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The Chosen People?
Post-Holocaust Jewish and Christian Conceptions of Jewish Chosenness
With an Appendix on Applications of Jewish Chosenness
in Post-October 7th Discourse



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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Rabbinic Ordination
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Acknowledgments

It is with immense gratitude that I complete my Rabbinic capstone. I am thankful for my thesis advisor, Dr. Leah Hochman, for helping me shape and reshape and reshape this project as the world changed around us. Her insightful feedback and painstaking editing has been instrumental in shaping this thesis and my intellectual growth. I am grateful to Rabbi Adam Rosenthal, the incredible librarian who was both a helpful and warm presence in the library. Thank you also to Rabbi Dvora Weisberg for her unwavering support, understanding, and patience throughout this process. Her encouragement and advocacy on behalf of me and all of my classmates is unmatched this year and throughout my time at HUC-JIR.

I want to thank Kelly Whitehead who has held and supported me through this piece of work, who reminded me often of caring for myself while processing intense and often disturbing theologies and ideas within this project. Lastly, I want to thank my parents, Kathie and Howard Bender for their endless love and support. Their sacrifices and belief in me has been a driving force as I navigated rabbinical school.

I am incredibly blessed to have such incredible individuals in my corner, my classmates and the community around me in and out of Los Angeles that have shown me constant support, kindness, and love. It took a village to arrive at this place.

Abstract

This thesis explores the nuanced conceptions of Jewish chosenness within Jewish and Christians theologies in the late 20th century. The first chapter delves into Jewish thinkers' perspectives on the concept of Jew's as God's chosen people, examining different interpretations and implications within Jewish thought. The second chapter examines how various Christian denominational thinkers grapple with the concept of Jewish chosenness. Additionally, an appendix analyzes the applications of the concept of Jewish chosenness in post-October 7th discourse, shedding light on the contemporary implications of this idea. Through a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, this thesis illuminates the evolving understanding and significance of Jewish chosenness in religious and political contexts.

Introduction

“Now, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. All of the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Exodus 19:5-6

The idea of Jews as “God’s Chosen People” is a concept rooted in the words of the Torah. The five books of Moses begin with the creation of all of humanity and tell the narrative of a specific people and their relationship with God. Beginning with the choosing of a man named Abram through a command to “go forth,”¹ the story of God’s relationship with Abram and his family and the nation that they become unfolds in the Torah. Through slavery and freedom, blessing and punishment, the five books set the foundation of Jewish tradition and collective memory.

It is from the verse above, among others, that Jews and non-Jews throughout history have stood by the idea that Jews are God’s covenant and chosen people. What “chosen” means exactly is contested widely inside and outside of the Jewish community. For some, chosenness implies a status, a title held that places Jewish people over others in internal character or favor of God. For others, chosenness implies responsibility and that God’s people have a specific role and weight to carry throughout history in order to further Divine will. Some focus on what happens to Jews through this chosenness, while other thinkers focus on what action Jews must take through this selection.

While there are many thoughts about what this chosenness carries, there is no doubt that the idea itself has been kept alive and affected the Jewish community throughout history. This continues to be true into the 21st century. Personally, I have had a curiosity around this concept for many years. Growing up in a Midwestern suburb, in a Reform congregation, within an

¹ Genesis 12:1

interfaith family, the idea was never spoken in my inner circles seriously. Chosenness was a joke to laugh about. We watched Tevye proclaim, “I know, I know, we are your chosen people. But, once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?”² I heard from friends about the Alaskan Jewish community who lovingly call themselves the “Frozen Chosen.”³ I learned growing up that there were people who took that idea seriously, but I felt that the term was archaic and egotistical. The only people around me who spoke seriously about this idea were Christian friends. In middle school, I remember hearing the excitement in the voice of a friend's mom when I said I was Jewish, “Oh! We love the Jews. You know, the savior is Jewish, too!”

Throughout my time in college and rabbinical school I have encountered chosenness again and again. The concept is found in our⁴ liturgy. Every time we read Torah, the blessing we say before reads: “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who chose us from among all the peoples and gave us Torah. Blessed are You, Adonai, Giver of Torah.”⁵ In the Aleinu the traditional text proclaims that God has “set us apart from the other families of the earth.”⁶ This concept inhabits our prayers so deeply. What has the presence of this idea done to the Jewish psyche? How might this special relationship affect the way we act in the world, the way we treat other people?

I wanted to do more reading on this topic, because it is a piece of my tradition that makes me feel truly uneasy. The idea that Jews have been chosen by God, that Jews have a special relationship with God, that Jews may even be thought to be different or better than other people because of this selection, or that Jews have a special responsibility, has never sat well with me.

² Norman, Jewison.1971. *Fiddler on the Roof*. United Artists. 181 minutes.

³ “The Frozen Chosen.” *The Forward*. August 6, 2012. <https://forward.com/news/160244/the-frozen-chosen/>.

⁴ Throughout this paper I will be using a first-person plural when speaking about the Jewish community. I am not writing this paper as an outsider, but a person coming into Jewish leadership and choosing to see myself as part of the Jewish people. When I say “we” and “us” throughout this paper, I mean the Jewish community as a whole, regardless of denomination- this may be interpreted differently by others.

⁵CCAR Press. *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur: Weekdays, Shabbat and Festivals*. 2007. 368.

⁶ CCAR Press. 586.

But the idea itself has shaped our communities' experience in the world so deeply throughout history, there must be more to explore. I came into this project wanting to research thinkers who have spent significant time thinking about Jewish theology in a more modern and contemporary thought, so I began to focus on this idea after the greatest Jewish tragedy of the last century, the Holocaust.

While studying Jewish thinkers on this idea, the context of the moment was very present. Both the trauma of the genocide against our people was present in the chosenness discourse, along with the creation and existence of the modern State of Israel. Within the biblical text, the special relationship that the people of Israel has with God also includes the possession of the land that was promised to them. This piece of the covenant was referenced by Jews and Christians alike when discussing modern Zionism. Intellectually, as someone who is committed to Jewish peoplehood and the future of people who live in Israel, this research was challenging and fascinating.

The first two chapters of this thesis focus on Jewish and Christian thinkers around the idea of Jews as the Chosen People. In my chapter on Jewish thinkers, I focus on five different people who show a range of different views and interpretations of this idea, and different applications of chosenness in the modern world, and often around modern Zionism. In my chapter on Christian thinkers, I delve into three larger denominations and some key voices within them.

For both of these chapters it is vital to understand that this concept is thought of in more ways than I am presenting, and should not be used to say “this is what Catholics think” or “this is what Orthodox Jews think.” I show a range of voices on this issue to create a wider picture. This

thesis and its explorations should not be used to make sweeping declarations about Christians or Jews.

Chapter 1: Jewish Voices

In this chapter I will explore Jewish conceptions of chosenness by Jewish thought leaders who wrote and published works in the latter half of the 20th century. I include Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Feminist voices as a way of creating a wide spectrum of beliefs and understandings of this concept.

Eugene Borowitz

Eugene Borowitz (1924-2016) was an American Reform leader and philosopher who was largely known for his works on Jewish theology and ethics. Raised in Ohio by two parents who immigrated from Eastern Europe, Borowitz graduated from The Ohio State University and was ordained as a Reform rabbi from Hebrew Union College in 19XX.

Borowitz often wrote about the idea of Jewish chosenness. Throughout his life, he developed his idea of covenant theology: he had a level of discomfort with the wording of Jewish chosenness and described it as a “unique covenantal relationship with God.”⁷ Borowitz was deeply aware of the effect that the Holocaust had on Jewish people and sought to develop a theology that was uniquely American, supported personal autonomy in relationship with God, and was relevant within the context of liberal ideals.

One of his main concerns was with humans retaining their autonomy without losing human involvement with collective. The Jewish individual and collective self derives worth through the covenant with God. In this sense, all peoples are covenant-partners with God giving root to our selfhood, though the Jewish people have a primary covenant.⁸ Borowitz identifies special responsibilities of religious groups, saying that for us as Jews, religious duties must be at

⁷Douglas R.Green. 2015 “A Rationalist Defense of Jewish Particularism.” *The Journal of Jewish Ethics* 1 (1): 78.

⁸ Borowitz, Eugene. 1998. “Renewing the Covenant.” In *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, 222.

the center of our lives in order to show that God is at the center of our lives. This is both an individual responsibility and a collective one as well. Through this our religious leaders hold a significant role in how our community recognizes the covenantal relationship.

Jewish leadership is tasked with guiding the community in the covenant with God. They must lead by what they believe “God wants God’s people to be doing now.”⁹ In this, Borowitz shows his belief of a unique and special relationship that the Jewish people have with God signified through the narrative of the Torah. There is a reciprocity required for this covenant. For example, Moses tells the people that they cannot live in the land of Israel unless they follow God’s rules. Within the biblical narrative, when the people do not obey God’s rules, they are thrown out of the land, punished, or rejected. In this back and forth we know that the Hebrews are not different in character than other peoples; they are not morally superior or chosen because of their inherent worth above others, but they “know it to be a special responsibility of theirs to keep the nation in thrall to the true sovereign.”¹⁰

To the question about why our people were chosen over others, Borowitz gives two answers. One substantive answer is that God chose us as an example to demonstrate that a people throughout history stemming from one family can be made sacred through “subordination to God’s rule.”¹¹ In this answer Borowitz says that in this moment in history, American Jews living in democratic, secular states show us new opportunities in this realm to pursue this objective of sanctification.

His second answer is functional; being organized as an ethnic group protects the community throughout history with this common goal of supporting the covenant. Throughout history the Jewish people have sustained blows that Borowitz gives credit to the “many layered

⁹ Borowitz. 224.

¹⁰ Borowitz. 228.

¹¹ Borowitz. 228.

ethnic armor.”¹² The community of Israel lives and acts in fear of God in a way that other communities have not, seeing our purpose as larger than God’s plan for our own community. Though this functional piece of the covenant has sustained the Jewish people throughout history, Borowitz also says that it has distanced us from other peoples. It is also within the understanding of this covenant that we must understand that God’s covenant is with all people.

In this sense, we must understand God’s unique covenantal relationship with the Jewish people as working towards a universal goal. Borowitz identifies this piece as something that has always existed within our covenantal relationship, but a piece that was made more explicit in recent times. He shows this by lifting up that the Torah does not begin with the choosing of Abraham but begins with the creation of the entire world. Though God has made this explicit covenant with one people, the purpose of the covenant reaches farther than that people itself. God attempts to assist all people through revelation, prophecy, and punishment with one nation. This creates a challenge for the Jewish people, where we must sit in the tension of devotion to our people and to humankind.¹³

This is a covenantal duality that Borowitz sees Jewish people sitting in as he understands it from a modern American perspective. Jewish people are still called to be distinct, and to obey the rules given to us by God. These rules are not arbitrary to Borowitz. The laws given that we must obey are a “life-and-society-transforming” set of rules.¹⁴ It is our distinctiveness and our commitment to our particular Jewish tradition that can aid us in this transformation. He deeply supports the transformation of Jewish tradition in a modern context. The Jewish people must be in conversation with God, and these choices must support the continued goals of upholding the covenant.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Borowitz. 227

When speaking of the Holocaust and the modern State of Israel, Borowitz says that we cannot expect moral choices from other nations, and that we must “do all we can for our peoples survival.”¹⁵ More of our people must return to what he sees as a necessary piece of living life within the particular community, as God needs “Jews and Judaism to achieve the divine purposes with humanity.”¹⁶ In his eyes, the Jewish state does accomplish this goal of protecting the existence of the Jewish people, but he acknowledges the desire for this state to be aligned with our covenantal responsibility of high humane standards in its actions. When the state acts egregious, it rejects the covenant with God.

