

# The Covenant and its Theology

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**Biography:** Eugene Korn is editor of *Meorot* and American Director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Efrat. His previous contributions to *The Edah Journal* and *Meorot* include *Windows on the World* (Tishrei 2010), *On Divine Command Morality* (Tevet 2007) and *Moralization in Jewish Law: Genocide, Divine Commands and Rabbinic Reasoning* (Sivan 2006).

**Abstract:** This essay argues that it is the underlying theology of the biblical covenant between God and the Jewish people that gives transcendent purpose to Jewish covenantal life and mitzvot. The theology of the covenant is grounded in the Books of Genesis and Exodus as well as the visions of the prophets, and it calls upon the Jewish people to be the central actors in redemption history. As a “kingdom of priests,” the Jewish people is challenged to influence the nations of the world to recognize the Creator of Heaven and Earth and obey the fundamental laws of divine morality. Although this covenantal mission has been eclipsed by Jewish persecution throughout history, it is necessary for a spiritually coherent account of religious life that transcends survival and self-interest.



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Spiritual beings seek transcendent ends. Living humanly means to thirst for noble purpose that connects us to both eternity and things beyond ourselves. This quest elevates our lives above mechanical behavior determined by biological or material forces, and transforms us into subjects fashioning our own destinies. In longing for self-transcendence we imitate God, whose search for relationship moved Him to create the universe.<sup>1</sup>

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

God's covenant with the Jewish people would be meaningless without this historical mandate. A covenant whose purpose is individual salvation is possible without a historical dimension, but the covenant made by the God of History with an eternal people can have a

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purpose only if His covenanted people has an enduring mission over the sweep of time. If personal transcendence is movement outward, then Jewish national redemption is movement inward, from the irrelevant margins of history to its center to be an impact-making people.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Berit Avraham and Berit Sinai***

Jewish theology of the covenant begins with the Torah's account of the founding of the Jewish people and its spiritual destiny. Genesis (12:1-3) relates that God created a unique relationship with Abraham, calling upon him to break from his father's home, culture and pagan idols of Mesopotamia and travel to Canaan. It is there that Abraham is to become

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

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

2. This is the way R. Joseph Soloveitchik understood Israel's redemptive role in sacred history. See "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," *Tradition*, 17:2 (Spring 1978), p. 55.

“the father of a great nation” whose destiny is blessing. Upon arrival, Abraham and his descendants receive eternal title to the Land, where Abraham immediately builds an altar “to call out the name of the Lord.” This was the birth of the intimate covenant between God and Abraham, soon formalized in Genesis 15.

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*Tradition understood the covenant at Sinai as a continuous extension of Abraham’s covenant*

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As in all contracts, each covenantal partner acquires benefits and assumes responsibilities: Abraham receives blessing, fame and land. In return, our rabbinic tradition understood that Abraham assumed the responsibility to be a witness to God’s presence in heaven and on earth: “Before Abraham, God was called ‘God of the Heavens’; after Abraham, people called Him ‘God of the Heavens and the Earth.’”<sup>3</sup> A bit later (Gen. 18:19), Abraham’s responsibilities expand to “teaching the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice (*tsedaqah u-mishpat*).” As Genesis continues, the covenant is passed down to Isaac and Jacob,

and the family covenant blossoms into a *national* covenant with the entire Jewish people at Sinai, where Jewish tradition teaches that God revealed to the Jewish people the written Torah and its 613 commandments. Rabbinic tradition understood the Sinai covenant to be a continuous extension of Abraham’s covenant, theologically and spiritually identical although varying in detail.<sup>4</sup> In other words, in the mind of the rabbis Abraham is Israel and Israel is Abraham.

