

“You Have Chosen Us from Amongst the Nations”

The unique relationship between God and the Jewish people is a basic principle that permeates the Bible and Talmud. We greet Shabbat with the words, “He chose us and sanctified us from amongst the nations,” and Shabbat closes with the words, “He distinguished between Israel and the nations.”

At the same time, our literature expresses God’s concern for the fate of all of mankind. Thus, in the Amidah of the High Holy days we look forward to the time when all of mankind “will form one union to practice Your will with a perfect heart.” And, in the Aleinu prayer, recited three times daily, we anticipate the time when the world will be rectified and accept the Divine Kingdom. Finally, in the prophet Tzephaniah’s vision, all the nations will turn to God in one clear voice (3:9).

Obviously, both motifs are central to Judaism’s worldview. Unfortunately, different individuals and groups stress one of the motifs without giving proper weight to the other. We frequently encounter confusion and provincialism in discussions of this fundamental, sensitive and critical subject.

We have therefore asked a diverse group of thinkers to explore and explain the profound meaning of the chosenness of Israel. It is remarkable that in spite of the rampant anti-Semitism pervading the contemporary world, our contributors are able to look ahead to the time when the nations will finally recognize and appreciate the mission of the Jewish people in fulfilling the ultimate purpose of man.

By Jonathan Blass

HaRav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook’s understanding of what makes *Am Yisrael* God’s Chosen People had practical as well as theoretical relevance for his generation, and continues to be vitally important to this day. It formed the basis for Rav Kook’s cooperation with the non-religious and anti-religious pioneers of his period (see *Iggerot HaR’Iyyah*, *Iggeret* 555) and underlies the belief of his disciples that the founding of even a secular Jewish state has not only political but also religious significance. Rav Kook teaches us that what distinguishes Israel from the nations of the world is its *neshamah*—its national essence.

To understand this further, let us look at the individual human being. The identity of an individual is not the sum total of either his character traits or of the beliefs he professes. Nor is it the history of his actions. These are but expressions of his identity, which may vary over time. For example, if a person, over the course of his life, becomes more generous, impulsive or thoughtful, or if he chooses to alter his behavior—his identity, nevertheless, remains unchanged; he has not become someone else in the process. A parent who in his later years suffers from Alzheimer’s has not lost his identity along with his mental faculties. He has not been replaced by another. He is the same human being—the same parent—now ill and intellectually handicapped. For this reason he remains entitled to the same respect from his children that the Torah granted him when he became a parent.

A human being is a single, indivisible, spiritual reality. This reality (when not frustrated by external obstacles) is expressed in one’s character traits, which is then manifested even more externally in one’s actions. Identity expresses itself in character traits; character traits then reveal themselves in action.

Similarly, on a national level, the identity of Israel is a given reality. It is this fundamental identity that sets Israel apart from other nations. This *neshamah* also influences our national character: *Chazal* say that Jews are “believers, children of believers” (*Shabbat* 97a), and are “bashful, merciful [and] charitable” (*Yevamot* 79a; *Devarim Rabbah* 3). Thus, whereas one might think that it is only the *mitzvot* that set Israel apart; according to Rav Kook, the *mitzvot* are the external expression of Israel’s existing spiritual identity. For example, the Torah’s “righteous laws” (*Devarim* 4:8), which mandate justice in labor relations and in the payment of damages, were not artificially imposed at Sinai on a nation to whom this behavior was foreign. This group of laws was a Divine codification of “the probity inherited from Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov”

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(*Guide to the Perplexed* III, 49). Rav Kook writes:

One might think that the entire difference between Israel and the nations is that difference [in the realm of action] which is given prominence by the active observance of mitzvot This view is mistaken.... It is the element of neshamah that sets Israel’s character apart as a distinct unit, unique in the world. From that difference spring all the differences in behavior [i.e., mitzvot], and even when these last are impaired [by lack of observance], that impairment cannot touch the ... psychic element from which they derive. Therefore the difference between Israel and the nations will remain forever (Orot Yisrael 5:7).

What is the nature of Israel’s national identity? What is *Am Yisrael*? Rav Kook teaches that Israel’s identity is one with God’s wisdom and will. By its nature, *Am Yisrael* strives to realize those truths embodied in the Torah. As Rav Kook writes: “The Mind [*sechel*] of Israel, because of its Divine spiritual source, is a Divine Mind, and its will is a Divine will” (*Orot Hatechiyah* 11). “The aspiration to fulfill the Divine Ideals ... has manifested itself in Israel, in the nature of its national *neshamah*” (*Da’at Elokim, Ikei Hatzon* 136).

But what of those Jews who are seemingly anti-religious? Aren’t there Jews who identify with the nation of Israel but who deny the existence of God and whose behavior is antithetical to that which is prescribed by the Torah? Are they also included in Rav Kook’s definition of *Am Yisrael*?

Unquestionably, yes. Rav Kook taught that the identity of Israel is inseparable from the God of Israel, so much so that “even Jewish *apikorsut* (heresy) is filled with faith and sanctity, far more than all the faiths of all the Gentile nations combined” (*Middot HaR’Iyya, Emunah* 10).

This is because Israel cannot disengage from God. The reality of a Jew’s being links him to God immutably. Everything he does is influenced by who he is—a *neshamah* whose most natural expression is pure faith in the God of Israel. At times, when the *neshamah*, hindered by external influences, is frustrated by its inability to assert its essence, it manifests itself in *apikorsut* against what it sees as obstacles to self-expression.

The beliefs, ethics and actions mandated by the Torah are the full and true manifestation in the physical world of an existing metaphysical reality, the Jewish *neshamah*. These principles cannot exist in this world independently of the Jewish nation, a people for whom they are not an artificial imposition but a natural expression of their very being.

Only Israel is capable of accepting the faith in the true God—“The Lord is one” (Devarim 6, 4)—in its entirety and goodness.... The Gentiles have not yet reached that point, and what has been introduced of faith in God into their environment from the light of Israel, not through an evolutionary process suitable to their natures, is in conflict with their individual personalities and strikes at their culture.... Eventually their sense of alienation will triumph ... and, as a result, anti-Semitism will increase (Orot Hatechiyah 54).

But aren’t the Torah and the will of God universal in scope

If we know our greatness, then we know ourselves, and if we forget our greatness, we forget ourselves.

“Delve again and again into the Torah, since everything is contained within it” [Pirkei Avot 5])? Doesn't Rav Kook negate this universality by identifying the Torah and the will of God with the national identity of a single nation—*Am Yisrael*—and by asserting that the beliefs of the Torah conflict with the identities and cultures of the multitude of Gentile nations?

On the contrary, the Maharal teaches that the Gentiles rejected the Torah when it was offered to them not because the Torah is ethnocentric—suited only to the particularity of Israel—but for exactly the opposite reason (*Derech Chayim* 5:22; *Chiddushei Aggadot Avodah Zarah* 2b; *Gevurot Hashem* 42). The nations of the world refused to accept the Torah precisely because the Torah is universal. Chazal write, for example, that the nations descending from Yishmael and Esav rejected the Torah because it prohibits theft and murder (*Sifri, parashat Vezot Haberachab*). These rejections were not indications of the Torah's lack of universalism, but rather of the fundamental inability of the nations of Yishmael and Esav to identify with the totality of the Torah's universal truth. While Israel is universal and identified with the universality and will and mind of God, not limited by any particularistic inclination, the Gentiles are particularistic. Rav Kook follows in this tradition when he teaches that “Israel's history is the epitome of world history; there is no movement in the world among any of the nations that does not have its parallel in Israel. Its faith is the epitome of faith, the source of idealism and goodness, which it bestows on all other faiths” (*Orot Yisrael* 1:1).

Rav Kook was aware of the reluctance on the part of many Jews to acknowledge the uniqueness and greatness of their national character (as opposed to most Americans who—certain of the universality of their national values and unafraid that these are tainted by ethnocentricity—believe that the superiority of the United States over all other nations, past and present, is self-evident). Rav Kook argues that this is a mistake: *It is a fundamental error to shrink from our preeminence, to cease acknowledging: “You have chosen us”* [“Atah bechartanu”]. *We are not only different from all other nations—different and separate by virtue of our extraordinary history that is unparalleled by that of any other nation—we are also better and greater than any nation. If we know our greatness, then we know ourselves, and if we forget our greatness, we forget ourselves; and a nation that forgets itself must be small and low. Only through forgetting who we are do we*

remain small and low, and forgetting who we are means forgetting our greatness (*Orot Hatechayah* 5).

Because of the Divine, and hence universal, nature of Israel's identity, the uniqueness of the Jewish national character does not negate the universal role the people of Israel play in history. Israel's sanctity is an open expression of the sanctity of Man, a sanctity which is hidden and dormant in all people (*Hakodesh Haklali* 13) and which gives life to the particular character and culture of every nation, linking each of them to God.

Because Israel encapsulates Man at his ideal, love of Israel, asserts Rav Kook, does not engender a hatred of all others but rather the opposite: “Love of Israel [*ahavat Yisrael*] requires loving Man” (*Orot Yisrael* 4:5). “Loving man” does not mean loving evil men or Man's evil, but rather it means loving those universal Divine qualities in each man that make him a Man.

Israel's role, writes Rav Kook, requires it to be “both ‘a nation that dwells alone’ and ‘a light to the nations’” (*Orot Yisrael* 5:3). Israel carries out this role, not by blurring the distinctions between itself and the other nations, but by achieving a full national expression of its identity, “by being who we need to be” (*Orot Yisrael* 5:5). “A kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Shemot 19:6)... stand[ing] strong and free, having been restored to its completeness and to its happiness” (*Yisrael Vetchiyato* 15), Israel brings all of mankind to the acceptance and fulfillment of God's will, with each nation joyfully making its own particular national contribution to the whole. Rav Kook writes:

Until the time of the future redemption we are teaching the nations of the world only of their obligations: morality and justice derived from knowledge of the true God... But the world has no desire to accept obligations. If it does accept them, a residue of resentment is directed at whoever is most responsible for imparting that knowledge that prevents the barbaric spirit from pursuing all of its desires. But when it comes time for the light of the world to be revealed, the world will know that we have conferred upon it ways of life filled with joy... Therefore “Ten men of all the languages of the nations will hold the garment of a Jewish man” (Zecharya 8:23) (Orot Yisrael 5:15).

