

Is There a Religious Meaning to the Idea of a Chosen People after the Shoah?

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I prefer the above formulation of the problem of Jewish self-understanding after the Shoah because it emphasizes the emotional and intellectual difficulties that are involved in it. The idea of a chosen people established the self-consciousness of the Jewish people from its inception in the Babylonian exile to its second return to Zion. It seems that the Jewish people cannot recognize itself as the same people in any other image, but after the Shoah, the idea of a people created to fulfill a universal mission for humanity became for the majority of Jews a meaningless pretense.

Putting the question whether Jews still think of their people in terms of chosenness on the level of ritual and dogma, the answer would be positive with regard to the religious movements, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, and negative with regard to secular movements. But, going down to the level of the individual, especially of the young generation, it seems that the question whether the individual's Jewishness endows him or her with a sense of universal mission will be answered with great embarrassment. Indeed, one should refrain from such politically incorrect questions, but on the other hand, one must admit that avoiding the question means covertly avoiding the concept that has given continuity to Jewish self-understanding throughout the ages.

I therefore believe that the task of integrating the memory of the Shoah into the comprehensive historical memory of the Jewish people obligates us to assume the burden of facing the problem, at least by clarifying the intellectual and emotional difficulties inherent in it.

The questions that should be asked preliminarily are as follows. First, what are the profound causes of the unwillingness to relate to the problem

philosophically? Second, what does the will of the Jewish people “to hide its face” mean from the point of view of Jewish solidarity in the near future? And finally, is there a possibility that the Jewish people will reclaim a universal message that makes the continuity of its existence important to humanity? Is there a possibility that individual Jews who succeeded in reintegrating themselves socially and nationally into the normal life prevailing in the Western culture of our age will prefer being Jewish to any other form of self-identification that is open for them and that seems much more convenient in terms of normality?

I must first summarize very briefly the situation of the problem before the Shoah. Elsewhere¹ I have described the background of relations among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and the fatal role that the Jewish people had to play in the formation of the new collective identities of secular nations and societies of the twentieth century. Here I will state only briefly that after the Enlightenment the Jewish people became the main challenger of a traumatic conflict in the self-understanding of Western nations and societies, thus placing itself in an unbearable position both for itself and for its sociocultural environment.

Trying to get out of the trap, the Jewish people was divided into two parts with regard to emancipation, one of which rejected the idea of Jewish chosenness and internalized the Christian, and afterwards the secular, anti-Semitic view that chosenness indicates a shameful depravity. The other part responded with reaffirmation of chosenness in its traditional halakic meaning, declaring that it means absolute separation, requiring Jews to remain uninvolved in the social, cultural, and political life of the surrounding secular culture. But the dialectics of the conflict eventually brought each of the groups, in its own way, to reclaim the idea of chosenness in new humanistic interpretations.

First to re-adopt chosenness through reinterpretation of its traditional meaning was the Reform movement. Against the refusal of the surrounding Christian society to accept the Jews as equals as long as they remained Jewish in any sense, Reform Judaism reinterpreted assimilation as a mission to teach humanity the values of humanism, and the right way to implement them in reality. The engagement with the idea of chosenness became even more profound for Reform Judaism in Germany after the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when it became clear that the success that many individual Jews had in assimilating into secular culture was so great that the vision of emancipation for the whole Jewish people was heading towards a catastrophic failure. The hatred against them moti-

vated already assimilated Jews to turn with hurt pride back to their own original Jewish selves, research their Jewish roots, and reclaim chosenness because of the evidence that Judaism and the Jewish people are the only hope for humanism in Western culture.

Second to re-adopt the idea of a chosen people were the secular Zionist movements that headed first towards normalization in terms of European nationalism. The cause of the dramatic change was a combination of two factors. First, being engaged in the realization of the Zionist program made it evident that the idea of normalizing an exiled people is indeed abnormal. It needed many more resources than an impoverished, dispersed, and unorganized people possessed, while help from the outside was scarce. One could of course draw for strength upon necessity and lack of choice. Still, to achieve a significant start, Zionism needed the motivation of self-sacrificial idealism. Second, being engaged in the realization of the Zionist program required one to redefine the meaning of being normal. Does it mean to become exactly like the surrounding nations? If so, are they normal in their own terms? The anti-Semitism that motivated the Jewish return to normality was the indication of a deep crisis that followed the era of emancipation, both of nationalities and of societies in Europe. This meant that for the sake of truly becoming normal, the Jewish people must solve for itself not only its specific problem but also those cultural-political problems that modern Western civilization still failed to solve. Thus it became incumbent upon the Zionist movement to make the Jewish people like all the other nations, through a heroic universal undertaking that at one and the same time would normalize the Jewish people and would make it “a light unto all the nations.”

