people a moral blank check. Moreover, God's highly particularistic covenant with Abraham is intended to bless all humanity. So central is election to the Bible that contemporary Jews who wish to have a theology rooted in scripture have no choice but to reckon with chosenness. To jettison the language of chosenness, I fear, is to jettison the Bible itself.

The notion of election faces many challenges in contemporary Jewish culture. In order to speak of election coherently, one has to affirm a God capable of making a choice — that is, a personal God who has a will. (It is no coincidence that Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, denied both the biblical God and the concept of chosenness; he understood how entwined these two concepts really are.) Moreover, we live in a time when, in some quarters, even speaking of the Jews as a people is considered troubling and outdated; after all, do we not live in a "post-ethnic America"?

Amos' words should be sobering. They may be bad theology, but triumphalistic notions of election are not rare. And so, chosenness leaves us with a paradox: From a biblical perspective, Jews are elected to serve God and, by extension, to question themselves.

In confronting chosenness, Jewish theology faces many questions, none of them easy: In this day and age, do we find it plausible to believe in the kind of God who loves and chooses? Can we talk about covenant without chosenness? Can we affirm election without deluding ourselves into thinking that we have a monopoly on God's love? Is it enough to affirm election as a subjective, experiential claim, but not as a metaphysical one? One thing is clear: To be an inheritor of the Jewish tradition is to grapple with the powerful, mysterious, enchanting, disturbing idea that we are God's chosen people.

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Are Jews 'Chosen'?

In an exchange of letters, Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi and Aryeh Bernstein discuss how their thinking about chosenness has changed over time — whether chosenness, today, is a notion that is instructive or detrimental to Jewish life. They consider how chosenness influences our relationships with Israel and the concept of peoplehood.

Shalom, Aryeh,

What does chosenness mean for us as Jews today? Should it still guide how we act? I believe that the idea of chosenness must remain central to how we understand ourselves. That we are a chosen people is a core aspect of what it means to be Jewish. It is rooted in the origins of our people, in the biblical narratives of Abraham (Genesis 12) and in the redemption and revelation that made us who we are. Exodus 19 says it in three different ways. First, we are an *am segulah*, precious to God, as well as *mamlekhet kohanim*, God's nation of priests, and a holy nation or people, a *goy kadosh*. It is significant that this is how God names us at the moment we are given the Torah with its commandments to create an ethical society. I understand these three statements to mean that from ancient times to the present era, whether we were celebrated or decimated, we understood ourselves to be precious, priestly, and holy.

Many Jewish thinkers have questioned this idea of chosenness — including the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan. And today, many who criticize the notion of chosenness for its particularist commitments — especially those on the far left who believe in a more universalist approach — are often the same people who most severely criticize the State of Israel. But I feel that a deep understanding of chosenness allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of nationhood and statehood. Given our modern universal ethics and pluralist contexts, chosenness may seem foreign. But chosenness does not mean we see ourselves as superior to others. Rather, it affirms that we have a particular role to play and a particular relationship with God that demands creating and sustaining an ethical society. The command to protect the most vulnerable in the ancient world is no less essential today. And Israel, today, has the obligation and opportunity to be the nation that most protects the vulnerable and most ensures the rights of all its citizens. This is what it means to be a holy nation.

In order to maintain this possibility of both peoplehood and ethics, it is essential that all Jews understand their role as a chosen people, chosen to create and sustain Israel in all its struggles and in all its strivings. Whether we lovingly critique or more easily embrace the specific policies of any particular government, the value of supporting the state of the Jewish people should remain foundational.

Rabbi **Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi** is the national director of recruitment and admissions and a president's scholar at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. Ordained at HUC-JIR, Sabath has a doctorate in Jewish philosophy from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. She also teaches at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Aryeh Bernstein is the coordinator of the Back-to-Basics program for the Mishkan community (mishkanchicago.org) in Chicago. After fourteen years in Israel, where he was director of activist learning for the TAKUM beit midrash for human rights (takumbeitmidrash.com), he has returned to his native Chicago. He has also worked as director of alumni affairs & recruitment at Mechon Hadar, and continues as editor-at-large at Jewschool.com and editor-translator for the Koren English edition of the Steinsaltz Talmud. He is a board member of Jewish Public Media, has led high holiday services at New York's Kehilat Hadar since 2002, and has been involved in the founding and nurturing of egalitarian learning and prayer communities throughout Israel and the U.S.

