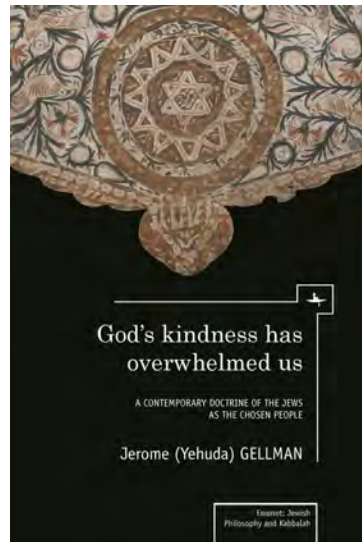


God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us: A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People

Chapter Four

For God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us:

Jews and the Nations of the World



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IV

For God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us: Jews and the Nations of the World

I

In his *Philosophical Fragments*, Søren Kierkegaard presented a most poignant parable about 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 their mutual love. So the king limits himself, and himself becomes a humble servant, so as to join with her in love freely given. Just so, says Kierkegaard, “God picks His steps . . . lest he trample human beings in the dust.” And just so, God limits Himself so that people will come to him freely. For Kierkegaard this thought leads into a kenotic theology of the incarnation, where God becomes a humble man so as to enter into relationship with other human beings in “freedom and joy.” God becomes the man Jesus who walks and talks among humanity as one of them, fostering a love that God could not get in any other way. This is not a pose or a trick, for God, for Kierkegaard, really does become a man, becomes a humble servant to be, as it were, with the maiden.

The principle of Kierkegaard’s parable is that God will not force God’s self onto a person by depriving her of her freedom with regard to choosing God. A number of Christian philosophers agree with the spirit of Kierkegaard’s parable. They argue that God must be “elusive” and not overwhelm so as not to rob people of their morally significant response to the Divine. Thus, Ronald Hepburn wrote that,

If God were incontrovertibly revealed, then our belief would be constrained, our allegiance forced, and no place would be left for free and responsible decision whether to walk in God’s ways and to entrust oneself to him in faith. Divine elusiveness is a necessary condition of our

being able to enter upon properly personal relations with God.¹

And Michael Murray wrote,

To preserve the exercise of robust, morally significant free will, God cannot provide grand-scale, fireworks displays in an effort to make His existence known.²

C. Stephen Evans has expressed an idea in this spirit in a principle he calls the “Easy Resistibility Principle.”³ According to this, God makes it easy for people to resist Him. Says Evans,

Those who do not wish to love and serve God find it relatively easy to reject the idea that there is knowledge of God. The plausibility of this principle stems from the assumption that God wants the relation humans are to enjoy with him to be one in which they love and serve him freely and joyfully.⁴

In this way, Evans explains why God does not provide strongly indicative natural signs of God’s presence in the world. God abides by the principle of Easy Resistibility. Yet, says Evans, God does make His presence accessible to those who wish to know him. Evans makes of this the “Principle of Wide Accessibility,” according to which God makes it *possible* at least for humans to come to know his existence. Still, the signs have to be read and a person must enter freely into a relationship with God.

Also, the Christian theologian, Paul K. Moser, in a book entitled, *The Elusive God*, has argued extensively that God would grant a non-coercive offer of fellowship to humans in which we are free to respond to God in

1 Ronald W. Hepburn, “From World to God,” *Mind*, 72: 40-50.

2 Michael Murray, “Coercion and the Hiddenness of God,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30: 37.

3 C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

4 This idea seems to surface in the Quran, where God says to Muhammad, “Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. Do you want to force the people to become believers?” 10:99/100. As I note below, though, this topic is quite complex in Islam.

love.⁵ God thus approaches us with a “call,” unlike “the coercive evidence of a splitting headache that just won’t go away.” God’s call

...may intrude a bit into our experience, say in conscience, but it can readily be overlooked, ignored, suppressed, or dismissed by us, because it’s intended by God not to coerce a will . . . but to be willingly received by humans. In particular, it’s designed to woo or invite us rather than to force or dominate us.⁶

These Christian philosophers, as well as others, testify to the fundamental way God relates to the world.⁷ The same idea surfaces in Jewish thought at times. The *Sefer Hachinuch* gives the following explanation for the Biblical commandment to keep a fire burning on the altar in the Tabernacle. (Mitzvah 132):

We and every wise person knows that in great miracles which God performs with His goodness to people, He will all ways 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 a demonstrative 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.⁸

The idea of this passage is that God does not want to overwhelm us,

5 Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

6 Moser, 243. Divine Persuasion, rather than coercion, is a major tenet of Christian process theology. See Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) for the concept of God’s power in process theology.

