



ISSUES IN JEWISH THOUGHT

THE CHOSEN

— a personal view

SECOND SERIES

By Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks MA (Cantab)

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Booklets in *this* series:

- Israel and the Jew
- Explaining Suffering
- The Chosen
- Future Worlds
- The Place of Doubt

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Foreword

Orthodox Judaism has long accepted and even encouraged the questioning mind. As Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, President of Bar Ilan University has put it:—

“A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty, not only because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, but also because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility, and consequently its greater potential ultimately to discover its Creator.”

(“One Man’s Judaism”)

The problem for the modern Jew is not that he has questions but that he does not know where to find the answers. It is in the spirit of Rabbi Rackman’s advice that Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks in this series “Issues in Jewish Thought” provides a route map for the journey to greater understanding. The booklets are brief and to the point, providing an introduction to Jewish thinking on each of the issues treated. The booklets should be particularly useful in forming the basis of an adult education programme or a study or discussion group at local synagogues. We are fortunate in having in Rabbi Sacks, a teacher who combines breadth and depth of learning with great clarity of exposition.

This series is part of an ambitious programme of publications on which the United Synagogue is embarked and in which Rabbi Sacks, holder of the Sir Immanuel Jakobovits Chair in Modern Jewish Thought at Jews College will play a prominent part. This is the second volume in the series and a third is being planned.

The programme also includes plans to produce a substantial series of practical guides to Judaism, the first volume being on Shabbat, and more basic pamphlets of instruction in Jewish ritual and practice. Through this range of publications it is hoped that members of the United Synagogue will increase their understanding of and strengthen their commitment to traditional Jewish values and practices, and thus enrich their experience of Jewish living.

Leslie Wagner
Chairman, Adult Education
and Publications Committee

“Blessed are You, God our Lord. . . who has chosen us from all peoples”. So we say when we make a blessing over the Torah. And in the *Alenu* prayer: “He has not made us like the nations of other lands nor placed us like the families of the earth.” A claim on which William Norman Ewer — a man not otherwise memorable — made the famous comment: “How odd / Of God / To choose / The Jews.”

It is undeniably odd. But rather more than that. No concept within Judaism has proved so controversial, provocative and antagonising. Was the choice a source of pride or a heavy burden of responsibility? This was the question Jews asked themselves. The question Christian adversaries often asked was, how could Jews be so obstinate as to believe that they were still chosen when — in the middle ages — they were the wandering outcasts of humanity?

Sometimes Jews were profoundly embarrassed by the notion, and wished as far as possible to suppress it. Occasionally a sympathetic non-Jewish thinker found inspiration in it, most notably perhaps George Eliot in her novel *Daniel Deronda*. She puts into the mouth of her Jewish sage, Mordecai, the passionate conviction, “Each nation has its own work, and is a member of the world, enriched by the work of each. But it is true, as Jehuda-Ha-Levi first said, that Israel is the heart of mankind. . . Where else is there a nation of whom it may be as truly said that their religion and law and moral life mingled as the stream of blood in the heart and made one growth?” (Book 6, ch.42.)

The argument took on an immeasurably darker tone in the twentieth century with the shocked recognition that the Nazi ideology was itself based on the concept of a *Herrenvolk*, a master race. Recently George Steiner, a Jewish intellectual profoundly influenced by the Holocaust, mounted an attack on the idea of chosenness, unparalleled in its savagery. In his *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, Hitler is discovered still alive in an Amazonian swamp. At the climax of the book he turns upon his Jewish accusers, and in feverish rhetoric claims that he took his idea from the Jews themselves:

“It was there that I first understood your secret power. The secret power of your teaching. Of yours. A chosen people. chosen by God for His own. The only race on earth chosen, exalted, made singular among mankind. . . They taught me. That a people must by chosen to fulfil its destiny, that there can be no other thus made glorious. That a true nation is a mystery, a single body willed by God, by history, by the unmingled burning of its blood. . . I learnt. From you. Everything.”

