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# Introduction

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This book is “neo-traditional” in that, on the one hand, it preserves three doctrines found in traditional Judaism: that the Jews are God’s chosen people, that Torah is from Heaven, and that God is a perfectly good being. On the other hand, it is a book for our times because it provides a new concept of the Jews as God’s chosen people; gives a new way of thinking about the Torah being from Heaven, despite the undermining of Torah history, at least down to its details; and puts forward a conceivable way of squaring, God’s perfect goodness with a good deal of the evil in God’s world. No more than that. Hence, “neo-traditional.”

This book is a new treatment of some of the main themes of the previous three books I have published with Academic Studies Press. In the first, *And God’s Love Has Overwhelmed Us*, I offered a revised conception of the Jews as God’s chosen people. The second, *This Was from God*, offered a theology acknowledging the undermining of confidence in the history of the Torah while maintaining the divine nature of the Torah. And the third, *Perfect Goodness and the God of the Jews*, was a theological discussion of God and evil. All three were attempts to demonstrate how to acknowledge the challenges of modernity and, at the same time, to retain a deeply felt faith in God and in God’s Torah.

Each of the three themes in this book has undergone refinement, clarification, and correction, both because of critical replies to the earlier books and also

because my ideas have taken a different shape and their formulation has improved. The theses remain basically the same, however.

Accordingly, the three parts of this book correspond, respectively, to the three earlier books. Part one, “The People,” is a tighter presentation of my defense, in the first book, of what I now call a “figurational view” of the Jews as God’s chosen people. It also contains an addition to the topic: a critique of Michael Wyschogrod’s view of God’s choice of the Jews. Part two, “The Torah,” includes an extensive revision of my reasons for rejecting the Kuzari Argument for the truth of Torah history, as well as corrections to other content. Part three, “The God,” deals with the problem of evil and the existence of God. I do not pretend for a moment to solve the problem for a believer or a would-be believer; I only want to suggest some ways in which one might be able to live with the problem until one sees a better day.

This book is written by a traditional Jew who lives his religious life within the Orthodox community. And my primary audience is people who are tradition-minded, as I am, or are attracted to tradition, and for whom the topics in this book are of importance. Others are invited to peek over our shoulders and hopefully gain something from what I have written. My method is to retain, religious belief as innocent until proven guilty, through solid reasons. Only then will I modify the belief, if possible, or, if not possible, I will simply abandon it or put it aside for now. In deference to the tradition, I make only the minimal changes needed to solve the problem in a satisfactory way. No more. And there are changes to be made.

Accordingly, in this book, as in the previous three, I address the three basic principles of traditional Judaism: the Jews are God’s chosen people, the Torah is divine, and God is perfectly good. I defend the belief that *in an important sense* the Jews are God’s chosen; that *in an important sense* the Torah is divine; and that God is perfectly good and that we can still envision justification for at least a good measure of evil in the world. In each case, I depart from standard understandings of these three principles in order to meet contemporary challenges that cannot be ignored.

There are several people to whom I am thankful for their help in various ways. Cass Fisher has been very encouraging and helpful. Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens graciously corresponded with me on their views of the Kuzari Argument. I wish to thank Michael Harris for his published criticisms of my view of Jewish chosenness; they prompted me to reformulate my position more tightly. Andrew Gluck challenged my view straight on and prompted me to carefully weigh his critique. Steven Kepnes has been a moral support for me for some time. Alon Goshen-Gottstein has played an important part in my

theological development. Samuel Lebens has published critical comments on my rejection of the Kuzari Argument, which have caused me to restate my view in a better way. Jon Levenson wrote a review of *This Was from God*, as a result of which I augmented my argument.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Malino read several of the chapters in this book. His corrections and spot-on questions have improved my work immeasurably. Eliot Sacks read several chapters and offered keen comments and corrections, which helped me very much. David Shatz corresponded with me on my concept of a perfectly good being, which was very helpful. Tamar Ross has been a pioneer in several of the topics with which I have been engaged, and I remain indebted to her for her thought and wisdom.