7 See also John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), especially 178-185.

8 My translation.

does not want to trample us in the dust, with His miracles. In order to give us the space for choosing Him freely, God hides his miracles just enough to give us a hint of his activity as well as the opportunity for us to respond to God freely.

I take this teaching of God's elusiveness to be included in the opening chapter of Genesis. For six days, God creates, pouring God's creative energy into the world, the world directly impacted by God's overbearing presence. On the seventh day, God rests. For God to "rest" is for God to withdraw God's overwhelming presence from the world so as to create the conditions for humanity to come to God in freedom. That God rests is the precondition for Eve to choose to eat from the forbidden tree and share the fruit with Adam. What it means, in Genesis 1, for the seventh day to be holy, is for it to hold the conditions for coming to God freely. (This is not yet the Jewish Shabbat. See below.)

I hope to convince you, however, that *the* formative Jewish experiences of God are a radical exception to this idea. And this exception informs the Jewish experience even today. The determining Jewish experiences of God are of *God overwhelming the Jewish people to accept Him and His Word*. God overwhelms the Jewish people, with an embrace than which none is stronger. No mere "wooing" or "invitation" for the Jews. Here is why:

1. A basic category of Judaism is "God commanding." In Judaism, God issues 613 commands to the Jewish nation, and these are expanded into a great many more laws by the rabbis. "Commandment" is such a central concept in Judaism that even the fear of God and the love of God are *considered commands* in Judaism! Franz Rosenzweig grappled with the paradox of God commanding love, and solved the problem by reducing the command to an imperative that could be uttered only by a lover to the loved.⁹ As such, the imperative is a pure expression of love that could not be performed by a third party. In so saying, Rosenzweig is assimilating God's command to love God to what any lover could say to the loved one: Love me! However, this softening of the command ignores the larger scriptural context of God's commands as being far more than mere imperatives. They are the commands of an overpowering being.

9 See Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, translated by Barbara E. Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 190-91. I am indebted to Heather Ohaneson for leading me to this source.

And it also ignores the fact that God's command to love God becomes the command of a third party religion that demands this love. No. God verily *demand*s love of the Israelites in the strongest terms possible.

In Rabbinic literature, God's 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. (Tractate Makot, 23b).

God displays most vividly and powerfully love of and desire for the Jewish people in the great many commandments God "bestows" on them. No coy wooing here.

2. God redeems the Israelite slaves with numerous, shattering violations of nature in the form of plagues upon the Egyptians. God then spectacularly splits the sea to save the Israelites, following which the bible testifies that they "feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant." God burrows into the Israelite consciousness with an overpowering pyrotechnic display of God's activity on their behalf. No hemming and hawing, no wooing and winking.

3. God makes Mount Sinai shake, and 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. No. 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.¹⁰

4. A Midrash expresses the lack of choice the Israelites have in being God's people. Rabbi Hanina has God declaring to the Israelites "Against your will shall you be my people." (Numbers Rabbah 2:16). This theme receives a stark formulation in the following Talmudic passage:

Said Rabbi Dimi: [At Mt. Sinai] God turned the moun-

10 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.

tain over above them like a bowl and said to them: “If you accept the Torah, fine. But if not, there you will be buried.” (*Avodah Zarah* 2:2).¹¹

This looks like raw coercion, not God letting the people come to God “in freedom and joy.” God veritably “tramples them in the dust,” to use Kierkegaard’s phrase. I want to enlist a Hasidic interpretation of this saying which transforms its harshness and pulls it in the direction of a contemporary application. That interpretation turns it from a coercive threat into an overwhelming act of love. I quote the Hasidic Master, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812):