Borowitz as a thinker uses Western intellectuality to push forward his ideas of universalism and particularism. It is precisely with our particularistic laws and traditions and communal living that we can further God’s divine goals for all of humanity. It is through our unique, changing, covenantal relationship with God that we can be an aide in God’s covenant with all peoples. This requires our direct involvement with the rest of the world, engagement with diverse groups and ideas, and a continued duty to uphold high moral and ethical standards for ourselves as individuals and as a community.

Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was an American Orthodox rabbi and the Rosh Yeshiva of Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University for many years. Born in Eastern Europe to a family with long rabbinic lines, Soloveitchik was known for appreciating both religious and secular wisdom. He was committed to human values that stemmed from Jewish text and particularism.

¹⁵ Borowitz. 229.

¹⁶ Green. 79.

Though Soloveitchik was a critic of Reform and Conservative communities, he has a general alignment with Borowitz in his understanding of Jewish particularism furthering divine goals for humanity. Though he does not see a divine covenant with non-Jews, he does see this one Jewish covenant as a mission to be a “light unto the nations.” Like Borowitz, he is against isolationism as a community approach. Jewish people must be distinct and hold to our traditions and customs as laid out by God, but we must integrate our Jewish values and traditions into daily lives in order to contribute positively to the broader society.

There seems to be a trend among post-WWII thinkers in the idea of chosenness not as a privilege, but a responsibility. Soloveitchik sees this covenant as holding the Jewish people to a higher ethical and moral standard, setting an example for righteous living for all peoples. This responsibility extends to a communal drive for intellectual and spiritual leadership. He believes that we must lead the realm of both worldly and religious wisdom. Torah scholarship and maintaining a strong connection to Jewish tradition is key to this leadership, rooting the community and leaders in continued understanding of our purpose and boundaries.

As an Orthodox thinker, Soloveitchik places a high importance on adherence to *halacha*. This piece of our particular relationship with God is key to the covenant. This is important both to individual practice and communal involvement for Jews; we must live by the commandments.¹⁷ Not only is it an obligation, but the laws themselves are a guide to “the creation of an ideal world.”¹⁸

When it comes to chosenness specifically, Soloveitchik identifies two covenants that Jews have been historically linked together. The first being *brit yi'ud*, covenant of destiny. This is focused on Jews adherence to *halacha*, and individual choices that Jews make in the course of

¹⁷ Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. 1983. *Halakhic Man*. 65.

¹⁸ Soloveitchik. 66.

their lives. This piece emphasizes an adherence to Jewish law and ethical principles. But this is not a call for isolation; this covenant is a call for our active engagement with the world, making moral choices in accordance to Jewish values and law. The covenant of destiny binds Jews together as active participants in their chosen status. Jewish people entered the covenant of destiny at Mount Sinai, it was at this moment that the people responded to God's call with "we will do and we will obey," signifying our commitment to continued relationship. Following the law is not only how humans can uphold the covenant, but the laws themselves are a gift. To be human is to be in distress and "observance of *halacha* teaches men how to live with distress, not how to overcome it, since that is impossible."¹⁹

The second piece is the *brit goral*, covenant of fate. This covenant we entered into in Egypt. This covenant we enter through our shared historical narrative and continued experience of persecution and oppression. We were forced together in Egypt through collective suffering and slavery. "We share a history all too often written in tears"²⁰ Though we may be bound together in our collective suffering through history, it gives us a powerful common story that makes us stronger through its connection. This covenant is recognized liturgically through our prayers; when we pray for healing we do so "among all the sick of Israel,"²¹ and when we comfort a mourner we do so among all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

For Soloveitchik, this experience continues to bind the Jewish community across denominational lines and the spectrum of observance. Although Reform and Conservative Jews, in Soloveitchik's eyes, reject the covenant of destiny through abdication of *halacha*, all Jews are

¹⁹ Dov Schwartz. 2006. "'Kol Dodi Dofek': A Religious Zionist Alternative." In *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*. 39 (3): 63.

²⁰ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. 2015. "The Covenants of Fate and Destiny." *The Jewish Press*, June 4, 2015.

²¹ Koren Publishers. *The Koren Siddur: The Lobel Edition*. 2006. 518.

still bound together through the covenant of fate and our shared and continued experiences of suffering and loss.

The covenant of fate was made clear through the experience of the Holocaust which showed the continued suffering of Jewish people no matter background or observance. The response to this experience of the covenant of fate, our inevitable suffering, is through activating the covenant of destiny; we must take an active role in our place in the world. While the covenant of fate is one we cannot choose, the covenant of destiny is one we opt into as individuals and a community, to make choices that further the goals of our God. For Soloveitchik, after the Holocaust, this action pointed towards Zionism: “we must act, not explain.”²² Soloveitchik stands by a traditional framework that it “is not only metaphysically futile to question God’s ways, but also Jewishly unauthentic to do so.”²³ Political Zionism, meaning Jews actively getting involved in their own return to the land that God had promised us, is engaging in the covenant of destiny.

Soloveitchik outlines two images of Adam within his book *The Lonely Man of Faith* that align with these covenants. The first Adam uses his mind and agency to master his environment, while the second submits entirely to God’s will. He uses these descriptions to show that the person of faith must integrate these images; one must both be submissive and susceptible to the will of God and also active in his engagement with the world and his role. These two Adams reflect the covenants that Soloveitchik describes. The first Adam is engaged in the covenant of destiny, using his mind and power to be in the world, the second Adam, submits to God, representing the covenant of fate, inactive and at the will of God and the world.

²² Tamir Granot. 2015. “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Holocaust.” *The Israel Koschitzky Torat Har Etzion*.

²³ David Singer, and Moshe Sokol. 1982. “Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith.” *Modern Judaism - A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 2(3): 253.

In many ways Soloveitchik and Borowitz seem to align in their desire to use Jewish particularism to push forward divine goals for all of humanity. They both also focus on chosenness in the context of the Jewish peoples covenantal relationship with God. However, Soloveitchik places a much higher demand on *halacha* and his two pronged covenantal structure presents a challenge to Borowitz's increased use of modernity and the transformational agency of modern Jews.

Michael Wyschogrod

Michael Wyschogrod was (1928-2015) an Orthodox, German-American Jewish theologian. Born in Berlin, he and his family fled National Socialism and arrived in the United States when he was 10 years old.²⁴ Wyschogrod was a student of Soloveitchik and aligned with him on many intellectual and spiritual ideas. Their largest disagreement was on the validity of theological discussions between Christians and Jews. It is within his own theology of particular love between God and Israel that aided Wyschogrod in contributing to Jewish-Christian dialogue throughout his life, and it is that particular love that makes his construction of Jewish chosenness distinct.

Wyschogrod begins with the question of why God chooses one people among the nations. He writes that because "these questions are so fundamental, we must answer them with caution."²⁵ It is essential for him that God not be subject to human understandings not of God's making. While some people spend time thinking and arguing over what God is and what God wants, he rejects answers that attempt to fit God into human language and experience. God is

²⁴David Goldman. "Michael Wyschogrod, the Kierkegaard of Orthodox Judaism, Dies at 87." 2015. *Tablet Magazine*. December 18, 2015.

²⁵Michael Wyschogrod. 1998. "The Body of Faith." In *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, 246.

sovereign and a master that cannot be questioned on human terms.²⁶ The answers that many have come up with, Wyschogrod identifies as missing the fundamental point of God's sovereignty and limits in the human mind God's power and agency. God chose the route of election and the election "of a biological instead of an ideological people, because this was his free choice."²⁷ We know this is the best choice, not because of our human understanding, but simply because that was the choice that God made. Within this, we can understand that he believes that God did not choose the community of Israel because they are morally or ideologically superior to other people, only because of God's mysterious purposes and love.

Wyschogrod speaks of a "post-Auschwitz Jew"²⁸ and the pieces of our biblical narrative with which such a Jew most identifies. He says that human encounter of God within the Bible is a deep challenge for the modern viewer, relating most with Abraham pleading with God for justice as the most resonant moment after the Holocaust. But he pleads with the community to recall a time when the focus in our communities was one of the praise of God, and that praise be recentered as we come out of the era of terror and anger. The community of Israel must praise God, not to justify the election of the people, but to express gratitude and wonder for the election itself. Therefore we must not try to justify the election, but understand it through the view of praise and appreciation.

Wyschogrod uses the language of love; he writes of *eros*, a sensual love between man and woman,²⁹ and of *agape*, the unconditional love of parent and child. He critiques the distinction between these two types of love. He argues that the Christian mind sees *eros* in the bodily experience of love, and *agape* in the spiritual experience of love. This distinction would be

²⁶ Wyschogrod. 247.

²⁷ Wyschogrod. 246.

²⁸ Wyschogrod. 247.

²⁹ Wyschogrod writes from a staunch heteronormative and monogamous lens when speaking of "romantic love," which I do not believe can be applied to a gender expansive view of love.

appropriate if the experience of soul and body were completely separate, but they are not. Therefore, the exclusive love given to the community of Israel does not mean that God does not love the other nations. He goes as far as to challenge the idea that parents love all of their children equally: if a parent says this to themselves they are lying. Each relationship is different, and meets each person as an individual, and there is inherent exclusivity within that.

Wyschogrod's says we must praise God precisely because God has chosen to love in a human way, to love us individually as who we are. The chosenness of the People Israel "thus is a sign of the humanity of God... the love with which God has chosen to love man is love understandable to men."³⁰ Wyschogrod says that when the text of the Bible does not tell us why Abraham was chosen, this is what it is saying; that God has experienced a true falling in love with Abraham. Though modern intellectuals may be embarrassed by this reading, understanding this as such validates God's dignity in the choice to love man in a genuine relationship. This does not mean that God does not love other peoples. Wyschogrod uses the example of Esau. That he still receives compassion from God. Therefore, Gentiles should know that God also stands in relationship to them and loves them and affirms their own uniqueness.

We know that God chose Abraham. Wyschogrod then asks why God chooses to elect the entire people, and all of Abraham's descendants. He says that the faith of the election of Israel is seen as "pre spiritual," and that modern Christianity's response to this election, calling themselves the "new Israel" affirms this; that old is bad and new is good. However, to Wyschogrod, the connection between the us and God proves that the Church being the "new Israel" cannot be so. The People of Israel view all people as made in the image of God but view

³⁰ Wyschogrod. 249.

each other as familially connected. By electing the descendants of Abraham, God has created “a people that is in his service in the totality of its human being.”³¹

It is the love itself from God that moves Wyschogrod to say that Judaism’s concerns should not be philosophical, but an embodied love between God and the descendants of God’s first love, Abraham. Within this adjustment, Wyschogrod gains community with Christian theologians. While many non-Jewish theologians may have been put off by exclusivity in language by other Jews, Wyschogrod has gained appreciation.

