the criticism while maintaining the concept of election is found in Leo Baeck's book *This People Israel* (1964), which says, in its concluding paragraphs: "Every people can be chosen for a history, for a share in the history of humanity....But more history has been assigned to this people than other people" (p. 402). Moreover, Judaism has always been open to the proselyte who—by accepting it—becomes part of the Chosen People. This fact is often cited to refute charges of a "racial" exclusiveness.

The criticism of the concept of election derives in the main from universality and humanist tendencies: Jews are men among men, and Israel is a nation among the others. The defense of the traditional concept is ultimately a theological task, defining the meaning of chosenness as distinct from "unique" or "different," let alone "superior." Modern Jewish thought is still grappling with the problem of redefining the traditional concept, in a way that does justice both to the universalist values of Judaism on the one hand, and to the specific character of Jewish historical and spiritual experience on the other.