God’s love for us is greater than our love [for God]. 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.¹²

On this interpretation, God is not threatening the Israelites. Rather, God is concerned that the Israelites will not carry with them away from the mountain a sufficiently lasting love for God. If that were to happen, they would end up spiritually “dead” (“*there*,” later, elsewhere, will be your “burial” place). So God overwhelms them with God’s own love to spur them to respond to God in kind. God hugs them tightly (the “bowl”), so that the feeling of God’s love will stay with them for ever after. True enough, later the Israelites then rebelled over and over again. But God was not making it easy for them to resist. God was making resistance a perverse response to His manifest love. As a foundational experience, God’s embrace at Sinai is to imbue all later Jewish understanding of God

11 Dan Baras has pointed out to me that this motif enters the Qur’an as an apparently real historical event. (Qur’an 2:63).

12 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Mamarei Ha-Admor Ha-Zaken*, Section 195-196. My translation. I am indebted to Yehuda Zirkind for leading me to this text.

and the Jews with a strong sense of God's overwhelming love.¹³

God is depicted as forming a covenantal agreement with the Israelite nation, in which both sides supposedly enter freely into the contract. But the truth is that God pressed the Israelites into accepting the covenant. God did not make it easy to resist the covenant offer.

There is a popular, contrary tradition to the one about the mountain being held over the Israelites' head, that praises the people for their freely choosing God and God's Torah. Based on the declaration, "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.¹⁴ This tradition includes the idea that God first offered the Torah to all other nations, who rejected the offer, before the Israelites freely agreed to accept it.¹⁵

This latter tradition has become a rather canonical understanding of the Israelite experience at Sinai, and it might seem rather disingenuous for me to dismiss this Jewish self-understanding. However, several competing traditional sources deflect Exodus 24:6 away from that interpretation, turning the Israelite declaration, "We will do and we will listen," into a negative response to God's being about to give them a revelation. Thus is that verse left with an ambiguous legacy in Jewish tradition. Rabbi Meir states in a Midrash that when the people said, "We will do and we will listen," they had idol worship in mind. (*Shmot Rabbah* 42:8)¹⁶ And another Midrash applies to the Israelites' declaration, "We will do and we will listen," a verse in Proverbs 24: "for their hearts devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble." The Israelites were not being honest in their declaration of accepting the Torah freely (*Leviticus Rabbah* 6:1, my translation).

My concept of the Jews as the chosen people adopts the view that the Israelites were showered with God's love at the mountain in order to arouse their love for God in turn. So, it favors this negative understanding of the Israelites *before* God showered them with love.

13 See below how to square God's love of the Jews with the reality of Jewish history.

14 Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a.

15 Pesikta Zutra, V'Zot Habrachah.

16 Menachem Fisch has suggested to me that Rabbi Meir reads the Hebrew of the verse as "We will make, and we will listen," meaning: "We will listen to what we make, i.e., the Golden Calf." The Hebrew term involved, "naaseh," can mean either "We will do" or "We will make."

As I noted in an earlier chapter, if you doubt the historical truth of the biblical events I have referred to here, I would ask you to agree only that the telling of these biblical stories reflected the way the Jews perceived their relationship with God. And that was that God took hold of them and wouldn't let them go. These stories have been told and retold throughout the ages, shaping the Jewish consciousness of God.

5. The sense of being overwhelmed by God is reinforced further by the fact that, mostly, Jews are *born* Jewish. No baptism, acceptance, or initiation by parents or oneself is required. In the eyes of Jewish law, you are Jewish whether you like it or not. And there is no way out. If you are born Jewish, you can become a Jesuit priest or a Buddhist nun, yet Judaism will consider you a Jew until the end of your days. Of course, someone can choose to convert to Judaism, but in doing so one chooses to join a people whose central experience is of a divine bear hug. As long as the conversion was sincere, there is no way back. The convert will remain Jewish and commanded until the day she dies, no matter what!¹⁷ Thus does the fact of just *being* Jewish reinforce the experience of God's overwhelming the Jews in choosing them.

