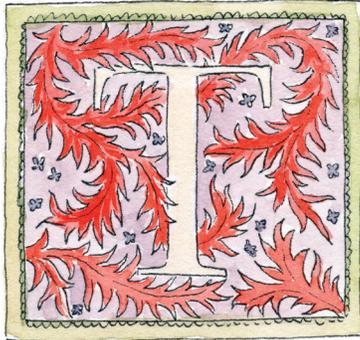


MALKA Z. SIMKOVICH

A 2,500-Year-Old Problem

*The Jews never deserved God's love.
Their job is to accept it*



THE NOTION that God chose the people of Israel over other nations is a millennia-old enigma that has caused no little embarrassment, not to mention danger, for many Jews. The trouble began more than 2,000 years ago, when Jews living in Hellenistic centers such as Alexandria and Antioch outraged their neighbors by shunning public festivals celebrating other gods. That the Jews refused to participate out of devotion to their own relatively unknown god, who purportedly ruled all humanity but chose only them, was considered to be especially absurd given that they buttressed their nonparticipation with scriptures that condemned their ancestors for disobedience. The Jews' claim of chosenness fueled their reputation as misanthropic elitists, a reputation that has proven unfortunately durable. It's no wonder that Jews soon grew uncomfortable with this central tenet of their theology.

To solve the problem of chosenness, Jews produced scriptural interpretations that reversed a key element of their origin story: God did not choose the people of Israel after all. The people of Israel chose God.

But how? Jewish interpreters who made this case paid special attention to Genesis 12, which opens with God's famous call to Abram (long before his name change to Abraham would signify his relationship with God). Strikingly, the biblical account begins with God speaking to Abram out of the blue, with no indication that this divine attention is in any way sought or earned. Early Jewish interpreters labored to change that. They treated God's call as a middle chapter in a story only partially recorded in the biblical text. In this broader story, Abram is not the pursued, but the pursuer. The covenant he receives, they asserted, is actually God's response to being discovered by Abram rather than the other way around.

This interpretation is found repeatedly, in varying forms. An early example appears in the Book of Jubilees, a text of the second century B.C.E. that retells the stories of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus. According to Jubilees, young Abram discovers God in the most unlikely of places: his father's idol shop. In this site of falsehood and iniquity, young Abram begins to worship God:

The lad [Abram] began understanding the straying of the land, that everyone went astray after graven images and after pollution. . . . And he separated from his father so that he might not worship the idols with him. And he began to pray to the Creator of all so that he might save him from the straying of the sons of men, and so that his portion might not fall into straying after the pollution and scorn. (Jubilees 11:16–17)

After Abram fails to dissuade his father Terah from worshipping idols, he decides to burn the store down:

Abram arose in the night and burned the house of idols. And he burned everything in the house. And there was no man who knew. (Jubilees 12:12)

It is only later in Abram's life — and 10 verses later in the Book of Jubilees — that Abram receives a call from God, when he begs for it:

And he prayed that night and said “My God, God Most High, Thou alone art my God, And Thee and Thy dominion have I chosen. And Thou hast created all things, And all things that are are the work of Thy hands. . . . And establish Thou me and my seed for ever That we go not astray from henceforth and for evermore.” (Jubilees 12:19–20)

God responds:

Come forth from your land and from your kin and from your father's house to the land which I shall show you, and I shall establish you as a great and numerous people. (Jubilees 12:22)

The text registers the act of choosing as Abram's, independent of any direct message from God. In this version of the story, the covenant is a well-earned fulfillment of Abram's overtures to God.

Such interpretations nimbly bypass the problem of chosenness. They also undermine the essence of Genesis 12 and other biblical stories about the Abrahamic family. A plain reading of the biblical text centers the *arbitrariness* of God's choice; the point of chosenness is that there was nothing Abram and his descendants could do that entitled them to God's covenant and abundant blessings. The biblical story is not about reward for virtue, but about undeserved love and the consequences of God's desire. Like that of his creations, God's desire is not rational. But it is consequential.