Rav Kook teaches that it is Israel's identity, the very reality of its being, its essential holiness, that distinguishes it from other nations. But it is this essence—this special connection with God—that will enable Israel to confer on all of mankind a life alive with meaning, “a life filled with joy.” **JA**

By Chaim Eisen

“Segullah”: Privilege or Purpose?

A palpable awkwardness almost inevitably obfuscates any discussion of our perceived identity as the “*Am Segullah*”¹—usually rendered as God's exclusive, special treasure among the nations. At best, regarding ourselves as “chosen” smacks of a chauvinistic sense of self-endowment; at worst, it evokes comparisons to Nietzsche's “*Urbemensch*” or Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov. If construed as conferring inborn privileges, such a doctrine's corollaries can include pervasive xenophobia and outright bigotry.

Yet, “*segullah*” elsewhere in the Bible denotes accumulated royal property,² provided with designated purpose, not prerogatives. Explains Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, “*Segullah* ... does not mean that God does not belong to any other people, but that this people must not belong to any other god, must not acknowledge any other being as a god.”³ Thus, we read the Divine promise, “to set you highest, above all the nations that He made, for praise and for renown and for glory,”⁴ as not a gift but a summons. Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno comments, “*And to set you highest—to understand and to instruct [all the nations]... ‘For praise and for renown and for glory’—of God, may He be Blessed.*” Similarly, Rabbi Hirsch observes that the “praise,” “renown” and “glory” are what we respectively offer, so to speak, to God: by serving historically as a demonstration of Divine providence and thereby *praising* God's dominion in human destiny, by bearing the Torah that renders God's will *renowned* as the source of our spiritual mission and vitality, and by faithfully fulfilling that Torah and thus *glorifying* God and spreading His light throughout the world. In this vein, he stresses, Yisrael's “spiritual and moral impact on human consciousness ... is the ultimate purpose of [its] historic mission in the world.”⁵

Recognition of this responsibility permeates Scripture. “I, God, have called you in righteousness and shall hold your hand; and I shall safeguard you and give you for a covenant of the people, for a light of the nations.... I have given you as a light of the nations, that My salvation may be to the end of the earth.... And nations will go by your light, and kings by the gleam of your shining.”⁶

Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak) explains, “The nations will go by the light of Yisrael—they and their kings and officers.” Furthermore, notes Rabbi David Altschuler, this

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promise obligates us: “They will learn from you the ways of God, and you will illuminate their eyes.”⁷

In this light, we can appreciate the implications of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi's famous simile, “Yisrael among the nations is like the heart among the organs [of the body].”⁸ While a body bereft of a heart is clearly dead, a heart dissociated from a body is equally pointless. The body can only function properly and attain its goals when, as an organic whole, it is complete—comprising both a heart and a full complement of organs. Perhaps alluding to this critical interplay, the Bible explicitly likens Yisrael among the nations to the *kohanim* (priests) within Yisrael. God stipulated at Sinai, “And you shall be to me a kingdom of *kohanim* and a holy nation,”⁹ a role the prophet Yeshayahu envisions actualized in the future.¹⁰ We should consider the implications of both these metaphors in elucidating Yisrael's unique role in the world.

The Kohanim and Yisrael, the Heart and the Body

The analogy of the priesthood is especially illuminating. The primary duty of the *kohanim* was pedagogical—to instruct the children of Yisrael concerning all the laws that God told them through Moshe.¹¹ Thus, the prophets likewise portray their mandate.¹² In practice, apart from relatively brief respites for Temple service, the *kohanim* (and, by extension, the *Levi'im* and others drawn to the task)¹³ were charged with teaching and guiding the nation.

The necessity of a sanctified caste, consecrated to spirituality and education, is clear. Yisrael is bidden to function as a normal, autonomous nation, engaging in all the normative pursuits of nationhood; yet, simultaneously, it is vested with the responsibility to advance the world toward its Divine goals. A constant danger perforce inheres in this dialectic. We each seek our individual worldly niches—mindful of the Talmud's conclusion that, for “each and every one, the Holy One Blessed be He beautified one's trade to him”¹⁴—to ensure the filling of every requisite role in the nation and world. Understanding that this is a crucial aspect of our devotion to Godliness and perfection of His world, we rightly strive indefatigably for professional excellence. But what guarantees that, while doing so, we do not lose sight of the spiritual purpose, which we intend all our efforts ultimately to achieve? What prevents righteous dedication to vocational success from degenerating into all-consuming obsession—reducing our lofty intent to actualize in our careers the Mishnah's mandate that “all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven”¹⁵ to mere lip service? The Torah's solution includes designating certain individuals from birth for total immersion in spirituality and holiness. Their training precludes any preoccupation with worldliness and equips them to serve as the essential heart

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of the nation. Rambam explains, “[The tribe of] Levi did not merit the inheritance of [land in] *Eretz Yisrael* and its spoils with its brethren, because it was separated to serve God and to minister to Him and to teach His upright ways and righteous laws to the multitudes” (see note 13).

Like the heart, pumping life-giving blood throughout the body’s extremities, the *kohanim* and their associates mediate the connection that spiritually vivifies the nation’s periphery. As such, “*kohanim* are diligent”;¹⁶ one conscious of his role as heart is never quiescent. Similarly, *kohanim* are notoriously irascible; being so intimately bonded to the essence precludes indifference.¹⁷ Thanks to them, terrestrial means, however important, do not obscure transcendent ends.

Finally, as the heart unites all the organs of the body it supports, through the blood coursing equivalently through them all, so the *kohanim* ensure the integrity of the nation as an organic whole, unified by the Torah’s mission. Thus, Hillel bids us to embrace peace specifically by invoking the paradigmatic *kohen*, who personified, as the first high priest, the very heart of the *kohanim*: “Be from among the disciples of Aharon—loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity and bringing them close to the Torah.”¹⁸ Strife results from the conviction that attaining one’s objectives entails thwarting those of others. True peace among us—as opposed to mere appeasement—is predicated upon appreciating that we all share the same Torah-ordained goals, exemplified by the *kohanim*, and our disparate endeavors are simply different means to advance them. With this realization, strife is as absurd as a conflict between two hands, which, though performing different functions, are obviously parts of the same body. This is the lesson of the *kohanim*, the heart of the nation.

Yisrael as the Kohanim—and the Heart—of the World

These conclusions empower us to elucidate God’s promise, “Now, if you truly obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My *segullah* from among all peoples, for all the world is Mine.”¹⁹ Indeed, these words immediately precede the aforementioned metaphor, “And you shall be to me a

kingdom of *kohanim* and a holy nation” (see note 9). Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno comments, “‘*You shall be My segullah from among all peoples*’—Even though all humankind is more precious to Me than all the rest of terrestrial creatures ... you will be ‘*My segullah*’ from among all of them. ‘*For all the world is Mine*’—and the difference between you [and other peoples] is one of degree; for, indeed, ‘*all the world is Mine*,’ and the pious of the nations of the world are precious to Me without doubt.” Moreover, Rabbi Hirsch explains “*for all the world is Mine*” as part of the mission: “The relationship that you are to establish now between you and Me ... initiates the renewal of the normal relationship that should exist between ‘all the world’ and Me. After all, by their destiny, all people and all peoples are Mine, and I am dedicating them to be Mine.” Yisrael’s designation as God’s “firstborn,” he observes, means that Yisrael is God’s first, but not only, child.²⁰ “As the first among the nations, [Yisrael] must lead all the other peoples on the road back to God and to His Law,²¹ by serving, on behalf of all of humanity, “as a manifest example, a warning, a model, an education.”²² In summation, “Yisrael has no other task than to acknowledge as its God the One Who calls and educates all human beings to His service, and to make Him known as such, through its destiny and way of life” (see note 3).

This is our essential duty as “a kingdom of *kohanim*.” Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno elaborates, “You shall be ‘a kingdom of *kohanim*,’ to understand and to instruct all humankind, ‘all to call in God’s Name [and] to serve Him with one accord.’²³ Thus will the matter of Yisrael be in the future to come; like [Yeshayahu’s] statement, ‘And you shall be called “*kohanei Hashem*”’ (see note 10). In this vein, Rabbi Hirsch adds that our role as *kohanim* is “for the sake of that selfsame destiny of ‘all the world.’ ... Each and every one of you will be a *kohen* ... and spread knowledge of God and submission to God, through the utterances of his mouth and the example of his deeds.” And, communally, our responsibility as “a holy nation” is “for the sake of establishing the kingdom of Heaven and its glorification on earth. This nation shall seek greatness not in its might but in the absolute dominion of the Divine moral law. Surely, this is the implication of ‘holiness.’”

In this light, we can better appreciate the Divine mandate, “I shall safeguard you and give you for a covenant of

the people, for a light of the nations.”²⁴ Radak notes, “‘For a covenant of the people’ [means] ‘for the sustenance of each and every nation’; for on account of you the entire world is sustained ... on two levels. One is that there will be peace on account of them among all the nations; as [Zechariah] said of the *Mashiach*, ‘And he will speak peace unto the nations’;²⁵ and [Yeshayahu] said, ‘And [He will] rebuke many peoples; and they will beat their swords into plowshares,’²⁶ et cetera. And the second is that because of Yisrael the nations will observe [the] seven [Noahide] laws and go on the way of goodness; as in, ‘He will instruct us of His ways, and we will go in His paths,’ et cetera.” “Like the heart among the organs,” on both levels, Yisrael is spiritually to vivify and sustain the entire world.