I do not mean to suggest that God does not also want the Jews to choose God in joy and freedom. On the contrary, this is God's fervent desire. The covenant's very existence attests to this desire. And according to one traditional source, the Jews freely chose God later in history, after the story of Esther.¹⁸ They freely accepted what they had earlier received.

So it was, after a long period of God's overwhelming the Jews with His presence, God pulls back and wants the Jews to react in freedom in accepting Him. The opening verses of the book of Psalms attest to this ideal of choosing God in joy and freedom:

17 There are minority opinions against this.

18 Other sources repeat the motif of re-acceptance of the covenant. "Said Rava: 'Nonetheless, [even though they had accepted the Torah under duress] they accepted it once again in the time of Ahasuerus.'" (Talmud, Shabbat, 88a). In Joshua 24, Joshua has the people accept God's word anew. Since this Talmudic source sees a free acceptance coming only much later, we must see it as deeming the Joshua episode as less than freely given. Bruce Rosenstock has suggested to me that the return of the exiles in the time of Ezra and their acceptance of the law marks a new freely given acceptance of God and His law. See Nehemiah 10:1. See also, David Weiss Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), Chapter 2.

How blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the Torah of God, and in His Torah he meditates day and night.

Most contemporary Jews are not likely to feel themselves compelled by God to observe Judaism. But my point is not that all Jews feel this way, and certainly not all contemporary Jews. Rather, I mean to say that, when confronting traditional Judaism, what faces a contemporary Jew is *this* sense of the Jews' formative relationship to God, reinforced for many by the lack of choice of having been born Jewish. The foundational Jewish sense of God as overwhelming the people remains the predominant lens through which to view the history of the Jews and the Jewish experience. It is in this context that the promise of the covenantal relationship is played out.¹⁹

II

All of this tells of God's relationship to the Jews. When addressing the non-Jews, however, God does not overwhelm. Here God does woo, does invite, issuing a *call* to come to God in freedom, a call that can be accepted or rebuffed.

Look at this Talmudic passage:

Rabbi Yochanan said, "Every word that God said [at Mt. Sinai] divided into seventy languages." (Shabbat 88b)

Now, in rabbinic literature, the "seventy languages" are of the proverbial seventy nations of the world. Hence, this statement declares that God proclaimed the Ten Commandments to all the nations of the world. On my understanding, in proclaiming these words to all nations, God exhibits his desire for all to come to God in freedom. God does not compel the non-Jews as God did the Israelites. Significantly, God's call to the other nations of the world comes concurrently with God's choosing the Israelites. The Divine choice of the Jews simultaneously reverber-

19 I am indebted to Rabbi Francis Nataf for pointing out to me the need for this paragraph.

ates as a *call* 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,” translated, I would add, into the seventy proverbial languages of humanity.

God does not call the Gentiles to observe 613 commandments. The 613 commandments to the Jews are a function of God’s overbearing demonstration of His love for them. God veritably lavishes the Jews with love. As a Midrash puts it, God says, “Take me with my Torah!”²⁰ And Jewish liturgy declares, “*Great love* have you loved us,” for giving the commandments to the Jews. The call to the Gentiles, rather than to follow the 613 commandments, is to come to God in freedom and in joy.

III

We have seen a radical distinction between God’s approach to the chosen people, the Jews, and God’s approach to the non-Jews. Here, then, is my proposal as to why God would single out one nation, whether Jews or Hittites, to robustly *induce* them to accept God, while acting with self-limitation toward the rest of humanity:

1. God wants humanity to come to Him freely, so God must restrain God’s manifestation of God’s love for them in order to make that possible. As a result, the human race is left with no clear indication, with no obvious expression, of God’s strong love for them, of God’s burning desire that they choose God. So, God is in danger of being perceived as not sufficiently loving of humanity, since it seems that God is not sufficiently anxious for humans to recognize God’s love for them. God must do something to prove his love to all human beings without departing from His desire that persons come to him in freedom.