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

Like Abraham’s covenant, *berit Sinai* also establishes an intimate personal relationship between God and His people. As in all forms of intimacy, the relationship is particularistic and forms an exclusivist relationship between the covenantal partners. This is why Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea repeatedly use the metaphor of marriage to describe the covenant

3. *Sifrei, Ha’azinu* 313. That is, Abraham taught people that God was present in human affairs. The rabbis derived the *midrash* from the text of Gen. 24:2-3, in which Abraham requires that his gentile servant swear “by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth.” After Christianity adopted this idea of religious purpose and popularized the term “witness,” Jews have shied away from using it. However, neither God nor Isaiah hesitated to do so in reference to the Jewish people and its mission. Through Isaiah, God calls Israel “My witnesses” (Isa. 43:11-12). Moreover, the Hebrew *adat yisra’el* (“congregation of Israel”), so common in traditional texts and rabbinic parlance, is derived from *eidah*, (assembly), assonant with *eidut*, “witness.” R. Joseph Soloveitchik insisted that *adat yisra’el* refers to the Jewish people in its spiritual, message bearing capacity to the world, as opposed to *mahaneh yisra’el*, which refers to the Jewish people in its defensive capacities to defend itself physically against outside enemies. See H. Schachter, *Divrei HaRav* (New York: Orthodox Union, 2011) p. 50. I thank R. Yosef Adler for bringing this text to my attention.

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

Though historically and textually difficult on a literal level, some talmudic and medieval rabbinic opinions tried to emphasize this point by claiming that Abraham kept all the Mosaic (and even later rabbinic) commandments. This is the opinion of mishnaic sage, R. Nahorei, expressed in the last *mishnah* in tractate *Qiddushin* and the late-second-century-early-third-century talmudic sage, Rav, in B’T *Yoma* 28b. (The same talmudic text records the disagreeing opinion of R. Shimi bar Hiyya.) Rav derives this conclusion from his exegesis of Gen. 26:5. It is also articulated by Rashi in his commentary on that verse. As we shall see, this is a minority view, and one, I am convinced, that is offered for pedagogical purposes only.

between God and the Jewish people. The sanctity of marriage lay precisely in the fact that husband and wife are devoted exclusively to each other. Because it is an exclusive relationship, the covenant's benefits accrue only to the Jewish people and the responsibilities of the covenantal commandments do not apply to the rest of humanity in the eyes of normative rabbinic thinkers. Unlike Christian theologians, the Talmudic Sages were true to the biblical narrative and did not try to universalize God's covenant with Israel. Quite the contrary, for the Talmud and *halakhab* were suspicious of gentiles who studied Torah and followed the Sinai commandments, viewing them metaphorically as interloping third parties, adulterers who try to intrude on the intensely private betrothal between God and Israel, between the Lover and His beloved.<sup>5</sup>

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

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

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The covenant demands intense focus on performing and understanding the *mitsvot*, the commandments that connect the Jewish people to their God and Jews to their kin. As a result, Jews can easily interpret the covenant as demanding that they remain a people "who dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations," residing in splendid isolation from the rest of the world, despite the fact that this fate was cast upon them by Balaam, Israel's cruel enemy.<sup>6</sup> And certainly the long Jewish experience in exile conduces toward this withdrawal. Today, we Jews are a traumatized people, a nation suffering from battered wife syndrome.<sup>7</sup> The deep wounds of history inflicted upon us by Rome, the Church, the Tsars, the Nazis, the Communists and those contemporary Muslims who hate Israel are still

5. BT *Sanhedrin* 59a; Maimonides, *Mishneh torah* (henceforth *MT*), Laws of Kings 8:10 and 10:9-10. Although Maimonides says in 10:10 that gentiles may perform commandments for their utilitarian value, he states in 10:9 that they should not do so *qua* commandment, i.e. as a covenantal obligation, without conversion.

6. Num. 23:9. The Torah is ambiguous as to whether this is a curse or a blessing.

7. I owe this vivid image of a battered wife to Rabbi Shlomo Riskin.

raw, and they have led some Jewish thinkers to idealize our isolation from world affairs. It seems that whenever Jews engaged with the world, Jewish blood ran in the streets. So it is natural for the Jewish people to turn inward and elevate survival as its primary religious value.

