SAPIR

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

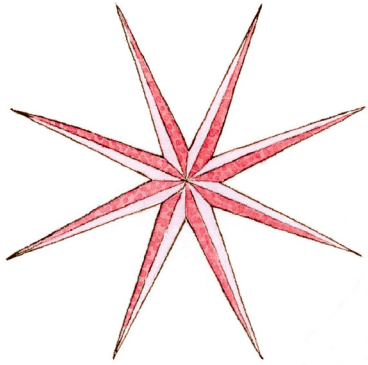
THE ISSUE ON

CHOSENNESS

Volume Eighteen *Summer 2025*

And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.

— Exodus 24: 10



Note on the cover: Of all the Bible's accounts of chosenness, Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3 is perhaps the most striking. The story of Moses, the Jewish foundling raised among Egyptian royalty only to escape to the wilderness, both recalls and foreshadows other stories in the Bible and Jewish history. God's choice of Moses is not the only part of the equation. It immediately requires Moses's agency, his noticing of the bush, and it will require much of him to fulfill God's charge and His choice of Israel. It is a story that continues to animate the struggle inherent in the Jewish concept of chosenness today.

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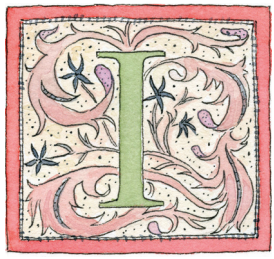

IN JANUARY 1983, the *New York Times* reported on a debate between John Murray Cuddihy, an associate professor of sociology at Hunter College, and Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, then the director of the Jewish National Resource Center. The topic? Chosenness.

The debate was part of a series called "Turning Inward: The Retribalization of the Jews." Cuddihy warned that chosenness leads to a "covert form of superiority" while Rabbi Greenberg argued that, for Jews, chosenness is less of a status and more of a calling. In fact, other peoples can be chosen as well, just for other callings.

But what is *our* calling? Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Man is a messenger who forgot the message." So what is the "message" that we Jews are supposed to be delivering? And is that message static, or does it change as the currents of history carry it and us from place to place and from time to time? Did it shift after the Holocaust, as Jews pondered a world that seemed indifferent to their destruction? Did it shift in 1948 when we once again had

a sovereign state for the first time in nearly two millennia? Did the message change on October 7, 2023, or on June 13, 2025?

For many Jews, the notion of bearing a special message seemed embarrassing, an outdated mode of thinking—"tribalizing," as the debate series put it. But many of those same Jews began finding their voice around 650 days ago. It seems that humanity did in fact need to be reminded of a divine message. They needed to be reminded that not every culture treasures life and protects its children at all costs. They needed to be reminded that evil does in fact exist. They needed to be reminded that freedom is fragile and must be protected. They needed to be reminded that all of humanity is created in the image of God and all are deserving of dignity. They needed to be reminded that study is important, not only to increase knowledge but to spot the rhyming patterns of history.

And they needed to be reminded that we can never give up on hope and redemption, that better days lie ahead and our mission is to work *together*, getting us to those better days a little sooner, a little faster.

Today's Jews have reclaimed their message with newfound urgency and clarity as the Jewish state fights to deliver it. This volume is for all of them. ✳

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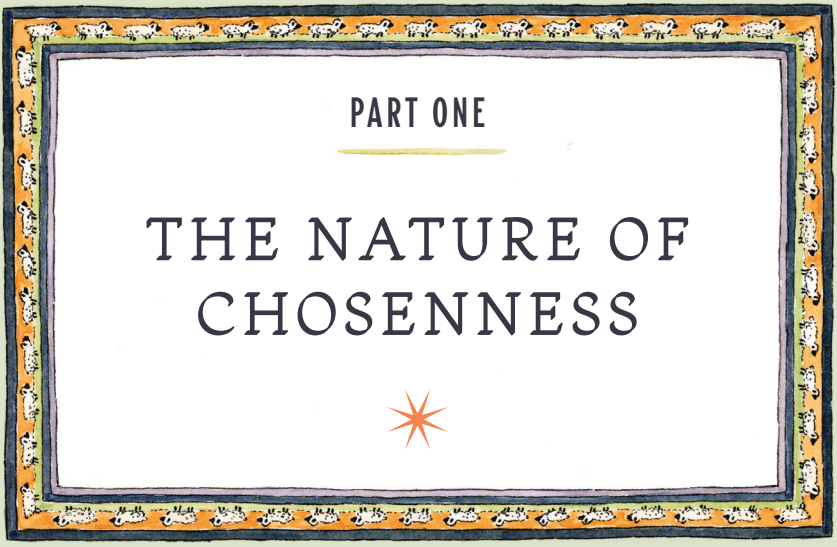

PART ONE

THE NATURE OF CHOSENNESS

HOWARD JACOBSON

The Unremitting Responsibility

Ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy…

N JUNE 2006, a young Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, was captured by Palestinian militants and abducted to the Gaza Strip. Five years later, he was returned to Israel in exchange for the release of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. Among the released was Yahya Sinwar, mastermind of the October 7 massacre. But that's an irony for another time. As is the question of what new atrocities might follow from the more recent exchange of prisoners for hostages. Yahya Sinwar is said to have read nothing but Jewish books in the time he was incarcerated. If the massacre is anything to go by, his studies were more the scholasticism of opportunism and contempt than a labor of love. By the time Sinwar was released, there was said to be no weakness in the Jewish psyche in which he wasn't versed, not least the willingness of Jews to pay any price to get their own people returned.

How to describe that weakness, if weakness it is, has exercised the minds of commentators on both sides of the conflict. Jews have been immemorially accused of driving hard bargains. So why

are we such soft touches when it comes to swapping prisoners for hostages? Do we love our own to the point of recklessness? Or is this to misdescribe what is in reality spiritual arrogance? Do we compute the value of Jewish life on a different scale from the one we use to compute the value of the lives of non-Jews?

Shortly after the release of Shalit in 2011, the late Deborah Orr, a well-regarded journalist for *The Guardian*, put the following gloss on the swap of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for one Israeli soldier:

> The deal is widely viewed as a victory for Hamas. . . . Conversely, it is being seen by some as a sign of weakness in Israel's right-wing prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.
>
> All this, I fear, is simply an indication of how inured the world has become to the obscene idea that Israeli lives are more important than Palestinian lives.

"Obscene" that we should think so contemptibly of Israelis? Or "obscene" of Israelis to think so contemptibly of Palestinians?

As her argument proceeded, it became clear that Orr meant the latter. Of the Palestinians, she said, "There is something abject in their eagerness to accept a transfer that tacitly acknowledges what so many Zionists believe — that the lives of the chosen are of hugely greater consequence than those of their unfortunate neighbours."

There is nothing new about upending Jewishness to make its sanctity show as self-importance and its virtues show as vices, but this version of topsy-turvydom is especially odious. At a stroke, the exorbitant price that militants had set for the release of a hostage they had held for five years, with little word of his well-being, was reconfigured as Israel's gesture of contempt, the final proof of its disdain for non-Jewish lives. For this preposterous scenario to have even a shred of plausibility, the infantilized Palestinians must be painted as having no role in the framing of the deal beyond an eager and abject acceptance of its terms, and the Jews must be returned to the desert of Deuteronomy where God called them His treasured

possession. Holy in their own eyes as a consequence, Jews became the model of moral heinousness for ever after.

I knew Deborah Orr. I worked with her briefly at *The Independent* before the sirens of *The Guardian* whistled her over. Her piece was a mystery to me because while it bore all the marks of classic antisemitism with a screw loose, she had never, in the time I'd known her, shown any predisposition to antisemitic views beyond a bit of de rigueur anti-Zionism. In fairness to her and *The Guardian*, the piece from which I've quoted came with a later footnote and apology acknowledging that the use of the word *chosen* was "inconsistent with Guardian guidelines." But the apology felt grudging, and the piece was not withdrawn.

Views similar to Orr's have since resurfaced as the negotiations for the return of the October 7 hostages have stuttered along. Yet again, on talk radio and the like, Israel's acceptance of Hamas's bloated terms is adduced as proof that it considers itself a chosen people and holds the lives of others in contempt. If this fantasy won't go away (somehow despite *The Guardian*'s footnote), it can only be because retaining it is too useful in justifying Jew-hate. Who, after all, can ever love a person who believes he is better than you because God told him so?

It was in my senior years at grammar school that my Gentile friends began quizzing me about "the chosen people." Hitherto, they had wanted to see my tail. I showed them in the shower. Look — all gone! Then they wondered why we were so good at making money. I told them my father was a taxi driver and showed them my frayed cuffs and collar. Chosenness came next but bore more the aspect of theological curiosity and was, for that reason, harder to refute. How did we know that God chose us? How did it make us feel? Did we look down on non-Jews? "No, only on you" was my preferred response.

The real answer was that we didn't think about it much, and

It was in my senior years at grammar school that my Gentile friends began quizzing me about 'the chosen people.' Hitherto, they had wanted to see my tail.

when we did, we made the joke later attributed to Tevye, and wished that God in His wisdom had either kept His preference to Himself or chosen someone else.

But I had private thoughts on the subject. I was, in ways I thought significant but couldn't explain, unlike my Gentile friends. I wasn't amused when one of my contemporaries turned on a timid teacher, abused him, threatened him, and stormed out jeering. The class erupted, yelling, cheering, thumping desks. A teacher had been belittled and one of our number had belittled him. I shrank into myself, embarrassed for the teacher, upset by the atmosphere of rebellious disrespect, and bewildered by what I felt. I knew why I wanted to cry, but I didn't know why others didn't feel the same. Or rather I did, but was unsure what to make of the reason I gave myself, which was that I was Jewish and they weren't. Did I feel superior on that account? How could I? I lacked my schoolmates' robustness. I lacked their gift for life. I was put together differently, and if, in my gloomiest moments of inadequacy, I comforted myself with thinking that I must have been put together out of finer material, is that really surprising? To turn feeling different into feeling special is a survival strategy. When the common consolations are denied you, what is more natural than to think yourself marked out to live a life beyond the common?

Did I believe myself to be "of hugely greater consequence" than the boys who had cheeked the teacher and the boys who'd cheered them on? How could I? In the race of life, they were still the winners.

I had to find another language for success, that was all. Whether or not I'd been chosen by God was the furthest thing from my mind. But if it turned out He liked my vocabulary, that was something.

Once, on a hot summer Sunday evening in Manchester, a street fight broke out between two drunken men, fathers of my friends. I lived in a respectable working-class area. Maybe 15 percent Jewish, where people owned their own modest terrace houses and grew stocks and geraniums in their front gardens. We played cricket and tennis in the street. If a ball broke somebody's window, we were shouted at; otherwise, it was quiet. The fight generated more excitement than I'd ever seen in the street. The combatants were stripped to their undershirts, and they laid into each other with their fists. Blood flew about. One or two women screamed from doorways for them to stop. Others gathered round and cheered, indifferent to the result, just roused by the sight of men in vests and the sound of bones breaking. My Gentile friends, too, bayed for blood and laughed. And I? Yes, I backed off and stifled tears. Eventually I ran home.

Too Jewish again? Well, that was what it felt like. I was deficient in blood lust and felt no kinship with those who weren't. But I didn't flee only to escape my own faint heart. I found the brutish spectacle just as unbearable for what it said of the combatants and those who thought it entertaining. I'd read in heder about Moses coming down from the mountain and seeing the children of Israel dancing around the golden calf. I understood his rage. This was why we needed Commandments.

Is it possible to wear shrinking as a badge of pride? Perhaps. I upset easily — okay? But it was more a badge of solace than of chosenness. No self-respecting God would have chosen me for shrinking well. It was some time later, when I was teaching at an undistinguished

college and failing to write the novels I had always wanted to write, that shrinking turned to shame and feeling special became more a hindrance than a help. I had not made the best of being different. I had failed to honor the obligations imposed on me by my Jewish upbringing and education. What exactly was expected of me, I didn't know. What promises I had failed to keep, I didn't know. But I held myself guilty of betraying a silent covenant.

Somewhere — at home, in shul (though I rarely went), in my reading of the Old Testament, in books by contemporary Jewish writers, and in conversations with my Jewish friends — I had picked up the idea that to be Jewish was to live a life of exemplary seriousness and purpose. Had I been a socialist, as several of my Jewish friends were, I'd have deployed my Jewish fervor to make a fairer society. Had I been religious, I'd have summoned eloquence to trumpet the magnificence of God's creation. But I was devout after my fashion. I revered the word. To be a Jewish man of letters meant to find in art the higher purpose in whose name the God of Deuteronomy had shown me favor. I too, no less than any rabbi, honored the Act of Creation. And if that necessitated beating myself up as one uncreative year followed another, what did I expect? A compliment from God is a burden from which no serious Jew has a right to expect relief.

Something like that, my dear Deborah, is what being a favorite entails. Forget the gross libel that Jews prize their lives above others. I prized my life above no one's except my own, the life I'd allowed mine to become — unfulfilled, lazy, self-doubting, disinclined. Believe me: To be treasured, by one's family or by God, is to take on the unremitting responsibility to live a life of worth and meaning. Nothing more. ✳

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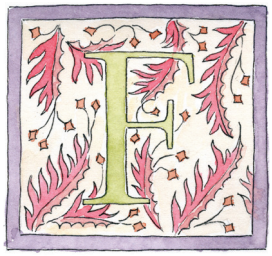
SHULI TAUBES

Divine Election and Its Contradictions

On walking humbly with God



OR THOSE of us in the Jewish education business, the concept of Jewish chosenness can often present a challenge. Few would deny that fostering a strong, authentic sense of Jewish self-worth, resilience, and pride is a noble goal. Or that this sense of self-worth ought not diminish that of other identities, some of which Jews hold in tandem with their Jewishness. We do this work by creating educational programming that empowers students to understand, articulate, and live their Judaism with conviction, and by transmitting knowledge of Jewish texts: the Torah, the Talmud, and the works of Jewish thought and commentary. If only these texts, composed over the span of several thousand years, together presented a coherent definition of chosenness. The problem is, they don't.

The Jewish tradition contains many statements on Divine

election, and their contradictions are enough to humble any single approach. Midrash Tanchuma, Terumah 9, for instance, boldly declares,

> If not for Israel, rain would not fall on the earth, and the sun would not shine, since it is in their merit that the Holy One illumines this world, and in time to come the nations of the world will see how bound up the Holy One is with the Jewish nation.

Yet the Hebrew Bible gives scarce evidence of this supposed merit. Taken as a whole, its 24 books could just as well serve as an extended indictment against the Jewish nation. Are the centuries of Jewish suffering a perverse reflection of Divine love, an indication of God's deep care and high expectations for the Jewish people? Or are they the opposite, an indication that God is through with the Jewish nation and its stiff-neckedness?

The many interpretations of this complex and central tenet of Jewish faith is rooted in the Bible's own multifaceted portrayal. The biblical texts themselves contain inherent tensions, as Harvard scholar Jon D. Levenson taught us in his seminal 1985 article "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism." While chosenness is undoubtedly a fundamental doctrine, there is no single, systematic, or precise philosophical approach to understanding it. Rather, the Bible speaks about chosenness in multivocal and mutually exclusive ways.

Here are some of them, explored via three orienting questions.

First, is Jewish chosenness eternal or conditional?

God's declaration to Pharaoh: "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exodus 4:22) portrays an unconditional, eternal bond, inherent and unbreakable like that between a parent and child. In contrast, just before the giving of the Torah, God tells the Israelites, "Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, *then* you shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples" (Exodus 19:5). This verse introduces clear

conditionality — Israel's status as a "treasure" is contingent upon obedience. Both metaphors — that of a parent and child and that of a husband and wife — are common in biblical and rabbinic sources and beautifully capture this enduring tension between eternal and conditional status.

Second, is chosenness an established fact or a spiritual ambition?

This tension can be framed as one between receptive status and active responsibility. *Chosen people* is often taken to suggest an ascriptive status, an inherent quality of the people, whereas *God chose* emphasizes a status that results from God's action. "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2) is not a description but a command, an aspiration — holiness is something one must strive for and achieve through action.

However, when the Bible says, "For thou art a holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be His own treasure, out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:6), it is as an established fact — you *are* a holy people, already chosen. This highlights a tension between a "quality-based" (or factual) and a "duty-based" (or responsibility-dependent) formulation of chosenness.

Third, what do the Jewish people mean to God?

Are the Jews uniquely special in God's eyes, or held to a higher standard of universal accountability? The prophet Amos proclaims, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). This implies a unique relationship, but one that comes with heightened accountability and potentially harsher punishment for misdeeds.

Yet the same Amos remarkably states, "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel? saith the LORD. Have I not brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). This startling verse seems to level the playing field, suggesting that

The Jewish tradition contains many statements on Divine election, and their contradictions are enough to humble any single approach.

God's involvement in the history of other nations is comparable to His bringing Israel out of Egypt. Is this a repudiation of Israel's difference, or a powerful rhetorical tool to emphasize universal accountability?

These examples underscore the crucial fact that the Torah and later Jewish tradition do not offer a monolithic or systematic conception of chosenness. Instead, they present a richly paradoxical tapestry of ideas.

The very first story of chosenness in the Bible, often overlooked, holds a key to understanding this complexity. In Genesis 4, Adam and Eve's firstborn son, Cain, brings an offering to God. Then, Abel, the secondborn son, brings an offering. "And YHVH paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering God paid no heed" (Genesis 4:4–5). Why was Abel chosen and Cain seemingly rejected? Classical interpretations offer various explanations. Some suggest that Abel brought a superior sacrifice reflecting greater devotion. Others, such as the commentator Isaac Abravanel, link Abel's pastoral occupation to a more natural, uncorrupted way of life compared with Cain's farming, a product of human artifice. For every explanation, a counterargument can be found within the text itself—Cain brought the first fruits, and agriculture was commanded to Adam.

Levenson, again, is helpful here. In *The Death and Resurrec-*

Chosenness is relational, particular to someone else's decision. Greatness is objective, universal, and dependent on one's own choices.

tion of the Beloved Son, Levenson notes that in God's preference for Abel lies the key to understanding chosenness: its inexplicability. The Bible offers no explicit reason for God's choice, and the absence of an explanation in the text is deliberate and meaningful. This pattern of seemingly unfathomable Divine selection will repeat itself time and again throughout the Book of Genesis, the Bible, and history. God's choices are mysterious, and attempts to solve the mystery will always tie his creatures into knots.

