

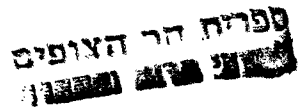
AMERICAN PLURALISM AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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The Rhetoric of Chosenness and the Fabrication of American Jewish Identity¹

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For at least the past half century, the religious thought of American Jewry has been dominated by a single issue, its rhetoric focused on a single theme: the chosenness of the Jewish people. Rabbis of the “second generation” (ca. 1930–1955) made election and associated ideas of mission, exclusivity, and covenant the central topic of their sermons and tracts. Theologians of the current “third” or “fourth” generations have implicitly and explicitly confirmed Arthur Hertzberg’s dictum that “the essence of Judaism is the affirmation that the Jews are the chosen people: all else is commentary.”² That emphasis is doubly puzzling: Why should one theme have provoked such an outpouring of interpretation, while others (exile, messiah, revelation) were virtually ignored? Why should this particular theme have been highlighted, when it urged a distinctiveness that most Jews wished to abandon, and presumed theological beliefs that they no longer shared? The discourse of American Jewry, it would seem, contradicted the beliefs and aspirations of rabbis and congregants alike. Yet, that rhetoric was not only articulated, but awarded pride of place.

The reason, as I have argued elsewhere,³ lay in the functions that the theme of chosenness served, both for those who employed it and those who listened. Students of the other major American religious group⁴ for whom chosenness was the focal thesis—the Puritans—have shown us how “rhetoric functions within a culture,” and “reflects and affects a set of particular psychic, social and historical needs.”⁵ Those needs, in the Puritan case, focused on the formation of identity, the definition of self as opposed to the “nonchosen” others outside one’s gates, and the multitude of possibilities confronting the chosen. Chosenness, I believe, served precisely the same function in the lives

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of twentieth-century American Jews as they sought to make their way, yet remain distinct in the country that the Puritans first pronounced heir to the chosenness of Israel. This was not the only function performed by the ideology of mission and election (I have detailed others in previous research),⁵ nor was it the sole determinant of American Jewish identity, whether collective or personal. It did, however, play a decisive role. The conviction of election enabled relatively secular American Jews to “make themselves holy” through the artifice of their words—to weave a definition of self from the fabric of tradition.

First, I will sketch the various interpretations of chosenness offered by American Jewish thinkers in the past fifty years; Second, I define, in greater specificity, the two key terms on which our analysis turns—rhetoric and identity; I also note several ways in which the rhetoric of chosenness has affected and shaped the fabrication of American Jewish identity in this period. Finally, I consider the intrinsic connotations and resonances that helped the image of “the chosen people” to perform the task assigned it in the face of considerable obstacles.

I.

The interpretations of election offered by particular American rabbis and theologians generally have varied with the movements to which they belonged. Orthodox thinkers have tended to be the least concerned with chosenness for two reasons. First, they do not need to discuss explicitly a doctrine that they affirm daily. Unlike rabbis in other movements, they have little difficulty with traditional beliefs in a personal God or His revelation of the Torah at Sinai; if Jews are bound by a halakha (law) not given any other people, it follows that God has chosen them for a unique role in perfecting His creation. Chosenness remains the “unformulated dogma,”⁶ as it has been for centuries. During the 1930s and 1940s, moreover, Orthodoxy remained largely an immigrants community, and, thus, felt no need to accommodate inherited doctrine to a Gentile world and culture that it had not yet entered. In our generation, a large segment of the Orthodox community has come to resemble Conservative and Reform counterparts in its degree of integration into America, and chosenness has received somewhat more attention.

The Reform movement already had discarded chosenness in nineteenth-century Germany on the grounds that it prejudiced the achievement of Jewish emancipation. The German rabbis had substituted in its place, a more acceptable notion: the Jewish mission to the nations derived from the prophet Isaiah. Jews were to be a “light unto the nations”; a teacher and exemplar of monotheism and high ethical standards. In America, this, too, proved problematic. It was not tactful to point to the “darkness” of one’s neighbors, nor

was it logical to claim a moral superiority over those one sought to emulate. Thus, when the Reform movement adopted the statement of principles known as the Columbus Platform in 1937, it proclaimed that Israel's mission was to "witness to the divine in the face of every form of paganism and materialism," a witness to be accomplished by cooperation "with all men" rather than through teaching or example.⁷ God's choice of Israel had given way to the belief that "Israel chose God."⁸

Regardless of who chose whom, however, the association of chosenness with special persecution remained, reinforced in the minds of this generation by the Nazis. "From the slave pens of the Pharaohs to the gas chambers of Hitler, the Via Dolorosa of this people of the immemorial crucifixion has stretched long and desolate through the weary centuries."⁹ Thus spoke Abba Hillel Silver, perhaps his movement's most accomplished orator, in a masterful polemic entitled "Where Judaism Differed." Yet, as one Reform critic noted, Silver's notion of the Jewish mission seemed to lack any substantive content outside of martyrdom. American Jews were not called upon to do anything in particular, except to be ethical and support humanitarian causes.¹⁰