Furthermore, apropos of the role of the *kohanim* mediating peace within Yisrael, we should consider the prerequisite of world peace envisioned by the prophets: “And many peoples will go and say, ‘Come and let us ascend to the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Yaakov, and He will instruct us of His ways, and we will go in His paths’; for from Tzion shall go forth Torah and the word of God from Yerushalayim.”²⁷ Rabbi Hirsch comments on this verse that “the teachings of right and social justice, of righteousness and love, shall one day become part of the life of all mankind, without exception.”²⁸ In the wake of that universal recognition, “And He will judge among the nations and rebuke many peoples; and they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war anymore.” True peace among nations is possible only once they all accept their diverse characters and ostensibly divergent interests and activities as complementary means for actualizing the same sacred objectives. As in the microcosm of the nation of Yisrael, such a realization renders strife absurd. The “Isaiah Wall” adjacent to the UN headquarters testifies to international submission to this utopian vision of the prophets, but the world has yet to appreciate that its fulfillment depends on the preceding verse.

The Sarim of the Nations

More fundamentally, though, to relate properly to the diverse characters and divergent interests of the nations of the world, we must invoke an additional, elusive concept. As articulated explicitly in Daniel’s visions²⁹ and reiterated continually throughout Talmudic and Midrashic literature, each archetypal nation has a “*sar*”—a so-called Divine officer—appointed over it, so to speak, in Heaven.³⁰ Such a foundational principle clearly demands explication, especially given its superficial resemblance to such idolatrous vulgarities as national and territorial deities and pagan pantheons. Who—or what—are these *sarim*?

Perhaps the most direct, albeit cryptic, definition of a *sar* is an incorporeal intellect that is a nation’s soul. To under-

stand this equation, consider that, on a microcosmic scale, we regard every human being as endowed with an individual soul—one’s spiritual essence. Simultaneously, the Talmud notes that, macrocosmically, in manifold ways, God’s relationship to the world—as the world’s spiritual essence, in Whom everything is subsumed³¹—is analogous to the relationship of a soul to a body.³² Between these scales, a nation’s *sar* is its national spiritual essence. Each individual retains free will and consequent autonomy, as well as the personal uniqueness that equips everyone to find one’s niche in one’s nation and the world, through which ideally to advance the goal “to perfect the world through the reign of the Almighty.”³³ Yet, nations are also significant components in this scheme, each provided with distinct national attributes enabling it to contribute singularly to this end. A person harnesses a vast array of organs, which one’s body comprises, in attaining one’s objectives. So, too, the multifarious missions of the members of a nation are all subsumed in its overarching aims,³⁴ which ideally represent its particular contribution to the world’s final completeness. In this sense, a nation’s *sar* is its collective, composite soul, encompassing all the souls of its members.

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler offers a parallel formulation: “Within this ultimate purpose [of Creation], each and every nation serves in [advancing] a specific goal, corresponding to its essential character. Thus, this unique character of every nation is its spiritual content, and this is the matter that our Sages intimated to us in connection with the ‘*sarim* of the nations.’”³⁵ While the *sarim* are entities and not mere ideas, they represent the ideological and cultural heritage of the world’s nations—and thereby the means through which each nation leaves its indelible mark on the vast tapestry of existence.

It is no wonder, then, that we find the prophet Yechezkel lamenting the destruction of heathen nations who were not even our friends.³⁶ Likewise, the Talmud relates that even the unavoidable destruction of the Egyptians at the splitting of the sea elicited, so to speak, Divine sorrow.³⁷ After all, if every archetypal nation was endowed with an original character and an attendant, unduplicated role in realizing the world’s destiny, the loss of any nation is calamitous.³⁸ Beyond the personal tragedies involved, such a loss necessarily entails an irreparable cosmic deficiency. To be complete, the great crescendo of world history demands every player and every instrument in the monumental symphony orchestra of Creation. Expressed by Rabbi Hirsch:

We are all working on one great edifice—all the nations ... are being guided toward serving the One God. The righteous among the nations, who exemplified unselfish justice and genuine human dignity, lived for this goal. The enlightened among them labored for it when they lifted up their brethren by word and deed to the One Alone, to respect for justice and to the elevation of man above the level of beasts. Toward the overall goal of humanity, the art of the

Greeks—to the extent that it was morally clean—had a refining effect on the mind, and their thought—to the extent that it embodied truth—enlightened the spirit. Toward this end, the Romans' sword united the nations; and, in a more peaceful way, the trade of the Europeans laid the basis for a brotherly community of nations. Yisrael, too, has contributed to this end, in its own way.³⁹

Yisrael's Role among the Nations

We can clarify Yisrael's "own way" in this context based upon our earlier analogies. Like the *kobanim* among us and "the heart among the organs," Yisrael singularly lacks the sort of particularized niche epitomized by the range of *sarim*. Thus, the Torah relates that, when this hierarchy was "apportioned ... to all the nations beneath all the heavens ... God took you, and brought you out of the iron crucible, out of Egypt, to be His heritage people, as you are today."⁴⁰ More expressly, "God's portion is His people; Yaakov is the lot of His heritage.... God alone guides it, and there is with Him no alien power."⁴¹ The *sar* of the nation of Yisrael exercises neither guidance nor governance, which God, so to speak, retains directly.⁴² Indeed, this *sar* is introduced to Daniel as "Michael," (see note 29) meaning "Who is like God?"—testifying simply to the all-encompassing message that it is our sacred duty to promulgate. In this vein, the Midrash stresses repeatedly that Yisrael is not part of the Divine scheme of *sarim* and nations (see note 30). Altogether, Rabbi Saadiah Gaon asserts, "Yisrael is a nation solely through its Torahs."⁴³ It is to remain at the essential core, heart-like, spiritually exalting and vivifying all the specific missions animating the world's diverse nations. This is, after all, consistently the *kohen's* task: to uplift, sanctify and unite all aspects of the periphery.

Moreover, the bestowal of *Eretz Yisrael* reflects the same dynamism that applies to *Am Yisrael*. The Midrash observes, "The Holy One Blessed be He ... when He created the world, apportioned the lands to the *sarim* of the nations and chose *Eretz Yisrael*.... And He chose Yisrael for His portion; as it is said, 'But God's portion is His people; Yaakov is the lot of His heritage.' Said the Holy One Blessed be He, 'Yisrael, who came to [be] My portion, should come to and inherit the Land, which came to [be] My portion.'"⁴⁴ Similarly, the *Zohar* concludes, "The Holy One Blessed be He distinguished all peoples and lands, to appoint delegates [for them]. Yet, no angel or other delegate controls the Land of Yisrael; rather, He alone. Because of this, He brought the people that none other controls to the land that none other controls."⁴⁵

Still, this special endowment—and its attendant intimacy with God—is no unconditional gift. As Rabbi Yehudah Halevi notes, inherent in the role of the heart is its exceptional sensitivity.⁴⁶ Thus, Amos warns Yisrael in God's name, "Only you have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I shall reckon with all your

iniquities upon you."⁴⁷ A parallel perspicacity, with equally dire potential consequences, applies to *Eretz Yisrael*.⁴⁸ With terrifying prescience, the Midrash elaborates: "'God's wrath will be kindled against you'—and not against the nations of the world. For the nations of the world will be saying, '[The nations] are immersed in goodness, and [the Jews] are immersed in anguish; the nations of the world do not bury their sons and daughters, and [the Jews] bury their sons and daughters.'"⁴⁹ Instead of privileges, Yisrael's national and territorial identities are subordinated to its Divinely ordained historic mandate. In this land alone, Jews acquire communal, not merely individual, status.⁵⁰ Thus, only in its homeland, Yisrael can expect to establish an autonomous model state permeated with true holiness,⁵¹ to illuminate and inspire all nations. Furthermore, *Eretz Yisrael's* placement at the historic epicenter of civilization⁵² has consistently maximized our exposure and impact. Therefore, Rabbi Yehudah Halevi explains, "This land—which is designated for the rectification of the entire world—was prepared as a heritage for the tribes of the children of Yisrael."⁵³ Comments Rabbi Hirsch, "There, Yisrael will dwell apart from the nations.... From it, the blessing will go forth; it will be the source of blessing."⁵⁴ Equipping Yisrael with its land is a means to fulfilling its duties for all humankind.

Yisrael's dereliction of its responsibilities affected both it and the world. The Talmud relates cryptically that "the Holy One Blessed be He exiled Yisrael among the nations solely so proselytes would be added to them."⁵⁵ It seems odd to regard such laudable conversions as a consequence of Yisrael's sins and most dire punishment. We should, however, contrast this dynamism with the God-given ideal. Yisrael, as a sovereign state in its land, was to serve as a role model, instilling Godliness in all nations, as the latter continue engaging in their particular national pursuits, all of them means to perfecting God's world. Varying the metaphor, the objective was not unison but harmony: myriad distinctive melodies that complement—rather than compete with—one another. In this portrayal, Yisrael is the orchestral conductor, charged with ensuring that every player is properly synchronized, to contribute the best to the world's great, emergent symphony. When Yisrael neglected its task, apart from its own spiritual deficit, it forfeited its right to the land that is "designated for the rectification of the entire world." Exiled and bereft of the opportunity to broadcast spirituality as an autonomous nation, it was reduced to functioning on the level of individuals. At worst, these succumbed to the hierarchy of *sarim* and strove to abandon their destiny altogether.⁵⁶ (Jews seem to have always exemplified patriotism and nationalism on behalf of the nations among whom they resided.) At best, we are still bidden in exile to epitomize personal righteousness, which may stimulate our neighbors to convert. Nevertheless, such conduct is a

The redemption we seek is not only ours.

paltry substitute for the national ideal. The conductor, denied his baton, can yet train additional conductors—but, all the while, the orchestra remains conductorless, producing cacophony and no music.