For people who don't see the connection between chosenness and commitment to the State of Israel, is it a failure of understanding or a failure of education? Is it that their universal sense of ethics has trumped their particularist identities? And, if so, what does this discomfort with particularist Jewish commitments mean for Jewish peoplehood as the global realities continue to become more complex?

With respect for our friendship and *chevruta*, Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi

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Shalom, Rachel,

I agree that chosenness is integral to Jewish life and that chosenness should not be understood to imply superiority. However, some of your definitions seem to obscure more than reveal. For example, you say that chosenness "affirms that we have a particular role to play…that demands creating and sustaining an ethical society." But is creating and sustaining an ethical society the Jewish people's *particular* role? Isn't it our *general* role, one that we share with all peoples?

The state of Israel "has the obligation…to be the nation that *most* protects the vulnerable and *most* ensures the rights of all its citizens." Why most? I agree that Israel has no less obligation than anyone else, but why *more*? And why is protecting citizens' rights "what it means to be a holy nation"? Isn't that just what it means to be a nation?

By contrast, you then distinguish peoplehood from ethics and identify chosenness with "creat[ing] and sustain[ing] Israel in all its struggles and… strivings." You situate chosenness in tension with a universal sense of ethics that has perhaps "trumped" the "particularist identities" of those who don't connect their sense of chosenness to a commitment to the State of Israel. How do you understand chosenness — as our universal ethics or our particular nationalism?

You express concern that many Jews are not sufficiently embracing Israel and they are eschewing chosenness; perhaps this is because they understand the current conception of chosenness as chauvinistic, and that it is this chosenness that creates the vulnerability to abuse for the most unprotected people in Israel: asylum-seekers, foreign workers, and Palestinians. Terms such as "precious," "priestly," and "holy" are often associated with feelings of superiority — among those who embrace chosenness as well as those who don't. If we want to promote a non-chauvinistic sense of chosenness, we need to articulate that vision more clearly.

Here's my stab at it: The association of chosenness with superiority reflects the faulty assumption that what I know is all there is to be known, that since I can testify to our chosenness because I remember Sinai, and since I have no personal knowledge of anyone else's chosenness, therefore, we must be the only people to have been chosen. However, other peoples know things we don't know and have their own inspiration. Our covenant is no evidence of superiority. The reason non-Jews cannot testify to Sinai is simply that they weren't there. I mean that poetically; I'll translate this into prose: Culture exists and inheritors of a culture have something unique to contribute to the world. It would be spiritually colonialist for me to testify to any other people's chosenness or revelation. My role is to listen and take people at their word, at their testimony to their experience, just as I hope they'll take my word and listen to my testimony of my experience.

The character of this chosenness is our unique, *particular* story. When we are called to the Torah, we say, "Praised are You…God…Who chose us from among the nations by giving us the Torah." But all nations — all humanity — are responsible for a *universal* ethics as encapsulated by the seven Noahide laws that ordain core guidelines of civilized, human life.

Every nation must sustain an ethical culture. As Jews, we must sustain the particular ethical culture shaped by having been slaves in Egypt, guided through the desert, etc. We are chosen to serve as we are and it seems as though everyone else probably is, too.

With regard to the State of Israel, I wonder: Does Israel magnify or compromise our application of a particular, ethical culture? If it manifests a chauvinist understanding of chosenness, how should nonchauvinists interact with it?

