וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה

“And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you”

Genesis 12:3

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Introduction
Reassessing Jewish-Gentile Relations Today

As the foundation of Jewish culture and identity, the Bible challenges the Jewish people in numerous ways to be "a blessing for all the families of the earth." This implies that the Jewish people should engage with gentiles in some way. Yet in both the Bible and the living historical reality of the Jewish people, Jewish experience with gentiles has been complex and fraught with difficulties. In biblical times most gentiles were idolators whom Jews were prohibited from befriending. Yet this is not the entire story: there were exceptions whom the Talmudic rabbis termed *benei Noah* (those who follow the Noahide covenant) and resident strangers (*gerei toshav*) whom the Bible and rabbinic tradition directed Jews to respect and even protect.

In the post-Talmudic era also, most gentiles were assumed to be idolators. Throughout the Middle Ages, most rabbis considered their Christian neighbors in Ashkenaz (Germany, France, England, Poland, Russia) to be idolators. Moreover, Jewish-Christian enmity sharpened the sense of otherness that Jews felt toward their Christian hosts. Because Muslims were pure monotheists, most rabbis did not consider them idolators, and relations between Jews and Muslims were sometimes positive and other times difficult. With the advent of the modern era and secular tolerance, Jews found themselves in a new relationship with their gentile neighbors.

In addition, the last eighty years has transformed Jewish-gentile relations in an unprecedented way. Political Zionism and the establishment the Jewish State of Israel in the Middle East has given rise to increased adversarial relations with the Muslims—particularly Arab Muslims. And while Middle Eastern Christians remain largely supersessionist and hostile to the continued validity of Judaism, the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s caused a Copernican revolution in Christian theology about the Jewish people and Judaism among most Western Christians. The fruit of the revolution is continuing theological and empirical reconciliation between Christianity and the Jewish people. Lastly, because so much of modern life takes place in a shrinking global village, Jews

today frequently meet non-Abrahamic believers and come to learn about Asian religions to a degree unprecedented in Jewish history.

What does Jewish thought and Jewish law (*Halakhah*) have to say about how Jews should understand, evaluate, and relate to Christians, Muslims, Asian believers, and secular gentiles in the past and today? And should Jewish-gentile relations change when Jews are a minority in the Diaspora and when Jews are the dominant majority in the State of Israel? What are the bounds of tolerance and Jewish religious pluralism? The essays in this book examine these issues.

The opening essay, "The Covenant and Its Theology," demonstrates that the central idea of covenant (*berit*) in Judaism requires theological principles to give Jewish religious thought coherence and urgency. The idea of the particularistic Jewish covenant immediately creates an insider/outsider problem: How should Jews inside the covenant relate to those people who stand outside the covenant? And does acknowledging the divinity of the particularist Jewish covenant imply that other purported religious covenants cannot not be valid?

At the very outset of God establishing a covenant with Abraham and his descendants stands the challenge to be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3). Blessing is also implicit in God's call for Israel to be a nation of priests (Ex. 19:15–16), since the function of priests is to be conduits of God's blessings to His[1] human children. But what is the meaning of this blessing, and how should the Jewish people fulfill this theological mission? Clearly, these biblical challenges entail Abraham's children exercising influence on humanity, but the Bible does not tell us how this blessing is to be achieved. Is Israel's role to actively engage gentiles, be passive models of excellence for non-Jews, or merely to engage in theurgic piety that results in divine overflow of goodness to gentiles? Chapter 2, "Israel as Blessing: Theological Horizons," analyzes these options found within rabbinic writings.

"*Extra Synagogam Nulla Salus*? Judaism and the Religious Other" argues from traditional rabbinic principles that authentic Jewish thought allows for limited religious pluralism, and requires Jewish moral and civil responsibilities

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1 Throughout this book I use the masculine "Him," "His," and "He" in reference to God as a linguistic convention only, and do not want to imply any gender or gender preference to God. In the Jewish theological tradition, God transcends gender although in attempting to understand God it is helpful to ascribe to God traits traditionally associated with both masculinity (such as authority and punishment) and femininity (such as compassion and nurturing). This has significant pedagogical implications: *Imitatio Dei* would demand that human beings also strive to develop a combination of personality traits as religious and ethical ideals. According to Jewish mysticism, all these traits will merge into a perfect unity in the messianic era—in both God and His creatures.

to the gentile stranger (Hebrew: *ger toshav*). "Revelation, Gentiles, and the World to Come" extends the argument of the previous essay by analyzing the historic debate among Jewish thinkers regarding whether gentiles must acknowledge classic Mosaic revelation at Sinai to gain eternal life and be loved by God. "Idolatry Today" examines the two major biblical and rabbinic understandings of idolatry, asking whether idolatry has any application in today's world. It argues that a contemporary definition of idolatry that combines the two classical conceptions is necessary today as a basis for rejecting religious violence and intolerance.