Perfecting—and Redeeming—the Entire World

In this sorry state, the world still approaches its destination, albeit circuitously. Thus, Christianity and Islam have functioned historically as our proxies—notwithstanding the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by many of their adherents—in disseminating the basics of God's Torah and advancing the world toward its final goal. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi describes them as the "preparation and prelude to the awaited *Mashiach*, who is the [world's] fruition."⁵⁷ More explicitly, Rambam asserts, "All these matters of Jesus the Notzeri and of [Mohammed] the Yishmaeli, who arose after him, are solely to straighten the way for the King *Mashiach* and to perfect all the world to serve God together; as it is said, 'For then I shall change to a clear language for peoples, for them all to call in God's Name [and] to serve Him with one accord' [see note 23]...."⁵⁸ Through them, the fundamentals of ethical monotheism have spread to "the distant isles" and most of humanity. As God chose us to be the heart, so they have served as arteries, infusing the heart's spiritual vitality throughout the world.

Moreover, we all yet yearn and strive to actualize the world's ultimate destiny: "And it shall be at the end of the days, the mountain of the house of God will be established on the top of the mountains and exalted above the hills, and all the nations will stream to it."⁵⁹ Rashi defines the prerequisite of "the end of the days" simply as "once criminals cease." Nonetheless, people come as "all the nations"—not as Jews—each bearing its distinct ideological and cultural heritage, but bringing it to God's house, to which, in the end, each realizes its unique legacy is dedicated. Rabbi Hirsch notes that the "hoped-for 'return' [of all human beings to God] is not... a mass conversion of all men to Judaism [but] ... the conversion of all mankind to true humanity ... in accordance with the universal moral law, which has been handed down in the Torah of Judaism for all the rest of mankind as well to follow."⁶⁰ As cited above, this alone can render international strife an anachronistic absurdity. Likewise, Yeshayahu envisions God bringing "children of the stranger ... to My holy mountain and ... rejoicing

them in My house of prayer ... for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the peoples."⁶¹ As Rashi emphasizes, "a house of prayer for all the peoples," like the heralded ingathering itself, is not exclusively for Jews. Thus, Rabbi Hirsch stresses, "The choosing of Yisrael ... begins the rebuilding of the spiritual and moral edifice of humanity.... The Temple of Yisrael will be ... the center for all humanity redeemed in God."⁶² Similarly, when accused, by the British commission deliberating the revocation of Jewish rights to the Western Wall, that Jews aspired to build their Temple by destroying the mosques currently occupying its location, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook replied: When it is time to rebuild the Temple, the Muslims will run ahead to disassemble their mosques, eager to make room for God's renewed "house of prayer for all the peoples." Indeed, the Midrash relates that, "had the nations of the world known what good the Temple was for them, they would have surrounded it with fortifications to safeguard it."⁶³ The redemption we seek is not only ours. Our objective, reiterated at the culmination of all our prayers, is "to perfect *the world* through the reign of the Almighty" (see note 33).

Still, some will regard this perspective—or any that reaffirms the Torah's assertion that Yisrael is "chosen"—as unconscionably chauvinistic. Admittedly, there are among us those who, confusing *segullah* with superiority, degrade and denigrate others. We yet have much to refine within ourselves. Twenty years after narrowly surviving the Holocaust, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg nevertheless urged, "It is fitting to put an end to the hatred of the religions for each other."⁶⁴ The antidote to such xenophobia, however, is not denying our historic role—rather, appreciating the premise of worldwide fraternity that underlies it. The Mishnah's observation that "man is beloved, for he was created with the [Divine] essence"⁶⁵ applies to both Jew and non-Jew. Likewise, regarding all humankind, it teaches, "Man was created singly ... so a person would not say to his fellow, '[My] father is greater than your father.'"⁶⁶ Rabbi Hirsch asks rhetorically, "Does not Yisrael consider universal acceptance of the brotherhood of mankind to be its ultimate goal?" (See note 3.) A conductor oblivious of the orchestra, like a heart divorced from the body's other organs, is worthless.

In practice, our mission nonetheless dictates that, presently, perforce, "Yisrael dwells alone."⁶⁷ But, Rabbi Hirsch challenges, "Does this spell enmity? Or pride? As if God were not the Lord of all creatures, all men?" (See note 3.) As he explains elsewhere, Yisrael "has to remain separate until the day on which all mankind will have absorbed the lessons of its experiences and the example of this

nation, and will united turn toward God.”⁶⁸ Still, most crucially, this future we crave must guide our attitude even now. Rabbi Kook exclaims, “I love everything. I cannot refrain from loving all creatures, all peoples. With all the depths of my heart, I desire the glory of all, the perfection of all. My love for Yisrael is more passionate, more profound; however, the inner yearning spreads by the might of its love over everything.”⁶⁹ Only thus, can we aspire finally to realize the prophet’s vision: “None shall hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain; for the world will be filled with knowledge of God as the waters cover the seabed. And on that day, nations shall seek the root of Yishai, which stands as a banner for peoples, and his resting place shall be glorious.”⁷⁰ So may we merit fulfilling it, speedily, in our days. **JA**

Notes

1. See Shemot 19:5; Devarim 7:6, 14:2 and 26:18 and Tehillim 135:4.
2. See Kohelet 2:8 and 1 Divrei Hayamim 29:3. In Talmudic literature, “*segullah*” means exclusively designated property, to which no one but the owner has any rights. See *Tosefia Terumot* 1:15, *Tosefia Bava Kamma* 9:3 and 11:1, *Bava Kamma* 87b, *Bava Batra* 52a, *Yerushalmi Ketubbot* 4:1 (22b) and *Yerushalmi Bava Kamma* 9:7 (30b).
3. “Letter Fifteen,” *The Nineteen Letters*, trans. Karin Paritzky, com. Joseph Elias (Jerusalem, 1995), 198.
4. Devarim 26:19.
5. Commentary on Devarim 28:10.
6. Yeshayahu 42:6, 49:6 and 60:3.
7. Radak and *Metzudat David* commentaries on Yeshayahu 60:3.
8. *Sefer HaKuzari* 2:36. The same simile appears in *Zohar* III, 221b.
9. Shemot 19:6.
10. Yeshayahu 61:6.
11. Vayikra 10:11. See also Devarim 33:10.
12. See Yechezkel 44:23 and Malachi 2:7.
13. See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shemittah Veyovel* 13:12-3.
14. *Berachot* 43b.
15. *Avot* 2:12.
16. *Shabbat* 20a and 114b.
17. See *Bava Batra* 160b and *Sanhedrin* 113a, and see Maharal, *Chiddushei Aggadot on Sanhedrin*, loc. cit.
18. *Avot* 1:12.
19. Shemot 19:5.
20. Commentary on Shemot 4:22.
21. Commentary on Tehillim 47:10, trans. Gertrude Hirschler.
22. “Letter Seven,” *The Nineteen Letters*, 105-6.
23. Tzephaniah 3:9.
24. Yeshayahu 42:6.
25. Zechariah 9:10.
26. Yeshayahu 2:4.
27. *Ibid.*, 2:3.
28. Commentary on Tehillim 25:4.
29. See Daniel 10:13, 20-1 and 12:1.
30. See *Sifrei* on Devarim 32:9 and 32:12; *Shemot Rabbah* 32:7; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 9:7 and 20:19; *Devarim Rabbah* (Lieberman) 2:40; *Tanchuma Noach* 3, Vayeshev 1, Balak 12, Re’eh 8 and Ha’azinu 6; *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 24 and *Midrash Tehillim* 5:1 and 28:1.
31. See *Bereishit Rabbah* 68:9.
32. See *Berachot* 10a.
33. Aleinu.
34. See Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, *Resisei Lailah*, ch. 58, p. 171.
35. *Michtav MeEliyahu* II (Jerusalem, 1963), 50. See also *ibid.*, III (Bnei Brak, 1964), 200 and 216 and IV (Jerusalem, 1983), 129.

36. See 27:1-36, 28:11-9 and 32:1-16.
37. See *Megillah* 10b and *Sanhedrin* 39b, and see *Michtav MeEliyahu* III, 216.
38. Regarding the correspondence between the seventy “archetypal” nations, each with its own *sar*, and the vastly greater number of contemporary states, see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 9:14. Three primary colors can be mixed to produce every hue in the spectrum. In light of this *midrash*, we may consider the seventy “archetypal” nations, with their unique roles and distinct missions, to have combined to yield the gamut of modern states, each with its own novel blend.
39. “Letter Fifteen,” *The Nineteen Letters*, 199-200.
40. Devarim 4:19-20.
41. *Ibid.*, 32:9, 12.
42. See Ramban, commentary on Vayikra 18:25.
43. *Haemunot Vehadeot* 3:7.
44. *Tanchuma Re’eh* 8.
45. *Zohar* I, 108b. See also *Taanit* 10a.
46. See *Sefer HaKuzari* 2:44.
47. Amos 3:2. See also *Tanna Devei Eliyahu Rabba* 15:9 (29a), *Midrash Yitbarach* and *Zohar* II, 17b, and see *Sefer HaKuzari*, loc. cit.
48. From the Torah’s threatened punishment of exile, the Midrash concludes: “*Eretz Yisrael* is not like all the rest of the world; it does not sustain violators of transgressions” (*Sifra* on Vayikra 20:22). See also Vayikra 18:25 and Devarim 11:10-2 with commentaries.
49. *Sifrei* on Devarim 11:17.
50. See *Berachot* 58a and *Horayot* 3a. See also *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shegagot* 13:2.
51. In this vein, the Talmud states, “There is no *semichah* [ordination] outside the Land” (*Sanhedrin* 14a); the full judicial fabric that is the hallmark of true Jewish society can develop only in *Eretz Yisrael*. See also *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin* 4:4,6, 5:8-17 and 13:8; *Tur, Choshen Mishpat* 1, 2 and 420 and *Shulchah Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 1:1.
52. See *Tanchuma Kedoshim* 10. See also Ramban, commentary on Bereishit 12:8, that the patriarchs’ mission to teach humanity about God was principally focused in *Eretz Yisrael*.
53. *Sefer HaKuzari* 2:16.
54. Commentary of Bereishit 12:3.
55. *Pesachim* 87b.
56. Conceptually, this is the intent expressed by Jewish exiles in Yechezkel 20:32 and further detailed in *Sanhedrin* 105a. Note that, as prophesied by Yechezkel, such attempts to sever our bond to God and reject our attendant identity and its concomitant responsibilities are ultimately doomed to failure.
57. *Sefer HaKuzari* 4:23.
58. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 11:4 (uncensored version). See also Rabbi Hirsch, “Letter Nine,” *The Nineteen Letters*, 126.
59. Yeshayahu 2:2.
60. Commentary on Aleinu, *The Hirsch Siddur*, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (Jerusalem, 1978), 208-9.
61. Yeshayahu 56:6-7.
62. Commentary on Vayikra 20:26.
63. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:3, *Vayikra Rabbah* 1:11 and *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 2:3 (5). Regarding the benefit of the Temple to the nations of the world, see in addition, 1 Melachim 8:41-3; 2 Divrei Hayamim 6:32-3 and *Sukkah* 55b. An alternative *midrash* relates that the seventy archetypal nations wept with Yisrael over the Temple’s destruction. See *Eichah Rabbah* 1:23.
64. Letter to Professor Samuel Atlas, 15 November 1965, quoted by Marc B. Shapiro, “Scholars and Friends: Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg and Professor Samuel Atlas,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 7 (1997), 118.
65. *Avot* 3:14.
66. *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5.
67. Devarim 33:28.
68. “Letter Seven,” *The Nineteen Letters*, 106-7.
69. *Arfillei Tohar* (Jerusalem, 1983), 31.
70. Yeshayahu 11:9-10.