I thank the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem and Bayla Pasikov and her staff for providing me with a library environment better than I could have imagined. It is there that I wrote this book. I am most thankful to my study partners—Eliot Sacks, Rabbi Levi Lauer, Rabbi Michael Graetz, Moshe Avraham, Yosef Mendelsohn, and Zev Wrotslavsky—who continue to enrich my religious life and have contributed to my ability and desire to write about these important topics.

I wish to thank the staff of Academic Studies Press for their sterling work in preparing this volume. Kate Yanduganova did a marvelous job of editing which much improved what I had written. Kira Nemirovsky did a wonderful job with the production, and Alessandra Anzani, as always, was there to help whenever needed.

I want to express my deepest gratitude and admiration for my teacher of philosophy, Alvin Plantinga, of the Christian Reformed Church. His teaching and personal example have been crucial in my life-long engagement with philosophy of religion and Jewish theology.

I am greatly appreciative of Edie, without whom I would be wandering all alone by now, confused, in a dark forest, trying to find my way out, in pouring rain, and freezing cold. I owe so much to her. In so many ways this is *our* book.

## The Chapters

Part one of the book is called “The People.” The first chapter presents a view of Jewish chosenness that is figurational, in the sense that God’s love of the

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1 Jon Levenson, “Divine Revelation and Historical Criticism: A Review Essay,” review of *This Was from God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History*, by Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *Modern Judaism* 37 (2017): 392–402.

Jews is a figure of God's love for all of humanity. Because of the figurational view it would be clearer to say that the Jews have been "designated" by God rather than "chosen." Chapter two presents a characterization of what it is for a person to hold a racist opinion and measures the figurational view against racist vulnerabilities. I then defend the figurational view from critiques by Michael Harris and Andrew Gluck, respectively. Chapter three examines the influential version of Jewish chosenness by the late Michael Wyschogrod. I argue that Wyschogrod's reasoning for his view is non-convincing. So, I remain with my figurational view.

Part two is on the Torah. Chapter four briefly surveys the reasons why the history of the Torah has been put into doubt by modern research. This requires a new faith-approach to the sense in which the Torah is from God. Chapter five examines the so-called "Kuzari Argument" for the truth of Torah history. I examine this argument because in recent times it has become popular in some Orthodox circles as a way of convincing Jews to become Orthodox. I am all in favor of people becoming some sort of Orthodox, but believe the argument fails, leaving us with the problem of history. While there is something right about the Kuzari Argument, on examination it proves to lack what it takes to reinstate Torah history in any serious way. Chapter six puts forward the thesis that a person of faith should think of *God* as being behind the historical process of bringing to light of the problems with Torah history, so as to lead us to a new reading of the stories of the Torah. So, when we fashion new approaches, we are not acting independently of God but as God's servants. I recommend Hasidic literature as a prototype for a non-historical approach to the stories of the Torah. I introduce the concept of divine *moderate providence* to portray the Torah as God's Torah, in consistency with modern findings.

Part three is about God. This part follows the portion of my book *Perfect Goodness and the God of the Jews* that deals with the problems of evil and God's perfect goodness. The seventh chapter lays out what I call "the autobiographical problem of evil." This problem does not emerge from philosophical reflection about God and evil but due to a person's inability or difficulty of accepting God in the face of the evil she knows. Chapter eight explicates what I propose we should mean by calling God "a perfectly good being," a notion without which the autobiographical problem of evil might not start. The final chapter of the book provides what I call a possible, partial theodicy, a proposal for why God might allow much of the evil we find in this world. The purpose is to open the sufferer of the autobiographical problem to the possibility of being able to imagine a reason why God might allow much of the world's evils. The theodicy is partial, for I am not prepared to advance it for some of the horrendous evils the world and the Jewish people are made to endure.