This may explain the fact that on the brink of the Second World War almost all the movements within the Jewish people adopted the idea of chosenness, each in its own interpretation. In the Shoah they came even closer to each other. The common experience convinced them that Hitler declared his war specifically and mainly against the Jewish people because it symbolized for him the universal humanism that he rejected. The chosen people incarnated all that Hitler hated in the name of German racist superiority. The Shoah was, then, in the eyes of the victimized Jews, the struggle between Jewish moral chosenness and German racist monstrosity. Thus the final victory was also considered to be the success of the Jewish people to withstand its trial, to resist absolute wickedness, as the representative of true humanity created in the image of God.

But, what was the impact of this unifying consensus on Jewish self-

understanding after the war and after the establishment of Israel as a main response to the Shoah? One impact was the natural feeling that Jewish solidarity must become the main life-restoring value and that it should be implemented by the unification of the Jewish people in its effort to build and strengthen Israel as a stronghold against any second threat of genocide. As a result, the idea of political Zionism—the most radical understanding of the will to normalize the Jewish people as a nation like all other nations—became the basis for Jewish solidarity after the Shoah. The Jewish people redefined itself through Zionism as the people that has survived. This redefinition was indeed a renewal of the ancient covenant as a “covenant of destiny,” and its first commandment was to become a normal people that can defend itself effectively. Let us remember that the danger of a second Shoah was still ahead. The threat of Arab and Communist countries was too real to be ignored. Thus the memory of the Shoah and the task of economic, political, and military normalization became the common denominators defining Jewish unity despite the divisions and the antagonisms that still prevailed.

After the Six-Day War Emil Fackenheim defined this Zionist unifying consensus in the theological terms of chosenness. It was for him the 614th commandment “not to let Hitler have victory after his death,” which positively meant making a second Shoah an impossibility. One should emphasize that Fackenheim understood this commandment not only in terms of the particularistic Jewish right to survive. The Jewish people still symbolized for him true humanity and its universal ethical values. The commandment to make a second Shoah impossible was for him a commandment to all humanity “to mend the world.” But asking the practical question of how humanity should achieve this goal, taking into account all the lessons that should be drawn from the Second World War, Fackenheim pointed to the fact that the Shoah was an “unprecedented event,” namely, an event that could be thought about and then executed only against the Jewish people, because of its specific condition in exile and its specific moral-theological mission to humanity. The implication was then that, practically, “to mend the world” means normalizing the conditions of the Jewish people by accepting it into the family of nations as a nation in its own right, then helping it to become strong enough to resist and protect itself efficiently against any threat.

It should be reemphasized that Fackenheim’s impressive philosophical formulation of the idea of Jewish mission after the Six-Day War was already the pragmatic understanding that unified the Jewish people right

after the War of Independence. This became also the main message of Jewish education, and, what is most important, it became the basic assumption that shaped Jewish policies both in Israel and in the Diaspora. All the efforts were concentrated around the undertaking of strengthening Israel in absorbing *aliyah*, in colonizing the land, in achieving economic independence, in integrating Israeli society, and last but not least, in building and fortifying its military power.

I believe that interpreting the mission of the Jewish people after the Shoah in these terms of normalization provides the profound explanation of the embarrassment surrounding the problem of chosenness today. The generation that matured after the Shoah, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, experienced the process of restoring the life of their people in terms of normalization, internalizing for that sake gradually also the new ethics of postmodernistic egoistical individualism. Thus it did not experience either in its Jewish education nor in its Jewish activities a sense of the universal message that Judaism is about. The only universal message this generation did experience was, as stated above, the lesson that after the Shoah a nation must rely for its well-being and safety only on itself, not on any idealistic vision, not on any belief in the progress of humanity, not on divine providence. Even for Orthodox Jews, both Zionists and *haredi*, the messiah that they believe in is a messiah that has already started to arrive, and their messianism is a matter of striving for power, safety, and happiness in the here and now of worldly achievements. Against this background, mending the world is interpreted in terms of developing balances of power among individuals, parties, societies, and nations that will make cooperation among them more beneficial than rivalry, enmity, and war.

Fackenheim emphasized this understanding of his 614th commandment when he protested against claims that a Jewish state should keep a higher standard of morality than other nations, even when fighting against enemies that try to destroy it. His response was similar to that of political Zionism before the Second World War: in the past this was the cause of Jewish weakness and therefore the Jewish people was victimized. After the Shoah we should know better. Weakness tempts enemies to implement their murderous wishes, so the ethical commandment should be, Thou shalt not be weak! If you chose to be weak, you are morally condemned! Which means that after the Shoah the Jewish people should defend itself in ways that will make its enemies think twice before they attack it. This is the way every normal group of people defends itself. Why

should a Jewish state behave differently? Which nation has the right to demand that a Jewish state should behave differently?

I am not trying to contest this view. I am also a Zionist, and I think that in the context of a war for existence this attitude is fully justified. It seems to me that it is also justified in Jewish halakic terms. But when this political program also becomes the essence of mending the world as a Jewish message to humanity, the whole idea of chosenness becomes a farce. Let me illustrate what I mean with one example.

