

Torah or religious education, if it stimulates our thinking about life's values, particularly if it helps us appreciate the religious significance of Jewish experience, then again, it is of undeniable value. But a rite that conveys no meaning related to any of these main concepts of Jewish religion deserves to become obsolete, even though it is prescribed in every one of the Jewish codes. And conversely, a religious ritual of value, such for example as that of *Bar Mitzvah*,⁹ or of Confirmation, for which no authorization can be found in any code, should be given a place in our religious tradition. Once we free religious ritual from its bondage to legalism, there are great possibilities for enriching Jewish life with new rituals, rituals that draw on all the arts known to man as media for the expression of significant religious ideas.

This completes our program of Jewish religion for the future. Timid souls are wont to fear even a slight departure from tradition, lest such departure lead to the destruction of Judaism. For this reason they try frequently to gloss over those changes in our thinking which challenge ancient beliefs. Paradoxical though it may seem, the only way to preserve the Jewish past as a living tradition is by centering our attention on the present need, and drawing on the past only where it can help us to meet that need. The effect of trying to preserve Jewish religion in its traditional form, without adequately reckoning with modern experience, is to make Jewish religion appear an anachronism in the modern world. That we cannot afford to do.

We must, therefore, base Jewish religion of tomorrow not on what our ancestors have told of their experience with God, but on our own experience with God. When we do that, we shall find that the Jewish past assumes new meaning, that it ceases to be a collection of archaeological relics, and that it becomes again a living tradition. We can best revere our ancestors and continue their unfinished task in their spirit when we look upon ourselves not merely as their descendants glorying in their achievements, but as the ancestors of posterity responsible for achieving something in which our descendants may glory, and which may inspire them to seek and find God in their lives.

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE IDEA AN ANACHRONISM

Despite the tendency in certain quarters to consider ideas as mere by-products of the interplay of blind social and economic forces, and to regard reason as a mere rationalization of instinctive passions and desires, we Jews must insist on clear and forthright thought as indispensable. We must strive to overcome the inertia which keeps us chained to a thought-world entirely alien to the modern spirit. There is as much difference between our universe of discourse and that in which our fathers lived before the Emancipation, as between the modern mind-picture of the physical universe and the one which prevailed, until Copernicus proved that the earth moves around the sun. Just as, in ancient times, men thought that the earth was the center of the universe, and that their own homes, being equi-distant on all sides from the horizon, were the center of the earth, so our fathers, in pre-modern times, regarded the drama of human life as exhausting the whole meaning of creation, and the Jewish people as the hero in that drama, with all other nations merely the supporting cast.

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 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. The skeptical attitude of the average Jew toward the doctrine of the Chosen People may be sensed in the Yiddish folk-rendering of the classic phrase, "Thou hast chosen us from all peoples." That rendering is "*Vos hostu gevolt hobn fun die Yiden?*"—"What didst Thou want of the Jews?"

WHAT THE CHOICE OF ISRAEL MEANT IN THE PAST

The Bible goes out of its way to deflate all delusions of grandeur that the assumption of being God's Chosen People might arouse. "Not because you were greater than any other people," says the Deuteronomist, "did the Lord set his heart on you and choose you—for you were the smallest of all people."¹ Long before him, the Prophet Amos spoke in an even more humbling vein, when he said, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you for all your wrongdoing."² We know by now that the assumption of being God's chosen people was at first merely a way of expressing Israel's self-awareness as a distinct and unique people. That mode of expression is common to virtually all primitive and ancient peoples. 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.

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 holy nation."³ 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.

This accent was reenforced throughout the Christian centuries, as a result of the moral support it gave the Jews in their struggle for existence. With the destruction of the Jewish State and the forced dispersion of the Jews among the other nations, that struggle became embittered. No less intense than the physical war waged against the Jews was the "war of nerves" which consisted then, as now, of unrelenting defamation. By the time the Christian Church was firmly established and its doctrine fairly crystallized, that slander had acquired a definite pattern which was calculated to make it extremely effective. The pattern consisted in basing it on the very concept of God which the Jews had evolved, and on the very Scriptures which the Jews themselves regarded

as the word of God. Their very doctrine of election was used as a weapon against them.

Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, has gone far beyond Judaism in utilizing the doctrine of election to affirm the divine prerogative of the Church. That doctrine became its very *raison d'être*. It set itself the task of realigning mankind into the chosen and the damned. The criterion was faith in Jesus, as the Son of God, and as identical with God. The objective was the establishment of a church that was to supersede all human governments. In this process, the Jewish people was singled out as the people which, having at one time been the elect of God, repudiated Him and thereby became a people accursed and damned.

In the face of this ruthless attack on its reputation, there was little else for the Jewish people to do but so to elaborate its traditional claim to superiority as to counter effectively the claim to superiority advanced by the Church. With the interest of Western mankind during the pre-modern Christian centuries focused on the question of salvation and eligibility for it, all of Jewish thought was cast in the mould of the doctrine of divine election. All of creation was regarded as having come into being for the sake of those who were worthy of being God's chosen. The company of the elect, by reason of their kinship with God, wielded a power not vouchsafed to ordinary mortals. Not only could they vanquish death, but even in this life they exercised, especially in their collective capacity as the divine *ecclesia*, an influence over the very course of nature. Thus did the doctrine of election, to whomever applied or by whomever used, connote two specific ideas: one, that of cosmic centrality; the other, that of mystical or supernatural power.