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Part 1

# THE PEOPLE

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# A Designated People I: A Figurational View

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In this chapter I offer a revised conception of the Jews as God's chosen people. In our Westernized societies, especially, many of us have become highly sensitive to the enormous potential for racist judgments to create untold human suffering. The twentieth century has had horrendous genocides and racist wars, and the continued thriving of anti-Jewism. This has brought many to the realization that we must take great care not to allow racism to flourish. For that we cannot allow racism a place in our hearts, or in public (and private) discourse and activity. Yet, the idea of the Jews as God's chosen people exposes Jews to the possible charge of racism.

Deuteronomy 7:7–8 says:

Of all the peoples on earth God chose you to be His treasured people. . . . Because the LORD loved you, and because He would keep the oath that He swore unto your fathers, has the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 14:1–2 states:

You are the children of the LORD your God: you shall not cut yourselves, nor make any baldness between your eyes for the

dead. For you are a holy people unto the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be His own treasure out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth.

The rabbinic literature celebrates the Jews as the chosen people, as in this Talmudic passage:

You have made me the sole object of your love,<sup>1</sup> as it is written, “Hear Israel, the Lord Our God, The Lord is One . . . (Deuteronomy 6:4).” . . . And I make you the sole object of my love,<sup>2</sup> as it is written, “Who is like your people Israel, one nation on earth” (1 Chronicles 17:21). (BT Chagigah, 3a–3b, all quotations from Talmud are given in my translation)

The traditional Jewish prayer book returns again and again to the theme of Jewish chosenness. There is a daily prayer thanking God for choosing us. In traditional prayer books, a Jew blesses God for not making him or her a Gentile. Other versions thank God, instead, for making one a Jew. A prayer thanks God for lovingly “separating” the Jews from the “wayward” nations. The classically worded *Aleinu* prayer, appearing in the three daily prayers, declares that God has not, “made us like the nations of the world,” and has not made our “lot” like theirs.

There is little doubt that the chosenness conviction has been taken to racist conclusions at times. For much of its history, the persecution of Jews by the surrounding cultures vindicated such attitudes in the eyes of Jews. After the Bible, there were the Roman persecutions, severe Jewish suffering at the hands of the Christian Gentiles in Medieval Europe as well as by repressive Muslim invasions into Spain and elsewhere. In Christendom, Jews were denied basic rights: for example, they were forbidden to join the guilds and professions and to own property. Jews were restricted to living in quarters reserved only for Jews, known as “ghettos.” In the eleventh and the twelfth centuries there were widespread Crusader attacks on Jews in the Rhineland, when several hundred thousand Jews were murdered by the Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land. Over history, there were numerous pogroms, collective local uprisings against the Jews, often led by the local priest.

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1 Or “have singled me out.”

2 Or “I single you out.”

There were many expulsions, from time to time, of all Jews from European countries, including from England, France, Germany, Spain, and Portugal, in the latter two countries of Jews who refused to convert to Catholicism. In addition, Jews were expelled from numerous specific localities in many other countries. (In Muslim countries of the time Jews did better, but still lived with restrictions.) No wonder that at times many Jews looked with utter disdain on the non-Jews in whose midst they found themselves. And if Jewish suffering was due to a Christian consciousness of superiority over the Jew, it was but a small step to respond with a Jewish affirmation of an immense superiority of the Jew over the Gentile. And yet, in our age, when the curse of racism has and continues to affect humanity for the worse, we could be careful to reinterpret Jewish election in a way that prevents racist understandings as much as possible, while retaining a core sense of Jewish chosenness.

