PART ONE

Jewcentricity in History

I

Chosen

To exaggerate is to weaken.

—Jean François de la Harpe

The origins of Jewcentricity lie in the historical odyssey of an idea, a Jewish idea about the purpose of Jewish people. But it is the collision of that idea with the long and eccentric history of the Jews that has given particular shape to Jewish self-image and behavior alike over the centuries. More specifically, the strategies that Jews devised to survive as a people—a nation lacking a common land, a common spoken language, and political independence for more than two thousand years—have often proved perplexing to the non-Jews in whose midst the vast majority of Jews have lived.

Those survival strategies, motivated and shaped by the moral tenets of a religious faith that has claimed the Jews to be God's chosen people, set Jews apart and led most host societies to encourage Jews to remain apart.[1] Separated from, but still within, their host communities, nearly everything the Jews did to enable themselves to continue their mission as the Chosen People *made* them chosen, and everything that made them chosen more often than not made them pariahs in the eyes of others. This chosen/pariah dialectic is the motor, the innermost source, of Jewcentricity.

Some of this Jewish desire for communal separation amid the larger society, and the willingness of non-Jews to enable or to tolerate

it, is clearly tied to the simple fact of difference. But some of it has its origins in the discomfort caused by ambiguity. Just as people often fear difference, they often go to great lengths to dispel, explain, or ignore (as the case may be) ambiguity. Human beings live by the categories they devise to organize experience, and when things, events, or other people violate their principles of categorization, they strive to restore the explanatory power of their cognitive frameworks. Just as dirt is "matter out of place"—as the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, quoting Lord Chesterfield, took pains to explain—the Jews in their global sojourn have often seemed to others "people out of place," hence a kind of social dirt.[2] As the Israeli writer A. B. Yehoshua once put it:

> We have a tendency to drive the non-Jews crazy. There is something in our existence which leads whole civilizations to be obsessed with us. Earlier we drove the Europeans crazy and now we drive crazy also the Arabs. Something in *our undefined existence* causes this madness. . . . To live without borders, without taking responsibility. To be here and also there, yet not here and not there, and to maintain such an elusive existence, such an unclear identity. . . . It is about time we should understand that our ambiguous identity is causing individuals and groups who suffer a chaos of identity to cast on us awesome implications.[3]

Is Jewcentricity, then, mainly the result of a prolonged intercivilizational misunderstanding? The kind where one episode tends to generate further episodes, gradually but ineluctably encrusting relations between civilizations to the point that no one can figure out how it all got started? Well, yes. However, the gentile misunderstanding of the Jews has become more protracted, ornate, interwoven, shifting, and ironic than any other roughly similar misunderstanding ever known. A central reason for this, at least for those societies that have been formed by Christian and Islamic religion, is that Jewish ideas have influenced them at one level even as flesh-and-blood Jewish communities have engaged them at another. The idea of chosenness itself radiated outward, became transformed as other "chosen" Abrahamic faiths sought to separate and distinguish themselves from their Jewish origins, and was then hurled back at the Jewish communities within. This is what led the redoubtable Israel Zangwill to say that the Jew is "the great misunderstood of history."[4]

But that is not quite all there is to it: there is a circularity to the misunderstanding at the heart of Jewcentricity, because Jews have

often misunderstood in turn the source of gentile misunderstanding. They understood traditionally that chosen meant different, not necessarily better, and they assumed that this distinction would also be clear to others. It was often, however, not so clear; difference, when associated with superior achievement of various kinds, easily blends into presumptions of snobbery. When who God in fact chose became a matter of theological dispute, and vulnerable Jews in Diaspora grew defensive about their own claims, "different" sometimes elided into "better," and the whole cycle began again. This would almost be amusing—a kind of reverse version of O. Henry's famous story "The Gift of the Magi"—if it were not so serious. But there it is—a misunderstanding that has shifted its bases and gears throughout the centuries and is doing so still.

To understand contemporary manifestations of Jewcentricity, we have to reckon with the fact that it is a phenomenon that has been many centuries in the making. Where did it all start? How did Jews become known worldwide as the people that considers itself chosen? Why the Jews?

The annals of history and anthropology are full of creation stories centered on the ancestors of the very writers of those stories. The idea that humankind itself is, as the Hebrew Bible suggests, the "crown of creation," is of course widespread, and the idea that a particular group with its own language and culture is the diadem at the center of that crown is not much less so. Indeed, the presumed cosmic union of land, people, and god is a formula so typical of ancient cultures that merely to summarize the principal examples would consume the better part of any given afternoon.[5]

Ancient Israel is certainly one of those examples, though a minor one by conventional measures. The people of Israel were small in number, built no great monuments, constructed no great cities, conquered no then-known-world-spanning empires. Yet the people of Israel turned out to have anything but a minor impact on history, and that is because its version of its own origin was and remains an example of ancient ethnocentrism with a twist.

Ancient Israelites (also called Hebrews, and later and until today called Jews for reasons we will come to in a moment) came to believe that their ancestor Abraham was called by God Himself to propagate the revolutionary idea of monotheism. Monotheism was revolutionary not

only because it proclaimed a single God, but also because the biblical creation story made clear that humanity was a parallel unity to a single God, having descended from one divinely created couple, Adam and Eve. And even more important than the idea that there is only one God was the astounding idea, for the time, that God is one, that God and his creation form a unity. (This is what the verse "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" actually means.) In other words, creation makes sense as a whole: there is a first cause, and all other causes are consistent with it.