When speaking about God’s love for other peoples, Wyschogrod says, “When we grasp that the election of Israel flows from the fatherhood that extends to all created in God’s image, we find ourselves tied to all men in brotherhood, as Joseph, favored by his human father, ultimately found himself tied to his brothers.”³² For Wyschogrod, the particular election does not abdicate the universal love from God, they are intertwined and should be recognized by all peoples as a valid divine choice. This election has a divine purpose, but we are not to ask what that purpose may be. Similar to Soloveitchik, why God chose the people of Israel is not the right question. To question God in this sense is to deny God’s role as sovereign. It is upon us to trust God and trust that this choice was the best God could make, and that the purpose is beyond our comprehension in the present, but is directly tied to the future.

In this sense, Wyschogrod believed the Jewish return to the land of Israel was historically significant. Though he was not fully in support of the secular Zionist movement, the opportunity to be in the Jewish land that God gave to Abraham’s descendants gave much opportunity for the People of Israel to develop a deeper theological understanding of their connection.

³¹ Wyschogrod 250.

³² Goldman. 2015.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz

Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994) marks a distinct change in theological understanding from other Jewish thinkers I have discussed. He was an Israeli Orthodox thinker and public intellectual. A radical religious voice who engaged deeply in secular thought, he was born in Russia to a religious Zionist family who moved to Palestine in 1935. A controversial figure in his theology, he has profoundly influenced academic thinkers in Israel in the realms of science and philosophy, though his conceptions of Jewish religiosity have not been adopted by many other Jewish practitioners.³³ In order to understand his views on Jews being chosen by God, it is important to understand his wider theology.

For Leibowitz, there exist two forms of religiosity: one based in values and beliefs, and one based in observance and demands. The first is focused on a person's spiritual experience, what services a person is offered by God and that person's own spiritual fulfillment. The second is focused on the obligations of a human being and what services a person can offer to God. Leibowitz states that Judaism holds to the religiosity of demands; *halacha* alone defines the Jewish religion. To be a Jew is to commit to a system of laws given by God regardless of what one thinks about God or the laws and regardless of what one might receive for obeying.³⁴

Because *halacha* centers Leibowitz's practice, he argues that it is only through the laws that humans can have any way of having a relationship with God. God is not within the realm of human understanding for Leibowitz and spending time figuring out the nature of God and who God is for humans is not a priority for Leibowitz. Humans are supposed to follow the laws for the sake of obeying God, in fact in his theology, faith does not precede the action. "God's

³³Benbassat, Roi. 2014. "Yeshayahu Leibowitz: Jewish Existentialism." *Religious Studies* 51 (2): 141-163.

³⁴ Benbassat. 145.

existence is derived from observance of the *halacha*. One who accepts halachic law as absolutely binding thereby accepts the existence of God as the giver of Torah.”³⁵

Faith is not at the center of Judaism for Leibowitz; therefore, it is not necessary to see God interacting with human life and one does not need to think historical events support one’s religious standpoint. Because of this, similar to Leibowitz’s attitude towards *halacha*, Jewish uniqueness, which I refer to here as “chosenness,” is not a fact; it is an endeavor. The holiness of Israel is not a reality, but a task... “uniqueness rather consists in the demand laid on it. The people may or may not heed this demand, therefore its fate is not guaranteed.”³⁶ The significance of the Jewish people is to live out the laws given in the Torah. Leibowitz says that anyone who believes that we were chosen because we are endowed with characteristics that non-Jews lack “derogates the significance of Judaism.”³⁷ It is the pride within this that taints our egos and disturbs the faith we are called to have. There is no difference between Jews and other nations outside of this task that we were given to follow the *mitzvot*.

Within this idea, Leibowitz sees many ways in which the people of Israel may not engage with this task or deny it outright. Many have not taken on his theological ideas of Judaism, however some in Israel have latched onto how these ideas have affected his public views on Jewish nationalism and the State of Israel.³⁸ Leibowitz was a religious Zionist and saw a Jewish existence in the land of Israel as a way to fulfill more *mitzvot*. But he cautioned that viewing the state as a “value” rather than a “vehicle for social or national good” would set a path to fascism, and corrupt the community.

³⁵ Benbassat. 146.

³⁶ Jeffrey Saks. 2013. “Leibowitz at 110.” *Jewish Ideas Daily*. February 11, 2013.

³⁷ Saks.

³⁸ Saks.

Leibowitz understood that the idea of Jews as a chosen people because of moral or genetic superiority would lead the community, especially when driven by secular desire for statehood, to ignore the essence of the Jewish task. He said about David ben Gurion, “he who empties the concepts of the Jewish people of its religious content, and still describes it as an Am Segulah (chosen people), turns the concept into an expression of racist chauvinism.”³⁹

Judith Plaskow

Judith Plaskow (born 1947) is an American Jewish feminist theologian. She was raised in a classically Reform community in New York and has said her first theological questions were provoked when studying the Holocaust. Questioning the nature of humans and God, and growing up in the civil rights era, Plaskow developed a vision of full and equal status of women in Judaism. She wrote her doctoral thesis at Yale about women’s experience and the theologies of two Protestant theologians “because there was no place to study Jewish theology in the late sixties and (she) wanted to be a theologian.”⁴⁰

As one of the most influential Jewish feminist thinkers, Plaskow’s concept of chosenness and covenant focuses on gendered experiences and redefining the covenant. In her path breaking theological book *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective* (1990), Plaskow identifies entering into the covenant at Sinai to be the foundational experience of Judaism.⁴¹ According to the biblical text, when preparing the People Israel for the covenant, Moses told “everyone” to avoid women. It is because of the exclusion of women here that Plaskow says that “the otherness of women finds its way into the very center of Jewish experience,”⁴² setting a foundation for the hierarchy of men over women.

³⁹ Saks.

⁴⁰ “Judith Plaskow.” 2021. Jewish Women’s Archive. June 23, 2021.

⁴¹ Plaskow, Judith. 1998. “Standing Again at Sinai.” *In Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*. 225.

⁴² Plaskow. 255.

Because of later interpretation of this biblical moment, Plaskow argues that women became objects within the Jewish tradition instead of subjects within the covenant who were able to shape and form history themselves. It is because of the way Judaism developed that women can (and must) reclaim their history and tell the stories of women's encounters with God. Traditional Jewish chosenness, according to Plaskow, has been used to reinforce patriarchy within Judaism, but she suggests a reinterpretation that emphasizes inclusivity, autonomy, and empowerment for all people. Through reinterpretation, all Jews can emphasize a more egalitarian understanding of chosenness, that being chosen by God implies a collective responsibility to promote justice, equity, and equality.

For Plaskow, this reinterpretation is not a great breach of tradition. Judaism in its nature is change, and a feminist revision of the religion would require no greater changes "than those which made Israel's survival possible after the fall of the Temple in 70AD [sic]." ⁴³

Mordechai Kaplan

Mordechai Kaplan (1881-1983) is one voice who actively pushes for the rejection of the idea of the Jewish people being God's Chosen. Born in a small town in Lithuania, Kaplan came to the United States when he was eight with his family. He attended traditional Orthodox Jewish schools, then attended Columbia University where he "absorbed a more critical approach." He was ordained from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and served as a rabbi at an Orthodox synagogue. In his leadership he increasingly pushed for innovation and change using the language of "reconstruction," wanting to hold the traditions of Judaism with change and progress as traditions themselves. Kaplan saw religion as the base of collective

⁴³Alicia Ostriker. "From a New Past to a New Future." 1990. *Women's Review of Books* 7 (12): 12.

self-consciousness, a necessary piece for authentic modern Jewish life and was critical of movements who remained stationary, and those who rejected the religiosity and ritualistic pieces of the tradition.

In his own progression, Kaplan “reconstructed” Judaism in his own ways. He organized the first public celebration of a Bat Mitzvah for his daughter, Judith, in 1922, where she read Torah. This among other distinct reforms he made, one among them being the rejection of the literal accuracy of the Torah, pushed him to get excommunicated by the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada in 1945. Within this was also a rejection of the belief in Jewish chosenness.

At the conference of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation in 1945, Kaplan said publicly that “the idea of the Chosen People was justifiable religious doctrine in ancient Judaism... but today it is not merely untenable, but also detrimental to a normal adjustment of the Jew to his environment....”⁴⁴ Kaplan saw this idea as harmfully separating us from the communities around us. According to his humanistic theology not only was this idea false, but it actively harmed our ability to be modern Jews who interact with the rest of the world. He continued by saying “the idea is in the realm of dogma and is meant to affirm that the Jewish people have been chosen to occupy forever the central place in the divine scheme of salvation. As such it can not be any longer accepted by modern-minded Jews.”⁴⁵

Kaplan struggled with how his rabbinic peers used these ideas, and how it inhabited the minds of Jews to keep them separate from others. He criticized movements who reinterpreted this chosenness. He believed that there was no interpretation of this idea that could dispel the implication that some nations are superior to others which he saw as one piece of Judaism that

⁴⁴ Jewish Telegraphic Agency. 1945. “Idea of ‘chosen People’ not Justifiable Now, Dr Mordecai Kaplan Tells Conference.” October 15, 1945. n

⁴⁵ Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

could not be “reconstructed.”⁴⁶ Kaplan encouraged those around him to dedicate themselves to universal values with ethnic particularism. As Jews, we can use our traditions and religion to guide our humanistic values. Though this idea may have resonated with Jews throughout our history when we may have needed supernatural explanation for our suffering, if we no longer view God as acting in history, how can we continue to believe in a God that is still choosing us?

Conclusion

Views on Jewish chosenness shifted after the events of World War II. In the wake of indescribable violence inflicted on and destruction of the Jewish people in Europe, Jewish theology was shaken as people reckoned with the terror that had continued unabated. Many Jews struggled to reconcile their previous understanding of God and the existence of evil. For many who had viewed God as one who acts within history, the Holocaust was God turning away from the nation of Israel. As the understanding of God is questioned, so is the special relationship God has with the people of Israel.

Steven Katz highlights the shifts and effects through essays written by an array of authors on Jewish theology in his book, *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology* (2005). Questions are raised around holding on to the idea of a Chosen People, the active presence of God in history, approaches to the presence of evil in the world, and the ways in which these questions affected the newly founded State of Israel.

It is clear that the Holocaust brought about new questions for the thinkers above, whether they spoke explicitly about it or not. Shifting views on God inherently leads to shifting views on how we understand our relationship to God. There is a trend among some post-Holocaust Jewish

⁴⁶ Mordechai Kaplan. “Rejecting Chosenness in Favor of Distinctiveness.” 2016. *Reconstructing Judaism*. May 13, 2016.

thinkers to frame chosenness not as a privilege but as a responsibility. By being chosen and accepting this chosenness we are called to be a light unto the nations, to lead the way in moral and ethical choices, and not to see ourselves as better than others. This reflection of chosenness reflects a potential misuse of other interpretations of chosenness, that if it is a privilege and we are to see ourselves as “God’s favorite,” this not only provokes hatred in the hearts of others, but can change how we act in the world as moral beings.