The concept of Jewish election by God is too entrenched in Jewish religious literature and prayer for a traditionalist to ignore or excise it from a theology of Judaism. Judaism is a religion of a people, a nation, a family, an ethnic group, whatever you wish to call it. Without a theological explanation for why Judaism should be for Jews only (including converts who become Jews), Judaism is in danger of being a mere elaborate folklore, a vehicle solely of ethnic identity, or simply what Jews happen to do. Saying simply that Judaism is for Jews and that other religions are for others misses the sense of Jewish singularity so deep in the tradition. On the other hand, a *desideratum* of traditional Judaism should be to change no more than what *must* be changed. So, unless absolutely necessary, a traditional Jew should not opt for liberal positions that abandon the idea of Jewish election altogether or water it down beyond recognition. That is not necessary. It is overkill.

For that reason, I present here what I call a *figurational conception* of the Jews as chosen, a conception I judge acceptable. The first component in the presentation is to prepare for what comes by replacing the term “a chosen people” with the more neutral and less given to abuse “a designated people,” designated by God. At this point, of course this is only a cosmetic change, but will represent better the figurational view about to come. I offer no idea for why God chose or designated specifically the Jews, rather than the Hittites, or anybody else. My view accounts simply for why God would want to choose or designate *any* people to be God’s “chosen people,” and so God designates the Jews for God’s purposes.

In this presentation, I cite various events in the Torah. In Part Two of this book I take up the question of the reliability of the history found in the Hebrew

Bible. Even those of us who doubt that reliability will frame our thoughts through the images of the persons, events, and teachings of our Bible. These remain for us the language of Judaism, the cultural rock-bottom from which to begin. So, in what follows all biblical references are to be taken either as history or as the stories and images that have informed Jewish consciousness for more than two millennia, whether history or not.

## Jewish Election as Figuration

I present this concept of the Jews as a people designated by God in a list of points.

1. This concept of Jewish election should be taught and expounded to Jews and non-Jews alike as a viable contemporary doctrine of the chosen people to replace previous formulations.

The figurational notion of Jewish election is to replace earlier notions in the popular mind, while keeping as much of the prior conceptions and language intact as possible. This is to retain the centrality of the role of the Jews, as newly envisaged.

2. God loves all human beings equally.

Here we must distinguish between two types of God's love, one more and one less obviously recognizable as coming from God. In both cases, the divine love itself is the same, full and pervasive. God's love is *manifestly* known when God openly reveals God's love or the fact of God's love to a person or group. This might be by a revealed message from God or by acts of God that openly and clearly demonstrate God's love. God can love a person fully by informing them of God's love and/or by manifesting God's love in a clear and wholly convincing way. A theophany would be a direct knowledge of God's loving us. God's love is *less than manifestly attributable* to God when God acts in full love but as it were relatively behind the scenes. Here God might act in a way that leaves hints and traces that here it is God's love behind events. Such love demands discernment and appropriation by the subject.

God's love can come in subtle ways, in ways that are not obvious. God can love a person or a group fully without that person or group fully realizing it. God can work lovingly through natural means, from a distance, putting into place a chain of events for the good. And God's love can be inscrutable, beyond detection at

least at a given time. Hebrew calls the world *olam*, which the mystical Kabbalah stresses as coming from the word for “hiddenness.” God is hidden yet detectable at the same time. In any case, whether transparent or not, the love that comes forth from God is by nature full and fullhearted for everyone.

3. There is greatly more value in people coming close to God in freedom than in being coerced into relationship with God. So, generally God will not coerce people to come close to God.

Here is a reason why God’s love is not regularly known to be God’s love. There is greatly more value in love we freely come to and to which we freely reciprocate than in love compelled or pressured into existence. One can question whether love coerced is genuine love at all. So, as part of God’s love for a person, God will want to withhold manifestly known love, which might overwhelm a person and would leave them with little or no self-will to come to God in freedom. So, generally God will refrain from coercive acts to create free, reciprocal love of God. Such love comes with a degree of ambiguity, allowing the person to choose to understand matters otherwise. Ordinarily, God’s love is more like an invitation of love from love.