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*Jews are a traumatized people, a nation suffering from battered wife syndrome.*

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

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

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

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

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

### **Covenant, Blessing and Mission**

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

If this is true of individual *mitsvot*, so it must also be regarding the system of commandments as a whole—the covenant at Sinai freely and voluntarily agreed upon by God and the Jewish people.<sup>11</sup> His covenant with us must be part of the divine rational economy, one with an overarching purpose that transcends the fulfillment of the particular *mitsvot* themselves. Commandments are the means to realizing a larger noble vision, a lofty divine end.

Here we confront the second consequence of the historical assaults on the Jewish people and

8. *The Koren Siddur*, American Edition, (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009) p. 134.

9. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:25-26; See also Sa’adia Gaon, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, III:1-3.

its Torah: the sharp focus upon the technical analysis, definition and logical coherence of the covenantal terms, *the mitzvot*, to the neglect of the covenant's *telos* and theology. Most profoundly, Greek and Roman culture, the Church, Enlightenment rationalism and post-

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*To argue that the divine commandments have no purpose diminishes the Creator, lowering Him to a whimsical dictator*

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modernism all presented us with an ominous common threat: anti-nomianism. Our response to this affront led us to view the enterprise of *ta'amei ha-mitsvot* with a jaundiced eye and to eschew philosophic reflection on the purpose of God's covenant as essential to our religious life. Traditionalist Jewish thought is now exhausted by authority and by the deontological experience of commanded-ness; theology, *abavat ha-shem*, and spiritual ends have been eclipsed. Rambam's *Mishneh torah* fills our bookcases, but there is no room for his *Moreh nevukhim* (*Guide of the Perplexed*).<sup>12</sup>

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

11. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, 7:2 (Summer 1965), p. 29. Rabbi Soloveitchik pointedly rejected the famous *midrash* ("*kafah aleihem bar ke-gigit*") found in BT *Shabbat* 88a, which claims that God coerced the Jewish people to accept the Torah at Sinai. Rabbi Soloveitchik's insistence on the *voluntary* acceptance at Sinai was necessary halakhically (a coerced contract is invalid, and hence not binding according to the *halakhab*) as well as philosophically, since for Rabbi Soloveitchik the acceptance and performance of *mitsvot* is essential to transforming one's life from an object to a subject, as well as *am yisra'el's* living out its freely chosen collective destiny and its escape from slavery and the arbitrary winds of fate. Rabbi Soloveitchik articulated this theology in 1956 in "The Voice of My Beloved Knocketh" ("*Qol dodi dofeq*"), translated by Lawrence Kaplan in *Theological and Halakic Reflections on the Holocaust*, Bernhard Rosenberg ed., (Ktav, 1991) pp. 51-92. For more on this aspect of Rabbi Soloveitchik's theology, see Benjamin Levi's article, "Fate and Faith: The Ongoing Covenants," in this edition of *Me'orat*.

12. The *Mishneh torah* is the paradigm of halakhic coherence, whose analysis is studded with citations of biblical verses carrying authority. By contrast, in the *Guide* Maimonides never resorts to citing a biblical verse or a talmudic passage to establish its authority, only as a secondary corroboration (*asmachta*) of a point he established previously by logical argument.

13. BT *Berakhot* 8a: "Since the day the Temple was destroyed, The Holy One, Blessed Be He, has nothing in His world except the four cubits of *halakhab* alone." The Talmud claims that it was the destruction of the Second Temple and loss of Jewish national independence that led God to contract and limit our access to Him to formal *halakhab* exclusively. Today, when *am yisra'el* has returned home and restored its independence and national sovereignty, has God not been "liberated" and can He not be found also in the political, social and philosophical experiences of the Jewish people?