Should not so lethal a concept be abolished once and for all?

CHOSENNESS IN THE BIBLE

What, though, is the notion of choice, and what does it imply? Our first recourse must be to the Torah itself, and to its description of Jewish destiny.

It begins, of course, with Abraham, asked by God to "Go away from your land, your birthplace, and from your father's house. . . I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you great. You shall become a blessing" (Bereishith 12:1-2). Throughout Bereishith little more is heard of the idea, other than that it involves the promise of a land and of numerous descendants.

When we reach Shemot, however, the family of Jacob has become a people. They are oppressed. God hears their cry and remembers the promise to the patriarchs. He orders Moses to deliver a message to Pharaoh, and for the first time the special relationship is crystallised into a striking image: "This is what God says: Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Shemot 4:22).

To be a firstborn son is a natural relationship; but in the Covenant at Sinai another relationship is proposed, one involving mutual commitments: "Now if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be My special treasure among all nations, even though all the world is Mine." (Shemot 19:5). The Israelites agreed to be bound by this contract, and thereafter this is the form that chosenness takes throughout the Torah. It is mutual: "Today you have declared allegiance to God, making Him your God, and pledging to walk in His paths, keep His decrees, commandments and laws, and to obey His voice. God has similarly declared allegiance to you today, making you His special nation." (Devarim 26:17-18). And it is more like the relation of a servant to his master than a child to its father: "For the Israelites belong to Me as servants. They are My servants because I brought them out of Egypt." (Vayikra 25:55).

Chosenness therefore has two sides: first the Torah to which the Israelites agree to be obedient, and whose demands are not made of any other people; second the providence by which God will grant them special protection and blessing if they obey, and special punishment if they do not.

It is therefore a two-edged situation, and the Torah predicts that either way, the world will recognise the Divine character of Jewish history. For good: "All the nations of the world will realise that God's name is associated with you, and they will be in awe of you." (Devarim 28:10). And possibly for bad: "All the nations will ask, 'Why did God do this to the land? What was the reason for this great display of anger?'

They shall answer, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant that God, Lord of their fathers, made with them.'" (Devarim 29:23-24).

Not only is Israel unique in being bound to the commandments (other than those given to Noah), but many of the commandments are themselves couched in terms of Israel's duty to be a people apart. "Do not follow the ways of Egypt where you once lived, nor of Canaan, where I will be bringing you. Do not follow their customs." (Vayikra 18:3). "The nations that you are driving out listen to astrologers and diviners, but what God has given you is totally different." (Devarim 18:14). However the code by which Israel live will not be incomprehensible to others: they will look upon their way of life and recognise it as admirable: "Safeguard and keep these rules, since this is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations. They will hear all these rules and say, 'This great nation is certainly a wise and understanding people.'" (Devarim 4:6)

The question of particularism and universalism in Judaism is evidently somewhat special. On the one hand primitive religions saw their gods as embodied in natural forces, or particular places, or as gods of particular tribes. Pharaoh, for instance, sees no reason why he should be bothered by the God of Israel (Shemot 5:2), for he is not himself an Israelite. There is no room for choice in any of these pagan conceptions. A god has a particular sphere of operation, which it does not choose but which is an essential part of its nature.

On the other hand, universalist religions, such as Christianity, do not involve choice either. The demands of faith are made of men as such, not of a particular group or nation.

Choice is central to Judaism precisely because it is *both* particularist and universal. God created the whole world, and does not belong within nature but above it. He is therefore the God of all nations, and the whole of humanity is His creation. Yet He does not make equal demands of everyone. Some demands are indeed universal, like the command to Noah against murder (Bereishith 9:6) — by tradition there are seven such laws. But most are made of just one people, who must bear the burden of being His special servants, and carry the privilege too.

