

The Chosen

The History of an Idea,
the Anatomy of an Obsession

Avi Beker

palgrave
macmillan

Contents

Preface	ix
1 Confronting the Issue of the Chosen	1
2 How Were “The Chosen” Chosen?	15
3 The Gentile Replacement of the Chosen	39
4 Global but Apart	69
5 Hating the Chosen: Anti-Semitism	89
6 Shoah: The Final Solution for the Chosen	109
7 Israel: A Chosen Nation in Their Chosen Land	131
8 Jerusalem: The Chosen City	157
Epilogue: Why Is the World Obsessed with the Jews?	177
Notes	193
Bibliography	219
Index	231

CHAPTER 1

Confronting the Issue of the Chosen

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be for Him a treasured people above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love upon you and chose you for you were the fewest of all peoples but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which He swore to your fathers.

—Deuteronomy 7:6–8

The Jews rule the world by proxy. . . . They must never think they are the Chosen People.

—The prime minister of Malaysia, Mohammad Mahathir, October 2003¹

Billions of people around the world define their religion, their nation, their tribe, or even their sports teams as the Chosen ones. This is natural: nations and religions alike tend to regard themselves as special. The 1.2 billion people in China see their country as the “center of the universe,” which is the meaning of the Chinese word for China. Another 3.3 billion people who belong to the two largest monotheistic religions, Christianity (2 billion) and Islam (1.3 billion), believe that they are the Chosen ones of God. Other nations such as India (with another billion citizens), Spain, Germany, France, Britain, and the United States also believe in their Chosen legacy.² All like to entertain the Chosen concept, but only the Jews—the biblical Chosen People—are censured for it. In this book we will try to examine why this is so.

* * *

The Chosen People is a term that elicits different reactions from different people. It can evoke pride or arrogance, embarrassment or hatred, devotion or confusion, apologetics or shame. The enemies of the Jews frequently invoke the Chosen concept, while the Jews are reluctant to mention it, and it is even denied by some of

them. The apologetic approach coupled with the justified fear of possible anti-Semitism leads to confusion even in internal Jewish discussions. In our post-modern world, which is supposedly less religious and with fewer prejudices and ignorance, there is a widespread perception among religious and secular Jews alike that Jewish behavior is motivated by the “Chosen factor.” Whether this is true or not is of little importance. It is the perceptions that matter, and often perceptions are stronger than reality.

Jews are hated because they are different—strangers, even when they are completely assimilated. Sometimes they are hated because they are successful. This kind of hatred is common to many other peoples. But the Jews are endowed with something else: they view themselves and are viewed by others as the Chosen People and are both envied and despised for it.

The amazing thing is that both Christianity and Islam are immune from criticism even though they also assume the role of having been Chosen by God. The Covenant between God and Abraham marked the beginning of the Chosen saga of the Jewish people. At the same time, those who criticize the Jews for behaving like a Chosen nation regard themselves as the children of Abraham who received the same promises from God. The Chosen concept is central to all three great monotheistic religions, but only the Jews are condemned for continuing to claim the title. This is because of a combination of antipathy, hypocrisy, cynicism, and deep jealousy. Could it be that the roots of both Christian and Muslim anti-Semitism lie in the struggle over the Chosen appellation?

In his book *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud referred to the Chosen concept as one of the motives for anti-Semitism: “The deeper motives of anti-Semitism have their roots in times long past; they come from the unconscious, and I am quite prepared to hear that what I am going to say will at first appear incredible. I venture to assert that the jealousy that the Jews evoked in other peoples by maintaining that they were the first-born, the favorite child of God the Father, has not yet been overcome by those others, just as if the latter had given credence to the assumption.”³

Freud may have been right in harnessing his own contribution to mankind, the “unconscious” motives of hatred, in his analysis. But he is wrong in blaming the Jews for evoking this hatred. The fact is that neither Christianity nor Islam, as we will see later in this book, denies that the Jewish people were Chosen by God; on the contrary, this is a central tenet of the dogma of both religions. Indeed, according to their own religious beliefs, it is accepted that the Jews were the first to introduce monotheism to the world. This is documented in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as well as in the Quran. Similarly, it is agreed that the Jews introduced the concept of an omnipotent, righteous, and holy God to mankind. In the Jewish view, this is part of their mission. But morality can be taxing, and there are people who prefer not to hear the message.

“Chosenness” is used here in the broadest sense and covers most aspects of Jewish-Gentile relations. Sometimes it lurks in the background and even in the unconscious, if we adopt Freud’s theory, but it can nevertheless be detected and identified. Everything that is part of the unique condition of the Jews and reflects

the complexity of attitudes toward them is part of the Chosen saga. This is why chapters of this book deal with the theological divide, the myths about the Jews and their separateness, the dispersion of the Jewish people, attitudes toward Israel, the issue of Jerusalem the Holy City, differing (sometimes double) standards in international law, the economic dimension, and the suffering of the Jews as expressed in the long history of anti-Semitism and in the unparalleled horrors of the Holocaust.

Chosenness is an all-encompassing term that covers different dimensions of the unique condition of the Jews. It deals with biblical tradition in both the Old and New Testaments, and the Quran and how these works deal with the concept of the Chosen People. Chosenness in the Bible also refers to the “Chosen” or “Promised” Land and the Chosen City, Jerusalem, all of which continue to be a critical part of the conflict in the Middle East. Chosenness is also the fundamental reason behind the uniqueness and separateness of the Jewish people wherever they live, in whatever age, in different cultures, in dictatorships, or in democracies. It includes the biblical mission of the Jews to act as a “Light unto the Nations,” in the words of Prophet Isaiah (42:6), and to deliver a special moral message whether in religious or in secular life, whether as rabbis or as antireligious revolutionaries. We will illustrate how even Jews who had distanced themselves from their religion, and sometimes had actively fought against it, were still imbued with this sense of a special mission to “repair the world” (*tikkun olam* in Hebrew).

Chosenness sometimes lies behind the myths about Jewish conspiracies and perceived Jewish power and is the prime source of hatred toward Jews. The infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (see Chapter 5) is a good example of this. Chosenness also provides the pretext for the double standard that is so often prevalent in the deliberations of countless international organizations and in the reports and commentary by the media and intellectuals, aimed at Israel and the Jews. In the United Nations and many human rights bodies, Israel is treated as the Chosen Pariah. Chosenness brings with it the unique historical suffering of the Jews in the guise of anti-Semitism and, in its wake, attempts to deny it, to relativize it, and to link it to countercharges against Israel of Nazi-like crimes. Denial of anti-Semitism is part of an attempt to discredit the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

Attacks on the Chosen

The revival of anti-Semitism at the beginning of the twenty-first century⁴ highlights the fact that the concept of the Chosen People stands at the center of a modern form of the medieval disputations between Jew and Gentile. The use of disputation is not confined to extremist hate literature or esoteric Web sites, to street demagogues or preachers in mosques, but it can be heard from the mouths of heads of states, parliamentarians, leading intellectuals, writers, and journalists. The revival of anti-Semitism came as a shock to many—Jews and non-Jews alike—and it has now become increasingly clear that anti-Semitism masquerading

as anti-Zionism is not simply a debate about the policies of the State of Israel, which is certainly not immune to criticism, but rather a reversion to classic old-fashioned anti-Semitism. This time, however, it comes in the shape of a mix of extreme Islamism and the intellectual left, both adopting the classic anti-Jewish stereotypes historically preached in Christianity and Islam. In this sense the new anti-Semitism is reverting to the ancient rivalry over the Chosen label, about who killed Christ and who betrayed Mohammad, and is the crucial element in a volatile mix of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish hostility. The alliance against the Jews uses Israel as the pretext for old-fashioned enmity toward the Chosen People.

Review and analysis of contemporary attacks against Israel demonstrate how central are those deeper motives of anti-Semitism—the old enmity against the Chosen. Many intellectuals and completely nonreligious people are using the Chosen concept and other related anti-Semitic stereotypes in their criticisms of Israeli policies. People like the renowned Greek composer Mikos Theodorakis and the Portuguese Nobel laureate Jose Saramago were using in their anti-Semitic attacks against Israel images taken from the Chosen. In 2004 Theodorakis spoke about Israel as the root of the world evil and about the Jews who control the world finances and the media. In Theodorakis's mind, all this has its origins in the Jewish "arrogance" and fanaticism of their biblical forefathers and the thought that they are the Chosen People. To make himself even clearer, Theodorakis, who had witnessed how Greek Jews were taken to their death during the Holocaust, admitted that his grandmother told him that "the Jews were the ones that crucified Christ." Saramago concentrated his attack on the suffering of the Chosen, which he accused the Jews for appropriating for themselves. While attacking Zionism for its "monstrous" idea that the Jews are the Chosen People, Saramago rejected the Jewish position that Israeli atrocities cannot be compared with Nazism and blamed the Jews for using the Holocaust as their bleeding banner (see Chapter 5).

France, because of its history and since it hosts the largest Muslim community in Europe, has become not only the major battlefield in the violent attacks against Jews but also in the war of ideas against the Chosen. The Jewish intellectual Alain Finkielkraut grappled with the paradox of how the Europeans who are haunted by the Holocaust now focus their blame on the Jews again. In Finkielkraut's words, France has become a country where synagogues have been burned, rabbis assaulted, cemeteries profaned, and very few Jews can dare to wear a *kippa* (a small cap, sometimes rendered *yarmulke*, worn at all times by Orthodox Jewish men) in some neighborhoods. "Every day, another intellectual denounces Zionism as a crime," he testifies, and Israel is becoming the target of anti-Semites. There is more old than new in this process: "Western discourse now accuses the [C]hosen [P]eople of believing themselves superior to other nation and of rejecting the gospel of a common, universal identity. Perhaps it is really the ancient condemnation of the Jew—for his worldliness, his particularism, his exclusivity, his national egoism, his closed fraternity—which, under the increasing burden of the Nazi trauma, is living a new youth, reveling in its flashy modern clothes."⁵

Because of its history, geography, and demography, Europe has again become the major arena of religious confrontation and anti-Semitism. With the presence in their countries of millions of Muslims, most of whom are recent immigrants, Europeans are ill-equipped to deal with what has been termed the “New Anti-Semitism.” An incident in a Norwegian school in February 2004 is a good illustration of the new lines of confrontation and of the reemergence of old religious symbols. In the town of Kristiansand, Inge Telhaug, a teacher at the local adult education center, a government institution, was informed by the principal that he could no longer wear a half-inch-wide Star of David around his neck. The principal argued that the many Muslim students at the school could deem the Jewish symbol a provocation. Telhaug, who is not Jewish, hired a lawyer to defend what he regards as a violation of his freedom of expression. He said that he wanted to wear this small piece of jewelry, which he generally wore tucked under his shirt, since, “I see it as the oldest religious symbol we have in our culture; because without Judaism there would be no Christianity.”⁶ In Western and mostly secular Scandinavia, far, far away from the Middle East, the religious triangle of Jews, Christians, and Muslims failed dismally to find a way for cultural symbols to coexist. Is this despite or because of the common roots of the three monotheistic religions?

The scope of the hatred crosses cultures and religions. Among Muslims there is a growing tendency to adopt the stereotypical semantics from classic Christian anti-Semitism. The Muslim-Arab world has become the most dangerous propagator of Nazi-like hatred of Jews and the largest distributor of hate literature. It is easy to find references to the Chosen concept in hate-filled pamphlets and to hear Arab accusations that the Jews killed Jesus and betrayed Mohammad. The irony is that, according to the Quran, Jesus did not die on the cross, but a substitute (Judas) died instead. Christians, on the other hand, are regarded guilty by Islam of the unpardonable sin of shirk, which means to assign partners or companions to Allah.