In Europe and America Jewish exposure to and engagement with gentiles has predominantly meant interaction with Christians and their faith. The last four essays discuss philosophical, theological, and halakhic considerations of the particular relationship between Judaism and Christianity. "Rethinking Christianity: Rabbinic Positions and Possibilities" surveys traditional rabbinic evaluations of Christianity and Christians in light of the changes in Christian thinking about Judaism and the Jewish people, as well as contemporary social, political, and religious realities. Is it possible today to overcome the polemics and hostilities of the past to form sympathetic and constructive relationships for the future? The chapter points to a way for greater Jewish appreciation of Christianity as a faith and for Jews to see the Image of God in the face of a believing Christian—all within the parameters of Jewish law.

"Esau Hates Jacob" reviews an age-old but still influential rabbinic dictum. Using recent scholarship, the chapter analyzes whether hatred between Jews and Christians is built into the universe as an irreversible law of nature, as some traditional rabbinic hermeneutics imply. "The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue" analyzes in detail the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik regarding interfaith dialogue and its limits, which has become the dominant policy for Orthodox participation in interfaith events. The essay suggests that much of R. Soloveitchik's public policy on interfaith dialogue has been misunderstood and his concerns about supersessionist policy by the Catholic Church toward Jews are no longer a factor in today's Jewish-Catholic—and most Jewish-Christian—dialogue.

Lastly, "The People Israel, Christianity, and the Covenantal Responsibility to History," argues for a Jewish understanding of contemporary Christianity that allows traditional Jews to see Christians as participants in the covenant of Abraham, and partners with Jews in a mission to be a kingdom of priests to bring divine blessing to humanity and human history.

In sum, this book takes up texts, questions, and arguments essential to Jewish-gentile relations, Jewish law, and religious thought. It analyzes the issues

standing at the heart of the critical discussion about Jewish teachings regarding gentiles and how Jews do and should behave toward others in contemporary life. It is my hope that this book will interest Christian scholars, clergy, and laity, as well as Jews interested in interfaith relations, and that the volume be a valuable resource for scholars, clergy, and laypersons in ongoing discussions about current Jewish experience and thought.

Unlike how traditional rabbis and theologians understood the primordial creation of the universe, no human thinking is done *ex nihilo*, out of a vacuum. Even scholars who achieve conceptual breakthroughs rely on intellectual antecedents and build on the work of those who come before them. In trying to explain the twists and turns of Jewish thinking about non-Jews and point to a constructive Jewish orientation of relating to humanity today, I have been blessed to be able to stand on the shoulders of previous giants, among them the Talmudic rabbis and medieval Tosafists, Maimonides, Rabbis Menahem Meiri, Yaaqov Emden, and Samson Raphael Hirsch, the historian Jacob Katz, and the contemporary theologians Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Abraham Heschel, and David Hartman. And much of this book would have been impossible without the Christian visionaries Popes John XXIII and John Paul II, A. Roy Eckardt, Alice L. Eckardt, and Krister Stendahl.

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Part One

JUDAISM, JEWS, AND GENTILES

1

The Covenant and Its Theology

Spiritual beings seek transcendent ends. Living humanly means to thirst for noble purpose that connects us to things beyond ourselves and to eternity. The search elevates our lives above mechanical behavior determined by material forces and transforms us into subjects who fashion our own destinies. In questing outwards for self-transcendence, we imitate the Divine, whose search for relationship moved Him to create the universe.[1]

To be a covenantal people is to participate in the unfolding of sacred history. That drama began at twilight of the sixth day, when God created Adam and Eve, endowing them with *Tselem Elokim*, and progressed through Noah, Abraham, and the revelation at Sinai. It continues until today and will ultimately end in the messianic era, when all persons recognize God's presence and His moral authority. As Isaiah, Micah, and Zechariah all taught, only when the entire world lives in blessing and peace will the Jewish people fulfill the sacred covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants. The covenant beckons the Jewish nation to be a partner with the Divine, to complete creation as central actors in the redemption of humanity.