The clearest articulation of this is found in the story of Joseph and his brothers in chapters 37–50 of Genesis. Here, the "chosen" son Joseph suffers terribly at the hands of the "unchosen," his brothers. This narrative highlights two critical stages: First, Joseph, the chosen one, initially misunderstands himself. He is an immature youth with dreams of grandeur, believing that the favor his father shows him entitles him to superior treatment by his brothers. He infers nothing from his chosenness beyond personal privilege. The brothers, feeling rejected and threatened by him, tragically attempt to eliminate the chosen one.

Reconciliation, the second stage, becomes possible only when both sides prove able to accept their various roles within God's larger plan. As Joseph famously declares to his brothers at the end of their saga, "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:8). And it is only after the brothers, having been tested by Joseph (to see if they would now sacrifice themselves for the sake of Jacob's new beloved son, Benjamin), prove that they

are changed men — with Judah willing to take the heat — that Joseph is finally able to reconcile with them. The basic lesson of the story is that God makes choices for reasons that may not be immediately clear. It is a lesson in humility and the limits of human perception.

But there is a deeper lesson about humility in the story, and it is about the limits of chosenness. The hero of the story is not only Joseph but Judah, the fourth son who, by virtue of his own courage, leadership, and commitment to his younger brother's safety, becomes the father of kings. Judah is chosen by no one but himself. And in this choice, Judah forces the distinction between two easily conflated concepts: chosenness and greatness. Chosenness is relational, particular to someone else's decision. Greatness is objective, universal, and dependent on one's own choices.

The distinction between chosenness and greatness in the Bible could hardly be clearer, and yet it is so easily missed. In the Bible, the supposedly "unchosen" are not rejected. Ishmael, Abraham's literal firstborn, becomes the father of another great nation of 12 tribes. Esau becomes a chieftain, inherits a land and blessing from his father Isaac, and also reconciles with his younger brother. Neither chosenness nor greatness guarantees or precludes the other.

For this reason, Tosefta Sanhedrin 13, among other rabbinic sources, declares that salvation, entry into the world to come, or a direct relationship with God is predicated not on Jewishness, but on individual conduct. This establishes that spiritual greatness is universally attainable through good deeds. Jacob is Jacob, heir to the covenant. Joseph is Joseph, the apple of Jacob's eye. Judah is Judah, the father of kings. Levi is Levi, the father of priests. Ishmael is Ishmael, and Esau is Esau, both the fathers of nations. All with their great differences and different greatness.

So, where does this somewhat perplexing exploration leave us? The doctrine of Divine election, of chosenness, is inextricably woven into the fabric of the Jewish story and faith. At

the core of that story is an unearned affection. God loves and chooses the Children of Israel simply because God loves and chooses them — an ultimate act of Divine grace that remains, in essence, beyond our comprehension. The source of this choice is not only unknown but unknowable, which is exactly the point. The point is to know how unknowable it is, and to be humbled by the limits of that knowledge.

To interpret chosenness as a warrant for arrogance, supremacy, or privilege is to be Joseph at the beginning of the story rather than the end: ignorant, self-absorbed, and naïve about the complexities of God's mysterious design. It is a version of chosenness that is self-satisfied and smug, and a Judaism based on this version of chosenness will remain stale and complacent at best.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is about the mystery of God's plan, and its lesson is humility. We do not know the whole story, and we can't. The path of the chosen is as uncertain as that of the unchosen. It compels us, as the prophet Micah says, to "walk humbly" with our God, making generous space for and deeply appreciating the immense value that other nations, cultures, and religions bring to the world. You are here to learn about God and his world, to teach what you learn to others, and the rest of God's children are here for that as well. We all have different lessons to learn and teach.

The ability to appreciate the mystery of God's world and yet embrace our role in it is the deep lesson of Divine election. The Jewish tradition has a word for this ability: *bitachon*. Variously translated as faith, confidence, or security, it is the recognition of the small but crucial role every person and every nation play in God's unfolding script. Understood correctly, it fosters a dynamism, accountability, and thriving in the face of adversity. This ability can be cultivated only with humility. A version of Divine

election that lacks humility will fail in its mission. It will conflate chosenness with greatness and thereby misunderstand both. ✳

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RICHARD HIDARY

Moses at the Bush

Without chosenness, there is no Israel

URING THE 15 years that Israel controlled the Sinai Peninsula, an archaeological excavation there uncovered something remarkable. Scholars revealed a set of large clay storage jars (pithos) from the ninth century B.C.E. featuring ink inscriptions that mention the personal name of the biblical God, "YHWH." This, together with a 14th-century B.C.E. temple inscription mentioning the same divine name associated with a nomadic tribe, prompted Bible scholars to theorize that nomadic tribes in the Sinai Desert maintained a belief in YHWH before the Israelites did. If true, this would mean that the Israelites had in fact adopted some of their key theistic tenets from their desert neighbors.

One of these neighbors may have been none other than Jethro — the Midianite priest and father-in-law of Moses — whom

the biblical text already credits with having advised Moses on organizing a judicial system. In this reading, Moses did not independently discover God as much as recognize the value of Jethro's spiritual teachings. Moses then acted as the conduit to broadcast these lessons to Pharaoh, to the Israelites, and to the world. Interestingly, the Midianites also play a significant role earlier in the biblical story, pulling Joseph out of the pit and selling him into slavery in Egypt, where he would later rise to prominence and establish the house of his father, Jacob.

The stories of Exodus 3 and 18, by this reading, encapsulate a historic cultural and religious transfer of ideas from one people, the Midianites, to another, the Israelites, who in turn, adapted and shaped those beliefs into a robust and lasting covenant.

This historical reconstruction, based on the archaeological discovery, sheds light on an otherwise cryptic verse in the concluding poem of Deuteronomy 33:2, "YHWH came from Sinai, and rose from Seir to them. He shone forth from Mount Paran.... At His right hand was a fiery law for them." The verse suggests that belief in YHWH by the various peoples to the north and to the east of Sinai set the background and led directly to the lawgiving by that same Being to the Israelite people. Even without the benefit of archaeological support, the sages, as recorded in the Sifre, concluded from this verse that God offered the Torah to all the peoples of the region. They each questioned its requirements and decided to opt out of its moral and spiritual demands. Had any of them chosen to accept, they would have been God's treasured nation.

> "And He said: YHWH came from Sinai" (Deuteronomy 33:2): When the Lord appeared to give Torah to Israel, it is not to Israel alone that He appeared, but to all of the nations. First, He went to the children of Esau, and He asked them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They asked: "What is written in it?" He answered: "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). They answered: "The entire essence of our father is murder," as it is written... "And by your

> sword shall you live" (Genesis 27:40). He then went to the children of Ammon and Moav and asked them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They asked: "What is written in it?" He answered: "You shall not commit adultery." They answered: "Lord of the Universe, illicit relations is our entire essence."…He then went and found the children of Yishmael and asked them: "Will you accept the Torah?" They asked: "What is written in it?" He answered: "You shall not steal." They answered: "Lord of the Universe, our father's entire essence is stealing."…There was none among all of the nations to whom He did not go and speak and knock at their door, asking if they would accept the Torah…Only Israel accepted the Torah with all of its explanations and inferences. (Sifre Deuteronomy 343)

In this dramatized retelling, Israel was actually God's last pick. This last-chosen people is simply the only nation to have chosen the responsibility of practicing God's laws and enacting His vision for the world.

But why Moses? Why was he chosen as the intermediary?

Born an Israelite, raised as an Egyptian prince, married to the daughter of a Midianite priest, Moses has a composite background that's meant to convey his bona fides. But Exodus 3 offers a deeper explanation for why Moses was chosen to shepherd the Israelites from Egyptian idolatry to biblical monotheism.

Moses first hears from God while shepherding Jethro's flock in the Sinai Desert. The verses introducing the encounter contain an essential message about human agency:

> Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When YHWH saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (Exodus 3:3–4)

Israel's treasured status is fundamentally conditional, conditional on the work it is here to do. If Israel completes its mission, it will lose its raison d'être.

God calls to Moses only after Moses himself takes the initiative to turn from his routine to notice something extraordinary. There may have been a dozen other shepherds who either did not see or did not care enough to veer from their path to investigate. By noticing the bush, by his curiosity and fascination, Moses — raised as an Egyptian prince — proves himself the person to shepherd the Israelites out of Egypt and partner with God as his messenger. His perceptiveness leads him to realize a God independent of the natural world, who creates energy rather than depends on it — a fire that does not consume its fuel.

Alternatively, the fire represents Egyptian persecution, and the bush is Israel, which continuously suffers but is not destroyed. Moses as an individual and Israel as a nation are the ones who go out of their way to notice the One liberatory power of the universe. And they recognize the responsibility inherent in that noticing, to take the initiative to build and maintain the righteous society God envisions.

This view conforms with the universalist beginnings and ambitions of the Torah, which addresses its message to all of God's creatures. Israel's treasured status is due to its willingness to uphold and spread that message, including God's equal care for all of humanity. This is the spirit of Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 that rejects all racism or claim of superiority of any individual or group: "For a human mints one hundred coins with one stamp and they

are all similar to each other. But the King of kings, the Holy One blessed be He, mints each human with the stamp of primordial Adam and yet not one of them looks similar to his fellow."

The message is that every human being is created equal in the image of the One God and is unique, worthy, and infinitely valuable. This sublime origin story matches an equally lofty vision for the end of days, when all peoples of the earth will recognize and serve God as One (Zephaniah 3:9; Isaiah 2:2–3; Zachariah 14), seemingly leaving no special status for Israel.

So what does that mean for Israel's chosenness?

It means that Israel's treasured status is fundamentally conditional, conditional on the work it is here to do. If Israel completes its mission, it will lose its raison d'être.

Even 800 years ago, Maimonides recognized that Christianity and Islam had accepted the biblical God and that the "entire world has already become filled with the mention of the Messiah, Torah, and commandments. These matters have been spread to the furthermost islands and to many stubborn-hearted nations" (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11:8).

The liberal world order has also proven to be an expression of the message. Its system of politics and morality is based on the biblical premise that all humans are created equal. While the Torah in its time was at the forefront of rights and opportunities for slaves, women, the poor, foreigners, and the animal kingdom, modern morality and law have extended the Torah's principles and are a fulfillment of them.

If the tiny Jewish nation has now done its part in transmitting these ideas to the vast majority of religious adherents and the world's most powerful countries, might this be the end of the Jewish mission and, to paraphrase Francis Fukuyama, the end of Jewish history? Why are the Jews still around?

Ironically, the spread of monotheism via Christianity and Islam led to exactly this assertion by those religions. Their claims to have superseded Judaism and YHWH's bond with Israel were effectively making this point—that Israel had been made obsolete by the universalization of its God.

But, in the most literal sense, they have been wrong. The Jews have not disappeared. Why not?

The answer is embedded in the words of the covenant itself. In Exodus 19:5–6, God prefaces the Ten Commandments with a conditional declaration: "Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The command makes clear that Israel's treasuredness is contingent on its fulfillment of the commandments. But it also doesn't give Israel a way out. It tethers Israel's very peoplehood to the work Israel is meant to do. Even if Israel should veer away from the covenant, and exile and persecution should befall it, the prophets emphasize that God will always protect a remnant of Israel as a seed for a future restoration of its mission and prominence. The Israelites are not granted the freedom to exist as a nation outside of the covenant.

More important for our day, the Torah does not give the Israelites the authority to decide when they have completed their mission. Although repeatedly threatening to destroy Israel if it fails in the mission, God stubbornly refuses to let it fail. Take for example God's threat to destroy Israel after the sin of the Golden Calf. Moses responds to the threat with his own, "Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!" (Exodus 32:32).

There is something deeply instructive in this statement. Moses exists for us only because of this record. Were his name to be erased from the book, it would be the same as having never existed. This ultimatum and his advocacy for Israel's survival are the essence of his existence.

What makes Israel worthy of any mention in this same record, indeed, worthy of any identity at all, is its mission. If it abdicates that mission, it loses its identity. Chosenness is therefore intrinsic to Israel's very existence. The covenant is not a feature of Israel but its essence, or if you prefer, its very name: Israel—*the one who struggles with God*. Israel can never become an un-chosen people. The Jews are chosen or they are nothing at all.

Chosenness therefore represents a constant existential requirement, and the loss of it an existential threat. Either Israel continues to spread YHWH's mission, as it was spread to the Israelites, or it ceases to exist, just like the Midianites.

The threat, then, is that by not accepting the responsibility of chosenness, Israel will become like its neighboring tribes, extinct. In the words of the prophet Amos, "'To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Cushites'—declares the Lord. 'True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir. Behold, the Lord God has His eye upon the sinful kingdom: I will wipe it off the face of the earth!'" (Amos 9:7–8). But how is this to be reconciled with the same prophet's claim, quoting the Lord, in the following line: "But, I will not wholly wipe out the House of Jacob"?

The point is that for Israel to exist as a nation, it must be on God's mission. The concept of chosenness cannot be extricated from the concept of Israel itself. There is no version of Israel that can exist outside of its namesake. And if, as the Torah makes clear, there is no chosenness without responsibility, Israel's task, like that of Moses, is to take responsibility, to notice where there is more work to be done.

And that goes for the State of Israel as well. While the young nation still struggles in many areas, these challenges and tensions may prove to be the laboratory of its next great gifts to the world. Having helped to birth both monotheism and liberalism, Israel now struggles to be both a Jewish state and a liberal democracy. It is a fitting tension and not an easy one to resolve. But if the State

of Israel can find a way to do so, it will be an invaluable model for Western democracies the world over on how to be both spiritually cohesive and politically and socially free. Israel's war ethics as it battles for its safety are being tested in ways unprecedented in any other democracy. Here again, if it can succeed in its long-term defense and remove terrorists while still minimizing casualties, it can set a paradigm for other nations facing similar threats.

Despite all of its military, political, and social challenges, Israel is rated one of the happiest countries on earth. It also has one of the highest birth rates among Western democracies, reflecting its optimism for the future. It is a melting pot where religious and secular people from dozens of countries have come together to fulfill a biblical dream of return. But that return must also be a return to Israel's Mosaic beginnings, the willingness to be the lone shepherd to notice the fire in the bush, and the choice to move toward it. ✳

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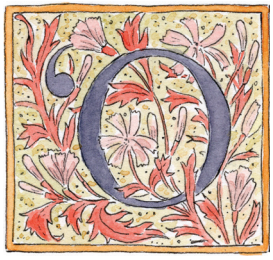
DAVID BRODSKY

The Origins of Chosenness

The indigeneity of an ancient idea



NE OF THE MOST prominent facets of the Jewish character is their exaggerated conceit and selfishness, rooted in their belief that they are the chosen people of God."

Thus opined Haj Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the Palestinian national movement during the pivotal decades before Israel came into being. The mufti went on to add that the Jews have "no limit to their covetousness…have no pity and are known for their hatred, rivalry and hardness." He was the decisive figure behind Arab opposition to Jewish immigration. So strong was his hatred that he teamed up with Hitler during World War II in an attempt to import the Nazi extermination of Jews to the Middle East. As far as the mufti was concerned, the Jews and their notion of chosenness had no place in Arab Palestine.

Ironically, this notion of chosenness that the mufti so hated is native to the land he loved. And it wasn't unique to the Jews. At the heart of the Arab–Israeli conflict is a profound misunderstanding of what chosenness is and where it comes from. It is intrinsic to many of the ancient indigenous peoples of the region.

On the east bank of the Dead Sea once lay the kingdom of Moab. There, the Moabites had a special relationship with the god Chemosh. As told in the sole surviving document from ancient Moab, the Mesha Stele, when Mesha, king of Moab, went to battle, he did so at Chemosh's command. When he conquered territory, he did so not just for Moab, but for Chemosh as well. When Moab lost territory to Omri, king of Israel, Mesha attributed it to the fact that "Chemosh was angry with his country." And when the Moabites retook territory, Mesha declared that "Chemosh restored it." The only other god that is clearly named in the Mesha Stele is the Israelite god, YHWH, but only in the context of Mesha having stolen YHWH's altars and having "brought them before Chemosh" after Mesha took Nebo from Israel at Chemosh's command.

In this ancient artifact of one of the Israelites' closest neighbors, we see not only that the Moabites considered themselves, like the Israelites, to have a special and reciprocal relationship with their national god, but that they also understood the Israelites to have the same special relationship with YHWH. It was understood that the Israelites were the chosen people of YHWH, and that the Moabites were the chosen people of Chemosh.

Such was the biblical world of the ancient Fertile Crescent, where nations were chosen by gods who fought for and alongside them. The Hebrew Bible describes this arrangement very clearly. In Deuteronomy, for instance, the presiding priest is said to declare to the Israelites before they go off to battle, "Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them. For it

is YHWH your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory" (Deuteronomy 20:3–4).

Sometimes the Bible even offers a play-by-play of the teamwork. Watch the action in 1 Samuel 7:10: "As Samuel was presenting the burnt offering and the Philistines advanced to attack Israel, YHWH thundered mightily against the Philistines that day. He threw them into confusion, and they were routed by Israel."

This explains why YHWH was called "a jealous god" and why idolatry was compared to adultery in the Hebrew Bible—why idolatry was such a grave sin in ancient Israelite culture. To offer sacrifices to another people's god was literally to feed the enemy. It was an act of profound infidelity.

In this ancient world order, every nation believed (and wanted) their god to be the strongest. When nations fought, the winner often attributed the victory not only to their god's superior might but also to their special relationship with that god. The battle was about convincing the enemy neighbors not only of the god's strength but of the people's ability to call on it. In 1 Samuel 4, for example, the Philistines become frightened when the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the Israelite camp, crying, "God has come to the camp. . . . Woe is us! Who will save us from the power of this mighty God?" (1 Samuel 4:7–8). As the young David put it when he faced Goliath in battle, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of YHWH of Hosts, the god of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day YHWH will deliver you into my hands. . . . The whole land shall know that Israel has a god" (1 Samuel 17:45–46).

When we read the Mesha Stele in this context, it makes sense that when the Moabites lost to the Israelites, they attributed it to Chemosh's anger with them rather than to his defeat by YHWH. This logic allowed the people to maintain hope in their god's strength and the possibility that he would prevail another day, once his people had repented. An angry god can be appeased, but a weak god can never save his people. Rather than acknowledge

Multiple peoples of the Fertile Crescent saw themselves as the chosen people of their god. The only reason why the Jews became '*the* Chosen People' is that their god, YHWH, came to be considered *the* universal God by billions of people via Christianity and then Islam.

that YHWH might be stronger than Chemosh, which would mean the Israelites were stronger than the Moabites, the Moabites could retain a sense of control over their destiny.

The Israelites of course employed the same logic, making it the central drama of their national literature, the Hebrew Bible. According to 2 Kings, the Northern Kingdom of Israel lost to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. not because the Israelite god, YHWH, was weaker than the Assyrian god, Ashur, but because the Israelites violated their relationship with YHWH: "This happened because the Israelites sinned against YHWH their god . . . and worshipped other gods" (2 Kings 17:7).