By the second generation's close, this hollow "mission" was no longer a favored theme, and Silver's own son and successor is typical of the third generation's thinkers in disavowing the idea in favor of a renewed emphasis upon chosenness.¹¹ He cannot literally believe in God's choice of Israel, but he affirms it nonetheless, and in this has been joined by theologians such as Emil Fackenheim and Eugene Borowitz.¹²

Mordecai Kaplan and his followers would have none of this in the Reconstructionist movement. Kaplan dismissed "mission" as pretentious bombast lacking any basis in Jewish tradition, and refused to "revaluate" or reinterpret chosenness as he had many other ideas and practices of Judaism. In *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), he provided three reasons for this repudiation of the doctrine. First, Jews needed "some new purpose in life" that, unlike chosenness, would direct their energies into "such lines of creativity as will bring [them] spiritual redemption." Chosenness was no longer viable. Second, the claim to election was incompatible with participation in American life, for the interests of a "chosen people" surely would take precedence over those of America, precluding the Jews' "complete self-identification with the state." Third, the Jews no longer could believe in election, having lost faith in "supernaturalism," and no longer should believe in it, because it was ethically reprehensible to perpetuate ideas of "race or national superiority."¹³ Kaplan proposed that Jews replace election with an idea of vocation. The notion of "calling" could "fulfill the legitimate spiritual wants" supplied by the idea of election without the latter's "invidious distinctions," all vocations being putatively equal.¹⁴ This suggestion, though ingenious, met with little enthusiasm.

Conservative thinkers found themselves in the middle. Like Orthodoxy, they sought maximum continuity with tradition, but they experienced some of the same doubts as Reform colleagues, and also were subject to Kaplan's constant criticism from within their own movement and its seminary. Thus, in 1927 Louis Finkelstein wrote that "we say He chose Israel in the sense that Israel was more keenly aware of His being than other peoples" but followed this with the affirmation, "It is therefore literally true that the inspiration of the Torah and the Prophets is the expression of God's choice of Israel as His people."¹⁵ A second rabbi argued in a series of essays and sermons that "all peoples had vocations, as did all individuals," but that God revealed "more or less of Himself, or unique aspects of Himself, as He chooses," thereby allowing for significant variation in vocation.¹⁶ The movement's prayer book, in an extended apologia for retaining the doctrine, cited the link between election and Torah as well as the "psychological" indispensability of chosenness to Jewish survival. If Jews were to remain loyal to their faith despite the disabilities involved, they had to be convinced that "the Jewish people has played and yet will play a significant role in the world." The instinct of self-preservation would not suffice.¹⁷ The current generation of Conservative thinkers has joined colleagues in other movements in affirming election as a "mystery" and a "scandal" defying human comprehension. This affirmation has come despite concepts of God and revelation woefully inadequate to belief in any traditional notion of election.

II.

It should be apparent from this schematic summary that few rabbis from the past fifty years engaged in setting forth systematically the rigorously defined concepts that we understand as theology. Rather, as I emphasized elsewhere,¹⁸ they relied on imagery, metaphor, hyperbole, or even self-contradiction—all standard rhetorical devices—to reach affirmations that their theology did not enable them to grasp. Religious ideology, as we may call it, permitted them to draw on the intrinsically powerful resonances of the word "chosen"—the special love of a parent, a place at the center, the ability to serve—to evoke and maintain loyalties threatened by the gap between traditional doctrines and contemporary disbelief.

Such a reliance upon the devices of rhetoric should not surprise us. The rabbis' efforts, whether in sermons, debates, tracts, essays, or longer works, were all "language designed to persuade"—the classical definition of rhetoric offered by Cicero.¹⁹ Kenneth Burke, in a more precise formulation, stipulates that "rhetoric is the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents." It is fundamental to all human intercourse, for the use of language is a "symbolic means of inducing cooperation" in beings

that, by nature, respond to symbols.²⁰ The greater the distance between two human beings (that is, between speaker and audience), and the less inclined one side is to the position of the other, the greater the need for rhetoric to step in and bridge the gap. However, unless the two groups already share a language and, at least, part of a world view, rhetorical appeals will be unsuccessful. Moreover, in a case where one party is in a position to coerce the other, rhetoric will be superfluous. Distance, relation, and the freedom of the actors to disagree are all essential prerequisites, leading Burke to postulate that the paradigm of rhetoric is courtship. For in courtship one being—one sort of being—tries to persuade another that their persons and interests are really one, and should be joined. Theology, Burke adds, is a similar enterprise: The attempt to speak to, and about, the being most different from ourselves, and to convince Him and ourselves that His interests and will are or should be identical to our own.²¹

One sees, then, why identification has always been a favored rhetorical strategy, for it is a means for one person (or interest or group) to persuade another that the audience or its interest is identical to the speaker or his interest. The two are identified with one another. American rabbis, attempting to persuade Jews and Gentiles alike of the Jews' rightful place in America, seized on the idea of the chosen people, common to both, as a means of furthering the partnership.