Chapter 2: Christian Denominational Voices on Jewish Election

In the wake of the Second World War, theologians of all religious traditions felt confronted by the evil that had been institutionalized and systematized by the National Socialists. In this chapter, I will investigate how non-Jewish theologians conceive of and deploy the notion of the chosenness of Jews and Judaism.

Protestant Voices

Two representatives of liberal Protestantism, Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), articulated conceptions of Jews as a chosen people and had differing relationships with Jewish communities during their lives. The views they held deeply affected the way they were received by Jewish communities during and after the Holocaust as well as their relationship with the Zionist movement and creation of the State of Israel.

Reinhold Niebuhr was an American pastor and Civil Rights activist born to German immigrant parents in Missouri. While he began his career as a pastor calling upon people to convert Jews, his views quickly shifted because of his experience with Jews and what he saw as our commitment to “better the welfare of the poor, the unemployed, and those who suffered from racial discrimination.”⁴⁷ Once he began working with his local Jewish community in Missouri he forcefully argued that Christians had no right to attempt to convert Jews.

The idea that both Judaism and Christianity were covenant communities with God forced Niebuhr to insist on dialogue between the groups under the notion of what he called a “double covenant.”⁴⁸ He believed that Jews first were chosen by God through covenant, followed by

⁴⁷Shalom Goldman. “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Zionism.” 2019. *Tablet Magazine*. January 23, 2019.

⁴⁸ Goldman.

Christians in a second covenant; therefore the communities are bound together under their service to the same God. While many of his Protestant peers preached a Christian responsibility to convert Jews because of their unique relationship to God, he saw that attempt as negating the communities' "common biblical inheritance."⁴⁹

Neibuhr actively spoke out against racism in the United States and saw a direct link to the fight against Fascism and antisemitism in Europe. His involvement with Civil Rights gave him a strong relationship with many key figures at the time, like Martin Luther King, Jr. He was outspoken well before World War II about rising anti-Jewish behavior and sentiment. This activism also translated into his support of the creation of a Jewish State. Though many Evangelicals of his time saw the Jewish return to the Land of Israel as "restoration" and a piece in the second coming of Jesus Christ, Neibuhr's support was explicitly pragmatic. He believed that Jews were part of a separate nation and therefore their desire for liberty and agency in their own land was valid.

Neibuhr is an example of a mainstream Protestant who was driven by the theological idea that Christians and Jews were both chosen and in covenants with the same God. He was actively in relationship with the Jewish community and was outspoken in his rejection of Christian driven persecution towards them. Because of their close friendship, Abraham Joshua Heschel delivered Neibuhr's eulogy.

Karl Barth articulated a different theology regarding the idea of Jews as chosen and had a different relationship with the Jewish community. In *Church Dogmatics* (1932), Barth outlines many of his thoughts on the people of Israel.

Barth believed that the idea of election is centered around Christ as part of a trinitarian understanding of Jesus as God's son. For Barth, Christ represents the ultimate election; he serves

⁴⁹Goldman.

as a human who took a divine role on Earth. In Barth's conceptualization, Jesus Christ is connected to both the People of Israel and the church through election. Jesus is the fulfilled messianic promise of Israel and is also the Lord of the Church.⁵⁰ Because of this fulfilled promise, Jesus connects the People of Israel and the Church underneath the umbrella of the ultimate elector God. However, the relationship to God, though both connected through Christ, is different for each group. While the People of Israel are treated through history as a witness of God's judgment, the Church through history is a witness to God's mercy. It is because of this use of the People of Israel that Israel continues and is not dissolved into the Church; Israel continues to be a part of God's universal mission.

The New Testament stands intrinsically connected to the Old Testament in Barth's eyes. Christians cannot reject Jews because then they reject Jesus Christ as well. He warns the Church not to say that Jews crucified Jesus for fear that Israel will cease to be chosen as the holy people of God. In using the life of Jesus as an overarching metaphor for the People of Israel, Jesus' resurrection proves that Jewish people were not in fact rejected by God but are bound together in being loved by God.

Barth sees Israel in history as necessary and, though avoiding explicit language, understands the Church took over the position of "chosen," as it acts in identity "with the Israel which rejected its Messiah."⁵¹ It is important to note that when Barth talks about "Israel" he speaks of the nation as a historical and spiritual entity. When talking about modern Jews and the "synagogue" his language is explicitly violent and harsh. He calls the synagogue a place of "the nationalistic-legalistic Messiah Dream" and the "Synagogue of Death."⁵² In *Church Dogmatics*

⁵⁰ When Barth refers to the "Church," he is most often referencing the institution and people of Christianity.

⁵¹ Paul S. Chung 2010. "Karl Barth Regarding Election and Israel: For Jewish-Christian Mutuality in Interreligious Context." *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4 (1): 25.

⁵² Chung 26.

Barth says that modern rabbinic Judaism is this Synagogue of Death that “hears the Word and yet for and in all its hearing is still unbelieving.”⁵³

Barth continues to believe in the election of Israel by God. This election, however, is rooted in a spiritual/historical connection to Jesus Christ and what he understands as a historical significance to God. Though Barth was harsh against modern Jewish institutional life (as evidenced by his use of the phrase “the synagogue”), he was a strong supporter of the political state of Israel and saw the creation and sustenance of the state to be a Christian-Jewish endeavor. Later in his life, Barth became more fond of Jewish people as a witness to God’s love and punishment throughout history. He continued to see Israel and the Church as connected under God’s chosen, Jesus Christ.

During the Holocaust, Barth spoke out against the violence and destruction against Jewish people, and saw anyone who viewed oneself as anti-Jew as someone who was also anti-Jesus Christ, thus, reaffirming his linkage of the two religions.⁵⁴ He viewed modern Judaism as the “natural environment of Jesus Christ,” and the continued existence of the Jewish people is a sign of the divine reign.⁵⁵

With regard to the political movement for the establishment of a State of Israel, Barth supported the Zionist movement fully. He saw the connection between Jewish people and the land to be the essence of Judaism, biblically grounded, and the concrete piece of the covenant. When Israel was founded in 1948, Barth expressed his pleasure and stated that it was proof that Israel is God’s partner in the covenant upon “whose fulfillment the church is founded.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Karl Barth. 1957. *Church Dogmatics* Volume Two. 195.

⁵⁴ Chung. 26.

⁵⁵ Chung. 29.

⁵⁶ Lindsay, Mark R. “Barth, Israel and Jesus: Karl Barth’s Theology of Israel.” *Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations*, Cambridge. 90.

In his later years, Barth wrote often about the relationship between Israel and the Church. F.W. Marquardt, a peer of Barth, writes to him saying, “Israel as such gave me so much to think about and to cope with that I simply did not have the time to look more closely at” other thinkers.⁵⁷ He wrote often about “the Jew” as preserved throughout history being the proof of God’s love and faithfulness. Barth was interested in learning from the experience of Jews, and other faiths as well, for the sake of mutual peace and respect. Towards the end of his life Barth even suggested that the Church should issue a full apology for the “deplorable role of the Church” in history’s violence against Jews. Barth sees the People of Israel as elected by God to serve as witnesses throughout history.

Catholic Voices

The most dramatic shift in the views of the Catholic Church regarding the place of Jews in Catholic theology took place between 1962 and 1965 in the Second Vatican Council (called Vatican II) under Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI. Before Vatican II, Church policies towards Jews were discriminatory and rooted most intensely in the belief that Jews crucified Jesus Christ. This theological idea led to deeply rooted anti-Jewish hatred among the Church and its constituents both in public discourse and Church policy. This hatred manifested in policies of Jews wearing separate clothing, prohibition of “pro-Jewish” ideas, rejection and demonization of Jews not only as ancient Christ killers, but modern communities engaged in ritualistic killing of Christians. In regards to Jews being God’s chosen people, the Church advocated a firm replacement theology that taught Jews were originally God’s chosen people, but when they

⁵⁷Chung. 37.

rejected Christ, they were replaced by the Church as God's favored community. Due to this rejection, Jews were cursed by God for rejecting the savior that God sent them.

Vatican II is believed to have been achieved because of the new social and political order after World War II and the devastation of the Holocaust. The violence against the Jewish community deeply shook the world and many viewed Catholic Church stances as directly fueling the rise of the Third Reich.⁵⁸ While the Church previously had rejected pluralism and secular states and religious freedom, it became clear that the alienation from those modern concepts would be destructive for the Church's power.

One of the first documents that solidified the Church's new stance on Jews began with the *Nostra Aetate* by Paul VI in 1965, which was a declaration on the Church relations with non-Christian religions. In this document he condemned antisemitism, confirmed a spiritual union between Christians and Jews, and rejected the idea that Jews killed Jesus. These pieces were theologically rooted in the commandment to "love your neighbor."⁵⁹

This document by Pope Paul VI reaffirms that the Catholic Church is the "new people of God" but that the "Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God."⁶⁰ This identification was stated both within the document's affirmation of a metaphysical connection between Jews and Christians, but also within a new rejection of antisemitism and violence against the Jewish people.

In an interview with the *National Catholic Register* in 2002, Cardinal Ratzinger (who later served as Pope Benedict XVI) responded to a question of whether Jews remain God's Chosen people. This question was spurred from the document released in 2002 titled

⁵⁸ Phillip L. Walden and Konrad Szocik, "The Attitude of the Catholic Church toward the Jews: An Outline of a Turbulent History." 2017. *Numen*. 64 (2/3): 212.

⁵⁹ Walden.

⁶⁰ *Nostra Aetate*. October 28, 1965. Section 4.

“Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” from the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. In this document it was stated that “campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.”⁶¹

Ratzinger responded to the question of Jewish chosenness by stating that it is clear that God has not left Israel, but that a new covenant was made with the Church after Jews rejected Christ. He stated that “Israel still has a mission to accomplish today. We are in fact waiting for the moment with Israel, too, will say yes to Christ, but we also know that while history still runs its course even this standing at the door fulfills a mission, one that is important for the world. In that way, these people still have a special place in God’s plans.”⁶² He states that while it is believed that eventually Israel will accept Christ, Catholics are now called to stand within the “patience of God,” and trust that history will take its course without their direct action.⁶³

Though there is rejection of Jewish conversion and antisemitism and an acceptance that Jews remain within God’s compassion and election, it is still believed by many that one of the signs of the “End Times” will be the mass conversion of the Jewish people to Christ.⁶⁴ This in itself is another piece of Catholic theology related to the question for what Jews were “chosen”; some answers include that they continue to exist under God’s compassion and punishment, and play a role in God’s metaphysical plan under Catholic doctrine.