When warring peoples share this logic, they weaponize it against each other, as the Assyrian imperial emissary does in his argument to the people of Jerusalem right before the Assyrian siege of the city (2 Kings 18:22): "And if you tell me, 'We are relying on YHWH our God,' is he not the one whose shrines and altars Hezekiah did away with?" The enemy emissary is scaring them into doubting that their god will come to their aid, since YHWH is still angry with their king for having removed his altars. The emissary also taunts them, appealing to their fear that their god may not be able to withstand the Assyrian king (backed by his god):

> Do not listen to Hezekiah, who misleads you by saying, "YHWH will save us." Did any of the gods of the other nations save his land from the king of Assyria? Where were the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where were the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Did they save Samaria from me? Which among all the gods of [those] countries saved their countries from me, that YHWH should save Jerusalem from me? (2 Kings 18:31–35)

This list of nations and their gods is yet another illustration of the fact that various peoples of the Fertile Crescent shared the theology of chosenness, each applying it to themselves. (In the Sennacherib Prism, written in the early seventh century B.C.E. but from the Assyrian perspective, Sennacherib credits *his* god, Ashur, for his victories.)

These gods were largely territorial. YHWH not only had a special chosen relationship with the Israelite people, but he also had that same special relationship with their land on the west bank of the Jordan River. As described in 2 Kings 17, when the Assyrians moved foreign peoples into the newly conquered Israelite territory, replacing the Israelites they had forced out, lions attacked the newcomers until the Assyrians brought a priest of YHWH back to teach them how to properly serve the god of that land.

The notion of the Jewish people as "the chosen people," then, distinctively marks it as indigenous to the region. Multiple peoples of the Fertile Crescent — especially those in the southwestern tip of the crescent that in 1922 would briefly become British Mandate Palestine — saw themselves as the chosen people of their god. The only reason why the Jews became "*the* Chosen People" is that their god, YHWH, came to be considered *the* universal God by billions of people via Christianity and then Islam. When the Christians and Muslims chose to follow the Jewish god, the Jewish people

came with him. In other words, it was Christian and Islamic civilizations that made the Jews *the* Chosen People. Had Jesus been a Moabite or Ammonite, the world might have come to consider Chemosh or Milcom rather than YHWH as the universal God, and the Moabites or Ammonites might have come to be seen as the Chosen People.

And why weren't they? Because they couldn't be. The Moabites, Ammonites, and most other identities that had preceded the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests were long gone by the time of Jesus. The Jews are the last people of this region to preserve this ancient indigenous theology. That, too, is a quirk of history — or really geography. Because Judah was at the southwestern edge of the Fertile Crescent, it was one of the last kingdoms to have been conquered by the empires from the north and east. As these empires — the Assyrian and the Babylonian — expanded across the crescent, they conquered many "chosen" peoples before expelling them one by one into captivity and forced assimilation into the new empire.

That assimilation was extensive. The Sennacherib Prism records the Assyrian king's conquests of the numerous peoples of the Fertile Crescent.

> The Arabs, Arameans, and Chaldeans, who were in Erech, Nippur, Kish, Harsagkalamma, Kutha and Sippar, together with the citizens, the rebels, I brought out, as booty I counted them. On my return (march), the Tu'muma, Rihihu, Iadakku, Ubudu, Kibrê, Malahu, Gurumu, Ubulu, Damunu, Gambulu, Hindaru, Ru'ûa, Pukudu, Hamrânu, Hagarânu, Nabatu, Li'tâu, Arameans (who were) not submissive, all of them I conquered. . . . As for Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke . . . like a caged bird, I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city.

How many of these peoples have you heard of? While their descendants may still live on, their distinctive national or tribal

identities, cultures, and writings are lost to history. The two notable exceptions are, as fate would have it, the Arabs and the Jews, though they survived for different reasons.

The Jews survived because Sennacherib never actually conquered Jerusalem. After destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E., the Assyrians assimilated its 10 tribes the same way they did all the other peoples, hence the term "the 10 lost tribes of Israel." Not so the other ancient Israelite kingdom to the south, the kingdom of Judah, with its seat in Jerusalem. According to both the Sennacherib Prism and 2 Kings, when the Assyrians reached Judah in 701 B.C.E., they conquered most of the towns, taking away their inhabitants, but the capital city of Jerusalem just barely managed to survive the siege. This remnant regrouped, reestablished the Kingdom of Judah, and reigned for another 115 years. They and their descendants are the ancestors of the Jewish people.

The Arabs survived the Assyrian conquest for two key reasons. First, not because they held firm to their cities but because they had no cities to hold. The ancient Arabs were mostly nomadic, making them harder to conquer than urban or agrarian peoples. Once conquered, they didn't stay in place: They simply went back to being nomads. Second, desert is much less valuable than agrarian lands, especially to an agrarian people like the Assyrians. So the Assyrians didn't spend nearly as much of their effort conquering the vast desert regions of the Middle East, where the Arabs lived.

For these separate reasons, the Jews and the Arabs would be the only two Semitic peoples from the ancient Near East to survive with their ancient languages and cultures largely intact (though both would continue to change and evolve in the ensuing millennia). By the time the Babylonians finally conquered the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E., it was only a few decades before the Persians would arrive to conquer the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E. And when the Persians came, they introduced a very different political and theological system, one that allowed the Jewish people to embrace their culture again.

Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians who had uprooted and assimilated the conquered peoples, the Persians fostered religious pluralism within the empire. Instead of the "my god can beat up your god" mentality of the Fertile Crescent peoples (including the Assyrians and the Babylonians), the Persians conceived of a unified empire of gods above to reflect their empire of peoples below, all working together to support the welfare of the empire as a whole. In this conception, there was national harmony under the rule of a single supreme king, the Persian king, and religious harmony under the leadership of a supreme god, Marduk. You might say it was their form of chosenness.

Upon defeating the Babylonians and taking control of their lands, the Persian Cyrus the Great proclaimed the restoration of regional indigenous practices, including that of the Jews in Jerusalem. The Cyrus Cylinder, an artifact that records this proclamation, portrays this decision as not of Cyrus but of the Mesopotamian deity Marduk, "the great lord" and head of all the other gods of the empire (presumably including YHWH). Instead of competing with the other gods, Marduk is now worried about how the other gods have been treated: He hears their complaints and is disturbed that they have been uprooted from their traditional shrines. This becomes the theological pretense for the radical change in political strategy. Cyrus seeks to let each people return home to their traditional worship of their respective ancestral gods. It is for this reason, Cyrus explains:

> From [Shuanna] I sent back to their places…the sanctuaries across the river Tigris—whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them…at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to

their sanctuaries, every day before Marduk and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds.

It may have helped create the political harmony Cyrus sought, but by the time of his proclamation most of the conquered peoples had already been under Assyrian and Babylonian assimilationist rule for two or even three centuries, far too long for them to maintain their old identities and ways. This includes the 10 tribes of Israel, who were conquered 136 years earlier than the kingdom of Judah, which had been in captivity for only a few decades when the Persians freed them. This span of decades was long enough that reconstituting the old ways was a daunting task that required the aid of a written record (the Torah—which suddenly appears on the scene at this time), but not so long that the Jews had become lost to history. The story of Purim takes place during this Persian period and is a cautionary tale of conflict between peoples within the empire mediated by the monarch.

It's not by accident that this shift away from Semitic competition between the gods would be introduced by the Persians, who were from an Indo-European rather than a Semitic culture. For the Indo-Europeans, including the Greeks and Romans who would conquer the region after the Persians, there were gods of different forces, but not of different peoples. The god of war was the universal god of war, whether one called him Ares or Mars, and the goddess of love was the universal goddess of love, whether one called her Aphrodite or Venus, or any other name. Indo-Europeans expected everyone to offer a sacrifice to the god of the sea before going on a voyage, regardless of the name they gave that god.

Cyrus intentionally hybridized the two systems to accommodate his empire: a system of gods particular to each of the peoples of his empire participating in an empire-wide cooperative. Jewish identity with its fidelity to a particular god could thus continue to develop and find its place under Persian pluralism, until the arrival of the Greeks in the fourth century B.C.E. ushered in a millennium

of Greek and Roman pure universalism in the place of Persian pluralism. By the time of the Greek and Roman conquests, the Jews were the last of their theological type still standing. These later European conquerors never understood Semitic theology the way the Persians had.

The story of Hanukkah takes place during this period, and it represents a confrontation between the Jews' fealty to their particular god, on the one hand, and the Greeks' adoration of all the gods of the universe, on the other. This conflict persisted into the Roman period, leading to multiple revolts and ultimately the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. This is the world Jesus was born into.

So, by the time of Jesus, YHWH was the only indigenous god left in the Fertile Crescent, and the Jews one of the last remaining indigenous identities (Arabia still had indigenous gods, but they would be displaced by Islam). With the Christianization of the Roman Empire, and the Islamic conquest of large swathes of the Middle East and North Africa a few centuries later, YHWH became the God of two imperial religions and their billions of followers the world over.

But the story of YHWH and his people in the Hebrew Bible remains the pre-colonial literature of a small Israelite kingdom from the ancient Fertile Crescent. They and their indigenous notion of chosenness have survived nearly three millennia of imperialism. And people like the mufti, who now worship that god, can't stop blaming them for it. ✳

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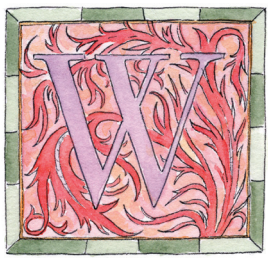
KIAN TAJBAKHSH

Reading Isaiah in Tehran

Chosenness and its shadows



WHEN A JEWISH JOURNAL invited me — a former political prisoner in Iran — to reflect on the theme of chosenness, I was both honored and unsettled. Honored, because I've long admired the Jewish tradition's moral seriousness. As my teacher, the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus, taught, the Hebraic theme of chosenness names a calling: to take responsibility in the embodied life of this world — what existentialists would later recast as the primacy of existence over essence. It stands in contrast both to the rational abstraction of Athens and to the world-denying escape of gnostic fantasy. It is a calling to encounter the full material reality of the world and to shun the desire to escape it.

And yet I was also unsettled. Because I have lived another side of chosenness — one that had nothing to do with moral calling

and everything to do with being marked as a figure, a threat, someone to be silenced.

In 2009, I was arrested and imprisoned by the Iranian regime. For a decade, I had worked with civil-society organizations promoting democratic reform. That work, and my identity as an American and Iranian dual citizen, made me a convenient scapegoat. I was not addressed. I was instrumentalized — disappeared into the apparatus of power. It was as though the regime wanted to escape my existence.

So chosenness cuts both ways. I became a symbol of the enemy. Not seen, but mis-seen. Not addressed, but purged. And so I learned: Being singled out can mark the beginning of responsibility or the end of personhood. It can be a summons or a sentence.

I have lived both. I was targeted. I was later received. This essay is an attempt to explore that doubleness — *chosenness and its shadows* — not to resolve it, but to sit inside its tension. What does it mean to be chosen, if we strip away both the pride and the punishment?

The Jewish concept of chosenness has long fascinated me, not as a theological claim to superiority, but as a philosophical framework for grappling with exile, moral burden, and the challenge of living with difference. I am not Jewish and claim no expertise in Jewish philosophy or debates about Israeli national identity. Yet I have found this tradition illuminating for two reasons: first, because of my own experience of being marked, mis-seen, and exiled; and second, because nations such as Iran — where belonging, power, and spiritual aspiration are deeply entangled — struggle in parallel ways with the ethical tensions of identity, justice, and collective purpose.

Chosenness, at its best, has meant being addressed, called not to privilege but to answerability: to live in the world as if one were accountable to something beyond oneself. As I've come to

understand it, chosenness names a call not to status but to moral seriousness. And by responsibility, I mean not mere obligation, but — drawing on what I've learned from thinkers such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas — the difficult work of seeing the other not as a mirror or a threat, but as a presence that demands response. "The *Thou* confronts me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one," as Buber put it.

This broader sense of being summoned — chosen through relation, not inheritance — finds echoes within Jewish scripture. Cyrus, the Persian king, is called Mashiach (the anointed one) by Isaiah — not because of lineage, but because he served justice and liberation. Naaman, a Syrian general, is healed by Elisha not through entitlement, but through a humbled act of response. These are not Israelites, yet they are called, engaged, transformed. In turn, they answer, engage, and transform. Such figures affirm that chosenness can extend beyond inherited or tribal belonging into action, into encounter, into the difficult work of hearing and answering a call.

Of course, that ideal is not always sustained. The call to answer can become entangled in the compromises of history. When religious or political worldviews anchor their ideals in the structures of power, the result can be distortion. The distortion comes not necessarily out of malice, but from the tension between moral aspiration and the realities of statehood. Once embodied in law and sovereignty, even the most generous visions of reciprocity must coexist with borders, institutions, and coercive law. This is not unique to any tradition. It is a danger wherever fallibility is forgotten and certainty replaces humility.

At the extreme, when congealed into ideologies — what Eric Voegelin called gnostic politics, which promise redemption through secret knowledge and world transformation — they mimic the structure of religious chosenness while discarding its burden. In Voegelin's sense, gnostic political movements, whether religious

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or secular, begin with a hatred of the world as it is and end with an attempt to purify or destroy it in pursuit of a totalizing vision. These movements claim moral purity not for the purpose of wrestling with human fallibility, but to eliminate it — by purging the world of its impurities. This is both a scientific error and a moral one. For human fallibility is a scientific fact with moral and political implications.

The Iranian regime, akin to those primitive gnostic political ideologies in its glorification of a particular social group, marked me not for communion, but for erasure. To purge me from society as though I was not a fact of that society.

I felt the sharp edge of this inversion firsthand. When I was imprisoned by the Iranian regime for more than a year and held as a political prisoner and hostage under house arrest for a further six, it was not because I was ignored. It was because I was seen and mis-seen: reduced to a type, cast as a threat, turned into a warning. Their vision of divine order had no room for heterodoxy — for other ways of being, thinking, or imagining what it means to belong.

And yet, something in me resisted that erasure. Not out of heroism, but out of the fact that I was part of the culture that sought to banish me. I could not comply with their script. I could not let the language of chosenness be seized by its destroyers. I could not let morality be recast as theological narcissism.

After the final rupture with Iran — my third exile, following an early uprooting to boarding school, the upheaval of the 1979

revolution, and then my imprisonment in 2009 and forced departure in 2016—I stopped thinking of return. I had tried to love the country I was born into. But there comes a time when love without reciprocity becomes a form of self-erasure. You cannot keep loving a nation that disappears you, imprisons you, denies your existence.

So I chose something else. I chose New York. And New York let me choose it. That, I've come to believe, is a higher form of welcome.

That might sound like a practical decision. But it was also existential. A choice about how to live and where to place meaning. In exile, you learn that identity is not only what you inherit. It is also what you move toward. To choose a city of strangers and friction, of languages that spill over one another, of secular cacophony and sacred fragments—that, too, is a kind of spiritual act.

In much of Jewish tradition, exile is not merely a punishment, but a condition of meaning. A people cast out, scattered, unhomed—yet still called to remember, to respond, to repair. Exile is not simply separation from a place. It is the unsettling awareness of estrangement—from certainty, from belonging, and sometimes from ourselves. And yet in that estrangement, meaning can begin. The famous Persian poet Hafez-e Shirazi captured this in his couplet: "Meaning lies counter to narrowed habit bound / For through life's disheveled strands was my meaning found."

That is how I came to see my own exile: not as negation, but as a form of ongoing responsibility.

To be unchosen by one land is not the end. It may be the beginning of a different kind of chosenness—the kind that isn't conferred, but claimed.

There was a moment—seared in memory—when the idea of chosenness took a strange and public form. In 2007, the Iranian regime imprisoned me and held me in a solitary-confinement cell in Evin Prison for more than four months and eventually used me as

a political pawn. As a dual citizen of the United States and Iran, I was chosen to be an example. That same year, President Ahmadinejad came to New York to speak at the United Nations. From that stage he, predictably but no less shamefully, denied the Holocaust and refused to acknowledge Iran's political prisoners, including me. In the theater of global diplomacy, I had been disappeared.

But something unexpected happened. Lee Bollinger, then president of Columbia University, introduced Ahmadinejad in an open forum — and said my name. He confronted a foreign leader on American soil and declared that a Columbia graduate had been imprisoned in Iran without due process and that I would have a place again at the university once I was free. Years later, true to his word, he welcomed me back to teach.

That gesture wasn't institutional policy. It was personal conscience. Bollinger, an eminent legal scholar of the First Amendment, spoke from a tradition of moral seriousness rooted in freedom of expression and human dignity. In a moment when he could have remained abstract or polite, he chose me in exactly the opposite way the regime had. He chose me for solidarity rather than sanction.

Perhaps this is what chosenness can look like: not privilege, but recognition. Not separation, but the refusal to let someone disappear. In that moment, Bollinger didn't speak in generalities. He named a person. He broke the silence that so often surrounds distant suffering. And in doing so, he affirmed that to be seen is to be remembered — and, sometimes, to be restored.

My experience of the Islamist regime in Iran taught me that the promise of otherworldly rewards — virgins in heaven, perfected glory — is more than a cliché of fanatical violence. It reflects something deeper and more enduring: a cultural and theological refusal to bear irony, paradox, and the brokenness and otherness at the heart of the human condition. It is an urge to escape the inescapable. In this view, there is no room for the stranger — not even the stranger within. I became the projection of the regime's inability to recognize its own inner strangeness.

Deaf to Freud's insight — what Julia Kristeva called "the 'other scene' within us" — the mullahs could not tolerate the stranger in the world, because it could not endure the stranger in themselves. I came to see the Islamic regime as a species of gnostic politics that rejects the world as it is rather than try to redeem it or repair it. Instead of loving "the stranger who resides with you . . . as one of your citizens . . . as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34), it sought to banish this strange and inherent quality of the world as it is.

Reinhold Niebuhr understood this deeper structure of ethical and theological alterity. He saw in the biblical imagination a persistent ironic reversal: The preference for "the poor, the foolish, the maimed, the sick, and the weak" would lead to "ironic success" — those whose suffering awakens a humility unavailable to the triumphant. For Niebuhr, these reversals are not recorded by history; they belong to a deeper judgment — "to Him 'who resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble.'" This, he wrote, is the symbol of a permanent tension between all historical achievement and the final meaning of life. True knowledge of the limits of human striving begins with awareness of that contradiction. "The divine wisdom and purpose must always be partly hid from human understanding," he said, before reminding us of Isaiah's words, quoting God's: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8).