* * *

Even the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States is used in anti-Semitic rhetoric with the assertion that the Jews control the United States and orchestrated the attack to incite anti-Muslim sentiment. Saudi Arabia—from which fifteen of the nineteen terrorists responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had come—shamelessly claimed in official statements by the Saudi minister of the interior, Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, that Israelis and the Jews were behind the attack.⁷ This grotesque absurdity was reprinted in the media worldwide and appears in books in the West as well as throughout the third world. The Arab world’s obsession with alleged Jewish power is widespread. In 2002, Egypt—which signed a peace treaty with Israel more than twenty years earlier—aired a forty-one-part television movie based on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Syria broadcast a similar production on the “Chosen Jews”

that included old-fashioned blood libels, such as the Jews using Christian children's blood in the manufacture of Passover *matzot*.

The former prime minister of Malaysia, Mohammad Mahathir is a good example of the new anti-Semitism, which is new only in some characteristics and which adjusts to specific political realities. However, this new anti-Semitism is ancient in its content, mythology, stereotypes, virulent hatred, and irrationality. Mahathir's statement, quoted at the head of this chapter, contained a juxtaposition of vicious hatred as well as, paradoxically, grudging admiration for the Jews. His statement, made at the opening of the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit meeting in October 2003, combined jealousy, frustration, and animosity. At the conclusion of his speech, leaders from the fifty-seven countries represented gave him a standing ovation. According to *New York Magazine*, "[n]ot since Hitler has a head of state had the gall to take off the rhetorical gloves with such zeal."⁸

Mahathir stated that Muslims have achieved nothing in more than fifty years of fighting Israel. Characteristically in his new anti-Semitism, he used the terms "Israel" and "Jews" interchangeably. He said, "They survived 2000 years of pogroms not by hitting back but by thinking. They invented Socialism, Communism, human rights and democracy so that persecuting them would appear to be wrong, so that they can enjoy equal rights with others." Mahathir noted that six million Jews out of twelve million were killed in Europe and that today, "Jews rule the world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them. . . . 1.3 billion Moslems cannot be defeated by a few million Jews."⁹ In his reply to a series of protests, he revealed the deep psychopathic anti-Semitic motives behind his remarks: "They [the Jews] must never think they are the Chosen People."¹⁰ After the speech by Mahathir, the foreign minister of Yemen also informed the press that "[t]he Israelis and the Jews control most of the economy and the media in the world."¹¹

As we will see, the dispute between the Jews and Islam today has become more and more influenced by old Christian prejudices against Jews. The Islamic import of anti-Jewish teachings was accelerated with their growing frustration in the Chosen struggle over control of the holy places in Jerusalem and the humiliation Muslims feel as a result of their inability to remove the presence of a sovereign Jewish state from the Promised Land (a term that appears in the Quran).

In the United States, the year 2004 marked the opening of the most ancient wound in Christian-Jewish relations with the release of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of Christ* (see Chapter 3) recounting the last twelve hours of Jesus' life, which focuses on the transfer or the displacement of the Chosen designation, according to Christian theology, from the Jews to Jesus and His followers. Jewish leaders pilloried the controversial film while at the same time most American Christians hailed it as "the best recruiting tool for 2000 years."¹² The film harks back to the origins of the Chosen rivalry, reviving the charge that it was the Jews, rather than the Romans, who were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Gibson makes the movie as authentic as possible: the cast speaks Aramaic and Latin, and the movie contains some of the most brutal and graphic violence ever

shot on film. In one controversial scene—that was subsequently cut—the Jewish high priest invokes a future curse on the Jewish people by declaring, “And the whole people said His blood be upon us, and upon our children.”¹³

This quote is seen as the ultimate admission of the collective guilt of the Jews. It is a central statement that has affected Jewish-Christian relations for centuries and has served as the justification for endless pogroms and persecution. It has turned every Jew at all times and in all places into a “Christ-Killer.” It was not the Jews who tried and crucified Jesus; nevertheless, because of this charge, millions of Jews were abused, tortured, and murdered over the course of two thousand years. The charge has become the backbone of Christian “displacement theology” sometimes also referred to as the “supersessionist doctrine” (see more in Chapter 3) because it justifies the *raison d'être*, repeated throughout the Gospels, that the followers of Jesus have replaced the Jews as the “People of God.” The refusal of the Jews to accept the new doctrine and to agree to convert is a crucial challenge because it comes from those who are acknowledged to be the *original* “Chosen of God.”

Many people are unaware of the extent to which the Chosen concept dominates the modern vocabulary of Islamic anti-Jewish propaganda. It is to be found everywhere in the Muslim world, including in the more “moderate” countries. For example, on November 29, 2003, in the *Daily Star* of Bangladesh, a Dr. Abdul Hashem wrote that the Jews “claim exclusivity as the ‘Chosen People of God’ and the right to the ‘Promised Land,’ all [of] which are biblical myths.” This is a typical self-contradictory Islamic reaction as the Quran itself refers to the Jews as the People of the Book, the Chosen People by God in their Promised Land, so that in Islam itself it is not a myth but rather an established religious assertion (see Chapter 3). However, as we will see, Muslims contend that the Chosen role moved to Islam later in history.

The fact that a modern, educated head of state such as Malaysia’s Mahathir feels comfortable uttering ancient and malicious charges to attack the Jews at a public forum is incredible enough. The weak European and even American reaction demonstrated how such attacks can easily become accepted *façons de parler* in the new century. Ten days after his statement and the resulting criticism, Mahathir reiterated his claim that the Jews control the world. Mahathir held power for twenty-two years and was known for his provocative statements against Jews, always leavened with a coating of sophistication so as to be more politically correct. Nevertheless, he engaged in classic anti-Semitism and even circulated the anti-Jewish tracts *The International Jew* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He banned the Holocaust film *Schindler’s List* and accused the Jews of manipulating the world’s financial markets.

Professor Jomo K. Sundram, an economics professor at the University of Malaysia, explained that by criticizing the Jews, Mahathir was attempting to bolster his credentials among Malaysia’s Islamic community. He needed to do so to compensate for his attacks against the Islamic religious leaders for not bringing their people into the modern world. Sundram explained that “[a]nti-Semitism is the kind of thing you do to establish your ostensible Islamic credentials.

Mahathir does this because his Islamic credentials are so weak, and because he spends so much time attacking the *ulamas* [Muslim clerics]. He was saying, ‘In case you think I am anti-Moslem, here is some anti-Semitism.’”¹⁴ Mahathir is a shrewd politician, and he understands the potential power of anti-Semitism, its political implications, and the added value to be earned by engaging in incitement and demagoguery by using the term “the Chosen People.”

Setting the Record Straight

This book is not an attempt to present a theological case for any one particular Chosen People, although we will draw upon religious texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to learn about the origins of the conflict. It is an attempt to set the historic record straight for Jews and Gentiles alike. A review of the attacks against Israel, and later against the United States as it moved toward the war in Iraq in 2003, shows how the anti-Semitic *Protocols* enjoyed a revival. This primitive czarist forgery about how a “cabal”* of Jewish elders supposedly control the world, provided a fashionable word to explain how a “Jewish Cabal” (an expression used recently by a British member of parliament and an American congressman in 2003) was pushing the United States into war.

Both Jews and non-Jews are reluctant to examine in depth what the Chosen concept is really about and why it continues to underline the never-ending campaign against the Jews. The present book is an attempt to present a summary of Jewish sources on the concept of the Chosen: its origins, its evolution, and its different interpretations among religious and secular Jews. We also look at it from the perspective of Christians and Muslims who claim to have assumed the title of the Chosen People, as well as from the point of view of those who ridicule the concept. This book attempts to fill the gaps in knowledge concerning the role that the issue still plays in Jewish-Gentile relations.

Islam and Christianity differ on many theological issues and the Quran and the New Testament provide texts and doctrines that are often at variance. However, there is a striking similarity in the attitude to the Jews in both texts. In both, one can trace the unfolding stages of the rivalry with the first Chosen People. Both acknowledge the Jewish sources of their religion, their attempts to convert the Jews, the formal recognition of the Jews as the first Chosen of God, the claim that the Jews sinned and were cursed—all common beliefs that finally culminate in Judeo-phobia and anti-Jewish rhetoric.

Is the doctrine of the Chosen People ethnocentric and arrogant? If indeed, one nation was Chosen by God to set an example for the rest of the world, does it mean that other nations are less moral? Can one nation claim moral superiority? The book will explore this question and provide references to traditional sources on the subject.

Some Jews are apologetic about and minimize the Chosen factor in Judaism. This is a misguided approach because it is clear that the concept of the Chosen

*The historical source of the word is from seventeenth-century Britain.

People is central to Jewish belief. However, deeper understanding of the Chosen concept shows that there is no need to apologize. The collective memory of the Chosen includes both the act on Mount Sinai of receiving the Ten Commandments and also the litany of curses that appears later and will befall the Jews should they fail to uphold the responsibilities of the Chosen. The words of the Prophet Amos demonstrate the burden and the price: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”¹⁵ From a historic perspective this is a heavy burden indeed. That is why many Jews have conflicting emotions about their role as the Chosen; they would prefer to be treated as a normal people. At the same time, all Jews take pride in the extraordinary contributions of the Jews to world culture, science, and civilization. It is no surprise that, in the face of persecution and hatred there are Jews who would prefer to escape from the Chosen role and feel less haunted and hunted. This is the case of Tevye the Milkman, the central character in Sholem Aleichem’s story, which, transformed for *Fiddler on the Roof*, became a hit musical throughout the world. Tevye turns to God and appeals to him: “I know, I know. We’re your Chosen People. But, once in a while, can’t You choose someone else?”¹⁶

For the Jews, chosenness means Jewish responsibility, a sense of universal mission and accepting more than their fair share of suffering. Chosenness does imply better behavior or lack of evil, and the treatment of the Jews by their own prophets as well as by God demonstrates this. Chosenness does mean accountability for wrongdoing, and the corollary is punishment and suffering that exceeds all proportion. The Holocaust, the acme of anti-Semitic hatred and Jewish suffering, has become another arena of the same struggle. The Muslims, with some help from the West, deny the uniqueness of the Holocaust in two ways—one with a built-in contradiction: on the one hand they deny that the Holocaust actually took place, while at the same time, they accuse Israel of committing similar atrocities against the Palestinians. One can see how Holocaust denial thrives alongside the wish that it had actually been more successful. The assaults on Israel at the beginning of the new century are characterized by the unprecedented use of comparisons between the Jews and the Nazis; between the Holocaust and the Palestinian *intifada*. The Jews are portrayed as the “New Nazis” not just in the Arab press but sometimes even in the Western media. The attack on Israel is an attack against the Chosen.

There are various areas of contention. The battlefield is vast and spans the globe: it is about Israel, about Jerusalem, about religion, about the economy and globalization and international law. Jews cannot deny that the Chosen concept is religiously, historically, and culturally central to Judaism. At the same time it is critically important that students of anti-Semitism, whether Jew or Gentile, pay attention to the origins and perhaps the atavistic sources of anti-Semitism. This can clear the air and provide an important base for combating Judeophobia.