Both of these ideas became integral to the conception of the Church which regarded itself as the Israel of the New Covenant, and as the heir of the Israel of the Old Covenant. The Church, moreover, viewed itself as a "fellowship with divine gifts," to use the technical phrase of Christian theology. Whether in direct response to the challenge of the Church, or as a spontaneous reaction to claims which began to be voiced by various religious sects during the early centuries of the Christian era, the Jews likewise advanced the claims of cosmic centrality and mystic and supernatural power for their own people, which thenceforth was designated not only "*ummah*," or nation, but also "*keneset*," or *ecclesia*, the exact analogue of church.

Throughout the Rabbinic writings, the Israel-centered conception of the cosmos and of human history is the theme of a vast manifold of

aggadic similes. The following is typical: "The straw, the stubble and the chaff were disputing with one another. Each one said, 'For my sake was the field sown.' Said the wheat, 'Wait until we get to the threshing floor, then we shall know for whose sake the field was sown.' When they arrived at the threshing floor and the owner winnowed the grain, the chaff was scattered in the wind, the straw was left on the ground and the stubble was burned. The wheat, however, was taken carefully and piled up into a heap, and whoever passed by fondled it with admiration. Likewise do all the nations contend among themselves, each claiming, 'The world was created for my sake.' But Israel retorts, 'Wait till the day of reckoning; then we shall know for whom the world was created.'"⁴

Moreover, the Sages ascribed to Israel the possession of supernatural power. According to R. Eliezer ben R. Jose, the Galilean,⁵ "God said to the Angel of Death: 'Although I have given you power over every one of My creatures, you can have no power over this nation Israel.'" Time and again we come across statements which stress the apotheosis of Israel. Israel is said to be a people transfigured and deathless, occupying a rank equal to that of angels or "holy princes."⁶ This and numerous other statements to the same effect imply that the *ecclesia* of Israel possesses the status of a mystic being which transcends the laws of nature.

2

THE EFFORT TO REINTERPRET THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL

Emancipation has undermined the status of the Jews as a nation. Enlightenment or rationalism has undermined the status of Jews as a *keneset* or an *ecclesia*. The traditional basis for the belief that Israel was God's Chosen People was the assumption that the miraculous events recorded in the Torah concerning the Patriarchs and their descendants in Egypt represented factual truth. By far the most significant of these miraculous events was God's self-revelation to Israel on Mount Sinai. It was as unthinkable to question the truth of those events as to question the reality of one's own body. Under those circumstances, Jews could not possibly regard themselves as other than the most privileged of all peoples. Those circumstances, however, no longer obtain with the majority of modern-minded men and women. The modern-minded Jew cannot consider the miraculous events recorded in the Torah and

in the rest of the Bible as other than legendary. He, therefore, cannot accept them as evidence of the traditional Jewish doctrine that Israel is God's Chosen People. The attempt to supply other evidence is itself a departure from tradition. Such an attempt might be justified, if at least the new evidence were convincing. But is it convincing?

Unable to accept literally the traditional version of the doctrine of the chosen people, the religious wing of the early *Maskilim*,⁷ the first *Reformers*⁸ and the middle group who designated themselves as the *Historical School*⁹ reinterpreted that doctrine to mean one or all of the following propositions, which are set forth in Kaufmann Kohler's *Jewish Theology*, as justifying the claim of the Jews to being a chosen people:

1. Jews possess hereditary traits which qualify them to be superior to the rest of the world in the realm of the religious and the ethical.
2. Their ancestors were the first to achieve those religious and ethical conceptions and ideals which will, in the end, become the common possession of mankind and help them to achieve salvation.
3. Jews possess the truest form of the religious and ethical ideals of mankind.
4. Jews are entrusted with the task of communicating those ideals to the rest of the world.

3

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE REINTERPRETATIONS?

First, the proposition that Jews possess unusual hereditary traits which entitle them to be God's elect is based on a series of unproved generalizations concerning certain qualities as being characteristic only of Jews, and on biological assumptions concerning heredity, which are entirely unwarranted.¹⁰ It is one thing for an ancient sage to express his love for his people by describing them as unique in the possession of the traits of chastity, benevolence, and compassion.¹¹ But it is quite another thing for a modern person seriously to assert that, because Jewish life has manifested these traits, Jews alone are inherently qualified to grasp and promulgate the truth of religion. We expect a greater regard for objective fact than is evidenced by such sweeping statements about hereditary Jewish traits.