That there is only one God, one brotherhood of man, and that God is the author of a creation that is itself a unity, were ideas that changed the world. They posited the first universal moral vision, and they arguably established the earliest foundations for modern science. But there is even more to the twist than that: Abraham's relation to a land, within the ancient conceptual trinity of land, people, and god, was *not* to the land of his birth, Ur Kasdim in Mesopotamia, in what is today Iraq, or the land of his sojourn, the region of Haran, in what is today southern Turkey. Rather, as all those who know the biblical story are aware, God told Abraham to leave his native land and go to a new land God would show him. That turned out to be Canaan, later called the Land of Israel, part of which is Judea, and which has been generally known since Roman times as Palestine.

That land, and more besides, was to belong to Abraham's posterity, but not by a right fixed by might. Rather, Canaan was to belong to Abraham's seed through his son Isaac by dint of a covenant, a reciprocal and conditional relationship between the Creator of the universe and what became the people of Israel. (The rest of "the land between the two rivers" was to belong to the descendants of Abraham's other sons, notably Ishmael, but also the six sons he had with Keturah after the death of Sarah, as related in Genesis 25:1–6.) This, too, the idea of a conditional, covenantal relationship between a single God and a single people whose purpose was to minister to a universal brotherhood of mankind, was a new idea. The Israelites were the only "chosen people" of the ancient world who defined themselves more by a creed than by a bloodline and whose moral mission trumped the importance of their ties to a land.

It is on account of the singular purpose of Israel that the biblical narrative tells a story that was revolutionary in another way, as well. In every other ancient religious narrative, God is an ally of the existing temporal powers and the hierarchy that sustains them. Not in the Hebrew Bible, whose main protagonists are not rulers or warriors but ordinary people with extraordinary concern for living a morally

informed life. In the story, if not in actual fact, Abraham leaves the most sophisticated urban culture of his day, crosses the river (hence the origin of the name Hebrews, from *avar*, to cross over), and sets off through the wilderness. The anti-hierarchical theme of the story is then replicated and greatly magnified with the story of Moses. Other ancient epics tell stories of noble-born children who somehow become the wards of slaves or the poor and are then restored to their rightful noble places. But Moses is born to slaves and ends up being raised as a prince of Egypt, only to reject privilege and associate his life with the underlings of society. As Jonathan Sacks puts it, the Moses story is an antimyth, arguably the world's first and certainly the most powerfully long-lasting antimyth in literature.[6]

A people who believe in a God who disdains earthly power isn't likely to endear itself to those in power, even when those in power happen to be Jews. This notion, that political rule deserves respect only when it is just, is an indelible feature of the Jewish worldview. It is how within the biblical narrative the prophets of Israel, armed with the antimyth of the Exodus, show their mettle. Indeed, from the time of Moses' audiences with Pharaoh onward, one sees the manifestations of this dynamic playing out in Jewish history, sending forth sparks of opposition to tyranny that lit the tinder of Jewcentricity hither and yon.

Ideas have real social and ultimately political consequences, and the ideas embedded in the stories of credit and blame that human communities tell about God and creation especially so.[7] What the Israelites believed about God set them apart from their neighbors, and over time the distinctions grew. For example, since there was only one God, gods fighting each other could not explain the forces of nature or disputes among peoples. Since the "Jewish" God did not die and get reborn with the seasons as gods typically did in pagan, or pantheistic, religions, the Israelites did not copy the resurrection rites of their neighbors, which often involved child sacrifice. Since God was beyond sexuality, the Israelites had no fertility rites either—no group copulations as with the Sumerians or institutionalized temple prostitution as with the Greeks—rites often associated with sexual excess and perversion.

Perhaps most important, God was an ally of both liberation and historical change; He was not merely a God in and of nature, but a God in and of history. This had two major implications that lay at the root of defining what was and has long remained different about the Jews.

First, since God was first cause in a world that made internal logical sense, it fell to people to figure out their own way in that world. Only after God, or the gods, were expelled from the immanent here and now, exported to heaven, so to speak, could human reason begin to take hold as a means to understand reality.

Second and closely related, in the Jewish view history mattered as something more than just a series of events. It meant something. It progressed toward a goal, rather than cycling back around itself like the seasons. It was free to become what its actors wished it to become. An omnipotent God is a god who can control the world in such a way as to turn events toward those who recognize Him.

The rabbis understood this from the Torah text, specifically from how God describes himself to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses asks God to tell him who is sending him to Pharaoh, God answers with just three Hebrew words: "*Eheyeh asher eheyeh*." Cryptic as this sentence seems, and despite the many translations it has attracted, it is actually quite simple grammatically. As the first and last words are the future tense, first person of the verb *to be*, it means, "I will be that which I will be." In other words, I am free, and you humans I have created in my spiritual image, you are free, too. What you do matters to your future, which is yours to shape.

