

LESSON 4

CHOSEN PEOPLE, CHOSEN PURPOSE

BACKGROUND TEXT 1

This short scene opens with Tevye (played by Israeli actor Chayyim Topol, 1935-2023) in a monologue with God. As he is returning home from celebrating the engagement of his eldest daughter, he receives news of an imminent pogrom – a scheduled government-sponsored attack on the Jewish community and turns to God with a question.



TEXT 1

VIDEO: [*FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*](#)

(1971) American musical comedy-drama.

(The video is hyperlinked to the title above.)

Transcript: Dear God, did you have to send me news like that today of all days? I know, I know we are the Chosen People, but once in a while, can't you choose someone else?



TEXT 2

DEUTERONOMY (*DEVARIM*) 7:6-8; 9:4-6

Chapter 7

6 For you are a people consecrated to the ETERNAL your God: of all the peoples on earth the ETERNAL your God chose you to be the treasured one. **7** It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that GOD grew attached to you and chose you – indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; **8** but it was because GOD favored you and kept the oath made to your fathers that GOD freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Chapter 9

4 And when the ETERNAL your God has thrust them from your path, say not to yourselves, “GOD has enabled us to possess this land because of our virtues”; it is rather because of the wickedness of those nations that the GOD is dispossessing them before you. **5** It is not because of your virtues and your rectitude that you

will be able to possess their country; but it is because of their wickedness that the ETERNAL your God is dispossessing those nations before you, and in order to fulfill the oath that the GOD made to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

6 Know, then, that it is not for any virtue of yours that the ETERNAL your God is giving you this good land to possess; for you are a stiffnecked people.

דְּבָרִים ז, ו-ח; ט, ד-ו

ו כי עם קדוש אתה לה' אלהיך בך בחר ה' אלהיך להיות לו לעם סגלה מכל העמים אשר על פני האדמה. ז לא מרפכם מפל העמים חשק ה' בכם ויבחר בכם כי אתם המעט מפל העמים. ח כי מאהבת ה' אתכם ומשמרו את השבועה אשר נשבע לאבותיכם הוציא ה' אתכם ביד חזקה ויפדה מבית עבדים מיד פרעה מלך מצרים.

ד אל תאמר בלבבך בהדף ה' אלהיך אתם מלפניו לאמר בצדקתי הביאני ה' לרשת את הארץ הזאת ובחשעת הגוים האלה ה' מורישם מפניו. ה לא בצדקתך וכישר ללבבך אתה בא לרשת את ארצם כי בחשעת הגוים האלה ה' אלהיך מורישם מפניו ולמען הקים את הדבר אשר נשבע ה' לאבותיך לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב. ו וידעת כי לא בצדקתך ה' אלהיך נתן לך את הארץ הטובה הזאת לרשתה כי עם קשה ערף אתה.



TEXT 3 EXODUS (*SHEMOT*) 19:5-6

5 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, **6** but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.

שְׁמוֹת יט, ה-ו

ה ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקולי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ. ו ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל בני ישראל.



TEXT 4

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, TRACTATE *SHABBAT* 88A

Compilation of teachings of 3rd–6th century scholars in Babylonia (*amora'im*); final redaction in the 6th–7th centuries.

Rav Avdimi son of Chamma son of Chassa said, This teaches that the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] vat, and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, *there* shall be your burial place.”

- 5 Rav Acha son of Yaakov observed, This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Rava, Yet even so, they reaccepted it in the days of Achashverosh, for it is written, “[the Jews] confirmed, and took upon them...” (Esther 9:27), they confirmed what they had already taken upon themselves.

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת שבת דף פח, עמוד א

אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלימד שפפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם
אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם
אמר רב אחא בר עקיב מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא
אמר רבא אף על פי כן הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים, קימו מה שקבלו כבר.



TEXT 5

AMOS 3:1–2

- 1** Hear this word, O people of Israel,
That GOD has spoken concerning you,
Concerning the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt:
2 You alone have I singled out
Of all the families of the earth—
That is why I will call you to account
For all your iniquities.

א שִׁמְעוּ אֶת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' עֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל כָּל הַמִּשְׁפָּחָה אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיתִי מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר. ב רַק אַתֶּם יִדְעִיתִי מִכָּל מִשְׁפָּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה עַל כֵּן אֶפְקֹד עֲלֵיכֶם אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם.



TEXT 6

RABBI JILL JACOBS, *TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF JEWISH CHOSENNESS*

(b. 1975) American Conservative Rabbi who is the Executive Director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

The tension between the contrasting biblical and talmudic understandings of chosenness resurfaces in the writings of Judah Halevi and Moses Maimonides, two prominent philosophers . . . Halevi adopts and expands upon the biblical portrayal of the Jews as the passive chosen people, while Maimonides develops the talmudic description of the Jews as active choosers.

For Halevi, the Jews are inherently different from other people. In his most famous work, the *Kuzari*, he introduces the idea that, at the time of the creation of human beings, God instilled in Adam a certain divine quality, which then passed to Adam's son Seth and then, through Seth's line, to the entire Jewish people (1:95). This divine essence, according to Halevi, is unlinked to any human behavior. A Jew who rejects Torah law cannot lose this essence, and a non-Jew who observes the commandments cannot acquire it.