How then do God and the Jewish people relate to the rest of the world? This is explored in various ways in the Torah. It is not always clear to what extent other nations are punished for acts which the Israelites may not imitate. In the case of astrology quoted above, for example, it is uncertain as to whether it is or is not a legitimate practice for non-Jews. Even in the middle ages, there was disagreement between the rabbis, Nachmanides arguing that it was valid for them but not for

us, Maimonides holding that it was always folly. In the key case of idolatry, it is certainly always condemned and even ridiculed. Isaiah heaps scorn on it in a devastating passage: "Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.' From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me. You are my god.'" (Isaiah 44:16-17). Yet there are indications that idolatry will not finally be eradicated amongst the nations before the Messianic age, and that until then it remains a singular mission of Judaism to preach monotheism to mankind. It is only in the end of days that, throughout the world, men will forsake their idols and see that there is One God.

There are many indications of God's concern for other nations. Jonah is sent on a mission to the people of Nineveh, capital of Assyria. There is no indication that Job, a man who "was blameless and upright, feared God and shunned evil", was a Jew. According to R. Jochanan he was not (Devarim Rabbah 2:4). Solomon in his prayer on the dedication of the Temple asks God: "As for the foreigner who does not belong to Your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your name. . . hear from heaven, Your dwelling-place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you." (I Kings 8:41-43). Malachi, at the end of the prophetic era, contrasts Israel's devotion unfavourably with that of other peoples: "My name is great among the nations, and in every place offerings are brought to My name. . . But you profane it." (Malachi 1:11-12).

There are even rare instances where the prophets speak of other nations in terms normally strictly reserved for Israel. Amos suggests that the exodus from Egypt was not the only instance of Divine deliverance: "Have I not brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). In an equally remarkable passage Isaiah foresees a day when two great empires will join Israel in a special relationship with God: "In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth. For the Lord of hosts has blessed him, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt My people and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.'" (Isaiah 19:24-25).

For the prophets Israel is at the centre of God's concern, an obstinate people and certainly not the most righteous of mankind, yet still the unique slice of humanity to which God sends His messengers, and to whose destiny He is never indifferent. Other nations appear in the prophetic books mainly insofar as they affect Israel's situation. In themselves, they are capable of producing good and righteous men, and

of worshipping God. There is no suggestion of their inferiority. It is just that while they are His creation, Israel is His servant.

CHOSENNESS IN THE RABBINIC LITERATURE

"Beloved is man for he was created in the image of God. . . Beloved is Israel for they were called children of God" (Avot 3:18). So R. Akiva summed up the doctrine. All men are precious to God; but Israel is precious in a different way.

Amongst the sages of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods we do not find a consistent unitary view of the nature of Israel's closeness. They addressed themselves, in different ways, to several perplexing features of the concept.

The first and most obvious was: Why was Israel chosen? In the Torah itself there is no clear answer other than that the choice flowed from the initial singling out of Abraham. In various ways the sages suggested that the choice was less arbitrary than this. According to one line of tradition it was not that God chose Israel but the other way round. God offered the Torah to all the nations of the world, but they refused it. Only Israel accepted. (Mechilta de-R. Ishmael to Shemot 20:2). According to another, it was God who chose, but this choice was integral to the creation of the world, and preceded it. Rashi quotes a passage of this kind in his commentary to the first verse of the Torah. We should read, not 'In the beginning', but 'For the beginning, God created heaven and earth', meaning, for the sake of Israel and the Torah, each of which are called elsewhere 'beginning'. According to a third what influenced God's choice at Sinai was not the past or present but the future. Only when the Israelites pledged their children as guarantees that they would keep the Torah, did God give it to them. (Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:4).