Identification can also link an audience with an ideal entity or an idealized aspect of themselves, bringing them to see themselves in its reflection. Thus, the Puritans' sense of self was shaped by sermonic identifications of their mission and land with those of God's original Israelites.²² Identification, in both senses, presupposes identity even as it is shaped. In order for me to identify with you, I must have a sense of who I am and what I am; otherwise, I lack criteria that will lead me to accept or decline the identification that is proposed to me. Once having been identified, I will come to see myself in a new light, or to accord prominence to aspects of myself previously recognized but not made central. Puritans might leave their preachers' election-day addresses further convinced that their travails had been prefigured in the biblical saga of Israel. Jews might leave their synagogues convinced that America, unlike the countries from which parents or grandparents had come, was a place where Jews could call home. In each case, the rhetoric, primarily through a strategy of identification, provided the audience with a new or enhanced sense of who they were in contrast and relation to others.

III.

I will turn momentarily to the particular definitions of Jewish peoplehood in America that the rabbis' reinterpretations of chosenness served to strengthen, and how those definitions of the communal self were accomplished. First,

however, we need to clarify the notion of identity, which has already been used here, as in the literatures on American Jews and American Puritans, with varying degrees of precision.

Most generally, the term identity connotes a sense of who and what an individual or group is, as opposed to what others are, and to all that it might be or might have been. Thus Sacvan Bercovitch calls the Puritan device of the halfway covenant a “high-point in the formulation of American identity.”²³ It rendered the chosen people a wider and ascriptive category that included individuals who personally had not achieved the regenerative experience of God’s grace. “We” came to include many who did not strictly speaking belong to “us, the elect,” but whom one did not wish to relegate to the status of “them, the non-elect.” Henceforth, Bercovitch argues, the category of the “chosen” grew steadily to include wider and wider circles of individuals: first, the children of the elect; then, all of New England; and finally, all of America—while tacitly excluding those who “clearly” did not belong—Indians, heretics, blacks.²⁴

Before proceeding, we should note, that such a notion of collective identity rests, to a degree, on metaphor. A group is never “one” as a person is “one”—hence, the need for extraordinary efforts by every group to retain the identification of its members. However, contemporary philosophical work on personal identity,²⁵ psychological research into personality, and Plato’s classical analogies between the polis and the individual all remind us that the individual self is no less a set of selves than the group; likewise, rent by conflict among warring factions and capable of becoming other than it is. The metaphor built into notions of collective identity is, therefore, both powerful and appropriate. That does not mean, of course, that individual and collective identity can be conflated, even in the case of a homogeneous primitive society. We need to pay attention to the ways in which personal identity is altered by changes in the collective identity of a group, and how groups seek to impose notions of self on individuals. We will find that chosenness is such a useful rhetorical aid to “the fabrication of identity” precisely because it seems to confer ultimate meaning, and impose a regimen of conduct, upon each and every individual who enjoys (ascriptive) membership in the elect group. The individual is defined out of anonymity and into a unique fate through identification with the chosen people.

The process begins with a given core that has the status of the self-evident and seems invulnerable to change. Unless we “know” who we are, in some sense, a speaker cannot persuade us that we are like someone or something else. Erikson has dubbed this core “what one is never not,” around which one grows into that which one uniquely is.²⁶ The Puritans, we might say, were “never not” a group separated from their homes and the civilized world by an ocean, surrounded in their new land by a wilderness and hostile Indians; they were

“never not” a group called by God to special work of cosmic importance. American Jews were “never not” a minority separated from its surroundings to some degree by group pride, historical consciousness, a distinct sensibility, folk customs, and religious rituals. Both groups became what they became, in part, by dressing in a borrowed wardrobe: the Puritans in the garb of ancient Israelites, the Jews in both that same garb and the clothing of modern, Gentile America. Again, the analogy of group to individual is rather exact. The task of formation of identity in the self is to coordinate its many outfits, new and inherited, thus making the patchwork all of a piece.

The social psychologist, Herbert Kelman, building on this notion of a core around which identity is fashioned, has usefully distinguished three dimensions of the identity thus provided: stability over time and across situations; integration of the various elements of identity with each other; and authenticity of relation to the personal and cultural “core” with which the self begins.²⁷ All three factors, we note at once, are rendered problematic in a pluralist and secular society such as that of contemporary America. For if culture, in Philip Rieff’s words, is “a design of motives directing the self outward” and faith “a compelling symbolic of self-integrating communal purpose,”²⁸ no single symbol in America is compelling and no one purpose automatically claims our allegiance. Commitments compete in the marketplace; they do not enjoy immediate, long-lasting, or society-wide assent. Therefore, stability is imperiled. A firm set of given affirmations and rejections is lacking; thus, the self’s resistance to the many facts that disconfirm the claims of any faith or commitment (what Rieff calls the “strain of observation and the assault of experience”)²⁹ is weakened. The “never not” of the self, by definition, must be firm enough to withstand such challenges, but what is “never not” in a society open to changing commitments, where one’s very sex—a fundamental component of identity, surely—can be altered? Integration, once a normative unification of the self that enabled us to speak of “integrity,” gives way to the successful coordination of roles in a “role set,” and of their performance before our varying audiences. Too often, as Lionel Trilling has observed,³⁰ the character ideal of sincerity or honesty to others has been superseded by that of authenticity, understood as lack of deception of oneself. We must know when we are playing roles and why we play them. Authenticity comes to connote the harmony of the various elements in our “wardrobe” with the core of self around which we have fashioned an identity, a harmony often difficult to achieve.

