



THE "CHOSEN PEOPLE" RECON- SIDERED A Symposium

In the opening essay, Hirsh presents his understanding of the Reconstructionist approach to chosenness. It is to his essay that the other writers respond.

The Nuances of Chosenness: A Reconstructionist Approach

Richard A. Hirsh

Among the many distinctive ideas of Reconstructionism, the most fundamental is the belief that Judaism is the humanly created and naturally developed product of the Jewish people. Classical Reconstructionism (i.e., the work of Mordecai M. Kaplan and his immediate disciples) sought to reinterpret rigorously the essential elements of Jewish civilization under the rubric "Judaism without supernaturalism." God was no longer to be conceived of as a supernatural being, but as a power or process operative in and through the natural world, made manifest most clearly in human conscience. Torah was no longer to be conceived of as a supernaturally revealed body of law and literature, but as coterminous with the totality of Jewish civilization — created by humans and subject to evolution. Finally, the people Israel was no longer to be conceived of as a supernaturally "chosen" people, but as a naturally evolving social group whose unique identity exists solely in relation to its unique culture. Of the many changes introduced into Jewish thought in the modern period, the Reconstructionist deletion of the endorsement of and reference to the idea of the "chosen people" has been among the most controversial. Continued resistance to this change indicates a need to reexamine the rationales invoked on its behalf.¹

It should be noted that other contemporary Jewish ideologies,

notably Reform and Conservative Judaism, have evidenced varying degrees of discomfort with the concept of chosenness, and felt a need to offer apologetic arguments for its retention.² In *The Future of the American Jew* (1948), Mordecai Kaplan indicates the four basic rationales commonly invoked for that purpose.

Four Contemporary Rationales

The first rationale is that Jews are, by virtue of heredity, superior in the fields of religion and ethics, having what the noted Reform theologian Abraham Geiger once called a "native talent for religion." The essential fallacy of such an argument is that it presumes that Jewish identity is in some way biological and/or genetic. It thus completely ignores both the multi-ethnic character of the Jewish people and the significance of conversion. Having struggled to gain acceptance of the concept of *peoplehood* as the appropriate category of Jewish corporate identity, Reconstructionists clearly would not advocate retaining the concept of chosenness based on a misunderstanding of that category. (Unfortunately, there persists in Jewish life today a vulgar version of the heredity argument which manifests itself in such undertakings as calculating the number of Nobel prize winners who are "Jewish.")



A second rationale for retaining the idea of chosenness which Kaplan rejected was that Jews were the first people to manifest the essential religious and ethical ideas which have since been adopted as the basis of Western civilization. Viewed historically, this claim is untenable as an absolute, since the contributions of Greek and Roman civilization, for example, as well as those of the European Enlightenment, were of significance as well. If anything, comparative religious and cultural studies support a superficial commonality with regard to ethical concepts which transcend civilizational lines. Even if, however, one grants that certain crucial moral insights have derived from the experience of the Jewish people, that would not be sufficient ground on which to stake the claim to chosenness.

A third argument made in favor of the "chosen people" is that Judaism represents the highest form (i.e., the truest form) of religious belief. As Kaplan notes, this may constitute a sufficient rationale for an Orthodox believer. The majority of modern Jews, however, accept a developmental model of Jewish religion, and thus cannot claim for it the category of "truth," which presumes a static, rather than a fluid, entity. The fact that a given stage of Jewish religion manifested certain ethical insights does not mean that those insights were always present, nor does it guarantee that they will always be accepted. While not endorsing a totally relativistic ethical system, the evolutionary conception of Jewish religion indicates that ethical postures are

subject to continual refinement and reassessment. It would thus be difficult to isolate one specific stage of Jewish religion and point to it as *the* highest form of religion; consequently, a convincing argument for chosenness cannot be based on this rationale.

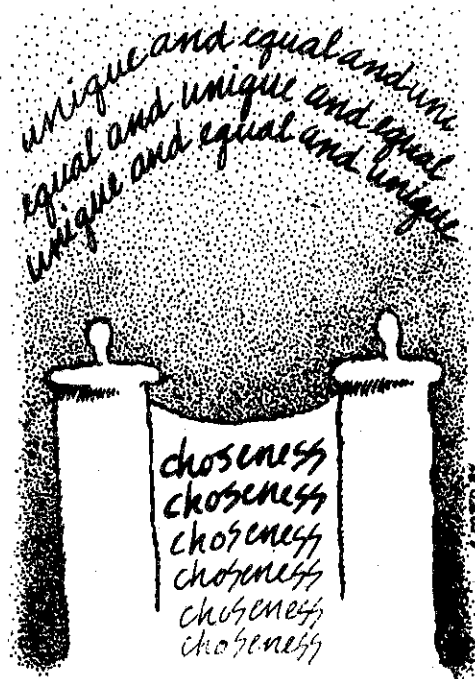
Jewish Mission

The final argument which achieved currency especially, although not exclusively, in Reform circles, is that Jews have a "mission" of spreading ethical monotheism, and that it is for this purpose that they have been chosen. This rationale might preserve the idea of election but runs the risk of creating a subtle but real intolerance for other faiths which, by definition, remain "incomplete." In a curious reversal of historical doctrinal disputation, the "mission theory" seems to imply that there is "no salvation outside the synagogue."

Furthermore, as Kaplan notes, the "mission" of Israel, as defined by modernists, does not correlate with the election of Israel as understood in Jewish tradition. Finally, even those who adhere to this notion are manifestly reluctant to undertake any real missionizing on behalf of Jewish ethical monotheism, although the recent call by a prominent Reform rabbi for "outreach to the unchurched" may represent an attempt to resurrect the mission theory.

Discomfort with Chosenness

The very fact that such apologetic arguments are put forth indicates discomfort on the part of many modern Jews with the implications of chosenness, as it is traditionally understood. Classical Reconstructionism rejected the attempt to reinterpret chosenness precisely because, in





Kaplan's 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."³ Thus, in the prayerbooks of the Reconstructionist movement, references to the doctrine of chosenness were eliminated in favor of alternative formulations which advocated a sense of *vocation* (as in the phrase substituted in the blessing before reading the Torah, "who hast brought us nigh to thy service. . ." [*asher kervanu la-avodato*])).

It is worth noting that Kaplan might have, on logical and rational grounds alone, declared the entire issue to be moot; a non-personal God conceived of as a power or process could not "choose" anyone. Yet Kaplan's essential argument was made on moral and pragmatic grounds. Morally, the assumption of a predetermined, supernaturally-bestowed and permanent superiority was not in keeping with humanistic concerns and in fact hindered the attempt to emphasize the common human needs to which every religion responded. Pragmatically, invocation of such phrases as "He hath not made us like the pagans of the world, nor placed us like the heathen tribes of the earth. . ."⁴ was not conducive to the fostering of intergroup goodwill which Reconstructionism maintained should be a goal of all religions.

The Persistence of the Idea

Having duly noted all this, we

return to our original question: What accounts for the persistence of the idea of chosenness despite the loss of its supernatural underpinning and the unconvincing nature of the rationales offered on its behalf? Perhaps an answer may be found by comparing two liturgical texts which, in their traditional formulation, were deleted from

intolerance of, and even contempt for, other peoples, which Reconstructionism would not endorse.

When we consider, however, another text, namely the blessing recited before reading the Torah, a different nuance in the category of chosenness is evident. The traditional prayer reads: "Who has chosen us from all

Our task today is to recover the traditional sense of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Torah, while avoiding the self-righteousness and intolerance that our possession of Torah has traditionally engendered.

Reconstructionist liturgy.

The *Alenu* prayer, which concludes every service, includes the phrase⁵

He hath not made us like the pagans of the world, nor placed us like the heathen tribes of the earth; He hath not made our destiny as theirs, nor cast our lot with all their multitude.