A second question, imposed both by circumstance and by the derision of antagonistic non-Jews, was: how could one maintain the doctrine in the face of the loss of the Temple, Roman rule, diaspora and persecution? The obvious answer, "Because of our sins we were exiled from our land", was not the only one. Some saw the very fortitude of Jews under persecution as proof of the correctness of the choice, going so far as to suggest that the very stiff-neckedness which had been their fault at the time of the Golden Calf was now their virtue (Shemot Rabbah 42:9). Others interpreted the verse "God seeks the pursued" (Kohelet 3:15) to suggest that the plight of Israel under oppression was

the very reason that God had sought them out (Vayikra Rabbah 27:5). Yet others were confident of Israel's power to outlive empires, and that the choice would become evident in the course of time. This view finds expression in the following parable: "The olive, while still on the tree, is marked to be picked. It is picked, then beaten, taken to the vat, ground in a mill squeezed and pressed: only then does it yield its oil. Israel is like the olive. It is plucked by the nations, bound, ground and oppressed. But then Israel repents, and God answers them." (Shemot Rabbah 36:1). Their sufferings refined Israel into an ever purer spirituality whose light would one day shine and illuminate the world.

A third emphasis became necessary in the time of the sages: a stress on the second word of the phrase 'Chosen People'. As the nation began to lose its coherence, the rabbis insisted that it was as a *people* that Israel had been elected, not as individuals. This is implicit throughout the Torah, but now it needed to be formulated afresh. Lacking a political basis, the sages grounded it in morality, in their principle that "All Israel are responsible for one another" (Shevuot 39a). R. Shimon bar Yochai gave the idea an image: "It is to be compared to people who were in a boat, and one of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath himself. His companions said to him, 'Why are you doing this?' He replied, 'What concern is it of yours? Am I not drilling under myself?' They replied, 'Because you will sink the boat for us all.'" (Vayikra Rabbah 4:6). R. Judah HaNasi saw this as the vital element of the covenant at Sinai: "When they all stood at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, they resolved, as with a single mind, to accept the kingship of God with joy. And not only this, but they pledged themselves, each for the other." (Mechilta de-R. Ishmael, to Shemot 20:2). It was not that Jews were special as individuals, but that they were bound to one another, that was the key to election.

Finally, the sages had to resolve the question of the spiritual place of the non-Jew in the Divine scheme of things. Here we find violently conflicting opinions, and these are less indicative of differences between the sages, than they are evidence of the different circumstances to which they addressed themselves. Clearly, two statements like, "A non-Jew who obeys the Torah is the equal of the High Priest" (Sifra to Vayikra 18:5) and "A non-Jew who occupies himself with the Torah is deserving of death" (Sanhedrin 59a) are directed to different kinds of non-Jew. In particular, the early Christians who tried to prove, by their interpretation of the Torah, that God had cast off the Jewish people and that the Torah was now null and void, earned rabbinic scorn. They try, said R. Ishmael, to "stir up jealousy,

enmity and wrath between Israel and their Father in heaven" (Shabbat 116a).

Nonetheless they adhered to the view that the pious of the nations of the world had a share in the world to come (Tosefta, Sanhedrin 13:1). Piety consisted in adherence to the seven universal commands given to Noah — the positive duty of justice and the prohibitions against murder, incest, robbery, idolatry, blasphemy, and eating the flesh of animals which are still alive (Sanhedrin 56a).