God's covenant with the Jewish people would be meaningless without this historical mandate. Unlike Christianity, whose purpose is individual salvation, the Jewish covenant is impossible without a historical dimension. Since

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1 Divine creation is philosophically superfluous. As least as early as Aristotle, thinkers understood that a perfect God has no need or motive to act at all. Yet Jewish tradition insists that God created the universe, not out of ontological necessity, but from the divine need for relationship. Maimonides defined this quality as *hesed* or *haflagah*—overflow into another. (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:53–54; hereafter *Guide*) There is only one thing Aristotle's self-sufficient God dwelling in splendid isolation could not do: relate to another. For Jewish theology this limitation renders God morally deficient. Although creation is metaphysically superfluous, it is essential to a Jewish spiritual and moral *weltanschauung*.

the God of TaNaKH made a pact with the Jewish people that endures throughout human history, this religious commitment can have a purpose only if His covenanted people has an enduring mission over the sweep of time. If personal transcendence is movement outward, then Jewish national redemption is movement inward, from the irrelevant margins of history to its center to be an impact-making people.[2] And if the State of Israel is the home of the Jewish people today, then it must play a central role in the unfolding of this universal sacred drama.

Berit Avraham and *Berit Sinai*

The Jewish theology of the covenant begins with the Torah's account of the founding of the Jewish people and its spiritual destiny. Genesis (12:1–3) relates that God created a unique relationship with Abraham, calling upon him to break from his father's home, culture and gods in pagan Mesopotamia and to travel to Canaan. It is there that Abraham is to become "the father of a great nation" whose destiny is blessing. Upon arrival, Abraham and his descendants receive eternal title to the Land, where Abraham immediately builds an altar "to call out the name of the Lord." This was the birth of the intimate covenant between God and Abraham, formalized soon thereafter in Gen. 15.

Similar to all contracts, each covenantal partner acquires benefits and assumes responsibilities: Abraham receives blessing, fame, and land. In return, rabbinic tradition understood that Abraham assumed the responsibility to be a witness to God's presence in heaven and on earth: "Before Abraham, God was called 'God of the heavens'; after Abraham, people called Him 'God of the heavens and the earth.'"[3] A bit later (Gen. 18:19), Abraham's responsibilities expand

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2 This is the way R. Joseph Soloveitchik understood Israel's redemptive role in sacred history. See his "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17, no. 2 (1978): 55.

3 *Midrash*, *Sifre*, *Ha'azinu* 313. That is, Abraham taught people that God was present in human affairs. The rabbis derived the *midrash* from the text of Gen. 24:2–3, in which Abraham requires that his gentile servant, Eliezer, swear "by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth." After Christianity adopted this idea of religious purpose and popularized the term "witness," Jews have shied away from using it. However, neither God nor Isaiah hesitated to do so in reference to the Jewish people and its mission. Through Isaiah, God calls Israel "My witnesses" (Isa. 43:11–12). Moreover, the Hebrew term *Adat Yisrael* ("congregation of Israel"), so common in traditional texts and rabbinic parlance, is derived from the word *eidah*, meaning witness. R. Joseph Soloveitchik insisted that *Adat Yisrael* refers to the Jewish people in its spiritual capacity as bearing a message to the world, as opposed to *Maḥaneh Yisrael*, which refers to the Jewish people in its defensive capacities to defend itself

to "teaching the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice [*tsedaqah u-mishpat*]." As Genesis continues, the covenant is passed down to Isaac and Jacob, and the family covenant blossoms into a *national* covenant with the entire Jewish people at Sinai, where Jewish tradition teaches that God revealed to the Jewish people the written Torah and its 613 commandments. Rabbinic tradition understood the Sinai covenant to be a continuous extension of Abraham's covenant, theologically and spiritually identical although varying in detail.[4] In other words, in the mind of the rabbis Abraham is Israel and Israel is Abraham.

As the terms of the covenant, the Sinai *mitsvot* provide the content, meaning and commitment to Judaism; their conceptualization, Jewish intellectual endeavor. They shape Jewish spiritual life. They are, in the language of the Jewish liturgy, "our lives and the length of our days."