God creates the world in six days and then rests on the seventh day. For six days, God creates, pouring God’s creative energy into the world, the world directly impacted by God’s overbearing presence. It is all hands-on, manifest, intervention. God appears to Adam, ordering him not to eat from the tree of good and evil. God’s presence is obvious and visibly active in the affairs of the world. And on the seventh day God rests. On the seventh day, that is, God recedes from God’s obvious active presence in the world (except on rare occasions), thereby creating the space for God’s creatures to come to God freely, by choice, and not by overwhelming coercion. This is one reason why the seventh day is holy, for having provided for the long-range purpose of creation for people to come to God in freedom and self-motivation.<sup>3</sup>

*Sefer ha-Chinukh* enunciates this principle in the following explanation for the Biblical commandment to keep a fire burning constantly on the altar in the Tabernacle even though a fire from heaven descended daily onto the altar (*mitzvah* 132):

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3 See chapter nine where I argue for universal “salvation,” meaning that every person eventually succeeds to come to God in freedom.

We and every wise person knows that in great miracles, which God performs with His goodness to people, He will always do them in a way of hiddenness, so that it appears somewhat as though they are plainly natural, or nearly natural. Even with the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, which was an explicit miracle, it is written that God moved the sea by way of an easterly wind the entire night, making the sea dry. For that reason, we are commanded to burn a fire on the altar, even though a fire would descend from heaven, in order to hide the miracle [of the fire descending from heaven], so that the fire that came from heaven would not be visible in its descent.<sup>4</sup>

The idea is that God does not want to overwhelm us with His miracles. To give us the space for choosing Him freely, God must hide miracles from view or give them enough of a naturalistic face to render them non-coercive.

In his *Philosophical Fragments*, Søren Kierkegaard presents a poignant parable of a king who falls in love with a humble maiden. The king fears he will overwhelm the maiden with “all the pomp of his power,” thereby depriving her of her autonomy and sense of self-worth so necessary for mutual love. So, the king limits himself, and becomes a humble servant, so as to join with her in love freely given. Just so, says Kierkegaard, “God . . . picks his steps more carefully than if angels guided them, not to prevent his foot from stumbling against a stone, but lest he trample human beings in the dust.” God must limit his exposure so that people will come to him freely.<sup>5</sup>

4. Yet, from God’s love of people, God wishes them to know of God’s love for them. Knowing of God’s love, they would be encouraged to turn to God in freedom, returning love to God.

Ordinarily, God will not manifest God’s love to a degree that will rob people of their freely choosing to come to God. But God wishes them to know of God’s full love for them in a non-compulsive manner. So God decides to pick a people for whom God’s loving relationship will be fully manifestly known. Others will have in God’s relationship to this people a living *figuration* of God’s present love

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4 *Sefer ha-Chinukh* (Jerusalem: Or ha-Chaim, 2001), 161–162. The author of this work is in dispute. My translation.

5 See Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David W. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 32–34. Kierkegaard carries the parable to a Christological teaching.

of them and a *prefiguration* of God's obvious love for them. Manifest love will emerge in freely coming to God.

God's so choosing a nation as a figuration need be only part of God's invitation to creatures to come to God in freedom. God also will scatter special spiritual individuals throughout history and nations for the purpose of advertising God's love for all. And God will provide ancillary manifestations of love in various religious and cultural contexts. However, the earliest and most long-lasting sign of God's love will be to a people, a nation, toward whom God has fully revealed his love, in a theophany, to a nation that continues alive and vibrant through it all. That is so that God's love will be manifest not only in the realm of one's personal life, but in guiding national political-social structures. What is for Caesar is also for God. This manifestation is meant to be a figuration of God's equal love for all.

Out of love for all people, God partly fulfills God's desire that people come to God in freedom, by *designating* a people as a figuration of God's love for all. In that way God can demonstrate through this people, as prototype, the love God has for all.