This is clearly a negative statement: "We are not like them; we are divinely set apart from them; they are inferior to us." (Lest the intent of this prayer be doubted, consider the following additional phrases, censored in medieval times but recently enjoying a revival in Israeli *siddurim*: "For they bow down to emptiness and nothingness, praying to a god who cannot save.") It is precisely this dimension of chosenness that is repugnant to many modern Jews, and which Reconstructionism has been at pains to refute. It indicates that the election of Israel is equivalent to the bestowal of a superior status, and entails a disturbing

peoples by giving us the Torah." In this context, the affirmation of election is juxtaposed with the possession of Torah, and no invidious contrast between Torah and any other system must be drawn. When one remembers that from a Reconstructionist perspective, *all* liturgical texts are symbolic, metaphorical and mythical, it is possible to interpret this blessing as meaning that Jews are distinctive by virtue of their distinctive culture; that is, we are "chosen" to be the people who "choose" to live by Torah. In effect, the statement is descriptive without being evaluative and essentially indicates that what renders Jews unique is that their culture is uniquely theirs. It is my contention that it is precisely this sort of reasoning that modern Jews have in mind when they argue for retention of the doctrine of chosenness, and that can explain, at least in part, its abiding strength and value as a concept.

We may recall that, in several of the apologetic rationales described above, the arguments for



chosenness are inseparable from a discussion of Jewish religion or Torah. That is, when we discuss chosenness, it is difficult to ascertain if we are talking about the *Jewish people* or *Judaism*. It may well be that, while we would not endorse a concept of chosenness which implies that the Jewish people are inherently distinctive, we do want to maintain the inherent distinctiveness of Torah as our religion and culture. When Jews react passionately in favor of the concept of chosenness, I believe that they are resisting a reductionist sociology-of-religion which would level all claims to uniqueness or qualitative distinction between religious systems. Torah is, for the Jewish people, our unique and authentic means to salvation, which is not interchangeable with any other. In fact, this is what the Reconstructionist prayerbook itself seems to endorse in its rendition of the *Alenu* prayer, which substitutes for the above-quoted phrases the following, "who gave us the Torah of truth and planted eternal life within us."

Affirming Distinctiveness

The task for Reconstructionism today is to recover from the traditional concept of chosenness the sense of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Torah as Jewish culture and religion, while avoiding the self-righteousness and intolerance which our possession of the Torah has traditionally engendered. The beginning of this task has already been achieved in classical Reconstructionism: by interpreting Judaism as our naturally

evolved culture, we understand that other peoples also have naturally evolved cultures. Our task is not to convert them to Torah, nor is it their responsibility to convert us from Torah. Viewed historically and sociologically, each group has the right to live according to its indigenous culture. Awareness of this enables us to celebrate Torah — and even claim on its behalf moral advances — without holding other religions in contempt or assuming their falsity. Building on this foundation, we need to examine ways — both conceptual and liturgical — in which we can affirm our uniqueness and explore our ethical insights without resorting to invidious comparisons.

In sum, we can affirm the nuance of chosenness which indicates the uniqueness of Jewish identity based on our relationship to Torah, but we must reject that dimension of chosenness which negates the

possibility of other equally unique, sacred and meaningful ways of living in the world.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this article, we presume as our reference group the vast majority of Western Jews who, to whatever degree, have abandoned the fundamental, traditional warrants for the belief in "chosenness." Needless to say, for those Jews who continue to believe in the supernatural origin of Torah, the entire discussion is irrelevant.
2. An excellent example of this phenomenon may be found in the Rabbinical Assembly *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook* (1945), edited by Rabbi Morris Silverman, in the explanatory note found on p. 383.
3. *Future of the American Jew* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1948), p. 217.
4. From the translation of the *Alenu* prayer as found in the Silverman *siddur* (see n. 2), p. 27.
5. *Ibid.*

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Kaplan and Chosenness: A Historical View

Arnold Eisen

Four questions need to be distinguished here. First, why did Kaplan — unlike almost all other Jewish thinkers of the past two generations — insist that the idea of Jewish chosenness could not be reconstructed along with the rest of Jewish tradition, but rather had to be repudiated? Second, why did the others not only affirm the idea despite "the loss

of its supernatural underpinning and the unconvincing nature of the rationales offered in its behalf," but also render the concept central both to their Jewish belief and their identity as American Jews? Third, why in 1984, when the options and assumptions of American Jews are very different from what they were at the publication of *Juda-*



ism as a Civilization fifty years ago, is the subject of Jewish chosenness still of interest, and even compelling? Finally — and of course most difficult — what are we to make of the idea? How are we to understand it? How can we possibly believe it?

Wrestling with Chosenness

The author of an entire book on such questions* is, of all people, least capable of responding to them “on one foot.” One fact should be recalled before the attempt is made: Chosenness has always been pivotal to the set of ideas guiding Jewish self-understanding (revelation, covenant, messiah, exile, God), and it has always been problematic. When Moses (*Deuteronomy* 7:7-8) tells Israel how not to explain its chosenness, but fails to say how that election should be understood; when the Talmud has a Roman general ask Rabbi Akiba “Why, if God loves the poor (i.e., Israel) so much, doesn’t He take care of them?” (B.T. *Baba Batra* 10a); when, in another midrash (*Lamentations Rabbah* 3:1) a queen exiled from her palace tells the angry king that he has punished her unjustly, for she is the only wife who would have him (all others having rejected God’s offer of the Torah) — our tradition is wrestling with the angel of Jewish chosenness that our people has never, in all its history, been able to escape or to overcome.

We should not be surprised

* Editor’s Note: See Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

that the issue became especially problematic in America. For what could it mean to be “a people dwelling apart,” or even a “light unto the nations,” when that people wanted nothing so much as to be a *part* of another people — which it hardly regarded as dwelling in darkness? What could it mean to be “chosen from among all the nations” to receive a Torah that one no longer regarded as binding, or even God-given? And how could Jews continue to call themselves the chosen people, among Amer-

socially from his identity, “he has to evolve some new purpose in life as a Jew . . . that will direct his energies into such lines of creativity as will bring him spiritual redemption” (p. 15 of 1967 edition). That purpose, of course, was Reconstructionism — which, we note, is necessary only because chosenness will no longer serve. With the old purpose in place, the new one is superfluous.

There were also political reasons to deny Israel’s chosenness. Citizenship in a modern state,

What could it mean to be a “people dwelling apart,” or even a “light unto the nations,” when that people wanted nothing so much as to be a *part* of another people?

icans who (thanks to the Puritan legacy) regarded themselves as God’s chosen nation, a “city on the hill,” a righteous elect? But if the Jews stopped calling themselves chosen, what were they? Who were they?

Kaplan’s Agenda

Kaplan grasped the dilemmas of the Jewish situation in America with unparalleled acuity. Through the program first articulated in full in *Judaism as a Civilization*, he moved to establish a way for Jews to be both apart in, and a part of, the larger society. Chosenness figured crucially in that effort from the outset. Before the Enlightenment, Kaplan wrote, Jews had survived persecution on earth by concentrating on salvation in the hereafter. However, “now that the aura of divine election has departed from his people,” and the Jew suffers economically and

Kaplan wrote, mandated that the “interest of any outside group” not be permitted to influence an individual’s political activity. A chosen people’s interests would “surely take precedence” over the larger national interests of America, particularly given the eventual return of the people to Palestine. Chosenness barred “complete self-identification with the state.” Remarkably, Kaplan here has recited verbatim the charge of dual loyalty which had been used to oppose Jewish emancipation since the eighteenth century. Only then did he proceed to the incompatibility of chosenness with “the modern ideology” — whether scientific (i.e., anti-supernatural) or moral (i.e., concerned with universality and equality).