2. In God’s behavior toward one chosen nation, God provides a real-life demonstration, a figure, a picture, of God’s desire for intimacy with *all* humanity. In God’s intensity toward that nation to accept God, God says to the world: “See my passionate desire to be God to this people. Here, in my turning to them is a concrete figuration of my desire for all of humanity. Keep this before you when you discern my presence as non-compelling. Keep this in mind when I call to you but do not compel

20 Midrash Tanchuma, Shmot (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1972/3), 459. My translation.

you. Don't take that as insufficient interest on my part. Here, in this nation, is proof of my wanting all of you with me."²¹

3. Thus, every act of God's love toward the people he has chosen also speaks to all peoples. Each such act is an invitation, a call, an offer by God to all peoples to receive God's love, as demonstrated by God's relationship to the people he has chosen to demonstrate his love. In this way, God is able to provide a demonstration of God's fervent desire for humanity while allowing humanity the requisite space to choose God in freedom.

4. In this way do the chosen people serve God as witnesses to humanity that God desires the hearts of *all* peoples. And this is *my* understanding of the verses in Deuteronomy, that God chose the Israelites because God loved them. God's love of the Israelites serves as a sign of God's love for all humanity.

As I have already said, this is *not* the way Jewish chosenness has been interpreted historically. Instead, most often God's love of the Jewish people was taken by the Jews to signify God's exclusive love of the Jews, or indicative at least of God's greater love of the Jews. I am proposing a new understanding of Jewish chosenness to replace old ones and other contemporary understandings. I am proposing a new story from traditional texts. And on my view, God's choice of the Jews will not be mistaken as being due to God's special love for the Jews, because the complete story I tell will be propagated. Not only do I present God as overwhelming the Jews with His love, leaving God's motive to be guessed. I tell my story about why God does this and what God hopes to accomplish thereby. The story is a "regulative narrative," which Edward Casey describes as one following the original while allowing "diversions along the way."²²

21 In personal correspondence, Robert McKim questioned why God would choose a *nation* for the desired role. It would have made more sense, says McKim, for God to sprinkle love throughout the nations by God's overwhelming selected individuals or groups with love. I answer that a nation is able to abide by a collective religion and create a society which reflect God's love of them. This cannot be done by individuals who are sprinkled throughout humanity. In any case, I am not so interested in arguing a priori that God had to choose only a nation, rather than some other configuration. My interest is more to suggest why God, who chose a nation in fact, would have done so.

22 Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Second Edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 106.

Objection: If the purpose of God's choosing the Jews was as I say it was, to serve the Gentiles with a model of God's love of all humanity, how come nobody knew about it all these years? If *that* was the purpose, it was a colossal failure! Did God "forget" to let this secret out to the world? That nobody ever heard of this until now is a good reason to deny that when God chose the Jewish people, God had in mind just this.

This objection will help me to clarify the nature of my proposal. Concepts of Judaism have changed over the ages in accordance with the ability of believers to formulate them and live in accordance with them. Divine accommodation plays an important role in the development of Judaism in history. We have now reached a point in history where a new concept of the Chosen People is in order because of a new type of understanding, both moral and scientific, which God has granted to us. My proposal aims to be commensurate with that understanding, hoping to encourage a readiness to advance to a new age of realization.

* * *

The following is the explanation, promised in the previous chapter, for why in my proposal there are not multiple covenants between God and the nations of the world, or between God and religions other than Judaism. The covenant between God and the Jews is *sui generis*. The entire idea of there being a covenant, on my present proposal, is to serve God's purpose of manifesting, through the Jews, God's love for all nations. For this reason God *imposes*, albeit lovingly, the covenant on the Jews. So, there exists no covenant save through God overwhelming the recipient of the covenant. And that is precisely what God will not do to the nations of the world, whom God wants to come to God in freedom and joy.

If you like, we could adopt an attenuated sense in which there exist "covenants" between God and nations other than the Jews or with religions other than Judaism. This would be in the sense of God being ready and open to be in an intimate relationship with every human being. There would be a *potential*, waiting, "covenant" between God and other nations, dependent on their freely coming to God. In my proposal, I would prefer leaving out the notion of multiple covenants, because doing so deflects from the unique nature and purpose of God's covenant with the Jews.