That is why the Hebrew Bible, unlike other ancient stories, amounts to an effort to write history, however arguable the result in terms of accuracy. As many observers have pointed out, it never mattered in other ancient narratives if what happened in the stories was literally true, for what was true did not happen in real human time but in heaven, among the gods. Abraham and the early Israelites essentially realized, which is to say brought into collective consciousness, the idea of a concrete now. History started to matter because it was understood to cumulatively create the present, just as action in the present created the future. One's behavior and decisions mattered, too, not just because they affected how the crops would grow or how to make one's family safe from the elements and hostile neighbors, but because they shaped the character of life, the quality of consciousness itself. That realization, so taken for granted now and thus so easy to underestimate as a revolutionary force, defines the inner logic of the Hebrew Bible.

And that—all that—is why, in turn, roughly a millennium after Abraham and the other patriarchs of Israel, what Jews believed and how Jews acted contrasted so vividly with what, say, Greeks believed and how Greeks acted. Whatever their material and philosophical

achievements, the ancient Greeks practiced infanticide and slavery, and exalted pedophilia and homosexuality as the preferred natural order of things. Why not? Their pantheon of gods did the same. Above all, when Jews and Greeks encountered one another in the fourth and third centuries BCE, the Greeks still aligned their temporal power with those of their whimsical gods; the Hebrews decided that their chosen status did not align with conventional political and military power, and they often stood athwart it—and would outlast it.

To review here the whole skein of Jewish history as related by the biblical narrative we cannot afford. The more familiar one is with that narrative, the clearer its historical impact on Jewish thinking and behavior becomes, but what matters, in any event, is that the biblical text has an underlying theme; it is not just a chronicle of sometimes touching, sometimes obtuse stories. The theme inheres in the unfolding of the Jews' chosenness in history; it is the extended tale of the divine mission given to Abraham. The Hebrew Bible amounts to a continuous reinforcement of the idea of the Chosen People: the Jews believe in God's having chosen them; the Jews then act a certain way as a result; something happens that is necessarily interpreted in the light of chosenness; that interpretation impels further understanding and behavior, which is interpreted again in the light of the chosen mission; and so on and on. Out of all this comes not only a historical narrative studded with a presumed meaning but a theology pointing forward to redemption.

We have already limned how it all starts: Abraham accepts God's call, as do his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. We know about Jacob's eleventh son, Joseph, the descent into Egypt and the Exodus from it, the revelation at Mount Sinai, the forty years in the wilderness, the death of Moses, and the slow conquest of the land under Joshua and the Judges. We know, too, about Saul as king, about David, who supplanted him, and about David's son Solomon, who built the first Temple in Jerusalem. We "know" all of this from the Hebrew Bible, not from corroborative historical and archeological sources, for they range from scarce to nonexistent. Biblical and historical accounts start to merge after the time of Solomon, as the odyssey of Jewish history merges with that of the wider world. It is from this point that the Jewish theology of chosenness collides with the broader flow of history, and it is this collision that has shaped the Jewish theology-in-history that endures to this day.

King David conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his capital sometime around 1000 BCE. The Jewish people, now about four and half centuries after the Exodus, enjoyed something very close to ordinary stability. Having ignored Samuel's advice and taken for themselves a king like the other nations (Samuel I, chapter 8), they had fairly well de-Jewcentrized themselves. They had a government, a territory, a place in the regional order, and a religious culture that, if the prophets can be believed, bore little resemblance much of the time to the code Moses delivered to the people from God. After David's death Solomon consummated the highest form of Jewish ritual obligation by building the Temple in which the Levites, the priestly caste, could fulfill their divinely mandated tasks. All seemed well, more or less, as these things go.

When Solomon died, something indeed utterly normal happened: his children fought over the kingdom, with the result that it split in two, in 933 BCE. The northern part was called Israel, with its capital Samaria and its own rival temple and priesthood; the southern part was called Judah (capital Jerusalem). Then in 722 BCE, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire; ten of the twelve tribes were carried off into captivity, vanishing from history as descendants of the Patriarchs.[8] This meant that the majority of Israelites who remained in their own land under their own government were of the Kingdom of Judah and were descended from Jacob's son Judah. Hence, ultimately, the word "Jew" to describe them.[9]

The Kingdom of Judah experienced its ups and downs over the decades, as all kingdoms do. But the idea of the Chosen People with its chosen mission was never entirely extirpated. Sometime around the year 621 BCE, under the reign of King Josiah, the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) was more or less canonized as it exists today as part of a religious revitalization movement generated by the king. Alas, the good times of what has become known as the First Commonwealth did not last long, for the power of the Babylonian Empire bore down on the eastern Mediterranean. The Kingdom of Judah remained more or less independent until 586 BCE, when it was conquered by Babylonian armies under King Nebuchadnezzar. Solomon's Temple was razed, and many, but not all, of the people were carried off as captives to Babylon.

The Babylonian Empire, however, was itself soon conquered by the Persian Empire—upon which Cyrus the Great gave the Jews permission to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. Led by

Ezra, this they did. The rebuilding took a while to complete, not least because most of the Jews, having gotten used to Babylon and thriving there, declined to return to Judea. Nonetheless, the Second Temple was dedicated in 516 BCE, just seventy years after the Babylonians had destroyed the first one.