In contrast, Maimonides, in accordance with the rabbinic understanding of chosenness as the result of human action, describes Abraham as a philosopher who is “chosen” only because he discovers God. Similarly, the Jewish people are “chosen” insofar as their acceptance of the Torah grants them a special relationship with God. . .

Early discussions of chosenness, then, follow two different – and opposite – paths. According to the traditional framework, the Jews are the chosen people either as a

result of a unilateral – and seemingly arbitrary – divine decision, or as the result of an active decision on their part to initiate a relationship with God.

Available online at myjewishlearning.com. Viewed July 2020.



TEXT 7 WILLIAM GIBSON, *GOLDA*, ACT TWO

(1914–2008) American playwright and novelist. *Golda* (1977), a play about the late Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, was not well-received by the critics, but the revised version, *Golda's Balcony* (2003), became very popular and set a record as the longest-running one-woman play in Broadway history.

The chosen people never meant to me God chose us, it meant we chose Him. It put us at the danger-point of everything human. Who knows more about suffering and love and exile and trying—we didn't always succeed—to live by the word we gave the world?

Gibson, W. 1977. *Golda - A Play in Two Acts*. New York: Samuel French, 107.



TEXT 8 RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, *MORAL GRANDEUR AND SPIRITUAL AUDACITY*

(1907–1972) Religious philosopher in America, Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

We have not chosen God; He has chosen us. There is no concept of a chosen God but there is the idea of a chosen people. The idea of a chosen people does not suggest the preference for a people based upon a discrimination among a number of peoples. We do not say that we are a superior people. The “chosen people”

- 5 means a people approached and chosen by God. The significance of this term is genuine in relation to God rather than in relation to other peoples. It signifies not a quality inherent in the people but a relationship between the people and God.

A. J. Heschel. 1983. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 425–426.



TEXT 9

RABBI JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK, *CONFRONTATION*

(1903–1993) Philosopher and talmudic scholar; leader of Modern Orthodoxy in America.

We Jews have been burdened with a twofold task; we have to cope with the problem of a double confrontation. We think of ourselves as human beings, sharing the destiny of Adam in his general encounter with nature, and as members of a covenantal community which has preserved its identity under most unfavorable conditions, confronted by another faith community. We believe we are the bearers of a double charismatic load, that of the dignity of man, and that of the sanctity of the covenantal community. In this difficult role, we are summoned by God, who revealed himself at both the level of universal creation and that of the private covenant, to undertake a double mission – the universal human and the exclusive covenantal confrontation.

Soloveitchik, J. 1964. "Confrontation." *Tradition* 6 (2) Spring-Summer. Available online at traditiononline.org. Viewed July 2020.



TEXT 10

THE ALEINU PRAYER

This prayer taken from the *siddur* is traditionally recited three times daily at the conclusion of each service and praises God for allowing the Jewish people to serve God. It expresses the hope that the whole world will recognize God and abandon idolatry in all its forms.

It is incumbent upon us to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the One who created at the start, that God did not make us like the nations of the lands and that God did not position us like the families of the earth; that God did not assign our portion like theirs, nor our fate like that of all the multitudes. [For they bow to

5 nonsense and emptiness, and pray to a god who cannot afford salvation.] But we bend our knees and bow, and offer thanks before the King who is the king of kings, the Holy Blessed One. For it is God who spreads out the heavens and lays the foundations of the earth, whose glorious abode is in the highest heaven, and the abode of [God's] might is in the loftiest heights. This is our God, there is no other.
10 Our King is truth, any other is naught, as it is written in [God's] Torah, "Know this day and take it to heart that the Eternal is our God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other" (Deut 4:39).

So we express hope before You, Eternal our God, that we will soon see Your
15 splendorous might in order to sweep idolatry from the earth, to utterly destroy false gods, and to perfect earth under the kingship of the Almighty so that all of humankind will invoke Your name, and cause all the earth's wicked to turn back to You. Then all the inhabitants of the world will know that to You every knee must bend, every tongue vow [loyalty]. Before You, Eternal our God, they will bend
20 every knee and cast themselves down, and they will give honor to Your name. And everyone will accept the yoke of Your kingship, and You will reign over them, soon and forever more. For sovereignty is Yours, and may You reign in honor forever. Thus it is written in Your Torah, "God shall reign for ever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). And it says, "And God shall be King over all the earth, on that day God shall be One and
25 [God's] name One" (Zechariah 14:9).

תפלת עלינו

עלינו לשבח לאדון הכל, לתת גזלה ליוצר בראשית, שלא עשנו כגויי הארצות, ולא שמנו כמשפחות האדמה; שלא שם חלקנו בהם, וגורלנו ככל המונם. [שהם משתחיים להלל וריק, ומתפללים אל אל לא יושע]. ואנחנו כורעים ומשתחיים ומודים לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא נוטה שמים ויוסד ארץ, ומושב קרו בשמים ממעל, ושכינת עזו בגבחי מרומים. הוא אלהינו אין עוד. אמת מלפנו. אפס זולתו. ככתוב בתורתו: וידעת היום והשבת אל לבבך כי ה' הוא האלהים בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת. אין עוד.