Like Abraham's covenant, *Berit Sinai* also establishes an intimate personal relationship between God and His people. As in all forms of intimacy, the relationship is particularistic and forms an exclusivist relationship between the covenantal partners. This is why Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea repeatedly use the metaphor of marriage to describe the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The sanctity of marriage lay precisely in the fact that husband and wife are devoted exclusively to each other. Because it is an exclusive relationship, the covenant's benefits accrue only to the Jewish people and the responsibilities of the covenantal commandments do not apply to the rest of humanity in the eyes of normative rabbinic thinkers. Unlike Christian theologians, the Talmud was

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physically against outside enemies. See "Kol Dodi Dofeq," in *B'Sod ha-Yaḥid v'ha-Yaḥad*, ed. Pinhas Peli (Jerusalem: Orot, 1976), 381–383.

4 The verses in Exodus describing Jewish slavery in Egypt and Moses's deliverance of the Jewish people emphasize this continuity. "God remembered his covenant with Abraham" (2:24) and God is identified to the Jewish slaves as the God of Abraham (3:15). The exodus is but a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (6:3–8). Thus, the religious dramas of Abraham and the theological events of the exodus and at Sinai are portrayed as being of one continuous cloth.

Though historically and textually difficult on a literal level, some Talmudic and medieval rabbinic opinions tried to emphasize this point by claiming that Abraham kept all of Mosaic (and even later rabbinic) commandments. This is the opinion of Mishnaic sage R. Nahorei, expressed in the last *mishna* in Babylonian Talmud (henceforth BT), tractate *Qiddushin*, and the late second-century and early third-century Talmudic sage, Rav, in BT *Yoma* 28b. (The same Talmudic text records the disagreeing opinion of R. Shimi bar Ḥiya.) Rav derives this conclusion from his exegesis of Gen. 26:5. It is also articulated by the popular medieval biblical commentator Shlomo ben Yitsḥaq (Rashi) in his commentary on that verse. As we shall see, this is a minority view, and one, I am convinced, that is made for pedagogical or polemical purposes only.

true to the biblical narrative and did not try to universalize God's covenant with Israel. Quite the contrary, the Talmud and *Halakhah* were suspicious of gentiles who studied Torah and followed the Sinai commandments, viewing them metaphorically as interloping third parties, adulterers who try to intrude on the intensely private betrothal between God and Israel, between the Lover and His beloved.[5]

On the surface, this dimension of Israel's covenant exposes a literary problem in the Torah, and in its depth it can lead to a more profound theological problem. As do all identity-forming relationships, the covenant erects boundaries, thereby creating an insider/outsider dichotomy. Nurtured in the covenant, Jews are under God's parental care; all else are "Other." If so, what are we to make of God's relationship with those outside my parochial covenant? The Bible seems to reinforce this challenge since, once Abraham appears in the biblical narrative, Hebrew Scriptures become almost an exclusive Jewish story. From Gen. 12 through Chronicles, the Bible is a history of the successes, failures, and journeys of the people of Israel. Gentiles never emerge from the background to play a primary role. With the arrival of Abraham, the cosmic drama of creation that pierced the farthest corners of the universe shifts with shocking discontinuity to a local family narrative.

On the theological level, this singular divine concern with his covenantal people radically narrows God's involvement with His vast creation. Throughout the Torah, the covenantal partners are so lovesick with each other that they leave the universe behind; those outside the covenant merit neither prolonged divine involvement nor Jewish attention. Abraham's travel from Haran to Canaan transformed not only Abraham, but also his Divine Partner. Sometime during the journey, the majestic all-caring Creator of Humanity voluntarily diminished Himself and became the demanding protective Father of the nation alone. But where is the Author of Creation, the God of resplendent holiness, Lord of Hosts, whose glory fills the entire universe, whose concern extends to all His children?

The covenant demands intense focus on performing and understanding the *mitsvot*, the commandments that connect the Jewish people to their God and Jews to their kin. As a result, Jews can easily interpret the covenant as

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5 BT *Sanhedrin* 59a, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* (henceforth *MT*), Laws of Kings and Their Wars 8:10 and 10:9–10. Although Maimonides says in 10:10 that gentiles may perform commandments for their utilitarian value, he states in 10:9 that they should not do so *qua* commandment, that is, as a covenantal obligation, without conversion to Judaism and thus joining the Jewish people.

demanding that they remain a people "who dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations," residing in splendid isolation from the rest of the world, despite the fact that this fate was cast upon them by Bilaam, Israel's cruel enemy.[6] And certainly the long Jewish experience in exile conduces toward this withdrawal. Today, we Jews are a traumatized people, a nation suffering from battered wife syndrome.[7] The deep wounds of history inflicted upon us by Rome, the Church, the Tsars, the Nazis, the Communists, and contemporary Muslims who hate Israel are still raw, and they have led some Jewish thinkers to idealize our isolation from world affairs. It seems that whenever Jews engaged with the world, Jewish blood ran in the streets. So it is natural for the Jewish people to turn inward and elevate survival as its primary religious value.