The Persian Empire fell in turn to the Greeks, and the Greeks in time gave way to the Romans, who conquered Judea and Samaria in the year 63 BCE. It was during this extended period between the end of the First Commonwealth and the start of the Roman era that the rest of the Hebrew Bible beyond the Torah was written and compiled, along with several other books that did not ultimately make it into the canon. The Hebrew Bible as a whole was canonized sometime in the first century CE. It was then that the books were given their names and put in the order they retain today.

The Second Temple stood until the Romans destroyed it in the year 70 CE in punishment for Jewish rebellion. The Jews soon rebelled again against Roman rule, most significantly in a revolt led by Shimon Bar Kochba starting in 133 CE. They were defeated and the people subsequently massacred in large numbers. Most of those who survived were sold as slaves or otherwise deported.[10] The Arch of Titus, which can still be viewed today in Rome, depicts some of these events—from the Roman point of view, of course.

From about the year 135 onward, Jews inhabited no territory on which their majority lived, lacked political independence, and, within a few generations after their dispersion, possessed no common spoken language—neither Hebrew, Aramaic, nor Syriac Greek. (They did have in common the written Hebrew language and a version of Aramaic as languages of prayer and study, which turned out to be critically important.) Yet the Jews as a people, as a corporate entity, managed to survive anyway. Moreover, starting in the mid-nineteenth century and consummated in May 1948, the Jews managed to reconstitute themselves on part of their ancient land as an independent nation, speaking a language similar to that of the Hebrew Bible—after a hiatus of about 1,878 years, give or take a few months. That, in a nutshell, is Jewish history.

No other people has ever pulled off a feat like this, and it is *how* the Jews managed to do it—managed not to become the historical fossils that Arnold Toynbee, Oswald Spengler, and other theorists of history claimed they must be—that provides the protracted context for the various and sundry manifestations of Jewcentricity that have dotted the history of the Common Era.

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So how did the Jews do it? The basic answer is at once simple and profound: the continuous compounding of the concept of chosenness has been accomplished through the cultivation of memory. Enjoined by the Torah to remember the past, the Jews created not only books but disciplines for the interpretation and study of those books. Because these books and their interpretations stretch over many centuries, when Jews study their religious literature they are in effect having an intergenerational conversation in which the contents and concepts of the Jewish historical memory are transmitted forward in time.

There have been three key source books for creating the common collective Jewish memory: the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Torah; the siddur, the prayer book; and the Haggadah, the story of the Exodus from Egypt. (The Talmud is also a very important book, but for other reasons we will come to later.) One can see how these books function as a vehicle for the collective memory of chosenness only by actually reading them, so let me take you on a highly selective and abbreviated tour of the Hebrew Bible, and describe the siddur and the Haggadah as we proceed below.

When God promised Abraham that He would make of him a great nation, here is what the Torah says He said:

> Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace and the house of your father, to a land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and he who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth will bless themselves through you. (Genesis 12:1–3)

When God calls upon Moses to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, again the Jews are called special, for the Bible says that never before had one people been taken out of the midst of another. It is a bit later on, however, at the time of the revelation on Sinai, that the biblical language of chosenness is most vivid. In Exodus, chapter 19, just before the revelation of the Ten Commandments, God instructs Moses to tell the children of Israel as follows: "You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I have borne you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me. And now, if you hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of people, for Mine is the entire world. You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In Deuteronomy, chapter 7, the language is similar but perhaps even

more vivid. Moses tells the people, "For you are a holy people to the Lord, your God; the Lord, your God has chosen you to be for Him a treasured people above all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. Not because you are more numerous than all the peoples did God desire you and choose you, for you are the fewest of the people."

Not only is the language of chosenness dispersed throughout the Torah, it continues on into the Prophets, for the concept of chosenness, at the very heart of all forms of Jewcentricity, did not remain inert as the history of Israel proceeded. As it was compounded in the cycle of experience and interpretation, it became a kind of prism through which the experiences of the Jews were refracted back to them. When Israel was planted upon the land during the First Commonwealth (and the Second), it is evident from Samuel I and II, Kings I and II, and other books that the people often strayed and were then punished in order to bring them back to their mission. Thus the prophet Amos (3:2): "You alone have I known from all the families of the earth, therefore I punish you for your iniquities."

Of course the Israelites and then the Jews experienced the usual sort of trouble any state endures in the world: the challenges of diplomacy and war, corruption and poor leadership. But the prophets interpreted everything in moral terms, translating the political into the religious as their moral imaginations developed over time. Thus Isaiah, who spoke of Israel as "a light unto the nations," elaborated Israel's mission anew by arguing after the traumatic destruction of the Northern Kingdom that the purpose of Israel's suffering was to cleanse not just its own collective soul but that of the entire world. (It was a relatively short step from that idea in prophetic Judaism to the Christian idea, transmitted via the Essene sect, that Jesus, taking the place of Israel, suffered for the sins of the world.)

Established as a central concept in Jewish theology from the beginning—Israel as the center of the moral universe, the handmaiden of God, the engine of cosmic history—the Jews applied the idea of chosenness to their circumstances in all cases. Of those circumstances, two stand out as most formative: the destruction of the First and Second Commonwealths, with them the First and Second Temples, and with those disasters exile from the land.