Since Judah Halevi in the twelfth century there has been no serious comparative work by a Jewish scholar on the concept of the Chosen and its impact on the three monotheistic religions. Halevi’s study is in the style and language of the disputations

of the Middle Ages, which were basically a theological debate on which religion is more authentic. It is surprising that despite dramatic changes in the Jewish condition after the Holocaust and following the establishment of the State of Israel, there has been almost no effort to reconsider in a comprehensive way, the subject of the Chosen in Jewish-Gentile relations. Following Vatican II and the *Nostra Aetate* of 1965, which, in addition to annulling the collective guilt of the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, referred to the Jews as the Chosen People, the need for such a review becomes clear.

It seems that Jews and Gentiles are still entangled in the old myths and constraints. For many Jews in the Diaspora, the issue of the Chosen People is seen as controversial, polemic, and provocative. In Israel, as part of the Zionist philosophy, there was a clear attempt to escape the fate of the Chosen and the mentality of the Diaspora so as to move toward being a “normal” nation in the Jewish homeland. The characterization of chosenness was left to the Bible, the Talmud, and the liturgy. While many non-Jews refer to the Chosen People, few are truly familiar with the Jewish sources and even less so, the taking over of the role of the Chosen—first by Christianity and then by Islam. Whether they like it or not, the Jews are still looked upon as the primary Chosen People. Daniel Bell, an American sociologist, wrote in 1946, “The Jews *are* a [C]hosen [P]eople, if not by God, then by the rest of the world.”¹⁷ Sixty years later Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg of the Supreme Court provided the same rationale: “[W]hen you are a Jew, the world will look at you that way; and this is an heritage that you can be proud of. And then, too, it’s something that you can’t escape because the world won’t let you.”¹⁸ The Gentile attitude to the Chosen People has usually been derogatory and on many occasions it adopted expressions of venomous hostility making the Jews a pariah people. However, there are also frequent expressions of admiration and appreciation for the contribution of the Jews to the values of mankind.

It is about time to put the issue squarely on the table and confront it as the most sensitive component in Jewish-Gentile relations and as the basic reason for anti-Semitism both now and throughout history. The method of analysis is not conventional as we turn to religious texts so as to understand contemporary political and even legal aspects of Jewish-Gentile relations. The issue of the Chosen is not restricted to scholarly theological argumentation but enters every kind of debate: whether on politics, economics, law, globalization, or violence in the streets. Nonreligious people, who may well be atheists or left-wing secularist intellectuals, have no hesitation in harnessing the religious context of chosenness for their attacks against Israel and the Jews.

The Big Divide

Chosenness is the big divide in explaining anti-Semitism and in formulating the religious doctrine toward Israel. There are only two groups, on the opposing extremes, that refer openly and without any constraints to the concept of Jewish chosenness: the anti-Semites of all religions and the evangelical Christians who

support Israel. The rest may discuss it sometimes in a circumvent fashion, but most of the time it remains *the central unspoken psychological, historical, and theological problem at the heart of Jewish-Gentile relations*. Even religious Jews who refer to the concept endless times in their daily prayers, or in their studies of the Torah, the prophets, and the Talmud, avoided a straightforward discussion of the implications of the Chosen concept on matters of policy and relations with the outside world.

Christian and Islamic anti-Semitism are related to the contention that they have replaced the Jews as the Chosen People. This displacement is stated openly, and it is a basic element in the theological development of both religions. Today's Islamists are not only driven by the concept of Jihad or by incitements quoting anti-Jewish references from the Quran but also by their own vision of chosenness and supersession (the *caliph* is the successor, and the *Khalifah* is the world single state that will rule all Islamic lands and subjugate the rest of the world to Allah). Even self-described moderates and liberal Muslims agree that Muslim teachings unequivocally state that Islam supercedes and cancels out all previous revelations by God. Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian ideologue of Islam who was executed by President Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1966, denied the concept of Arab nationalism saying that "God's real [C]hosen [P]eople is the Muslim community, regardless of ethnic, racial, or territorial affiliation of its members."¹⁹ Today's radical Islamic commentators have developed a new and a deadly twist to their displacement theory. In addition to the supersession theory, which is very similar to Christianity with its elements of anti-Semitism, they have added a new slant to it: that the Jewish Bible in its extant form is not authentic, but rather was distorted and corrupted by the Jews in their efforts to prove that they are God's people and that Palestine and Jerusalem belong to them.

Analysis of the Quran's text reveals, against the conventional wisdom, that supersession or replacement theories are even more central and significant in Islam than in Christianity. The clash of Islam with modernity and the series of defeats dealt to the armies of several major Arab powers by the small Jewish state reignited the built in tensions within Islam involving its foundational principles of theological origin and religious authenticity. The same Jews who opposed the gestures of Mohammad and were doomed, according to Islam, to dispersion and humiliation, were returning to their Promised Land, to the places from which they worshiped God before the Islam's conception. These Jews, who are according to the Quran "apes, despised and rejected,"²⁰ had become an inescapable political fact secured by an unbeatable army. The return of the Jews to what used to be their land—a land conquered by Muslim armies and therefore seen as given by Allah to his followers—served as a poignantly distressing reminder of their pre-Islam status as Chosen. Existing tradition and commentary within Islam could not reconcile this new reality; the recourse to hatred and anti-Semitism (which has a solid, vast base in the Quran) was a natural outcome.

The "humiliation and disgrace" of Islam by foreign powers to which bin Laden referred in his videotape of October 7, 2001, must be taken mainly in the context of the *Khalifah* vision of supersession. For Islamists who regard the West

and America as their main enemy in their campaign for a global Islamic state, Zionism is not a matter of territorial or ethnic dispute but a shattering challenge to their claim to chosenness and a caustic reminder of the Jewish origins of Islam (see Chapter 3). An increasingly prevalent trope among Muslim religious leaders today emphasizes the claim that “Islam is the religion chosen by Allah for all humanity.”²¹

For the Vatican and other Churches the supersession theology was the major obstacle in dealing with the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. An independent Israel confronted the Catholic Church with one of its greatest challenges, shattering years of theological belief based on the humiliated and dispersed position of the Jews and the loss of its Chosen title (Chapter 7). It took the Vatican about one hundred years since its flat rejection of the Zionist idea and a revolutionary transformation of doctrine regarding the Chosen in order to present a more pragmatic approach that, though it did not abandon the essence of supersession, would allow it to establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. But this view is not supported by all Catholic leaders and churches, and it is rejected outright by groups such as traditional Catholics.

On the other hand, the admiration by other Christian groups to the Jews and in particular their political support for Zionism and the State of Israel is based to a very large extent on the Chosen concept. The most critical divide between America’s and the rest of the world’s attitudes to the Middle East lie in the differences that their publics attach to the Chosen concept and the way they interpret its meanings to foreign policy. Many political observers and analysts underestimate the extent of religion’s influence on American politics and fail to draw the links between theology and foreign policy. In the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, which is America’s oldest federal cultural institution and the largest library in the world, there is a conspicuous recognition of the Jewish contribution to civilization. In the self-acclaimed “unparalleled treasure house of the world’s knowledge and America’s creativity”²² the central architectural monument emphasizes the impact of Judaism on America and mankind. The domed ceiling, stretching 160 feet above the floor of the Main Reading Room in the Jefferson building, represent the different dimensions of *Human Understandings* in a huge painting by Edwin Blashfield (1898). The Jews (*Judea*) are depicted as those who contributed the idea of religion to mankind, and the pillar on the ceiling inscribes in Hebrew letters the injunction from Leviticus 19:18: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

At every crossroads of historical changes and decision making on the Middle East since the early nineteenth century, Christian Zionists were very much involved in inspiring, acting, and lobbying for the restoration of the Jews in their historical Promised Land. As shown later in this work American Protestantism today has moved substantially to an evangelical theology that represents a sea change in the attitudes toward the role of Jews in modern history and in Christian redemption. Evangelists still believe in their own chosenness and attach great importance to their duty to spread their Christian values throughout the world, but they no

longer subscribe to the age-old Christian supersessionist and displacement doctrine that refuses to recognize the viable existence of the Jewish people and, particularly, its Chosen status. These churches believe that the Jews continue to be favored as God's people, and some of them even renounce supersessionism and affirm that the Jews have a valid way to find God within their own faith. When so many Americans regard the Bible as the word of God and almost half Americans believe that the land of Israel was given to the Jewish People by God, the Middle East conflict gets an important dimension, which cannot be ignored. A poll taken by the Pew Research Center (the leading nonpartisan polling organization in America) in July 2003 found that 37 percent of Americans describe themselves as a "born-again" or evangelical Christian. Two-thirds of Americans regard the Bible as the word of God, and one-third says that it should be taken literally, word for word. Forty-four percent of Americans believe that the land of Israel was given to the Jewish people by God, and 36 percent believe that that the State of Israel is a fulfillment of the biblical prophesy about the second coming of Jesus.²³ When 86.3 percent of fundamental evangelical Christian respondents agree that the Jews are still the Chosen People,²⁴ the policy implications cannot be dismissed. For Evangelists the continued existence of the Jewish People and its return to its Promised Land is a proof for God power in history. Evangelists, more than most of the Jews, regard God's first act of chosenness toward the Jews in his words to Abraham: "And I will make of thee a great nation" a matter of policy. Literally they also read the following words of God: "And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee,"²⁵ as a clear directive by God for U.S. officials that is based on the Chosen covenant with Israel and implying that God will bless America if the United States blesses Israel.

Charles Murray, an American Gentile and a scholar, has tried to develop a theory on the Jewish extraordinary intellectual skills to explain their outstanding and disproportional contribution to science and the advancement of mankind. He focuses his argument on the "Jewish Genius" (the title of his article) on their system of education and religious studies as an evolutionary process that he traces back to the period before the first century BCE, before the destruction of the Second Temple. His heroes include the Jewish sage Joshua ben Gamla, who issued an ordinance in 64 CE mandating universal schooling for boys at the age of six. Murray goes back to Moses, who propagated God's commandments, which were intertwined with intellectual complexity and required intense learning and deep insight. But despite his "evolutionary" theory Murray admits at the end, "I take sanctuary in my remaining hypothesis, uniquely parsimonious and happily irrefutable. The Jews are God's [C]hosen [P]eople."²⁶

The apologetic and sometimes ostrich-like approach to the Chosen concept should be rejected. Without recognizing its centrality in shaping the perceptions of Jews and non-Jews alike, we cannot fully understand Jewish history and the world's attitude toward the Jews. In the final analysis there is no better explanation for the particular strength that has made the Jews different and kept them intact despite two thousand years of dispersion and persecution. As history

shows, the Chosen factor is also part of the mission of the Jews and their contribution to mankind. Most Jews and non-Jews would agree (even if they prefer not to say it aloud) that for better or worse, the Jews are different, set apart, and a “People that Stands Alone.”²⁷ There is no better expression for this mystery than the concept of the Chosen.

CHAPTER 2

How Were “The Chosen” Chosen?

You have distinguished the Lord today to be a God for you . . . and the Lord has distinguished you today to be for Him a treasured people.

—Deuteronomy 26:17–18

Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said: All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and we will be obedient!”

—Exodus 24:7

For it is written [in Exodus] that “they stood at the foot of the [Sinai] mountain” and Rabbi Dimi bar Chama said: this teaches us that the Holy One, Blessed be He, tipped the mountain and positioned it over the Jews as though it were an overturned vat and told them if you accept the Torah, all is well—but if not your burial will be there!

—Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 2b

How exactly did the Jewish people received their Torah, which so dramatically marked them off from all other peoples then and now? Did they make a conscious decision to accept the holy book from God’s hands; did they do so out of their free will? Or were they selected for this honor (and burden); was this an offer they could not refuse? The two sources quoted above present diametrically opposed interpretations of this seminal event. The biblical account conveys the enthusiasm with which the Children of Israel embraced God’s word and thus became the Chosen People. Jewish commentaries emphasize the immensity of this decision, taken at the foot of Mount Sinai. It was, they say, something the Jews alone undertook, of all the nations that might have, demonstrating the special qualities that uniquely qualified them for God’s service. The talmudic source, however, tells us that the choice was imposed from above, that the Jews had no alternative but to accept the sacred word—upon pain of death. While the first interpretation emphasizes the Jewish people’s avid hunger for the divine connection, the second focuses on the heavy yoke that being Chosen laid upon them.

How are we to understand these two approaches? Which is considered more correct? Are they truly contradictory, or is there common ground between them? Are there, indeed, other interpretations as well? As a starting point to exploring these questions we might say that for the Jewish religion the idea of chosenness is axiomatic. No theme in the Old Testament is more fundamental than that of the Covenant between God and Israel, that a people was Chosen and that they responded to the call in many ways and for so long. Judaism, its history, and its religion cannot be understood without focusing on the concept of the Chosen. It is hard to conceive Jewish identity in its various forms and throughout the ages without the Jewish claim to chosenness.

Since within Judaism the Chosen concept is axiomatic, the rabbis did not feel the need for extensive commentary. The Bible paints a vivid picture of how the Covenant originated and how it was confirmed and reconfirmed, and the sages for the most part are content with the biblical exposition. Even Maimonides (Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, known as the Rambam) does not list chosenness in his compilation of the Thirteen Principles of Faith.¹ But, also because the concept is so axiomatic, interpretations are complex. Often they seem at odds; sometimes they are mysterious. But always they go right to the heart of what it means to be Jewish.

All the rabbinic commentaries are based on the biblical narrative, so interpretations are always anchored in the world of the patriarchs and prophets. But at the same time the rabbis saw the Bible not just as a sacred document from the past, but as a living instrument that illuminates the present. Consequently, interpretations often reflect Jewish-Gentile relations at the time of their writing. These belong to the genre of commentary known as *midrash haggadah*. *Midrash haggadah* (often called simply *midrash*) refers to nonlegal elements in the rabbinic literature, for example, legends, allegories, expositions of history, philosophy, and folklore. *Midrash* is not the law (*halakah*), but it is central to an understanding of the context and environment in which the sages developed their worldview, in our case their view of what it means for Jews to be the Chosen People. The interpretations reflected in these legends illustrate how involved and multidimensional the Chosen concept is in Jewish tradition. Let us start by considering our two apparently contradictory versions of how the Jews came to be Chosen.

“We Will Do and We Will Be Obedient”

The Chosen process in the Bible starts with Abraham and the patriarchs in Genesis and reaches its culmination at Mount Sinai. In Exodus there is a dialogue, an offer, and a process. God calls to Moses from the mountain:

Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob, and tell to the people of Israel. You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will hear my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine. And you

shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation . . . So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do.’²

This pledge is confirmed and repeated later: “Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said: ‘All that the Lord has spoken, we will do and we will be obedient!’”³

The declaration “We will do and we will be obedient!” is a cornerstone of the Jewish people’s faith in God and their commitment to Him without reservation. It is this commitment, this Covenant, that sets the Jewish people apart from others, so “We will do and we will be obedient” functions as both a vow of faith and a declaration of separateness. However, the process of choosing was mutual: God chose Israel only, not other peoples, and Israel chose God:

[Moses] said: When God revealed himself to Israel to give them the Torah, He also revealed himself to all nations. First He went to Esau’s people and asked them: “Are you willing to take the Torah?” And they asked: “What is written in it?” He told them: “Thou shalt not kill.” They refused. Then He went to the people of Amon and Moab and they asked the same question . . . and God told them that it is written: “Thou shalt not commit adultery” and they refused. He went to the Ishmaelites and they refused because of the commandment, “Thou shalt not steal.” And there was no nation that God did not approach but all refused. And then He came to Israel; They replied: “We will do and we will be obedient.”⁴

The verse from Deuteronomy at the top of this chapter shows that the process was mutual: God chooses Israel, and Israel (as distinct from the other peoples) chooses God. There is another midrash that speaks to the same idea, this one on Numbers (*Bamidbar Rabah*): “Why did God choose Israel?” it asks. “Because Israel has chosen Him and His Torah.” Many Jews regard this notion with some degree of discomfort because it implies that Jews set themselves above others. But this discomfort deflects attention from the fact that the Torah and its Ten Commandments were indeed absolutely revolutionary. This set of laws and moral standards did differentiate the Jews from the surrounding peoples, while the concept of one omnipotent God, which was the basis of it all, was perhaps the most singular development in mankind’s entire spiritual history. As Abba Eban, the former foreign minister of Israel, put it, “What was born in Sinai was a concept as revolutionary as the wheel, an idea as influential as the plow—the idea of hope and progress and the stubborn belief that human life can be improved.”⁵ Nothing distinguished the Jews more than their laws and their faith, which contrasted so sharply with the beliefs of the peoples among whom they lived.

Written during the early years of Christianity, these midrashim reflect an era of confrontation and persecution at the hands of both pagans and Christians, a time when it was especially important to confirm the distinctive identity of the vulnerable Jewish community. Professor Ephraim Urbach explains⁶ that the talmudic emphasis on offering the Torah to many nations was an attempt to

demonstrate that there was nothing arbitrary about the choosing, that it was not a forced imposition but the outcome of a reciprocal process. Later talmudic comments to this effect were part of the fourth-century conflict between Christians and the Roman Emperor Julian, who reverted to paganism. Julian (known later as “The Apostate”) maintained that Christianity was a religion of trickery. He argued that Christian claims to have taken over the Chosen title from the Jews had no validity, no more than Roman claims to the title would have, and that Romans had never been vouchsafed an opportunity to be Chosen; they received neither the Torah and the prophets like the Jews, nor a purported Messiah like the Christians. In this atmosphere the talmudic scholars felt the need to demonstrate that there was not one among the myriad nations that God did not ask if they wanted to receive the Torah, with all the implications stemming from their refusal.

Maimonides, perhaps the greatest postbiblical Jewish figure, wrote in his “Epistle to the Jews of Yemen,” (*Igeret Teiman*) that indeed prophets were sent to both Ishmael and Esau, as descendants of Abraham, but they rejected the Torah and the commandments. In his epistle, Maimonides tries to strengthen the resolve of the Jews of Yemen in the face of persecution, and he tells them that Jews believe in a God whose laws were given through Moses and that these teachings were

intended to constitute us as an entirely distinct people. The chosenness was not due to any inherent worth of ours. Indeed we have been distinctly told so in the scriptures. But because our progenitors acted righteously through their knowledge of the Supreme Being, therefore we, their descendents, reap the benefit of their meritorious deeds. . . . My brethren, it behooves us to keep ever-present in our minds the great day of Sinai . . . you who were born in this covenant and raised in this belief. . . . For a whole people heard the word of God and saw the glory of His divinity. From this lasting memory we must draw our power to strengthen our faith even in a period of persecution and affliction such as the present one. My brethren! Hold fast to the covenant.⁷

Implicit in Maimonides’ admonishments and the earlier teachings about choice is the recognition that the Covenant, however enthusiastically embraced, is exceptionally difficult to keep. In Exodus, immediately after becoming the Promised Nation, the Jews misbehaved, and their moral stature diminished. The Talmud emphasizes that at Mount Sinai, two events occurred: the Jews were uplifted to become the Chosen People, accompanied by the angels, while in the same place they sinned and were brought down again.⁸ The Bible and later commentaries emphasize how demanding the task of the Chosen People is and how fragile the will to conform. Remaining God’s Chosen requires the greatest effort; that is to say, the people must constantly exercise their will and make the same choice their ancestors made at Sinai.

The Overturned Vat

In saying “We will do and we will be obedient,” the impression is that the Jews had no alternative but to accept the Covenant. Not was there any suggestion that

God offered the Torah to other peoples, in this version of events. This interpretation created a double problem for commentators: After all, if the Jews were unwilling to agree on their own, did that render them less qualified for chosenness? And because they were forced, does straying from the commandments then seem justified? Moreover, how can any blame be attached to the Gentiles if they were never offered the role in the first place?

The Talmud even asks this question directly, posing an imaginary dialogue between God and the Gentiles. In this story, the Gentile nations come to God and complain that since they had not accepted the Torah they are under no obligation to observe its laws. God asks them, why did you not accept it in the first place? And the nations reply, “Master of the Universe, did you tip the mountain as if it were an overturned vat over us as you did with the Jews?”⁹ In a similar vein, the late thirteenth-century commentator Rabbi Shlomo Ben Aderet (the *Rashba*) posed the question, Why did the Children of Israel have to go into exile for not observing the laws that they had never accepted of their own free will? As if anticipating this question, the Talmud, immediately after the midrash of the overturned vat, tells of the reaffirmation, some fifteen hundred years after Sinai, when the Jews in the days of Queen Esther finally accepted the Torah of their own free will.

In another talmudic tractate exploring the nature of the commitment at Mount Sinai, the two opposing approaches appear once more. Here too the rabbis say that if chosenness was imposed on the Children of Israel, then they could argue that since this was not done of their own free will God cannot blame them for violating the laws.¹⁰ And here again the answer is that during the days of King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther the Jews reaffirmed their commitment. They “confirmed and undertook upon themselves and upon their seed.”¹¹ This approach aims to explain that the Jewish people made this second affirmation while in exile, out of self-conviction, without the Temple and lacking all the miracles and revelations shown to them at Sinai.

Yet another dimension of the Jewish bonding with God is conveyed in the same tractate. This midrash tells about a certain Sadducee (rigorous proponents of free will, in opposition to the Pharisees) who tries to embarrass and heap scorn on the people because they made fools of themselves by accepting the Torah before actually seeing it. According to the midrash, the Sadducee comes to Rava, a renowned talmudic scholar, interrupts him in the middle of study, and tells him, “You are an impetuous people for you put your mouth before your ears. Why didn’t you listen before accepting it [the Torah]?” Rava answers him patiently, “We, the Jews,” he says, “are a wholesome people who love God and have faith in Him and know that He would never command the impossible from us. The people who attack us are devious and corrupt, and they project their own malevolent distrust on to others, assuming that they too cannot trust God.” In the same passage, the Talmud says that because of their “naïve” acceptance of the Torah, God likened the Jews to the angels who are also totally submissive to His will.¹² The suggestion here is that the people’s commitment at Sinai was neither forced nor the result of some rational decision—pure faith in God was the only operative factor.

In these various midrashim the sages examine the problem of chosenness from various angles and try to resolve the different interpretations, each interpretation with its own set of psychological and moral implications. In particular the sages were concerned to determine how free will and determinism worked themselves out in this most fundamental decision of the Jewish people.

The same juxtaposition appears in the tractate *Yoma* (87b), clearly revealing how the two meanings create a living tandem. This midrash concerns another renowned scholar, Rabba, who started his prayers on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, by reciting, “You have chosen us above all the peoples; you have loved us and found favor in us; you have exalted us above all the tongues, and you have sanctified us with your commandments.” But immediately after doing so, he moved on to confessional and penitential prayers, emphasizing the helplessness of human beings facing God. These then, are the two sides of the Chosen: the privilege and the burden.