על כן נקנה לה' אלהינו לראות מהרה בתפארת עזה להעביר גולים מן הארץ, והאילים פרות יפרתו. למקן עולם במלכות שדי וכל בני בשר יקראו בשמה להפנות אליה פל ושעי ארץ. כפרו וידעו פל יושבי תבל כי לה תכרע פל ברה, תשבע פל לשון. לפניה ה' אלהינו יכרעו ויפלו, ולכבוד שמה יקר יתנו. ויקפלו כלם את על מלכותה, ותמלך עליהם מהרה לעולם ועד. כי המלכות שלה היא ולעולמי עד תמלך בכבוד. ככתוב בתורתה: ה' ימלך לעולם ועד. ונאמר: והיה ה' למלך על פל הארץ, ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד.



TEXT 11

RABBI MORDECAI KAPLAN,

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE IDEA – AN ANACHRONISM

(1881–1983) Rabbi, essayist, and Jewish educator; the ideologue of Reconstructionist Judaism.

- The idea of Israel as the Chosen People, must, therefore, be understood as belonging to a thought-world which we no longer inhabit. It fits in with a set of ideas that were congruous and rational enough in their day. But it can no longer help us to understand relations, or to orient ourselves to conditions, as they exist
- 5 today. The very notion that a people can for all time be the elect of God implies an epic or dramatic conception of history, a history predetermined in form and aim. Nowadays for any people to call itself “chosen” is to be guilty of self-infatuation. It is paradoxical for the Jewish people to be collectively guilty of self-infatuation, when individually so many Jews are guilty of self-hate. . . .

- 10 In the Bible, the assumption of Israel's election merely implies that YHWH, the God whom Israel acknowledged as its god, was so incomparably greater than the gods of the other nations, that the Israelites might well consider themselves fortunate in being His people.
- 15 That belief acquired a deeper significance after the Babylonian exile. From that time on, it meant that the Jews were convinced that they alone were in possession of the Torah which contained all that a people needed to live by, in order to achieve wellbeing and perfection. Regarded as having been dictated by God, the Torah conferred upon the people that accepted it the title of "kingdom of priests and a
- 20 holy nation." Throughout the period of the Second Commonwealth, the accent in the doctrine of election was not on national self-awareness as such, but on being the most privileged of all peoples, by virtue of possessing God's Torah. . . .

- There are many apologists for the doctrine who cling to the assertion of divine
- 25 election, but compromise on its implied claims. They even confess to an awareness of the distaste which the assertion of divine election provokes in many modern-minded people. They seem to understand and even to admit that "extolling God for 'not having made us like other peoples' is grating." Nevertheless, they maintain that properly interpreted, the doctrine still remains valid and should not be discarded.
- 30 Though the belief expresses a certain national pride, or a sense of national privilege, "it carries with it also a sense of consecration and responsibility." No one can question the fact that the belief of being divinely elect has long been associated in the Jewish mind with consecration and responsibility. However, we cannot ignore the other implications of that belief, especially those which are often sharply
- 35 stressed, as in the Aleinu and the Havdalah prayers. In the latter, the invidiousness of the distinction between Israel and the nations is emphasized by being compared with the distinction between light and darkness. It is that invidiousness which is highly objectionable, and should be eliminated from our religion. . . .
- 40 . . . the essence of Jewish religion can no longer be made to depend upon the factual truth of the supernatural events which are recorded in the Torah and on the presumable conclusion that they prove the election of Israel. Jewish religion will have to be based on what objective study has shown to be the function of a religion in the life of a people. That function is so to inspire and direct the energies of a

45 people as to help its individual men and women to achieve their destiny as human beings, or to make the best use of their lives. . . .

. . . What more important calling could a people have than to promulgate, by its way of life, the truth of the universal presence of God in all religions, and the universal
50 obligation of every man to use his traditional sancta for glorifying not merely his own people or church, but mankind as a whole?

Kaplan, M. M. 1967. *The Future of the American Jew*. New York: Reconstructionist Press, 211–230. Used with permission of the publisher.



TEXT 12

RABBI LORD IMMANUEL JAKOBOVITS, *CHOSEN FOR WHAT?*

(1921–1999) Former Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of Great Britain.

Yes, I do believe in the Chosen people concept as affirmed by Judaism in its holy writ, its prayers, and its millennial tradition. 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. Only, some fulfill
5 their mission and others do not. 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
10 their national purpose.

Eleff, Z. 2016. *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History*. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 260–264.



TEXT 13

RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON, *THE PEOPLE CHOSEN FOR WHAT?*

(b. 1959) American Conservative rabbi, author, speaker, and the occupant of the Abner and Roslyn Goldstine Dean's Chair of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

At the textual summit of the Book of Exodus is the encounter between God and the Jewish People at Mount Sinai. Here, God and the Jews meet and exchange promises of loyalty and love. Here, God and the people embrace the Ten Commandments – the first articulation of our sacred, mutual *berit*, our covenant.

5

Immediately preceding this momentous event, God speaks to Moses, contextualizing the ensuing revelation. For the first time, God clearly articulates a notion of the Jews as the Chosen People: “Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a nation of priests and a holy nation.”

10

This one sentence indicates the tension inherent in the concept of “chosen people”: How can the God of the Universe choose just one people? If God is truly omniscient, isn’t the restriction of God’s choice to one particular people an act of xenophobic idolatry? Doesn’t God love everybody equally? The impetus behind these questions has caused some observant Jews to renounce any claim to chosenness. They argue that chosenness is an arrogant claim that denigrates the rest of humanity.