How did the Jews adapt? For the sacrificial service in a temple they invented and substituted communal prayer in a synagogue. For this they relied on books: on the Torah, on the rest of the Hebrew Bible, and on an evolving and increasingly standardized liturgy—the siddur, the second of the three key books of memory in the Jewish

literary pantheon. In order for this adaptation to work, not just widespread literacy but study and interpretation of texts were paramount: and so a community of the intellect came into being, starting in Babylon and continuing thereafter.

Those interpretations, in turn, eventually formed the core of other books, notably the Talmud, which served as a vehicle for the interpretation of scripture in light of the needs of the day. Judaism (although no one called it that at the time) stopped being what many religions tend to be: static, conservative, and inclined against change. Instead, Judaism became a system of belief that looked forward to redemption from exile and restoration to its land. This followed from the Abrahamic realization that human time was real and open-ended rather than cyclical, and that human life could be shaped by human agency. With the advent of rabbinic Judaism, that basic insight looked forward to a messianic age that would repair a broken world. The Jews accepted the authority of the clergy over that of scripture itself in order to make the journey forward.

Once a basically optimistic attitude toward change became established within Jewish thinking, that attitude doubled back and affected the interpretation of texts and of Jewish history itself. Texts became open in the sense that their meanings looked forward, and their interpretation was linked to the realities of Jewish life as time progressed. Had this not occurred, had the religious ideas of the Jews not become both portable *and* future-looking, the Jews could not have survived as a self-aware, self-defined people over nearly two thousand years after the Roman Exile.

As things turned out, the Jews got two cracks at this form of adaptation, and without the experience of the first, the second might have failed. As already suggested, the portability of Judaism was first pioneered during the Babylonian Exile, when the Jews figured out how to maintain a separate existence in a larger society without putting themselves in untenable opposition to it. It was also in Babylon that the Jews began to understand what their prophets had warned them about, what Abraham and Jacob and Moses and Samuel and Amos and Hosea and Isaiah had been trying to tell them: religious duty was not just for kings and priests but for ordinary people; not about external grandeur but about internal grace; not about sacrificing children or even animals, but about setting aside one's own needs out of love for and generosity to others.

The Jews also gained practical experience in Babylon that would prove critical in later centuries, for here they first experimented with

how to create and maintain far-flung personal networks, as the Jews followed Babylonian trade routes to every corner of the then-known world. More than that, Babylon's culture was more highly developed than Israelite culture, and from Babylon the Jews took a lot—a script, a calendar, a language (a form of Aramaic), the Babylonians' knowledge of astronomy, and much else. But they grafted these elements onto their own sense of corporate identity, historical mission, and moral sensibilities.

Not only that, but after their restoration to the land of Israel under the Persians, Jews reinvigorated their national life with the lessons learned in Babylon. Here, too, the Jews had help. The two-century period of Persian overlordship was a creative and culturally interactive one, and one in which Jewish political and cultural autonomy was extensive. Thus, when the Jews encountered Alexander the Great in the third century BCE and endured the dominant influence of Hellenism over the next several centuries, they already knew how to live a parallel existence in temples of time and spirit. They had already devised a way to maintain their religious and spiritual life apart from the vicissitudes of politics.

Hellenism represented a challenge to Judaism and Jews at least as great as the Babylonian Exile and the Roman one. Jewish civilization probably would not have survived Hellenism had it not been for the prior experience in exile in Babylon, and it would not have survived exile after 135 CE had it not been for the centuries of simultaneous synergy with and separation from Hellenism. Looking back, the sequence was both necessary and uncanny in the way it presaged the next two millennia of Jewish survival.

With the Roman destruction of the Second Temple as a result of the failure of the Jewish uprising against Rome, and the subsequent massive destruction and exile, Jews suffered such a calamity that not even their prior experience might have sufficed to ensure continuity. But there are times when the force of personality, of genius (perhaps through divine help, who knows?) makes the difference. Yohanan ben-Zakkai was that force, for in the first century CE, at a place called Yavneh, he and his associates elaborated a system of portable identity that has lasted till today: rabbinic Judaism.

Several of the main elements of rabbinic Judaism were already in place in embryo: belief in the chosen mission of the Jewish people, which provided the will to survive; and a mobile structure of law and

the educational institutions required to develop and propagate it, thanks to the experience of the Babylonian Exile. Ben-Zakkai and his associates, however, refined and extended what they had inherited. Ben-Zakkai himself, as best we can tell from the literature, focused on preserving the court system, fixing the religious calendar, and assuring the continuity of the House of David; his associates and their students did the rest.

To understand what the pioneers of rabbinic Judaism actually did is to understand the key elements of Jewcentricity itself. That is because the innovations of rabbinic Judaism not only defined the chosen behavior of Jews, they also prefigured the gentile reaction to it. We can describe the essence of the rabbinic system by enumerating ten interrelated innovations. Taken together, these innovations constituted, as we might describe it today, a transterritorial netcentric governance system. The system worked because it stressed human capital, social trust, and institutional coherence—the three qualities that enable all such systems to work.

First, rabbinic Judaism's pioneer generation faced the very real concern that the existence of slavery in the ancient world could destroy Jewish families in exile and literally put an end to Jewish continuity. So they ordained that Jews were responsible for the freedom and basic well-being of other Jews. "All Israel is responsible, one to the other," it says in the Talmud, and the first duty of free Jews was to ransom any Jew who had been enslaved.