If Jews were to adopt the foregoing reinterpretation of the doctrine of election, they would, by implication, assent to the most pernicious theory of racial heredity yet advanced to justify racial inequality and

the right of a master race to dominate all the rest of mankind. The truth is that historical circumstances, as well as geographic environment and social institutions, are greater determinants of national traits than heredity. Moreover, to represent divine election merely as confirming naturally inherited traits is to identify it virtually with natural selection. It is but one step from such identification to the identification of God with the process by which the physically weak are weeded out. We know all too well from current experience how such a concept of God is only another name for the apotheosis of the will to power.

Secondly, for Jews to claim sole credit for having given mankind those religious and ethical concepts which hold out the promise of a better world smacks of arrogance. The Greek philosophers, the Stoics in the Roman period, the humanists of the Renaissance, and the rationalists of the 18th century have made highly significant contributions to spiritual and moral truth. The religious philosophies of the Hindus antedate all others, and are experiencing a remarkable revival in our day. Even if Jews were the first to enunciate the great moral and spiritual teachings, it would be immodest of them to boast about it. That would not make them better or superior to the rest of the world, in any sense whatever. The first-born has no right to claim that he is better or more beloved than the other children. Special privileges no longer attach to primogeniture.

It is said that to express at this late date dislike of what sounds like pretension is merely to yield to "the conventions of Anglo-Saxon taste."¹² Since when is humility a virtue prized by the Anglo-Saxon rather than the Jewish tradition? Our Torah praises Moses for his meekness. It records the prayer of Moses that he be blotted out of God's book, if only his people might enjoy God's grace.¹³ It tells of his refusing to be disturbed by the news that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp and his exclaiming in response, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!"¹⁴ Can we imagine Moses thanking God that He had not made him like the rest of Israel, but had made him the chosen vehicle for conveying God's message to his spiritually inferior brethren?

Thirdly, for Jews to maintain that they possess the truest form¹⁵ of truth would be understandable, if they still believed that the teachings of their religion are immutable and infallible. However, with the modern dynamic conception of Jewish belief and practice being accepted by those of light and leading among them, the only meaning such claim can have is that Jews generally have managed to advance

a bit ahead of every new development of spiritual truth. No one, however, who knows how far behind the best thinkers of their day some of our greatest Jewish spiritual leaders have been at times can subscribe to this reinterpretation. Spinoza, who truly did forge ahead of his contemporaries, was excommunicated.

The very assumption of a predetermined and permanent superiority, no matter in what respect, does not lend itself to reinterpretation. Our purpose in reinterpreting traditional values should be to retain and emphasize those elements in them which are compatible with our own highest ethical standards. Among those ethical standards, to which any traditional value must necessarily conform if it is to continue functioning in our lives, is that conception of human worth and individual dignity which regards as immoral any classification of human beings into superior and inferior. This does not mean that we must shut our eyes to the fact that human beings are unequal in their gifts and attainments. What it means is that we should not assume *a priori* that a particular race, group or people is endowed, by nature or by God with any gift which entitles it to regard itself, *ipso facto*, as superior. *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.*

Finally, the fourth proposition confuses the doctrine of Israel's election, as expressed in the overwhelming majority of Biblical allusions which deal with Israel's relation to God, with the doctrine of Israel's mission which is the subject of less than a dozen passages in the second part of Isaiah. There is not the slightest implication in the multitude of references to Israel as a Chosen People that it is expected to fulfill the mission of making God known to the nations.

As for the few unmistakable allusions to the mission of Israel, the manner in which the mission is to be discharged has very little in common with what we usually associate with missionary activity, or even with exemplary conduct. The light which Israel is to be unto the nations is portrayed by the Prophet as radiating from Israel's brilliant career as a nation in its own land, dispensing justice and maintaining peace in the name of its God. The establishment of the ideal Kingdom of God in the land of Israel is what the Prophet hoped would lead the rulers of the world and their nations to acknowledge the God of Israel as sovereign.¹⁶

There are many apologists for the doctrine who cling to the assertion of divine 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."¹⁷ Nevertheless, they maintain that properly interpreted, the doctrine still remains valid and should not be discarded.

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."¹⁸ 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 stressed, as in the *Alenu* 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.

There are some who argue that the Chosen People idea is not out of harmony with our modern universe of discourse. They reject the supernaturalist version of the revelation of the Torah on which tradition bases belief in the election of the Jewish people. For them that belief rests rather on the evidence of history that at least the Western world is indebted to Israel for its fundamental religious ideas and institutions, as are also those peoples and individuals in the East who have been converted to Christianity or to Mohammedanism. This fact seems to them to indicate that the Jews are committed by their history to the purpose of converting the world to belief in the unity of God, with all the ethical implications of that belief. "Those who today believe in the election of Israel," writes Dr. Bernard J. Bamberger,¹⁹ "are those who regard Judaism as a universal religion, as *the* universal religion, with a message for all men."