This relation of self to audience brings us to a final elaboration of the notion of identity, provided by social psychologist Simon Herman: the distinction among “objective public identity” (the pattern of individual or group traits as they appear to others), “subjective public identity” (the self’s perception of how these traits appear to others), and “self-identity” (the self’s vision of the

pattern of traits as they “really are.”³¹ The term “objective” is, of course, a misnomer, since “others” are a diverse group with varied perceptions; how they perceive one is determined by a complex bundle of their own needs, prejudices, ideals, and self-perceptions, in which the perception of the “self,” in which we are interested, may play a crucial role. Yet, as we shall see, the distinction is crucial to understanding the fabrication of American Jewish identity. For the subjective public identity, consisting of Jews’ perceptions of how Gentiles viewed them, was decisive in their negotiation of a Jewish self-identity—their view of how Jews really are and should be.

Our discussion on how the rhetoric of chosenness has helped to shape American Jewish identity will conceive of this definition of self as a process that builds on a given core, interacting with other selves similarly engaged, and thus achieves a unique self characterized by stability, integration, and authenticity. I now consider four ways in which the rhetoric of chosenness has figured in that process among American Jews:

- by setting boundaries between themselves and Gentile America, through the definition of their community as a “religious civilization”;
- by providing content to that limited distinctiveness, and to the identities of individual Jews, despite their abandonment of Israel’s traditional covenant with God;
- by overcoming the challenge posed to this self-definition by the historical events of the Nazi era; and
- by provoking, and then coping with, several dangers to communal and personal identity that are inherent in the very notion of a chosen people, no matter the circumstances by which it is affirmed.

In conclusion, I reflect upon the intrinsic connotations and resonances that enabled the theme of chosenness to “bear” the tremendous burden placed upon it by American Jews—the weight of their fabricated identities.

IV.

The situation of American Jews in the 1930s and 1940s was not propitious for the appropriation of any traditional affirmations, least of all chosenness. A second-generation community—concerned largely on rising from the middle class, moving out of immigrant neighborhoods, and earning the acceptance of Gentile Americans—could hardly affirm without qualification that Jews were meant to live apart and destined to suffer persecution. Sharing the values of liberal Gentile neighbors and professing the creed of American democracy, Jews could not claim credibly a mission to bring those neighbors the truth. A people that had, by and large, cast off the “yoke of mitzvah” and shunned

voluntary observance of the commandments could hardly wear the mantle of a “kingdom of priests and holy nation.” “We cannot help ask ourselves,” observed Rabbi Felix Levy in 1927, “if missionaries can flourish in the soil that produces department store and factory owners, corporation lawyers, labor leaders, itinerant professional propagandists and high-salaried rabbis?”³²

This distance between daily reality, as known by Jews, and the traditional reality, conjured up by the rhetoric of their rabbis, posed dilemmas that become clearer if the three components of identity, specified by Kelman, are recalled. Milton Steinberg’s expressed doubt, in 1934, that acrobats could retain their footing on as a narrow tightrope as Jews walked between their two worlds of tradition and America,³³ pointed to the problem of stability, graphically enacted: what to stand for and where to stand, so as to withstand the challenge of an all-too-accepting world. Would a notion of mission provide the right balance of distance from, and closeness to, one’s Gentile neighbors and Jewish ancestors, and convey it to one’s children? Would a notion of vocation? Would symbolic acceptance of chosenness, despite disbelief in revelation, messiah, and personal God? Jews searched for integration of their experience as a part of modern America, with the root-images of self associated with the consciousness of standing in the stream of Jewish history. One simply could not banish the images of a mother lighting Sabbath candles; a grandfather’s tallis and tephillin; the centuries of martyrs; the pride in the Bible and the prophets; and, since World War II, the reaction to the Jews killed in the Holocaust or the building of the state of Israel. Yet, one simply could not assume that legacy for oneself, and there was little authenticity and little guilt in sloughing off large portions of the inheritance, the accumulated core of one’s identity—the “never not” of previous generations of Jews. Small comfort that one could successfully play the roles of both Jew and American, and know the extent of one’s self-deceptions as one played.