Second, in order to keep Jewish numbers up to a minimum level for survival—this in the shadow of the mass murder perpetrated by the Romans after the failed Bar Kochba revolt—they reiterated and strengthened Ezra and Nehemiah's earlier, post–Babylonian Exile ban on intermarriage. They also ordered draconian penalties for infanticide, celibacy, and selling one's children into slavery. They fixed the principle of matrilineal descent, too. (In ancient Israel, the determinant of identity had been patrilineal for reasons related to tribal equities.) They did so in part for legal reasons: if a Jewish male who was not a Roman citizen married a woman who was a citizen, children of that union would not legally be the possession of the father and could not inherit his estate. The ruling also encouraged Jewish men to insist that non-Jewish women convert in order to marry, not a trivial matter given the parlous demographic condition of the Jews at the time.[11]

Third, having done what was required to maintain live Jewish bodies, the rabbis set about making sure that there would be Jewish hearts and minds within them. So they ordered universal

education for all male children from the age of six and up and sanctioned education for females. It was more important, they said, for communities to build schools and pay teachers than to build synagogues and pay rabbis. Rabbis were to get paying jobs of their own. They ordered as well that Hebrew dictionaries and grammars be written so that the schools could teach the language of the Torah.

Fourth, they made sure that communities were properly functional. They ordered that anyplace where more than 120 Jewish males over the age of thirteen lived had to form a school and a synagogue, and have a charitable fund, a burial society, and, above all, a court so that they could take care of disputes among themselves without having to resort to the mediation of non-Jewish authorities.

Fifth, in order that these courts should apply a consistent set of laws, Jewish communities far and wide were knit together in a kind of legal confederacy. Senior sages discussed, debated, and handed down legal guidance based on the Torah. They did this over a long period, centered on certain academies where the next generation of rabbis were trained, but they also engaged in long-distance correspondence, establishing a network of communication that was later to have many uses. This is how the core commentary on the Torah, the Mishnah, grew ultimately into a written form from around the year 70 through about the year 200 CE, and it is how the commentary on the Mishnah, the Gemara, came into being between the third and the fifth centuries. (The two together formed the Talmud, which was eventually written down and thus in effect canonized by sometime around the end of the sixth century.[12])

Sixth, in order that Jewish belief and ritual standards remained unified, the early rabbis standardized the liturgy and defined the prayer rituals of the synagogue. They created the siddur, fixed the calendar, and extended the privilege of the public reading of the Torah during the prayer service to anyone who could master the skills.

They also extended the custom of having translators and interpreters on hand to make sure people understood what they heard, for Aramaic, not Hebrew, had long since become the everyday vernacular by the second century CE. This resulted in a continuous process of translation from Hebrew into Aramaic that turned ineluctably into a process of interpretation. The synagogue, which had been created during the Babylonian Exile, but which continued even when the Second Temple stood, now became as much a house of study and debate as of prayer. The Jewish concern not only with text but also

with translation and interpretation became institutionalized and critically shaped the Jewish understanding of education. The Jews fused piety and learning, and democratized both. Indeed, over time, the critical role of learning distinguished the Jews in the Diaspora from the larger communities in which they lived: whereas most offices—political, ecclesiastic, and military—were either inherited directly or purchased through the privilege of exalted birth in most host societies, Jewish leadership, long since detribalized by two exiles, was far more meritocratic.

Seventh, the standardization of the liturgy went hand in hand with the standardization of Pharisaic beliefs. Of the three main groupings within early Judaism, the Pharisees had for some centuries during Hellenistic times taken a more liberal approach than the Sadducees and Essenes. They were more egalitarian, more oriented to the message of the prophets, and more conservative socially, disdaining Greek and later Roman mores. The Sadducees, associated with the government and the Temple service, were open to Hellenistic cultural ways but not to religious innovation or the democratization of personal religious obligation. With the collapse of the Second Commonwealth state, the Sadducees virtually disappeared, and the tiny Essene sect withdrew to monastic conditions outside the cities. So Pharisaic attitudes won out in part by default, and the way the prayer book reads illustrates this vividly, for example, in its affirmation of the idea of an afterlife, which was not part of the Sadducees' belief system.

The affirmation of chosenness naturally became a central part of the liturgy. When a person is called to the Torah, he recites a prayer whose translation is as follows: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, who has chosen us from all other peoples, and given us His Torah. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who giveth the Torah." Every single morning religious Jews—and the vast majority of Jews were observant and prayed according to the law before the last few centuries—recite this line: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who has not made me a gentile." Just before the central prayer of Judaism, the Shema, Jews recite:

> With abounding love Thou hast loved us, O Lord our God, and great and overflowing tenderness Thou hast shown us. . . . Thou hast chosen us from all other peoples and tongues, and hast brought us near unto Thy great Name forever in faithfulness, that we might in love give thanks unto Thee and proclaim thy unity. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who hast chosen thy people Israel in love.

In the sanctification of the wine on the Sabbath and festivals, part of the prayer goes as follows: "For Thou hast chosen us and hallowed us above all nations, and in love and favor Thou hast given us the holy Sabbath as an inheritance."