Jews poignantly express our inward gaze in a central part of our liturgy:

> My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent; may my soul be to all like the dust. Open my heart to Your Torah and let my soul pursue Your commandments. As for all who plan evil against me, swiftly thwart their counsel and frustrate their plans. Act for the sake of Your name; act for the sake of Your right hand; act for the sake of Your Torah. That Your beloved ones may be delivered, save with Your right hand and answer me. May the worlds of my mouth and the meditation of my heart find favor before You, Lord, my Rock and Redeemer. May He who makes peace in His high places, make peace for us and all Israel—and say: "Amen."[8]

This is the final prayer of the *Amidah*, the collection of nineteen statutory prayers that Jews recite three times daily as they stand before God. As the farewell in the direct communication with God, it represents the culmination of a Jew's personal petition. Note its major aspirations:

(1) personal piety,
(2) individual and national deliverance from hostile enemies,
(3) personal observance of the divine *mitsvot* (Torah),
(4) peace for all Israel.

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6 Num. 23:9. The Torah is ambiguous as to whether this is a curse or a blessing.
7 I owe this vivid image to R. Shlomo Riskin.
8 *Koren Siddur*, American edition (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 134.

The prayer's religious vision is cautious and restricted. The penitent Jew sees the outside world not as a blessed manifestation of God's creation, but as wholly Other: an existential threat to him and the Jewish people ("Your beloved"). The fervent plea is for God to act as Deliverer of the Jewish people and Carrier of peace to Israel, not the Father of all humanity. The religious dream is personal piety disconnected from the world. Indeed, God's glorious creation as the arena of religious wonder and covenantal challenge has been left behind.

Covenant, Blessing, and Mission

Maimonides and all rabbinic rationalists insist that God's commandments (*mitsvot*) are rational.[9] A rational human act is a deed directed toward an adopted end, a purposive gesture. Similarly, for God's commandments to be rational each must have a purpose and be commanded with a constructive end in mind. The God of the Cosmos who created a world characterized by good cannot be arbitrary when He commands His children. To argue that the divine commandments have no purpose diminishes the Creator, lowering Him to a whimsical dictator who orders His children around simply to parade His authority over them.[10]

If this is true of individual *mitsvot*, so it must also be regarding of the system of commandments as a whole—the covenant at Sinai freely and voluntarily agreed upon by God and the Jewish people.[11] His covenant with us must be part of the divine rational economy, one with an overarching purpose that

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9 *Guide* III:25–26; See also Saadyah Gaon, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* III:1–3.

10 In *Guide* III:31, Maimonides implies this diminution of God by people who ascribe no rational purpose to divine commandments.

11 R. Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1965): pt. 6, particularly 29. (Originally appeared as *Ish ha-Emunah* [Jerusalem; Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1968].) Rabbi Soloveitchik pointedly rejected the famous *midrash* ("*kafah aleihem har k'gigit*") found in BT *Shabbat* 88a, which claims that God coerced the Jewish people to accept the Torah at Sinai. R. Soloveitchik's insistence on the *voluntary* acceptance at Sinai was necessary halakhically (a coerced contract is invalid, and hence not binding according to *Halakhah*) as well as philosophically, since for R. Soloveitchik the acceptance and performance of *mitsvot* is essential to transforming ones' life from an object to a subject, as well as *Am Yisrael*'s living out its freely chosen collective destiny and its escape from slavery and the arbitrary winds of fate. R. Soloveitchik articulated this theology in 1956 in "Kol Dodi Dofeq," 368–380. For a fuller exploration of the tension between coercive and voluntary acceptance of the Torah, see "On Liberty and Halakhah" in Eugene Korn, *To Be a Holy People; Jewish Tradition and Ethical Values* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2021) chapter 5.

transcends the fulfillment of the particular *mitsvot* themselves. Commandments are the means to realizing a larger noble vision, a lofty divine end.

