



Letters

Readers respond

The letters below respond to our Chosenness issue of Summer 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:



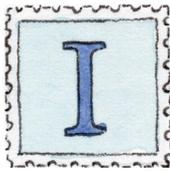
WHILE I appreciate SAPIR a lot, I am surprised that your issue ignores the debate over chosenness between Maimonides on the one hand, and much of historical and contemporary Orthodoxy on the other hand. For Maimonides, chosenness is a challenge; for most other pre-modern Jewish thinkers, it is an endowment. For details, see chapter 3 of my book *We Are Not Alone: A Maimonidean Theology of the Other*, on Election/Chosen People.

From the title of my book, it is clear that I root for Rambam.

MENACHEM KELLNER

Haifa, Israel

To the Editor:



IN HIS compelling article, Richard Hidary persuasively argues for the intrinsic link between chosenness and covenant. Israel's status as a chosen nation, he contends, is conditional upon "the work it is here to do." But what, precisely, is that work? Hidary turns to Exodus 19:5–6: "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." In essence, Israel's continued national existence is predicated on fulfilling God's mission — a claim Hidary extends to the modern State of Israel.

It is curious, then, that he frames Israel's current challenge as balancing its identity as both a Jewish state and a liberal democracy. Who determined that democracy is part of the covenant? Where, in the prophetic tradition, is Israel charged with upholding democratic principles? To be clear, I strongly support democracy. However, it must be acknowledged that democracy — especially one that extends fully to Israel's Gentile citizens — is not a covenantal requirement.

JACOB SASSON

New York, New York

Richard Hidary responds:



THANK Jacob Sasson for the insightful question. Although the modern instantiations of liberal democracies are anachronistic to ancient biblical political theory, America's Founding Fathers drew inspiration for equal rights and democratic representation from the biblical teaching that all men are created in the divine image. Furthermore, the Bible's begrudging tolerance of monarchy in favor of a

balance of separate powers, spurred generations of commentators to contemplate superior forms of government. I believe that the liberal order of elections and protections of minorities most closely achieves the ideal biblical form of government yet conceived. Deuteronomy's sustained warnings not to oppress the alien resident is best expressed today in Israel's equal treatment under the law for all its citizens. That Arabs and Muslims enjoy more freedom in Israel than in most Arab or Muslim countries makes it a shining light in the Middle East. That Israel offers freedom of religion while also nurturing a people joined by history, faith, and deep moral and spiritual values makes it a shining light in the West.

To the Editor:



LLEGRA Goodman correctly chides the editor of Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* for letting Potok repeat some of his descriptions. Ironically, the editor was the great Robert Gottlieb, who in his autobiography *Avid Reader* tells an amusing anecdote about the genesis of the novel's title. According to Gottlieb (if memory serves), this future Simon & Schuster bestseller was originally saddled with a very flowery, literary title — pretentiously biblical, perhaps — that no one at the publishing house liked. But no one could come up with anything better, the deadline was approaching, and they were going to have to use the unsatisfactory title. With the planned cover on his desk, catalogue copy to write, and just minutes to go, Gottlieb walked down the hall toward the men's room. On the way, he passed the office of another editor, the elderly Arthur Sheekman, best known for his early work on Marx Brothers' scripts. Sheekman's door was open, and Gottlieb stopped in to explain that he was desperate for

a title. He began laboriously describing the various strands of the novel—World War II-era Brooklyn, Jewish kids’ baseball leagues, the Holocaust, Orthodox rabbis, Hasids, the birth of Israel—and before he’d even finished what was going to be a long, complicated description, Sheekman shrugged and said, “Call it *The Chosen*.” Gottlieb instantly recognized that that was the perfect title, and he tells us that if he hadn’t at that moment needed to take a leak, the book’s publishing history might have been very different.

TED KLEIN
New York, New York

Allegra Goodman responds:



THAT a great story from Bob Gottlieb—and so characteristic of him. He was not only brilliant but funny and self-deprecating. I will always be grateful to him for championing my short fiction when I was in my early twenties and he was editor of the *New Yorker*. During his tenure there, he published many of the stories that appear in my book *The Family Markowitz*. I do think that *The Chosen* would have benefited from more rigorous editing. The title is inspired, however, and I’m glad Bob gave credit where credit is due.



To the Editor:



WE HAVE BEEN reading with interest and curiosity the essays on chosenness in the Summer 2025 issue of SAPIR and have found it disappointing as well as puzzling that SAPIR did not dedicate at least one article to articulating Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan’s critique of that concept. In the space of this letter, we hope to rectify that omission.

Kaplan resisted and rejected modern attempts at reinterpreting chosenness precisely because, in his words, “by no kind of dialectics is it possible to remove the odium of comparison from any reinterpretation of an idea which makes invidious distinctions between one people and another” (*The Future of the American Jew*, p. 217).

On conceptual and rational grounds alone, Kaplan might have declared the entire issue to be moot. In his naturalistic and humanistic understanding of religion, God is conceived of as a power or process, not as a supernatural Being who consciously plays favorites among individuals and human families. Kaplan’s God cannot “choose” anyone, any more than, say, gravity could make a distinction between one ethnicity, religion, or nation and another.

Kaplan’s objection to the idea of chosenness as a religious value was also ethical. The assumption of a predetermined, supernaturally bestowed, and inherent superiority adhering to the Jewish people, is morally problematic, modern apologetics and poetic midrashim notwithstanding.

Chosenness, whether imagined as inherent in Jews through an embodied genetics (an ugly, racially tinged, and essentialist notion) or as inherent in Jewish religion through divinely bestowed grace and covenantal faith, is for Kaplan an anachronism unworthy of the Jewish people (or any people) in the modern world. It raises the problem of what Walter Kaufmann, in his book *The Faith of a Heretic*, called “gerrymandering,” contrasting “the best of ours” with “the worst of theirs.”

It is curious and disconcerting that contemporary Jewish thinkers who have with ease dispensed with other classical religious beliefs—Torah as verbatim revelation from Sinai, the resurrection of the dead, and the coming of a supernatural Messiah, to name but three—somehow draw the line at the concept of chosenness, which they labor hard to sanitize. For those of us for whom Kaplan’s

arguments are convincing, we endorse his conclusion that “the very assumption of a predetermined and permanent superiority, no matter in what respect, does not lend itself to reinterpretation” (*The Future of the American Jew*, p. 217).

Admittedly, as the articles in the SAPIR series demonstrate, Kaplan’s position on chosenness remains a minority opinion in contemporary Jewish conversation. But surely the critiques he brings deserve to be discussed alongside the many attempts to defend the concept of chosenness in the pages of SAPIR. *

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