In one of the closing prayers to every Jewish prayer service, the Aleynu prayer, taken from the heart of the ancient Yom Kippur service, Jews recite:

> It is our duty to praise the Lord of all things . . . since He hath not made us like the nations of other lands, and hath not placed us like the other families of the earth, since He hath not assigned unto us a portion as unto them, nor a lot as unto all their multitudes. For they prostrate themselves before vanity and emptiness and pray to a God that saveth not.[13]

Chosenness is not all the siddur expresses theologically. On pilgrim festivals (Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles—Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot), the prayers clearly assign cause-and-effect explanations for Jewish history's ups and downs: "On account of our sins we were exiled from our land and removed far from our country, and we are unable to go up before Thee to fulfill our obligations in Thy chosen House, that great and holy Temple that was called by Thy Name, because of the hand of violence that hast been laid upon thy sanctuary." The prayer then asks for God to rebuild the Temple and "bring our scattered ones among the nations near unto Thee, and gather our dispersed from the ends of the earth." And not just on holidays did Jews for centuries pray for the Temple, for the ingathering of the exiles and for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but every single day, in some prayers recited three times every day, they honed the obligations of memory.

The redemption of the land and the rebuilding of the Temple were associated in rabbinic Judaism with the coming of the messiah. The theology of rabbinic Judaism holds that there will be no third exile but instead the messianic age, when the Kingdom of Heaven is established on earth. Learning, they believed, from the disaster of the Bar Kochba revolt, a revolt aided by the fact that some famous rabbis hailed Bar Kochba as the messiah, the rabbis warned against trying to "force the end." God will decide when the Jews are worthy of redemption. What Jews need to do is remember always the mission, always the moral demands of being chosen, and try patiently to perfect their own conduct to "repair the world" until God decides to send the messiah and end the exile. So in the eighth of the ten

elements of the rabbinic system, the early rabbis banned the idea of fighting to reconstitute Jewish sovereignty.

More than that, they inveighed against proselytizing and told Jews they had to be loyal citizens of the states in which they lived. They told them "*dina d'malchutah dina*," the law of the kingdom in which you live is the law, except for when it might enjoin a Jew to contravene a few crucial, uncompromisable elements of faith (idol worship, incest, and the shedding of innocent blood). They said, be citizens of other countries, but keep your spiritual allegiance to Torah and to God; do not put Jews in danger, defenseless as we are, through acts of hopeless zealotry, but don't blend with the societies in which you live except to the extent you must. Dietary laws and strict Sabbath observance, as the rabbis, not the Hebrew Bible, defined them, helped reinforce the balance between integration and separation.

These eight strictures exhaust the literal and legal aspects of the ben-Zakkai revolution, but two additional elements of the post–Second Commonwealth system support and sustain the rest. The ninth element of the system, already noted in passing, is that religion has to be capable of progressive articulation. Built into the way one looks at texts must be the sense that study and thought will reveal new meanings for old words—and here we come upon the significance of the Talmud.

The logic of the Talmud, flowing from Mishnah into Gemara, depended on the need for and the possibility of progressive articulation during the roughly five centuries in which the Gemara was developed and then codified. This seed planted by ben-Zakkai continued to grow after the Talmud was closed and committed to writing. A system of rabbinic *responsa* arose thereafter, *responsa* being simply a continuation of the legal discussions that led to the Talmud by means of correspondence, debate, publication, and teaching. Indeed, the Jews never really "closed" any of their books except to open a new one. Had that not been so, Jews never would have survived in exile as a self-defined unitary people, and they never would have been able to defeat various schisms that developed along the way.

The tenth element of ben-Zakkai's system is the hardest of all to describe to contemporary Western readers. It is that in order for Judaism, or any law-based system of religious faith, to adapt, there has to be an underlying understanding of human nature that legitimates the logic inherent in the process. The early rabbis did have a concept of human nature, a simple and elegant one, but one so foreign to the

intellectual vernacular of twenty-first-century America that it requires careful restatement.

Western intellectuals have been battling for centuries over the essence of human nature. To simplify only a little, there is Rousseau's view that people are basically good but society is corrupting, and the Hobbesian view of people as inherently selfish and corrupt, needing a strong social restraint to contain "the war of all against all." In its early modern European incarnation, this disagreement had a lot to do with the tension between religion and early science: Hobbes's view was consistent with Christianity, if not with the habits of Christendom, and in context conservative. Rousseau's view was anti- or post-Christian, and in context revolutionary. The rabbinic approach to the question of human nature rejects both Hobbes and Rousseau because they see human nature as fixed one way or the other.

Judaism does not have a fixed view so much as a characteristic approach to understanding human nature. Put simply, it is that people have a good and an evil inclination, and can choose, as individuals and communities, how to form their own moral characters. There is not only free will, there is an obligation to make choices and to take responsibility for them. The Talmud enjoins each Jew to imagine that the fate of the world rests on his or her next act, that a single decision can tip a cosmic scale. So there is no fixed human nature in the sense that we are inherently good or bad; it is God who is good, and we can be good only by becoming partners with God (and one another) in repairing the world. We are born morally neutral: whether we lean more toward our good inclinations, as we nestle into our inevitable social contexts, is ultimately up to us.