Many of the myths concerning the Jewish concept of their chosenness are simplistic and freighted with negative implications. But the actual talmudic discussions embody a complex and spiritually rich amalgam that emphasizes both the significance and also the often painful responsibility of the Chosen. In the words of the historian R. Travers-Herford, “If it was an honor and a privilege to have been so chosen, it was full of danger and exposed the bearer of it to the ill-will and jealousy of his fellow men.”¹³ In so many ways, the selection was a terrible burden as well a grace. It was, writes Maurice Samuel, “a divine destiny reluctantly assumed, everlastingly repudiated, everlastingly reclaimed.”¹⁴ In this sense chosenness determined the ongoing moral dynamics of the Jewish people, just as it determined so much else about their essential identity.

The Meaning of the Chosen

The concept of the Chosen occupies a central place in Jewish tradition and liturgy. The Torah, or Jewish prayer book, adopted many references based on the biblical texts concerning the concept of the Chosen People. When a Jew is called up to read the Torah, he recites the blessing, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God king of the universe, who has chosen us from all peoples and hast given us thy Torah.”¹⁵ This blessing is recited in the daily prayers and is repeated in the reading of the Torah, twice during the week and twice on the Sabbath and during the festivals. The Talmud regards this blessing as supreme since it links together the choosing of Israel with its holy scripture, the Torah.¹⁶ It is also important to note that the blessing ends in the present tense: “Blessed art thou, O Lord, giver of the Torah,” as if to emphasize that the encounter on Mount Sinai between God and the Jewish people is a continuing process and that every Jew should feel as if he or she was actually present at the Mount.

From a religious point of view, the Covenant between God and the Jewish people is unbreakable, thus putting great responsibility and the resultant hardship on the Jews. They have to serve God and keep His laws, and in the process strive to perfect themselves and the world (*tikkun olam*). If they fail in these

obligations they will be punished for their sins. It is clear to them that they are required to adhere to higher standards than those expected from other nations. In this sense, Chosen means to be separate and unique: “And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I am casting out before you. . . . I am the Lord your God who has separated you from the people. . . . [Y]ou shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine.”¹⁷ While the Jews understand the burden implicit in chosenness, they also express their pride in becoming the Chosen. As Rabbi Akiva commented, “Beloved are Israel, for they are called children of God; for they were given a precious article; . . . My Torah. . . .”¹⁸

At the same time, Judaism rejects outright the idea that Jews are somehow personally or racially superior to others. The Jews were chosen not because of any personal merit but because they were ready to accept the Torah and commit themselves to serving God. The Torah states specifically that the Jewish people were selected not for their virtues but for their faults—“not for thy righteousness, nor for the uprightness of thine heart”—but because of their intransigence as stiff-necked people.¹⁹ There is no call in Judaism to convert non-Jews, as there is in the great proselytizing religions. There is no faith-driven compulsion to assert Judaism’s superiority. Chosenness does not imply hegemony over other nations, nor does it seek to impose the Torah on other peoples. On the contrary, there is an underlying acceptance of others as they are, the recognition that, despite differences, nations are capable of and deserve mutual respect. The prophet Micah, referring to the ultimate redemption, posits a famous pluralistic prescription: “Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every man under His vine and under His fig tree and none shall make them afraid.”²⁰ In a similar vein, the prophet Isaiah envisioned the restored Temple as a sanctuary for non-Jews as well: “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. . . . For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”²¹

Chosenness implies distinctiveness, but not preeminence. And indeed Gentiles who conform to the seven laws given to Noah (or, Noahide laws) are assured a place “in the world to come.”²² Neither does chosenness embody any sense of racial superiority. Converts, for example, are treated as if they had been present at the encounter with God on Mount Sinai along with the rest of the Jewish people. The Torah says, “Nor is it with you only that I make this sworn covenant, but with He who is not with us here this day.”²³ The phrase “He who is not here,” refers to future converts as well as to the Jewish generations to come. The Talmud enjoins Jews not to embarrass a convert, nor treat him as a foreigner: “If he was a child of converts, one may not say to him, ‘Remember the deeds of your ancestors [the Gentiles],’ for it said, ‘You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him’²⁴ (*Exodus* 22:20).

Maimonides explains that under Jewish law the convert recites the same blessing to God “who selected us from among the peoples” and the blessing at the close of the Sabbath, “Blessed art thou O God . . . who separated . . . between

Israel and the nations,” as well as the words, “Our God, and God of our ancestors.”²⁵ The burden of the suffering element of chosenness is reflected in an important legal principle of conversion. The Talmud states, “When one comes to convert to Judaism, they [the rabbis, seating in the religious court] are to say to him: ‘what benefit do you see in coming to convert? Do you not know that Israel is beset, downtrodden, lowly, distraught, and persecuted?’ If he says, ‘I know and I am not worthy to be part of them,’ they are to accept him immediately.”²⁶

This absence of racism is also reflected in the halakic approach to Jews who converted to other religions. In Jewish law “a Jew remains Jewish even if he has sinned,” so that converts to Christianity remain Jews. The late archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, was born to Polish-Jewish parents who immigrated to France. As a child during the Holocaust he was raised in a convent, and at the age of thirteen he converted to Catholicism. Lustiger takes pride in his Jewish origins. In interviews he always defines himself as a Jew who practices Christianity. In explaining this duality, he refers to the mission of the Chosen saying that “[f]or me, the vocation of [the People of] Israel is ‘bearing a light unto the Gentiles.’ I believe that Christianity is the means for achieving this.”²⁷

At the same time, Jews understand that while they may not discriminate against others, others often feel great anger toward them. Traditionally, the hatred felt by other nations is considered to have begun at Mount Sinai at the very moment when the Jews became the Chosen. The sages of the Talmud play on the words “Sinai” and “sinah”—“hate” in Hebrew. “Why is it called Sinai?” they ask. “Because from there the hatred against Israel descended . . . and from there the nations of the world received this hatred.”²⁸ They recognize that chosenness brought, along with its distinction, the inevitable suffering that accompanies being an object of envy and hate, and that, consequently, suffering as well as pride is intrinsic to Jewish identity.

In his book, *Errata*, the Jewish writer and philosopher George Steiner argues that the moral code of the Jews, with its integral definition of God, lies at the very heart of anti-Semitism. Steiner, who is not religious, maintains that at Sinai the Jews introduced to the world a God who is beyond understanding and cannot be conceived and also introduced moral decrees that for their time were inflexible and unacceptable. The totality of the Ten Commandments—against murder, adultery, greed, setting up your own gods and idols, and so on, were too demanding, too all-inclusive, and too absolute. They call on man to overcome his ego, his natural instincts, his desires, and his freedoms. In doing so the Jews put tremendous moral pressure on the world, and the world responded with hatred and abomination and then with the urge to persecute the Jews, to make them pariahs, to shut their mouths, and finally to liquidate and destroy them. Without this bone-deep historical anger, Steiner reasons, it would be almost impossible to explain the persistence of anti-Semitism, especially after the Holocaust.²⁹

Modern, self-confident Jews living in countries where they feel relatively insulated from anti-Semitism still tend to be uneasy and restless with the concept of chosenness. They understand the ominous historical implications of being

Chosen, and they reject the taint of some supposed innate superiority. They are more in tune with the kind of universalist sentiments voiced by the theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “God is either the Father of all men or of no man. . . . It seems to be the will of God that there be more than one religion.”³⁰ Many Jews who see themselves as part of liberal Western civilization are reluctant to emphasize the traces of Jewish particularism and ethnic separatism that seem to be implicit in the Jewish tradition. The Nazis’ glorification of themselves as a “superior race” (the *Herrenvolk*), also helped erect a powerful psychological barrier against emphasizing a concept like the Chosen People, which seems so suggestive of ethnic exceptionalism.

American Jews generally have striven to integrate themselves into their surrounding society and have been ambivalent about characteristics that in the past separated Jews from others, even though they are aware that it is precisely these elements that have guaranteed Jewish survival over the millennia. The typical American Jew, says Professor Charles Liebman, seeks ideological positions that deny the existence of any tension between himself and his environment, and he needs, therefore, to cloud over and obscure some of the basic concepts of Judaism.³¹ Chosenness, explains the historian Roland Eisen, has become in America “the most often blurred concept, and was reinterpreted with new definitions in America of the twentieth century. Jews could get comfort from being Chosen behind the ghetto walls, but they found it awkward to claim chosenness in the new Chosen Land of America.”³²

One group within American Jewry, the Reconstructionist movement, even took formal steps to drop the concept of the Chosen from its ideology altogether. Mordechai Kaplan (1881–1983), the founder of Reconstructionism, proposed a Judaism that rejected the concept of the Chosen People. He regarded Jewish chosenness as “anachronism” and as a dangerous idea that clashed with modern concepts of justice and equality and perpetrated a sense of “racial or national superiority.” In that sense he also criticized the idea of the Reform movement that the Jews, because of their qualities, are entrusted with the mission of “Light unto the Nations.” To claim that the Jews have “given mankind those religious and ethical concepts . . . smacks of arrogance,” said Kaplan.³³ Following Kaplan’s lead, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, founder and former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, called for the elimination of the Chosen concept from the movement’s liturgy and philosophy. He advocated humility and admonished modern Jews to avoid maintaining that “God gave the Torah to us and nobody else.”³⁴ The Reconstructionist prayer book states candidly, “Modern-minded Jews can no longer believe . . . that the Jews constitute a divinely [C]hosen [P]eople.”³⁵

But even this outstanding exception of the Reconstructionist movement is gradually evaporating, and the text has been modified in new prayer books following discussions in the early 1980s. Members of the movement indicated clearly that the “Kaplanian position on the [C]hosen [P]eople might be *passé*.”³⁶ Joseph Hayyim Brenner, a similarly minded, anti-religious Zionist writer (who was murdered by Arab rioters in Jaffa in 1921), wrote, “I would blot out from the

prayer book of the Jew of our day the [words] ‘Thou hast chosen us’ in every shape and form.”³⁷

It is something of an irony that American Jews, who are tender about the Chosen People issue, have assimilated themselves into a society with its own strong tradition of chosenness. As rigorous, “purifying” Protestants, the Pilgrims and Founding Fathers believed that they had been especially selected by God as the new “Chosen People,” superseding and replacing the biblical Children of Israel. Their new society, proclaimed John Winthrop, Massachusetts’s first governor, would be a “City on a Hill,” a divinely inspired model for the world to see and emulate. The Puritans, according to Winthrop, were the Chosen People of Massachusetts, like the Israelis the old. “The Lord thy God,” Winthrop told his followers, echoing Moses’ valedictory to the original Chosen People, “will bring thee into the land . . . and thou shalt possess it.”³⁸ The Puritans’ vision was later taken up in a secularized form by founders such as John Adams and James Madison and still animates America’s view of its role in the world.

The Chosen Pillars

The biblical tradition of the Chosen is based on the two individuals who received the Covenant from God: Abraham, the first Jew, and Moses, the first leader of the Jewish people. There are many other references to the concept by the prophets, but all of them derive from God’s direct promises to Abraham and Moses. Abraham was the actual founder of Judaism and monotheism in an era so distant that its peoples could not even conceive of such an idea. God and Abraham’s reciprocal Covenant was on a more personal level than the Covenant granted Moses (though God designated Abraham’s Covenant for his descendants as well). But though separated by many hundreds of years, the link between the two Covenants is clear. They are twin parts of the same master plan for the Chosen People.