IV

The history of the romance between God and the Jews has not been idyllic. It has been a mixture of millennia of Jewish responses to God in joy and with loyalty, together with Jewish resistance to God, with the resistance coming from the very start with Israelite rebellions in the desert. God, in turn, has treated the Jews both to glory and to suffering. So much suffering, in fact, that Christians could believe that the Jews continued to survive only as a sign of the misery visited upon those who would deny Christ. So much suffering, in fact, that at times Jews themselves developed a rather ironic sense of God's love of them.²³

In light of this, I suggest that Jewish history is a complex response to God's decision to choose the Jews both by overwhelming them and granting them an enhanced capacity to respond to God with love. On the one hand, Jewish history is a story of Jews responding in love to God in light of the initial overwhelming experiences. On the other hand, it is a story of resistance born of the struggle against God's intensity, and of being born Jewish, and thus being commanded, with no choice in the matter. It is a story of struggle for freedom. Jewish rebellion is thus the price that God pays for having overwhelmed a people into serving as a demonstration of his desire for human intimacy and of ultimate divine grace. In that sense, the Jewish people have been and continue to be a *sacrifice* for God, participating in all of the joy, and all of the tragedy, of being God's chosen people.

I want to elaborate on the sacrificial nature of Jewish chosenness and on the correlative Jewish consciousness within the sacrificial mode. The continued existence of the Jewish people, through all of its triumphs and sufferings, is a living reminder to the world of the formative experiences of the Jews. That continued existence should signify to the nations of the earth God's steadfastness in staying by those to whom God has turned.²⁴ This is the promise implicit in the story of the exodus from Egypt.

But more. The history of the Jewish people serves as a mirror of all of human existence. Human existence has a good share of loss and

23 So we get the classic Jewish quip when things go wrong, as for example, "I ran like crazy to try to make my flight, and Gawt hat geholfen (God helped)...and I missed it!"

24 This, of course, is an inversion of how the Augustinian position is ordinarily understood that God keeps the Jews in a dispersed existence to suffer for their rejection of Jesus and to be witness to what happens to those who do so. (Based on Augustine's *City of God*, 18:46.)

failure, of anguish and disappointment, of suffering and defeat. This truth about human existence is mirrored in the history of the Jewish people. Jewish history has been a long litany of persecution and suffering, restrictions and isolation. But through it all Jewish history has been punctuated by God's grace shining through the tribulations of a people. The Jewish people continues to exist, and with its religion intact. In this way, the Jewish people serve as a model for how to understand one's life and how to maintain hope in the darkest of nights.

In 1914, the Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem published a play, entitled *Shver Tsu Zayn a Yid*, or "It Is Hard to Be a Jew." This, I submit, is a mirror for "It is hard to be a human being." When one looks into the mirror of the Jewish people, what one sees is that throughout the dire vicissitudes of life God's covenant will remain.²⁵ The controlling image here is of the burning bush, which burns but never is consumed. This image has served Jewish commentators at least since the time of the ancient Jewish philosopher Philo, who wrote:

For the bush was a symbol of those who suffer the flames of injustice, just as the fire symbolized those responsible for it; but that which burned did not burn up, and those who suffered injustice were not to be destroyed by their oppressors.²⁶

The Jewish role as God's chosen people implies a sacrificial existence that configures, but does not atone for, the fiery side of human existence with the promise of God's redemption. Hence the Jews in their sacrificial mode are a suffering servant of God's. But the Jews are not a Christ figure of Paulinian atonement. Rather, the Jews are the Israelites who endure bitter enslavement only to be redeemed in an archetype of

25 This does not address the question of why God allows the vicissitudes of life such free reign in the first place. I will not take up that question here. It is the classic question about God and life and most poignantly about God and the Jewish people. In what I write here there is a partial, but very partial, attempt at a theodicy concerning Jewish suffering. That is that given the fact of human suffering, Jewish suffering together with Jewish survival against all odds testifies to the world of God's grace within the afflictions of life. This is a dimension of the sacrificial role of the Jews in God's world. I do not pretend for a moment, however, that this thought justifies the horrendous evils the Jewish people have endured in their history. Neither do I address why there is human misery in the first place. Here I must be silent.