15

Is that appraisal the only way to understand this central biblical claim? After all, the Bible itself presents this assertion as the contextual underpinning for the Ten Commandments, and for all the profound teachings that follow. Doesn’t denying the context result in uprooting the values and heroic figures of the biblical tradition?

20

Rather than rejecting such a pivotal idea, we would do well to try to understand it in a way that is consistent with both the divinity of all humanity, and of the uniqueness of the Jews. Viewed in that light, we must quickly echo the words of the Bible that the “chosenness” of the Jews is consistent with the assertion that God loves and cares for each human being. We are all precious.

25

But chosenness implies a uniqueness, a particular purpose. The statement, “I was chosen today,” is incomplete unless I specify what it is I was chosen for. Similarly,
 30 Jewish chosenness is a sentence fragment. It is grammatically and theologically incomplete.

What completes the chosenness of the Jews is the assertion that Jews were (and are) chosen to embody the life and values of the Torah and rabbinic tradition. By
 35 living a life centered on *mitzvot* and by constantly growing as Jews, we choose to be chosen. We allow the *berit* to live by the way we conduct our lives. As with any love relationship, both partners have the power to affirm or to rupture that relationship of their own free will. The idea of *berit* places that enormous responsibility in our hands, no less than in those of God.

40 In the words of the *Mekhilta*, the ancient rabbinic commentary to Exodus, the phrase “and you shall be Mine” means “you shall be turned to Me and be occupied with the words of the Torah.” God doesn’t love Jews better; God loves us differently. By immersing ourselves in the study and practice of Torah, we Jews renew our
 45 unique relationship with God. By living lives centered on God and mitzvot, we justify the claim, not of being God’s only love, but of being God’s first.

And in building communities of holiness and love, we assist our non-Jewish neighbors in cultivating their love relationship with God as well – joining hands
 50 together to build a world that is just, compassionate, and worthy of God.

Artson, B. S. 2001. *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Vision and Dreams*. New York: Contemporary Books, 122–123.

BACKGROUND TEXT 14

The following is an excerpt from Buchdahl’s 2016 Rosh Hashana Speech delivered in October 2016 at Central Synagogue. Earlier in the speech, she draws upon her experience of being born in South Korea to a Korean Buddhist mother and an American Ashkenazi Reform Jew. At the age of 21 she underwent a Reform conversion, which she views as a “reaffirmation ceremony.”



TEXT 14

RABBI ANGELA BUCHDAHL, *CHOSEN TO BE THE OTHER* (2016)

(b. 1972) American reform rabbi who was the first East Asian-American to be ordained as a rabbi and cantor.

[E]ven if you are quite secure in your Jewish identity, there may be no concept more unsettling and perhaps even embarrassing for the modern Jew than the idea of chosenness. In an age of increasing multiculturalism and diversity and intermarriage, thinking of ourselves as the chosen people seems unnecessarily
5 exclusive and uncomfortably arrogant. Chosenness reeks of racial superiority or even supremacy. Unless we ask it as the question it is—chosen for what?

Jews were not chosen to be better, but to make things better. We were chosen to uphold the traditions and teachings of our Torah with our own particular
10 Jewish language and customs andchutzpah. Now in a world that is increasingly celebrating the universal, embracing particularism can seem too narrow too provincial too tribal.

But tribalism is not all bad. Human beings need our tribes, our families, our
15 congregations, our sports teams, our sororities. Tribes give us a sense of identity and belonging. They give us roots and a community. They help us find our own unique place and purpose. We Jews need our tribe so we can know our story, so we can know who we are, and what we were chosen to do.

20 Chosenness is not about being chosen above others. Jews were chosen to **be** the other. What do I mean by that? Jews were chosen to **be** the other. Well with apologies to Rabbi Hillel, if I had to sum up the entirety of the Jewish tradition while standing on one foot, I would say, you were a stranger therefore love the stranger as yourself all the rest is commentary go and learn it.

25

....

Our God has given every person and every tribe a light within-- a divine spark. If we fan that flame with fear and hatred, it will become a consuming fire. And if we hoard

- 30 that light, cultivating it only for ourselves only for our tribe, it will ultimately fade out.
But if we take up our unique light as a tribe that knows the heart of the stranger,
who will stand up for the other and love the stranger and shed light where it is most
needed, then we will live up to the prophetic call to be in an *ohr la'goim*, a light to the
nations—starting with our own great nation. We Jews were chosen for this; all the
35 rest is commentary. Let us go and live it...

For the full sermon click [here](#).



TEXT 15

VIDEO: RABBI KEN SPIRO, [WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHOSEN PEOPLE?](#)

Senior Lecturer and Researcher for Aish HaTorah, Jerusalem. In addition, he is a licensed tour guide from the Israel Ministry of Tourism.

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(The video is hyperlinked to the title above.)

KEY TERMS

Aleinu Prayer. The name of a prayer recited at the conclusion of traditional synagogue services. In the context of its main theme – the kingdom of God – the prayer focuses on the idea of the “Chosen People.”

Berit. (בְּרִית). A covenant, treaty, or pact.) A major biblical concept concerning the mutually binding, if unequal, partnership between God and the people Israel. The relationship between God and the Jewish people was concretized through the establishment of a covenant. The circumcision ritual has become known as *berit* (or *beris*) because it is a symbol of the Covenant.