Abraham

Both Christianity and Islam recognize Abraham’s founding role as history’s first believer in one God. Both refer to themselves as the “Children of Abraham.” In Jewish tradition, when Abraham obeyed God’s command to “Go forth,” it was not only he but all of mankind that embarked on a new course. The great story begins with God’s sudden, unanticipated announcement to Abraham (still “Abram.” God changed his name only later), telling him to set out from his home. Abraham, for reasons the Torah does not tell us, hears and obeys, separating himself from his dwelling place and from the people he had lived among for so many years. “Go from your country,” God tells him, “and from your kindred and your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great . . . [A]nd by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.”³⁹ In that first command, and in Abraham’s response to it, the concept of the Chosen People was born.

In the course of being Chosen, Abraham leaves his home and homeland, is circumcised, enters into a Covenant with God, and receives God’s pledges concerning the Promised Land and the Chosen People. Adding to the biblical narrative, the commentaries tell us about ten trials, or tests of faith, that Abraham had to submit to before becoming the father of the Jewish people.⁴⁰ These tests show Abraham both as choosing and being Chosen; they illustrate the mutual nature of the Covenant. Abraham’s status is confirmed only after he passes the tests—demonstrating that he has both the wisdom and the courage to make the right choices. Maimonides explains in his *Guide to the Perplexed* that God does not require the choosing and testing processes since He knows all future events. Instead their purpose is to demonstrate to the world how man should obey God. Abraham, in his faithful obedience to God’s will in situations of extreme pressure, set a precedent and a lesson for the rest of humanity.⁴¹

Abraham was called *Ivri*, which is the semantic root of the “Hebrew people,” derived from the word *ever*, meaning the “other side.” From the very beginning, having been Chosen marks him off. It makes him different, a sojourner in alien and sometimes hostile lands. When he purchases a burial plot for his wife Sarah in Hebron, he tells the local Hittite inhabitants, “I am a stranger and a sojourner among you.”⁴² What Abraham means is “I am not the same as you. I may live among you, but I am different.” Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040–1105), perhaps the greatest commentator on the Bible and the Talmud, explains that this means that Abraham is both an alien from another land and a resident who has settled among people different from himself. Here then, at the very beginning, we see the Jew as an outsider, a prelude and parallel to the Jewish condition in the Diaspora.

Nachmanides (Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman, 1194–1270), another great Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages who successfully defended Judaism at a historic disputation in Barcelona, Spain in 1263, laid down a rule that everything that happened to the patriarchs is a portent for future generations, inasmuch as the stories about them are both factual and allegories for the whole of Jewish history. Accordingly, Nachmanides considers the life story of Abraham and his travails as a microcosm of Jewish history: the Jew is fated to be an alien and a stranger, insecure in his surroundings, engaged in a perpetual search for the Promised Land, and practicing distinctive religious principles and following a moral code that presents a challenge to others.

Rabbi Joseph Dov (Baer) Soloveitchik, one of the great rabbinical scholars of American Jewry in the twentieth century, says that Abraham’s situation among the Hittites gives expression to “the dual role that every Jew must play.” On the one hand he must be a loyal citizen of his country and must pray for its welfare. But at the same time, as a Jew in this world, he is always an alien; his allegiance to God makes him so. Soloveitchik, who was born in Belarus, had undoubtedly heard accusations about Jewish double loyalty more than once. But he saw nothing either wrong or strange with his situation, which after all had been Abraham’s as well from the moment he undertook God’s service. “A Jew,” Soloveitchik wrote, “must always be ready to be a lonely alien, resisting the culture that surrounds him and maintaining his unique responsibility.”⁴³

Paul Johnson, a noted non-Jewish historian, describes how the Jews' unique sense of history makes them the "only people in the world today who possess a historical record . . . which allows them to trace their origins back into very remote times."⁴⁴ That historical record began with the need to understand what Abraham did, how he did it, and what it meant for his descendants. In this sense Abraham's action of separating himself from others spurred the Jewish obsession to define themselves and record their story.

Abraham makes his decision out of his own will and vision, and once made he is faithful to his commitment, even at the expense of breaking his family and social ties. Declaring that there is only one God, he takes it upon himself to break his father's idols; that is to say, he is prepared to stand alone and apart from his family and from the universal beliefs of his time. An important dimension of Abraham's personality (and perhaps an essential component of the very nature of chosenness) is this exceptional courage. This quality is so powerful in him that he is not afraid even to confront God in making a stand for justice. The exchange between Abraham and God on the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is unprecedented in ancient literature. Like a lawyer pleading in a court of law, he argues with God and asks, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent people within the city? Will you raze the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty. . . . Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?" And so the argument continues and the stakes go down—forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty—stopping at ten. And Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed only because not even ten righteous people could be found there.⁴⁵

The debate between God and Abraham introduces another important element of the concept of the Chosen: the ability, even the obligation, to argue for justice and to exhaust all means available so as to save life. Their intimate relationship with God endows the Chosen with this special requirement to seek justice. Like Abraham before them, Jacob and Moses also found it necessary to argue with God. Courage, then, is not just a personal quality, as it might be for a warrior hero; it is a moral necessity, and it has a moral purpose. The role of Chosen bears with it not just the imperative for obedience but for moral action.

The role of Chosen marks Abraham spiritually. It also involves a physical marking. In Hebrew the same word, *brit*, means both circumcision and Covenant. All of Abraham's male descendants are to be marked in the same way as Abraham, bearing witness to their participation in the same Covenant to which Abraham committed himself. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he was circumcised. According to a midrash, God Himself was physically present at Abraham's circumcision and held his hand.⁴⁶

The circumcision act, as shown later, would become the major barrier between Judaism and early Christianity. In Jewish tradition the Covenant of circumcision as it appears in the Genesis text made it clear that the blessing of children and the possession of the Land of Israel are depending on circumcision. The circumcision Covenant with Abraham is a strong act of chosenness aiming "to help the Jew ennoble himself and return to the spiritual state of Adam before his

sin.”⁴⁷ The text continues immediately to the promise to Sarah that she would give birth (at age ninety!), which is regarded by talmudic midrashim as another manifestation of the divine intervention toward the emergence of a new nation. This intervention becomes central in the narrative of the patriarchs and matriarchs as it unfolds in the book of Genesis since infertility is their common problem. As the leading contemporary Jewish orthodox commentary explains (based on talmudic sources) this is “God’s way of proving that the Jewish people are not a natural phenomenon” and the way that Isaac is born, as well as the other patriarchs, “established the miraculous nature of God’s Chosen People.”⁴⁸

“Abrahamic religion” has become a widely used term to designate the three major monotheistic religions, and each of the three regard Abraham as their first in line who revolted against idolatry and introduced the concept of God to their respected religions. For each religion the connection to Abraham is critical for its Chosen claim, and that is why in Christianity he is the early witness to the Trinity and that is why God’s promises to him are not for the Jews but rather for the “True Israel” namely Christianity the supersessionist (see next chapter). The Muslims made, some say appropriated, Abraham as the first Muslim (“Our Father *Ibrahim*”), and the Quran introduces the concept of “the religion of Abraham” several times. A look at the world map shows how large is the spread of the Abrahamic religions. Though they are little more than half of the world’s population (excluding China, India, and Japan) the arena of the contention for the Chosen title covers about 90 percent of the world’s inhabited continents

For Abraham, the act of committing himself to the Covenant already bears within it the burden of suffering. Nothing illustrates this more dramatically than God’s command that he must sacrifice his son Isaac. This *akeda* or “binding” is resolved thanks to a last-minute divine intervention, but the religious Jew understands from the story that conforming to God’s requirements inevitably brings with it suffering and pain. This, the *akeda* indicates, is the lot of the future descendants of Abraham.

The story of Abraham is not just a study in ancient theology, but, as Nachmanides says, it contains within it the future codes of the history of the Jews and of mankind. It even has its bearing on the conflicts in the Middle East and in international relations. The former president of the United States, Jimmy Carter, wrote about his personal involvement in negotiating the historic peace treaty of 1979 between Israel and Egypt. He saw fit to call his book *The Blood of Abraham—Insights into the Middle East*. President Carter, himself a devout Christian, wrote that the scriptures are of critical importance for understanding the roots of hatred and bloodshed in the region. Carter recalled his discussions with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel, and he noted how both Christianity and Islam took the promises of God to Moses and his people and incorporated it into their religions. He writes, “To a remarkable degree, ‘the Will of God’ is the basis for both esoteric debates and the most vicious terrorist attacks among Jews, Moslems, and Christians. God’s early promises and how they must be implemented cause conflict some forty centuries after the Patriarch Abraham fathered the Arabs and the Jews in the Holy

Land. . . . How could different believers be convinced by their reading of the same history that each was God's Chosen People?"⁴⁹

Moses

With Moses, Judaism emerged as a religion and the Jews as a people, a unique juxtaposition in itself. For the Jews, the struggle culminating in the Exodus from Egypt was not just a liberation from slavery, it was a crucial event in Israel's conception of itself as a nation as well as a religion based on the Chosen concept. The revolution in thinking is clear: prior to Moses there was no organized religion based on the belief in one God—and there was to be no other for another millennium and a half. In this immense time span Moses is *the* central figure. This is why he is of such towering importance, for Christians and Muslims as well as for Jews.

When God speaks to Moses He reveals and confirms the bond between Himself and the people He has chosen: "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty . . . and I established My covenant with the. . . . And I will take you for My people, and I will be your God."⁵⁰ And further, "Now therefore if you will obey My voice, and keep My covenant, you shall be My own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."⁵¹

The meaning of the story in Exodus is clear: freedom and liberation bring with it prodigious responsibilities. Here, in one of history's most profound dramas, we are brought to see that the decision to be free is not simply a personal choice with personal consequences. Freedom means keeping the Covenant, with all its obligations. We in the twenty-first century in the West are accustomed to thinking of freedom as something we enjoy as individuals who are not forced to endure arbitrary restrictions imposed by others. But Exodus reveals in stark terms that freedom is the farthest thing from a passive concept.

Being Chosen also means suffering. Immediately after their liberation from the Egyptian yoke, the Jews were confronted by the stringent demands at Mount Sinai. The Covenant with God binds the Jews to their faith and code of laws and makes them liable for punishment if they break them. "But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God which I command you this day . . . then all these curses will come upon you and overtake you."⁵² Freedom, in other words, involves not just obligations, but fear and responsibility as well.

Many commentators suggest that Moses was selected by God to lead the Jews out of bondage precisely because of his different background. As a prince of Egypt, he was born and bred into Egyptian life and tradition. A midrash tells us that he was appointed by Pharaoh as a chamberlain over the palace, but at the same time the Torah speaks of him as a man who feels great compassion for his people: "Moses grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens."⁵³ Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, a biblical commentator in twelfth-century Spain, explains that this was a plan of divine conception, because only a person with an understanding of the royal mentality could later confront Pharaoh with

the demand of “let my people go.” It would have been unthinkable for a person living in slavery and in the conditions of humiliation of the Children of Israel to aspire to such a position.⁵⁴

The Exodus from Egypt was not only a liberation from slavery. It became a universal metaphor for the attainment of human rights, freedom, and justice, again demonstrating the grip the ancient scriptural stories have exerted on subsequent history. The Exodus was the reaffirmation of the Covenant with Abraham, and it marked the beginning of the training process of the Hebrews towards chosenness. The biblical narrative provides an insight into the behavior of the Chosen People in a way that was not common in the chronicles of other peoples of antiquity. Unlike the records of other nations, the Bible does not engage in self-glorification. For example, contrary to the Egyptian inscriptions in praise of the almighty Pharaohs, the Children of Israel are under the continual scrutiny of a highly critical observer. Rather than being glorified, their special status exposes them to punishment and suffering. The Jews are depicted in all their fear, misbehavior, loss of faith, and betrayal. In crossing the Red Sea, they are not portrayed as a victorious nation triumphant because of their military prowess. Their survival is due not to their own merits, but only to God’s protection: “Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord saying, ‘I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea.’”⁵⁵

The laws Moses received from God and taught to his people, give prominence to the concept of the Chosen in a variety of forms and statements that would later be incorporated in Jewish laws, liturgy, practices, and customs. The three festivals that commemorate the Exodus from Egypt would become central features in collective Jewish memory and its heritage of chosenness. Each of them marks a different season, creating together the yearly life cycle: *Pesach* (Passover), the spring festival, which also marks the early harvest in the land of Israel; *Shavu’ot* (Pentecost), the festival of the giving of the law, which marks the beginning of the summer and the main harvest; and *Succot* (Tabernacles), the autumn festival. Of them all, Passover is the most remarkable in the sense that it especially emphasizes the chosenness and uniqueness of the Jewish people.