Evangelical Voices

The Evangelical community is wide and diverse, like all faith groups. Evangelicalism is an umbrella that covers a wide variety of theological and ideological beliefs. Some widely held

⁶¹ Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and delegates of the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. “Reflections on Covenant and Mission.” August 12, 2002.

⁶² Joseph Ratzinger. 2002. “Thoughts on Jews and Judaism (Interview Excerpts).” October 6, 2002.

⁶³ Jim Cosgrove. 2020. “God’s Chosen People.” *National Catholic Reporter*. August 27, 2020. .

⁶⁴Nicholas Hardesty. “Are the Jews Still God’s Chosen People?” *Catholic Savior*. April 10, 2014.

beliefs that are present in most Evangelical groups, according to historian David Bebbington, are biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. Biblicism means a specific regard for the Bible; crucicentrism is a focus on the work of Christ on the cross who atoned for all sins; conversionism refers to the idea that human beings should convert to Christianity; and activism describes the belief that the gospel of Jesus Christ should be expressed through action.⁶⁵

Though these may be accepted as the pillars of Evangelicalism, how people interpret their meaning and usage varies deeply among denominations, churches, and individuals. Politically, these communities hold a wide spectrum from left to right and can be incredibly politically active on the left and right. Because of this diversity, it is a challenge to choose thinkers who represent “Evangelical thinking” on the concept of Jewish chosenness. While there are many views held from the pulpit and the pews, Evangelical Christians in the public sphere are some of the largest supporters of the State of Israel which is theologically tied to some Evangelicals' conception of the end of days. I will describe this idea more specifically below . Finding thinkers who encompass the spectrum of views held by Evangelical Christians post-Holocaust about Jews as the chosen people was a challenge, and I focus on two.

Frederick Fyvie Bruce (1910-1990), known as F. F., was an influential Evangelical scholar in Great Britain. When he began writing, the academic community looked down on Evangelicals as a group who were mostly isolated in their theological spaces and absent in the academy. Bruce demonstrated to many academics the worthwhile scholarship in and out of secular institutions by Evangelicals. His biographer, David Bebbington, described him as kind, charitable, and respected by those who agreed and disagreed with him. Bruce was a part of a

⁶⁵ David W. Bebbington. (1989). *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman. Pp. 2-17

group called “Brethren” who held onto the “truth of the Gospel and the importance of Christian freedom.”⁶⁶

At the beginning of Bruce’s career, the standard beliefs of Evangelical communities were focused on proving the inherent truth of the scriptures. Bruce contributed to these justifications saying that, “when one’s only commitment is to truth, one is free to follow the evidence wherever it leads.”⁶⁷ It was because of this belief that Bruce scriptures academically. While his own body of work convinced academics of the value of Evangelical scholarship, he also pushed many Evangelicals not to turn away from academic methods of Bible study even if the results led them to views that were not traditionally Evangelical.

F.F. Bruce wrote over 60 books and hundreds of articles which positioned him as a “historian, not a theologian.”⁶⁸ In this identification, he claimed objectivity. On some topics his views strayed from mainstream Evangelical theology, but did his best to hide these from public view. Politically, he was called a “conservative liberal” by one IVCF General Secretary, but he stayed mostly within religious and academic spaces. Though Bruce wrote using academic language and structures of literary criticism, he believed in the biblical writers as reliable historians. Through this language I unearth some of his theological understandings of chosenness.

Many of his books delve into the historical study of the books of the New Testament. One book that illuminates his conceptions of the community of Israel is *Israel and the Nations* (1963). The opening pages of the book include this understanding:

The persistence of the nation of Israel through the centuries, leaderless, landless, fugitive, persecuted, yet always surviving and often itself producing world-leaders, is one of the

⁶⁶ “Who Are the Brethren? - F.F. Bruce - Frederick Fyvie Bruce.” F.F. Bruce.com

⁶⁷ Bruce.

⁶⁸ Bruce, F.F. 1971. *New Testament History*. New York, NY. Doubleday.

outstanding phenomena of our modern world. Small wonder that the things that happened to that small nation in the last millennium B.C. are still relevant to us....⁶⁹

Bruce outlines his view of the history, of the nation of Israel from the Exodus from Egypt to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. He describes their journey from the standpoint of the historical interaction with Israel's "neighbors." He states that the birth of Israel as a nation begins with their departure from Egypt, and the covenant made between them and God at Sinai. He describes revelations as the moment "the people solemnly undertook to keep the covenant into which Yahweh had brought them with Himself; He would be their God (as He had already shown Himself to be), and they would be His people."⁷⁰

Though Bruce does not use the language of "chosenness" he identifies this covenant as something that separates Israel from other nations: "they were to regard themselves as a holy people, i.e., a people set apart for Yahweh."⁷¹ This covenant, according to Bruce, included being holy as God is holy, that is, "righteous, merciful, and true to His pledged word." It is because of this directive that the people are called to embody these qualities.⁷²

Bruce's stated purpose of his book is not theological but historical. In this work, he is focused on the political life of the nation; he considered religiosity somewhat secondary and used it to illuminate political concerns. Because the book ends with the destruction of the Second Temple, and Bruce kept within the realm of historical Israel and not the life of Jesus, I cannot ascertain his view of this covenant.

In order to understand how F.F. Bruce understands the continued relationship between God and the people of Israel, we can look at his interpretations of more of the New Testament.

⁶⁹ F. F. Bruce 1963. *Israel and the Nations: The History of Israel from the Exodus to the Fall of the Second Temple*. Paternoster Publishing. 1.

⁷⁰ Bruce. 15.

⁷¹ Bruce. 15.

⁷² Bruce. 16.

According to his commentary on the Book of Acts, Bruce asserts that after Christ, members of the church were being identified as “Israel,” replacing the Jews of the time as God’s people. He says in response to Acts 15 that “the prophecy finds the fulfillment...(the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David) in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, the Son of David, and the reconstitution of His disciples as the new Israel.”⁷³

These interpretations by Bruce are commentaries based around what is widely known as replacement theory; the idea that the Christian Church has superseded the people of Israel as God’s chosen people through the acceptance of Jesus Christ. Bruce is unique in that he takes a historical perspective and views himself as an academic, and has contributed immensely to Evangelical scholarship and thought by engaging in other modes of study not accepted widely by his community at the time.

In an attempt to show a range of beliefs that may accurately portray the Evangelical spectrum, I turn to Oral Roberts (1918-2009). Oral Roberts’ fame and influence on the Evangelical movement was made through his healing and pioneering televangelism. Roberts is one of the most well known, and controversial, American religious figures of the 20th century.

Born in Oklahoma and raised in a poor family, Roberts became a traveling “faith healer,” who was known for laying his hands and praying over sick people who were then miraculously healed. He traveled the world, had magazines and seed-faith campaigns from which he collected money from believers around the world.⁷⁴ By the 1980s Roberts led a \$120 million a year organization. He began broadcasting on the radio in 1947 and began televising his revivals in 1954. There was much controversy around his methods and the extravagance that he lived among with the money he made from these endeavors.

⁷³ Bruce. 18.

⁷⁴ Bill Sherman. 2009. “Oral Roberts: The Man. The Mission. The Ministry.” *Tulsa World*. December 10, 2009.

Where Bruce was an academic, respected in academic and religious circles alike, Roberts was known by his followers as a man of the people. He seemed like a miracle worker, and a major figure of what is known as “charismatic Christianity,” which is a form of Christianity that emphasizes the works of the Holy Spirit in the everyday life of the believer. Roberts tells a story of being a struggling preacher, flipping the pages of a Bible open to the 3 John 2:; “I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” The day after this, he says, he bought a Buick and God appeared to him to tell him to go out and heal people.⁷⁵

Oral Roberts held a flattering view of the Jewish people. As someone who viewed the Holy Spirit as live and active in the workings of people on Earth, Roberts viewed the creation of the state of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and sponsored the publication of a Hebrew Bible, including Old and New Testaments, that he had distributed in Israel. Roberts saw himself motivated by a desire to convert the Jewish people at the end of days.⁷⁶ It is this project that on which I focus to analyze Roberts’ view on Jews as the Chosen People.

The Hebrew Bible project was a major component in the world vision of Oral Roberts and was intertwined completely with his conceptions of the End of Days. The Hebrew Bible Project was a program designed by Roberts to distribute Bibles in Hebrew throughout Israel, contributing to the mass conversion of Jews, which he saw as a major harbinger of the end of days. Roberts represents philo-Semitism, a “love” for the Jewish people. This “love” was based in the role Roberts saw Jews playing in the end of days, directly related to their return to their holy land.

These views were connected to his interpretation of the Bible. He said once, “people, if you will bless the Jews, God will bless you. But if you curse them, you will be cursed. The Bible

⁷⁵Christopher Reed. 2017. “Oral Roberts. Obituary.” *The Guardian*, December 1, 2017.

⁷⁶Eric Newberg and Samuel Hogan. “Oral Roberts and the Hebrew Bible.” *Spiritus* 3 (2).

says it. History proves it. They are wonderful people and I love them. I love them and make no apology for it.”⁷⁷ Roberts thought that Jews were skeptical of Christians because of the Holocaust and he condemned his antisemitic Christian peers who advocated the supersessionist claim that Christians replaced the people of Israel as God’s chosen people, saying, “God made His covenant with them and someday they will come back to that covenant.”⁷⁸ Though this rejects a commonly held belief, Roberts views were driven by the idea that Jews were incorrect for rejecting Christ and they will one day “return” to the God they rejected. He said, “God has not cast away his ancient people, rather He is preparing their hearts for the mass acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.”⁷⁹ In order to support God in preparing the hearts of the Jews, Roberts committed to the Hebrew Bible project and put his prophecy into the hands of people in Israel and around the world.

For Roberts, Jews were still chosen, but they have rejected their rightful place as God’s people. This idea does not halt Robert’s compassion for Jews; he viewed his involvement as support for the coming end of days, which he understood the Jewish return to Palestine as playing a key role. Before and after Israel was established, Roberts spoke in excitement about this step towards the end of days, “they may not know it yet but they are returning according to God’s timetable.... This is the first preliminary: the returning of the Jews.”⁸⁰ This zest for the end of days was compounded by Roberts’ visit to the country itself. Aligning with biblical prophecies he saw, through the Hebrew Bible Project he not only distributed the Christian Bible to Israelis, but also buried them in caves around the land of Israel for Jews to find when the Antichrist comes to destroy the world.

⁷⁷ Oral Roberts. “You and I Together with God can Change the World.” *America’s Healing Magazine*, October 1955, 15.

⁷⁸ Oral Roberts. 1984. *New Testament Comes Alive, Vol, 2, Acts- Philemon*. 207.

⁷⁹ Oral Roberts. *God’s Timetable for the End of Time*. Tulsa. Helitrope. 1969. 26.

⁸⁰ Oral Roberts. *The Fourth Man and Other Famous Sermons*. Tulsa. Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1958. 71.