There is, I believe, a secular practical form of this awareness — what Karl Popper called fallibilism: the humility to live without final answers, to build a liberal open society rather than a perfect one. (I was imprisoned by the Iranian regime while serving as the representative of George Soros's Open Society Foundations in Iran in the 2000s — an effort to promote exactly that ethos, years before OSF lost its way.) That humility — of not pretending to know the whole — echoes the prophetic tradition of being addressed, not assured.

That was the spirit I tried to defend in Iran, and what I was

punished for. The regime's rejection of this openness, of this deeper sense of alterity, is what ultimately exiled me.

Chosenness, if it is to mean anything worth keeping, must make room for that contradiction. It must begin not with conquest or certainty, but with trembling: like Abraham, uncertain but answering; like Moses, stammering his way into speech; like the prophets, weary and still speaking.

In my own life, I have known what it is to be chosen by those who wished to break me. And I have also known what it is to be chosen — quietly, without fanfare — by those who saw in me something worth sheltering. Both moments leave their mark. One disfigures. The other restores.

That, I believe, is the enduring moral power of chosenness: not that it sets us apart, but that it requires us to answer. ✳

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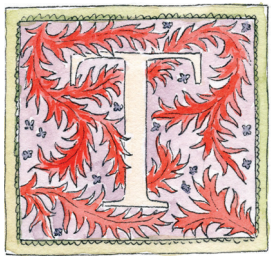
PART TWO

THE PROBLEM OF CHOSENNESS

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 inter-

pretations 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

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.

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 reaching 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. ✳

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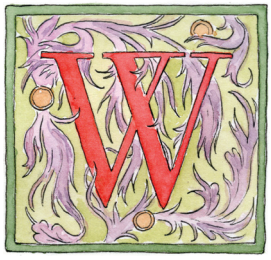
ADAM MINTZ

The Paradoxes of Conversion

Choosing to be chosen



WHAT'S in a name?

When a person converts to Judaism, he often takes on a new name, a Hebrew name, to signify that transformation. The name chosen usually depends on any number of factors: an affinity for a certain biblical character; something that symbolizes his Jewish journey; a name that bears similarity to the name given at birth. But every Hebrew name contains two parts: the proper name and the name of one's parents, the latter of which a convert cannot choose. Conversion makes one a child of Abraham and Sarah, the biblical patriarch and matriarch. Becoming a "Jew by choice" means joining Abraham's and Sarah's family.

What's interesting about this is that the Hebrew term for a convert, *ger*, is first uttered in the Bible by none other than Abraham, but in a context that means something else entirely. When he wishes to purchase a burial plot for his wife Sarah, he says to Ephron the Hittite, "I am a stranger [*ger*] and an inhabitant

among you." Here, as elsewhere in the Bible, the term *ger* refers to a stranger who has not joined the host group. Why did the rabbis choose a name that denotes outsiderness rather than a more inclusive term?

Maybe the rabbis were attempting to highlight something fundamental in the transition—by joining the family of Abraham and Sarah, a convert becomes like the stranger that Abraham was to his neighbors. Alternatively, it could be the opposite, that by joining Abraham and Sarah's family rather than being born into it, the convert remains on some level a stranger within.

This linguistic curiosity reflects a fundamental strangeness at the heart of Jewish conversion. While other religions have historically invested vast energy into conversion, Jewish attention to the concept is rather scant: a handful of rabbinic texts and a smattering of conversion stories in the annals of Jewish history (some real, some not). The Jewish tradition has long been at pains to accommodate itself to conversion. The Mishnah instructs, "If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him: Remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it is stated: 'And a *ger* shall you neither mistreat, nor shall you oppress him'" (Exodus 22:20). The Mishnah's notable omission of the remainder of the Exodus verse, "for *you* were strangers in the land of Egypt," makes it doubly strange. If the verse is speaking of our forefathers in Egypt as strangers, is the implication that *all* Jews are really the children of converts?

The Mishnah's dance with the term *ger* can be read as an attempt to resolve the tension inherent in chosenness by turning it ever so slightly fluid. How can an already-chosen people accept strangers into its chosen status? Apparently by reminding ourselves that before we were a nation of priests, we were a nation of strangers. As Yossi Klein Halevi has eloquently put it, "The Jews are a story we tell ourselves about who we think we are; without our story, there is no Judaism."

Isn't it interesting, then, that the story we tell ourselves about our future is so focused on our conversion past? The Book of

Ruth tells the story of a convert who, like many converts of today, comes to Judaism via a romantic partner. But the death of that partner only solidifies the convert's commitment to Jewish peoplehood. "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people" (Ruth 1:16). While the rabbis debate whether Ruth was allowed to become a member of the Jewish community in spite of the fact that she was a Moabite, the text of the Book of Ruth ends by identifying this new member of the community as the ancestor of King David and, ultimately, the Messiah.

If the Jews are a story we tell ourselves about who we think we are, we sure do think that our messianic future will be born of conversion. The inclusion of Ruth in Judaism's biblical canon is a foundational statement about how inextricable converts are from the Jewish story, where it's been, and where it's going.

More and more people have joined this story in recent years. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, I was involved, as a Modern Orthodox rabbi, in not quite 50 conversions per year. In 2023, it was 75, and in each of the following two years, it has been pushing 200. I have heard anecdotally of similar trends in the Reform Movement. As these numbers rise, the Jewish community is being thrown headfirst into many new challenges that are at once theological, social, and historic. It is the current generation's task to meet them as creatively as did our forebears, who redefined the word *ger* and who incorporated Ruth's story into our own, because today's converts are tomorrow's Jews.

To put it succinctly, it is one thing for a convert to be chosen by God and by the rabbi administering the conversion. It is quite another for that convert to be chosen by the Jewish people, and that responsibility lies with the Jewish community at both a local and global level. The convert's choice to join the Chosen People

The inclusion of Ruth in Judaism's biblical canon is a foundational statement about how inextricable converts are from the Jewish story, where it's been, and where it's going.

generates an obligation on that people to choose them back. It is an obligation fundamental to their identity as a community with a divine mission, in the words of Leviticus, "The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I, YHVH, am your God" (Leviticus 19:34).

We have much to learn from Ruth in this regard. Just as the Jewish tradition incorporated Ruth into its story, Ruth incorporated the Jewish story into her own. In my work with converts, I have witnessed many versions of this firsthand. Recently, one of the conversion candidates exclaimed after her immersion in the mikvah that she "always felt part of the Jewish people" even though she had grown up Catholic. At no point in the process did I suggest to her that this was the case. But in going through the conversion course, learning about Jewish practice, belief, and history, she became identified with the story that we tell ourselves. Converts who identify their place among the Chosen People through their decision to become Jews by choice tell their own story in a manner that places them in the middle of Jewish history and the Jewish experience, similar to how the Jewish tradition has subtly written conversion into its own story. This mutuality in narrative is something that should be more actively welcomed in the conversion process.

The conversion process itself emphasizes that, by joining the Jewish people, the convert is accepting the fate of the Jewish people

Just as the Jewish tradition incorporated Ruth into its story, Ruth incorporated the Jewish story into her own. In my work with converts, I have witnessed many versions of this firsthand.

as her own. Prior to immersion in the mikvah, the members of the rabbinical court supervising the conversion ask the candidate a series of questions:

1. Do you accept the God of Israel to the exclusion of all other gods?
2. Do you reject all other religions except Judaism?
3. Do you recognize that the enemies of the Jews do not distinguish between Jews who are born Jewish and those who convert to Judaism?

These questions leave no room for discrepancy between the fate of the convert and that of the Jews. At the same time, the recent proliferation of conversion, even Orthodox conversion, has brought with it a set of new challenges that would have been unthinkable in previous generations, some of them exceedingly delicate. I'll share a recent example.

A woman, non-Jewish by birth and now partnered with a Jewish man, approached me wishing to convert together with their toddler son. However, she also has a teenage daughter from an earlier relationship who is not going to convert. The daughter is worried that if her mother converts, she will no longer be

able to celebrate Christmas with her, including having a tree in their home.

Is there space within the convert's choice to join the Jewish people, and given her affirmative answer to the above questions, to fulfill her older daughter's desire? There are of course several elements to this question: the relationship between the mother and the daughter, the relationship between the mother and her Jewish family members, and, of course, the mother's relationship with her Judaism. How is a Jew-by-choice to navigate this challenge to her evolving Jewish story, and how are we, the Jewish community and its rabbinic leaders, to do the same?

Challenges like this one that commonly arise in a blended Jewish family are issues that, for the most part, are not addressed by classic rabbinic authorities. They arise because of the unprecedented social integration of Jews into Western liberal societies, and they are far from simple. But neither was the case of Ruth in her own time. The responsibility of rabbis today is, as it was in the times of the Mishnah, to address these challenges in a way that's sensitive to both the human and religious dimensions of new circumstances. While many Orthodox rabbis today would choose not to convert one member of a blended family if any member of that family will remain non-Jewish, I would argue for an alternative approach, informed by the view of Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovits, former chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, particularly as it pertains to Jewish chosenness. Rabbi Jakobovits writes:

> In fact, I believe that every people — and indeed, in a more limited way, every individual — is "chosen" or destined for some distinct purpose in advancing the designs of Providence. Maybe the Greeks were chosen for their unique contributions to art and philosophy, the Romans for their pioneering services in law and government, the British for bringing parliamentary rule into the world and the Americans for piloting democracy in a pluralistic society. The Jews were chosen by God to be "peculiar

unto Me" as the pioneers of religion and morality; that was, and is, their national purpose.

According to Rabbi Jakobovits, the chosenness of the Jewish people is not a devaluing of other nations or systems of belief, nor does it preclude the chosenness of others. Rather, it is a realization of the unique contributions of every nation, including the Jews. This concept of multiple chosenness does not devalue a convert's parents, or her children and their religions. It affirms them as stories of their own, and the application of this concept requires making space for those stories as the Jewish one changes. I advised the mother to place the Christmas tree in a discreet room in the home, demonstrating that it does not represent the beliefs of the mother or the family as a whole. In the spirit of Rabbi Jacobovits, the mother is not rejecting the religion of the daughter. Yet, at the same time, she is drawing a necessary distinction between what is appropriate for the daughter and what is correct for the rest of the family.

There is certain to be disagreement among rabbis and within the community over how to address some of the emerging challenges of this new era, but everyone should recognize that as unprecedented as some of these challenges are, transformations are always unprecedented. The Mishnah's transformation of the word *ger* was unprecedented, but the rabbis of the time understood their responsibility both to individual converts and to the Jewish community they were joining. They made the necessary transformation to push the Jewish story forward, and they did it by employing the ethical thrust of the biblical text.

The biblical term *ger* refers to the stranger and not the convert, but it asks us to love that stranger even if she remains apart. How much more so ought we love those who join? The love ethic reflected

in the Torah for the *ger* must be extended to the *ger* of today, those who choose to join the Chosen People. And as the description of Ruth's kingly descendants makes clear, we, Jews by birth and Jews by choice, are all destined for the same story. ✳

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MICHAEL OREN

A Chosen State?

After agonizing months of war, the concept of 'am sigula' remains powerfully relevant

S ISRAEL the chosen state? Syllogistically speaking, it must be. If we Jews are the chosen people and the Land of Israel is the chosen land, then the people who dwell in that land, and the Jewish state established on it, must also be chosen. But chosen how, one must still ask, and for what? Can a country founded largely on secular and universalist principles lay claim to a uniqueness grounded in spiritual, particularist ideals? Is Israel, a country widely accused of the darkest transgressions — racism, colonialism, apartheid, and genocide — chosen only to be doomed?

As a divinely bestowed status, chosenness is introduced in the Book of Exodus 19:5, "Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples." The Children of Israel receive this declaration just prior to receiving the Ten Commandments. The notion reappears in Deuteronomy 7:6–8 and 14:2. But in all these cases, the term *chosen people* would be a mistranslation of the Hebrew *am sigula*, "a treasured people." And even that is conditional; Israel

must accept and keep the law. While God chooses Israel — so the Talmud teaches us — Israel chooses God.

With the exception of a brief reference in Amos, chosenness all but disappears from most of the biblical narrative. The Jews are depicted as just another Mediterranean people, no better, and sometimes worse, than any other. Their sole distinction is their special relationship with God and their continued obligation to His law. Not until the post–Second Temple exilic period does chosenness resurface as a defining Jewish characteristic. It does so by turning on its head the classic Christian view of Jewish suffering as proof of the loss of God's love. On the contrary, the rabbis argue, the Jews' suffering is a sign of their chosenness. "Just as the olive only produces oil after being crushed," the tractate Sanhedrin (101a) tells us, "so, too, Israel fulfills its purpose through suffering."

Suffering as the source of chosenness has a higher, eschatological, purpose. The Jews have been chosen to be a "light unto nations" (Exodus 19:6) and to spread monotheism, such that "all peoples on Earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Commentators from Rashi and Maimonides to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch agreed: Chosenness does not bestow a superior or privileged status on the Jews, but rather a profound moral and spiritual responsibility. Chosenness is the Jews' duty to humanity.

Israel's chosenness had great meaning for medieval and pre-modern Jews. It peppered their liturgy from the Aleinu to the Kaddish prayer to the benediction for reading the Torah. But for Zionism, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, chosenness was not necessarily a blessing, but a challenge.

For many of its secular pioneers, Zionism was a revolt against chosenness. It was an attempt to become a nation like every other. Rooted in the suffering caused by statelessness, chosenness was an affliction that only Zionism could cure. For all their differences, Herzl and

Jabotinsky similarly dreamed of creating a modern, largely secular, liberal Jewish state, a normal state like the many others that dotted the map, the France or Austria of the Middle East.

Yet Zionism's normalizing mission, its attempt to extricate Jewish peoplehood from chosenness, was only partially successful. Many Jews refused to abandon their religious beliefs and, together with Christian Zionists, viewed the rebirth of Jewish statehood in the biblical homeland as a millenarian event. That state would be, in the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption." Celebrating its creation was an article of faith.

Despite these dissenters and their religiosity, secular Zionism managed to establish a state that in many ways did resemble France. The music, the museums, the universities and research centers, the food—all were appurtenances of normalcy. Yet the Jewish impulse to chosenness, even among those who eschewed it, proved irrepressible. No sooner had the state come into being, as it grappled with seemingly insurmountable economic and security challenges, than it dispatched agricultural delegations to Africa and South Asia. The Foreign Ministry opened a special department, Mashav, for aiding developing countries. The IDF deployed rescue missions to disaster-struck areas abroad. While these humanitarian initiatives also brought diplomatic advantages to a small and embattled state, they served as evidence of Israel's moral preeminence—implicitly, its chosenness.

Not surprisingly, then, Israelis are ambivalent about their chosenness. We want our soldiers to be judged by the same standards applied to others while at the same time insisting that the IDF is the most moral army in the world. We strive for normal ties with foreign nations, but with the United States, where tens of millions still believe in Israel's chosenness, we claim a special relationship. Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, the majority of Israelis agree, but that same majority takes pride in the assistance we render to other nations in need. We are Israel First and *tikkun olam* all at once.

Much of the world, by contrast, shows no such ambivalence about

For many of its secular pioneers, Zionism was a revolt against chosenness. It was an attempt to become a nation like every other.

choosing Israel. The singling out of Israel by the United Nations and other international bodies, the media's malign obsession with the Jewish state, and the transformation of elite universities into hotbeds of anti-Zionism—all suggest that Israel is, in some obverse way, special. Israel's detractors today see it much as the medieval church regarded Jews, as chosen not for admiration but for contempt. Those who denounce it as a "white settler state" and call for its destruction differ little from those who, centuries ago, considered Jews to be the spawn of Satan and condemned us to expulsion or death. Today's anti-Zionists, much like the Jew-haters of the past, adduce our wholesale demonization as proof of our inherent wickedness. After all, those countless keffiyeh-clad college students chanting "from the river to the sea" can't be all wrong.

In response, Israelis could assert, as our ancestors did, that the world's hatred of us is a sign of our chosenness—that accusations of genocide, like the earlier ones of deicide, indicate that we remain, even as a secular state still yearning for normalcy, chosen. But, again, chosen for what?

Prior to the massacre of October 7, the answer might have seemed simpler. Israel supplied the world with an example of a country that can reconcile East and West, tradition and modernity, a democracy with a nation-at-arms. Israel showed how a small country could welcome and absorb massive waves of immigrants, reverse desertification,

and desalinate seawater. Israel gave humanity Waze, Mobileye, the components of every cellphone, computer, and system that form the mainstays of 21st-century life. Israel demonstrated that a country short of natural resources, short on allies, and surrounded by lavishly armed foes, could produce one of the planet's healthiest and happiest societies, with universal medical care, a solid infrastructure, and a polity that, despite never knowing a minute of peace, has never experienced a moment of nondemocratic governance. Chosen indeed.

After October 7, though, the questions of whether Israel is chosen and, if so, for what purpose, became far more complex. The state failed to fulfill its most basic duty of defending itself and its citizens, a failure hardly consonant with chosenness. On the other hand, we were once again thrust into the role of a people who both suffered and were accused of deserving that suffering. But on what basis, besides being martyred and scorned, can Israel still lay claim to being chosen?

Arguably, the post–October 7 war reaffirmed Israel's chosenness as never before. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis voluntarily returned to army service for hundreds of days at a stretch. They confronted an enemy that stood for everything abhorrent to Western civilization; that hid behind civilians and shot from inside schools, mosques, and hospitals; and that massacred, mutilated, raped, and kidnapped hundreds of innocent people. Israel also showed how a nation so grievously threatened can still reduce civilian casualties to the lowest number proportional to combatants in any contemporary war—a point demonstrated by the meticulous research of John Spencer, chairman of Urban Warfare Studies at West Point's Modern War Institute.

Millions of Israelis—an estimated 80 percent of the entire country—meanwhile volunteered to help the wounded, house the displaced, and tend to the fields of short-handed farmers. Throughout, the Israeli birth rate, already the highest among industrialized societies, continued to climb.

The jihadist forces facing Israel in this war are identical to those increasingly threatening all democracies today. Israel has demonstrated how those nations can be defended and has reminded

them why they are worth fighting for. We've shown how a society, though traumatized by loss and haunted by the hostages' ordeals, can still rally for the common good. We are a testimony to the ways in which a beleaguered but determined people can indeed survive. Perhaps that is what we've been chosen to do.