The festival of Passover involves stringent restrictions on what may be eaten especially the strict prohibition of all leavened bread.⁵⁶ The festival focuses on the suffering of the Jews as slaves in Egypt and their miraculous deliverance by God, but it also contains reminders of later suffering in Jewish history under the Gentiles. The destruction of all leaven and the weeklong eating of *matza* (unleavened bread) is the crucial symbol of the holiday, which is why it is also known as the “Festival of Matzot.” The thorough cleansing of any traces of leaven from the house symbolizes, among other things, turning away from the ordinary things of life; it makes the Jewish home even more different from other homes than do the year-long regular dietary laws.

Of all the holidays, Passover still has the most powerful hold on Jews all over the world. The observance of the festival and, in particular, its highlight at the first evening with the *Seder* (literally “Order”), the traditional service with the

reading of the Haggadah and the festive meal, which is an intrinsic part of it, is replete with customs and symbols that dramatize the unique and peculiar Jewish condition. The Seder, which is attended by all members of the family, and the Haggadah give special prominence to children, and the dialogue with them emphasizes the special situation of the Jews and its continuance from generation to generation.

Succot is a seven-day festival in which Jews construct temporary shelters to commemorate the desert experience and God's protection. *Shavu'ot* commemorates the awesome event at the foot of Mount Sinai, with God's dialogue with Moses and the revelation of the Ten Commandments. These three holidays are marked by Jewish pilgrims from Israel and the Diaspora coming to Jerusalem and the Temple.

The special distinction of the three pilgrimage holidays can be found in their respective prayers, which stress the status of Israel as God's Chosen People. These are the national holidays of a people who were freed from Egypt (Passover), took refuge in the wilderness (*Sukkot*) and were given the Torah (*Shavu'ot*). At the center of the prayers on each of these holidays there is the declaration of the special status of the Jews as the Chosen People: "You have chosen us from all the peoples; You loved us and found favor in us; You exalted us above all the tongues and You sanctified us with Your commandments."⁵⁷ The same language appears also in the blessing over the wine (*kiddush*), which is recited in each of the festivals in synagogue and at home around the dinner table.

The other holiday associated with the Exodus is the weekly Sabbath, which was instituted in the desert even before the Jews came to Mount Sinai.⁵⁸ Moses admonishes the Israelites to "[r]emember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there. . . . [T]herefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."⁵⁹ Sabbath is a reminder to the Jews of their chosenness, their being set apart, mirroring in its way God's setting aside the seventh day. Like the revelation on Sinai, Sabbath, with its injunction to rest and revere God's creative work, is another Jewish contribution to mankind, to social justice, and to spirituality. "The Sabbath," God tells the people, "is a sign between Me and you throughout all the ages so you may know that I, the Lord, have consecrated you."⁶⁰

The Exodus from Egypt under Moses' leadership was an act of separation, a prelude to the forty years of nation building in the desert before the people were permitted to enter the Promised Land. Like Abraham, who had to leave his homeland and wander before he was worthy to receive the Covenant, so Moses had to lead the Children of Israel and separate them from their previous existence. Maimonides explains that the Children of Israel had to experience these forty years so as to rid themselves of the slave mentality of Egypt before becoming free men and women in the Promised Land.⁶¹

The revelation in Sinai has many facets: it demonstrates the human potential to choose between good and evil, to break free from hopelessness and continuing disaster, to fulfill the divine purpose through peoples' own actions, and to show compassion through rest from labor. In short, humans were now able to be

responsible for their own future. The revolutionary nature of all this for ancient times can hardly be exaggerated. The same can be said for our own times, over three thousand years after the event.

Moses was the key player in shaping the nature and destiny of the Chosen People, its laws, festivals, and national perceptions. He is the father of the prophets, a colossus in terms of leadership, and as such he is remembered in the Sabbath prayers: “Moses rejoiced in the gift of his portion, that you called him a faithful servant . . . when he stood before You on Mount Sinai. He brought down two stone tablets in his hand.”⁶² Even before the Christian era non-Jews recognized Moses as the man responsible for introducing the Jewish concept of God, which was so unique and different. The Greek historian Hecataeus wrote about Moses in about 300 BCE: “He had no images whatsoever of the gods made for them, being of the opinion that God does not have human form; rather the heaven that surrounds the earth is alone divine.”⁶³

Moses is revered, but in Jewish tradition his role is carefully modulated (he is “a faithful servant”) because of the rabbis’ concern that he should not appear somehow superhuman. The Bible and subsequent commentaries emphasize his human nature and even weaknesses. This is also evident in Jewish oral law, where Moses, although greatly respected and admired, is very human. The Talmud, for example, refers this way to the act of giving charity: “The man who gives charity in secret is greater than Moses our teacher”⁶⁴ This modest depiction of Moses stands in decided contrast to the heroic fashion in which the seminal figures of other peoples tend to be depicted, including the founders of the other two great monotheistic religions, Jesus and Mohammad.

Moses’ role is made clear in the Bible and in other sources, which emphasize that he faced Pharaoh by himself while the elders of the people, stayed behind. It is because of his personal courage and leadership that he alone was found worthy to ascend Mount Sinai while the elders had to wait below. But the extraordinary fact is that on the Seder evening, when every Jewish family comes together to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses is mentioned only once and indirectly at that. The text of the Haggadah, which elaborates on every aspect of the liberation of the Jews, including the plagues visited upon the Egyptian people by Moses, virtually ignores him.

There is a clear Jewish message here to other religions, particularly to Christianity. The text of the Haggadah was compiled in several stages, starting from the days of the Second Temple and extending well into the Christian era. It seems certain that part of it was affected by the rivalry and disputation with the Christians at a time when the Church was developing its own texts and doctrines on the “New Israel”—the assumption of the “Chosen” title by Christianity.⁶⁵ In this period the authors of the Haggadah were determined to highlight the unique relationship between God and the Jews as the Chosen People. The Haggadah thus tries to demonstrate that it was God himself who redeemed the Children of Israel—without any intermediary. This is emphasized in the text, which says, “And the Lord brought us out of Egypt, not through an angel, and not through

a seraph, and not through an intermediary, but the Holy One, blessed be He in his glory and with His own being.”⁶⁶

There is a deliberate effort here, which is substantiated by the Bible, to show that the miraculous intervention was performed directly by God. Omitting Moses from the Haggadah constitutes a pointed message, conveying the fact that Judaism, unlike Christianity, does not have God-like surrogates. As repeatedly emphasized in Jewish tradition, the Exodus portrays the collective experience of the Children of Israel, not the miracle working of a transcendent leader. Jewish people as a whole were both Chosen and made their choice. Jewish tradition contrasts sharply here with both Islam, which focuses on the revelations of God to Mohammad, His Prophet, and Christianity, which centers on the narratives of Jesus, God’s son.

Judah Halevi—Promoter of the Chosen

Judah Halevi (1075–1141), one of the greatest Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages (second only to Maimonides), wrote the most all-embracing work on the concept of the Chosen, as part of a comparative analysis with Christianity and Islam. Halevi dedicated his book, *The Kuzari* as well as many liturgical poems to the axis of the God of Israel, the Chosen People, and the Chosen land. This triumvirate was, in his view, the ideal, the mission, and the essence of Jewish existence.

From an early age, Halevi followed the great confrontation between the two major religions, Christianity and Islam. He was a young man when the Crusades got underway, and he moved from his birthplace of Christian Toledo to Cordoba in Muslim Spain. This was an era in which both Christians and Muslims claimed to have inherited the role of the Chosen, and the Jews were persecuted by both. Both had large armies at their disposal, and they attempted to prove their chosenness in the battlefield and by conquest, while Jews like Halevi could only watch from the sidelines. In their humiliated condition, lacking sovereignty and a military force, the Jews could only resort to spiritual and philosophical channels and tried to retain their title of the Chosen People through an intellectual exercise.

The Kuzari is an apology for Judaism at a time when the Jews were, according to Judah Halevi, a tragic and persecuted people. The subtitle of the book is, “In Defence of the Despised Faith,”⁶⁷ and Halevi was engaged in its compilation for twenty years. Written in Arabic, the book argued that the entire Jewish people was endowed with a special religious aura, first given to Adam, and then bequeathed, through a line of Chosen representatives, to the people of Israel.

The Kuzari is based on a legend that appears in several historic records about the Khazar people (an independent Turkic nation in the Caucasus region of today’s southern Russia, between the seventh and tenth centuries CE), who converted to Judaism under King Bolan. The king began to study the origins of the three religions, following a dream in which an angel told him that “God appreciates his intentions but not his deeds.” King Bolan invited a secular philosopher, a Jewish representative (Halevi), and representatives of Christianity and Islam to his court, and after a long exchange he determined that Judaism is the true religion.

At the outset of his examination, the king did not want to see the Jew because of the humble condition of the Jewish people, but when he realized that Judaism lay at the origins of the other two religions, he summoned Halevi to state his case. Halevi takes the bull by the horns and explains the roots of the theological rivalry: the concept of the Chosen. He focuses on the dual approach by which both Christianity and Islam call upon their Jewish heritage: They base themselves on it and claim that they are the rightful successors (a proof for their contention is that they are fighting in and for the Holy Land), and at same time, they hate and persecute the Jews, perhaps because of the Jew’s temerity in holding on to the title of Chosen.

Judah Halevi was a strong religious Zionist (long before the term was invented) who regarded the redemption of the Land of Israel as a central imperative for world Jewry, a credo that he himself practiced. At the same time, he regarded the Diaspora as an important element in the Jewish mission, to be a “Light unto the Nations” and to disseminate the ideas of monotheism and the values of Judaism. The purpose of Jewish history according to Halevi is to bring humanity to accept that the world was created by God; the miracles as well as the suffering of the People of Israel serve as the proof for it.⁶⁸

Judah Halevi’s most famous poem, “My Heart is in the East” combines, all the elements of the Chosen saga: the contrast between the life of plenty in the Diaspora and the strong imperative to move to Zion with the resultant fate of the Jews caught between the two new contestants for the mantle of the Chosen: Christianity (Edom) and Islam (Arabia):

My heart is in the East, and I am in the uttermost of the West,
How can I taste what I eat, how can I enjoy it?
How can I fulfill my oaths and vows, while yet
Zion is in the hands of Edom, and I am in the chains of Arabia?⁶⁹

The Jews, maintains Halevi, are the Chosen People for good or for bad: “Israel among the nations is like the heart among the other organs of the body—it is exposed to more ills yet it is healthier than the rest.”⁷⁰ The Jewish people’s special relationship with God and their observance of the Jewish laws lie at the core of the existence of the Chosen People. Rational laws are important for every society, but the illogical laws are crucial for keeping the links between Jew and God, whether in Israel or in the Diaspora. Those unique laws of the Jews are the reason for their separateness among the nations, and the laws keep them apart as “[a] people that dwells alone,” otherwise they would be fated to disappear. The persecution and the suffering, the dispersion and the oppression cannot be seen as proof that the Jews were deserted by God but rather as their educative burden and task that was their lot as the Chosen nation.