However, as noted, this gap between reality and tradition only served to provoke rhetorical strategies designed to bridge it, chiefly through the device of identification. Jews still were what the tradition pronounced them, despite appearances, and if they could no longer literally believe what Jews had once believed—particularly the theological presuppositions of chosenness—they could affirm traditional doctrine, nonetheless, as symbolic ideology. In this fashion, all parties to the second generation’s debate on the desirable degree of separation from Gentile America invoked chosenness to supply and legitimate their positions. Julian Morgenstern, the president of the Reform movement’s seminary, argued, in an address entitled “Nation, People, Religion—What Are We?” (1943), that “the true genius and destiny of Israel find expression only in its role as a religious people, the bearers of a spiritual heritage.”³⁴ His colleague, Samuel Goldenson, drew the logical conclusion: “If we insist, as I believe we should, upon the moral basis and universal validity of democracy,

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we should at the same time emphasize less and less the particularisms in our Jewish heritage . . . that separate us from others, and stress the universal concepts and outlooks more and more.”³⁵ Not surprisingly, advocates of an ethnic definition of American Jewry (by Mordecai Kaplan or Horace Kallen) rejected the Jewish mission out of hand, stressing instead a peoplehood demarcated by distinctive customs, diet, history, and culture. Mission, Kallen wrote, was but “the most insidious of all pretenses, that of altruism . . . the lupine nature under the wool,”³⁶ while Kaplan repeatedly historicized, psychologized, and simply ridiculed the idea of chosenness—all strategies of disidentification that stressed the distance between reality and tradition, rather than seeking to overcome it. In the end, however, all sides were forced to give way: the Reform Jews, to a reacceptance of Jewish peoplehood, expressed in the definition of Judaism as “the historical religious experience of the Jewish people”³⁷; Kallen, to the realization that Jews needed more than “kitchen traditions” to guarantee their survival³⁸; and Kaplan, to recognition of the unique “vocation” of Judaism. All civilizations, by definition, had a religion, and all religions were, in theory, equal in their ability to provide salvation. But, Kaplan conceded, at present Judaism (for historical reasons, to be sure, and not any divine choice) was able to provide uniquely self-fulfillment to its adherents.³⁹ Thus, while all vocations were equal, one was more equal than others. Appeals to an instinctive “will to live” as Jews, Kaplan had learned, would not suffice. Difference had to be undergirded with transcendent significance. In this way, a moderate claim to chosenness won the assent of all parties, and served to define a modest degree of Jewish separation from Gentile neighbors.

This particular debate on Jewish exclusivity and chosenness was especially important, because the drawing of boundaries between self and others—the fundamental task of formation of identity—had been rendered difficult for this generation by their lack of visible markings such as dietary laws or fringes on their garments. It was further complicated by the lack of “others” who could remind Jews every day of who they were not. American Puritans, writes historian Michael Zuckerman,

had to have those they scorned—the blacks, the Indians and all the idle, dissolute, and damned—to maintain the boundaries of their increasingly brittle identities. Precisely because they found themselves, and in truth created themselves, in their counteridentities, they required for their very sense of selfhood the outcasts they purported to abhor.⁴⁰

One finds a remnant of these dynamics in stereotypes of the Gentiles whom Jews did not abhor, but rather, strove to emulate. One could not trust Gentiles: They were drunkards; they were sexually licentious; their moral standards were lax; they were not as smart as Jews.⁴¹ Philip Roth could have been

speaking for many American Jews when he wrote, in 1963, that while the Jewish culture transmitted to him by his parents was at best fragmentary, he had “received whole” a psychology that could be expressed in three words: Jews are better.⁴² One sees the importance and difficulty of boundary maintenance in these circumstances in the Jews’ deeply felt opposition to intermarriage and in hostility towards Jewish converts to Christianity. Watchfulness on the border is necessary when crossing is easy, when, indeed, Jews can go back and forth daily and so incorporate elements of the other into themselves. The rabbis of the Talmud sought to blame the golden calf on “the mixed multitude,” who had accompanied the Israelites out of Egypt. Their modern counterparts similarly have attributed rising rates of crime and divorce among American Jews to assimilation, rather than to failings intrinsic to the community or its religion. Both explanations met apparently with some success, although neither is especially convincing; in each case, the required demarcation of Jews from the guilty Gentile party is lacking. The rhetoric of chosenness, given this fluidity of boundaries, served to reinforce such separations as remained. Jews were distinguished from Gentiles even if they looked, believed, and lived like Gentiles—for God or historical destiny had eternally set them apart.