I write these words as Israeli forces are in the process of inflicting untold damage on Iran, eliminating its military leadership, neutralizing its ballistic arsenals, and, most fatefully, preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons. While it is premature, only hours after it began, to predict the long-term impact of Operation Rising Lion, it seems likely that the regional war so many feared has not erupted, nor has Israel suffered a crippling counterattack. More propitiously, Israel's preemptive strike, much like that of 1967, promises to create an entirely new Middle East. Peace between Israel and Lebanon is possible, with Syria, Saudi Arabia, and, conceivably, with Iran under a different leadership. Once again, Israel has shown the world — and especially an increasingly timorous West — how a nation can stand up and defend itself from evil. Israel, once more, has earned the distinction of chosenness.

More than 3,000 years after God and the Children of Israel chose one another, and after many agonizing months of war, the concept of *am sigula* remains powerfully relevant. Whether on the battlefield or in the Israeli streets where opposing protests sometimes clash, it is a status we must always strive for and a title we must relentlessly earn. Israel, built by the chosen people on the chosen land, must prove it is chosen not by suffering and enduring hate, but by showing strength, seeking justice, and embracing peace. Not only to the world but to ourselves, Israelis must affirm that chosenness is, in fact, our normal. ✳

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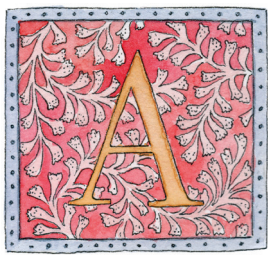
DAVID WOLFOWICZ

Judaism Is Not About Antisemitism

Beyond a reactive identity



AFTER A WAVE of pogroms shook Russia in the early 1880s, the Zionist thinker and physician Leon Pinsker wrote that the Jew appeared in the eyes of the world as "a ghostlike apparition of a living corpse." It was a fitting metaphor. The Jew of his day was neither fully alive nor fully dead — suspended between assimilation and distinctiveness, homeland and exile, purpose and passivity. The world, Pinsker argued, could not reconcile the presence of a people so long divorced from their land, so long removed from their mission, and so visibly unable to explain their own role among the nations.

Pinsker's diagnosis of antisemitism was that it is a chronic, multisystem disease. Its symptoms — the charges that Jews were beggars, exploiters, vagrants, or conspirators — were beside the point. To treat those accusations individually would be as futile as

treating a fever without addressing the infection. The real illness, Pinsker argued, was fear — fear of the stateless, landless Jew who lived among the nations but belonged fully to none. His prescription was not to plead for tolerance, but to demand dignity. The Jews, he argued, must "auto-emancipate" and take responsibility for themselves, their identity, their future.

More than a century later, antisemitism — what Pinsker called Judeophobia — persists across cultures, ideologies, and continents. As Pinsker rightly understood, antisemitism is not a glitch. It's a feature — a condition — of Jewish existence.

Contending with this condition means confronting the very nature of the thing many modern Jews have resisted: chosenness.

A recent Voice of the People survey asked more than 10,000 Jews what most concerns them. The top response by far was rising antisemitism. That has now become the dominant frame of Jewish discourse. Billions are poured into Holocaust education and "fighting antisemitism."

But if antisemitism is a chronic condition, as Pinsker argued, the best that can be hoped for is remission, not a cure. Like the return of a dormant cancer, antisemitism is not a problem to be solved once and for all, but an alarm to be heeded.

What I want to propose is that antisemitism is simply one expression of chosenness — the reality that Jews are perpetually marked as different, whether they choose that difference or not. When Jews experience this form of chosenness, they can treat it as either something that is happening to them, which leads them to fight it, or something happening for them: as an alarm reminding them of their chosenness.

If antisemitism functions as an alarm, an inherent aspect of the condition of chosenness, then Jews must respond to this wakeup call in the most effective way: not by silencing the alarm

or attempting to reason with it, but by rising to meet the challenge of the day. The current rise in antisemitism summons us to fulfill the active calling of chosenness, to be "a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

This biblical notion of chosenness is far less about who the Jewish people are and more about who they are called to be. As the 19th-century scholar Samuel David Luzzatto explained, "God did not choose Abraham for Abraham's sake alone, but so that he would be the father of a holy nation. And the choosing of the nation, too, was not for their own sake, but for the sake of all humanity."

The choice facing the Jews is therefore not whether to assimilate, which they can never fully do. It is whether to shape an identity based on passive otherness or to engage in active chosenness. The former is an act of falling victim to the discourse of antisemitism while the latter is the impulse to take up the sacred mission of the Jewish people—living with covenantal purpose, modeling a distinctive moral life, and serving as an example to all of humanity. Passive otherness, by contrast, is when Jews are made to feel different, regardless of whether they choose to model distinctiveness or run toward assimilation.

Antisemitism reminds us that we are different. But only Judaism can tell us why.

The history of the Jews can be seen as a dialectic between these two forms of separateness. What history and memory both seem to show is that when Jews actively embrace their calling as a chosen people, the condition of chosenness tends to manifest less as antisemitism and more as philosemitism. But when Jews retreat from that calling, or worse, define their identity primarily in opposition to antisemitism, the condition of chosenness manifests more intensely as antisemitism.

If antisemitism is meant as an alarm for Jews, it should be treated as an air-raid siren for everyone else. Periods of violent antisemitism often coincide with moments of heightened tension within a

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society. That tension usually has to do with the competing forces of progress and tradition. The historian Jeffrey Herf described the rise of Nazi Germany as "reactionary modernism" — a fusion of industrial technology with a rejection of liberal Enlightenment values. Fascist movements could embrace modern tools while longing for tribal purity. The Jew became the target of a society at war with its own identity.

But the core elements of this phenomenon predate and extend far beyond 20th-century fascism. Across history, periods of rapid technological and social change have consistently produced what we might call reactionary modernist responses — societies that struggle with a world that is rapidly changing around them and spiral into a crisis of identity. In such moments, Jews have repeatedly found themselves singled out for persecution. And it is easy to understand why. The Jews are a multi-millennia embodiment of that struggle.

While there is no justification for the scourge of antisemitism, there may be an explanation. The Jewish people have long been exemplars of what may be termed "conservative progress." They occupy this position in the stories of several civilizations. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 32:7, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch rendered the verse as "Remember the days of yore, contemplate the changes of generations." He explained that the Jewish mission is

Jewish identity and tradition have a lot to say about the latest crisis of humanity: the challenge of living and transmitting a sense of meaning in a time of vast social and economic upheaval.

to remain rooted in ancient wisdom while fully engaging with new generational challenges. Jews, at their best, model how to embrace beneficial change without losing essential identity — the very challenge that reactionary modernists such as the Nazis struggle to overcome. When Jewish communities fail to model this type of synthesis — when they fail to live as an ancient people in a modern world — they undermine their very purpose of acting "for the sake of all humanity."

In 1492, Spain, like the rest of Europe, was on the brink of transformative change. Printing presses were circulating early humanist texts, and Columbus was poised to sail west. Yet amid this promise, anxieties lurked. Venetian editor Hieronimo Squarciafico had recently warned that "printing had fallen into the hands of unlettered men, who corrupted almost everything," expressing a fear that newfound means of discovery might undermine cultural cohesion. Spain's decision to convert or expel its Jews revealed a society convinced that new horizons could be reached only by silencing any echo of its formerly diverse soul. And while, according to some estimates, 100,000 Jews chose exile in August 1492, more than double that number chose to convert to Catholicism.

By the late 19th century, the center of Jewish life had shifted eastward. More than 5 million Jews lived in the Russian Empire. At that time, Russia was struggling to industrialize and catch up to the rest of Europe. Railroads, financial institutions, and cities expanded. New ideologies flooded in, and Jews were caught in a crosscurrent. The Orthodox rejected modernity; the *maskilim* (secularists) abandoned tradition. Neither approach modelled for Russia how to evolve without coming apart. Pogroms and restrictive laws followed, leading to an exodus of more than 2 million Jews between 1881 and 1914. (This was the world in which Pinsker called for auto-emancipation.)

Germany, for a time, did offer a model of Jewish balance. But as Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk warned at the beginning of the 20th century: "He [the modern Jew] will think that Berlin is Jerusalem . . . and then a storm will come." And it did. Germany's fusion of modern technology with ancient resentments became the most pure and terrifying reactionary modernism in history.

The age of AI that is upon us is teeming with that volatile tension, with the potential to explode into reactionary modernism. As Tyler Cowen and Avital Balwit recently wrote, "We stand at the threshold of perhaps the most profound identity crisis humanity has ever faced." Outlining the stakes, they continued: "This technology can usher in an age of human flourishing . . . [but also] a crisis about what it is to be human at all."

This may well explain why antisemitism is on the rise. The AI revolution is creating the same anxieties about progress and identity that historically produced antisemitic responses. One form of reaction to identity crises of our day has been identity politics — characterized by an obsession with immutable characteristics. But the framework that casts some as innately virtuous and others as oppressive cannot hope to reclaim the essential identity of humanity. It echoes the "purity of blood" doctrine from 15th-century Spain.

With the steady decline in prominence of identity-politics frameworks, the Jewish people may, counterintuitively, be well

positioned to heed the calling of Jewish chosenness by modeling a conservative progress that can help humanity navigate its identity crisis in an age of change. Jewish action is not protest or viral slogans. It is keeping Shabbat — carving out sacred time from the algorithm. It is giving *tzedakah* — not as charity, but justice. It is honoring parents — not as sentiment, but as a societal institution. These are practices that root us in a life of meaning and remind us what it means to be human.

People are nervous of a future in which humans are no longer the most intelligent beings. They wonder: What makes us human? What is the grounding principle of human distinctiveness, of human identity?

The reactionary modernists are ready to turn this crisis toward a familiar outcome: antisemitism. To lean into a reactive Jewish identity as the core Jewish identity, to define Jewish priorities by antisemitism, is to treat the alarm as the problem. Antisemitism is not a reminder to fight Jew-hatred. It is a wake-up call to practice and propagate Judaism.

Jewish identity and tradition have a lot to say about the latest crisis of humanity: the challenge of living and transmitting a sense of meaning in a time of vast social and economic upheaval. Taking up the mantle of chosenness now means to be proactive in offering up Jewish ideas and rituals as a toolbox. For instance, the Jewish practice of a weekly digital detox helps to facilitate uniquely human experiences that AI cannot replicate. It brings about the kind of communal bonding imperiled by the dissolution of boundaries between human and machine. Other fruits of Jewish civilization may prove deeply valuable in a transformed human landscape. By building off the wisdom of Jewish legal texts, we can forge new frameworks and ways of thinking about AI and ethics, allowing us to maintain our sense of agency in shaping technological

development. Jewish law has already brought its insights and ethical principles to bear on questions presented by the advent of electricity and organ transplantation. That body of precedent and methodology expands as we continue to look to Jewish learning as a source of enduring wisdom.

When Jews secularize and wait for antisemitism to remind them of their Judaism, and then seek to "fight" it, they do nothing to solve the core problem that lies at the heart of that antisemitism—the disillusionment that society is feeling with its own identity. Only by showing how we can balance the old and the new, maintaining authentic human identity without shunning technological progress, can Jews reduce society's anxiety and transform the condition of chosenness from antisemitism into philosemitism. This is not a time to protest our difference. It is a time to live it—on purpose, with purpose. ✳

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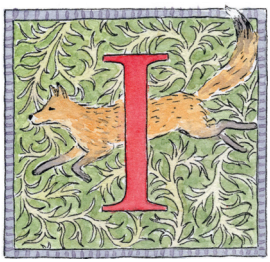
PART THREE

THE PROMISE OF CHOSENNESS

BRET STEPHENS

Jews Were Chosen to Think

But what are we thinking about?



IN MAY, the *New York Times* published obituaries for Philip Sunshine, Peter Lax, and Richard Garwin, all of whom died within a few days of one another at the ages of 94, 99, and 97, respectively. I'm embarrassed to say that, until I read the obits, I knew nothing about them.

Sunshine, a son of Denver pharmacists who spent most of his career as a physician at Stanford, all but created the field of neonatology, developing techniques to save prematurely born babies that previously would have been given up for dead. "Dr. Sunshine helped train hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of doctors who went on to work in neonatal intensive-care units around the world," the *Times* reported. "When he retired in 2022, at age 92, the survival rate for babies born at 28 weeks was over 90 percent."

Lax, who came to the United States as a refugee from Hungary in 1941, worked on the Manhattan Project as a teenager and was a

pioneer in the field of supercomputing: "Among mathematicians," the obituary noted, "he was most renowned for theoretical breakthroughs that others used to analyze specific phenomena" — from weather patterns to aerodynamic designs to the shock waves from bombs. After winning the Abel Prize (the equivalent of a Nobel in mathematics) in 2005, Lax observed that, "as mathematics develops, things are simplified, and unusual connections appear."

As for Garwin, the Cleveland native was described by his University of Chicago mentor, Enrico Fermi, as "the only true genius I have ever met." At 23, he drew up the design of the first hydrogen bomb, Ivy Mike, detonated on a Pacific atoll in 1952 with the force of 700 Hiroshimas. He advised 13 presidents — from Eisenhower to Trump — on subjects ranging from satellite reconnaissance to atmospheric nuclear blasts to international arms-control agreements, for which he was a fervent advocate. As a longtime employee of IBM, he also was granted 47 patents, including one for a mussel washer.

Three Jews, three professions, three life stories. Yet each of them did something that seems to be the special calling of the Jewish people: They made the world think. Is there a less surprising story? And shouldn't it at least tempt us to consider that, if Jews were chosen for anything, perhaps it was for this: to think originally and powerfully and in ways that repeatedly reshape the world's understanding of what it is and what it can become?

Month after month, year after year, in wildly disproportionate yet altogether predictable numbers, the *Times* publishes obituaries for Jews whose thinking transformed their respective fields. In May alone, there was also Robert Jarvik, inventor of the first permanently implantable artificial heart; Jack Katz, who pioneered the graphic novel; Susan Brownmiller, the feminist author who fundamentally reshaped our understanding

of the nature of rape; Marcel Ophuls, the documentarian who debunked the myth of widespread French resistance to Nazi occupation; Sybil Shainwald, the attorney who made the pharmaceutical industry pay for the cancer caused by the synthetic hormone DES; Étienne-Émile Baulieu, inventor of the abortion pill; Sholom Lipskar, the Florida rabbi who reached out to Jews in American prisons; Charles Strouse, composer of *Annie* and other Broadway sensations; Monroe Milstein, founder of the Burlington Coat Factory; Hans Noë, sculptor, architect, and New York restaurateur; Michael Ledeen, neoconservative scholar, political operator, and bridge champion; Leslie Epstein, author of the acclaimed Holocaust novel *The King of the Jews*; Robert Shapiro, marketing wizard behind NutraSweet; Judith Hope Blau, who made art from bagels; Joel Krosnick, renowned cellist; Michael Roemer, director of films that won cult followings decades after they were made; Peter David, among the most prolific science fiction and fantasy writers of our time; Lynn Freed, the acclaimed South African novelist; Stephen Mo Hanan, Broadway actor and singer; Margot Friedländer and Walter Frankenstein, Holocaust survivors who returned to Germany late in life to tell a younger generation about their ordeals.

This record of staggering achievement in so many fields almost invariably leads to the question of what, exactly, makes so many Jews so smart. It's a subject of pride, controversy, misgiving, anxiety, denial, misunderstanding, and calumny. Some Jews worry that to speak of these achievements, much less boast about them, invites antisemitism. Some non-Jews think the pride Jews take in their intellectual accomplishments signals a conviction of innate superiority over others — itself an antisemitic thought.

But whatever the consequences of wondering what makes individual Jews smart, it's simply the wrong question.

Jews may have an outsized share of the most brilliant minds, leading to exceptional contributions in abstruse fields such as medicine, physics, and math. Yet there are plenty of Jews whose exceptional

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achievements in their respective fields weren't the result of Garwin-grade intellects. Jews also have a culture that, for centuries, has prized literacy, numeracy, and educational attainment. Then again, so do many other cultures, with vast populations that swamp whatever advantages Jews might enjoy, proportionally, in raw intelligence.

A better question, or set of questions, would have less to do with Jewish brains than with Jewish *thought*. To wit:

- Is there a specifically Jewish way of thinking, born of religious heritage and social practice, that confers advantages when it comes to noticing hidden connections, latent possibilities, underlying patterns, and unexpected solutions?
- Is the Jewish account of the universe — physical, moral, and temporal — coherent and therefore intelligible?
- Does the Jewish practice of analogical reasoning diagnose problems and illuminate solutions in ways that other forms of logic do not?
- Do Jewish parents tend to instill in their children habits of conversation, learning, and argument — including an open-ended attitude toward thorny questions, a tolerance of dissenting opinions, and a willingness to question received

wisdom — that help turn them into intellectual trailblazers?

- Has Jewish tradition valorized mental virtues over physical ones, moral conscience over social prestige, ingenuity over power, underdogs over overlords, nerds over jocks?
- Do Jewish stories underscore, more than other ethnic and religious traditions do, the importance of independent thought, freedom-seeking, personal conscience and agency, and resistance to tyranny?
- Have Jewish stories that offer role models of courageous and smart women inspired future generations to maximize the opportunities available to women to lead, serve, and forge new pathways?
- Is there something about a history of repeated exile (and the perpetual threat of exile) that puts a premium on knowledge, wits, and enterprise as the most portable of goods?
- Did a Jewish emphasis on literacy, starting early in the Diaspora, lead Jews to settle in cities and pursue learned professions? And did Christian and Muslim restrictions on what Jews could and could not do, economically speaking, further push Jews into those professions?
- Does devotion to the written word, the practice of close textual analysis, and a belief that every detail, even the smallest, is potentially significant — what the biblical scholar James Kugel calls "omnisignificance" — help train minds to become more probing and precise?
- Does familiarity with different cultures and fluency in multiple languages — Maimonides, Isaac Abravanel, Joseph Nasi, and Henry Kissinger all come to mind — deepen an understanding of how the world works and how best to operate in it?

- Has discrimination required Jews to work harder and smarter, and have centuries of persecution made Jews more sensitive to bigotry and alert to political danger?
- Does the diasporic experience of having one foot in a mainstream culture, and another foot out of it, help Jews see things that others living wholly within that culture might not — including social injustices hiding in plain view and business opportunities that others fail to notice?

The answer to all of this is: Of course. Whatever case there is to be made about the benefits that come when smart people mate with other smart people, the secret sauce of Jewish intellectual achievement does not lie in biology. It lies in Jewish ideas, role models, practices, and historical experiences. It's in the independent-minded examples of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. It's in the prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power: Elijah's rebuke of King Ahab, Amos's rebuke of the hypocritical rich, Jeremiah's rebuke of the warmongers. It's in the respect that the House of Hillel accords the House of Shammai. It's in argument for the sake of heaven. It's in the Talmud and the study of Talmud. It's in reverence for Rashi and Rambam, Buber and Scholem. It hangs between Portnoy and Sammler, the morally shocking and the morally shocked. It's in the pious irreverence of Job and the impious irreverence of Lenny Bruce. It's in the ideological feuds between anti-Stalinist Alcove No. 1 and Stalinist Alcove No. 2 at City College, Edward Teller and Robert Oppenheimer, the Podhoretzes and the Trillings. It's on the journey from Lisbon to Amsterdam, Genoa to New York, Odesa to Tel Aviv. It's in the recollection of former homes and homelands, and the adaptation to new ones. It's in the perpetual tension between Jewish endurance and Jewish precarity, stretching memory and heightening awareness of both the joys and menaces of life.