Exile, according to Halevi, is part of the divine plan to disseminate the values of Judaism and to provide a guiding light for other nations. Suffering helps the Jews to improve their position with God. Unlike Christian doctrine (see next chapter), Halevi regards exile as part of God’s divine design for the Jews and not

as a proof of the abandonment of the Jews. Israel remains the Chosen People as it represents the original religion that was given at Mount Sinai as revealed by God: this is the axis of world history and human experience. The reality of being Chosen made the Jews special and different: “For God chose them for himself to be a people and a nation distinct from all nations of the world.”⁷¹

Judah Halevi is unique. Not so much in his commentaries on the Chosen that also appear in other sources, but rather in his monumental work that amassed all the arguments and presented them in a concentrated form. Other commentators like Rashi or Maimonides, do this more selectively, in a more rational approach lacking the Kabbalistic, sometimes mystical, additions of Halevi. Halevi, which provides a “generic account of [the] election” of the Jews, causes very much discomfort for modern liberals.⁷² Some sources share the premise of Maimonides that it is solely the Torah which gave rise to the uniqueness of the Jews, and not any qualities related to a Jewish gene pool, as argued by Halevi.

The philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) could not decipher the chosenness conundrum. As one who had rebelled against religious authority and was excommunicated from the Jewish community of Amsterdam as a result, he regarded the concept of the Chosen as a barrier, and he rejected the traditional doctrine of selection by God. Spinoza explains that “the Hebrew nation was chosen by God before all others not by reason of its understanding nor its spiritual qualities, but by reason of its social organization.”⁷³ He stated that the Jews still exist because they choose to live separately, and this brings down hatred upon them, and in a vicious circle it is this hatred keeps them apart as separate community. However, he admitted that there is something mystical in the Jewish existence, even for those who are not religious. Spinoza maintained that “[t]hese Jews might cease to believe in God but they will cling to circumcision and all their separatist rituals.”⁷⁴ Professor Arthur Hertzberg concludes, “This rationalist [Spinoza] is saying that the Jews will defy logic, and he is right. Generations of modern non-believing Jews have adhered to their Jewishness for reasons they themselves cannot articulate.”⁷⁵

But it seems that Spinoza did not desert the Chosen concept and he would use it in a pre-Zionist prophecy. The Jews, he said, may once become again a nation in the full sense of the term, including the idea of the Chosen: “I would not hesitate to believe that they will one day, given the opportunity . . . establish once more their independent state, and that God will again choose them.”⁷⁶

Nine hundred years after Halevi, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who struggled to maintain Orthodoxy in the mid-nineteenth-century age of emancipation and enlightenment, attempted in a somewhat apologetic manner to emphasize the sense of the Jewish mission in fulfilling the role of the Chosen People. Hirsch, unlike Judah Halevi, did not dwell on the special qualities of the Jews but limited their role as Chosen only to the mission that they are required to perform. With reference to the blessing in praise of God, “[w]ho selected us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah,” Hirsch explains that God has chosen Israel to disseminate, study, and observe the Torah. “The historic significance of Israel among the nations stands and falls to the extent that we cultivate the Torah and keep our

faith in it. The moment that we stop doing so and do not observe it, we forfeit our role among the nations.”⁷⁷

The universal mission of the Chosen is a concept that often attracts more support among rabbis of the Reform Movement for Progressive Judaism, the world’s largest organized Jewish religious group in the world. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, a Reform rabbi and a leader of the Zionist movement in America in the mid-twentieth century, presented a strong defense of the Chosen concept. Jews may be a Chosen and even holy people, he said, but this does not make them morally immaculate, racist, or superior. Their mission is to increase holiness in the world while remaining separate and distinct from heathen people. “Holiness is not an accolade of self-glorification but a hard discipline of self purification.”⁷⁸

Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, was another example of a secular promoter of the Chosen concept. According to Ben Gurion, who often used the term Chosen, the Covenant between God and the Jews is an original concept making the two parties equal. There was a universal Covenant between God and Noah and then came the Covenant between God and Abraham, which led to the Covenant with the Children of Israel given on Mount Sinai. In the view of Ben Gurion, the role of the Jews according to the Bible is not just in respecting crucial human values of justice, truth, peace, and fraternity, but, as we have seen so often, also determining the mission of the Jewish people to be Isaiah’s “Light unto the Nations.”⁷⁹

The Song of the Chosen

It must have been a difficult decision for the Jewish sages to include the Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) among the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible. Orthodox commentaries explain that it is one of the most complex books of the Scriptures—not because it is particularly hard to understand but because it is so easy to misunderstand. No other book seems so out of place in the biblical canon, “not only because it is a love song but because it is a love song of uncommon passion.”⁸⁰

It is clear that there was a tendency among the Jewish sages to remove the Song of Songs from the Bible. It was only by the intervention of Rabbi Akiva, the leading religious authority at this period, that the book was left in. Rabbi Akiva instructed to keep it, determining that “[a]ll of the books [of Scripture] are holy, but *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs) is the holy of holies.”⁸¹

The Song of Songs is the love story of the Chosen, a tender and moving poem that is regarded in the tradition as an allegorical rendering of the love between God and Israel. Popular Orthodox commentary explains that the prophets frequently compared the relationship between God and Israel to that of a loving husband angered by a straying wife. Since Israel is destined to suffer a series of exiles, the Song of Songs nostalgically recalls “Israel’s former status as God’s beloved Chosen.”⁸² Less traditional interpretations refer to it as “the most secular of all the books of the Bible,” and “the most erotic text in the Jewish tradition.”⁸³

The Song of Songs overflows with sensuality: “O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!” it begins. “For your love is better than wine. . . . Draw

me after you, let us make haste,” and far more. The unfolding love story tells of the lover choosing and coveting the Chosen. It speaks of courtship and marriage. “Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding day, on the day of the gladness of his heart.”⁸⁴

The allegorical interpretation here, agreed on by Midrash, Kabbala, Zohar, and Rashi, understands “his mother” as signifying “His (God’s) nation,” as in, Israel. (In Hebrew, the word *ima* [mother] is related to *uma* [nation].) “When Israel accepted the Torah [becoming the Chosen] she becomes not only the mother of her own children, but the spiritual mother of all mankind.”⁸⁵ When the lover describes his beloved the images are so erotic and bold that it is easy to understand why the sages might have objected. “Behold, you are beautiful, My love, behold you are beautiful, your eyes are doves behind your veil. . . . Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that feed upon the lilies.”⁸⁶ Rashi, following the midrash, explains that “the two breasts” refers to Moses and Aaron who “nursed” the Children of Israel, twins because they are equal.⁸⁷

The song asks, “How is your beloved better than another, O fairest among women?” The midrash and Rashi both declare: This is how the heathens question the Jews about their God—is He so superior to other gods that you are ready to be burned and tortured for Him? The verse, “My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the garden and to gather roses,” means allegorically that even when the Children of Israel are in exile, God is still with them. The Jews in exile, says a late nineteenth-century commentator, are as a “rose among thorns.” God accompanies them in their exile, and on the day of redemption he will pick the roses.⁸⁸

Another verse speaks to exile: “I am black yet comely, O daughters of Jerusalem. . . . Do not gaze upon me because I am swarthy.”⁸⁹ In traditional Jewish commentaries this is an exchange with the nations (the daughters of Jerusalem), who condemn Israel because her “Husband” (God), abandoned her due to her sins (swarthy). Rashi explains that here Israel tells the nations, “I am blackened in consequence of my own deeds, but I am comely by virtue of the deeds of my forefathers. Although I sinned with regard to the Golden Calf, I have compensated for that misdeed by the merit of having accepted the Torah.”⁹⁰ As always, Rashi draws a parallel with the Chosen concept—the acceptance of the Torah after it was rejected by the other nations. Other commentators have their own interpretation: “Do not think that God has rejected me utterly: He still loves me because of my merits. And when I repent, He will grant me atonement for my sins ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.’”⁹¹

It is perhaps worth noting that Christian scholars posit that this passage is actually testimony to the transfer of the election of the Chosen. In this definition, there are two Covenants: one at Mount Sinai, which was given to the Children of Israel, and the second, given in Jerusalem to the Church.⁹² The literature on this exchange is vast, and there are many instances where it focuses on the replacement of the Chosen. What is common to both the Jewish and the Christian commentators is their agreement that the Song of Songs is an allegory,

and the rivalry between the commentaries is so critical precisely because Rabbi Akiva identified this book as the "Holy of Holies."

Whatever the controversies, the crucial point for us is that the various Jewish religious authorities harness this unusual love story to describe the unique relationship between God and the Jews, through down-to-earth human language, dealing with the very act of mutual Choosing; how God seeks and finds the Jewish people with the Torah, and the consequent exile, redemption, and burden of love and suffering.

It is interesting that God's name does not appear in the Song of Songs. Maybe this is because of its allegorical nature, or the intent to keep God's ineffable name out of the earthy descriptions. Nevertheless the commentators, beginning with Rabbi Akiva, are convinced that the treatment of the Chosen concept is part of the continuing love story between God and His people, inasmuch as God moves to exile together with Israel. "How beloved is Israel before the Holy One, blessed be he; for wherever they were exiled the *Shekhinah* ["Divine Presence"] was with them."⁹³

In a different commentary, this time from the Talmud, the sages compare sensual love between a married couple to the intimate relations between God and His Chosen People. The approach here is realistic as well as erotic, recognizing that love between a husband and wife is often intense at the beginning but then declines. The Talmud compares the love of a couple in their early days with the love between God and Israel in the desert, immediately following the revelation on Mount Sinai: "There was a man who used to say: 'When our love was strong, we could sleep on the edge of a sword; now that our love is waning, a bed of sixty cubits is not wide enough for us.'⁹⁴

The allegorical idea is clear: during the period in the wilderness, God and Israel could meet in a small space on the top of the ark in the portable sanctuary. During this period of great love there was no need for a larger space. Later, in Solomon's temple, the dimensions of "God's abode" grew significantly, and finally after the destruction of the Second Temple (because Israel sinned and became estranged from God), no temple would be able to accommodate God. The husband and the wife in this analogy will no longer be in love, and they will feel uncomfortable even in a bed of vast proportions.

* * *

The Song of Songs is recited in the synagogue on the Sabbath of Passover, connecting its theme of chosen love with the drama of God and man choosing each other at Sinai. In the story of Abraham, the Bible tells of the personal Covenant between God and the first Jewish patriarch. In Exodus it relates how the Covenant came to be sealed between God and the nation. In the Song of Songs the idea of chosenness clothes itself in the intimacy and longing of lover and beloved. There could be no more powerful a portrayal of the passion with which the Jewish people held to the Lord their God. But they were not the only ones who claimed to be God's beloved. In the course of time bitter rivals emerged to challenge their role as the Chosen.