By Yaakov Feitman

Rabbi Chaim Segal, *zt”l*, the veteran *menahel* of Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin, is said to have once asked the *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Yitzchak Hutner, *zt”l*, “What is the single most important teaching to transmit to the new generation of American students?” His reply was terse and immediate: “That we are the *Am Hanivchar*.”

So while it is clear that this topic was of the utmost importance to Rav Hutner, there is not one published *ma’amar* or even a word-of-mouth tradition from him on this subject. It would therefore be presumptuous to claim any approach as the definitive Rav Hutner position on the election of Israel.

However, Rav Hutner did speak a great deal about the *uniqueness* of Israel. The *rosh yeshivah* spent much time defining what he generally referred to as *Knesses Yisrael*. He also explored deeply the *purpose* of *Am Yisrael*. Perhaps most importantly to this topic, he spoke and wrote much about *havdalah*—the *dissociation* of Israel from the nations. Through a study of his views of these cognate subjects, we may come to appreciate Rav Hutner’s understanding of the concept of *Am Hanivchar*.

The Creation of Am Yisrael

Although *Klal Yisrael* was brought forth in the year 2448 after Creation, our Sages make it clear that the very first word of Genesis—*Bereishis*—suggests the Midrashic explication “because of Israel who is called ‘*Reishis*’ or ‘First.’” The implication of this teaching is that the nation of Israel’s existence was predestined and necessary to the world. What is the nature of this “necessity”? One aspect, based upon the teachings of the Gaon of Vilna, relates to the name of God mentioned in the beginning of Creation: “In the beginning Elokim created.” As Rashi points out, Elokim is the name associated with *din* or judgment (1:1). Only later in Creation is the name YKVK added (2:4). The reason is that “in the beginning God thought to create the world with *din* alone. When He saw that the world could not exist in such a condition, He added the trait of mercy.”

The Gaon uses this *midrash* to explain another well-known *Chazal*. “When Moshe Rabbeinu saw Rabbi Akiva being tortured to death, he asked, ‘Is this the reward for such devotion to Torah?’ Hashem replied: ‘This was my original intention’” (*Menachos* 29b). According to the Gra, “original intention” refers to the world of Elokim, the cosmos of absolute justice. Rav Hutner explains that one of the

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distinctions between *Am Yisrael* and the nations is that *as a people* we are able to survive in the rarefied atmosphere of pure *din*. It is not only Rabbi Akiva who was able to live and die on that level but the nation itself (*Pachad Yitzchak*, [henceforth *PY*] *Rosh Hashanah* 4:13).

We can readily see that Rav Hutner’s view of *Am Hanivchar* has nothing to do, God forbid, with some perverse sort of Aryanism. Not only are we not claiming any more rights or privileges than other nations, we are proudly asserting our adherence to an infinitely higher standard.

We return to an issue alluded to earlier. If Israel represents the purpose of Creation, why did two and a half millennia pass before it appeared on the world scene? This is because of the Divine approach known as “*Sof ma’aseh bemachshavah techilah*”—“The end in Creation was the first in intention” (Lecha Dodi). Thus, Shabbos is not an afterthought to the six days of Creation but its natural culmination. Israel, too, *could not* exist in the beginning since the world required a multi-step process that would inevitably lead to its emergence from the world of thought into the universe of reality (*PY, Pesach* 74:3).

Knesses Yisrael’s relation to the world of thought manifests itself in another divergence from the nations as well. Only for Israel is a thought considered equivalent to an action (see *Kiddushin* 40a). The source of this rather surprising distinction is the oneness of the nation of Israel with God and the Torah (*Kudsha Brich Hu veYisrael veOreisa chad hu*). Although Hashem is the *Creator* of all, He is One only with His people. Therefore, when the Jewish people perform His will, their actions are merely the final external manifestations of the reality of that oneness (*PY, Shavuot* 4:7; 10:5).

An early example of this principle was the *Akeidah*, the binding of Yitzchak Avinu, one of the seminal events in Jewish history. Although, in effect, Yitzchak was never *actually* sacrificed, the terminology used by *Chazal* to describe the event indicates that it was something that actually occurred. Thus, for example, our Sages, describing the merit resulting from the *Akeidah*, say that Yitzchak’s “ashes are piled on the altar” (Rashi, Vayikra 26:42). What ashes? Wasn’t the *Akeidah* aborted? However, *Knesses Yisrael*, by submitting to the exacting and demanding rigors of *middat hadin*, living, suffering—often perishing—in the dangerous yet consecrated dimension of pure Elokim, earns the right to have its intentions count as actions (*PY, Pesach* 75:12 and *Ma’amarei Pachad Yitzchak, Sukkos* 76:9-12).

Here, too, we understand Rav Hutner’s vision of *Am Hanivchar* to be a uniqueness born of responsibility and an acceptance of a higher calling. To earn the right to have your thoughts count as actions, you must be prepared to submit to the most critical of criteria. You must negate your own identity and subjugate your needs and aspirations to those of the Almighty. It is because we, as a nation, are one with Hashem that our essence is totally subsumed in His. That relationship changes and uplifts us, even as it sometimes subjects us to unparalleled

As a people, we are able to survive in the rarefied atmosphere of pure din.

tragedy. This is a theme to which Rav Hutner often returns and which occupies a significant portion of his teachings concerning *Am Yisrael* (e.g., *PY, Shavuot* 2:7, 9, 11; 8:24; 10:5; 21:12; 42:5; *Pesach* 75:2, 9, 12; *Yom Hakippurim* 25:7).

We come, finally, to the eschatological place of *Am Yisrael*. One can state without exaggeration that the most famous passage in the Torah, which has been the clarion call of the Jewish people through the ages, is “Shema Yisrael!” “Hear O Israel!” et cetera (*Devarim* 6:4). Rashi interprets the verse as a distinguishing point between Israel and the nations:

The Lord, who is our God now and not the God of the other nations, He will be, in the future, One Lord, as it is stated, “For then I will turn to the peoples a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord” (Tzephaniah 3:9).

Rav Hutner’s understanding of this passage is that the prophet is predicting that the path through which the nations will come to recognize God will be the road that leads to *Am Yisrael*. His source for this explication is the Rambam’s oft-censored analysis of the place of Christianity and Islam in preparing the world for *Mashiach*. Citing this verse in Tzephaniah, Rambam writes:

All these are only to help smooth the road for the King Mashiach and to rectify the world to serve God together as it is

said, “Then I will turn ... et cetera.” How will this happen? The entire world will already have been full of discussion of Mashiach.... (*Hilchot Melachim* 11:4, Frankel ed.).

Rav Hutner notes that both Christianity and Islam’s contributions to the awareness of *Mashiach* were developed in the homes of the *Avot*. Both Yishmael and Esav, despite their deficiencies, retained some shred of understanding of the truth from the house of Avraham. Even the role they have to play in eternity flows from their connection to *Am Yisrael*. Being chosen, far from leading to rewards in this world, confirms only the status of spiritual pioneer. Israel’s role as the Chosen People is a threat to no one. On the contrary, it allows the nations of the world to discover their place in the infinite scheme. Hashem will, indeed, turn to all the nations, but their teachers and guides will be those who have suffered through Crusades, pogroms and holocausts, thereby earning their noble title. At the end of time, Israel will lead all back to Hashem. The climax of all history, the resolution of all troubles and the achievement of all noble goals will flow from the Chosen Nation to all who have learned the poignant lessons of that long journey (*Ma’amarei Pachad Yitzchak, Sukkos* 114). **JA**

By Eitan Fiorino

Although the phrase *Am Hanivchar*, the Chosen People, says an enormous amount about the relationship between God and the Jewish people, it leaves even more unsaid about the nature of that relationship. We can easily list some of the known facts—who, when, even why. (According to the Gemara it is because our forefathers were willing to accept the Torah without reservation, in contrast to the other nations who had reservations.) What is less clear, however, is the nature of the chosenness of the Jewish people. While intuitively chosenness implies something special, what that is remains unclear.

To try to understand the chosenness of the Jewish people, there

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Are the Jewish people chosen because we are special, or are we special because we are chosen?

Menashe, the sons of Yosef and his Egyptian wife, that racial and genetic purity was not an essential component in the formation of *Knesset Yisrael*. Furthermore, the acceptance of *gerim* (converts) as Jews essentially equivalent to born Jews is inconsistent with the racial view of chosenness. Rambam’s ruling that converts may recite “*Elokeinu VeElokei avoteinu*” (our God and the God of our forefathers) is a major statement about the nature of the conversion process. The convert is so completely accepted and assimilated into the nation that he may claim the forefathers as his own, despite a divergent national or racial origin. Finally, modern scientific data has not shown that Jews have any biological or genetic advantages over any other ethnic or racial group.