In sum, it's in the spirit and method Jews rely on to approach the tasks of inquiry. For all the obvious exceptions to which one

At what point, if any, does freedom become a mortal threat to survival? Or is it the cause of freedom itself that offers us the deepest reason to struggle to survive?

can point (from Spinoza's excommunication in the 17th century to Haredi schools that barely teach science in the 21st), Jewish life tends, on the whole, to foster habits of mind that encourage people to ask, explore, and debate fundamental questions on nearly every conceivable topic without too much fear of reaching unexpected, undesirable, or forbidden conclusions. That spirit of openness, that freshness, that willingness to reexamine things at their foundations may not be unique to Jews. But it is characteristic of Jews in a way it hasn't been in cultures where second-guessing is treated as impudence, disagreement as treason, and dissent as heresy.

Years ago, I saw a funny TV commercial in which a young radio operator with the German coast guard gets a distress call. "Mayday! Mayday! ... We're sinking, we're sinking!" pleads a desperate voice from the stricken vessel. "What are you sinking about?" replies the linguistically challenged operator. It was an ad for Berlitz, the language-education company.

So: If Jews were chosen to think, what should we be thinking about?

Three things, mostly, two of them familiar. First, it's to think about being a holy nation. This requires more than following a script or deferring to authority; it demands insistent reflection.

What is the maximum size of an eruv? Why do we hang mezuzot a certain way? How do we know when a war is just? Judaism is an invitation to puzzle our way through a faith of caveats, complications, and contentions.

Second, Jews think about repair. Whether it's Jarvik designing an artificial heart or Friedländer teaching a younger generation of Germans about the horrors their grandparents inflicted on her — all this mending of what is broken and straightening of what is crooked has been the worldly work of exceptional Jews ever since their ancestors were freed from the ghettos and fled the shtetls. This should not compete with the requirement of being a holy nation. It extends and, in many ways, completes it.

But there's a third topic. That's the thought we must devote to our survival, as people and as Jews.

Ever since I first read *Not I: Memoirs of a German Childhood*, the German historian Joachim Fest's memoir of growing up in Berlin in the 1930s and '40s, I've been haunted by a line that Fest attributes to his father, Johannes, a philosemitic schoolteacher who detested the Nazis and paid dearly for his convictions. The elder Fest had a clear idea of where his Jewish friends had gone wrong politically: "They had, in tolerant Prussia, lost their instinct for danger, which had preserved them through the ages."

For years, I thought the line applied powerfully to American Jews but not at all to Israeli Jews. Then came the self-inflicted wound of judicial reform followed by the catastrophe of October 7, and it shook my thinking: How much rot was there inside the citadel? Events since then have restored my confidence, but only partially. The Israeli security establishment showed, after its debacle, that it remains the most tactically brilliant force in the world today. But, as of this writing, it remains unclear whether Israel can capitalize on its achievements. Does it know how to end Hamas's reign in Gaza? Or convert its military success against Tehran into diplomatic achievements in Riyadh and other Arab capitals? Or win back liberal Westerners who have soured on the Jewish state?

The answers to those questions are for another essay. But raising them illustrates how much work remains to be done, in Israel and the Diaspora, on this third, essential, subject for Jewish thought. Should we bid for the world's empathy and pity, or for its awe and respect? Will we survive by proving our moral worthiness in our communities, and in the community of nations, or will we survive by demonstrating our fearsomeness and disdain for fatuous moral scolding? Will Jewish life flourish when it's more in step with the societies that surround us, or more out of step with it? Does Israel have better options in the Middle East than to kick cans down the road—perpetually postponing the day of reckoning with the Palestinians, Haredi enlistment, and even Iran's nuclear programs if the regime should succeed in restarting them? Or is can-kicking the best a country of Israel's size can do while it hopes for a fortunate turn of events?

An even larger question hangs over these: Has the classical liberalism of democracy and civil liberties, its institutions and habits, reached the limit of its utility for Jewish survival? Or does it remain our ultimate hope? That's the difficult and uncomfortable question that thoughtful Jews will have to grapple with over the widest range of issues: free speech, surveillance, migration, religious freedom, military policies, and so on. At what point, if any, does freedom become a mortal threat to survival? Or is it the cause of freedom itself that offers us the deepest reason to struggle to survive?

These issues matter to all people. Right now, for all its many errors and shortcomings, Israel is furnishing a model to the rest of the world: a democracy that can have bitter domestic debates even as it unites to fight enemies on multiple fronts; citizens who will protest their leaders while still being ready and willing to fight in their army; a prime minister who will submit to the demands of a courtroom even as he runs a government; a nation that is willing to

endure ostracism and calumny if that's the price of survival. There are profound lessons in this, above all for a West that increasingly seems indifferent to the future of freedom, the requirements of its own civilization, and the ways in which that civilization is being threatened from within and without.

But those aren't necessarily the lessons that will win the day. If Jews are in fact chosen to think, it means also that we've been chosen to remember — and memory, for us, is frequently bitter. So let's ponder this: Without thinking well about survival, there can be no thinking about holiness or repair. A lesson, there, for the most observant and progressive alike. ✳

June 28, 2025

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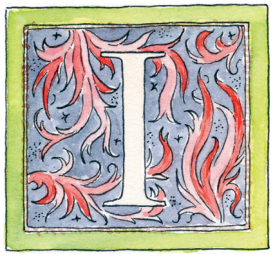
NOA KUSHNER

American Sinai

Jews were chosen not only by God but by America. Sometimes we can't tell the difference



I KNOW that the idea of Jews being "chosen" was at one time controversial, but in the circles I travel, it feels practically quaint. In 2025 San Francisco, talk about Jewish chosenness is more likely to elicit a polite shrug than a theological or philosophical crisis. Here, the concept of God is up for grabs. Not whose god, but God altogether. Religion that includes God, especially of the Western, organized variety? That's countercultural. Loving God, Torah, and the Jewish people with all our many obligations and contradictions? A rare position indeed.

And that is both a problem and an opportunity.

First, the problem. While most American Jews are aware they're a part of the "chosen people," many don't have the slightest idea what chosenness means. Why are so few American Jews today even the least bit curious?

This disinterest is, in my experience, particularly prevalent among third- and fourth-generation American Jews of Ashkenazi extraction. And the reason for this, I think, lies in American, mostly Ashkenazi, Jewish history.

Ashkenazi integration into the American landscape has been so complete that it's hard to imagine American Jewish life as anything other than charmed. Even accounting for the latest serious waves of antisemitism, Jews whose grandparents or great-grandparents arrived penniless on these shores have become equal participants in the American project. This was no fortunate accident. While the emerging Ashkenazi American denominations from Reform to Modern Orthodox all had differing takes on God, Torah, and Jewish religious practice, they had one thing in common: They made a concerted effort to be chosen not only by God but by America, too. And often, these two objects of our affection were conflated — with God riding in the back seat of the Jewish American car.

One example: Theological giant Mordecai Kaplan, who arrived in the United States as a child in 1889, shortly before the establishment of Ellis Island, famously rejected the idea of Jewish chosenness, a position that became a cornerstone of the early Reconstructionist movement. What was it about chosenness that made it incompatible with this thoroughly American Jewish movement? Kaplan's position was a product of the kind of country America was a few generations ago, a newish kind of optimistic place where, at least in principle, no single religion took precedence over another and so could not be used as a basis for oppression.

I can easily imagine how, as partners in the work of creation of this most liberal project, "America," the idea that we Jews would

then trumpet our special relationship with our God as superior and singular could be perceived as out of step, jarring, ungrateful. Many Jews, not only followers of Kaplan, were (and are) universalists as well as Jews, caring about and aspiring to be equals with our fellow Americans in all ways. Looking back over the past few generations, I now think that much of American Ashkenazi Jewish life evolved to be presentable to the American eye, just in case a Christian neighbor might stop by. American Jews largely internalized that non-Jewish, "American gaze," a gaze we constantly carried with us, whether our neighbors ever actually stopped by or not.

Perhaps unwittingly, we have enacted a trade: to be chosen by our American neighbors over being chosen by God. Generally speaking, acceptance in the United States was not something we received without bartering away some of our particularity, tradition, and faith. Prioritizing our status in America often came at the expense of our relationship with God, a problem incidentally so old that it's one of the first warnings God offered us at Sinai: *I am your God, no one else.* And *nothing* else.

Today, in 5785, it's time we revisited the bargain. As revolutionary as America has been for Jews, and as natural it is for us to develop a Jewish life that is distinctly American, the trade has left many American Jews suspicious of their own tradition. Religion for the sake of the "American gaze," no matter how loving the embrace, no matter how seemingly self-evident or beyond critique, is a Judaism based on the perception of outsiders. God was right at Sinai: The only gaze we need internalize is the one from on high.

But what if the American experience is meant to teach us something else? Here is the opportunity. Just as America welcomed and chose us as partners, there are those in America whom we ought to be choosing. If we reconsider the relationship between chosenness and Jewish ethnicity, we may discover another path forward. In

But what if the American experience is meant to teach us something else? Here is the opportunity. Just as America welcomed and chose us as partners, there are those in America whom we ought to be choosing.

our era (as well as others), spheres of Jewish commitment and Jewish ethnicity may overlap, but they are not the same. Rather than drawing our circle of chosenness solely around those who have converted or who were born Jewish, we might instead draw that circle wider, including *all* who participate in Jewish life, whose Jewish actions and faith speak repeatedly over time. It is possible that to be chosen is not only a designation at birth or conversion.

Who am I describing? In my role as a rabbi, I have met many of them. The curious boyfriends and girlfriends of Jews who show up to shul and help set up kiddush. The non-Jewish 13-year-old who just wanted to learn how to read Torah, her parents in tow, wondering how they ended up with such an apparently Jew-ish child. I could tell you about the person who was dating someone Jewish, but they broke up and he moved away, but could she still join us for Shabbat? The Catholic mother who came to shul with her kids and, when she was diagnosed with cancer, asked for a *Mi Shebeirach*. Or I could tell you about the stoic, secular philosopher grandfather of the bar mitzvah who was lifted in a chair for the hora and then never wanted to come down. "I didn't know I was allowed," he said afterward, tears streaming down his face.

These were people who heard something, who experienced something and then couldn't let it go. They wanted and they want to be a part of it, not as polite observers or as grateful recipients.

It is possible to display commitment to the covenant, even if that covenant is not sealed. If the barrier to entry is not primarily one's pedigree but rather one's participation, sustained over time, the commitment is undeniable.

They don't want to stand on the side, they want to carry the weight of the tradition and be carried by it.

In my community, we ask for the action, the participation, first. Instead of asking a newcomer whether he or she is Jewish, we ask: "Are you coming for Shabbat on Friday?" Or, "Can you stay and help collect the siddurim after services?" Or, "Do you need to stand for Mourner's Kaddish?" Because, as we like to say, you can be Moses himself, and if you're not willing to do anything Jewish, then there's not much we can do with you. On the other hand, if you've no background whatsoever but you're willing to enter our Shabbat and let your life be changed by it, then it seems we have a lot to do together.

And while I officiate at many conversions, many people resist converting as a prerequisite to acceptance. Can you blame them? But when they are accepted first, they start showing up, learning how to do things over time, and their participation knows no bounds.

This post-ethnic approach to Jewish chosenness may help resolve our "chosen" dilemma. It is possible to display commitment to the covenant, even if that covenant is not sealed. If the barrier to entry is not primarily one's pedigree but rather one's participation, sustained over time, the commitment is undeniable. In this version

of chosenness, any claim of ethnic bias or genetic superiority as it relates to "chosenness" is unfounded. Being chosen is now equal opportunity, a lesson gained from America itself.

Our being chosen immediately raises the question: Chosen for what? If we cannot answer this question, let alone live up to it, it is no wonder that the claim of being chosen seems arbitrary or chauvinist, even to us.

Luckily there's an answer, and we don't have to be especially bold or creative to find it. The Torah is unequivocal, repetitive: We are chosen, beloved by God, to be an *am segula*, a treasured people, not in order to luxuriate in or obsess over our Jewish selves but to keep our covenant with God. There is much we can say about this covenant and what keeps us in good standing. But one thing is clear: There is no being chosen without obligation.

To use a metaphor popular with the rabbis, Sinai may have been the wedding, but Jewish life is the marriage. Participation in Jewish religious life signals our ongoing commitment to the covenant. Through this lens we can start to see the folly of separating our being chosen, loved, treasured, or cherished from 1) our choosing or loving, treasuring or cherishing God ourselves, that is, our agency in the matter, and 2) what being chosen and choosing entail, that is, our upholding the marriage or covenant.

Can you imagine the pain of a marriage in which one partner doesn't choose the other? Where someone is left, bereft and ashamed, after the wedding party is over? That's precisely how the rabbis see it when we break our covenant with God. They say we're like a bride running off with another. How about a marriage where the couple makes big, bold promises under the huppah, only for mistrust to take root in the years that follow, growing and strengthening in force until the couple cannot take another step forward together?

Now we can see that God choosing us communicates not a

disdain for all other possible spouses, or a rejection of the fundamental equality of all possible wedding couples. Rather, it speaks of an irreplaceable, particular love between the two parties who are both chosen and choosing. I hope and suspect that peoples of other faiths or religions have their version of this love with their own God, too. My love does not preclude that of others. My wedding does not detract from yours. We can all be brides.

In the end, our understanding of chosenness now has a kind of good-news, bad-news quality. Here's the good news: If you felt vaguely uncomfortable about Jewish "chosenness" as if it were a trust fund you did not earn but that came with unarticulated yet ominous strings attached, your intuition was right. To define "chosenness" in a vacuum, without explaining its accompanying demands, renders it useless and problematic. It would be like a groom "choosing" a bride without her consent and without outlining any expectations for the marriage. If this makes you nervous, that's the Jewish version of good news, because you are right to be nervous. The good news is that Jewish "chosenness" actually requires our faith, obligating us to keep the commandments. Far more demanding than some kind of ethnic lottery, Jewish chosenness is also less unnerving precisely because it is clear and honest. There's no such thing as being chosen without choosing, and no such thing as being chosen without at least trying to consistently fulfill what it is we were chosen to do.

There's a midrash that, at the burning bush, Moses asks God why God is freeing Israel from slavery. "After all," Moses wants to know, "what have the Israelites done to deserve your redemption?" "It's not what you have done, but what you will do," says God, "I'm not freeing you for who you are now but for who you will be, because one day you will accept my Torah and make a covenant with me" (Exodus Rabbah 3:4). In other words, God is saying, "I am freeing you so that one day you will be my people and I will be your God."

And so, it seems the bad news is not really so bad. The bad news is that we're not ready yet, and our task is to become ready, not

once but many times, "when we lie down and when we rise up." The bad news is that there is quite a lot to learn and to do, in order to guard a covenant as precious as this, a God-given opportunity if there ever was one. ✳

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ROBERT P. GEORGE

An Unbreakable Covenant

A Catholic perspective on a Jewish question

UPON HIS RESIGNATION from the pontifical office in 2013, Benedict XVI largely retreated from public view to avoid becoming a distraction to his successor's leadership of the Catholic Church. Benedict's public writings during the last decade of his life were therefore limited. Of his few post-retirement works, one, an article published in 2018 in the scholarly journal *Communio*, was a theologically rich reflection on the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

In the article, the pope emeritus addressed some long-standing questions—aspects of which were authoritatively settled by the Second Vatican Council and by consistent papal teaching in the

Council's aftermath, but that are nonetheless still litigated by Catholics who dissent from conciliar and postconciliar teaching—pertaining to the Catholic Church's theological understanding of the Jewish people as a corporate body. Specifically, Benedict criticized, in light of Catholic doctrine, what he called the "theory of substitution"—the idea, also referred to as "supersessionism," that the Jewish people "ceased to be the bearer of the promises of God" after many Jews failed to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the scripturally foretold Messiah. Instead, Benedict offered a defense of God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people, which, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "has never been revoked."

One might be forgiven for wondering why, from a Catholic perspective, these questions are still discussed as if they are controversial—and why, even from retirement, Benedict felt a need to speak up in defense of the Catholic Church's understanding of its unique and mystical relationship with the Jewish people. After all, it was Saint John Paul II, his predecessor as pope, who declared that with Judaism, the Church has "a relationship which we do not have with any other religion"; that Judaism is "intrinsic"—not "extrinsic"—to Christianity; and that Jews are Christians' "elder brothers" in faith (mindful of the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, Benedict later changed this well-intended, though potentially misleading, metaphor to "fathers in the faith").

Lumen gentium, the Church's dogmatic constitution promulgated at Vatican II, taught that while Christ instituted a New Covenant with himself as mediator, God's covenant with the Jews continues to remain in effect—it is unbroken and indeed unbreakable. And *Nostra aetate*, the Vatican II document outlining the Church's authoritative teaching on her relationship with Judaism and other non-Christian religions, explicitly repudiates all forms of antisemitism—along with the many slanders and crimes that have been historically perpetrated against the Jewish people, often by individuals and nation-states acting under the banner of Christianity (including under the banner of the Catholic Church).

Sadly, we are today witnessing a resurgence of antisemitic beliefs and attitudes, including among people who claim to be faithful Christians and orthodox Catholics—from celebrity influencers, political commentators, and fringe priests to legions of anonymous social media users. Videos produced by the respected Catholic apologist Trent Horn and his organization Catholic Answers related to Jews and Judaism, including a video criticizing Holocaust denial as gravely immoral and a video explaining why faithful Christians cannot be antisemitic, are flooded with comments attacking, at times in quite vicious terms, Judaism and Jewish people. Bishop Robert Barron, perhaps the most prominent Catholic clergyman in America, was inundated with vile comments after he posted a photo of a menorah to commemorate the beginning of Hanukkah. In a follow-up essay reflecting on the rise in antisemitism among self-professed Catholics and other Christians, Barron shared a few of the diabolical comments he received: "Did they fill your pockets with shekels to say this?," "Judaism is the anti-Christ religion," "Sin-o-gogue of Satan anyone?" My own tweets speaking positively of Jewish people, reflecting on the Jewish roots—and indeed the *Jewishness*—of Christianity, and calling out antisemitism, have similarly been overrun with (mostly anonymous) users spreading anti-Jewish messages.