F.F. Bruce and Oral Roberts hold vastly different positions within the Evangelical community. F.F. Bruce stood by the idea that the Church replaced the people of Israel as God's chosen and covenant people. He viewed himself as a scholar and often refused to speak publicly about tense issues within the community. Oral Roberts was a charismatic public figure. Controversial for his wealth and how he used his pulpit, Roberts spoke often of his love for the Jewish people, and their continued place as God's chosen people. His public support for the State of Israel and the Jewish people was directly linked to how he saw their role in the end of days.

Conclusion

This handful of Christian thinkers on the topic of Jewish chosenness provides a window into the varied ways people think about it. While some view Jews still as God's chosen people, most thinkers and institutions I discussed above see Christians as a new, or added, chosen people of God. Neibuhr reflects this in his idea of a double covenant, viewing Christians and Jews as possessing a common biblical inheritance. Barth viewed Jews as having a special place in God's divine plan for the world, but sees the initial and continued rejection of Christ as a rejection of God. F.F. Bruce wrote in many of his books about the historical choosing of Israel by God, but affirmed that the Church in their acceptance of Christ replaced them as God's chosen people.

Catholic thinkers and the Catholic Church in official statements faced their harmful views on Jews, and made a dramatic shift with the Vatican II documents. They affirm that the Catholic Church is God's new people, but that it should not be interpreted that Jews have been rejected by God. Oral Roberts stands out in viewing Jews still as God's chosen people, and expressed deep philosemitism.⁸¹ He outwardly expressed his love for Jewish people in regard to their place in the end of days, and viewed their turning to Christ as a part of his leadership.

For many of these thinkers, their conception of the Jewish people's relationship with God translated to their support for the existence of the State of Israel. Their relationships with Jewish communities themselves were shaped by these views and how they acted on them. Barth is known by many as an antisemite because of the harsh language he used towards Jews as modern rejectors of Christ. Oral Roberts also acknowledged Jewish rejection of Christ but held fast to the idea of their divine position. He was respected by members of the Jewish community and had a relationship with the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion.

⁸¹ An expression of interest, respect, and appreciation for Jews by a non-Jew.

This spectrum of thought may feel uncomfortable for Jews. Hearing about ourselves, our place in the Christian divine plan, and our purpose in this world, compounds the inequality experienced in the by the religious and political power that Christian communities hold in the wider world and within which our people exist. Though how we approach chosenness does impact how we interact internally and externally, how Christians widely perceive our chosenness has a greater effect on our existence. Christianity holds a vast political and sociological influence in our world and especially in the United States. Christian interpretations of this concept can profoundly impact interfaith relationships, international diplomacy, and cultural perceptions. Understanding these interpretations can illuminate power dynamics, prejudices, and opportunities for dialogue.

Conclusion

Understanding the diverse perspectives on the idea of Jews as the chosen people as presented by Jewish and Christian thinkers is an important exercise for fostering meaningful dialogue and self-reflection within the Jewish community. What does it mean to be a “holy” people of God? What does it mean for us to be “elected” by God? Is this chosenness only for our benefit and purpose, or does it intrinsically touch the divine plan for non-Jews as well? What were we chosen to do? Who are we chosen to be?

The conversations around Jewish chosenness are both internal and external dialogues. Internally, as Jews, we question our relationship with God and our purpose in this world. We wrestle with what we are religiously called for and what we are divinely given. Externally, how we are perceived as chosen or not chosen deeply affects how we are treated. How people around the world and, more specifically in America because of the power dynamics, how Christians

view Jews paints how we are viewed and consequently treated. In regard to the State of Israel, this concept guides the internal and external conversation around a complex modern political situation bringing about new ways to think about the promised land that is directly connected to biblical chosenness.

Many Jewish thinkers post-Holocaust propose we view chosenness as a call to lead the way in moral and ethical choices in the world; some see our paths for this being Jewish law, others perceive Jewish action and status through secular thought and enlightenment ideas combined with our tradition. Soloveitchik's teachings highlight ethical dimensions of Judaism and emphasize our covenants of fate and destiny; he describes one covenant as one all Jews are a part of and identifies another in which Jews decide to be active in our chosenness. Plaskow challenges traditional notions of chosenness and advocates for a more inclusive and egalitarian reinterpretation of our relationship with God. Kaplan completely rejects the idea of chosenness as it stands in a unique and special relationship between Jews and God; he denies the use of this concept in contemporary society.

Christian thinkers also stand on a wide spectrum of beliefs regarding this idea. Barth offers perspectives on a shared spiritual heritage of Jews and Christians as chosen by God for divine purposes. Roberts emphasizes Jewish chosenness in the context of the end-of-days and the Jewish role in eschatological beliefs. Pope Paul VI stands by the idea that the Catholic Church is the new chosen people of God, but denies that Jews have been rejected or shamed by God; he believed that Jews still hold a place in the holy kingdom. These different perspectives have shaped how these individuals interact with Jewish communities, how Jews have been viewed by Christian communities, and how Christians form opinions and policy related to the State of Israel.

By engaging in these diverse perspectives, as Jews, we can better understand the reality of our place in the world and how we may be viewed by others. This is important to doing the work of justice making and dialogue. However, I want to suggest that the most important reflections must be internal. We must ask ourselves, what chosenness means for each of us as individuals and how each of us wants our communities to live and grow and act in this world. We can reject chosenness like Kaplan, opting for a more humanistic theology. We can see ourselves as elected by God biblically out of love like Wyschogrod, seeing the deep love between God and the Jewish people as special, without taking away from God's love of others. We can choose to be active in our covenants by the words of Soloveitchik, deciding to act as Jews in the world and reaching for high ethical and academic excellence. Whether we choose any of these paths, or none at all, we must wrestle with this piece of our tradition that so deeply inhabits our theology, text, and liturgy.

The concept of Jews as the chosen people permeates our religious identity and shapes our worldview, and is held by others whether we want it or not. It influences how we perceive ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we engage in the world around us. By critically examining and internalizing diverse perspectives on chosenness we can gain a deeper understanding of our heritage. When we do the work of this reflection, and decide for ourselves how we want to interact with this concept, it should help guide our actions in the world. It should inform our personal, communal, and political lives. The acceptance and rejection of this concept, as seen by Jewish thinkers, both can lead to inspiration of upholding ethical values, fostering inclusivity, and contributing positively to society. Whether with intention we choose to be chosen, or reject chosenness altogether, may we strive to live our values in shaping a more just, compassionate, and interconnected world.

Appendix: Applications of Jewish Chosenness Post October 7th

Introduction

The above paper addresses a variety of beliefs on how to understand the idea of Jews as “chosen.” It is clear that this idea painted many thinkers' views on the creation and existence of the modern State of Israel and brought this concept into the contemporary political sphere. Jews and non Jews referenced the biblical promise of the land of Israel as validation for modern Jewish political sovereignty with varying degrees of responsibility; others saw this concept as outdated or not an appropriate claim to land. These theologies are also often tied implicitly or explicitly to the Holocaust, an event that changed Jewish thought deeply.

The events of October 7, 2023 traumatized many around the world, and the continuing war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza has surfaced moral and ethical questions for those in and out of Israel. In the discourse surrounding this historical moment, the idea of Jewish Chosenness, specifically being the people chosen to inhabit the land, has surfaced in many fascinating and disturbing ways. This ongoing conflict is an opportunity to see in real time the ways in which this concept is applied to complex communal and political situations.

Even before October 7th, as seen in the above paper, there were many people who referenced the biblical connection to the land of Israel in their theologies. It is of note that though many may see this as an idea only in religious spaces, religious, progressive, and secular Jews and non-Jews allude to the divine gifting of the land, and the covenant made between God and the people of Israel.⁸² Within the Jewish community many were activated seeing the violence

⁸² Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and non religious Jews. The word religious is tricky as many Jews claim “religiosity” over others. But I as a Reform Jew consider myself religious, just not halachically bound.

perpetrated by Hamas on October 7th, moving some politically to the right, while the violence against Palestinian citizens in Gaza has pushed others away from Zionism and mainstream Jewish institutions. There are growing numbers of Jews who are rejecting this claim of chosenness through their political work.

In this appendix I will not analyze the situation itself, but *how* people are talking about it. I am interested in the ways in which the idea of Jews as chosen is appearing in the discourse of this war. Just as the thoughts presented in the above paper do not represent what all Jews think or what all Christians think, the sources I am presenting here only show a small representation of the spectrum of views.

How people relate to the idea of Jews as God's chosen people post-October 7th varies widely, but presents us with a unique opportunity to see how this theological concept affects a complex political situation. People are writing and speaking about this war and reference this concept to different ends, sometimes to present theological questions and sometimes to present a political opinion or path they want to further through this language.

As seen by the opinions in the paper above, the idea of Jews as God's chosen people includes different pieces, gifts, and responsibilities. Within the discourse on Zionism, the State of Israel, and the current war, the pillar of chosenness used often relies on the divine gift of the land to Abram and his descendants.⁸³ Writing in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, Sol Roth wrote that "the land, according to the biblical testimony, was received from God by covenant and is, therefore, the property of the Jewish people. It is true that, in the course of history, other peoples have occupied and administered this territory. From the Jewish vantage point, however, they did so without legitimacy."⁸⁴ Unique to this modern political conflict in the

⁸³ Genesis 15:18-21.

⁸⁴Sol Roth. "The Right to the Land." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*. 1977. 17 (1): 7.

discussion of the Jewish claim to the land of Israel, many reference the biblical promise by God as a historical right to sovereignty. To say this is the only reason advocates for the modern state support Israel is reductive and simplifies the historical and political realities of the area, however, for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the debates referencing this interpretation.

Part of the covenant made between God and biblical Israel is the possession of the Land of Israel. The ideas that God gave us the land, we were uprooted, and now are returning within our divine right, make up one of the founding narratives of modern political Zionism. Many religious and secular Jews reference these ideas as a sound historical and theological claim to a modern state within the Land of Israel. Many Christians use biblical sources related to the Jewish right to the land to push for wide Christian communal and political support of the state. Since October 7th, the validity of this argument has come into debate.

In the paper above I used mostly academic resources and focused on thinkers who occupied spaces of religious, academic, and sometimes political power. As an analysis of applications of Jewish Chosenness this appendix will use those as well and I will also consider pieces of writing within public discourse, including blog posts, opinion editorials, speeches at rallies, along with religious sources. Because of the current nature of technology, this debate is accessible to more people than ever. There are people with a lot of power who are contributing to these thoughts, along with others who speak from their own small personal platforms.

This paper will look at four ways the concept of Jewish Chosenness is being used: as a claim to land, as political justification, as theological framing, and analysis of its absence. Within these categories are Jews, Christians, Muslims, Israelis, Palestinians, faith leaders, political leaders, organizations, and individuals, who have all referenced this concept in the context of October 7th and its preceding events.

Chosenness as Claim to Land

Even before the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7th, there has been a debate over who has a true and authentic claim to the land. Early and contemporary Zionists referenced a biblical connection, and Jews' unique relationship with God and the land as justification for this claim, which has only increased since this war began. Organizations and individuals place this idea as one of the main road blocks for a lack of support of Israel's claim to land ownership and read it as a misunderstanding of the Jewish "right" to the land.