In time, religions other than Judaism and other than of the Jews arise to help fulfill God's purposes. But the Jews, aye the Jews, are the ancient and constant touchstone for all.<sup>6</sup>

##### 5. This designated nation is the Jews.

This designated nation is the Jews. God becomes visibly manifest to the Israelite nation almost compelling them to be a covenantal nation to God.<sup>7</sup> God redeems the Israelite slaves with shattering, overwhelming violations of nature in the form of plagues upon the Egyptians. God spectacularly splits the sea to save the Israelites. It is only then that the Israelites "feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant." God activated a raw, overpowering pyrotechnic display to bring the Israelites to this realization.

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6 A religion that requires separate treatment is Buddhism, an atheistic religion. I have dealt with Judaism and Buddhism in Jerome Gellman, "Judaism and Buddhism: A Jewish Approach to a Godless Religion," in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 299–316.

7 There is a contrary tradition that the Israelites freely chose God and God's Torah. Based on the declaration by the Israelites, "All that God says we will do and we will listen" (Exodus 24:6), the idea is that the people freely committed themselves in advance to "do" whatever they would afterward hear from God. In doing so, they acted as the angels, who are ready to perform whatever God will ask of them. However, there are sources in the rabbinic literature that demote and even reinterpret the status of this declaration.

Most centrally, God makes Mount Sinai shake. Fire and thunder drive the fear of the Lord into the Israelite nation (Exodus 19–20). Then, God reveals the Ten Commandments not just to a leader who must then convince the people of their having been revealed by God. God *sears* the Ten Commandments into the consciousness of the Israelite people by revealing the commandments directly to the entire nation all at once in a shattering event.<sup>8</sup> God leaves no room for doubt about the testimony of others or doubt about the authority of the leader.

“Said Rabbi Dimi: [At Mt. Sinai] God turned the mountain over above them like a bowl and said to them: ‘If you accept the Torah, fine. But if not, here you will be buried’ (BT Avodah Zarah 2:2).” This is coercion. God is not letting the Israelites come to God “in freedom and joy.” God veritably “tramples them in the dust.” The Hasidic master Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), however, softens this passage in a way more fitting to my figurational conception:

The Rabbis said, “God turned the mountain over above them like a bowl.” This means that because of the intensity of God’s love for us [the Jewish people] He acts to arouse in us love of Him, so that we should not want to separate ourselves from Him. It is like a person who hugs a person [from behind] and turns him around face to face and won’t let him go, because the love of the hugger is greater than that of the hugged, and so that the hugged will not forget the love of the hugger.<sup>9</sup>

On this interpretation, God overwhelms the Israelites with love to make it difficult for them to resist. God hugs them tightly (the “bowl”), so that the memory of God’s love will stay with them for ever after. True enough, the Israelites then rebelled repeatedly. But God was not making it *easy* for them to resist. God was making resistance a perverse response to His manifest presence. God overwhelmed them time and time again.

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8 The plain meaning of the text in Exodus 20 is that the people heard all ten of the commandments, although later tradition limits the number of the Ten Commandments the Israelites themselves heard.

9 Schneur Zalman of Liadi, “Sos Tasis” (1811), in *Maamarei ha-Admor ha-Zaken*, Chabad Library, accessed October 24, 2021, <https://chabadlibrary.org/books/adhaz/maamarei/572/39/196.htm?q=%D7%94%D7%A8%20%D7%9B%D7%92%D7%99%D7%92%D7%99%D7%AA>. Lest God here strike you as a stalker, please note that God’s hugs—as opposed to those of a stalker—are given in such a way that they are received with joy and love.