The conduct of non-Jews was occasionally not merely admired but taken as a model for emulation. Thus the piety of a heathen, Dama son of Netina, towards his father was cited as the answer to the halachic question, 'How far does the honour of parents extend?' (Kiddushin 31a). Nonetheless the sages were faced with a real dilemma in evaluating the conduct of the Romans. Admirable in some respects, to be sure; yet these were the people who had destroyed the Temple and were ruling over Israel. What is more, the sages were anxious to avoid the kind of assimilation and defection which had occurred under the Greeks, and against which the Maccabees had had to struggle. It is in this context that we must understand, say, the discussion between R. Judah and R. Shimon bar Yochai about the Romans: "R. Judah began and said, 'How fine are the works of this people. They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths...' R. Shimon bar Yochai answered and said, 'All they have made has been for their own benefit. They build market-places for prostitutes. They build baths to rejuvenate themselves. They make bridges to collect tolls.'" (Shabbat 33b). The moral argument is ultimately one of political strategy: R. Judah believes in accommodation with the Romans, R. Shimon remains a revolutionary. Some of the same concerns are evident in an earlier discussion between R. Jochanan ben Zakkai and his disciples. They are considering the meaning of a verse, which can be read as either, "The righteousness of the nations is sin", or "The righteousness of the nations is a sin-offering (i.e. an atonement)" (Proverbs 14:34). One after the other, the disciples give the former interpretation, namely that "All the charity and kindness done by the heathen is counted to them as a sin" because they are acting from selfish motives. R. Jochanan ben Zakkai himself, however, prefers the second reading; in his words, "Just as the sin-offering makes atonement for Israel, so charity makes atonement for the heathen". (Baba Batra 10b).

These discussions reveal how difficult it is to disentangle rabbinic attitudes towards the non-Jew from the context in which, and the purpose for which, their remarks were made. The halachic insistence on

the spiritual recognition of the pious non-Jew remains, however, a permanency unaffected by shifting conditions. The non-Jew must pass through only seven gates to heaven; the Jew has 613, each a hazard and at the same time a sanctification.

SUPERIORITY

The doctrine of chosenness does not occupy a prominent place in the writings of the medieval Jewish philosophers, not because it was unimportant to them but because it lay outside their particular challenge. Their concern — to test Judaism against the claims of reason — focussed attention on the more general and abstract ideas underlying the Torah, rather than on the concrete historical drama through which chosenness realises itself. Moreover, as far as reason is concerned, no one is chosen; for rationality is the faculty of man as such, possibly the sense in which all men are "the image of God" (Rashi to Bereishith 1:26).

Nevertheless, Maimonides included in his thirteen principles of faith, belief in the Messianic Age, the great denouement of history in which Israel's chosenness will be recognised by all. The two figures who stand out in their preoccupation with the special character of Israel, though, are also the two who were least impressed by the claims of philosophy: the halachist and mystic Nachmanides, and the poet Judah HaLevi.

The doctrine that "He appointed a ruler (or guardian angel) for every nation, but Israel is the Lord's own portion" (Ben Sira 17:17) is to be found already in the book of Daniel, is perhaps hinted at in Devarim, and was taken up by the sages. This is a dominating idea in Nachmanides, particularly in his commentary to the Torah. The nations are governed by natural law — in his formulation, through planetary influences. But the people of Israel is directly governed by God. Thus even the most prosaic of events in the life of the righteous is a hidden miracle. Ideally, for example, there would be no need for the practice of medicine amongst Jews: their illness would always be punishment for wrongdoing, and they would get better by God's favour. Only when we neglect God does He, to some extent, abandon us to the natural order. Israel is the chosen land, and the relationship between Jews and God is only complete within its borders. Outside Israel the fulfilment of the commands is a shadow of, even a marking-time for, the redemption. Only in Israel can Jews enjoy a directness of relationship with God that renders them immune to the processes of nature. Nothing in Israel is natural: it 'vomits out' (Vayikra 18:25) those who are immoral.

Earlier, Judah HaLevi had gone even further, and had spoken of the

qualitative difference between Jew and non-Jew. His passion for the Jewish people as the unique bearers of revelation led him into a series of striking statements about their superiority. And they are all the more surprising if we remember that the book in which they appear, the *Kuzari*, is set in the form of a dialogue between a rabbi and a non-Jewish king.

The king, for instance, asks the obvious question: if the Torah is Divine wisdom, why was it not commanded to *all* men? The rabbi replies: "You might as well ask why all animals are not rational beings." The fact is that not all men were worthy of the revelation. "The sons of Jacob were distinguished from other people by special Divine qualities, as if they were a kind of angelic order." (I, 103).