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

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

However warranted, this reaction should be understood correctly as our Talmudic tradition understood it: as a defensive polemic forced upon us by our fate as victim, as a spiritual weakness rather than an ideal.<sup>13</sup> While legal analysis and technical coherence have become our educational goals, transcendence remains a spiritual necessity. Transcendence without analysis may be blind, but analysis without transcendence is impotent.<sup>14</sup>

This *telos* provides coherence to the Torah's conjunction of the cosmic account of creation with the remainder of the Bible as a particularistic Jewish narrative. And it is this *telos* that gives the *berit* theological significance beyond Israel itself. As a spiritual people, *Am Yisra'el* fulfills a divine purpose in history, a unique mission as an *Am Segulah*—a treasured people. It is this message-bearing mission to others, this charisma, that endows the Jewish people with significance in universal history and that redeems our covenantal life from narrow self-interest and spiritual narcissism.<sup>15</sup>

Not only rational Jewish theology but the Torah itself that testifies to this covenantal end and overriding religious purpose. In the very text that establishes God's particularistic covenant with Abraham, God preserves divine concern for all His children when He issues the theological imperative for Abraham to interact with humanity:

“You shall be a blessing....Through you [i.e. Abraham], all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:2-3)

Abraham and his descendants—the Jewish people—are challenged to play a role in human history. God demands that the Jewish people be neither a parochial nor a ghetto people relegated to an insignificant footnote in the larger drama of humanity. God's covenantal people is to be a central actor—the central actor—in the grand human story. This broad covenantal ideal is so important for Israel that the Torah reiterates it another four times, twice when God reaffirms the covenant with Abraham, when it is passed on to Isaac, and once more when it is bequeathed to Isaac's son, Jacob.<sup>16</sup> This is the divine paradox of

sacred history: God shows an intimate and exclusive love to Abraham and his descendants, and this particular people is to bring God's blessing to all people everywhere.<sup>17</sup>

The Bible does not spell out the exact nature of the blessing that Abraham's children are to bestow upon the nations, but both classical and modern Jewish thinkers have given it explicit content. The blessing blossoms forth out of two distinct theological obligations placed on Abraham and the Jewish people: Spreading the knowledge of God<sup>18</sup> and teaching

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*Transcendence without analysis is blind, but analysis without transcendence is impotent*

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the world about divine moral values that are fundamental to human welfare.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish people achieve these goals and their resulting blessings by being active instructors and less directly as role models for the successful moral life when Jews shape their lives to be testimony about God and his moral law.<sup>20</sup> God charged

16. Gen.18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:13-14.

17. Recently, Michael Wyschogrod discussed the universalist implications of God's particular election of Abraham and Israel. For him, only God's preferential love for Abraham could guarantee the possibility that every individual person can have a genuine personal relationship with God: “Chosenness expresses to Jew and Gentile alike that God also stands in relation with them in the recognition of their uniqueness.” In other words, it is God's choosing of Abraham the individual that ensures that God relates personally to each individual, not merely to humanity as an impersonal collective. Moreover, “when we grasp that the election of Israel flows from the fatherhood that extends to all created in God's image, we find ourselves tied to all men in brotherhood, as Joseph, favored by his human father, ultimately found himself tied to his brothers.” See Michael Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996) and Meir Y. Soloveichik, “God's First Love: The Theology of Michael Wyschogrod,” *First Things*, November 2009.

The particularist/universalist paradox plays out on another level, that of geography: In the biblical vision, the Jewish Temple restricted to the particular locale of Jerusalem is the source of God's Word radiating outward to touch all the inhabitants of the earth, wherever they reside: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.” (Isa. 56:7)

18. See commentaries of Isaac Abravanel and Menachem Recanati on Gen. 12:2; Maimonides, *MT*, Laws of Idolatry 1:3 and *Guide*, III:29; and Yehudah Leib Alter, *Sefat Emet*, *Sukkot* 5664. This interpretation is supported by the numerous passages in Genesis where Abraham “calls the name of the Lord.” (Gen 12:8; 13:4; 21:33). Isaac does the same in 26:25. Gerald Blidstein claims that Maimonides “points to Israel's universalistic mission of the Jewish people as instructors of humankind in the worship of God,” when he codifies in *MT*, Laws of Sacrifices, 19:16, that Jews may teach gentiles how to offer sacrifices to God. See Blidstein's “Maimonides and Me'iri on Non-Judaic Religion” *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction Between Judaism and other Cultures* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990) p. 31, n. 12.