This is crucial to the evolution of Jewcentricity for the simple reason that for centuries Jews lived among people taught by premodern forms of Christianity to believe in fate and predestination, not in freedom and responsibility. Educated Jews tended to see Christianity as a throwback to pre-Abrahamic notions that denied the possibility of historical open-endedness and individual free will. This distinction made the Jews different in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others; it infused a moral intensity into their lives that was mostly missing from and strange to the societies in which they lived. Again: ideas, even abstract ones, matter.

These ten elements define the system of Jewish survival in exile. The keys, really, are memory and education on the one hand and freedom

and responsibility on the other. Hence the centrality of the Jewish ritual, done in the home rather than the synagogue, that fuses the two: the Passover seder.

The Passover recitation of the Haggadah as the key lesson for children has embedded the antimyth of the Hebrew Bible into Jewish hearts and minds now for two thousand years. The recitation of the "fact," generation after generation, that "you were a slave in the land of Egypt" tells every Jew, in effect: remember that you were once on the lowest rung of a strictly hierarchical society ruled by an autocratic government, a society in which there was no social mobility, only stasis and hopelessness for the unfortunate. Remember, too, that many still suffer under similar conditions. This is how the Jews have nearly always seemed to end up on "the other side of the river," on the other side of the ideological railroad tracks, why Jews beseech God on the High Holy Days to "sweep away the rule of tyranny from the earth."

The Haggadah's emphasis on children has been particularly important. The seder is all about imparting the chosen mission to the next generation. For the Jews, as we have seen, maintaining the Jewish people constituted an acute practical problem thanks to their diasporic condition. Other ancient peoples built great structures to intimidate others in the present and defy time itself. The Jews chose a different method, learned so well because it is embedded in the biblical narrative itself.

In Exodus, chapters 12 and 13, Israel is about to leave Egypt; Moses is instructing everyone in the preparations God has ordered. What does Moses say at the gateway to freedom? Does he talk of freedom or redemption, or about the destination being a "land flowing with milk and honey"? Does he warn how dangerous the journey might be? Not Moses. Not once but three times (Exodus 12:26–27; 13:8; 13:14) he says: "And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?', you shall say: 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.'" As Rabbi Sacks explains, as the Jews have seen things, "you achieve immortality not by building pyramids or statues—but by engraving your values on the hearts of your children, and they on theirs, so that our ancestors live on in us and we in our children, and so on until the end of time."[14]

In other words, freedom and the moral elevation it allows are not achievements that, once attained, simply endure. They are fragile and so must be earned in each generation. "Civilization hangs suspended," Rabbi Jacob Neusner has written,

> by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. . . . And the generation that will go down through time bearing the burden of disgrace is not the one that has said nothing new—for not much new marks the mind of any age—but the one that has not said what is true.[15]

Because Jews have believed this for many centuries, they have learned to see education as an ultimate beacon of hope. It is, after all, one of the few things over which a small and dispossessed people can maintain some control. But more important, education preserves memory, and memory is the gateway to the accumulated wisdom of the ages. That memory and that wisdom have enabled Jews to stand back from given social and political conditions in which they have found themselves and to see those conditions in a broader context.[16] Because they insisted they were chosen, and because they lived in ways that preserved the possibility of consummating their mission, they ended up choosing certain ways to see the world—like lenses in a pair of conceptual spectacles. And those ways of seeing, in turn, helped provide the means to navigate and survive in it.

Each element of the rabbinic system of exilic survival, and especially the system taken as a whole, created patterns of behavior that non-Jews could not readily understand, that seemed alien, often off-putting and occasionally even threatening. To take pre-modern European cultures as a point of comparison, other peoples did not make a point of banding together to redeem captives, did not prohibit intermarriage among different linguistic groups, did not stress education, did not organize themselves into a network of communities that transcended political borders and maintained a legal confederacy, did not practice unintelligible rituals in a liturgy written in an undecipherable alphabet, did not conduct key religious rituals in their homes without officiating clergy, did not maintain beliefs that they did not try to proselytize, did not abjure force to pursue social goals, did not keep adding to and changing the corpus of their religious literature, and did not entertain open-ended ideas of human nature that credited individual human freedom and moral self-reckoning.

It is on account of these differences that the interactions of Jews and non-Jews describe a unity in the manifold in the sense that regardless of the circumstances, the Jewish exilic system always managed to adapt. It persisted in good times and bad, for at the core of that system was its reason for being: that God loves the Jewish people, has given it a singular mission, and has therefore promised that Israel cannot be destroyed and will be redeemed from exile. Like Moses at the burning bush, the Jewish people have found it impossible to say no to that proposition—not that he, and they, didn't try. And so Israel, like the burning bush itself, has been constantly aglow, throwing off light while being continuously consumed.

This is a metaphorical way of saying that the concept of the Chosen People has a kind of indestructible circularity to it, as manifested by its own history and the witness of the rest of the world to it. Why do Jews insist on existing, and existing as Jews? Because they are chosen for a divine mission. How have Jews proved to themselves and others that they are chosen? By existing. Is this an inherently Jewcentric point of view, a highly self-regarding conceit? Not if it isn't an exaggeration. Alas, only God really knows, and He's not telling.