The meritocratic (or anti-chosen) reading of the covenant wends its way through later biblical interpretations, including ones that express vastly different outlooks than the one held by the Hebrew-speaking (and likely sectarian) author of Jubilees. The Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E.–50 C.E.), for instance, depicts Abraham as a model of the Greek exemplum, the figure who embodies every virtue and opposes every vice. In his treatise *On Abraham*, Philo describes how Abraham, in the process of achieving philosophical perfection, earns his chosenness by intuiting the existence of God:

For the Chaldeans were especially active in the elaboration of astrology and ascribed everything to the movement of the stars.... In this creed Abraham had been reared, and for a long time remained a Chaldean. Then opening the soul's eye as though after profound sleep, and beginning to see the pure beam instead of the deep darkness, he followed the ray and discerned what he had not beheld before, a charioteer and pilot presiding over the world and directing in safety his own work, assuming the charge and superintendence of that work and of all such parts of it as are worthy of the divine care. And so to establish more firmly in his understanding the sight which had been revealed to him the Holy Word follows it up by saying to him, "Friend, the great is often known by its outlines and shown in the smaller, and by looking at them the observer finds the scope of his vision infinitely enlarged. Dismiss, then, the rangers of the heavens and the science of Chaldea, and depart for a short time from the greatest of cities, this world, to the lesser, and thus you will be better able to apprehend the overseer of the All." This is why he is said to emigrate first from

the land of Chaldea to that of Haran. (Philo, *On Abraham*, 69–72)

Philo interprets God's call for Abram to go to Haran (and only later to go to Canaan) as an allegorical instruction to depart from the false teachings that dominated his society and enter a realm of true knowledge. This call, according to Philo, is a divine reaction to Abram's own discovery of God rather than an act of divine choosing.

The late first-century historian Josephus also describes Abraham as the prototypical exemplum by casting Abraham as an ideal servant of God who embodies Hellenistic values. In *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus follows Philo by having Abram philosophize his way into discovering God:

[Abram was] the first boldly to declare that God, the creator of the universe, is one, and that, if any other being contributed aught to man's welfare, each did so by His command and not in virtue of its own inherent power. This he inferred from the changes to which land and sea are subject, from the course of sun and moon, and from all the celestial phenomena; for, he argued, were these bodies endowed with power, they would have provided for their own regularity, but, since they lacked this last, it was manifest that even those services in which they cooperate for our greater benefit they render not in virtue of their own authority, but through the might of their commanding sovereign, to whom alone it is right to render our homage and thanksgiving. It was in fact owing to these opinions that the Chaldaeans and the other peoples of Mesopotamia rose against him, and he, thinking fit to emigrate, at the will and with the aid of God, settled in the land of Canaan. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.7.1; LCL)

Here again, Abram clashes with his Chaldean neighbors after reach-

ing the conclusion that only one god can exist. Unlike Philo, Josephus highlights Abram's military accomplishments and praises his expertise in astronomy. He even interprets Abram's sojourn in Egypt, which occurs later in Genesis 12, as an opportunity for Abram to converse with Egyptian wise men and teach them mathematical wisdom. Yet the accounts share a remodeling of the biblical text: Abram infers the existence of God before God ever speaks to him.

The midrashic compendium known as Genesis Rabbah picks up on this theme. In one passage that resembles a version of the tale about young Abram in Jubilees, Abram pranks his father's customers by destroying the idols and offers the shocked patrons the explanation that the idols destroyed one another after fighting over food (Genesis Rabbah 38:13). The amusing tale is later complemented with a more serious passage that shows Abram systematically inferring the existence of God:

The Lord said to Abram: "Go you, from your land . . . (Genesis 12:1)." Rabbi Yitzhak began: "Listen, daughter, see, and incline your ear. Forget your people and your father's house (Psalm 45:11)." Rabbi Yitzhak said: "This is analogous to one who was passing from place to place, and saw a building with a [candle] burning in it. He said: 'Is it possible that this building has no one in charge of it?' The owner of the building looked out at him and said: 'I am the owner of the building.' So, because Abraham our patriarch was saying: 'Is it possible that this world is without someone in charge?' The Holy One blessed be He looked at him and said to him: 'I am the owner of the world.'" (Genesis Rabbah 39:1)

This midrash, too, frames God's call to Abram as a response to Abram's inference of a single universal Creator. Like the other interpretations, it solves the problem of chosenness by inverting the

direction. It was not God who chose Abraham but Abraham who chose God.



None of this is organic to the biblical text. There, God's call to Abram comes as a surprise, not as a result of some transformative epiphany—philosophical, ethical, or otherwise—that leads Abram to infer God's existence. Indeed, it is God's unprompted initiation of the covenant that gives it its heft. Throughout the Pentateuch, God's abundant blessings are evident in words that highlight their unearned nature and the relationship that blossoms as a result. In Genesis, this keyword is *bracha*, blessing, which flows from God upon the family of Abraham. In Exodus, the word is *hesed*, a word that denotes not merely loving-kindness, but unending loyalty, and that is meant to flow first from God to the people, and to be reciprocated and flow from the people to God. In Deuteronomy, the keyword becomes *ahava*, love, which reflects the increased level of active devotion that God expects the Israelites to take on once they enter the Land of Israel. This love marks a deeper form of commitment, one founded not on the entitlement that comes from merit, but on gratitude for undeserved blessings even in the face of continual and seemingly compulsive transgression.