19. This also has biblical support in Gen 18:19. See also Maimonides, *MT*, Laws of Kings 10:11, who states that the Noahide laws with their requirement of a legal order was given to humanity to help ensure that “the human society is not destroyed.”

Abraham to re-teach humanity what it had lost in its spiritual descents from Adam and Noah and from Noah and Abraham.<sup>21</sup> God beseeched Abraham's covenantal children to become a partner with the Holy One to bring the nations of the world to their spiritual and moral fulfillment. This is the covenant's purpose in sacred history and the mission of the covenantal people.

Though Jews tend to avoid "witness" and "mission" language because these terms were so widely appropriated by Christian theologians, this language captures, nevertheless, exactly the way rabbinic thinkers understood Abraham's behavior and his children's covenantal purpose: "Our task is to teach the Torah to mankind, to influence the non-Jewish world, to arouse in mankind a sense of justice and fairness. In a word, we are to teach the world the seven *mitzvot* that are binding on every human being."<sup>22</sup>

The Torah also tells us the purpose of the covenant at Sinai and its commandments with the entire people of Israel:

"If you will faithfully obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all people. All the earth is Mine, but you shall be a for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:5-6).

The Torah insists that priests are those who bestow God's blessings upon others of the community, and by doing so they receive God's blessings upon themselves<sup>23</sup>:

Thus shall you bless the people of Israel:  
May the Lord bless you and keep you.  
May the Lord deal kindly and graciously with you.  
May the Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace.  
Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel and I will bless them.  
(Num. 6:22-27)

Yet if all Israel is to be a "kingdom of priests," it can only be the gentile nations who are the community that Israel is called upon to bless. Mirroring God's charge to Abraham to "be a blessing," Jewish theologians identified the Sinaitic priestly function as spreading blessing by teaching the world about God and divine ethical values.<sup>24</sup> This is why our rabbis so often identified Abraham as a kohen despite his having lived before the formal institution of priesthood.<sup>25</sup> His theological mission announced in Genesis 12:3 foreshadowed the challenge God uttered at Sinai for *benei yisra'el* to be a *mamleket kohanim*. This challenge is the meaning of election at Sinai, the reason for Israel's covenantal destiny. Rabbi Naftali Zvi

20. Deut. 4:6-7 explains how the model religious life will constitute a living "proof" to the nations of God's existence, wisdom and morality: "Observe them [i.e. divine commandments] faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing all these laws will say, 'Surely that is a wise and discerning people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call up on him? Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Torah that I set before you on this day?" Also Zech. 8:23: "In those days it will happen that ten men of all the [different] languages of the nations, will take hold, they will hold the corner of the garment of a Jewish man, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"

21. This is how Maimonides understands pre-Abrahamic history, although in Maimonides' account, Abraham discovered God rather than God commanding Abraham. See *MT*, Laws of Idolators, 1:1-3.

22. *Abraham's Journey, Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarchs* by Joseph B. Soloveitchik, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Zeigler (Jersey City: KTAV, 2008) p. 182. Rabbi Soloveitchik repeatedly insists upon this as Abraham's ethical and theological mission to the world. See also my review "Windows on the World" of the book in *Me'orot 8 (Tishrei 5771)*. Similar earlier rabbinic views of the mission of Abraham and the Jewish people are discussed later in this essay.

23. This is the formulation of R. Tsadok Hakohen in his commentary on Deut., *Ki Tavo*, 4.

24. See the commentaries of Rabbis Obadiah Seforno and Samson Raphael Hirsch on Ex. 19:6. Regarding Abraham, see R. Soloveitchik's views indicated earlier and in note 21.

25. *Midrash aggadah* (Buber ed.) on Gen.12:3. This appellation is applied to Abraham because he is seen as functioning as a priest/teacher to the (pagan) community around him.