Kadosh. (קָדוֹשׁ). Object or person that is holy.) While the precise meaning of the English “holiness” is uncertain, the Hebrew term refers to things that are set apart or dedicated for specific uses or purposes. While “holy” refers generally to the attainment of God-like attributes (since God is described as “holy”), such as moral purity and perfection, the Hebrew term indicates a state of being separate from that which is forbidden by the Torah.

Mitzvot. (מִצְוֹת; sing. Mitzvah, מִצְוָה) According to rabbinic tradition, the Torah contains 613 mitzvot (248 positive commandments – *mitzvot aseh*, and 365 negative commandments – *mitzvot lo ta’aseh*) that God commanded the Jewish people to observe.

Mount Sinai. The mountain located along the route of the Exodus where God’s Revelation took place.

Reconstructionist Judaism. Religious and social movement. The Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York City was its first congregation founded in 1922 by Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan. He also founded the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships in 1955, and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College opened in 1968. The movement teaches that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization with its own unique language, history, culture, body of customs and folkways, social organization, and attachment to the Land of Israel imbued by a religious core. In this view, Revelation is the continuing discovery, through nature and history, of truths about God and the world.

Segulah. (סְגוּלָה; Lit., a treasured possession) Image employed in the Tanakh to describe the special relationship between God and the Israelites.

KEY NAMES

Rav Acha son of Yaakov. (4th cent. CE) Babylonian *amora*; student of Rav Huna; taught Torah in a small city near Pumbedita.

Amos. An older contemporary of Hosea (Hoshea) and Isaiah (Yeshayah), he was active c. 760–755 BCE during the rule of kings Jeroboam (Yarov'am) II and Uzziah. Although he was from the southern Kingdom of Judah, he prophesied in the northern Kingdom of Israel. His major themes of justice, God's omnipotence, and divine judgment became staples of prophecy. The book Amos is attributed to him.

Artson, Rabbi Bradley Shavit. Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, Vice President of the University of Judaism, and teaches courses in Ancient & Medieval Jewish Philosophy, Modern & Contemporary Jewish Theology, as well as Homiletics. He is a member of the faculty of the Wexner Heritage Foundation and the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program.

Rav Avdimi son of Chama (son of Chassa). *Amora* whose time and place is unclear.

Borowitz, Rabbi Eugene B. (1924–2016) American leader and philosopher in Reform Judaism, he is known largely for his work on Jewish theology and Jewish ethics. He also edited a Jewish journal, *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, and taught at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. A prolific author, he received numerous awards for his contributions. During the Korean War, he served as a chaplain for the US Navy.

Buchdahl, Rabbi Angela Warnick. (b. 1972) Pioneering American Reform rabbi and cantor. She is notably the first East Asian-American to be ordained as both a cantor and a rabbi. In 2006, she became the senior cantor at Central Synagogue in Manhattan. By 2013, she was appointed as the congregation's first female senior rabbi. Throughout her career, she has been an advocate for a more inclusive Jewish community, serving on the board of the Jewish Multiracial Network. She has been recognized among *Newsweek's* "Most Influential Rabbis" and *The Forward's* "Forward Fifty," highlighting her significant impact on the Jewish community and beyond.

Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua. (1907–1972) A religious philosopher, he served as professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Author of numerous books on philosophy, Tanakh, kabbalah, and Hassidism including *The Prophets*, *A Passion for Truth*, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, *Man's Quest for God*, *The Sabbath*, and *God in Search of Man*.

Jacobs, Rabbi Jill. (b. 1975) Conservative rabbi and CEO of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, an organization that mobilizes rabbis and cantors to advocate for human rights. She served as the Rabbi in Residence at Jewish Funds for Justice and as the Director of Outreach and Education for the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. She has been recognized multiple times on *Newsweek's* list of the 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America and the *Forward's* list of 50 influential American Jews.

Jakobovits, Rabbi Immanuel. (1921–1999) Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1967 to 1991, prior to which he had served as Chief Rabbi of Ireland and as rabbi of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue in New York City. He was regarded as an authority in medical ethics from a Jewish standpoint. He was knighted in 1981 and became the first Chief Rabbi to enter the House of Lords in 1988 as Baron Jakobovits.

Kaplan, Rabbi Mordechai M. (1881–1983) Essayist and Jewish educator, ideologue of the Reconstructionist Judaism movement. In 1889, he immigrated with his mother and sisters to the United States to join his father in New York. From 1893 to 1902, he studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary and began his career as an Orthodox rabbi. From 1934 until 1970, he wrote a series of books in which he expressed his Reconstructionist ideology, centered on the “concept of Judaism as a civilization.” He was a prolific writer, keeping a journal throughout most of his life.

Soloveitchik, Joseph B. (1903–1993) A spiritual leader of Modern Orthodoxy in America, he taught Talmud and Jewish philosophy at Yeshiva University, and was the author of numerous halakhic treatises, responsa, sermons on the Torah and philosophical books and articles, including *Halakhic Man*, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, *On Repentance*, and *Kol Dodi Dofek*.

Spiro, Rabbi Ken. Senior Lecturer and Researcher for Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem, as well as a licensed tour guide certified by the Israel Ministry of Tourism. His insights have been featured on various media outlets, including BBC Radio and TV, the National Geographic Channel, the History Channel, and Arutz Sheva-Israel National Radio.