Here we confront the second consequence of the historical assaults on the Jewish people and its Torah: the sharp focus upon the technical analysis, definition and logical coherence of the covenantal terms, the *mitsvot*, to the neglect of the covenant's *telos* and theology. At their profoundest, Greek and Roman culture, Christianity, Enlightenment rationalism, and postmodernism all presented Jews with an ominous common threat: anti-nomianism. This threat led Jews to view the enterprise of *ta'amei ha-mitsvot* (finding reasons for the *mitsvot*) with a jaundiced eye and to eschew philosophic reflection on the purpose of God's covenant as essential to our religious life. One unfortunate result is that traditionalist Jewish thought is now exhausted by authority, by *yirat shamayim* [fear of heaven], and by the deontological experience of commanded-ness; theology, *ahavat ha-shem* [love of God], and spiritual ends have been eclipsed. Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* fills the bookcases of traditional Jewish libraries, but there is hardly any room for his *Moreh Nevukhim*.[12]

However warranted, this reaction should be understood correctly as the Talmudic tradition understood it: as a defensive polemic forced upon us by our fate as victim, as a spiritual weakness rather than an ideal: "Since the day the Temple was destroyed, The Holy One, Blessed Be He, has nothing in His world except the four cubits of *Halakhah* alone" (BT *Berakhot* 8a). The Talmud claims that it was the disaster of the destruction of the Second Temple that forced God to contract Himself and limit our access to Him exclusively to *Halakhah.* It is no *a priori* ideal.

Yet while halakhic analysis and technical coherence have become our religious educational goals, transcendence remains a spiritual necessity. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, "transcendence without analysis may be blind, but analysis without transcendence is impotent.[13]

Today *Am Yisrael* has returned home and reclaimed its national sovereignty. If so, has not God been "liberated"? Can we not find Him then also in the political, social and philosophical experiences of the Jewish people? In addition to the State of Israel as the guarantor of the survival of the Jewish people, should

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12 *MT* is the paradigm of halakhic coherence whose analysis is suffused with citations of authority. By contrast, in *Guide* Maimonides never resorts to citing a biblical verse or a Talmudic passage to establish its authority, only as a secondary corroboration (*asmahta*) of a point he established previously by logical argument.

13 This is why *Halakhah per se* holds such little interest to Jews who have no commitment *apriori* to it. In our world that quests meaning, the dynamics of halakhic analysis are not by themselves spiritually compelling.

it not also be the instrument for enabling the Jewish people to recover its place in the family of nations and exercising its religious responsibility to influence humanity toward God's covenantal values?

This *telos* provides coherence to the Torah's puzzling conjunction of the cosmic account of creation with the remainder of the Bible as a particularistic narrative about the Jewish people. And it is this *telos* that gives the *berit* theological significance beyond Israel itself. As a covenantal people, the Jewish people fulfills a divine purpose in history, a unique mission as an *Am Segulah*—a treasured people. It is this message-bearing mission to others, this *charisma*, that endows the Jewish people with significance in universal history and redeems our covenantal life from narrow self-interest and spiritual narcissism.[14]

Not only rational Jewish theology, but the Torah itself testifies to this covenantal end and overriding religious purpose. In the very text that establishes God's particularist covenant with Abraham, God preserves divine concern for all His children when He issues the theological imperative for Abraham to interact with humanity: "You shall be a blessing. . . . Through you [Abraham], all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2–3). Abraham and his descendants—the Jewish people—are challenged to play a role in human history. God demands that the Jewish people be neither a parochial nor a ghetto people relegated to an insignificant footnote in the larger drama of humanity. God's covenantal people is to be a central actor—*the* central actor—in the grand human story. This broad covenantal ideal is so important for Israel that the Torah reiterates it another four times, twice when God reaffirms the covenant with Abraham, when it is passed on to Isaac, and once more when it is bequeathed to Isaac's son, Jacob.[15] This is the divine paradox of sacred history: God shows an intimate and exclusive love to Abraham and his descendants, and this particular people is to bring God's blessing to all people everywhere.[16]

The Bible does not spell out the exact nature of the blessing that Abraham's children are to bestow upon the nations, but classical, medieval, kabbalistic, and modern Jewish thinkers have given it content, as we will see in the next chapter.

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14 See R. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2003), 73–86, here 85. As R. Soloveitchik argues passionately elsewhere, the Jewish people dare not be like Peretz's unredeemed Bonstche Schweig, "who died without leaving a trace or a mark on others." "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," 61.

15 Gen. 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:13–14.

16 The particularist/universalist paradox plays out on another level, that of geography: In the biblical vision, the Jewish Temple restricted to the particular locale of Jerusalem is the source of God's Word radiating outward to touch all the inhabitants of the earth, no matter where they reside: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7).