Considering the troubled times in which we find ourselves, I will follow the late Pope Benedict in reflecting on the authentic Catholic understanding of Jews and Judaism. Specifically, I want to share some reflections, in light of authoritative Catholic teaching, on God's covenant with the Jewish people as unbroken and unbreakable, along with some conclusions that follow. My claim here is simple: Any attempt to deny or undermine God's unique and mysterious bond with the Jewish people—a bond that was never abrogated and that reflects God's special and continued care for them—is both antithetical to Christianity (it denies Christianity's fundamentally Jewish roots) and opposed to the Catholic Church's teachings. This includes all efforts, largely motivated by gravely

Sadly, we are today witnessing a resurgence of antisemitic beliefs and attitudes, including among people who claim to be faithful Christians and orthodox Catholics.

sinful prejudice against Jewish people and Judaism, to delegitimize, dishonor, or vilify Jewish faith and practice.

It is true that the Catholic Church emphatically rejects religious indifferentism—the idea that all religions and religious traditions are the same, contain equal elements of the truth, and are equally authentic or efficacious paths to communion with God and eternal salvation. The 2000 doctrinal document *Dominus Iesus* reaffirmed the Catholic dogma that "with the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for salvation of *all* humanity." In rearticulating the Catholic Church's teaching that it alone contains the *fullness* of the truth—following Jesus's own teaching in the Gospels, when he said that he was "the way, the truth, and the life"—*Dominus Iesus* once again ruled out relativism, subjectivism, and indifferentism in religious matters.

But the same document also reaffirmed the Catholic teaching, earlier expressed in *Nostra aetate*, that the Catholic Church "rejects nothing of what is true and holy" in non-Catholic religions—and, indeed, that the Church "has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from [the Church's] own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." The concrete applications of this principle are clear: The agnostic who in good faith ponders existential and transcendental questions, the theist who recognizes the existence of God, the Buddhist who engages

If Jesus Christ is, as the Catholic Church proclaims, the fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament and the universal redeemer of mankind, how can a covenant with the Jewish people endure?

in prayer and meditation in a sincere effort to commune with the divine, the Muslim who honors God with prayer and fasting, and the non-Catholic Christian who conforms his life to the Gospel to the best of his ability all realize value from the aspects of the truth they grasp — even if their recognition of the truth is, from a Catholic perspective, limited or incomplete to varying degrees.

The Jewish people and modern Rabbinic Judaism (particularly Orthodox Judaism, whose faithful strive to adhere to biblical precepts without compromising with modern secular culture on the law's demands) present a unique case. From a Catholic perspective, Judaism is not simply a religious tradition external to the Catholic Church that contains some elements of the truth; it is, as John Paul II said, "intrinsic" to Christianity and the Catholic Church. Put another way: "Because of the Jewish roots of Christianity, all Christians have a special relationship with Judaism," as the new pontiff Leo XIV stated in a recent address. There was neither a schism nor an additional piece of claimed revelation that led to the existence of the Jewish religion. Quite the opposite, for God uniquely chose the Jewish people to be a "light unto the nations," as the prophet Isaiah famously proclaimed. Jewish faith and practice thus have a unique theological consistency and legitimacy. Still, the question might remain: If Jesus Christ is, as the Catholic Church proclaims, the fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament and the

universal redeemer of mankind, how can a covenant with the Jewish people endure?

The precise contours of the relationship are perennially difficult to grasp — and the Catholic Church herself acknowledges that there are elements of the relationship between the Old and New Covenants, between *Synagoga* and *Ecclesia*, that remain mysterious and perhaps are known only to God. As a landmark 2015 Vatican document on Catholic–Jewish relations states, even Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans engaged in a "passionate struggle" to articulate the "dual fact that while the Old Covenant from God continues to be in force, Israel has not adopted the New Covenant." The document — a comprehensive theological reflection on *Nostra aetate*'s 50th anniversary that I commend to all readers interested in this subject — explains that "in order to do justice to both facts," the apostle coined the metaphor of the Jewish people as the "rich root of the olive tree" onto which the "wild shoot," the Gentiles, was grafted. Turning to address the supposed conflict between the truths of "the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ" and "God's unrevoked covenant with Israel," the document proclaims,

> That the Jews are participants in God's salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery.

So while the plan of salvation that God has for the Jewish people, from a Catholic perspective, does retain elements of mystery — and Catholics like me ought to trust in God's mercy that he has a plan, unfathomable, perhaps, to us mere mortals, to bring Jews and Christians into perfect unity — it is clear that Catholic teaching leaves no room for the denial of Judaism's continued validity and significance and its special role in God's plan for the world. The purpose for which God chose the Jewish people and their mission

in fulfilling that purpose continue today: Jewish fidelity, witness, and wisdom *enlighten*. They light the path to God.

The 2015 Vatican document stated,

> While affirming salvation through an explicit or even implicit faith in Christ, the Church does not question the continued love of God for the chosen people of Israel. A replacement or supersession theology which sets against one another two separate entities, a Church of the Gentiles and the rejected Synagogue whose place it takes, is deprived of its foundations. From an originally close relationship between Judaism and Christianity a long-term state of tension had developed, which has been gradually transformed after the Second Vatican Council into a constructive dialogue relationship.

The increasingly common internet slanders that true Judaism "no longer exists" or is no longer authentically practiced — whether because of the Second Temple's destruction at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70, because of various developments in contemporary Jewish religious practice, or any other theory that is alleged — are simply incompatible with Catholic teaching on the validity and legitimacy of God's enduring covenant with his chosen people. And those who seek to divorce Christianity from its Jewish roots — who seek to deny or downplay that Jesus, his mother Mary, and his Twelve Apostles were faithful Jews, or who seek to set the Old and New Covenants against each other as if there was a radical rupture — should recall the heretical movement in the early Christian church known as Marcionism. In his 2018 article, Pope Benedict XVI writes that Marcion, who was active in the second century A.D., led a religious movement that sought to "break" the unity between Christianity and Judaism, such that they would become "two opposing religions." For these efforts Marcion was excommunicated by the Church. His ideas were deemed to be heretical. And yet, as the ever-prescient late

pontiff notes, "the Marcionite temptation persists and reappears in certain situations in the history of the Church."

It is incumbent upon Catholics to reject Marcionite and antisemitic temptations — temptations that both stubbornly endure within the Church and seem to once again be gaining traction in the world. This is not a trivial matter. For the Catholic, it is a matter of one's right relationship with God and one's communion with the Church through fidelity to the Church's authoritative teachings on God's unbreakable covenant with our Jewish brothers and sisters — the people chosen by God himself to light our path to him.

Furthermore, although it would be presumptuous of me to instruct the Jewish community on its engagement with Catholics and other Christians, I cannot but applaud the efforts of my beloved friends Rabbi Professor David Novak and the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, among other Jewish authorities, to think theologically about Christianity as the vehicle by which God, in his providence, brought the blessing of the Hebrew Bible, and its fundamental truths about God and man, to the world.

Those of us who claim the mantle of Christ must never forget that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, and of course the God of the faithful Jew named Jesus, is our God as well — unchanging, perfect, and never failing to be faithful to the promises he makes and the covenants he establishes with his people. In our faithfulness to the Church's teachings, we should continue to honor and pray for the Jewish people, "first to hear the word of God," in the words of the revised Good Friday prayer, that he "may grant them to advance in love of his name and in faithfulness to his covenant." ✳

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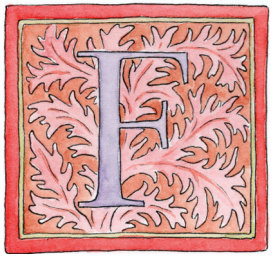
ARI LAMM

The Rebirth of Chosenness

The story of 17th-century England and what it means for us today



FOUR MONTHS after ordering the expulsion of every Jew from his realm in the summer of 1290, England's King Edward I—better remembered today as the villain from *Braveheart*—boasted in a letter that he had driven out the "perfidious" Jews "for the honour of Christ." His infamous Edict of Expulsion, forcing every Jew, perhaps as many as 17,000 souls, out of England, hardly came out of the blue. It was a capstone to an already ugly record of English Jew-hatred. England had pioneered the blood-libel myth in 1144, when the Jews were baselessly blamed for ritually murdering a young boy named William of Norwich; mobs had wiped out York's entire Jewish community at Clifford's Tower in 1190; even the Magna Carta, a justifiably lauded milestone for liberty, singled out Jews for ill treatment.

But three and a half centuries later, England would emerge as

the most philosemitic country in the world. In 1648, a different Edward, pamphleteer Edward Nicholas, would write with earnest sincerity that "the good or evil usage of God's people is the greatest state-interest in the world," arguing for the good. How did one realm travel from boasting of Jewish banishment to treating Jewish well-being as a barometer of national destiny?

England in the 1600s was a society facing, much like the Western world today, war, plague, and political vertigo. Yet somehow it birthed the Scientific Revolution, the modern state, and sustained economic growth. What powered such astonishing accomplishment? For the English, the answer was a burgeoning conviction that the world could — and would — get better, a confidence that stirred new ambitions in science, politics, and philosophy. And that conviction derived from a blazing theological idea: biblical chosenness.

In fact, biblical chosenness became a driving force behind the many innovations that would characterize 17th-century England, a period that economist Tyler Cowen recently called "one of the most important centuries any nation ever had."

The English turn toward biblical chosenness, and from antisemitism to philosemitism, began with the twin rallying cries of *sola scriptura* and *ad fontes*. The Reformation doctrine *sola scriptura* — Latin for "Scripture alone" — declared that every believer must judge Scripture's words for himself because Scripture alone is fully sufficient for faith and practice. This meant that every single person needed access to the text in his own tongue. Translating the Bible into English without episcopal license was still a capital offense in 1530 when William Tyndale — a reformer who had earlier vowed to a learned man that soon even "a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost" — printed an English Pentateuch on an Antwerp press and

had it smuggled to England. His strangling and burning at the stake in 1536 only intensified demand for an English vernacular version of the Hebrew Bible. The first authorized translation, known as the Great Bible, arrived three years later and was followed by a succession of translations, culminating in 1611 with the King James Version. England was now a biblical society.

Equally important, both during this process and in its wake, was the Renaissance slogan *ad fontes* — "back to the sources" — which sent scholars to reengage with the Bible in its original languages: Hebrew and Greek. This proved a tall order. While Greek could be dusted off in monastery libraries, Hebrew had to be rediscovered, and in Judenrein England, that rediscovery had to be done by Christians. As scholars — so-called Christian Hebraists — wrestled with the Hebrew biblical text, charting its right-to-left letters in fresh grammars, they realized that interpretive aids were necessary. In the past, of course, they could have just addressed any questions to their priests. No longer trusting the Roman church, Protestants turned to an alternative source: centuries of Jewish commentary that Christian Europe had long ignored. Hebraists soon found that resources from the midrash to Maimonides, from Ibn Ezra to Flavius Josephus, proved substantially helpful in clarifying everything, whether legal questions or historical riddles or prophetic idioms. Lecture halls from Cambridge to Leiden began buzzing with the ascendant idea of *Hebraica veritas* ("Hebrew truth").

These trends converged with particular force in England. Henry VIII scoured Leviticus and the rabbinic laws of levirate marriage to justify divorce from Rome; common lawyers mined Deuteronomy and Maimonides's *Code* to sketch out monarchical and republican political orders. By 1652, an anonymous English pamphleteer demanded that the nation be "established, as the Commonwealth of Israel was in Mose's [*sic*] time." Top political theorists including James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, and John Selden queried the "Talmudical commonwealthsmen" of ancient

For over a millennium, clergymen had insisted that the biblical *Israel* referred to the Church, and that terms such as *Zion* were a symbol of its earthly reality and ultimate perfection.

Israel for arguments about popular sovereignty, land reform, and religious toleration — proof that the Bible supplied not only individual salvation but national civic architecture.

Science, too, took note of this biblical renaissance. England, in short order, became the scientific center of the world. The legendary Sir Francis Bacon recast empirical inquiry as a second Edenic mandate: "Man by the Fall fell at the same time from his state of innocency and from his dominion over creation," he wrote in *The New Organon*. "Both of these losses can in this life be in some part repaired; the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and science." Bacon's merging of religious and scientific advancement was a direct result of his country's sense of election. Seminal figures in the Scientific Revolution — such as pioneering chemist Robert Boyle and Royal Society founder John Wilkins — treated these as marching orders. In their hands, the laboratory became a covenantal workshop where barometers, water desalination, and cell biology were all steps toward what historian Jonathan Immanuel called "a man-made but divinely ordained heaven on earth." Eliminating disease and famine would not eclipse Scripture; it would vindicate it, proving that Providence intended human ingenuity to help reverse the Fall of Adam.

This belief in the biblical story thus inspired England's intelligentsia to chart new political philosophies and scientific theories in the here and now.

From republican constitutionalism and abolition to scientific innovation and modern diplomacy, the Anglo-American surge of achievement and human progress repeatedly drew energy from the idea of chosenness.

But as English readers thumbed through their Bibles — Isaiah, Jeremiah, and on to Zechariah — they also encountered clear promises of a tangible future. And these promises were about Israel, not England. In the Bible, God promised He would gather Israel, plant her in Zion, rebuild Jerusalem, and set that restored nation as a light unto the nations. Could such verses be taken straight — no metaphor, no allegory — at face value?

For over a millennium, clergymen had insisted that the biblical *Israel* referred to the Church, and that terms such as *Zion* were a symbol of its earthly reality and ultimate perfection. Yet, as England's theologians, political theorists, and scientists pored over newly minted Hebrew Bibles, the old interpretive scaffolding began to creak and wobble. After all, the text seemed to say exactly what it meant: The Bible was a story about the Jews, and that story was far from over.

Sir Henry Finch, a lawyer and politician, detonated the debate in 1621 with his bombshell book *The World's Great Restauration, or The Calling of the Jews*. He insisted that *Israel* in prophecy means the literal descendants of Jacob, that God will one day "bring them back to their land and ancient seats," and that once restored, they will "be kings and chief monarchs of the earth [and] govern

all" — including England. The pamphlet raced through elite circles; King James, who fancied himself a new Solomon, fumed at the thought of ranking beneath a returning Jewish king, and he briefly jailed Finch and his printer, while a court preacher scoffed that his vision was as likely as "Men in the Moone." Yet the uproar left two indelible impressions: Scripture might in fact foretell a geopolitical Jewish comeback, and England's own sense of election would have to reckon with that divine agenda.

Finch's audacity unsettled England's most impressive thinkers. If *Israel* meant something other than Israel — if it meant the Roman Church, or better yet, the English themselves — England could still cast itself as the central focus of salvation history. But if the Hebrew prophets truly promised a flesh-and-blood Jewish restoration, then England — so sure of its own providential mission — had to ask: *What part do we have to play?*

Into this debate stepped the most celebrated Jew in Europe, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel. Born in 1604 to Portuguese conversos who escaped the Inquisition, he spoke several languages, founded Amsterdam's first Hebrew press, and wrote for Gentile as well as Jewish audiences. His *Conciliador* — a tour de force harmonizing apparent biblical contradictions — became a Continental bestseller; Dutch humanist Hugo Grotius hailed him as heir to Maimonides; and the aforementioned Robert Boyle jotted that Menasseh was "one of the most celebrated of the modern Rabbis." By the 1630s, the modest Amsterdam preacher had become Europe's go-to Hebrew consultant, a 17th-century Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks whose dinner table was a coveted place for every diplomat or scientist hoping to pick the good rabbi's brain.

Menasseh's most daring publication came in 1636 with *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, a treatise aimed at Europe's prophecy-obsessed elite on how they could play a part in the biblical story. First, he enjoined them to adopt the Bible's seven Noahide commandments — universal precepts against idolatry, bloodshed, theft, and so on — which Hebraists would begin to identify as the

scriptural root of natural law. Second, he exclaimed, à la Maimonides, that "the righteous of every nation shall have a share in the world to come," a destiny, the sages added, equal even to that of Israel's high priest. English thinkers left uneasy by Sir Henry Finch could embrace this synthesis, which brought them into the biblical story of chosenness. Israel's physical return to Zion would not sideline other peoples; on the contrary, it would invite every nation to embrace virtue and walk the same road with them to redemption. John Selden, who drew upon Menasseh for his monumental *On the Natural Law*, then marveled that "we may best understand the meaning of salvation from the Jews."

As it turned out, biblical chosenness and the story of Israel, rightly read, expanded hope for the world rather than constricting it. After decades of religious violence throughout Europe, this message offered hope for a brighter future. To believe in the literal truth of the biblical vision was to believe that God was acting in the world, was invested in it, and that His covenant people were headed home. If you believed this—as an increasing number of influential and powerful Englishmen did—then you could also believe that you, too, were redemption-bound, the sort of sweeping sentiment that fills men with the spirit needed to discover new horizons of human possibility. The very notion of chosenness ignited a yearning to understand God's plan for humanity and to be a part of it.

In 1650, Menasseh pushed the story further with his publication of *The Hope of Israel*, translated into English in 1652 by the English Puritan scholar, and John Milton's close friend, Moses Wall. Menasseh dedicated the English edition to "the Parliament of England." Drawing on Deuteronomy's prophecy that the Jews would be scattered "to the end of the earth" before God restores them, he pointed out that medieval Hebrew writers routinely rendered the old French name for England, *Angleterre*, as *ketzei ha'aretz*—the very term in Deuteronomy meaning "the end of the earth." Because no openly Jewish community lived there, the dispersion was literally unfinished; the curtain of salvation could not rise.

The remedy, Menasseh argued, was clear. England must welcome the Jews — treat them generously and protect them — to facilitate the coming redemption. Readmission would therefore serve a double hope: It would crown England as the final link in Israel's exile and position the nation to assist when the summons to rebuild Jerusalem came.

By conceiving chosenness in this new way, the thinkers of this time and place transformed their pursuits from ones of self-interest to ones concerned with the flourishing of others. It caused a nation on the threshold of global expansion to reconsider itself in view of a small, persecuted people that it itself had banished. It persuaded English politicians, philosophers, and scientists to think of themselves and their choices in light of a much larger story.

In the early 18th century, rationalist philosopher John Toland argued that assisting the Jews to regain Palestine would serve England, reasoning that a nation built on such an "excellent constitution" would become "more populous, rich, and powerful than any other," and that it was Britain's Christian duty to support it. Isaac Newton, history's preeminent scientist, filled page after page with intricate calculations projecting the very year he thought God would regather the Jews. He even allowed himself to wonder patriotically whether restoration "may perhaps come forth not from the Jews themselves, but from some other kingdom friendly to them." William Whiston, Newton's successor at Cambridge, posited that Noah's flood had been caused by a comet, and he translated the works of Josephus, "the Jewish historian," into English. He, along with Joseph Priestley, discoverer of oxygen and radical champion of dissent, and William Wilberforce, the driving force behind British abolition of the slave trade, preached that human progress and Jewish restoration rose or fell together.