B'vrakhah, Aryeh Bernstein

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Dear Aryeh,

I am grateful for your responses and your questions, because they highlight chosenness as what God uniquely commanded us to be. This notion is essential to our identity, because it defines our uniqueness and our particular and universal mission as a people. Without a particular commitment to the sacred narratives, ethics, and commandments that are at the core of our identity and spirituality, we have little that is unique to us through which we can ground our identity. God still wants us to create in our contemporary world the society of justice and ethics that we were once chosen to create.

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This does not mean that the unique foundations of other peoples are less worthy, and we must vigilantly guard against perspectives that use chosenness to devalue or demonize other people.

Yes, our simultaneous commitment to both universal and particular ethics certainly includes — perhaps, even necessitates — both ancient and contemporary forms of nationalism. And though we have survived historically as a people without sovereignty, we are told in the Bible to create and steward an ethical society. Carrying out this obligation is dependent on some form of national existence. But that sovereignty is dependent upon our ethical behavior. We have to earn the right to live in the Land of Israel every day. Deuteronomy 11:12 and Leviticus 18:28 crudely warn us that we will be vomited out of the land for not observing the commandments that God chose for us to receive about creating and sustaining an ethical society in the Land of Israel. We thus learn that we must be very careful as a nation and as individuals in the State of Israel today. While we have a right to defend ourselves as well as the land, it is clear that it is conditional upon moral behavior.

If we are not creating an ethical society in the ancient Land of Israel or in the sovereign State of Israel, we must repent. We must engage in the necessary self-scrutiny and *cheshbon hanefesh* (accounting of the soul) to reorient ourselves, to recalibrate and do whatever we can to ensure that we are worthy of our chosenness, worthy of being God's partners, worthy of the gift of God's Torah, and worthy of residing in the Land of Israel. I do not believe that there can ever be a point at which one can relinquish such a gift or its responsibilities.

With respect for our friendship and *chevruta*, Rachel

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Living in a Chosen Land: America

CLAUDE S. FISCHER

An irony of the American Jewish experience: Just as America's Christian leaders donned the Jews' mantle of "chosenness" to explain and justify the new nation, America's Jewish leaders shrugged off that cloak to ease Jewish entry into America.

Ministers of the dissident Protestants who settled New England cast their flock as a new "children of Israel" who were fleeing a new pharaoh and carrying a new covenant to the new Promised Land. Although the Puritans were a strange regional sect that dissolved within a few generations in America, their ideas have had a lasting force throughout the history of this nation. Invocations of biblical language (the King James version) and Israelite comparisons persisted beyond the American Revolution, further fueled by evangelical Protestants calling for the (final) arrival of the Messiah. (Note that praise showered the "Israelites of old," not the Jews of the day.)

American religious and political leaders explicitly or implicitly drew on chosenness rhetoric for generations. Todd Gitlin and Leil Leibovitz's book, *The Chosen Peoples: America, Israel and the Ordeals of Divine Election*, compiles examples up to the present. George Washington, for instance, referred to "the Divine Arm visibly outstretched for our deliverance," and Bible skeptic Thomas Jefferson labeled America as "a chosen country" into which our fathers were divinely led "as Israel of old." Abraham Lincoln hedged by calling Americans the "almost chosen," but as the Civil War raged on, his religious sensibilities intensified. By his second inaugural, Americans' chosenness — just like that of the Israelites — also entailed punishment for moral failure: "So, still, it must be said, 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

In a nation defined from virtually the start as remarkably egalitarian, claiming a special tie to God — even a secularized, sanitized version of that tie — sounds wrong.

Over the generations, though the language of chosenness shifted, the core sensibility remained. The "Manifest Destiny" of the 19th century combined America's providential selection with a mission to save the heathens; they were to convert or perish like so many Canaanites. Conservatives recently repurposed the 20th-century phrase, "American exceptionalism" — coined by socialists debating America's seeming immunity to class revolution — into a claim of special, probably divine, election. Television personality Sean Hannity declares that the United States "is the greatest, best country God has ever given man on the face of the earth" — greater, one assumes, than the original Promised Land. Conservatives harassed President Barack Obama, demanding that he declare his faith in

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