In a blog in *Mishpacha*, an Orthodox Jewish magazine, Rabbi Avrohom Neuberger argues that when understanding the current war, we must continue to understand the Jewish claim to the land of Israel as rooted in a divine and intrinsic right according to Torah teachings. He says that after the attack even secular Jews are beginning to identify more strongly as Jews, everyone feeling that "we in fact have the right to Eretz Yisrael because we are Hashem's Am Yisrael."⁸⁵

The American Jewish Committee published an article entitled "5 Facts About the Jewish People's Ancestral Connection to the Land of Israel," in which the final fact is that "Israel plays a central role in the Bible." The authors describe God promising the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants and include a note about how many accounts in the books of Judges and Kings have been "proven historically accurate by archaeological finds and Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian sources."⁸⁶ Both the post on *Mishpacha* and the AJC article use this divine connection to argue explicitly for a Jewish claim to the Land of Israel and explicitly support the

⁸⁵ Avrohom Neuberger. *Mishpacha: An Orthodox Jewish Magazine*. October 28, 2023.

⁸⁶"5 Facts About the Jewish People's Ancestral Connection to the Land of Israel." 2024. American Jewish Committee. February 26, 2024.

State of Israel. The AJC reiterates this claim in other pieces as well, such as the post “Responding to False Claims about Israel,” in which one argument against the “false” claim that Israel is a settler colonial enterprise is that “the Jewish people are indigenous to the land of Israel and first achieved self-determination there 3,000 years ago.”⁸⁷

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, a Conservative rabbi and theologian, published an article in Los Angeles’ *Jewish Journal* called “Israel’s Claims to Its Land”; the second reason given on his list, is “God gave the Jews this land.” In this section he argues that this idea of God-given land is powerful to “religious Jews and for many Christians,” and in further research, “the Koran and its official interpreters.”⁸⁸

There are many who use this concept to justify a Jewish claim to the land of Israel. There are many who stop there, and finish their speeches, articles, and blogs with the claim alone. However, I will show in the following section that people often begin with this justified claim to argue other political positions.

Chosenness as Political Justification

Of the ways that people are applying this concept, one of the most interesting is its use to justify a specific political position or governmental action. Though one may expect to see theologically based political justification only from religious thinkers and people who view the Bible as a literal history, references to chosenness are made across the political spectrum in and out of Israel. Because Judaism is weaved into Israeli culture, secular Jews also allude to the Torah when discussing military action, the current war and the events on and after October 7th.

⁸⁷ “Responding to False Claims About Israel.” 2023. American Jewish Committee. November 9, 2023.

⁸⁸ Elliot N. Dorff. 2023. “Israel’s Claims to Its Land.” *Jewish Journal*. November 1, 2023.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a secular Jew; he does not observe Jewish law and may not identify with the Jewish religion, only Jewish Israeli culture. Even so, Netanyahu often references the stories of the Tanakh as a piece of the national collective memory of the Jewish people and of the State of Israel. In a speech on October 28th, 2023, Netanyahu addressed the citizens of Israel to disclose the second stage of the war against Hamas. When talking about the soldiers he said they “join a chain of heroes of Israel that has continued for over 3,000 years, from Joshua, Judah Maccabee and Bar Kochba....”⁸⁹ He referenced the biblical enemy of the Jewish people, Amalek, as a call to remember and fight. At the end of the speech, he quoted from Deuteronomy, “May God make the enemies who rise against us be struck down before them! May he subdue our enemies under them and drown them with deliverance and victory.” Netanyahu used these references as a framing for his war plan. In his view, the Torah, and though not named explicitly until the verse from Deuteronomy, God, both support the State of Israel in their war, in Netanyahu’s government and in his vision for the State. The verses he referenced call for the biblical Israelites to completely eliminate their attackers, a solution many believe Netanyahu is acting upon. Though Netanyahu has made clear he is a secular Jew, by blurring the religious and secular lines, he uses the idea that Jews have a special relationship with God to claim that God gave them possession of the land, which serves as validation to use whatever means necessary to keep and protect it.

Within Israel there are many Religious Zionist voices who are speaking up in support of the State of Israel also on biblical grounding. On October 30th, 2023, there was a letter written by Rabbi Dov Lior⁹⁰ and signed by almost 50 Orthodox rabbis to Netanyahu and the current Israeli government stating that there is no prohibition of Jewish law to bomb hospitals in Gaza if

⁸⁹Benjamin Netanyahu. “Statement by PM Netanyahu.” In *Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs* website. October 28, 2023.

⁹⁰ Former Chief Rabbi of Hebron, head of the “Council of Rabbis of Judea and Samaria.”

the “enemy hides behind a human shield” and if innocent people are killed the divine blame will be on those who stood in front of them.⁹¹ The letter is written with many quotes from the Tanakh⁹² and argues that God will protect Israeli soldiers and will assist in the release of the hostages. To close the letter, the author uses a verse from Deuteronomy that references God’s vengeance towards the enemies of Israel and how God will “cleanse the land of God’s people.”⁹³ These explicit biblical references draw from stories of destruction and the defeat of biblical Israel’s enemies. For these rabbis, God chose the Jewish people to possess the land of Israel, and it is the responsibility of the Jewish State and its citizens to protect Jewish sovereignty at any cost. They address what may be a concern for religiously observant Jews, the halachic allowance for violence. Though killing is wrong, this letter says that the law to protect and conquer the land triumphs, explicitly supporting a governmental action through the lens of the Jew’s unique relationship with God and the land.

Lior has made other halachic rulings backed by what he understands as the divine right for Jews to own, occupy and govern the land. For example, regarding granting permission to violate the laws of Shabbat to halt aid trucks from entering into Gaza, he writes, “it is permissible for anyone who can prevent this and disrupt it so that the evil people that are fighting against the people of Israel, who want to destroy the people of Israel and the state of Israel, will not receive food” even if it calls for driving on Shabbat.⁹⁴ Lior is viewed by many in the Jewish community as an extremist, and his explicitly violent views are seen by those Jews as contradictory to Jewish values.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Translation from the Hebrew, letter (posted on the telegram account of Amit Segal, Israeli journalist: https://twitter.com/Nimrod_Flash/status/1719080045887521054

⁹² Torah, Neeviim, Ketuvim

⁹³ Deuteronomy 32:43

⁹⁴ *Middle East Eye*. 2024. “Controversial Israeli Rabbi Says Breaking Shabbat Rules to Block Aid to Gaza is ‘Permissible.’”

⁹⁵ <https://forward.com/news/breaking-news/202794/extremist-rabbi-issues-ruling-saying-jewish-law-pe/>

In January 2024 the Jerusalem International Convention Center hosted the Israeli Right's "Victory for Israel" Conference. This conference, organized by the settler organization Nachala, hosted far right members of Knesset including National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir. The conference's slogan was "Only settlements bring security: Returning to Gaza Strip and Northern Samaria."⁹⁶ Continuing to voice the views of the ultra-right members of the religious Zionist community, Gvir said in a speech, "we need to go back home because that's the Torah, that's historical justice, and that's what's right." Though this conference was not made up entirely by religiously observant Jews, many speakers referenced Torah in their justification of displacing the Palestinian population and building Jewish settlements in Gaza.

Outside of Israel there are an array of voices who also use this biblical grounding to support the State of Israel in their campaign. In an article on Chabad.com called "It Is Time to Declare the Truth about the Jews and Israel," Dovid Margolin, argued that the Torah tells us how to act in this moment of risk for Israel; that military experts must lead the way to fully defeat the enemy. The author explicitly says that as "God's chosen people" we are responsible for protecting the Jewish sovereignty of the land. Quoting the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Margolin wrote that "our right to dwell in Israel and to strongly protect ourselves...comes directly from God, creator of heaven and earth."⁹⁷

Similar comments were argued by Pastor John Hagee, who is the founder of Christians United for Israel, the largest Zionist organization in the United States. According to their website their policy is committed to "Israel's strength, security, and sovereignty."⁹⁸ Though explicit theological language around Jews as chosen is absent from most of their materials, they state

⁹⁶Yori Yalon. "Map of would-be Gaza Settlements Presented at Controversial Right-Wing Conference." 2024. *Israel Hayom*. January 29, 2024.

⁹⁷"It Is Time to Declare the Truth about the Jewish and Israel - the Torah Grants Israel to the Jews and Obligates them to Protect Her People." October 26, 2023. From *Chabad.org*.

⁹⁸Christians United for Israel. 2023. "Policies - Christians United for Israel." September 25, 2023.

multiple times on the Website that “as Christians, it is our biblical and moral responsibility—as well as our great privilege—to stand with Israel and support the Jewish people.”⁹⁹ Hagee spoke at the March for Israel, a large pro-Israel demonstration that took place at the National Mall in Washington D.C., on November 14th, 2023. His presence was controversial, being called out by progressive pro-Israel groups like J Street, claiming that he has a history of “hateful comments” against Jews.¹⁰⁰ In his speech, he referenced the “many cowards [who] are remembered only for their failed attempt to destroy God’s chosen people.”¹⁰¹ He used biblical allusions again and again to call for American and Christian support of the Israeli government.

From different points of a theological spectrum, there are many who continue to use this biblical grounding to support the actions of the Israeli government, or encourage support of their military efforts. Whether an allusion or explicit belief in the Bible as true, this use of Jewish chosenness continues to be raised.

Chosenness as Theological Framing

The actions of October 7th posed a theological challenge for many religious Jews and Christians who identify with the concept of Jews as the Chosen people. Many asked how God could do this to the Jewish people, like other tragedies in the past, but “unlike previous Jewish suffering, this occurred in the land God promised us.”¹⁰² Moshe Taragin, an Orthodox Jewish teacher at a *yeshiva* in Gush Etzion, wrote in *The Jerusalem Post* that the Jewish collective is questioning “who we are as a nation and our divine rights to the Land of Israel.”¹⁰³ In his piece,

⁹⁹Christians United for Israel. 2023. “Learn - Christians United for Israel.” December 21, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Erik Ortiz. “Divisive Megachurch Pastor Draws Criticism for Roles at March for Israel. 2023. NBC News. November 15, 2023.

¹⁰¹Official Christians United For Israel Youtube. 2023. “Pastor John Hagee Speaks at the March for Israel” November 14, 2023.

¹⁰²Moshe Taragin. 2023. “Why Did God Let Hamas Massacre Israeli Jews in the Promised Land?” *The Jerusalem Post*. November 3, 2023.

¹⁰³ Taragin.

he does not give an answer as to “why,” but insists as Jews, we must stay true to our faith in God, knowing that we cannot truly comprehend God’s ways. Taragim suggests that it is appropriate to ask these questions. Questions help confirm our belief and active engagement with God.

Shmuley Boteach, American rabbi and television host, also referenced God in a blog published in *The Times of Israel*, “Where was God on October 7th?” He insisted that as Jews we not “let God off the hook...rather we say ‘Lord, we, your servants, are decent people...in the name of all that is righteous we implore You, to protect our children. Your children, so that all the peoples of the world will see Your great hand in history.’”¹⁰⁴ Boteach argues that we have a right to be angry, and like many of our ancestors before us, as God’s chosen people we are responsible for pushing back and being active participants in the living covenant.