God's initiative is also what makes the covenant so complicated. No human can possibly reciprocate God's perfect love. Even Abraham does not manage to match the terms of the covenant by entering into it with love. Instead, he enters it with fear. Take, for example, the story of the Akedah, Isaac's near-sacrifice in Genesis 22. Having chosen Abraham for a relationship, God needs to know whether Abraham chooses God back. Astonishingly, Abraham is willing to kill his son as a demonstration of loyalty to God (the same God who gave this son miraculous existence). In preparing to do so, Abraham demonstrates

to God that he is fully invested in the covenant that God has offered him. God, in turn, approvingly recognizes Abraham's devotional fear:

And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then a messenger of the LORD called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." (Genesis 22:10–12)

Following this revelation, Abraham spots a ram caught in a thicket and sacrifices it to God in Isaac's stead. God again responds approvingly, declaring that Abraham's actions have provided his descendants with the merit to enjoy divine blessings:

The messenger of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I swear, the LORD declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command." (Genesis 22:15–18)

While God chooses Abraham long before the Akedah, the Akedah is God's way of giving Abraham an opportunity to choose God back. The rub, however, is that God desires a relationship based on love rather than fear.

This poses a challenge to Abraham. As a mortal human, even God's most obedient servant cannot reciprocate God's abundant blessings.

The relationship can never be equal. How then can Abraham make himself worthy of God's unearned love?

Hints as to how to answer this question begin to emerge prior to the Akedah story, in Genesis 18:25, when Abraham pleads for God to have mercy upon the wicked city of Sodom: "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall the Judge of all the earth not practice justice?"

The rabbinic authors of Genesis Rabbah saw in this story a key to understanding why Abraham merited receiving the covenant:

Rabbi Levi said, quoting Genesis 18:25: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not practice justice?" In saying this, Abraham meant: "If You wish to have a world, there can be no strict justice, and if you wish strict justice, there can be no world. But you seek to hold the rope at both ends; You wish to have a world and You wish to have strict justice. Choose one of them. And if You do not ease up a bit, the world will be unable to endure." The Holy One blessed be He said to Abraham: "You love righteousness and abhor wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with oil of gladness above all your peers (Psalm 45:8)." From Noah until you there were 10 generations, and from among all of them, I did not speak with any of them except for you. (Genesis Rabbah 39:6)

In this interpretative tradition, which has Abraham critique God for treating humanity with justice rather than mercy, God responds to Abraham's critique with delight and declares that his singular commitment to mercy caused him to merit the covenant in the first place. But there is another way to understand this story. The people of Sodom are not Abraham's family. They are not among the chosen. The way Abraham makes himself worthy of his chosenness is by

fighting for the unchosen. It is specifically out of his commitment to humanity that Abraham accepts the responsibility of his chosenness while rejecting its privilege. He is a reluctant politician. Abraham deserves power because he recognizes that the world cannot exist without divine beneficence.

While God is infinitely more powerful than Abraham, God's relationship with Abraham need not be equal but mutual. That God negotiates with Abraham is a display of respect for his moral convictions and a demonstration of faith in them. This is the kind of love God desires, a love based on mutual respect and partnership. God's relationship with Abraham and his descendants works because this family has the capacity to respond to their chosenness by partnering with God in taking responsibility for the world.

While Jewish interpreters tried to circumvent the problem of God choosing Abram, the covenant between God and Israel is incoherent unless it is initiated by God and founded upon blessings that Israel can only strive to merit. The very force of the covenant lies in the fact that God wants the people of Israel, and the challenge of chosenness is for them to rise to the occasion as Abraham did.

As the covenant transitions from one-directional blessings to uneven loyalty and finally to mutual love — from *bracha* to *chesed* to *ahava* — the covenantal people are expected to dig deeper into their own emotions and rise to the level of wanting God back. They are expected to continually strive to deserve the covenant by responding to God's call. Though buoyed by the guarantee of divine mercy, they must not become complacent, or de-incentivized to obey God's terms. Nor should they become distracted by the question of why God has chosen them. For if God did choose Abraham's family for a particular reason, the people would be able to opt out of the covenant if they disagreed with this reason.

The task of the Israelites and their descendants is not to justify

the fact that God wants them. Instead, their task is to reciprocate God's love, even when true reciprocation is impossible. Their task is to acknowledge that God wants the Jewish people as a partner, and that the Jewish people want God back. *

MALKA Z. SIMKOVICH is the editor-in-chief of the Jewish Publication Society. Her most recent book is *Letters from Home: The Creation of Diaspora in Jewish Antiquity*.