Nothing less than God, or a “godlike-term,” such as destiny, could have accomplished the task, and this necessity to invoke God posed two problems for Jewish thinkers: First, as we noted previously, they did not have the requisite belief; second, Jewish persecution made invocation of the “Lord of History” problematic. Reform rabbis who explained that Israel had chosen God (and not the reverse) continued, nonetheless, to speak of Israel’s “mission as the servant people of the eternal” and its “messianic goal.” In ascribing an activist mission to Jews listening passively to their sermons, they employed a rhetorical device, described by Burke, as a “kind of elation in which the audience feels as though it were not merely receiving but creatively participating in the speaker’s assertion.”⁴³ Other rabbis did the same, especially during the war years. Yet, as a Conservative rabbi observed in the late 1920s, Jewish suffering was “futile and gratuitous” unless it was motivated by the belief that Jews had a unique contribution to make to mankind, and that their survival represented the “finger of God in history.”⁴⁴ Vague appeals to a universalist mission, and the argument that “the Jews chose God,” were inadequate to the circumstances. When Rabbi Simon Greenberg was asked, in 1939, what sense it made for a Jewish mother to bring children into the world, he responded that Israel’s place on the “battlefield” had been chosen by God as well as by previous generations of Jews, and so Jews had no choice but to remain “the mark at which every arrow poisoned throughout the ages.”⁴⁵ Such a stark contrast (the “battlefield”) between Jews pursuing justice and mercy, and a non-Jewish world succumbing to base appetites (“lust” and “thirst”) reinforced the boundaries between Greenberg’s audience and their Gentile neigh-

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bors, even if his reference was to a them overseas by whom all Americans abhorred. Persistence in the Jews' unhappy lot, somewhat masochistic if the reason lay only in the choice of previous generations, attained transcendent purpose if the battle lines were drawn by God.

Yet—the question was inescapable—why would God punish any of His children in this fashion, let alone His chosen? One suspects that Jews were led to the dialectic of “psychic uncertainty” and “rhetorical self-assertion” that historians have observed in the Puritans.⁴⁶ The more the facts failed to confirm election, the more “outlandish” the “aspiration” of the rhetoric.⁴⁷ Puritans, afraid that their “errand in the wilderness” might prove to have been an error in reading the text of God’s involvement in history, were all the more determined that the consciousness of election survive in themselves and their children. Their preachers feared the “gulf of desperation” as much as, if not more than, the “rocks of presumption.”⁴⁸ Kaplan and Kallen repeatedly point to the Jews’ sense of inferiority as the stimulus to belief in election,⁴⁹ and the Conservative movement, we recall, even included the psychological need for the doctrine in its list of reasons for retaining chosenness in the prayer book. The more frequent recourse to this theme in sermons during the years of World War II strengthens our suspicion that the heights scaled by the rhetoric were inversely proportional to experienced depths of doubt and despair. The Jews’ faith in their own identity was in jeopardy.

Two problems further plagued the assertion of election. First, as we have seen, the extension of an identity, once validated by specific activities, to individuals unable to point to such acts in their own lives had watered down the idea of election. The Puritans’ halfway covenant, although it offered only provisional membership in the elect, served to blur the boundary between the saints and all others,⁵⁰ allowing ambitions to be cloaked in the mantle of chosenness. This led to guilt that the claim was undeserved, and the suspicion that one’s existence was unjustified, lacking the mission that could legitimize it. It also could lead to the enlargement of individual ego in the absence of traditional constraints imposed by the group. Traditionally, chosenness strengthened both identities at once. The self was enlarged through the aggrandizement of the group (“Jews are chosen, so I am, too”), while achievements of individual Jews redounded to the credit of the group as a whole. Conversely, if an individual lacked confidence that he or she was living up to the terms of the collective calling, he nevertheless remained part of a group that plausibly could claim to be observing the covenant faithfully. Once the ties binding individuals to the chosen group have been attenuated, however, neither of these dynamics can function. The individual’s guilt remains unassuaged; his or her ambition is neither contained nor ennobled. The energy generated by the claim to election, and the need to demonstrate it, is channeled into personal achievement—for example, success in the Jews’ chosen callings of business and the

professions—and no longer serves the calling of the group as a whole, although it does, of course, continue to foster group pride (the classic Jewish count of Nobel prizewinners). Integration and authenticity—difficult enough in such circumstances, as observed previously—are further threatened by the invocation of a collective calling to legitimize individual achievement.⁵¹

Finally, there is the problem that assertiveness of the collective Jewish self against its larger world would lead to tension, with Gentiles left out of the claim to chosenness. The Puritan's proclamation of self reechoed harmlessly off the trees of their wilderness, and came at the expense of a nonelect from whom they were separated by an ocean. American Jews, however, lived among neighbors whose resentment of Jewish pretensions to election could only be assuaged (and even then only partially) by rhetorical appeal to America's own election. You also are a chosen people, the rabbis repeatedly told America: the more we stress the original chosenness, the more well-founded your derivative claim will be. Hence, the chorus of rabbinic hymns of praise to America was heard, and the identification of Judaism with democracy, especially during the war years, when both the Jews and democracy seemed imperiled. Such arguments, resting on the identification of Jewish with American interests, could never be entirely persuasive. However, the problem that an identity founded on chosenness posed to Jewish acceptance in America has been mitigated by appeal to that very same chosenness—enlarged to include all America.