Though none would dispute the spiritual indebtedness of the Western world to Israel, the inference from that indebtedness that Israel was chosen by God to be His messenger to mankind is nevertheless a "grating" *non-sequitur*. When a delegation of Chicago ministers visited Abraham Lincoln to urge the abolition of slavery, one of their number told him that it was God's will that he free the slaves. To which Lincoln²⁰ replied: "If it is, as you say, a message from your Divine Master, is it not odd that the only channel He could send it by was the roundabout route by way of that awful wicked city of Chicago?" The Jewish

people may not be awfully wicked, but one may still ask: "If God has a message for all mankind, is it not odd that the only channel through which He could send it should be the roundabout route via Zion?" To say that many of the most significant religious ideas of the Western world are of Jewish origin does not answer that question. For all we know, Lincoln might have gotten some very good suggestions from Chicagoans. But Lincoln rebuked the arrogance which assumed that he himself had less access to divine guidance than the Chicago ministers, and his rebuke was justified. *The assumption by an individual or group that it is the chosen and indispensable vehicle of God's grace to others is arrogance, no matter how euphemistically one phrases the claim to being chosen.*

Moreover, if Israel's having influenced the world religiously in the past proves that the Israelites are God's Chosen People, what inference are we to draw from the fact that Israel is today *not* influencing the religions of other peoples, but rather being influenced by them? Who can read the works of such men as Sholem Asch, and Franz Werfel, to name two of the most distinguished Jewish writers, by way of example, without perceiving the profound influence that Christianity has had on many Jews? Does that prove that the Christian Church has been chosen and Israel rejected? Would we not resent such an inference? It has been well said that "Ideals remain real only when one continues to realize them." If that is true then the doctrine of the Chosen People, whatever validity it may have had in the past, is today utterly unreal.

4

DIVINE ELECTION INCONSISTENT WITH EVOLUTIONARY CONCEPTION OF RELIGION

The apologists for the doctrine of Israel's election do not take the trouble to think through to a conclusion the role of religion in human civilization. Formerly the adherents of all the traditional religions of the Western world maintained that religion was supernaturally revealed truth. That such truth was transmitted only by one's own people was sufficient evidence that only one's own people had been chosen. Since it was assumed that salvation could be achieved only through revealed truth, the possession of that truth imposed the obligation to convey it to others and to induct them into one's own "chosen" community by way of conversion.

But when one abandons the idea of supernatural revelation, what becomes of religion? If religious truth is independent of any historic self-revelation of God to a particular people, then it is no different from scientific truth in being accessible to and attainable by all mankind. Indeed, one of the main criteria of truth is its universal applicability to and conformity with universal reason. No one can take seriously the theory advanced by Kaufmann Kohler and Abraham Geiger that the Jews, as a race, have a particular genius for religion.²¹ Certainly, the capacity for grasping and conveying truth in the realm of religion, as in every other field of human knowledge and experience, varies more among the individuals of any one group than it does between group and group. The propagation of specific religious truth cannot possibly be the distinctive function of any particular group. Different religions may actually stand for the same truth about God, while, in any one religion religious truth has always to contend with religious error and superstition.

A religion is the organized quest of a people for salvation, for helping those who live by the civilization of that people to achieve their destiny as human beings. In the course of that quest, the people discovers religious truths and abiding values. These truths and values, like all others, are universal. They are not the monopoly of the group that discovers them. They may be discovered by other groups as well. Religions are distinct from one another not so much ideationally as existentially. Each religion represents a particular area of collective life marked out by the *sancta* of the group. These are a definite product of the group's unique historic experience. Such *sancta* are its saints and heroes, its sacred literature, its holy places, its common symbols, its customs and folkways, and all objects and associations which have been hallowed, because of their relation to that people's quest for salvation. There is no more reason for having all the world adopt the *sancta* of one people or church than for all people to wear an identical type of garment. What is important is that the *sancta* of each people or church help to humanize all who belong to it, by implementing those universal values which it should share with all other peoples and churches. A religion is universal, if its conception of God is one that imposes on its adherents loyalty to a universally valid code of ethics. It is only in that sense that the Jewish religion is universal.

The role of religion in human life is to humanize men by enabling them to transcend the limits of present human nature. It emphasizes that which differentiates man from the beast; it identifies the divine

element in that which man can make out of himself. That differentia is the creative urge manifest in man's will to salvation, in his will to the achievement of the good and full life, to the realization of the holiness of human life. To the extent that any civilization contributes to this end, it is religious. That is what we mean when we speak of Judaism as a religious civilization.

Religion is not one of a number of coordinate elements of human culture, but rather the process which organizes all of them into a pattern. It is what personality is to the individual, and nationalism to the nation. That is why Jewish religion is both particular and universal. It is particular, insofar as it functions within and through Jewish life. It is universal, insofar as it seeks to integrate Jewish life with the universal life of mankind, through the worship of the one God of all men and all peoples.

5

THE MISSION IDEA AND RELIGIOUS IMPERIALISM

The conception of the Jewish mission may be said to have originated in the tension between the belief in the one God of all the world and the belief that God has manifested His purpose with reference to human life only through Israel's Torah. The particularistic notion of Israel's exclusive possession of revealed truth had somehow to be reconciled with the universalistic concept of the unity of God. The reconciliation took the form of a compromise between universalism and particularism. The mission idea is such a compromise. Whether it is a satisfactory one is another question.