This almost biological superiority leads HaLevi to an unpleasant but inevitable conclusion. The Jew is *born* different; therefore even the convert who accepts the practices of Judaism is not wholly his equal. "Those who become Jews do not take equal rank with born Israelites. . . They can only achieve something by learning from them, and can become pious and learned but never prophets." (I, 115). "If the law were binding on us only because God created us, the white and the black man would be equal, since He created them all. But the Torah was given to us because He led us out of Egypt and remained attached to us, because we are the pick of mankind." (I, 27). A strange doctrine to present to a king contemplating conversion to Judaism.

The idea finds a rare but occasional echo in some mystical and Hassidic texts. And it is the nearest Jewish thought ever gets to a form of racialism. Even then, HaLevi's thinking never verges on intolerance. He wishes only that the Jewish people should recognise their distinctiveness, not least as a prelude to the return to Zion. The nations produce fine thinkers and admirable codes of ethics (IV, 19). It is only in their passionate involvement with God, land and history that the Jewish people stands apart.

That this should be the outermost limit of claims to superiority is little short of extraordinary. Plato, for example, had outlined in *The Republic* a political system of the most deep-rooted inequalities, in which the citizens were to be taught, by a deliberately constructed and propagated myth, that "When God fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those who are qualified to be Rulers, silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the rest." (Republic, III,415). Aristotle speaks of slaves as being as different in kind to freemen as the animal is to the human. A slave is qualified only to be someone else's property. (Politics I,5). Thus the Jewish thinkers of the middle ages had available to them models of natural inequalities

between men. Yet even Judah HaLevi goes nowhere near the spirit of the Greek philosophers.

So far HaLevi. But the important point is that his view was countered in the strongest possible way by Maimonides in a famous responsum. Writing to a convert who has asked whether he may say, in the prayers, "Our God and God of *our fathers*", he replies: "He who becomes a proselyte and confesses the unity of God as taught in the Torah, is a disciple of Abraham our father. Such persons are of his household. . . In this sense Abraham is the father of his descendants who follow his ways, and of his disciples, and of all the proselytes. . . Do not think little of your origin: we are descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but your descent is from the Creator." (Maimonides, Responsa, Blau, II, p.549.). Indeed the Mishna had already established rabbinic opinion in the strongest possible terms: "Man was created alone. . . so that no man could say to another, My father was greater than yours." (Sanhedrin 4:5).

CHOICE, REJECTION, PLURALISM

The Torah itself often leads one to think, "How odd of God". The Israelites are constantly upbraided for being a rebellious, obdurate people. That they should have been given the land is due neither to their moral nor to their numerical superiority: "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land" (Devarim 9:5); "God did not embrace you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." (ibid. 7:7).

The critic of the Torah, Jew or non-Jew, who sees the idea of the Chosen People as wishful thinking on the part of the Israelites — a kind of pride projected onto the fabric of the universe — must contend with the facts: that it was never seen as a natural right; that it entailed a burden of life under the commands whose acceptance, said the rabbis, amazed even the Almighty ("Who revealed to My children this secret of the angels?" — Shabbat 88a); that it subjected them to immeasurable suffering ("God gave Israel three precious gifts, and each only through suffering" — Berachot 5a); that it never allowed them to rest secure in their land or on the accumulated merits of the past. Nothing could look less like the projection of a wish.

And the sages were well aware of it. The Talmud tells us that an intending convert to Judaism was to be asked: "Do you not know that at the present time Israel is persecuted and oppressed, despised, harrassed

and overcome by afflictions?" (Yevamot 47a). Rabbinic self-knowledge went deep enough to know that it would be an extraordinary thing to choose to be a Jew if one had not been born into the choice.

Why, then, the choice? And what is its nature? The often neglected fact is that the Torah itself has a virtually explicit commentary to offer, in the chapters of Bereishith prior to Abraham. God makes man in His image; yet Adam rebels and cannot live with God so close, with Him in the garden. The society based upon man living out his nature degenerates, prior to the Flood, into the corruption of all of nature.