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APPENDIX



[A] ARYEH BERNSTEIN AND RACHEL SABATH BEIT-HALACHMI, *ARE JEWS CHOSEN?*

Bernstein is the coordinator of the Back-to-Basics program for the Mishkan community in Chicago. Sabath Beit-Halachmi is the national director of recruitment and admissions and a president's scholar at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

In an exchange of letters, Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi and Aryeh Bernstein discuss how their thinking about chosenness has changed over time – whether chosenness, today, is a notion that is instructive or detrimental to Jewish life. They consider how chosenness influences our relationships with Israel and the concept of peoplehood.

Shalom, Aryeh,

What does chosenness mean for us as Jews today? Should it still guide how we act? I believe that the idea of chosenness must remain central to how we understand ourselves. That we are a chosen people is a core aspect of what it means to be Jewish. It is rooted in the origins of our people, in the biblical narratives of Abraham (Genesis 12) and in the redemption and revelation that made us who we are. Exodus 19 says it in three different ways. First, we are an *am segulah*, precious to God, as well as *mamlechet kohanim*, God's nation of priests, and a holy nation or people, a *goy kadosh*. It is significant that this is how God names us at the moment we are given the Torah with its commandments to create an ethical society. I understand these three statements to mean that from ancient times to the present era, whether we were celebrated or decimated, we understood ourselves to be precious, priestly, and holy.

Many Jewish thinkers have questioned this idea of chosenness – including the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan. And today, many who criticize the notion of chosenness for its particularist commitments – especially those on the far left who believe in a more universalist approach – are often the same people who most severely criticize the State of Israel. But I feel that a deep

understanding of chosenness allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of nationhood and statehood. Given our modern universal ethics and pluralist contexts, chosenness may seem foreign. But chosenness does not mean we see ourselves as superior to others. Rather, it affirms that we have a particular role to play and a particular relationship with God that demands creating and sustaining an ethical society. The command to protect the most vulnerable in the ancient world is no less essential today. And Israel, today, has the obligation and opportunity to be the nation that most protects the vulnerable and most ensures the rights of all its citizens. This is what it means to be a holy nation.

In order to maintain this possibility of both peoplehood and ethics, it is essential that all Jews understand their role as a chosen people, chosen to create and sustain Israel in all its struggles and in all its strivings. Whether we lovingly critique or more easily embrace the specific policies of any particular government, the value of supporting the state of the Jewish people should remain foundational.

For people who don't see the connection between chosenness and commitment to the State of Israel, is it a failure of understanding or a failure of education? Is it that their universal sense of ethics has trumped their particularist identities? And, if so, what does this discomfort with particularist Jewish commitments mean for Jewish peoplehood as the global realities continue to become more complex?

With respect for our friendship and chavruta, Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi

...

Shalom, Rachel,

I agree that chosenness is integral to Jewish life and that chosenness should not be understood to imply superiority. However, some of your definitions seem to obscure more than reveal. For example, you say that chosenness "affirms that we have a particular role to play ... that demands creating and sustaining an ethical society." But is creating and sustaining an ethical society the Jewish people's particular role? Isn't it our general role, one that we share with all peoples?

The state of Israel “has the obligation ...to be the nation that most protects the vulnerable and most ensures the rights of all its citizens.” Why most? I agree that Israel has no less obligation than anyone else, but why *more*? And why is protecting citizens’ rights “what it means to be a holy nation”? Isn’t that just what it means to be a nation?

By contrast, you then distinguish peoplehood from ethics and identify chosenness with “creat[ing] and sustain[ing] Israel in all its struggles and ... strivings.” You situate chosenness in tension with a universal sense of ethics that has perhaps “trumped” the “particularist identities” of those who don’t connect their sense of chosenness to a commitment to the State of Israel. How do you understand chosenness – as our universal ethics or our particular nationalism?

You express concern that many Jews are not sufficiently embracing Israel and they are eschewing chosenness; perhaps this is because they understand the current conception of chosenness as chauvinistic, and that it is this chosenness that creates the vulnerability to abuse for the most unprotected people in Israel: asylum-seekers, foreign workers, and Palestinians. Terms such as “precious,” “priestly,” and “holy” are often associated with feelings of superiority – among those who embrace chosenness as well as those who don’t. If we want to promote a non-chauvinistic sense of chosenness, we need to articulate that vision more clearly.

Here’s my stab at it: The association of chosenness with superiority reflects the faulty assumption that what I know is all there is to be known, that since I can testify to our chosenness because I remember Sinai, and since I have no personal knowledge of anyone else’s chosenness, therefore, we must be the only people to have been chosen. However, other peoples know things we don’t know and have their own inspiration. Our covenant is no evidence of superiority. The reason non-Jews cannot testify to Sinai is simply that they weren’t there. I mean that poetically; I’ll translate this into prose: Culture exists and inheritors of a culture have something unique to contribute to the world. It would be spiritually colonialist for me to testify to any other people’s chosenness or revelation. My role is to listen and take people at their word, at their testimony to their experience, just as I hope they’ll take my word and listen to my testimony of my experience.

95 The character of this chosenness is our unique, particular story. When we are called to the Torah, we say, “Praised are You ...God ...Who chose us from among the nations by giving us the Torah.” But all nations – all humanity – are responsible for a *universal* ethic as encapsulated by the seven Noahide laws that ordain core guidelines of civilized, human life.

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Every nation must sustain an ethical culture. As Jews, we must sustain the particular ethical culture shaped by having been slaves in Egypt, guided through the desert, etc. We are chosen to serve as we are and it seems as though everyone else probably is, too.