During the period of building the land before the establishment of the state, and even in the first decades after its establishment, Israel was proud of its idealistic socialistic achievements and proclaimed them to be its universal message to humanity. But the moshavim and the kibbutzim collapsed under the economic capitalistic success of Israel. After being normalized economically, Israel then took as its pride in spectacular achievements in agriculture, namely, its success in transforming the desert into a source of abundance. For several years this was Israel's contribution to some poor countries, especially in Africa, and it was considered to be its universal message to humanity. But agriculture too became an economic burden due to capitalistic economic normalization, so now the pride of Israel is the IDF as the strongest military power in the Middle East and as a leading power in the use of high-tech armaments. The IDF is surely very important for safety, wealth, and peace with neighbors, but naturally one can hardly interpret it as a redeeming message to humanity, though Israel indeed became distinguished in the world as a producer and deliverer of sophisticated arms. But should we consider this capacity to be the ultimate universal message of normalization?

Naturally, during the period of struggle for survival, when the threat of a second Shoah was real, one could not realize that such an outcome would be the impact of the 614th commandment. But it was precisely after the Six-Day War that caused Fackenheim to formulate his commandment that Jews started to have more and more reason to believe they had already restored their people to normal parameters of safety, personal freedom, higher education, economic success, a high standard of living, and strong political status, both in Israel and in the western Diaspora, and this, of course, made a revolutionary difference.

It suddenly became obvious that once normalization has been achieved, this state cannot be morally conceived of as an end in itself, nor can it be appreciated as an act of mending the world, even if it becomes a place where genocides and other national and social wrongs and injustices are

unthinkable. On the contrary, it means participating as one power among other powers in being responsible for a world full of injustices and terror, in which attempted genocides occur quite regularly and in which, eventually, in the process of restoring itself to power, Israel itself may become a cause of injustice done to another people.

What then are the implications of the normalization that has already been achieved when it is understood not as a tool of working for higher ideals but as an end in itself? What does normalization in the sense of being “like all other nations” mean for a people that is still different structurally and historically from all other nations in terms of religion, ethics, culture, political establishments, and ways of communicating among its different parts and its different environments? The irony of the present situation may be summed up in the following sentence: Being normal “like all other nations” (By the way, is there even one nation that is normal in such universal terms?) seems to be definitely abnormal for the Jewish people. Through normalization the Jewish people become a conglomerate of antagonistic identities, and the war between its parts and parties makes it act as its own enemy.

As my space is limited, I will try not to prove my verdict through an analytical description of the present: the Kultur Kampf in Israel, the growing assimilation in the Diaspora, and the growing estrangement between Israel and the Diaspora. I assume these phenomena are known to everyone as they are known to me. My conclusion is that unless the Jewish people is restored to its real self as a people engaged in the realization of a redeeming principle for itself and for humanity, it will become a stranger to itself, will bring itself to the brink of another catastrophe, as it has already done several times during its long history.

The final question that I must try to answer is therefore this: can we find a meaning to the idea of a chosen people after the Shoah, not only in terms of ritual and dogma but also in terms of values, ideals, and commandments? I will try to answer this question very briefly, in fact “on one foot” like our old sage Hillel. As I have said in the beginning of my paper, I think that the Orthodox understanding of the idea of a chosen people became meaningless for the majority of the Jewish people after the Shoah, and I do not believe that it can be recovered or reinterpreted in a convincing way, but the idea of a chosen people may become meaningful again, and indeed redeeming, if interpreted in terms of the ancient prophetic covenant that obligated the Jewish people to the ethics of responsibility to build a different society and a different statehood, based on freedom and

justice. By “ethics” I mean those that interpret human freedom and dignity not in terms of individual rights, which eventually create formal obligations towards the other and the collective, but in terms of obligations towards the other and the collective, which become the sound basis for realized individual rights. I believe that the morality of the covenant is the only way to reunite the Jewish people, to root it in its sources and in its historical memory, and at the same time to respond to the challenge of egoistical individualism that has now become the essence of paganism in our era and is the biggest moral threat to the future of humanity. The commandment to “mend the world” should be interpreted in the terms of the covenant.

Let me conclude my paper by reminding readers that the covenant has been renewed only yesterday, immediately after the Shoah, with the establishment of the state of Israel. In its Scroll of Independence Israel has taken upon itself the obligation to become a Jewish state: Jewish in its responsibility to all the people and to its history and Jewish in its statutes, laws, and policies, which must strive to realize the eternal prophetic values of Judaism and thus redeem the Jewish people spiritually as well as materially, and contribute to the redemption of humanity. The sources of this covenant were according to the Scroll of Independence, “the Eternal Book of Books,” the history of the Jewish people, the history of the Zionist enterprise, and the universal Scroll of Human Rights. On this basis the founders of Israel took it upon themselves to build a state that “will be based on the foundations of freedom, justice and peace in the light of the prophets of Israel.” Indeed, all this was stated in the scroll in too general terms, but the cited sources made the scroll a basis for a concrete conception of a society and a state that will become the spiritual center for the Jewish people and the source of a universal message to humanity.

NOTE

1. Eliezer Schweid, “The Holocaust as a Challenge to Jewish Thought on Ultimate Reality and Meaning,” in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, vol. 14, no. 3 (September, 1991).