Indeed, the assumption that only by accepting one's own religion, or by acknowledging its hegemony, can the world be saved is the religious analogue of what, in the political realm, we condemn as imperialism. There was a time when *imperialism* was an honorific word. The Romans were convinced that, in extending their empire, they were extending not merely Roman civilization but *civilization*. They were very proud of the *Pax Romana*. Britons not so long ago boasted of the civilizing influence of their colonial empire as a great service to humanity, as "the White man's burden" of responsibility for the welfare of the "inferior" or "backward" races. Moreover, the claims that empires have frequently extended the area of human cooperation and peace are not without foundation. Empires represent an intermediate step between national isolationism in which every people regards every other

with hatred and suspicion and the long-awaited federation of nations. They are a preparatory stage for that eventual development, when mankind will be recognized as an organic whole, and all its populations as equally concerned in, and equally responsible for, the common welfare.

Similarly, missionizing religion represents an intermediate step between a situation, on the one hand, in which peoples regarded their gods as exclusively interested in them, and regarded themselves as possessing the only way of salvation from which all others were permanently barred, and, on the other hand, the ideal situation in which the implications of the unity of God will be fully realized.

In that ideal situation we shall have, not a cosmopolitan religion of the kind advocated by rationalists who lack appreciation of history, but universal religion—with the “the” omitted—which will be based upon the following principles: (1) all men and all peoples are in need of salvation, or of fulfilling their human destiny; (2) all groups seek salvation in accordance with their own collective experience, and by utilizing their own respective cultures; (3) the ultimate salvation of mankind depends on the recognition that no people can attain complete salvation, until all peoples attain it; and (4) all peoples can attain salvation, only when it is recognized that God is equally accessible to all religious groups, through the proper development and interpretation of their own *sancta*.

An intermediate stage, which may be designated as that of “religious imperialism,” is reached when a group, that believes itself the exclusive possessor of a divinely revealed way of life, seeks to impose it on others, whether by force of arms or by propaganda. And just as political imperialism has to its credit the widening of men’s political horizons, so may the expansion of God’s Kingdom through missionary zeal have to its credit the widening of spiritual horizons. Nevertheless, both are forms of imperialism, and imperialism involves injustice.

When rival imperialisms co-exist, as in the modern world, the inevitable consequence is warfare on a global scale. Religious imperialism has likewise been a source of warfare. Not only Islam, but also Christianity, was spread by the sword. The Thirty Years’ War was motivated by the rival imperialistic claims of Protestantism and Catholicism to universal hegemony. Only after Europe had been bled white and the fighting ended in a draw, did the world begin to conceive the need for religious tolerance, the actual achievement of which awaits the future. But even where the missionizing of a people proceeds by peaceable means, it works havoc with human lives. It invades the family and dis-

turbs its unity. It dissolves the integrity of ancient civilizations, by acting as a sort of fifth column for alien groups. There has never been a people that has been missionized, without resenting the implied insult to its own civilization and religion. The Boxer Rebellion in China was largely a protest against foreign missions. The hatred against Jews and Christians in pagan Rome was another manifestation of the ill-will inevitably provoked by missionary activities.

Our apologists would contend that Jewish missionary activity was not comparable to that of Christianity and Islam, because it always relied solely on persuasion, and because it always recognized that “the pious ones of the Gentile nations have a share in the world to come.”²²

But the truth is that even peaceful missionary activities inevitably create ill-will. One cannot help wondering, moreover, whether the peaceable methods of Jewish missionary activities were not mainly the result of Jewish military impotence imposed by Rome rather than of superior religious insight and tolerance. When one believes one’s own religion to be the only true religion, it is easy to justify a “holy War” as waged to extend the domain of God’s Kingdom and to help redeem mankind. It is historical fact that, at the height of the Hasmonean power, the Jews did actually impose Judaism on the Idumeans by force of arms.

As for the recognition in Jewish tradition that individuals among the Gentiles might attain salvation by conforming to the ethical laws revealed to mankind through Noah, its application did not extend nearly as far as modern Jewish liberals would like to believe. Maimonides, for example, maintained that for a Gentile to conform to the Noahitic laws was not enough. To obtain salvation he must look upon those laws as revealed by God.²³ Since the only evidence of any revelation to Noah is to be found in the Torah of Israel, the achievement of salvation by a Gentile was thus made to depend on his recognizing Israel as the chosen vehicle of divine salvation for mankind.

6

THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION NOT NECESSARY FOR JEWISH SURVIVAL

The question naturally coming to mind at this point is this: Since the proponents of the various reinterpretations of the doctrine of the Chosen People no longer believe in the factual truth of the Patriarchal

stories, or of the miracles and the Sinaitic theophany, why are they at such pains to reinterpret that doctrine? The reason often suggested for their insistence upon retaining the doctrine of Israel's election, namely, that it permeates the whole of Jewish tradition, cannot be true. For, by the same token, they ought to insist on the traditional doctrine of the divine authorship of the Torah. There surely is not a single syllable or letter of the Jewish tradition which is not thoroughly saturated with the idea that the whole of the Pentateuch was dictated by God to Moses. Yet these men have managed to emancipate themselves from that assumption. What then prompts them so to resist any tampering with the doctrine of Israel's election?