My point here is not to question Kaplan’s sincerity or to disparage his motives in repudiating a doctrine in which he could not believe, for obvious reasons. It is



striking, however, that the man who taught us to see all world views as ideologies (note his usage of the term above) and to regard belief-systems as sets of symbols given to (and indeed requiring) repeated reinterpretation, was the one major Jewish thinker in America who refused to affirm or reconceive Jewish chosenness. That refusal persisted even when Kaplan was forced to concede, in *The Future of the American Jew*, that not all "vocations" were equal; that, at least for the present and in a special sense that he explained, the Jewish nation was uniquely equipped to provide salvation to its members.

Reconstructionism's Raison d'Etre

Other considerations than pure logic determine our theological commitments, Kaplan insisted, and that surely held for his own commitments as well. The fact that Reconstructionism's *raison d'être* depended from the start on the inability of chosenness to give Jews meaning — indeed, the fact that Kaplan's dismissal of election served to set his nascent movement clearly apart from all others, as Hebrew Union College's Julian Morgenstern once noted — must surely be taken into account. In the end, I believe, it was Kaplan's agenda, and not his concept of God, which precluded the affirmation of chosenness that others made through strenuous reinterpretation.

They did so, I believe, because they had no choice. Round and round the issue they went,

in countless sermons, essays, articles and books, asking what chosenness meant, how it could possibly be reconciled with the facts, how it could be made compatible with commitments to universality and equality, whether Jews should still be chosen if all others were also chosen, and if Jews could be Jews if Jews were *not* chosen.

The reasons for this preoccupation were complex, but five can be listed briefly. First, the American emphasis upon this same self-image. Jews seeking in the 1930's and 40's to demonstrate their compatibility with America very sensibly stressed the self-understanding which the two peoples shared.

Second, the challenges of anti-Semites and others who denied that compatibility. When *The Christian Century* attacked the Jews' separatism and attributed it to chosenness, rabbis could not but respond.

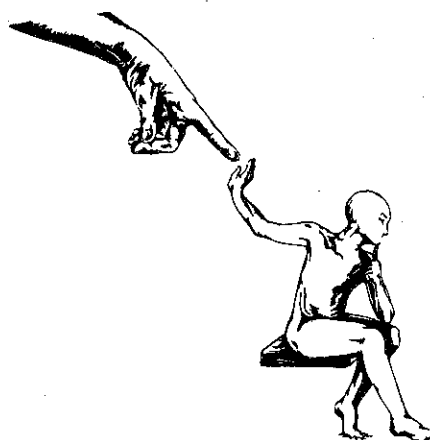
Third, the process of defining the new identity of the American Jew. Chosenness had always told Jews — and Gentiles — who Jews were. If the doctrine could no longer be affirmed unequivocally, neither could it simply be

discarded. As a result, it was puzzled over, and endlessly discussed.

Fourth, the Holocaust raised questions of "why us," which were traditionally responded to, if never actually "answered," by recourse to Israel's election. When all other set-apartness was in doubt, the Jews' uniqueness in suffering was demonstrated yet again, and to an unprecedented degree.

Rationalizing Mysteries

I have reserved the fifth reason for separate treatment, because it takes us to the heart of why chosenness continues to preoccupy American Jewish thinkers — even now when integration into America has been accomplished, anti-Semitic ideologists are quiet, and the American Jewish identity has been formed and proved through use. Certainly the awful reverberations of the Holocaust still disturb our acceptance of all claims to meaning, and the State of Israel stands exposed to anti-Semitic assault in a way which re-enacts Jewish isolation all too often, and all too graphically. A





new generation of theologians, moreover, has affirmed as mysteries beyond understanding (or rational disproof) what a previous generation, including Kaplan, sought to rationalize or revamp. Chosenness, then, and not surprisingly, is still very much on our minds.

Far more important, however, it is in our hearts, in our guts, buried deep inside our psyches. It is not, as Rabbi Hirsh states, a particular "sort of reasoning that modern Jews have in mind when they argue for retention of the doctrine of chosenness," any more than it was logical argument which persuaded Jews throughout the centuries to affirm this tenet of their faith or any other. That is not how religions work, even for the intellectuals devoted to systematizing them in theology.

Chosenness grips us, and seized previous generations of Jews, through the power of the pictures it presents to our innermost vision, the images it conjures before us, the way it thereby makes sense of things that logical argument could never explain. Consider only its most obvious resonances. The love of a parent. A place at the center of things. Work which needs doing, and awaits us and no one else. Uniqueness. Blessing. It is the task of theology to order and inter-relate such religious symbols, linking belief to ritual orderings of reality, and linking both to the outer world in which we pass our lives. That task is especially problematic in the modern period, when many traditional sorts of explanation no longer seem to fit the world as we have come to know it. But

the power of the images persists, our need for the direction supplied by chosenness is unabated, and so we keep alive this idea which sustains us — if only by asking, over and over, what it means.

I cannot answer that question, the fourth which I enumerated at the start of this essay. To do so I would have to spell out a coherent philosophy of Judaism and the Jewish people, relate election to the other principal convictions of our faith, and venture some sort of response to the age-old mysteries of what is before and hereafter, above and below. Such things cannot be attempted on one foot. This much can be said:

chosenness comes to us clothed in the many shades and layers of meaning supplied it by three thousand years of questioning Jews. Even "were all of us wise, all of us people of understanding, all of us learned in the Torah," it would still be our duty to wrestle with our chosenness. And, I think, to affirm it, as we affirm all of our deepest commitments — not, in other words, by words, or at least not by words alone.

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A Naturalist Affirmation of Chosenness

Rami Shapiro

Rabbi Richard Hirsh's essay on chosenness and Reconstructionism does justice to both reader and policy maker by presenting us with a solid piece of scholarly speculation. Rabbi Hirsh puts forth the classical arguments for and against chosenness, and concludes that we must reconstruct from the jumble of alternatives a coherent affirmation of the uniqueness of the Jewish civilization. His findings bring him to a transvaluation of the meaning of chosenness that walks a fine line between pride and prejudice, and redefines chosen as distinct.

Rabbi Hirsh writes that such an understanding of chosenness

is "descriptive without being evaluative," and suggests that through this redefinition we can reclaim chosenness without jingoistic chauvinism. While I am sympathetic to the search for a palatable concept of chosenness, I do not find Rabbi Hirsh's solution a particularly workable one.

Jews Feel Superior

Rabbi Hirsh asks why Jews are still in love with chosenness and concludes that they are really in love with the uniqueness of their culture. Would that this were so. I have had many conversations with Jews on this issue — more of late as I prepare



to write this essay. On no occasion did I hear a person equate chosenness with uniqueness without the overt connotation of being better. Superiority, and not "distinct but equal," is a more appropriate understanding of the average Jew's feelings of chosenness.

Despite our best efforts and intentions, most Jews think being Jewish is superior to being non-Jewish. It isn't polite, but most Jews look down on the goyim. You hear it in their inflections; you see it in their faces: chosenness means better. Chosenness persists, and resistance to its removal exists, because deep down many Jews feel superior to the non-Jew. Perhaps this is some deep-seated defense mechanism. Perhaps if we were to dig deeply enough this superiority would dissolve into a more profound inferiority. But for all intents and purposes, chosenness connotes superiority.

Rabbi Hirsh claims that "it is precisely this dimension of chosenness that is repugnant to many modern Jews," and I am sure this is so. Many of us are repulsed, but many more of us are quietly intrigued and enthralled. In certain circles, and in many public interfaith settings, chosenness is stripped of its chauvinism, but in the safety of our own backyards, it lives with all its pride and perversity.

To claim that chosenness, in the heart of hearts of most Jews, really means "distinct but equal" is, at least in my experience, wishful thinking. Yet even if we put aside what I consider to be Rabbi Hirsh's misreading of the sociology of chosenness, we are still left with another problem

that renders his conclusions less than satisfactory.

Choosing Torah

Rabbi Hirsh's position that chosenness means distinctiveness, and that this distinctiveness is directly related to the distinctiveness of Jewish culture, leads him to make the following statement:

Jews do not retain chosenness because they feel distinct but because they have lost all sense of distinctiveness.