There are other Jewish thinkers presenting a theological framing of October 7th using this concept. Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, a Dutch-born Israeli rabbi and philosopher, authored a piece posing the idea that October 7th was God’s way of preventing a civil war in Israel. According to Cardozo, foundations of Zionism have been shaken through the violence on October 7th, but Israelis rising up and uniting in support of their communities is a light from the darkness that shows God’s hand onto God’s people. He writes, “the Jews are God’s stake in human history. I am witness to a supreme moment in that history.”¹⁰⁵

In addition to the application of this concept by Jewish thinkers, Christians have used this idea to explain theologically the events starting with October 7th. Chosen People Ministries is an organization who in their stated doctrine “believe God chose the Jewish people as his bridge of redemption to a sinful world”¹⁰⁶ and whose main goal is to pray for as well as evangelize the

¹⁰⁴Shmuley Boteach. 2024. “Where was God on October 7th?” *The Times of Israel Blogs*. January 9, 2024.

¹⁰⁵Nathan Lopes Cardozo. 2023. “ Hamas October 7 Massacre was God Stopping an Israeli Civil War.” *The Jerusalem Post Opinions*. November 17, 2023.

¹⁰⁶Chosen People Ministries. 2023. “Doctrinal Statement - Chosen People Ministries.” August 3, 2023.

Jewish people. They published on their Website a description of the theological terms of the “violent act of antisemitism against Israel” on October 7th as an act of Satan. They say that Hamas’ hatred of the Jewish people is the work of Satan on earth whose goal is to “destroy God’s chosen people.”¹⁰⁷ The correct response for “believers” is to denounce antisemitism, get educated on it, and “more importantly” pray for the “the peace of Jerusalem, for the protection of God’s people, and for the salvation of all peoples before God’s throne.”¹⁰⁸ Chosen People Ministries frames the acts on October 7th as part of a larger theological battle between Satan and God. God’s people, the Jews, are a part of a larger plan for the universe, and Satan, through the hands of historical enemies, has always sought to destroy them. October 7th is another event in this metaphysical battle.

There are others who take this position further. Catholics for Israel posted a blog on December 16th, 2023 where the author uses texts from the Bible to outline how the events of October 7th could have been prophesied biblically.¹⁰⁹ They use the words of Deuteronomy to show how God’s people, Israel, have returned to their land but have turned away from God and were hence punished. The author references the large Buddha statue that was present at the Nova Music Festival as an example of God’s chosen people turning to idols. This disturbing interpretation ends with an affirmation that God will always send salvation to Israel, and that modern Israel will be avenged by God in the end.

Chosenness in its Rejection or Absence

¹⁰⁷Chosen People Ministries. 2023. “The October 7 Massacre: Violent Act of Antisemitism Against Israel.” Chosen People Ministries. December 4, 2023.

¹⁰⁸Chosen People Ministries.

¹⁰⁹Doron Scheiner. 2023. “Biblical Prophecy About the October 7 Massacre.” Catholics for Israel. December 16, 2023.

It is clear that much of the discourse that applies this concept is used in support of a pro-Israel view, whether this be in favor of the state or the people. Because this concept is so present within the discourse on the State of Israel, when a piece of work advocating for other positions does not include it, its absence appears as a rejection of the concept of Jews as the chosen people of God.

There are many organizations in and out of Israel who use universal theological language. A.J. Hendry writes in a blog on the platform Substack, “Dear Christians, the Palestinians are God’s children too” attempts to reach Christians who may only be seeing some peoples as “God’s children.”¹¹⁰ He writes that some people tell him that “Israel is just defending themselves, that they are God’s chosen people, that this is their land.” Hendry argues that regardless “of whether there is any truth to those claims or not, none of that justifies the horrific treatment of the Palestinian people.”¹¹¹ Hendry rejects this claim both by presenting a theology where God loves and cares for all people, along with an explicit rejection that this concept is a justification for the ongoing actions of the State of Israel.

Moti Mizrahi’s article “Revisiting Yeshayahu Leibowitz” was acquired by JSTOR Daily earlier in 2023, but was posted with an editor’s note saying “this essay was acquired in July 2023 and was not written in response to Hamas’s attack on Israel. It nevertheless provides useful historical context to current events.”¹¹² This article was posted on October 18, 2023 and provides the lens of a religious thinker, visited earlier in this paper, who rejected the use of the Jewish religion as a political tool and “as a justification for Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian

¹¹⁰ A.J. Hendry 2023. “Dear Christians, the Palestinians are God’s Children too.” *When Lambs are Silent with A.J. Hendry* (blog). October 21, 2023.

¹¹¹ Hendry.

¹¹² Moti Mizrahi. 2023. “Revisiting Yeshayahu Leibowitz.” *JSTOR Daily*, October.

territories.” The article revisits Leibowitz’s thoughts around divine right to the land, sharing that he saw these claims as “tantamount to a form of tyranny.”

Jonathan Ofir, an Israeli musician and blogger also writes about Leibowitz in an opinion piece for *Mondoweiss* in December of 2023;¹¹³ he describes Leibowitz’s use of the term “Judeo-Nazi’s” after an Israeli Supreme Court judge legalized the use of torture for the interest of the state. He says that he had always thought that Leibowitz was exaggerating, but that the current actions of the Israeli government in Ofir’s eyes, and specifically tweets from Jerusalem’s Deputy Mayor Arie King with pictures of naked Palestinian men in Gaza with the biblical reference, “eradicate the memory of the Amalek, we will not forget,” now represents a genocidal regime.

There are other major figures who may allude to the language of chosenness. American President Joseph Biden made a speech on October 18th, 2023 about Israel in which he said Israelis “are not alone. As long as the United States stands—and we will stand forever—we will not let you ever be alone.”¹¹⁴ During his speech, Biden discussed grief, his plan to send money and weapons to Israel, and his desire to also send Palestinian citizens in Gaza aid. At the end of this speech he declared, , “we are all human beings created in the image of God.... In the darkness, to be the light unto the world is what we’re about.”¹¹⁵

Biden alludes to the biblical text by quoting the creation story in Genesis when God made humanity in God’s image. He also references the idea of being a light unto the nations, though he employs humanistic language. Biden refers to the modern State of Israel and the United States

¹¹³Adam Horowitz. 2023. “I Used to Think the Term “Judeo-Nazis” Was Excessive. I Don’t Any Longer.” *Mondoweiss*. December 11, 2023.

¹¹⁴ Joe Biden. CNBC Television. 2023. “President Biden Delivers Remarks in Israel.” October 18, 2023.

¹¹⁵ Biden.

as wanting to “be the light unto the world.” The biblical allusion and generalized language inadvertently rejects the particularistic idea of Jews as God’s chosen people.

There are many Jewish organizations in and out of Israel that do not reference the concept of Jewish chosenness. Rabbis for Ceasefire is a group of rabbis and Jewish clergy students devoted to a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.¹¹⁶ They held a world wide event called “Shabbat for Ceasefire,” along with other religious events meant to push others to call for a ceasefire. In none of their materials is the idea of Jews as the chosen people, having a special relationship with God, or claim to the land of Israel. It is in this absence we can find a rejection and see this idea being referenced in many other Jewish writings.

¹¹⁶ Rabbis4ceasefire.com

Conclusion

When I began working on my rabbinic capstone, I was interested in the academic understanding of Jewish Chosenness because it was something that had always made me uncomfortable. Researching how chosenness is understood by Jewish and Christian thinkers provided a wider view, and I appreciated being able to wrestle with this idea. And then October 7th happened.

As a Jew, a future rabbi, an Israeli citizen, my paper became heavier than I could have imagined. I read post-Holocaust Jewish theology and could only think about how the violence on October 7th is provoking similar questions around our relationship with God. I researched Christian theology related to the contemporary State of Israel, and could only see so-called allies in their support of the Israeli government. It is because of my pain and grief that I decided to explore how this concept is being applied at this moment.

The events of October 7th, 2023 and the continuing war has provided a fascinating case to study how this concept is applied for an array of purposes. I will not attempt to explain the full complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it is clear that understandings of Jewish chosenness are woven into the public discourse of a complex contemporary political conflict. Though this has always been the case with regard to Zionism, this moment enhanced and highlights how it is used.

Public support for Israel is down because of the escalating tensions of this war.¹¹⁷ This has led to many people and organizations attempting to prove a Jewish right to the land of Israel. As seen above, some of the arguments towards a Jewish claim to the land are rooted in biblical texts, and the promise of Israel to us by God. This is often the foundation then for political justifications. Politicians and lay people, religious and non-religious alike, are using Jewish

¹¹⁷ Jones, Jeffrey M. 2024. "Americans' Views of Both Israel, Palestinian Authority Down." *Gallup.com*.

chosenness as a framework for support of the government of Israel's actions in Gaza. From the most disturbing settlement rabbis claiming that one can break the laws of Shabbat to harm Palestinians to the secular Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu referencing biblical texts as allusions for his political choices, chosenness remains a reigning metaphor and understanding.

There are many religious people who have been faced with similar questions as the post-Holocaust thinkers and have asked where God was on October 7th. How can we understand this violence theologically? The framework of Jews as chosen by God, and our promised land, underscores much of this conversation as well.

Within this discourse there are many who do not reference this idea or who explicitly reject it. Jewish groups have come to use the slogan “not in our name” to reject the use of Jewish tradition or religious concepts as justification for the violence against people in Gaza. Other Jews attempt to prove the divinity of all people and use a humanistic theological framework that in its structure rejects the idea that there is one people who may be chosen or privileged over others.¹¹⁸

This appendix focused on public discourse of the idea of Jewish chosenness within this specific political context. It is important then to mention the imbalance of power of the sources that I drew from. President Biden has more power referencing a humanistic theology than an individual's blog. A large, well-funded organization has more power in utilizing this concept than an opinion piece in the Times of Israel. However, we live in a time in history where people from a wide spectrum of privilege and power can both read and share their thoughts to a broad audience online. All of these views contribute to the larger understanding of this conflict.

¹¹⁸ Alaa Elassar. 2023. ““Not in Our Name”: Jewish Peace Activists across the US call for Immediate Ceasefire and Justice for Palestinians.” *CNN.com*.

When I chose this subject over a year ago, I had hoped that by doing this research I would have a clearer image on my own theological understanding of this. My opinions now have, of course, been shaped deeply by the way this idea has been used in the previous 5 months. I remain uncomfortable with the idea of Jews as the chosen people, partially because of how I see it being used to justify political policies at this moment, and partially because my own theology does not involve a God who “chooses” at all. It is clear how this idea is pervasive in the largest Jewish denominations and I continue to be deeply disturbed by its use.

As seen by the Jewish thinkers in Chapter 1, one can use the acceptance and the rejection of chosenness as inspiration for upholding ethical and moral values. It is not just a Jewish phenomenon to interpret biblical content to be applied to modern political contexts, but I pray that personally and communally we reevaluate the concept of our chosenness to guide us towards truth and justice.