The only reasonable motive to which such zeal can be ascribed is not one which derives from the momentum of tradition, but from considerations of Jewish survival. They seem to think that Jews would give up their struggle to live as an indivisible people, unless they were to believe that they are endowed, either individually or as a group, either biologically or culturally, with some moral or spiritual preeminence over the rest of the world.

In reply, be it said that the very attempt to bolster up the Jewish will to live by reasons or assumptions of questionable validity not only defeats its own purpose, but is injurious, from the standpoint of Jewish self-respect. The Jewish will to live cannot be fortified by spurious means. Any claim to moral or spiritual superiority, that is not based on incontrovertible proof, either supernatural or natural, is spurious and unworthy even of ordinary morals, to say nothing of a high spiritual standard.

Judaism can certainly not afford to harbor any doctrine which is in conflict with the ethical basis of democracy. That basis is the intrinsic worth of the individual human soul, a worth which is independent of the people, race or church to which one belongs. This implies that no people, race or church can confer upon its members a higher human status than does any other. Democracy as such calls for the treatment of individuals, despite their marked differences, as equals, from the standpoint of law and of their right to happiness and salvation. Ethical democracy goes one step further and calls for the treatment of all peoples, races and churches as equals in all respects. Indeed, *societies are far more like one another in their characteristics and behavior than are individuals. Hence, discrimination between one people and another is even more irrational and unethical than between one individual and another.*

Continuity of the Jewish consciousness demands that as large a number as possible of traditional Jewish values be retained. This does not mean, however, that all traditional values must necessarily be retained. Some are inherently of such a character as not to be capable of reinterpretation, or of being fitted into the pattern of the present-day outlook on life. Not even the fact that they suffuse the entire tradition, and that their elimination must produce a radically altered tradition, should be sufficient to save them. Take, for example, the traditional beliefs concerning the restoration of the Temple with its sacrificial worship, or concerning the status of Jews in the Diaspora as exiles. These beliefs are an integral part of Jewish tradition. But life is stronger than tradition. The Jewish will to live has managed to survive the desuetude of these beliefs. Why then should we assume that the Jewish will to live would be weakened, if we were to eliminate one more belief which runs counter to the progress of the human spirit at its best?

7

BELIEF IN ELECTION OF ISRAEL A SOURCE OF
MALADJUSTMENT

Far from being a factor for Jewish survival, *the doctrine of Israel's election is henceforth bound to be, ideologically, a definite hindrance.* In its traditional form, that doctrine belongs to the same universe of discourse as the one in which God was conceived as a magnified human being, sitting on a great throne in the heavens, surrounded by hosts of angels and demons who were at His beck and call, ready to carry out His will on earth. It belongs to the universe of discourse in which the supernatural miracles, believed to have taken place in the past, were a guarantee of like miracles in the future. In that thought-world, the divine sound of the *shofar* on Sinai was an assurance of the *shofar* of the Messiah at "the end of days." It is part of a world-outlook in which all human suffering, even the fact of death, was attributed to sin, in which animal sacrifice was accepted as an indispensable means of atoning for sin, and in which a whole people could be conceived as subjected to unceasing torment of body and mind for centuries, because of failure to atone for some anonymous ancestral sin. To get back to that pre-modern universe of discourse is possible for the modern-minded man only in the same sense as it is possible to revisit the scene of one's childhood. People

do that sort of thing to satisfy a feeling of nostalgia, but not with a view to finding a permanent home.

If the Jewish people is to have a future, it must so reconstruct its ideology concerning the world and God that it may feel itself perfectly at home in the universe of discourse in which those who are most advanced intellectually, morally and spiritually dwell at present. Their religion is not based on the tradition of miraculous events and theophanies supposed to have taken place in ancient times. It is based rather on the fundamental fact that all normal human beings are endowed with a capacity for striving to achieve their human destiny, provided that, individually and collectively, they coordinate their conduct and their institutions with the conception of God as the Power within and without them that makes for salvation. That conception of religion points to a better world in which Jews, without giving up their historical uniqueness and continuity as a people, want to have a share. *In that better world, the orchestration of human life is not to serve merely as an accompaniment to any one nation or ecclesia playing solo.*

A far nobler motive for Jewish survival than the assertion of a claim to spiritual superiority is the need for a people always to strive to outdo itself, always to keep on growing in moral and spiritual capacity. There can be no better evidence of such growth than the surrender of notions and beliefs that may have served some useful purpose in a people's childhood or youth, but that have become outdated, when that people has attained maturity. Retaining a doctrine like the election of Israel, which is so out of harmony with the modern world-outlook, is bound to produce further maladjustment in the Jew and to stunt the growth of Judaism. This becomes evident, when we consider the actual effect which the continued retention of the doctrine is having on the two predominant types of people, the rational and the romantic.