God "regretted that He had made man on earth". He wipes out His creation and begins again with Noah. With him He makes a covenant, built on the recognition, not that man is Divine, but that *the other man* is Divine (Bereishith 9:6). This too fails. The builders of the Tower of Babel wish to frustrate the Divine purpose. God descends and ends their plan.

The crucial moral is that twice God instituted a *universal religious order*, once with Adam, again with Noah. Twice it failed, and thereafter He proposed something else: that one man, one family, eventually one nation, should take upon itself the task of living day by day with and in the presence of God. At the end of the cycle began by Adam, God *rejected* mankind as a whole. But after the Flood He vowed, "I will never again strike down all life" (Bereishith 8:21). The same circumstance repeated itself with Babel; but true to His promise, He did not reject. Instead He divided humanity into a diversity of languages and cultures (11:9). From now on he would be reconciled with humanity if one small subsection of it would pledge itself to Him. Through this one man and his descendants "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (12:3).

Perhaps there was a reason for choosing Abraham rather than someone else; or perhaps it was just God's unfathomable will (Guide for the Perplexed II,25). The rabbis themselves were uncertain "whether God chose Israel or Israel chose God" (Yalkut Shimoni, Jeremiah, 288). But the choice meant — and this was consistently reflected in Jewish law — that the nations were free to pursue their own natural destinies, while Israel alone depended for its survival on their faithfulness to God. Choosing Israel was not *rejecting* the rest of the world, but on the contrary, allowing it to endure. This was the difference between the choice of Abraham and the choice of Noah before the Flood.

At the heart of Jewish particularism is therefore a profound tolerance towards other faiths, and a recognition of the pluralism of human culture. A dangerous idea? To the contrary, it is *this* idea which stands opposed to the implicit imperialism of universalist creeds, which must seek to impose themselves on others.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

So central is the idea of Chosen People to the Torah that by far the most instructive reading is to be found in the Bible itself, especially the book of Devarim and the books of the prophets. An excellent analysis of rabbinic thinking on the topic is to be found in E.E. Urbach, *The Sages*, Magnes Press, pp.525-554. *The Kuzari* is available in translation by H. Hirschfeld, Schocken Books; read especially part 1. Maimonides' letter to the proselyte, referred to in the text, is translated in N. Glatzer, *A Jewish Reader*, Schocken Books, pp.172-2.

Part of the history of the concept is the Christian claim that Judaism legislates against non-Jews: see, on the whole subject, J. Bloch, *Israel and the Nations*, Berlin.

A general summary of Jewish thinking can be found under the heading 'Chosen People' in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol.5, pp.498-502.