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With regard to the State of Israel, I wonder: Does Israel magnify or compromise our application of a particular, ethical culture? If it manifests a chauvinist understanding of chosenness, how should nonchauvinists interact with it?

110 *B’vrakhah*, Aryeh Bernstein

...

Dear Aryeh,

115

I am grateful for your responses and your questions, because they highlight chosenness as what God uniquely commanded us to be. This notion is essential to our identity, because it defines our uniqueness and our particular and universal mission as a people. Without a particular commitment to the sacred narratives, ethics, and commandments that are at the core of our identity and spirituality, we have little that is unique to us through which we can ground our identity. God still wants us to create in our contemporary world the society of justice and ethics that we were once chosen to create.

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125 This does not mean that the unique foundations of other peoples are less worthy, and we must vigilantly guard against perspectives that use chosenness to devalue or demonize other people.

Yes, our simultaneous commitment to both universal and particular ethics certainly includes – perhaps, even necessitates – both ancient and contemporary forms

130

of nationalism. And though we have survived historically as a people without sovereignty, we are told in the Bible to create and steward an ethical society. Carrying out this obligation is dependent on some form of national existence. But that sovereignty is dependent upon our ethical behavior. We have to earn
 135 the right to live in the Land of Israel every day. Deuteronomy 11:12 and Leviticus 18:28 crudely warn us that we will be vomited out of the land for not observing the commandments that God chose for us to receive about creating and sustaining an ethical society in the Land of Israel. We thus learn that we must be very careful as a nation and as individuals in the State of Israel today. While we have a right to defend
 140 ourselves as well as the land, it is clear that it is conditional upon moral behavior.

If we are not creating an ethical society in the ancient Land of Israel or in the sovereign State of Israel, we must repent. We must engage in the necessary self-scrutiny and *cheshbon hanefesh* (accounting of the soul) to reorient ourselves, to
 145 recalibrate and do whatever we can to ensure that we are worthy of our chosenness, worthy of being God's partners, worthy of the gift of God's Torah, and worthy of residing in the Land of Israel. I do not believe that there can ever be a point at which one can relinquish such a gift or its responsibilities.

150 With respect for our friendship and *chavruta*, Rachel

Available online at the website of *Sh'ma*, a journal of Jewish ideas – shma.com. Viewed July 2020.



[B] ALEINU PRAYER, RECONSTRUCTIONIST VERSIONS

Taken from the siddur, *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*.

Version 1

It is up to us to offer praises to the Source of all,
to declare the greatness of the author of Creation,
who gave to us teachings of truth
and planted eternal life within us.

עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל
לְתֵת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרָאשִׁית
שֶׁנָּתַן לָנוּ תוֹרַת אֱמֶת
וְחַיֵּי עוֹלָם נָטַע בְּתוֹכֵינוּ.

Version 2

It is up to us to offer praises to the Source of all,
to declare the greatness of the author of Creation,
who created heaven's heights and spread out its expanse,
who laid the earth's foundation and brought forth its offspring,
5 giving life to all its peoples,
the breath of life to all who walk about.

עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל
לְתֵת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרָאשִׁית
בּוֹרֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנוֹטִיָּהֶם
רֹקַע הָאָרֶץ וְצֹאצְאֶיהָ
נֹתֵן נֶשְׁמָה לָעָם עֲלֵיהָ
וְרוּחַ לְהוֹלְכִים בָּהּ.

Wyncote, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 1996, 120–121.



[C] RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI, *KUZARI* 1:95

(1075–1141) Poet and philosopher in Muslim Spain. The *Kuzari* was originally written in Arabic.

Bear with me a little while that I show the lofty station of the people. For me it is sufficient that God chose them as His people from all nations of the world, and allowed His influence to rest on all of them, and that they nearly approached being addressed by Him. It even descended on their women, among whom were

5 prophetesses, whilst since Adam, only isolated individuals had been inspired till then. Adam was perfection itself, because no flaw could be found in a work of a wise and Almighty Creator, wrought from a substance chosen by Him, and fashioned according to His own design . . . The soul with which he was endowed was perfect; his intellect was the loftiest which it is possible for a human being to

10 possess, and beyond this he was gifted with the divine power of such high rank, that it brought him into connexion with beings divine and spiritual, and enabled him, with slight reflection, to comprehend the great truths without instruction. We call him God's son, and we call all those who were like him also sons of God. He left many children, of whom the only one capable of taking his place was Abel,

15 because he alone was like him. After he had been slain by Kain through jealousy of this privilege, it passed to his brother Seth, who also was like Adam, being [as it were] his essence and heart, whilst the others were like husks and rotten fruit. The essence of Seth, then, passed to Enosh, and in this way the divine influence was inherited by isolated individuals down to Noah. They are compared to the heart; they

20 resembled Adam, and were styled sons of God. They were perfect outwardly and inwardly, their lives, knowledge and ability being likewise faultless. Their lives fix the chronology from Adam to Noah, as well as from Noah to Abraham. There were some, however, among them who did not come under divine influence, as Terah, but his son Abraham was the disciple of his grandfather Eber, . . . Thus the divine spirit

25 descended from the grandfather to the grandchildren . . . The essence of Abraham passed over to Isaac, to the exclusion of the other sons who were all removed from the land, the special inheritance of Isaac. The prerogative of Isaac descended on Jacob, whilst Esau was sent from the land which belonged to Jacob. The sons of the latter were all worthy of the divine influence, as well as of the country distinguished

30 by the divine spirit. This is the first instance of the divine influence descending on a number of people, whereas it had previously only been vouchsafed to isolated

individuals . . . If disobedient men existed among them, they were hated, but remained, without doubt, of the essence inasmuch as they were part of it on account of their descent and nature, and begat children who were of the same stamp . . .