The rational type of Jew insists on clear and distinct thought in religion. This does not mean that he will not admit into religion anything but that which is scientifically demonstrable, or that he has no feelings, or that he is averse to mysticism. All it means is that in religion as in everything else we must not say what we do not mean. The rational type of Jew knows very well that, in religion, symbols and metaphors are indispensable, and that we cannot always articulate clearly what they imply. But while it is true that we cannot always say what we mean, we definitely should not say what we do not mean. The fact that we have not paid sufficient regard to this simple ethical principle

is the reason
for the
theology

is probably responsible for our having alienated from Judaism some of the most worthwhile men and women.

A striking illustration of the harm done by failing to reckon with the rational type of Jew is what Felix Adler says about himself in his *An Ethical Philosophy of Life*.²⁴ He there states that, when he was a young man, he was urged to enter the rabbinate, though he held views which he could not openly avow to his congregation. He was told that, by remaining within the Jewish fold he could contrive to have his people accept his views. "Would this be fair to them, or to myself?" he inquires. "Was I to act a lie in order to teach the truth? There was especially one passage in the Sabbath service which brought me to the point of resolution. I mean the words spoken by the officiating minister as he holds up the Pentateuch scrolls, 'And this is the law which Moses set before the People of Israel.' I had lately returned from abroad where I had had a fairly thorough course in biblical exegesis, and had become convinced that the Mosaic religion is, so to speak, a religious mosaic, and that there is hardly a single stone in it which can with certainty be traced to the authorship of Moses. Was I to repeat these words? It was impossible. I was certain that they would stick in my throat. On these grounds, the separation was decided on by me, and became irremediable." Felix Adler was by no means alone in this insistence on absolute sincerity in religion. We shall never know how many of our most brilliant minds have been kept out of the rabbinate, because we have made of intellectual honesty a prohibitive luxury. Their number is undoubtedly legion.

The effect of the retention of the doctrine of election on the romantic type of Jew, though of an entirely different character, is not less detrimental to Jewish survival. The romantic type of Jew deprecates all insistence on taking literally matters of ritual and liturgy. They are not intended, according to him, to convey exact truth, but to arouse the religious emotions. That purpose, he contends, is defeated by all attempts to submit the language of prayer or religious creed to the scrutiny of reason. But why flout reason unnecessarily, when it is possible to evoke an even more profoundly religious emotion which can be shared by everybody, by using language which calls forth no mental resistance? When raising the Scroll of the Torah, is it not better to recite the formula: "This Torah is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it; and of them that uphold it, every one is rendered happy,"²⁵ than to arouse disturbing questions in the minds of an increasing number of people by reciting the traditional formula which alienated Felix Adler from the synagogue? Is it not more in keeping with spiritual religion, when

be my
vs. with

we recite the "Alenu," to thank God for having given us "the Torah of truth and planted eternal life in us," than for not having made us "like the nations of other lands?" One may well suspect the romanticist of being so fond of tradition as to sacrifice his people for its sake.

The romantic policy of "Hands off!" from anything, however obsolete, that is sanctified by tradition is sure to paralyze all spiritual initiative. This is just what has happened with the doctrine of Israel's election. The romantic fondness for it has narcotized, yea lulled the Jew into a state of dangerous somnolence. It has prevented the Jewish mind from applying itself seriously and with all its might to the task of reformulating the place of Israel among the nations. *So long as the Jew takes it for granted that he belongs to a people that is divinely chosen, he can see no need for canvassing the problem of the political and religious status of the Jewish people.* In seeing no such need, Classical Reform and extreme Orthodoxy (Agudaism) display the same romantic type of mentality.

8

VOCATION A VALID SUBSTITUTE FOR THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

Jewish survival depends entirely upon our achieving a moral realism which, on the one hand, will wean us away from the futile compensatory mechanism of imagined superiority, and, on the other, will enable us to find the basis for intrinsic worth of Jewish life in the daily round of contemporary living. The only kind of Jewish survival that would constitute a creative adjustment to the world as it is today is one in which the two elements of our tradition would continue to function, namely, Jewish peoplehood and Jewish religion. *But what peoplehood and religion represent today must be stated in different terms from those which were current in the past.*

The essence of Jewish peoplehood can no longer be identified either with political unity or with religious uniformity. Political unity will have to be confined to Jews living in their own homeland. Uniformity will have to be replaced by a fundamentally common spirit. Likewise, 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 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.

The place previously occupied in the Jewish consciousness by the doctrine of election will have to be filled by the doctrine of vocation. The whole course of Jewish history has been so dominated by religious motivation that Jews cannot be true to themselves, as a people, without stressing the religious character of Judaism. Jewish religion would have Jewish civilization make for the enhancement not only of Jewish life but of the life of mankind, and thus help to render manifest the cosmic purpose of human life. Jewish religion expects the Jew to live the civilization of his people in a spirit of commitment and dedication. To live thus is to live with a sense of vocation or calling, without involving ourselves in any of the invidious distinctions implied in the doctrine of the election, and yet to fulfill the legitimate spiritual wants which that doctrine sought to satisfy.