We are "chosen" to be the people who "choose" to live by Torah.

This statement is crucial to Rabbi Hirsh's argument, but by bracketing the key words in quotation marks he has gutted the statement of any possible value and meaning. I know what *chosen* means, but I am unclear about "chosen"; I know what it means to *choose* to live by Torah, but not what it means to "choose" to do the same. Quotation marks are often knowing winks to the sophisticated reader, warning us not to take the bracketed phrase literally. But in the absence of some workable synonym that I can substitute for "chosen," I am at a loss to make sense out of the statement at all.

I imagine that by placing *chosen* in quotation marks we can somehow avoid the devastating criticism by Rabbi Kaplan that a non-supernatural impersonal deity cannot choose at all. But even if this worked, it would not

make Rabbi Hirsh's solution satisfactory.

Having rightly gutted the traditional theological underpinnings of chosenness, Rabbi Hirsh offers us a sociological substitute that is "descriptive not evaluative." But is the statement "Jews 'choose' to live by Torah" really descriptive of the American Jewish community?

Again, would that it were so. But it is not. Even if we take

Torah to mean the gamut of Jewish cultural treasures, we cannot pretend that the modern American Jew chooses to live by Torah. Unless we reduce Torah to a couple of movies, a best seller or two, a holiday now and again, and a smattering of Yiddish humor and profanity, we cannot make a case that the majority of American Jewry lives by Torah.

The Torah of American Jews

If we really wish to be descriptive, we must honestly assess the state of living Judaism in this country. The vast majority of Jews don't read, let alone study, Torah; they don't keep kosher; they don't pray; they don't support synagogues; they have only a vague notion of where Judaism came from, and have no notion at all as to where it ought to be going. For most Jews the sancta have been re-



duced to ritualized irrelevancies that they may experience a half dozen times in their adult lives.

I am speaking about most Jews, not all. But if we are going to make sociologically descriptive statements, let us take care to note whether we are describing the majority or simply a minority subgrouping. Rabbi Hirsh is correct in that there is a strong minority of us who "do want to maintain the inherent distinctiveness of Torah as our religion and our culture," but let us not flatter ourselves into believing that we are the controlling party within American Jewry. For most Jews the distinctiveness of our culture is lost in the monotonous sameness of mass-marketed America. The things that make us distinct also make us different, and, for many, that is dangerous and to be avoided at all costs.

Given that so many Jews retain a notion of chosenness for chauvinistic reasons and that their lives lack Jewish distinctiveness, we may conclude that the real reason that the idea of chosenness cannot be rooted out is that it is all we have left. In our last-ditch attempt to hang on to some notion of Jewishness without violating reason, common sense, modern sensibilities, or the homogeneity of the middle class, we wield the neutron bomb of Judaism: chosenness as superiority allows the facade of Jewish life to continue while poisoning the spirit of Judaism.

Jewish by Default

Too many of us are Jewish by default. The demands our Juda-

ism makes upon us are so removed from our daily lives as to go unnoticed. Our demands upon it are so shallow and formulized in synagogue politics and pews as to be all but meaningless. We cling to chosenness because we want so desperately to be Chosen: to be lifted out of the meaninglessness of life and shown the Why and the Way.

Rabbi Hirsh has misread the evidence. Jews do not retain chosenness because they feel distinct; they maintain chosenness because they have lost all sense of distinctive culture. After years of watering down our civilization with false and sterile renderings of propriety, modernism and logical positivism, we cannot suddenly claim distinctiveness;

It may be impossible for us to be chosen, but it is possible for our children. My son will not choose to be Jewish. He is chosen, not by God, but by history, ancestry and environment.

on the contrary, we must slowly and painstakingly reclaim and rebuild a distinctive Jewishness.

One immediately thinks of the neo-Orthodox revival, but this is not what I have in mind. An unthinking return to tradition can only end in a sterile imitation of Judaism. Nostalgia may be filling but it contains no nutritive value. We cannot give birth to the future by resurrecting the past. I am not interested in a revival but in a renaissance: not a restoration of what was, but an open-ended exploration of what might yet be. If Reconstructionist Judaism stands for anything, it stands for this renaissance of Jewish life and thought.

Reconstructing Distinctiveness

Before we can speak of Chosenness (please note the bold capital C as opposed to the self-effacing quotation marks) we must reclaim and reconstruct our distinctiveness. How this is to be done is the topic of another essay, but that it is to be done is the key to the present one. Without a distinctive and lived Jewishness, we cannot make sense out of Chosenness or "chosenness." But even with a fully realized Jewish renaissance Chosenness must be reworked to avoid any supernatural connotation while still lending strength to the struggle for Jewish sur-

vival. How will Chosenness be reconstructed? Let me offer but one possibility.

Not long ago a mother and daughter came to me to discuss the daughter's involvement with a Pentacostal church. All of the girl's high school friends belonged there, and she too wanted to join. Her mother was visibly upset. "We are Jews," she said plaintively.

I inquired into the Jewish background of the daughter and her family, and her mother explained quite proudly how she and her husband, both of whom were Jews, had decided not to bias their daughter's religious inclinations by bringing her up in



a Jewish home. When she grew up, they had assured themselves, she would choose for herself which religion to belong to. "But," the mother concluded, "all our friends were Jewish." Clearly the girl's parents had felt that the passive influence of friends would offset the active influence of peers. They were wrong.

There was no Chosenness in this family. But there was a lot of choosing. The two are not the same. To be Chosen is not "to choose" as Rabbi Hirsh would have it. On the contrary, to be Chosen is to have the choosing done *by someone else*. To choose for oneself is to preclude being Chosen.

It is popular to speak of all modern Jews as Jews by Choice. It is true; having not been Chosen a priori, we must choose to be Jewish on our own. But once having chosen Judaism for our-

selves we must then become the Choosers of Judaism for our descendants.

It may be impossible for us to be Chosen, but it is possible for our children. My five-year-old son Aaron will not choose to be Jewish, because my wife and I chose to raise him that way. He is Chosen, not by God, but by history, ancestry and environment.

Chosenness and Choice

Being Chosen, however, does not preclude his freedom of choice; it simply places it in a historically-defined civilizational context. Aaron can choose to reconstruct his Judaism in ways I have not imagined, or he may blend it with other sources of wisdom. Or he may choose to leave it altogether. Any choice short of denying his people and

their heritage plants him firmly within the context of Chosen, a context that he will be able to pass on to his children. To be sure, the ontological significance of Chosenness is missing from this model, but that is to be expected given the evolution in naturalist philosophy and humanism that is central to Reconstructionist thought. What is not missing, however, is the level of obligation and responsibility that each Jew must feel towards both the past and the future that leads to bold reconstructions and innovative advances in present Judaism.

In addition to the Chosen, there will always be, I hope, those who freely choose Judaism of their own accord. We are enriched by the convert in a very special way. But once having converted, the proselyte must become a Chooser and thus create a new Chosen.

To Be is to Stand For

There is a need for Chosenness in Reconstructionism, but not as a noun. Chosenness must come to express the dynamic interplay of inherited culture and its distinctive demands, with freedom, integrity, personal growth and social transformation.

We do not need a "chosen-ness" that is simply descriptive and value free. We must inherit a Judaism that stands for something. We must be Chosen to carry on a quest for meaning and life purpose within the rich and wisdom-filled context of an evolving Jewish civilization. And we must choose to remain Cho-





sen, for that is the ante of democracy and the promise of a dynamic confrontation of past and present that leads us into the future. If we do not make our Chosenness evaluative and if we do not stand for something, then we shall not be Jewish at all. As

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said: To be is to stand for.

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The Chosen People: Mythic Meaning and Power

David Brusin

Chosenness is not a belief to which one pledges allegiance; it is not a religious doctrine that one accepts or rejects. *Goy kadosh* (holy nation) and *am segulah* (treasured people), as the Israelites became known, are not poetic or pre-philosophical formulations of religious dogmas. Chosenness is a religious metaphor, the stuff of which world views are made, deliberately employed and developed internally. It operates within one's religious frame of reference, directly affecting some parts of the system and coloring others.