Thus, it is two ideas, "objective" and "subjective public identity," that shape the Jewish view of self. Jews responded to negative, Gentile images of Jews as clannish, elitist, or simply alien. They sought to exploit approbation extended to God's chosen people. They acted to mute or expunge prayers or declarations that might be offensive to Gentiles or became unacceptable to Jews who internalized the "objective" viewpoint of the outsider. The process is nicely highlighted in a debate between Mordecai Kaplan and the Christian theologian Franklin Littell. When the latter insisted that the Jews were God's chosen people, Kaplan replied that such a belief precluded acceptance of Jews by Gentile Americans, and so was unacceptable.⁵² The third and fourth generations could move to reemphasize beliefs regarded as offensive in the second generation, because the pressure from the outside had been removed. In other words, Jews became less sensitive to Gentile criticism, because Gentiles had proven to be less offended by Jewish particularism than Jews had feared.

In sum, then, the favored theme of chosenness, sounded in countless sermons and debates, enabled the Jewish community to define and legitimate itself as a somewhat separate religious and ethnic entity. The rhetorical strategy of identification was employed to minimize the disparity between such claims to election and the reality of daily life. Doubts that the Jews were chosen by God, or that God could have chosen them for suffering, were met with reassertions of the doctrine and assurances that both the doubt and the persecution were

experienced by previous generations of Jews. In this way, even nonobservant Jews were able to share in the pride and confidence conferred by belief in election, perhaps stimulating individual achievement outside the sphere of collective activities mandated by the traditional covenant. Belief in the choosing God was abandoned, the historicity of the moment of choosing (described in the Bible) was denied, traditional observances were ignored, and yet individual Jews remained Jews and so chosen. Identity had been fabricated from an inherited core, and could be transmitted.

V.

The complexity of these dynamics is bewildering, leading us to wonder how a single set of associations, conjoined in the single image of a chosen people, could provoke and contain such a variety of social and psychological effects. Moreover, if the Puritan case so resembles that of American Jews (despite the many differences between the situations of the two groups), we are further inclined to suspect that the symbol of chosenness that was shared by the two claimants to divine election may itself contain the elements that give rise to the dynamics that we have observed. The symbol itself, then, deserves our attention.

One source of its power, surely, as well as its usefulness in the fabrication of identity, lies in the connotation that the chosen one is defined out of the mass or totality. That is, chosenness stands against nonexistence rather than mere nonelection. The alternative is not merely anonymity, but the chaos of the void. This idea of individuation, implicit in the very notion of a transcendent personal God, makes it seem virtually inevitable that His distinctiveness be complemented and reflected in that of a distinctive people removed from the lot of all nations into a unique fate. Thus, Deuteronomy invokes the chosenness of Israel to argue for centralization of the cult, stating implicitly that the one God could be worshipped properly by the one people only at one central site—a plurality of altars would not do. To be is to be one; to be one is to be distinct from all others and know oneself to be so—at the essence, at the center.⁵³

Yet, if one has been chosen by God, the choice must be a blessing—the result of unfathomable love rather than of caprice. The word “chosen” is used sparingly in the Bible, to convey the passion of the choosing. Its antonym is not “considered impartially” or “ignored,” but “despised.”⁵⁴ Choices are momentous. Precisely for that reason, it is all the more difficult to live up to the promise that the choice implies—to earn one’s election, as it were. How does one earn existence, let alone existence at the center, the special love of the Creator? What can one do? What is enough? Only if the Chooser has specified His demands one can hope to live with a sense of suffering. The demands having been specified, however, our inability to meet them is manifest.

Notes

1. The title is borrowed from Michael Zuckerman, "The Fabrication of Identity in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977), pp. 184-5.
2. "The Condition of Jewish Belief" [reprinted from *Commentary* (August 1966)] in *Being Jewish in America* (New York: Schocken, 1979), p. 20.
3. See Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
4. *Ibid.*, ch. 3-6.
5. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. xi.
6. Solomon Schechter, "Election of Israel," in *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 57.
7. See the *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, 1937, pp. 97-9.
8. Cf. Frederic A. Doppelt, "Are the Jews a Chosen People?" *Liberal Judaism* (February 1942), pp. 6-8; Samuel S. Cohon, "The Doctrine of the Chosen People," *Liberal Judaism* (May 1946), pp. 31-8, 48; Abba Hillel Silver, *Where Judaism Differed* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1957), pp. 1-5.
9. Silver, *ibid.*, p. 82.
10. Jakob J. Petuchowski, "Where Judaism Differed," *Commentary* (August 1957), pp. 153-9.
11. Daniel Jeremy Silver, "Beyond the Apologetics of Mission," *Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (October 1968), pp. 55-62; "A Lover's Quarrel with the Mission of Israel," *JCCAR* (June 1967), pp. 8-18.
12. Eugene Borowitz, "On Celebrating Sinai," *JCCAR* (June 1966), pp. 12, 16; "The Chosen People Concept as It Affects Jewish Life in the Diaspora," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12 (1975), pp. 553-68; Emil Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future* (Boston: Beacon, 1968).
13. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), pp. 7, 15, 22-4, 36-43.
14. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 226-9.
15. Louis Finkelstein, "The Things That Unite Us" *Rabbinical Assembly of America* (1927), p. 43; see Louis Ginzberg's less equivocal defense of chosenness in *PRAA* (1932), p. 306.
16. Ben Zion Bokser, "Doctrine of the Chosen People," *Contemporary Jewish Record* (June 1941), pp. 243-52; "The Election of Israel," *Conservative Judaism* (July 1947), pp. 17-25; "The Future of the American Jewish Community," *PRAA* (1948), pp. 194-9, 226-7.
17. Preface, *The Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1946), pp. vi-ix. The preface was written by Robert Gordis.
18. Arnold Eisen, "Theology, Sociology, Ideology: Jewish Thought in America, 1925-1955," *Modern Judaism* 2 (1982), pp. 91-103.
19. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 49.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 162.