It is generally assumed that the idea of "vocation" is a Christian, particularly a Protestant, idea. As a matter of fact, that idea is no less Jewish than it is Christian. Thus we read in the Talmud: ²⁶ "A familiar saying in the mouth of the Sages of Yabneh was this: 'I (who study Torah) am a creature (of God); my work is in the city, his in the field; I rise early to my work, he rises early to his. Just as he cannot excel in my work, so I cannot excel in his.' Perhaps thou wilt say: I do much and he does little (for the Torah). But we have learned, 'He who offers much and he who offers little are equal, provided that each direct his heart to Heaven.'" Judaism should extend the significance of vocation to include nations as well as individuals. *No nation is chosen, or elected, or superior to any other, but every nation should discover its vocation or calling, as a source of religious experience, and as a medium of salvation to those who share its life.*

It has been suggested that for an individual to experience the presence of God in his life as a divine calling, he has to meet the following conditions: He has to be engaged in doing needful work, work that calls into use his best powers and encourages their development, and, finally, that enables him to contribute his share to the welfare of mankind.²⁷ If Jews wish to feel a sense of vocation, all they need to do is to apply themselves to those tasks which would be most likely to meet for the Jewish people the foregoing three requirements. What they are has been outlined in Chapter II—*Reconstruction—A Program*.

If we Jews would accept that, or some similar program, as our voca-

tion, we would not need to have our morale bolstered up by such a spiritual anachronism as extolling God "for not having made us like the other nations." ²⁸ Instead, we would find our calling as a people so absorbing, so satisfying and so thrilling that we would have every reason in the world to thank God for having manifested His love to us, as He does to all men and nations who have found their true vocation, and for having rendered us worthy to be identified with His great and holy name.

It may be argued that not all vocations are of equal importance to society. The role which the President of the United States has to fill is far more crucial than that of some janitor of a "Five and Ten." It is not belittling either Mr. Jones or his vocation, if we regard the President's task as infinitely more crucial. ²⁹

Granted. And granted, too, that Israel's role in the history of mankind is also a crucial one. That would still not justify inclusion in the liturgy of prayers praising God for making Israel's role more crucial. What would Americans have said, if, on his accession to office, a President would pray, "I thank Thee, Lord, that Thou hast not made my vocation that of the janitor John Jones, but hast chosen me from among all Americans to lead the nation and mankind to peace?" A truly religious soul never reacts in that way to the fact of his being given a crucially important vocation. He is rather humbled by that fact and disposed to question his own qualifications, accepting as a grave and burdensome responsibility the tasks to which, in loyalty, he feels dedicated.

All these considerations make it clear that, whether we apply rational or pragmatic criteria, the traditional formula concerning Israel's divine election is objectionable. Rationally, it has no place in the realm of discourse from which belief in the supernatural revelation of religious truth has been excluded. Pragmatically, it is objectionable, as barring the way to peace and harmony among religions, and as making for self-righteousness and cant. All the genuine values that once attached themselves to this belief can be maintained by substituting for it the doctrine of "vocation." 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 obligation of every man to use his traditional *sancta* for glorifying not merely his own people or church, but mankind as a whole?

RELIGIOUS DOUBTS AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

1

DEFEATIST VS. CREATIVE DOUBTS

The attitude of traditional religion towards those who doubt its tenets has been one of unqualified condemnation. Throughout the Middle Ages, the skeptic was damned as a heretic. The tenets of religious faith that were deemed indispensable to man's salvation were conceived as revealed truths, possessing an altogether higher degree of authority than human reason or experience. If some of these tenets seemed absurd in the light of human intelligence, the devoted believer suppressed his doubts by assuming with Tertullian, "*Certum est quia impossibile est.*" (It is certain because it is impossible.) That God saw fit to reveal His word to man meant that human experience and reason were not to be trusted, at least when they contradicted revelation. To such an extent has the notion that doubt is essentially irreligious taken hold on the minds of men that the term *free-thinker*, denoting a man who assumes that he has the right to doubt allegedly revealed truth, has been used almost interchangeably with *atheist*.

In Jewish tradition, too, doubt was frowned on. To doubt a religious tenet was to forfeit salvation. If a man could not subscribe to the belief that the resurrection of the dead is expressly proclaimed in the Torah, he forfeited by his unbelief whatever share he might otherwise have claimed in the world to come. ¹

Nevertheless this assumption that doubt is incompatible with religion may itself be questioned. Charles Francis Potter, a Unitarian clergyman, put the matter cleverly when he said: "If you want a safe religion with all doubts removed, you can easily find it, if you promise not to think. But if you want a live religion, you'll have to go fishing in your own soul and catch it." Our Bible is not lacking in expressions of religious doubt. Skepticism with regard to traditional beliefs is the dominant note in Ecclesiastes and Job, and is expressed in many passages in the Prophets ² and Psalms. ³ Even more notable is the fact that the Torah pictures Abraham, who is always taken as the exemplar of religious faith, whose faith, tested by ten trials, withstood them all, as nevertheless questioning the justice of God. When God tells Abraham