Rabbi Richard Hirsh's paper ignores all this. His concern is with the truth or falsity — the appropriateness or inappropriateness — of the "rationales" of chosenness. As a result, Rabbi Hirsh offers simple solutions to several complex, interrelated issues. For him, Israel either is or is not God's chosen people. He argues that, as Reconstruc-

tionists, we must disavow both racism and supernaturalism. Therefore, according to Hirsh, we must dispense with the idea of chosenness and liturgical texts that state or imply otherwise.

"Classical" Reconstructionism

To refer to the rejection of chosenness as "classical Reconstructionism" is puzzling. A relatively new movement that is still in its formative stages, whose institution of higher learning is only fifteen years old, should not be bound by the clichés of "time-honored tradition," "normative Reconstructionist doctrine" or the like. Rabbi Kaplan's writings are surely our common point of departure. This is so because of the depth of Kaplan's insight into and commitment to Judaism and its classical sources. It is not because we are always in agree-

ment with Rabbi Kaplan or are not free at all times to strike out on our own. To suggest that anything less than abandoning chosenness is anti-Reconstructionist is simply beside the point. Moreover, such a claim is itself anti-Reconstructionist, as I understand the purpose and promise of Reconstructionism.

Liturgical modification — with all its implications for Jewish education when it involves something as basic and pivotal as the first Torah *berakhah* (blessing) — is an extremely important aspect of the chosenness controversy that Rabbi Hirsh does not address satisfactorily. It is entirely appropriate to the broader questions embedded in his discussion. So far, "classical" Reconstructionist thinking has not recommended amending the standard, biblical version of the *Shema*, though one could present a strong case to do so based on Kaplan's reinterpretation of the idea of God. At the outset, it must be determined if philosophical issues are ultimately to be decided by appeal to social and emotional considerations.

Rabbinic Interpretations

Another matter that has bearing here involves our understanding of the biblical roots of chosenness, as well as rabbinic reactions and interpretations. We certainly should not overlook or underestimate the rabbis' struggles with the idea of Israel's election. There is, for instance, a revealing passage in the midrashic text, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Horowitz-Rabin, p. 205, ll. 16-18), that tries to explain why



the Torah was given in the wilderness of Sinai, outside the land of Israel:

The Torah was given in the open and in public, for if it had been given in Israel, it is possible that the Israelites would declare to the other nations of the world: "You have no share in it." For this reason, it was given publicly, indicating that all who wish to receive the Torah may do so.

The rabbis are concerned about both the plain meaning of the biblical text and the historical ramifications of Israel's election. Territorial claims to exclusivity are inadmissible on both counts.¹ Furthermore, although the Israelites alone were brought to the foot of the mountain (*Exodus* 19:2, 11, 17), the rabbis attempt to demonstrate that all the nations of the world were made aware of what was happening (see *Mekhila*, p. 205, ll. 18-20).

At the same time, we must come to grips with the rabbis' comments that are particularistic in intent. Repeated several times is the legend of Balaam, who, as the Torah is being given and received, reassures all the kings of the world that God is not destroying the earth but is merely giving the Torah to His people (*Mekhila*, Lauterbach edition, volume 2, pp. 162-163, 233). Rather than displaying any interest in Torah, the story has the kings responding with a verse from *Psalms*: "God will bless His people with peace" (*Psalms* 29:11).

Finally, there is the fascinating discussion in the *Mekhila*

(Horowitz-Rabin, pp. 234-235) and in the Babylonian Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 2b), in which the Torah is offered to all the peoples of the world who, in turn, refuse to accept it because of one or another of its ethical prerequisites. The Israelites alone are willing to embrace Torah, agreeing to be bound by all of its moral imperatives.² The Talmudic discussion concludes with a pessimistic evaluation of what would happen if the Torah were offered to the nations of the world a second time (*Avodah Zarah* 3a-b):

The nations will then plead, "Offer us the Torah anew and we shall obey it." But the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to them, "You foolish ones among the peoples, he who took trouble [to prepare] on the eve of the Sabbath can eat on the Sab-

was inevitable that only Israel would accept. God did not select the Israelites randomly. In His infinite magnanimity, God offered the Torah to all; in His infinite wisdom, He knew that only Israel would accept. But this particularistic attitude toward Israel's election is held in constant tension with the universal outlook of the *Mekhila*.

Chosenness is not Racist

The rabbis always describe Israel's uniqueness in terms of Torah. It is the only expression of chosenness that mattered for them. Yet Torah, as they understood it, remained open to all who would cling to it. Chosenness in this context is no more racist than is Zionism. There is nothing more natural than to perceive our way of life, our

There is nothing more natural than to perceive our way of life — our country, our city, our neighborhood, our spouse — as "better" for us than the alternatives. Otherwise, one rightly considers converting, divorcing or relocating.

bath, but he who has not troubled on the eve of the Sabbath, what shall he eat on the Sabbath? Nevertheless, I have an easy command which is called *sukkah*; go and carry it out. . . ."

Straightaway will every one of them betake himself and go and make a booth on the top of his roof; but the Holy One, blessed be He, will cause the sun to blaze forth over them as at the summer solstice, and every one of them will trample down his booth and go away.

The Torah was offered to all the nations of the world, yet it

country, our city, our neighborhood, our spouse, as "better" for us than the alternatives. Otherwise, one rightly considers converting, relocating or divorcing. *Kiddushin* (the Jewish wedding rites) does not demand that one adopt a negative attitude toward other women (or men). Since it forms the foundation of one's interpersonal relationships, marriage should have the opposite effect. Indeed, we cannot truly know what love of the stranger or *ahavat Yisrael* (love of the Jewish people) means, if we have no prior understanding of what



parental or marital love is.

Am Kadosh

The idea of *am kadosh* (a holy people) is analogous. Living as a Jew requires conscious and deliberate decisions, or it becomes meaningless, rote behavior. The decision to be and live as a Jew — if it is genuine and is to have substantial consequences — must in some sense involve the decision *not* to be a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, etc. Similarly, the conscious and deliberate decision to marry one particular person, if it is genuine and is to have positive consequences, must involve the decision not to relate to other women (or men) in the same ways.

This is plainly what the rabbis intended. *Kiddushin* and *am kadosh* are parallel concepts that apply to different objects. There is no implicit or explicit racism here. To decide to be Jewish does not automatically diminish the worth of our non-Jewish neighbors.

To be called up voluntarily to the reading and study of Torah is not an insignificant bit of behavior that we engage in because our heirs before us did. It is and must be bound up with all that Torah is, contains and stands for, with all that being Jewish presupposes and implies. No less powerful a myth than chosenness is required to anchor such a commitment and an all-pervasive world view.³ To be “chosen” from all the nations of the world is not to be “better” than all the peoples of the earth. It is to be different from them, as they are from us. It is thus a means of

making sense of and justifying the choice of one particular style of life and thinking from all others. This not a question of racism, though it may be a matter of Jewish survival.

Rabbi Hirsh examines four so-called rationales for chosenness to which no one would or should publicly subscribe. I do not believe that this list of rationales describes fairly the motivations of those who wish to retain and incorporate the metaphor of chosenness. Such people do not necessarily regard Jews or Judaism as genetically superior, historically superior, the highest developed religion, or called upon by God to convert the world to the “true” faith. If these were the underpinnings of chosenness, we would have every reason to

emptiness and nothingness.”

Rabbi Hirsh concedes that the juxtaposition, in the first Torah blessing, of chosenness and Torah does not imply invidious comparisons and thus might be restored to its original form. He then argues that, for a Reconstructionist, all liturgy is symbolic. Jews are distinctive by virtue of their distinctive culture. Therefore, what makes Jews unique is their unique culture. In other words, what makes Jews distinctive and unique is that they are Jews.