Thus we must reject the racial hypothesis of chosenness, that Jews are chosen because we are special. For some, this is no *chiddush*—indeed a 1966 survey of Jewish thinkers by the journal *Commentary* revealed a unanimous view among the Orthodox thinkers, numerous luminaries among them, that the concept of chosenness cannot be used to identify a racial superiority of the Jewish people. Yet nearly forty years later, despite the logical flaws, one still finds this interpretation of chosenness offered, with *Sefer HaKuzari* cited as the major source. More problematic, one still finds this notion underlying sentiments of racial superiority within the Orthodox community, which seems to generate a kind of religious chest banging that easily degenerates into spiritual arrogance and cultural ignorance.

The alternative understanding of chosenness, that the Jewish people are special because they have been chosen, appears to be a far more likely interpretation. The Gemara’s contention, mentioned earlier, that the Jewish people were chosen because of a national act, the acceptance of the Torah, is consistent with this understanding, yet adds little to how we understand what chosenness means now. While Yeshayahu’s concept of “*or lagoyim*”—that is, that the Jewish people are chosen to serve as an example to the world, to bear witness to God—is frequently presented as the ultimate purpose of chosenness, in my view, this says nothing about the nature of chosenness. Rather, the nature of chosenness can best be learned from its most basic Biblical source: In *parashat Yitro*, God tells the Jewish people that they will be “a kingdom of priests

and a holy nation.” The acceptance of God’s proposal by the Jewish people is immediately followed by a Revelation that unfolds on a national level with the giving of the Torah. Chosenness is thus tightly linked to covenant, and covenant, our covenant, involves our acceptance of the Torah and the *mitzvot* contained therein. Indeed, the liturgical focus on chosenness relates it exclusively to Torah and *mitzvot*: In Birkat HaTorah we say “*Asher bachar banu mikol ha’amim venatan lanu et Torato*,” (“Who selected us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah”); in the Kiddush for Yom Tov we say “*Asher bachar banu mikol am veromemanu mikol lashon, vekideshanu bemitzvotav*,” “Who has chosen us from every people, exalted us above every tongue and sanctified us with His commandments,” and in the Birkat Keriyat Shema of Shacharit, after a tribute to the Torah, we say “*Uvanu vacharta mikol am velashon*,” “You have chosen us from among every people and tongue.” It was the acceptance of the Torah and *mitzvot* that created the status of chosenness for the Jewish people.

Our chosenness is, in effect, a direct consequence of our contract with God, a consequence of our forefathers’ acceptance of the Torah in a binding, enduring and non-negotiable manner; in Rav Aharon Lichtenstein’s words from the 1966 symposium, the result of “active submission to a divinely ordered discipline.” Indeed the prophets’ view of the relationship between God and the Jewish people is commonly formulated in terms of a marriage, a relationship in which mutual obligations and responsibilities are defined by a contract. However, our contract is distinct from a marriage contract in that it is exclusive and eternal. Our failure to uphold our end of the deal neither nullifies the contract nor alters our obligation, though it may have other consequences: “You alone I have known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all of your inequities” (*Amos* 3:2). More critical for our understanding of chosenness, neither does non-adherence on our part alter God’s obligations to the Jewish people. Just as the prophet Hoshea was obligated to take back his wayward wife, God remains, waiting for the Jewish people despite our straying. This then is the nature of chosenness—the eternal, mutual relationship between the Jewish people and God, who cannot shirk His obligation to us to redeem us when we fulfill our obligations to Him. May that happen speedily in our days. **JA**

Twenty years ago, standing on the wet, beautifully tended grass at the Babi Yar ravine, I imagined that I understood Jewish history. I believed it was a story driven by dual mechanisms—one natural, the other Divine.

I believed that the Holocaust and other dark times in Jewish history were just products of a natural mechanism—what I dubbed, “the Law of Evolution of Nations.” This law read: Any nation survives until its fitness is successfully challenged by its neighbors, and then it passes out of existence. Eventually, every nation experiences a moment of weakness, and then it disappears. As evidence that holocausts are normal, I adduced the respective downfalls of Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, Persia and other fallen civilizations right through the Soviet Union. All these nations experienced their respective sunsets—their holocausts. The Jewish Holocaust was also the result of a natural mechanism that Jewry shared with the rest of the world. This view is shared by respectable Jewish scholars to this day.

However, simultaneous with this natural mechanism, a supernatural mechanism was operative, which ensured Jewish survival. This mechanism helped explain the unusual circumstances that invariably allowed the Jews to escape total annihilation—like 185,000 Assyrian soldiers dying the night before their planned conquest of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, or the mighty Greek army’s irrational retreat in the face of a handful of Maccabees in 164 BCE or the 1948 CE defeat of the five most powerful mechanized armies in the Middle East by a ragged band of Holocaust survivors, only about half of whom actually had guns.

My theory was that God made a covenant with Jewry, measure for measure: To the extent that we cling to supernatural law and lift ourselves beyond the realm of natural instinct, God promises that He will hold us above the natural mill grinding nations out of existence. Jewish survival is thus quid pro quo. Secularism is natural, but every Torah commandment conflicts with human nature. It is natural to partake of whatever we want, whenever we want it; it is natural to live selfishly; and it is natural to express anger when someone does not behave as we wish. When we, as a nation, climb above human nature by allowing the Torah to guide our choices, we reach escape velocity and soar beyond nature, hovering above the universe’s natur-

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al, destructive forces. This is how I understood the verse promising that the “Torah is a tree of life for those who cling to it.” The Torah is a rope from heaven. When the Jewish nation grasps it, our feet dangle just above the maelstrom.

Jewish History as Purely Supernatural

The idea that holocausts are natural sounds very reasonable when all you have is a university education behind you and a beautifully tended ravine in front of you. Neither conveys the unique fury in an anti-Semite’s face, or the absolute apathy of our “supportive” neighbors or the humiliation, the degradation or the terror. The peaceful, picturesque boardwalk at Babi Yar does not assist us in conjuring up visions of what it sounded and looked like sixty years ago when, in only forty-eight hours, 34,000 Jewish men, women and children were stripped, beaten, driven into the ravine, forced to lie face down and machine-gunned to death. The classroom and the history books also have a way of dulling the picture’s resolution. There is something sobering about the reality—about staring at the meat hooks on which live Jews were hung at Mauthausen, watching Palestinians dancing through the streets of Ramallah waving the entrails of Israeli reserve officers and witnessing the slow and deliberate decapitations of Jewish boys like Daniel Pearl and Nicholas Berg. Not that only Jews have been tortured, disemboweled and decapitated, but there is something unique about the way the world relates to Jews that one detects only when witnessing anti-Semitism in real-time, something subtle that is absent from most academic discussions of the phenomenon.

In our generation we have seen innocent Gentiles slaughtered around the world, from Sudan to Indonesia and from Chechnya to the Congo. But we—who read about these events not just in history books, but also in the morning paper—know that these non-Jewish victims were invariably killed only because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were not hunted down from country to country and sent to international extermination centers; neither were they made into soap and lampshades. Jews are treated differently.

The world’s feelings toward the Jewish State are significant in this regard. In modern times, Israel is “The Jew,” and the world now relates to the Jewish State the way it has always related to individual members of our people. The European Union recently called Israel the “greatest threat to world peace on the planet.” Not North Korea, despite its explicit nuclear threats to the West and wholesale export of uranium to Libya et al. Not Russia, who has been providing nuclear technology to Iran and other rogue states. Not Iran or Syria who sponsor terror organizations on three continents. Israel. The United Nations General Assembly, a microcosm of mankind, has issued more condemnations of the only democracy in the Middle East than it has against any other nation on the planet. The General Assembly has not yet critiqued Sudan for punishing shoplifters with cross-amputation, China for harvesting organs from political prisoners or Saudi Arabia for banning the practice of any religion besides Islam, but it has

Just as there is nothing natural about the details of Jewish survival, there is nothing natural about the details of Jewish destruction.

devoted 60 percent of its emergency sessions to the purported misdeeds of Israel—including crimes like Israel’s preemptive attack on Egypt in 1956 and its recent construction of a fence to keep suicide bombers out of Jewish population centers.

Strangely, the General Assembly has never passed a resolution condemning anti-Semitism. When, in 1964-65, the American delegation tried to include a reference to anti-Semitism in the UN’s International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the effort failed because of widespread protests at the UN that anti-Semitism was a question not of race but of religion; and in 2003, when the UN drafted its *Resolution on Religious Intolerance*, the term anti-Semitism was left out because, as the Irish delegate explained with a straight face, “It is more properly considered under the rubric of race.” When Daniel Bernard, the French ambassador to England, at a London dinner party criticized Israel for its continuing presence in Gaza and the West Bank, calling the Jewish State “a ____ little country,” the Zionist philosopher Hillel Halkin reacted with shock: “Who at London dinner parties makes nasty remarks about Hindus because India has militarily occupied Muslim Kashmir for half a century? Would a French diplomat call China a ‘big, ____ country’ because of its occupation of Tibet?”

Halkin, a man who put all his faith in Theodore Hertzl’s promise that having our own state would restore the Jews to the family of man, recently confessed publicly that Zionism’s failure “is a bitter reality to accept.” The State has not normalized Jewish existence. If anything, it has just become a convenient and visible target for a destructive force that throughout history has defied rational explanation.

The theory I relied upon for so long—that anti-Semitism is a natural phenomenon, another ordinary hatred—rings hollow when *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *The Passion of the Christ* are your generation’s form of entertainment. At some point I had to accept that just as there is nothing natural about the details of Jewish survival, there is nothing natural about the details of Jewish destruction. I needed a new explanation of Jewish history, and I found it in a book written nearly 2,000 years ago.