26 Philo, *Life of Moses*, 1:65-67, as quoted in James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 213.

a divine promise of redemption for all of humankind.

Jewish pain is a picture of the world's pain. Our suffering, a figure of the suffering of Gentiles. Our sinning, a mirror of the sinning of others. And our goodness, a depiction of theirs. And our past redemption from the suffering of slavery, our continued existence despite all, and the promise of our future redemption are the hope held out to all of humanity.

Of course, the sacrificial nature of Jewish existence is but one side of the Jewish experience, balanced with the joy and sublimity of being Jewish and following the Jewish religion. Yet, for a Jew the joy and freedom must come through and be the result of living the sacrificial mode of service to God. It would take us too far from the task at hand were I to enter into how this complexity works itself out in Jewish religious life. But I do mean to suggest a phenomenology of Judaic religious consciousness rooted in the sense of being commanded, and overwhelmed by being God's chosen people. A sense of sacrificiality redeemed.

In saying that God only *calls* to the non-Jews and does not compel, I must issue a slight qualification. I am aware that sometimes non-Jewish individuals have felt that God had taken hold of them tightly and would not let them go. Teresa of Avila comes to mind as an outstanding example of this. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* writes about her, "The more she endeavored to resist, the more powerfully did God work in her soul." I recognize this as a possibility for a non-Jew, and admit that this would violate Evans' Principle of Easy Resistance. However, this phenomenon does not reflect Divine activity for Christianity as a collective. In contrast, it is the Jews as a people who have carried this sense of God's overbearing overtures to them into an entire religion, as a permanent presence in the world.

On my view, each of God's acts of love toward the Israelites and the Jews becomes a promise to the Gentiles if they will only come to God in freedom. The Exodus from Egypt speaks of a promise of redemption for all peoples in God. The giving of the Torah to the Jews signifies the possibility for all peoples to be guided by God's light if they so choose.

As I said earlier, the opening chapter of Genesis attests to God's self-removal from God's creation enough to insure its freedom. For six days, God is overwhelmingly active in and present to the world. On the seventh day, God rests. For God to "rest" is for God to withdraw God's overpowering presence from the world so as to create the conditions for

humanity to come to God in freedom. This is the nature of the “Seventh Day.” Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, on the seventh day of the week, comes and subverts the seventh day of rest of creation. The Sabbath is a sign of the close intimacy between God and the Jews, who are bound to God in the covenant: “The Children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath for all their generations, as an everlasting covenant. For between me and the Children of Israel it is a sign forever.” (Exodus 31:17) Jewish tradition has taken the Shabbat to be the time in which God is most accessible to a Jewish person, in clear contrast to what is otherwise the retreat of God from an accessible presence in the world. Thus does the *Shabbat* bear a duality for the world: a movement by God to create freedom for the Gentile to come to God in joy, the seventh day, and a movement by God to bind the Jews to God as the chosen people, the Sabbath.

Why are the Jews closest to God on the Sabbath? “For in six days God made heaven and earth and on the seventh day he stopped and rested.” (Exodus 31:17) Because God withdrew His obvious presence from the world on the seventh day, the Jews must then proclaim on that day that God’s love for the Jews represents God’s love for all. Precisely when God withdraws is the time of greatest need to remind the world of God’s call, so it is then that God’s loving relationship with the Jews is most important as a demonstration of God’s love for all.

The Sabbath liturgy celebrates God’s gift of the Sabbath day to them: “For the Lord our God has not given it to the nations of the world...for [only] to your people Israel did you give it in love, to the descendants of Jacob, whom you have chosen.” (My translation) It is *because* the nations of the world do not have Shabbat, that God gives Shabbat to the Jews. The intimacy of the Sabbath exhibits the intimacy promised to all who will come wholeheartedly to God in freedom.

This concludes my presentation of what it means for the Jews to be God’s Chosen People and the implications for the Jews’ relationship to non-Jews. In the next chapter, I turn to the implications of this for a Jewish theology of world religions other than Judaism.