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21. *Ibid.*, pp. 177–9, 208; see also p. 111: “In this sense, even the most theological of terms can be implicitly modified by very accurate nontheological meanings which, though they may not show through the expression itself, were clearly felt by the persons using it”—as were the implications of Israel’s election. For more on identification in general, see pp. 19–29.
22. Cf. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, ch. 1–3; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975).
23. Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, p. 94.
24. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, ch. 4–5, especially pp. 152–4.
25. See Derek Parfit, “Personal Identity,” *Philosophical Review* 80 (January 1971), pp. 3–4; “Later Selves and Moral Principles,” in Alan Montefiore, ed. *Philosophy and Personal Relations*, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1973).
26. Erik Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), p. 266.
27. Herbert C. Kelman, “The Place of Jewish Identity in the Development of Personal Identity,” a working paper prepared for the American Jewish Committee’s Colloquium on Jewish Education and Jewish Identity (November 1974).
28. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), pp. 2–5.
29. Philip Rieff, *Fellow Teachers* (New York: Delta, 1972), p. 73.
30. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).
31. Simon Herman, *Jewish Identity: A Social Psychological Perspective* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977), p. 30. The distinction is based on work by psychologist D. R. Miller.
32. Felix Levy, “The Uniqueness of Israel,” in Sefton D. Temkin, ed. *His Own Torah: Felix A. Levy Memorial Volume* (New York: Jonathan David, 1969), pp. 161–73.
33. Milton Steinberg, *The Making of the Modern Jew* (New York: Behrman House, 1948), p. 247.
34. Julian Morgenstern, “Nation, People, Religion—What Are We?” (Cincinnati: *Union of American Hebrew Congregations*, 1943).
35. *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, (1939), pp. 331–48.
36. Horace M. Kallen, “On the Impact of Universal Judaism,” in Kallen, *Judaism at Bay* (New York: Bloch, 1932), pp. 21–2.
37. The Columbus Platform: see endnote 7.
38. Horace M. Kallen, “The Dynamics of the Jewish Center” (1930), *Judaism at Bay*, pp. 232, 237, 245; “Jewish Education and the Future of the American Jewish Community” (1943), in Judah Pilch, ed., *Of Them Which Say They are Jews and Other Essays on the Jewish Struggle for Survival* (New York: Bloch, 1954), pp. 191–2; “To Educate Jews in Our Time” (1933), *Ibid.*, p. 176.
39. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), pp. 188–94, 303; *Judaism Without Supernaturalism* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1958), pp. 28–33.
40. Zuckerman, “Fabrication,” p. 211.
41. For a discussion of these stereotypes see Eisen, *Chosen People*, ch. 6.
42. Philip Roth, comments in a symposium on “The Jewish Intellectual and Jewish Identity,” *Congress Bi-Weekly* (Sept. 16, 1963), pp. 21, 39.
43. Burke, *Rhetoric*, p. 58.

44. Israel Goldstein, "Are People More Religious Than They Admit," *The Definition of a Good Jew* (New York: Congress B'nai Jeshurun, 1927), p. 13.
45. Simon Greenberg, "The Birthright" in Greenberg, *Living as a Jew Today* (New York: Behrman, 1940), pp. 3-4, 21-2.
46. Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* p. 103; see also p. 120.
47. Zuckerman, "Fabrication," p. 198.
48. John Downname, *The Christian Warfare* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1612), in the "epistle dedicatory."
49. See the references in endnote 13, as well as *Judaism in Transition* (New York: Behrman, 1941), pp. 102, 123, 159; and Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, pp. 94-103. For Kallen's similar arguments, see "Universal Judaism," pp. 21-2; *Zionism and World Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday Page, 1921), p. vii.
50. Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, p. 94.
51. For a discussion of these dynamics in nineteenth-century England, see Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).
52. Franklin H. Littell, "Thoughts About the Future of Christianity and Judaism: A Christian View of Reconstructionism," *Reconstructionist* April 4, 1947, pp. 10-6; April 18, 19XX, pp. 16-22; and Kaplan's reply, "We Still Think We Are Right," May 2, 1947, pp. 14-9.
53. This discussion is indebted to Rivka Scharf Kluger, *Psyche and Bible: Three Old Testament Themes* (New York: Spring Publications, 1974), pp. 1-42.
54. See, for example, II Kings 23:27; Psalm 78:67-68; Isaiah 7:15, 41:18.