HaLevi, J. 1964. *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld. New York: Schocken Books, 64–67.



[D] MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM), *EPISTLE TO YEMEN*

(1135–1204) (Moshe ben Maimon) Philosopher, codifier, communal leader, and doctor in Spain and Egypt.

Remember, that ours is the true and authentic Divine religion, revealed to us through Moses, the master of the former as well as the later prophets, by means of which God has distinguished us from the rest of mankind, as Scripture says, “Yet it was to your ancestors that God was drawn in love for them, so that God chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all peoples” (Deuteronomy 10:15). This did not happen because of our merits, but rather as an act of Divine grace, and on account of our ancestors who were cognizant of God and submitted to God, as we read, “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that God desired you and chose you . . . but it was because God favored you and kept the oath God made to your ancestors . . .” (Deuteronomy 7:7–8). God has made us unique through laws and precepts, and our pre-eminence is manifested in God’s rules and statutes, as Scripture says, in narrating God’s mercies to us, “what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?” (Deuteronomy 4:8). Therefore all the nations instigated by envy and impiety rose up against us, and all the kings of the earth motivated by injustice and enmity applied themselves to persecute us. They wanted to thwart God, but God cannot be thwarted. Ever since the time of Revelation, every despot or slave that has attained to power, be he violent or ignoble, has made it his first aim and his final purpose to destroy our law, and to vitiate our religion, by means of the sword, by violence, or by brute force, such as Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian, may their bones be ground to dust, and others like them. . .



[E] MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM), *MISHNEH TORAH*, *HILKHOT SHEMITTAH VEYOVEL* 13:13

(1135–1204) (Moshe ben Maimon) Philosopher, codifier, communal leader, and doctor in Spain and Egypt.

[A]ny human being whose spirit moves them, and whose awareness leads them to stand apart in the service of God, to come to know God, and who walks uprightly as God made them to be, and who has cast off their neck the yoke of many a cunning wile that humanity has contrived, has thereby sanctified themselves to the highest levels of the sacred, and God will forever be their portion and heritage . . .

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רב משה בן מימון, משנה תורה, הלכות שמיטה ויוכל יג, יג
... אלא כל איש ואיש מכל באי העולם אשר נדבה רוחו אותו והבינו מדעו להבדל לעמד לפני
ה' לשרתו ולעבדו לדעה את ה' והלה ישר כמו שעשהו האלהים ופרק מעל צוארו על החשבונות
הרבים אשר בקשו בני האדם הרי זה נתקדש קדש קדשים ויהיה ה' חלקו ונחלתו לעולם ולעולמי
עולמים . . .



[F] RABBI EUGENE BOROWITZ, *THE CHOSEN PEOPLE* *CONCEPT AS IT AFFECTS LIFE IN THE DIASPORA*

(1924–2016) American leader and philosopher in Reform Judaism, known largely for his work on Jewish theology and Jewish ethics. He also edited a Jewish journal, *Sh'ma*, and taught at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

The concept of chosenness, theologically considered, ought to affect the life of the Jew in six ways. Four are inner-directed and emphasize the life of holiness and the assurance of redemption – the uniqueness of the Torah and commandments. The other two are outer-directed and include separation and service, and activism – the idea that Jews have a high calling and must set a “high example of personal conduct before humanity.” Supposedly, the inner aspects of chosenness have a higher priority than the outer. For the State of Israel this is so, but for diaspora Jews the “outer aspects of chosenness are highly significant.”

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10 Secularization is a crucial category of diaspora Jews and has produced both a social and an intellectual change. Socially, Jews have willingly adopted non-Jewish lifestyles, producing a strong emphasis on humanity, with accompanying ethical expectations. It also accounts for the rejection by the average American Jew of the traditional concept of being chosen, in contrast to the State of Israel, due to the reality of the experiential differences. The intellectual change accompanying
 15 secularization has also affected the diaspora Jew's sense of chosenness. This change consists in a de-emphasis on God's action and an increased emphasis on human activity and creativity. Naive, optimistic humanism is ruled out.

20 This new attitude toward chosenness strongly affects the lives and attitudes of diaspora Jews. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform have reacted in different ways, partly admirably and partly despicably. There is a transformed religious impulse. If we look carefully, we can trace in secularists a displaced religiosity, which comes out particularly in the interest on the part of an overwhelming number of diaspora Jews in high culture and achievement, in high ethical ideals and behavior, in
 25 embarrassment and shame at improper behavior on the part of individual Jews, and in intense involvement in the behavior of the State of Israel. These are "signals of transcendence."

30 Finally, a theological renewal of the concept of chosenness is possible. It can best be seen as an emphasis on covenant rather than on chosenness – the relationship between Jews and God, and the potentially universal characteristics of this relationship.

Borowitz, E. 1975. "The Chosen People Concept as It Affects Life in the Diaspora." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12: 553–568. Viewed June 2020.