Jewish Tradition on Survival and Destruction

The Talmud (*Ketubot* 66b) provides an eyewitness account of Jerusalem just after the Romans destroyed the city. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and his students were wandering amidst the rubble when they saw a starving Jewish woman picking undigested barley grains out of

donkey dung. The woman, the daughter of one of Jerusalem’s wealthiest Jews before the destruction, told Rabbi Yochanan that her family had lost their fortune because of the failure to properly tithe their wealth. Rabbi Yochanan burst into tears and exclaimed:

How fortunate are the Jews! When they do the will of the Omnipresent One, no nation or tongue rules them; and when they fail to do the will of the Omnipresent One, He places them into the care of . . . the animals of a degraded nation.

Instead of caring for other people, or even other animals, we survive by animals “caring for us,” by providing us with their feces. Our God-given role is to care for the world, and we do this by mastering the Torah and observing its *mitzvot*.

When we reject the giving role—the role of caring for others—we suddenly find ourselves needing to take, needing others to care for us. It is degrading to sink from donor to recipient. It is even more degrading to sink so low that our sponsors are not human at all—to fall to a spiritual status in which our survival is only facilitated by the generous donations of donkeys.

Rabbi Yochanan understood that both conditions reflect Jewry’s good fortune. Every other nation has been handed over to an intermediary, to nature. There are natural limits on how high a nation can soar and for how long, and there are natural limits on how low they can sink and how much they can be tortured. The fortune of every other nation has a floor and a ceiling. Not so for the Jews. Our relationship with the Almighty is too intimate, and real intimacy cannot flourish through an intermediary. We are God’s beloved, and He is our *bashert*. When our nation clings to God—when we study His Torah as if it were a love-letter and observe His *mitzvot lishmah* (for their own sake)—we find ourselves dancing with Him, high above the world of *mazal*. If *chas vechalilah* (God forbid) Jewry lets go of God, if we view His Torah as nothing more than a text for *semi-chab*-degree programs and His *mitzvot* as 613 problems that we must “be *yotzei*,” there is no natural safety net; there is no limit to how far we can fall. Then we experience horrors that would be impossible within the natural realm.

Rabbi Yochanan was able to see our good fortune, our *shidduch*, even in the midst of the maelstrom. He understood that just as nature does not constitute a ceiling for the Jews, so too it provides no floor. When you are betrothed to the Almighty, there are no natural rules. In this regard, we are His personal treasure, His *am segulah*. **IA**

The doctrine of *am hanivchar*—the election or chosenness of Israel—has been glorified and condemned, but mostly misunderstood, for the greater part of our history. Some have dismissed it with contempt and infamously compared it to the Nazi idea of the *Herrenvolk*; others have exaggerated its particularity as thoroughly genetic in nature; and yet others have diluted it to just about the point of making the notion both pointless and meaningless. Few other *ikkarim*, major principles of Judaism, have been subjected to such distortion.

The comparison to the foul ideology of Aryan racial superiority is a vicious canard that has been with us since the Enlightenment, but ratcheted up since the appearance of mass anti-Semitism in the twentieth century. The non-ideological discomfort that some modern Jews feel is more of a social nature; “what will my non-Jewish neighbors think of me/us when they hear of this boast?” underlies a good deal of the embarrassment with the *am hanivchar* idea. And not far removed from this concern is its enfeeblement and eventual excision by many liberal-modernist Jewish groups.

Equally fallacious, if somewhat less deplorable, is the interpretation of chosenness in some *Chareidi* and other circles, namely, that Jews are religiously and spiritually superior to the rest of mankind and that this pre-eminence is genetically determined. Placing the concept on a biological basis is good for the collective ego but is poor scholarship and is untrue to our sacred texts.

A critique of all these views will become explicit in the following paragraphs.

The doctrine of election is accepted by all great Jewish thinkers but not necessarily to the same degree. Thus, for instance, Rambam and a number of other Sephardic scholars of the Middle Ages accepted it, but did not give it the prominence accorded it by other Jewish thinkers. Rambam does not include it in his Thirteen Principles of Faith, the *Ani Ma’amins*. Other prominent sages, from Yehudah Halevi to the Maharal to Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, expounded the doctrine of chosenness and gave it an especially high place in the hierarchy of Jewish precepts. But even those who did not emphasize it to the same extent obviously approved of it; else how did they recite the Kiddush or the blessing before the Shema? Moreover, the Torah itself speaks of the Divine choosing of Avraham and, at Sinai, the people of Israel.

There are several questions that beg to be answered. Among them: Who chose whom at Sinai? Why was this

choice made in the first place? What does this chosenness imply? What about all the other nations of the world? Can strangers “join the club” if they were not originally Jewish?

The first to be chosen by God to bring His message to mankind was Avraham. His loyalty, his faith and his self-sacrifice made him the chosen one, and his children after him (the “seed of Avraham”) were to carry on this tradition despite all difficulties. At the Revelation at Sinai, the Divine Voice informed our ancestors that we are chosen to be a “holy nation” and His *segulah* or “special treasure,” and that He desired us and chose us not because we were numerous or great, for we were the smallest of all the peoples. Rather, we were chosen because He loved us and had promised our forefathers that He would redeem us from slavery. He wishes us to know at all times that He is faithful and keeps His promise made to our forebears in the covenant with them, and extends His love for their descendants “unto a thousand generations” (Devarim 7:6-8).

There is nothing in these sacred texts that implies genetic or racial superiority of the “seed of Avraham,” nor that other peoples are inferior or less deserving of Divine compassion, nor that we were destined to rule the world or be given any special privileges other than observing the Torah and the *mitzvot*. On the contrary, chosenness implies a commitment to serve Him and thus to become the teachers—willingly or unwillingly—to the rest of humankind. For in addition to declaring us a “holy nation,” we were simultaneously commissioned to be a “kingdom of priests,” a *goy kadosh*—a term which implies, as Yechezkel would later announce (22:26), that as a priest-people we were to teach the world the difference “between the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure.” The best term to describe this Divine mission is the French *noblesse oblige*. God loves all humans and therefore provided a single people to undertake the noble and historic task of bringing God to them and them to God.

Who chose whom at Sinai? The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 2a,b) records two famous versions of the giving of the Torah. One has the Almighty offering the Torah to various of the ancient peoples, all of whom objected to certain basic commandments; only Israel accepted the Torah in toto. The second has God coercing Israel to accept by threatening to bury them under the falling mountain. The difference between them is this: The first tells us that the Jews chose God; the second, that God chose the Jews.

I believe that both versions must be read together; both, paradoxically, are equally and simultaneously true. There was *and is* a mutual “choosing.” When we are born, we are inducted into the Covenant of Avraham and confirmed as members of the Chosen People—whether we like it or not. We are the chosen, not the choosers. But as we learn and mature, we come into our role not by coercion but by will and love and eagerness. Jews who reject the “yoke of Torah” are condemned to being the subject of Divine duress. They are—no matter

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Our choosing God is as important as His choosing us.

how much they try—Jews by birth only. They often suffer from their Jewish identity—anti-Semitism and confusion about the State of Israel and spiritual rootlessness—and do not taste of the glory of Jewishness. Only when we turn around and choose Him and His Torah, of our own free will, do we experience the dignity and delight of being Jewish. Our choosing God is as important as His choosing us.

Finally, “Israel” is not described anywhere as a racial-genetic group, thus excluding all the rest of mankind from the opportunity to serve Him as part of the “holy nation” and “kingdom of priests.” Were this so, we would never be permitted to accept proselytes from other nations. Those who advocate such a narrow view must explain why, according to the Midrash, Avraham and Sarah were the first to enlist pagans as *gerim*, and why the Tradition affirms that the souls of proselytes of all generations were present at the Revelation—“those who are here standing with us this day ... and those *who are not with*

us here this day” (Devarim 29:14)—a phrase that intends not only future generations of Jews from birth but also true proselytes (*Tosefta, Sotah* 7:3).

What binds the generations of Jews together is not biology but a culture of faith that is transmitted not by genes but by a shared history and a shared destiny, a faith of commitment to live and act in a manner that will yield holiness. Those bonds are powerful, but they are not impenetrable to those who yearn to accept upon themselves the *mitzvot*—and the *noblesse oblige*.

A few decades ago a scholar wrote a dissertation in which he conclusively demonstrated that, amongst the *Tannaim*, the more a *Tanna* emphasized the “doctrine of election,” the more pronounced was his universalism. Not only is there no conflict between the two, but chosenness affirms universalism.

The more Jewish you are, the more do you—and should you—care for the rest of the world. **JA**

By Mosheh Lichtenstein

B*echirat Yisrael*, the unique *kedushah* bestowed upon *Am Yisrael* by Hakadosh Baruch Hu, is not only an important theological issue worthy of our attention, but, more importantly, it is also a central motif in our religious experience that runs like a thread throughout our life cycle. Every morning as we approach Hakadosh Baruch Hu in prayer, we praise and thank Him in two central parts of the *tefillah* (Birkat HaTorah and Birkat Keriyat Shema) for His choosing us from amongst the nations; every Shabbat we take note of our uniqueness in His eyes, and every Yom Tov, as the holiday begins, we sanctify it with the ringing proclamation of “*Atah bechartanu mikol ha’amim*,” “You chose us from all the nations.” What is the meaning of this *bechirah* (election)? Is it compatible with our deeply held belief that the Ribbono shel Olam concerns and involves Himself with the needs of all humankind, and how do we reconcile it with our abhorrence of a racist ideology? To phrase the question in a softer manner, what is the relationship between particularism and universalism in Judaism? Can the two ideals coexist, or must we choose sides?

Any serious attempt to relate to these issues must proceed along a dual path: A. An analysis of the man-God relationship

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and B. Interpretation of the sources in Tanach that relate to the topic of *bechirat Yisrael*. However, the medium of a popular magazine article and the amount of space allocated to us preclude a lengthy discussion and the presentation of a close textual reading. Therefore we shall attempt to provide the basics of an approach in the hope that the reader will be able to return to the primary sources and apply the theory outlined here to them, within the broader context of the religious experience.