We learn nothing from this form of circular reasoning about the uniqueness of Judaism or about the individual’s motivation or decision to remain Jewish or to practice Judaism. It is not clear how the first premise (that

There is nothing arbitrary in our chosenness, our uniqueness. Isaiah’s vision is still operative in Jewish history. It is both a reason to persist as Jews and a promise of a better world in which all will share.

be embarrassed and apologetic.

Anti-pagan Polemics

Hirsh maintains that chosenness, “traditionally understood,” would warrant even fewer endorsements. His several references to the biblical and rabbinic polemics against paganism pose special and complicated problems that need to be examined and discussed separately. Abraham was not a racist because he refused to tolerate idolatry or to recommend it to Isaac. Rabbi Akiva was not a bigot because he applauded and reiterated his ancestors’ refusal to “bow down to

liturgy is symbolic) pertains to the rest of the argument, unless Rabbi Hirsh is assuming that the first Torah blessing is a symbolic, metaphorical rendition of the statement, “Jews are distinctive because they have a distinctive culture.”

This is hardly problematic, but it is definitely not the meaning of “*asher bahar banu* — who has chosen us from all the peoples of the world by giving us His Torah.” A more accurate paraphrase would be: “Jews are distinctive and unique because God offered them Torah which they now possess.” Since this remains true, as Hirsh seems to



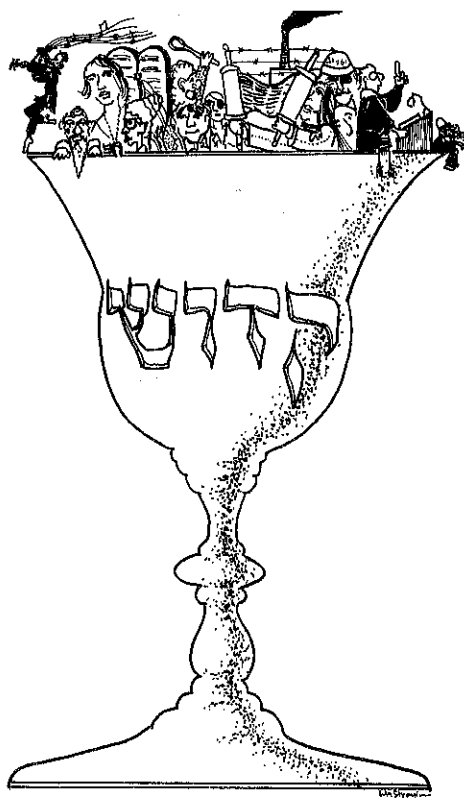
concede, there is every reason to continue asserting it. What makes Christians or Muslims unique and distinctive is not their failure to be able to make the same claim. Torah is not what distinguishes *them* from other peoples. Their distinctiveness is defined in relation to assertions and beliefs that they choose to affirm from within their own religious frames of reference. No apology needs to be made for their *inability* to proclaim the *Shema* or the first Torah blessing or *Adon Olam* or *Hatikvah*.

Fact and Value

As Hirsh readily admits, his formulation is "descriptive without being evaluative." This is precisely why it is vacuous while the first Torah blessing is not. To be worthy of its central place in the liturgy, the Torah blessing must subtly interweave the realms of fact and value. It must be willing to make a statement both about what is and what ought to be. To describe is one thing; to embrace Judaism, and to live individually and collectively as Jews, is something else altogether.

Isaiah's Vision

It is no accident that chosenness is intimately connected with the notions of the remnant of Israel and the Jews' eternity. Isaiah (*Isaiah* chapters 10 & 11) speaks at length about the remnant that will survive the scourge of Assyria, ironically becoming "a standard to peoples" (11:10). Whoever accepts the new



standard is to be embraced. At another, equally tragic moment in Jewish history, *Isaiah* explains further what chosenness means. "Observe what is right and do what is just," he pleads. "Never will the foreigner be justified in saying, 'The Lord will keep me apart from His people.'" For those who "attach themselves to the Lord, . . . who hold fast to My covenant, I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (56:1-7).

There is nothing arbitrary in our chosenness, our uniqueness. And *Isaiah's* vision is still operative in Jewish history. It is both a reason to persist as Jews and a

promise of a better world in which all will share.

The Second Torah Blessing

With all the attention focused on the first Torah blessing, we forget that it is conceptually related to another blessing that follows the reading itself. First we proclaim our association with Torah and, thereby, with the remnant to which every Jew rightfully sees himself or herself belonging. Next we listen to the words of Torah as they are intoned. Only then are we entitled to articulate the profound vision of eternity embedded in the second Torah blessing, described as follows by the great Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (*The Star of Redemption*, p. 335):



The seed of eternal life has been planted, and can wait for the budding. The seed knows nothing of the tree that grows from it, not even when it flings its shadow over the whole world. In time to come, a seed that is like the first will fall from the fruits of that tree. "Blessed art Thou . . . who hast planted eternal life in our midst."

NOTES

1. Interestingly, this same evidence argues against the well established thesis in the phenomenology of religion that Jonathan Smith (in *Earth and Gods*) calls the concept of the "Holy Center." The most significant event in Israelite memory and history, *matan torah* (the giving of the Torah), occurs outside the "Holy Center," *Eretz Yisrael*, and the rabbis seem not to be at all disturbed by this. On the contrary, it prompts them to consider the tradition from a universalistic perspective.
2. Even this nationalistic explanation must be contrasted with the frequently quoted passage that has God holding the mountain over the Israelites' heads, offering them the "choice" between Torah and death (B.T. *Shabbat* 88a).
3. Christianity, the "New Israel," and Islam, to which someday all Jews are expected by Muslims to convert, have recognized this and addressed it throughout their respective histories.

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The Limits of Functional Reinterpretation: An Orthodox Response

Menachem Kellner

In the first footnote of his valuable and elegantly stated essay, Richard Hirsh states,

We presume as our reference group the vast majority of Western Jews who, to whatever degree, have abandoned the fundamental, traditional warrants for the belief in "chosenness." Needless to say, for those Jews who continue to subscribe to the literal supernatural origin of Torah, the entire discussion is irrelevant.

As a Jew who continues to subscribe to the literal supernatural origin of Torah, I cannot, in fairness, respond to Hirsh's arguments on the basis of assumptions acceptable only to Orthodox interpreters of Judaism.

In a certain sense this makes my job as a respondent to Hirsh's essay easier, since I do not have to propose a constructive position of my own — having been told, in effect, that positions such as mine are irrelevant to the discussion at hand. On the other hand, if I am going to criticize Rabbi Hirsh's position then I must do so only on grounds which he would accept. This I propose to do.

Richard Hirsh examines and rejects four non-Orthodox rationales for retaining belief in the idea that the Jews are the Chosen People: (a) Jews are biologically superior to other peoples in

the fields of religion and ethics; (b) the Jews were the first to manifest the essential religious and ethical ideals since adopted by Western culture; (c) Judaism is the highest form of religious belief; (d) Jews have a mission to spread ethical monotheism.

The position which Rabbi Hirsh himself proposes may be expressed in the following terms: It is not the Jews who are chosen but Judaism (Torah) which is chosen, not by God, but by the Jewish people. The idea of the Chosen People is thus reduced¹ to the claim that Judaism is qualitatively distinct from (*but not superior to*) other systems of religious belief. Hirsh here follows Mordecai Kaplan in interpreting an old idea in a new way.

Kaplan and Functional Reinterpretation

But is this reinterpretation satisfactory? Kaplan maintains that if we are going to use traditional terms in a radically new way (such as he himself does with terms such as "God," "mitzvah" and "salvation"), we must examine how they functioned in traditional society.²

The ideas expressed in the ancient Jewish literature, and the institutions that have become identified with Jewish life, should be regarded



as attempts to express in terms of beliefs and practices the needs and desiderata of a fuller life than man had been able to attain. What these needs and desiderata were, can be discerned in some of the consequences in thought and action which resulted from those ideas and institutions. The task of reinterpretation consists first in selecting from among the ideational and practical consequences of the traditional values those which are spiritually significant for our day, and then in turning those consequences into motives of thought and conduct.