The coercive nature of God's overwhelmingly manifest love was well recognized in the rabbinic literature. Here is the full text of the above rabbinic statement:

Said Rabbi Avdimi son of Hama son of Hasa: [At Mt. Sinai] God turned the mountain over above them like a bowl and said to them: "If you accept the Torah, fine. But if not, here you will be buried." Said Rabbi Aha son of Yaakov: This is a substantial protest against the Torah. Said Rava, Nonetheless, the people did accept the Torah again [freely] in the days of Ahashverosh. (BT Shabbat 88a)

God wished also for the Jews to choose God in freedom. Only later, after the saga of Queen Esther, did the Israelite nation accept God's Torah freely, as was God's principle desire for responding to the divine love.

The coercive nature of God's original relationship to the Jews contrasts with God's valuing freedom in all others is highlighted by this midrashic comment on the love God has for converts:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: "The convert [to Judaism] is more beloved to God than those who stood at Mount Sinai. Why? Because all those had they not seen the sounds and the torches and lightening and the mountains shaking and the ram horns sounding, they would not have accepted upon themselves the kingdom of heaven. But this one [the convert] saw none of these and comes and attaches himself to God and accepted on himself the kingdom of heaven, is there anyone more beloved than that?"<sup>10</sup>

Converts to Judaism come to God in joy and in full freedom. So, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish declares, God loves converts more than God loves native Jews. Just so, God loves all who come to God and the Torah in freedom. We may expand this principle to all of humanity who come to God, for the value they bear of coming to God in freedom.

Commandment is a central concept in Judaism to such an extent that the fear of God and the love of God are *commands* in Judaism! Ideally, the Jew is to feel commanded by God, not invited or cajoled. In rabbinic literature, God's

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10 *Midrash Tanchuma*, ed. Solomon Buber (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1971/72), 57. My translation.

many commands to the Israelites are a sign of God's great love of them. So attests the following rabbinic source: "Rabbi Hananya ben Akashia said: 'God wished to confer merit on Israel. That's why God gave them such an abundance of Torah and commandments'" (BT Makot 23b). God displays most vividly and powerfully His love of and desire for the Jewish people in the great many *commandments* God "bestows" on them.

When addressing non-Jews, God does not overwhelm. Here, God issues a call to come to God in freedom, a call that can be accepted or rebuffed. "Rabbi Yochanan said, 'Every word that God said [at Mt. Sinai] divided into seventy languages'" (BT Shabbat 88b). This statement declares that God proclaimed the Ten Commandments in the language of all nations of the world. The divine designation of the Jews simultaneously reverberates to all of humanity. And God's call continues even today, as a rabbinic midrash says that daily God proclaims from Mt. Sinai, "I am the Lord your God." It is because of the incessant cacophony of noises we raise in our lives that we creatures on earth don't hear that booming Heavenly voice. If only we could be still for a moment, we could hear it.

I take the seventy languages "at Sinai" to humanity in a metaphorical way. The cashing of the metaphor occurs in the intimations of the divine scattered throughout human history and throughout human reality. That includes the wonders of the natural world, historical teleology, great world spiritual figures who have opened people to the divine, private and public religious experiences, and in religions that carry that call forward. To term these intimations a "call" is to affirm the belief that God wishes to have an intimate, loving relationship with humanity, freely given and enjoyed. To dub it a call from "Sinai" is to indicate that the call to the other peoples of the world is an echo of God's overwhelming embrace of the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai. To speak of it as coming from "Sinai" is also to point to God's love of the Jews as a sign of God's desire for all nations and all people. People can be aware of God's love of them by way of the Jewish people as a picture of that love, and that love as a prefiguration of the manifest love available to all.

If you doubt the historical truth of these stories, a topic I take up later in this book, please appreciate that these pictures represent the historical Jewish self-conception of their relationship to God. It is this self-consciousness that has shaped the Jewish receptivity to the account of God's acts in history toward them.

There are many rabbinic texts attesting to God's unique and special love of the Jewish people, from which it follows that God has no comparable love for non-Jews. Some of those texts can be adopted by reinterpreting the distinction to be between manifestly known divine love of the Jews and the divine love of others, the lower degree of revealment of which leaves room for non-Jews

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