The imageries employed by Tanach to express the concept of *bechirat Yisrael* are often drawn from the area of family relationships. The famous statement that Hakadosh Baruch Hu made to Moshe Rabbeinu in the beginning of Shemot (4:22) defines us as His chosen child—“*beni bechori Yisrael*,” “My firstborn son is Israel.” Many such verses appear throughout Tanach, each emphasizing our status as God’s children. An additional metaphor—employed often by Yeshayahu and other prophets and that, according to many interpretations, is the entire point of Shir Hashirim—utilizes the marital relationship to express our connection with God. He is the lover, we are the beloved; He is the groom, we are the bride; He is our husband, we are His wife. Although there are basic differences between these relationships, for our purpose, the crucial point is what they have in common, namely, that the metaphor of a marital relationship expresses the concept of *bechirat Yisrael* as a *relationship*. The ramifications of this are crucial for our topic, but to better understand them, let us begin with an analysis of the metaphor

itself before applying it to the subject of *bechirat Yisrael*.

We all do our best to relate to others with dignity, respect and empathy; we try to help others when they are in need, to understand and support them in times of crisis and to rejoice with them in times of happiness and achievement. Nevertheless, for family we reserve special treatment. The relationship we have with family—our sense of identification with and our willingness to help them—is qualitatively different than that which we have with strangers.

Were someone to accuse us of having a discriminatory attitude towards non-family members, we would reply that we are not discriminating against strangers by denying them their proper due as human beings, rather it is our relatives who are being singled out for extraordinary treatment because of our intimacy with them. It is not that we are doing less for others, it is that we are doing more for *mishpachah* (family).

The reason for this is that our connection to family is rooted in an I-Thou relationship—as the very use of the word “relatives” to designate family implies—that exists between us as persons rooted in a common existential and social situation and not in a logical formula or moral imperative. *Chazal’s* dictum to treat others as we would like them to treat us, “*Mai desani elech lechavercha lo ta’avod*,” the obligation to act fairly and honestly in our dealings with fellow human beings and other ethical standards that we abide by are rooted in the realm of reason and obligation. As such, they are universal codes of behavior that must be observed towards all, without exception—friend and foe, neighbor and stranger, Jew and non-Jew. Our relationships with our friends and family, though, are due to an interpersonal connection that reflects an emotional bond. It is not the rule of the mind but the affinity of the heart that is the focal point of these relationships.

Therefore, we do not relate to mere acquaintances as we do to close associates and relatives; and neither do our acquaintances expect us to relate to them as if they were the latter groups. Fairness and respect of all humankind as beings created in His image are our universal obligations, but the special relationship that exists between kin—and that is often expressed in preferential treatment—is not required of us towards strangers.¹

It is this same duality that governs our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. God is Master of the Universe, the transcendental Prime Mover who towers above man and the world. His supremacy and rule demand total allegiance and obedience from humankind, who is subordinate to Him. This relationship, defined by *Chazal* as *avodah miyirah* (worship of awe), is the experience that the Torah focused upon when it distilled the basic religious experience expected of man into a concise formulation of obedience: “Now Israel, what does Hashem, your God, demand of you? Only to fear Hashem, your God, and to observe His *mitzvot*.” Regarding Jews, man’s subordination to the Almighty is established through the system of the 613 *mitzvot*, while the obligation of non-Jews towards Hakadosh Baruch Hu is expressed in a more general commitment of ethical and moral behavior, accompanied by a recognition of Hakadosh

Baruch Hu that is formulated in the Seven Noahide Laws. Nevertheless, all are obligated by a commitment to act as God imposes upon man.

This, though, is only part of the story, since the man-God relationship is represented in Tanach not only as a master and servant, but also as a husband-wife/groom-bride metaphor, as an intimate I-Thou experience. From this perspective, God is not distant and transcendental, to be perceived from the infinite distance of eternity, but rather close to man who is lodged in His bosom.

Thus, we have a dialectical relationship with the Ribbono shel Olam that is rooted both in the numinous awe of *middat hayirah* and the intimate love of *middat ha’ahavah* (the attribute of love). There is, though, a basic difference between the two. The former is a universal claim that the Lord of the Universe imposes upon all of mankind, since it is rooted in a condition that is common to both Jew and non-Jew. From the transcendental perspective, all humans are a drop in the bucket and are totally subordinate to the Master, regardless of race, creed or gender. However, this is not so regarding the latter; it is an existential relationship that is not rooted in a universal claim based upon the objective status of man but is a subjective relationship between two entities that retains the particular nature unique to such contact. Therefore, from the vantage point of relationships and their legitimate particularism, disparity between different groups is possible. It is this effect that enables the concept of *bechirat Yisrael* to be valid while remaining consistent with God’s mercy and justice vis-a-vis humankind.

The metaphor of groom and bride as an expression of man’s involvement with the Almighty was understood by Rambam as the quest of the individual soul that longs for contact with God. Presumably, this is a universal state that applies to all of humankind. Rashi, though, interprets Shir Hashirim as representing *Am Yisrael’s* unique bond with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. As a nation, the idea of a special relationship with the Ribbono shel Olam is what lies at the root of our status as a chosen people.

The upshot of this in relation to *bechirat Yisrael* is that we must draw a distinction between these two realms of religious experience when attempting to understand the meaning of *Am Yisrael’s* election. Regarding the perspective of reason and awe, the difference between Jew and non-Jew is essentially quantitative, as both groups are subsumed under the category of humanity. The controlling metaphor of Tanach in this regard is that of the master and servant. However, it is also expressed in the parent-child relationship, since there is an element of obedience and subordination in the child’s obligation to his parents that accompanies the love and care between them. The use of the image of the *bechor* regarding *Am Yisrael’s* status is very instructive, since the *bechor* is the eldest son who is first among equals, i.e., all are considered members of a common family despite the differences in rank (see Yeshayahu 19:24-5 and commentators ad loc.), but the *bechor*

The idea of a special relationship with God lies at the root of our status as a chosen people.

has an added value that is due to a deeper relationship and to his existential status as representative of the father.

On the other hand, the bride-groom relationship between man and God is unique to *Am Yisrael*. There can be many family members, but there can only be a single mate so that an unbridgeable qualitative gap is posited.

This duality expresses itself both in our expectations from non-Jews and in our relationships with them. It is our expectation that non-Jews recognize Hakadosh Baruch Hu, worship Him and obey the dictates that relate to them (be it the Noahide laws or natural law and morality), and it is our obligation to treat them with respect, dignity and honor for their rank in the universe as creatures created in the Divine image and subordinates to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. What we cannot grant them is the status of having *Am Yisrael’s* intimate relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. This is a special relationship that is limited to members of *Am Yisrael* alone.

Therefore, it is evident from this analysis that there are absolutely no grounds for discriminating against non-Jews as human beings, but there is legitimacy to deny their participation in our special relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Our obligations towards them should be analogous to our obligations towards a stranger who must be treated with respect and fairness but need not receive the special treatment that we reserve for family.

Practically, this means that anything inherent to the human condition that is not a function of our special relationship applies to non-Jews and should be recognized as such. Therefore, denying non-Jews the legitimacy of their humanity (for example, the need to grieve, laugh, play, work, worship, et cetera)² is a racist position and is counter to the Torah’s values. Moreover, there is a recognition on our part of a common human condition vis-a-vis God, even if manifested in varying degrees of obligation. This is what enables us to benefit from the insights of non-Jewish thinkers and writers who reflect upon the human condition and the universal religious experience. However, values and *mitzvot* that are a function of the unique Jewish fraternity need not be extended to non-Jews. Thus, the *halachot* that the Torah imposed upon us as a supra-moral obligation to assist fellow Jews as members of a common brotherhood (for example, *ribbit*, charging interest for a loan; *hashavat aveidah*, returning lost items; et cetera) do not apply to non-Jews, while the prohibitions that are rooted in their rights as human beings (for example, theft, murder, et cetera) relate to them as well. In a similar manner, we exclude non-Jews from experiences that are a function

of our special relationship, such as engaging in *Torah Shebe’al Peh*, while granting recognition to universal expressions of man’s position in the world, such as *tefillah* and *korbanot* (sacrifices) that apply to all of humankind.

Ironically, the position presented here is not too far from that expressed by Rabbi Yehudah Halevi in his classic work, *Sefer HaKuzari*. Although indeed the thinker who created the widest possible chasm between Jew and non-Jew by advocating a philosophy that denied non-Jews the ability to approach Hakadosh Baruch Hu through the religious medium that we use in our relationship with Him, the popular perception that he did so by denigrating the status of non-Jews is incorrect. A careful reading of *Sefer HaKuzari* will illustrate that all of the spiritual life inherent within natural religion, which is dictated by reason or experience, is expected of all humanity and incumbent upon them. Only the special relationship between man and God, which he termed *ha’inyan ha’Eloki*, i.e., the capacity to communicate with Hakadosh Baruch Hu through a non-rational spiritual experience, is limited to Jews. In other words, he draws a distinction between universal, natural religion and a relationship that is unique to His people. Since Rabbi Yehudah Halevi believed that the realm of reason was limited and could not provide the necessary religious fulfillment, his position denying non-Jews a basic religious experience is problematic and not easy to defend. However, the idea implicit in his model, viz, that *bechirat Yisrael* is not less but more and that natural religion, be it rational or mystical, is universal while relationships alone are particular to us, is a paradigm that we can readily adopt. **JA**

Notes

1. The ideal that *Chazal* posited for us is that we develop the necessary sensitivity to regard all fellow Jews as our brethren and bestow upon them the special relationship that we reserve for family. This is the meaning of the famous statement that all Jews are brothers to each other.

2. To American ears, the need to emphasize the legitimacy of a non-Jew’s right to such basic elements of the human condition must seem bizarre. But unfortunately, such a denial of legitimacy, either implicit or explicit, is not uncommon among certain religious circles in *Eretz Yisrael*. The justification for such a position on a theological level, or the understanding exhibited towards such attitudes due to the political circumstances of conflict, do not prevent the *chillul Hashem* (desecration of God’s name) engendered by such a position.