Kaplan calls this process "functional reinterpretation." Before allowing himself to use traditional terms in radically new ways, Kaplan first examines how these terms functioned in their traditional contexts. Only then does he propose new meanings for these terms, meanings which

function in modern society in ways analogous to the ways in which the old meanings functioned in traditional society.

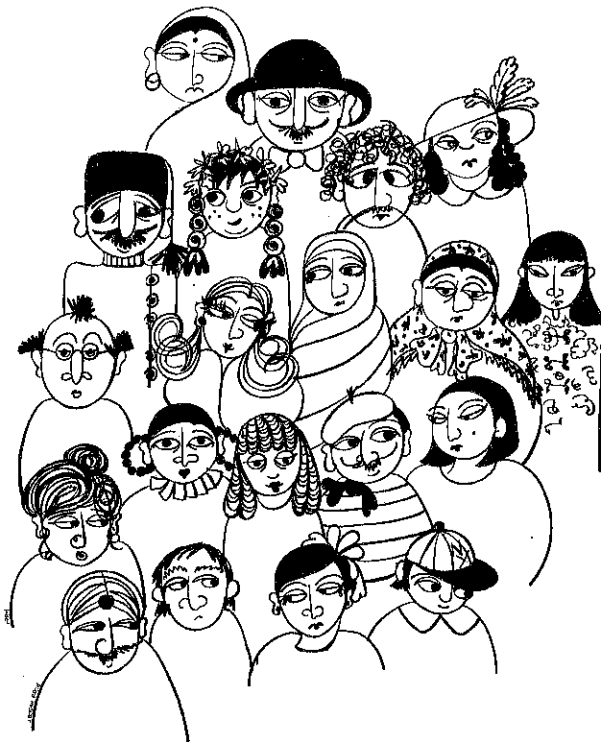
The Function of Chosenness

Kaplan, then, wants us to seek the significance of an idea or an institution "*not only in its overt expression but also in its implications.*"³ What functional implications, therefore, did the idea of the Chosen People have in traditional Jewish society? Belief in the Chosen People functioned primarily to guarantee faithfulness to Torah even when Jews were persecuted for adhering to Torah, or in periods (such as our own) when Jews were in danger of being seduced away from adherence to Torah by the undeniable attractions of other systems

of thought and behavior. So long as one does not question the authority of the chooser, to be chosen for some task is to be placed in a position of having to fulfill the task whether one wants to or not. "Thou didst choose us from among all the peoples," the *Amidah* for festivals states; it does not state that being chosen was our idea. But having been chosen and having accepted that fact (the essential point of the covenant), the Jewish people are given certain responsibilities (first and foremost, faithfulness to the Torah) which simply cannot be shirked. This idea, perhaps more than any other, explains the remarkable persistence of the Jewish people in maintaining their existence through history.

It should be noted, even though this is not strictly relevant to the development of my ideas here, that the concept of the Chosen People, so understood, carries with it no inherent doctrine of the superiority of the Jews (as opposed to the superiority of the Torah, which it most emphatically affirms). The idea of the superiority of the Jews to all other peoples is a natural, but hardly necessary — indeed incorrect — outgrowth of the concept of the Chosen People.⁴

Returning to the issue under discussion, we must ask: Is Richard Hirsh's interpretation of the concept of the Chosen People faithful to Kaplan's canons of functional reinterpretation? If it is not, then Hirsh must come up with another way of justifying the legitimacy of using an accepted formulation in a way wholly at variance with its standard usage. I think that





Hirsh's reinterpretation fails this test. By denying the superiority of the Torah, he totally empties the concept of the Chosen People of any force for justifying faithfulness to Torah in times of persecution or inconvenience. If the Torah is only distinct from, but not superior to other religious systems, why stubbornly stick to it if it is dangerous to do so, or inconvenient to do so, or if competing systems of thought or styles of life appear to be more pleasant or fulfilling?

Why Remain Jewish?

We may sharpen the point even further. Given, as Emil Fackenheim has pointed out, that our own decision to remain Jewish may in effect be a death warrant for our children or grandchildren — God forbid! — (as was indeed the case with the decisions to remain Jewish of grandparents and even great-grandparents of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust) one ought to have a damned convincing reason for remaining Jewish. Does Hirsh's position allow him such a reason? Hardly. If anything, his claim reminds one of the Jewish Averroists of the fifteenth century, whose adherence to Judaism was fatally weakened by their denial of any qualitative superiority of the Torah over competing religious doctrines.

In short, Rabbi Hirsh's proposed reinterpretation of the concept of the Chosen People fails as a functional reinterpretation of the idea. It is incumbent upon him to justify his use of a traditional term in a radically new way, a way which destroys the significance of the

term's original usage.

Kaplan's Rationale: Ethical Nationhood

I should like to add here that Richard Hirsh is hardly the first exponent of Reconstructionism to have problems reinterpreting the idea of the Chosen People and to have problems in justifying adherence to Torah in a convincing fashion. Even though he never raises it explicitly, Mordecai Kaplan, in *Judaism as a Civilization*, attempts to provide an answer to the question: Why remain Jewish? He posits an "inescapable law of human nature that only through interaction with his group can the individual achieve personality and self-fulfillment or salvation."⁵ Thus, in order to fulfill himself as a human being, the Jew must remain faithful to the Jewish people. This position may have been convincing in 1934; five decades of successful assimilation have refuted it since then.

Sooner or later every Jewish thinker who takes seriously the need for justifying loyalty to Jewry or Judaism is driven to assert some variant of uniqueness and superiority.

On some level, Kaplan seems to have been aware of the need for a more convincing rationale for remaining Jewish when he wrote his last major work, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood: Judaism's Contribution to World Peace* (1970). Although he reiterates his classic position — a Jew who wishes to achieve self-fulfillment as a human being must remain a Jew in order to

do so⁶ — Kaplan develops a new rationale for remaining Jewish (without actually presenting it as such), one which in effect builds upon the idea of the Jews as being, in a certain sense, the Chosen People.

Kaplan argues that acceptance of the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of nations is leading the world ineluctably to nuclear catastrophe (pp. ix and 71). How can the world be saved from this catastrophe? Only by adopting the principles of ethical nationhood to replace those of absolute sovereignty. The Torah teaches the ideals of ethical nationhood and "the Jews who are the biological and spiritual descendants of ancient Israel should resume the vocation of fostering ethical nationhood in the contemporary world" (p. x). Kaplan restates this point in the following terms:

In the present crisis of life on this planet, the humanist version of Judaism — through promulgation of

ethical nationhood — might point the way to the abolition of nuclear war. In the course of its evolving religious civilization the Hebrew prophets proclaimed justice and law as the final determinants of human destiny. They originated and fostered ethical nationhood as religion.⁷

Kaplan is, in effect, preaching a rationale for remaining Jewish: in order to avert nuclear holo-



caust, the Jewish people must remain true to its traditional teachings so that it, the world's only truly transnational people, can serve as an example to the world of an alternative to absolute sovereignty. On this understanding, a Jew who strays from the Torah is in effect contributing to the destruction of the world! This is certainly a rationale for remaining Jewish and affirms — emphatically — the special character and vocation of the Jewish people.⁸ This, in effect, is to affirm the chosenness of the Jewish people in a way which functions analogously to the way in which the idea functioned in pre-modern Jewish life: as a rationale for remaining faithful.