The impact was, if anything, more intense, once it leapt the Atlantic to colonial America. By that time, it had already found its chief philosopher in John Locke, who drew directly and powerfully upon the Hebraic tradition to argue for religious toleration, natural rights, and government by consent. These liberal, Enlightenment ideals would soon spread westward. John Adams thus wrote that the Jews had "done more to civilize men than any other nation" and confessed, "I really wish the Jews again in Judea an independent nation." Abraham Lincoln spoke of Americans as an "almost chosen people" and reportedly told his wife, Mary, that he longed to tour the Holy Land after his second term. Ulysses S. Grant fulfilled that pilgrimage in 1878 during his post-presidential world tour. And, of course, Harry Truman would eventually cast himself as chosen for the role of Israel's restorer, quipping at a meeting with Jewish dignitaries, "I am Cyrus!"

From republican constitutionalism and abolition to scientific innovation and modern diplomacy, the Anglo-American surge of achievement and human progress repeatedly drew energy from the idea of chosenness.

Fast-forward to today and America stands where 17th-century England once did: wealthy yet anxious, powerful yet unsure of its script. Fortunately, we are heir to the very same tradition of Hebraic republicanism that the English used to power one of the most consequential centuries in human history. The lessons they learned ring just as true for contemporary America: When a nation grafts itself into the Bible's storyline — honoring the Jewish covenant while embracing its own calling in service to God — it gains a forward-leaning confidence that fuels discovery and progress. In turn, whenever that covenant consciousness fades, cynicism rushes in and despair crouches at the door.

Happily, the cultural weather shows signs of shifting in that

direction. Gen Z is turning back toward faith, according to a 2023 Springtide study: Two-thirds now say they are at least "slightly religious." Research has found that the decades-long rise of the religious "nones" has stalled and possibly even begun to reverse. Well over half of young Americans already identify somewhere within Christianity, and social media metrics show "Christian TikTok" exploding in reach. You might call this young cohort Steph Curry Christians—public, innovative, culture-shaping believers who treat Bible study in NFL locker rooms, viral worship singles on Billboard's Hot 100, and prayer clips on Snapchat as normal life. They are desperately searching for meaning and are increasingly finding it.

That renaissance of belief is an open invitation. The same Hebraic hope that once propelled England to its golden century—and later powered Adams's constitutional vision, Lincoln's longing for the Holy Land, Truman's recognition of Israel, and more—can again inspire the United States. If this rising generation latches onto a God who keeps His promises to His covenant people, and calls every nation into His drama, it will recover faith not only in Providence but in America's own capacity for scientific ingenuity, technological breakthroughs, moral leadership, and public virtue.

We can sneer at the very notion of divine election, dismiss Israel's role, and watch despair corrode our civic spirit. Or we can imitate 17th-century England's better instinct and Menasseh's grandest insight by welcoming the Jewish story, accepting our own task, and wagering once more that history bends toward blessing.

The hour is ripe: Embrace chosenness, and our republic's future can be as audacious as its past. ✳

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DEPARTURES

ALLEGRA GOODMAN

Jewish Masterpiece: *The Chosen*

Rereading Chaim Potok's novel of midcentury American Jewry

I DISCOVERED *The Chosen* when I was 14. This must have been around the time the lovely 1981 film adaptation came out, but I know I read the book first. I was visiting my grandparents in Los Angeles, and I curled up on their couch to read Chaim Potok's 1967 tale of two Jewish boys living in 1940s Williamsburg. My own neighborhood in Honolulu, with its plumeria trees and mynah birds, was a far cry from Potok's yeshivas and city playgrounds, so the Brooklyn setting seemed exotic to me. Within pages, I was swept away by this Jewish novel beginning with a ferocious softball game.

Perhaps you read *The Chosen* years ago as well. Perhaps you read it as a child. As you may recall, narrator Reuven Malter is an Orthodox boy playing second base and pitcher for his day school softball team. Literally opposing Reuven is Danny Saun-

ders, a Hasidic youth who bats for "the small yeshiva established by his father." Both Reuven and Danny wear "skullcaps," both learn Talmud and pray daily. However, Reuven's father, David, is raising him in what we'd now call Modern or even Open Orthodoxy. David Malter is a scholar who writes biblical criticism and advocates the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. In contrast, Danny's father, Reb Saunders, is raising his son to take his place as unquestioned spiritual leader of a small Hasidic sect. Reb Saunders and his followers are mystical, separatist, and anti-Zionist. Saunders believes that redemption requires prayer not politics; a secular Jewish state is sacrilege. He declares, "When the Messiah comes, we will have Eretz Yisroel, a Holy Land, not a land contaminated by Jewish goyim."

While Reuven and his teammates wear ordinary American clothes, Danny and his team take the field in black trousers and white shirts. Their hair is cropped short except for their *peyyes*, and they play hard. Reuven's friend calls the Hasidic boys murderers. Danny calls the boys on Reuven's team heretics, *apikorsim*. With a killer swing of the bat, Danny hits a line drive right back at Reuven, breaking his glasses and nearly blinding him. But in the aftermath of this dangerous game, the boys become close friends. I recognized this friendship as remarkable when I read *The Chosen* years ago. Rereading the novel in these fraught times, the bond seems miraculous.

In today's America, many Hasidic Jews live in siloed communities. The thought of a yeshiva like Danny's playing softball against a Modern Orthodox day school like Reuven's — literally being in the same league — is even stranger today than it might have been 80 years ago. So is the thought of the two becoming classmates, as they do, at Hirsch College, a stand-in for Yeshiva University. For the scion of a Hasidic dynasty to attend such an institution would be a scandal for his community. Yes, Danny is exceptional in his brilliance and curiosity. Yes, he pushes his parents to let him go to college. What marks *The Chosen* as fiction is that Potok imagines

a critical mass of Hasidic boys attending Hirsch College with him.

In a turn that seems even more far-fetched today, Chaim Potok reveals that the boys become friends because their fathers allow it. David Malter encourages Reuven to befriend Danny, and after some initial testing, Reb Saunders supports Danny's friendship with Reuven. The fathers do not meet in person, but they know each other's work. They stand opposed when it comes to the future of the Jewish people, the divine status of Scripture, and the role of God in the world. Even so, they respect each other. "Reb Saunders is a great man," says Reuven's father. "Your father is a great scholar," Reb Saunders tells Reuven in turn. What develops is the mediated communication of two men through their sons.

Throughout *The Chosen*, Potok explores the depth and difficulties inherent in communicating without words. Most dramatically, Reb Saunders refuses to speak to Danny except when they are learning Torah. The rabbi has decided to raise his brilliant son in silence so that he might experience suffering and learn humility. This aspect of *The Chosen* rang false when I first read the novel. Raising a child in silence seemed like something out of a fairy tale. At 14, I could not imagine a father refusing to speak to his son — especially if he was worried that his child was drifting away.

Critic that I was, and already an aspiring writer, I finished reading *The Chosen* and told my mother, "Raising your son in silence would never happen. I would never write about a family that way. And then the whole scene with the rabbi explaining that he made his son suffer for his own good and his son accepting his decision — that doesn't work. If I write a novel about a father who stops speaking to his son, the son won't forgive his father, ever."

My mother, who grew up in Flatbush, looked surprised, a little offended, but also bemused as she responded, "Well, we'll see what you can do."

When I grew up, I did write a novel in which a rabbi and his estranged son speak for the last time and do not reconcile. In *Kaaterskill Falls*, published in 1998, I push back against what

Potok shows how friendship makes this magic possible, how we might learn and grow if we stop shouting long enough to listen.

seemed like an unrealistic premise in *The Chosen*. Years later, I remain unconvinced by Reb Saunders's paternal silence. The conceit betrays a sentimentality on Potok's part, an exoticism of Hasidic Jews and their spirituality. Reb Saunders's fear for his brilliant son and his almost superstitious desire to humble Danny don't jibe well with the carefully observed scenes of Jewish life that Potok develops. The reader wonders along with Reuven: How can a father be so cruel? Even Reuven's father is shocked, identifying Reb Saunders's behavior with a story from the Old Country. "Once in Russia I heard something," David Malter says, "but I did not believe it." Reb Saunders's silence is extreme, mystical, folkloric, the gooey romantic core of a realist novel.

What I do find compelling is Potok's notion that silence allows space for a different kind of conversation. That fathers who don't speak face-to-face might allow their sons to grow up together and learn together. This permission to engage appeals to me, and yet, I wonder, is dialogue across such difference possible? In Israel, religious and political differences threaten to tear the country apart. Haredi Jews live in the Holy Land, but they insist on special status that includes draft exemptions for their sons. While Israel is at war, a tiny number of Haredi Jews have enlisted, but their rabbis oppose any military service. Leaders of the Haredi political party Agudat Yisrael continually leverage their threat to bring down the

government if the Knesset drafts their children, while those from religious Zionist and secular families protest that their children are fighting and dying to defend the nation. Perhaps the bond between Reuven and Danny is a romantic notion too.

To his credit, Potok, who was a Conservative rabbi and later received a doctorate in philosophy, explores political, demographic, and spiritual divisions. Danny is Reuven's best friend, but he won't eat at Reuven's house. Reb Saunders admires David Malter's textual skill but bemoans his methodology. "Ah, what your father writes! Criticism. Scientific criticism." Strikingly, Potok dramatizes the conflict between religious Zionists and Hasidic anti-Zionists at Hirsch College when Israel declares independence. "In the lunchroom one day, one of the Hasidim accused a member of the Revisionist youth group" — Zionists who supported the Irgun — "of being worse than Hitler. Hitler had only succeeded in destroying the Jewish body, he shouted in Yiddish, but the Revisionists were trying to destroy the Jewish soul."

Today, Jews on American college campuses continue to fight about Israel. The ground has shifted since the 1940s, but the intra-Jewish conflict remains, as does the weaponization of the Holocaust against the Jewish nation. Some young Jews declare that Israel has a right to exist and to defend itself. Others condemn Israel as racist, imperialist, and genocidal. Beyond college, assimilated Jews are more assimilated than ever, while yeshivish Jews strive to insulate themselves from secular life. Of course, there are secular Jews who seek a connection with Judaism, and there are Haredi Jews who engage with the secular world, but the chasm is vast, and the Jewish community seems more fractured than ever. How poignant to return to the pages of *The Chosen*. Here we join Reuven and Danny as they enter each other's worlds. We catch Reuven's excitement at Reb Saunders's table as a Talmudic discussion takes flight. We hear a Brooklyn shtiebel humming with prayer. We thrill with Danny as he discovers a portal to science, literature, and history in the public library.

Potok shows how friendship makes this magic possible, how we might learn and grow if we stop shouting long enough to listen. In this way, *The Chosen* works as a parable. Consider other Jewish American novels of the 1960s. Saul Bellow's 1964 *Herzog* crackles with manic energy. Philip Roth's 1969 *Portnoy's Complaint* disgusts and dazzles. These are audacious, formally inventive novels about secular Jews chafing against the world of their fathers. Chaim Potok's project is quite different. His is an earnest fable about the religiously committed. His story is not meant to scandalize but to instruct. Roth and Bellow write about Jewish neuroses and identity crises. They dramatize performative, explosive, rebellious masculinity. In contrast, Potok writes about Jewish tradition. He explores conscientious masculinity grounded in self-discipline, scholarship, religious ritual, and community. The violence that begins *The Chosen* on a softball field is startling and scary, but it's the aftermath that matters to Potok. This is a novel about learning to forgive, overcoming animosity, and the shift from anger to understanding. "Who is a strong man? He who conquers his evil inclination," says Pirkei Avot (4:1).

At times, Potok the educator hinders Potok the novelist. David Malter becomes the author's mouthpiece explaining the origins of Hasidism to Reuven in a lecture lasting eight pages. "What a lecture it has been," David says when he is nearly done, and it's true. Potok has stopped his novel to lecture the reader. At other times, Potok succeeds in revealing tradition to his readers. His characters pray and we understand the stakes—that the rhythms of prayer direct and shape their lives. His characters observe Shabbat and we experience its music. "I knew the melody and I joined in," Reuven says of songs at the Shabbat table. "I joined in, hesitantly at first, then strongly, swaying back and forth. At the end of the song, another melody was begun, a light, fast wordless tune."

Potok takes Jewish life seriously, neither mocking believers nor apologizing for their beliefs. As a result, his work is about Judaism as a religion, not just a culture.

Potok lacks the wit and genre-busting artistry of Bellow and Roth. He is no stylist and tends to repeat himself. "I was sad and depressed," Reuven says, describing his mental state in the hospital. In chapter 8, Reuven meets Danny's sister and describes her as having "dark, vivacious eyes." Then in chapter 12, Reuven says, "Danny's sister, I noticed for the first time, was a very pretty girl with dark eyes and long dark hair combed back into a single braid, and vivacious hands." This is quick and careless writing. (Where was Potok's editor?) But if he is not a great writer, Potok is a captivating teacher with a great subject. In his best scenes, Potok draws us into a warm and compelling Jewish world. Perhaps this is why his work continues to appeal to us — especially to children, to students and their teachers.

At its core, *The Chosen* has less in common with its Jewish-American peers than it does with one of its non-Jewish contemporaries — Harper Lee's 1960 *To Kill a Mockingbird*, another gently didactic novel often taught in school. Like Lee, Potok employs a motherless young narrator with an aphoristic father. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view," says Atticus Finch. "A man must fill his life with meaning," says David Malter. Scout grows up attending church in a small town in the South while Reuven davens in a big city in the North. However, they learn the same lessons. The world is unjust. Even so, there are good people in it. People are cruel, but they can be generous too. We can love instead of hate. Joy, curiosity, and courage combat fear and prejudice. Simple messages, as important now as when they were written. Important to hear, and difficult to practice. How do we fight for justice and for truth? Where do we look for goodness? Perhaps, as Potok and Lee suggest, we must start small. Within our own communities we must learn to love our neighbor.

Many have written about what it means to call the Jews a people

chosen, consecrated by God. As a rabbi, Potok wrote extensively about Jewish history and spirituality, but in *The Chosen*, he uses fiction for what fiction can do. With narrative sympathy, Potok asks us to imagine Jews choosing each other. "The Talmud says that a person should do two things for himself," Reuven's father tells him. "One is to acquire a teacher. Do you remember the other?" Reuven answers, "Choose a friend." ✳

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Letters

Readers respond

Sapir is pleased to begin including select letters to the editor in the print edition. The letters below respond to our Chosenness issue of Spring 2025. Additional letters can be found on our website at sapirjournal.org/letters. We welcome your responses to the current issue at letters@sapirjournal.org.

To the Editor:

Jewish communal talk about fighting toxic anti-Zionism in the United States often mentions resurrecting strategies from our campaign to free Soviet Jewry. Unfortunately, the activists with the most intuitive grasp of these strategies are across the quad in the "globalize the intifada" encampments.

Consider how much Soviet Jewry nostalgia focuses on the December 1987 Freedom Rally on the National Mall—a peak moment one-off near the movement's end—rather than the decades of sweat that got us there.

Kudos to Ariella Saperstein for highlighting what activists in the fight against Soviet anti-Zionism used to know: Movements

succeed by creating a thick culture of replicable practices ("Why Has Palestinian Activism Been So Successful"). This was why they invented Passover freedom seders, bat mitzvah twinnings, Anatoly Shcharansky bracelets, Pepsi boycotts, aid missions to Moscow, and more. It was this rich activist culture — not any single rally — that changed American Jewry and the world.

Encampment leaders understand this principle. Their replicable protest culture of tents, keffiyeh fashion, watermelon memes, boycott demands, and ritual chants may do nothing for Palestinians, but it has changed America. For the first time in this country's history, a successful mass movement of the political Left has arisen in which Jewish symbols, ideas, and people feature as the villains for crowds to rail against.

Jews are now less safe in America. As anyone nostalgic for the Soviet Jewry movement knows, activist cultures shape identity. Decades from now, today's campus activists will reminisce about the encampments, washing them in sepia and sunlight. And how will rational argument sway people whose loathing of Zionists is tethered to nostalgia for their lost youth?

SHAUL KELNER
Author, *A Cold War Exodus: How American Activists Mobilized to Free Soviet Jews* (NYU Press, 2024)
Nashville, Tennessee

To the Editor:

WRITE to congratulate Ariella Saperstein on her thoughtful and necessary analysis in "Why Has Palestinian Activism Been So Successful?" It is a piece that does what so much of our own advocacy fails to: It thinks strategically, not just reactively.

Here in the U.K., we've seen exactly the dynamics that Saperstein describes. The success of pro-Palestinian activism derives

not merely from the content of its arguments, but from its emotional calibration and cultural agility. It feels both cool and warm — morally righteous and socially relevant. By contrast, Jewish and pro-Israel communication often feels either coldly defensive or emotionally out of sync with the moment.

That point is powerfully echoed in Toba Hellerstein's companion article, "Actually, Feelings Don't Care About Your Facts." She and I have had many constructive and inspiring conversations — we've helped each other sharpen our advocacy (albeit across a vast ocean), and I see deeply complementary themes in her work and Saperstein's. Both argue, in different ways, that emotional resonance trumps empirical overload when speaking to audiences without shared context.

Coming from the world of advertising, branding, and communications, I know this truth well. Successful campaigns aren't built on the righteousness of your cause. They're built on how well you understand your audience — and how you make them feel. About us. About themselves. About our opponents. We obsess over coolness (does this feel modern, relevant?) and warmth (does it feel human, trustworthy?). The result, ideally, is not just noise or reach — but measurable behavioral change.

That requires clarity of purpose. What does success look like? Who are we trying to reach — and crucially, how do we want them to think, feel, and act differently as a result? Too often, we confuse social media performance among echo-chamber influencers with real-world impact. But persuasion begins where agreement ends.

It remains a mystery — and a source of deep frustration — why the global Jewish community, which has helped shape some of the most impactful brands, campaigns, and social movements in the world, so often fails to apply the same clarity and craft to our own cause. What do they say about the shoemaker and his children?

We need to stop creating for one another and start reaching those who don't yet understand us — or worse, think they already

do. That means being audience-centric, not egocentric. And it means designing communications not for applause, but for effect.

Saperstein and Hellerstein have laid out the challenge — and the opportunity. We need to take it!

MALCOLM GREEN
London, U.K. ✳

To read and share these and other letters online, scan the QR code.

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— שמות כד:י