GLOSSARY

- ARAMA, ISAAC — Spanish rabbi and philosopher, 15th century C.E. His famous commentary to the Bible is entitled 'Akedat Yitzchak'.
- BET DIN — Jewish court of law.
- DERECH ERETZ — Literally, 'the way of the land'. Used figuratively to mean, variously, polite behaviour, a worldly occupation, involvement in matters of secular concern.
- EMUNOT VE-DEOT — '(The book of) Beliefs and Opinions', Saadia Gaon's philosophical treatise, completed in 933 C.E.
- GALUT — Exile; the condition of Jews outside Israel.
- GAN EDEN — Literally, 'the Garden of Eden'. Used figuratively to signify the resting-place of the soul after death.
- GEHINNOM — 'The Valley of Hinnom', a valley south of Jerusalem. Used figuratively as a name for the place where the wicked are punished after death.
- HALACHAH — A term signifying either a particular Jewish law, or Jewish law in general.
- HASSID — 'Pious man'. Often used specifically to refer to an adherent of the popular mystical movement in Judaism initiated in the 18th century C.E. by the Baal Shem Tov.
- JUDAH HALEVI — Poet and philosopher, born c.1075; d.1141 C.E.
- KUZARI — Title of Judah Halevi's great philosophical dialogue, in which he sets out, in the form of an imagined conversation between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, his view of the uniqueness of Jewish spirituality.
- MAGGID MISHNE — Commentary to Maimonides' Mishne Torah, by R. Vidal of Tolosa, 14th century C.E.
- MAIMONIDES — R. Moses ben Maimon (RaMBaM), 1135-1204 C.E., outstanding rabbi, philosopher and codifier of Jewish law.
- MEKHILTA — Collection of teachings from the Mishnaic period arranged as a commentary to the book of Shemot. There are two such collections, the MEKILTA DE-RABBI ISHMAEL and the MEKILTA DE-RABBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI.
- MIDRASH — A generic name for rabbinic Biblical interpretation.
- MIDRASH RABBAH — Whenever there is a reference in the text to a book of the Bible, followed by the word RABBAH (e.g. SHEMOT RABBAH), the work referred to is a volume in the collection known as the MIDRASH RABBAH; a series of midrashim to the Five Books of Moses, and the five Megillot.
- MISHNE TORAH — Literally, 'repetition of the Torah', and used to refer either to the book of Devarim, or to the law code of Moses Maimonides (Rambam). Whenever there is a quotation from Maimonides, whose source is indicated as 'Hilchot. . .', the reference is to one of the books of his Mishne Torah.
- NACHMANIDES — R. Moses ben Nachman (RaMBaN), 1194-1270 C.E. Spanish rabbi, philosopher, and mystic. Author of a famous commentary to the Torah.
- ORACH CHAYYIM — Section of the Shulchan Aruch dealing with the laws of prayer, Shabbat and the festivals. Literally, 'The Way of Life'.
- RASHBAM — Acronym of R. Samuel b.Meir, c.1080-1158 C.E. French rabbi and author of a commentary to the Torah. A grandson of Rashi.
- RASHI — Acronym of R. Shlomo b.Yitzchak, 1040-1105 C.E. French rabbi, author of the most famous of all commentaries to the Torah, and of the indispensable systematic commentary to the Talmud.
- REBBE — Teacher; often used specifically of Hassidic leader.
- SAADIA GAON — Outstanding rabbi and leader of Babylonian Jewry, 882-942 C.E. A pioneer in many fields of study, including grammar, Biblical translation and commentary, halachic codification, and Jewish philosophy.
- SHECHINAH — The Divine Presence, a term usually employed to indicate the aspect of the Divine which is indwelling, rather than transcendent.
- SHEMONEH PERAKIM — 'The Eight Chapters': title of the introductory treatise to Maimonides' commentary on the Ethics of the Fathers.
- SHULCHAN ARUCH — 'Prepared Table'; name of Joseph Karo's law code, first published in 1564-5 C.E.
- SIFRA — Halachic midrash, of the Mishnaic period, to the book of Vayikra.
- SIFRE — Halachic midrash, of the Mishnaic period, to the books of Bamidbar and Devarim.
- TALMUD — 'Study' or 'Learning': the name given to the composite work of the Mishna (compiled by R. Judah HaNasi, early 3rd century C.E.) and the exposition and elaboration of it, the Gemarra. There are two such works, the Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli), and the Jerusalem Talmud (Talmud Yerushalmi).
- TUR — Full title — Arba-ah Turim, 'Four Rows': the name of the halachic compendium written by R. Jacob ben Asher, c.1270-1340 C.E.
- TZIDDUK HA-DIN — Vindication or acceptance of the Divine judgement. In a more specific sense, the name of the prayer said at a funeral (S.P.B. 424-5).
- YALKUT SHIMONI — Anthology of midrashim, usually attributed to 13th century C.E.
- ZOHAR — 'Splendour': major work of Jewish mysticism, mainly arranged as a commentary to the Torah.