I cite Kaplan's position here not in order to suggest that the reader adopt it (I do not find it convincing), but in order to illustrate the fact that sooner or later every Jewish thinker who takes seriously the need for justifying loyalty to Jewry or to Judaism is driven, even as Kaplan was, to adopt some variant of the position that the Jewish people or its Torah is in some non-trivial sense unique and superior to other peoples or religious doctrines. Only on that basis can one convincingly argue that being Jewish is precious and worth every sacrifice.

NOTES

1. My choice of terminology reflects my bias.
2. *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 388f.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 388; italics Kaplan's.
4. This position is not only incompatible with the Torah, when it is properly understood, but also leads to execrable political positions here in Israel.

5. *Op. cit.*, p. 335; see also p. 281.

6. *Religion of Ethical Nationhood* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), pp. 82 and 139.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 9; see also pp. 71-76.

8. Typically, Kaplan emphasizes the Jewish people over the Torah here.

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A Defense of Kaplan's Doctrine of Vocation

Rebecca T. Alpert

If we are to take seriously the teachings of Mordecai M. Kaplan, we must be willing to do two things. First, we must examine the Jewish tradition perpetually, with the aim of reconstructing it for each generation. Second, and of equal importance, we must remain true to the tradition, studying it seriously in an attempt to understand it on its own terms before contemplating any reconstruction.

To this generation of Jews, the teachings of Kaplan himself fall into the category of Jewish tradition. Thus, it is our task to examine Kaplan's teachings with the same combination of reverence and critical insight that he taught us to use when approaching any other aspect of the tradition we inherit as Jews.

Of all Kaplan's teachings, the rejection of the Chosen People doctrine is perhaps the most problematic for this generation. We make the assumption that Kaplan was embarrassed by chosenness, that he removed it to prove to the non-Jewish world

that Jews aren't really as arrogant as our liturgy would make it appear. Further, we think that by rejecting chosenness, Kaplan meant to deny that the Jewish people and the Jewish heritage are unique and special. We also question why Kaplan singled out this concept for liturgical change. If indeed all liturgy is metaphor, why can't we retain this metaphor and rethink it in our own minds, using Kaplan's own concept of revaluation?

It is my contention that Kaplan's rejection of chosenness is completely misunderstood. I will argue that the theory behind it is in keeping with contemporary sensibilities and that the practical results (liturgical changes) are both appropriate and consistent.

In *The Future of the American Jew** (FAJ) Kaplan makes it clear that his rejection of what

* This brief summary cannot do justice to Kaplan's exquisite argument. I commend to the reader Chapter 13 of FAJ, "The Chosen People Idea an Anachronism," for a more thorough understanding.



he calls the doctrine of election is based neither on theological principles nor on apologetics, but is a result of Kaplan's understanding of ethics.

He begins with the assumption that modern heterodox Jews do not believe literally what our ancestors took for granted: that God chose the Jewish people (for good or ill) to be the bearers of Torah through direct revelation. Nor need we any longer argue with traditional Christians over which people is God's elect. We do not therefore retain chosenness either because we literally believe it or because we need to prove our superiority.

In fact, the general disagreement with the traditional doctrine of chosenness led to a variety of reinterpretations in the modern era. Kaplan was not satisfied with any of them. Each reinterpretation is based on claims of superiority: either of the Jewish people (hereditary theory) or of the Torah (the first, truest teachings which needs to be communicated to the rest of the world). In fact, Kaplan argues, the theory of election is not susceptible to reinterpretation because it is inseparable from a claim of superiority. Such a claim, says Kaplan, is not consonant with the best ethical values.

Kaplan's Argument

Kaplan's argument is as follows. Each people must strive for salvation, that is, the fulfillment of its highest goals and aspirations. Each people determines the definition of salvation for itself, based on its collective experience and through its own

cultural expression. No people can achieve salvation unless all peoples do so. This can happen only when it is understood that all peoples possess equal access to God, i.e., that each people's experience and expression, when directed towards the highest goals, are equally valid.

If we wish to assert the equal validity of all peoples and paths which meet these criteria, then a claim to chosenness for the Jewish people or for Torah is problematic. Therefore, it is not only references to the Jews as a chosen people, such as in the prayers *Alenu* and *Havdalah*, that we must omit or change. We must also remove references to "being

kervanu la-avodato for *bahar banu* in the first Torah blessing implies precisely that. Similarly, in the *Alenu*, we substitute gratitude for receiving Torah for the claim of superiority. Both versions indicate the unique and separate character of the Jewish people. But while the traditional version implies superiority, the Reconstructionist version only defines the content of our uniqueness and difference.

The Cause of the Controversy

In theory, Kaplan's reconstruction of this element of tradition, given its basis in ethical

Kaplan argued that the theory of election is not susceptible to reinterpretation because it is inseparable from a claim of superiority. Such a claim is not consonant with the best ethical values.

chosen by being given the Torah" which Rabbi Hirsh is ready to retain. From Kaplan's perspective, it is inappropriate to claim superiority for our people or for our tradition, since that claim would invalidate similar claims of others.

Kaplan's argument against chosenness was strictly a rejection of claims of superiority. In no way did Kaplan reject the uniqueness or specialness of the Jews or of Judaism. Each people must attain salvation; each must do so through the development of its inherited tradition. Thus Kaplan substitutes the concept of vocation for election: Torah is our work, rather than our claim to superiority. The substitution

principle, should have caused no more controversy in heterodox circles than his rejection of animal sacrifice. Had it remained a theory, that might have been the case. The problem is that Kaplan put his theory into practice and changed several of the best-known and frequently recited elements of the liturgy: the Shabbat and festival evening *Kiddush*, the blessings recited over public recitation of Torah, the *Alenu* and *Havdalah* prayers. It is these changes which people find most difficult to accept. Yet it is precisely these changes which were Kaplan's most important contributions, and which Reconstructionists should perpetuate for the following reasons.

1. *We must strive to be intellectually honest.* Kaplan said it best himself (*FAJ*, p. 226, italics added):

Kaplan clearly was aware that the liturgy is metaphorical; in no other way could he have accepted speaking in liturgical language. Nonetheless, he argued that even our metaphors must express what we truly believe. If we do not believe literally in chosenness, and if we can not reinterpret it, it must be removed and a more appropriate substitute must be found. Kaplan changed what was unacceptable to him; he set the example for us to change what is unacceptable to us, provided that we have serious ethical grounds to do so. (Inclusive, non-sexist language is a contemporary example.)

There are other benefits to intellectual honesty in liturgy. The changes jar us from our rote renditions of liturgy. They remind us that we should not have to turn off our minds during prayer if prayer is to be an experience for the whole person.



2. *We must continue to experiment with changes.* Clearly, the substitution of vocation for election has not been adopted nor heralded by the wider Jewish community. This should not deter us from the experiment, if we still find its theoretical underpinnings attractive. Our retention of Kaplan's changes keeps others thinking about the issue of election, even if they do not agree. We need the courage to stand by our convictions, even if they are not popular. If an innovation is good for the Jewish people, it will last. If not, it will fall by the wayside like other experiments that have failed. We should not be disappointed if our experiments fail; but we should not abandon them be-

3. *We must be willing to be different.* Kaplan often has been accused of rejecting the Chosen People concept because he was afraid to say that we were different from other peoples. As has been shown above, that is not an accurate description of Kaplan's motivations. It is indeed ironic that people now suggest we return to chosenness on the grounds that we should not, in that way, be different from other Jews. While *Klal Yisrael* is an important value, other principles should not be sacrificed because they conflict with it. We must continue to assert our right to be different from other Jews in our religious expressions, indeed as a model of our vision for pluralism within the Jewish community. In keeping with Kaplan's dictum, each group within each people must also be able to define salvation for itself.

It is good that, fifty years after the publication of *Judaism as a Civilization*, we are beginning to question and debate those ideas which have formed the basis of classical Reconstructionist ideology. Kaplan himself taught us that the teachings of religion are neither immutable nor infallible. He also taught us, by word and deed, a profound respect for the teachings which express our highest ethical standards. Let us be sure in our debate to listen to our teacher.

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