Yehudah Berlin (Netsiv) went so far as to claim that in establishing the covenant at Sinai, God completed His plan for all of creation that began in Genesis.<sup>26</sup> As the *Am Segulah*, Israel is the culmination of creation, not because Jews are the center of the universe, but because Sinai charged the new nation to be humanity's teachers, to instruct all people of God's authorship of creation and His moral rules for continuing the human social order. Israel was created for the world, not the world for Israel.

Isaiah poetically expresses this same covenantal calling to Israel, when he proclaims in God's name:

"I have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand and keep you. And I will establish you as a covenant of the people, for a Light of the Nations... Behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and a thick darkness the nations. But God will shine upon you. Nations shall then go by your Light and kings by your illumination. (42:6; 60:2-3)

The disparity between Gen 1-11 and the rest of the Torah is now closed by God's paradox of sacred history: A particular people, a tiny people, is tasked with the mission of bringing God's blessing to all of humanity and the light of divine morality to every corner of creation.

At times Jewish tradition focuses on knowing God as the goal of the covenant; other times it stresses the blessings of peace and ethical perfection. Genesis through Deuteronomy

repeatedly calls on the Jewish people to "know God," and Rambam, in his *Guide*, understood

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*This particular people is to bring God's blessing to all people everywhere*

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this intellectual virtue to be the ultimate purpose of God's covenant and its commandments. Indeed, neither text refers at all to the era of messianic moral bliss that Isaiah, Micah and Zechariah dream of so beautifully and insist upon so passionately.

Yet the two visions are one, and both purposes merge into unity. This is clear in Rambam's culmination of *Mishneh torah*:

At that time, there will be neither hunger, nor war; neither will there be jealousy, nor strife. Blessings will be abundant and comfort within the reach of all. The single preoccupation of the entire world will be to know the Lord. Therefore there will be wise persons who know mysterious and profound things and will attain an understanding of the Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind....<sup>27</sup>

Here it is our knowledge of God that leads naturally to messianic tranquility.<sup>28</sup> For Isaiah, too, peace and knowledge of God are inevitable natural partners, as he announces in the same verse with which Rambam concludes his great halakhic code:

26. See *Ha'ameq davar*, Introduction to Book of Exodus.

27. *MT*, Laws of Kings 12:5 (according to the Yemenite manuscript). Most printed texts include the word "Israel" to qualify those who will attain ultimate knowledge of the divine. This qualification is inconsistent with the earlier, more accurate manuscripts. See Shabse Frankel edition of *Mishneh Torah* (Congregation Benei Yosef: New York, 1998). It is also inconsistent with the earlier emphasis on the universal nature of messianic blessing ("The single preoccupation of the entire world..."). See Menachem Kellner, "'Farteitsht un Farbessert': Comments on 'Tendentious 'Corrections' to Maimonidean Texts," B. Ish-Shalom, ed., *Be-darkei shalom: iyyunim be-bagut yehudit mugashim le-Shalom Rosenberg (In the paths of Peace: Topics in Jewish Thought in Honor of Shalom Rosenberg)* (Jerusalem, 2006): 255-263 (Hebrew). For English translation, see "*Farteicht un Farbeserret* (On Correcting Maimonides)," *Me'orot* 6:2 (*Marbeshvan* 5768) at [www.yctorah.org](http://www.yctorah.org).

28. This is also the case in the conclusion of the *Guide* (III:54), where Rambam explains that the achievement of the intellectual virtues has as its natural consequence the abundance of *besed*, *tsedaqah* and *mishpat*. See also *MT*, Laws of Servants 9:8, where Rambam stresses that correctly living the *mitsvot* nurtures empathy, responsibility and compassion for all people, without any distinction between Jew and gentile, master and servant.

There will be neither hurt nor destruction in My holy mountain for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the seabed. (Isa. 11:9)”

So too in the Torah, the knowledge of God and the fulfillment of His covenant yield human blessing, security and tranquility.<sup>29</sup>

### The Patriarch Abraham

We do well to reconsider Abraham and God’s covenant with him—and by implication all of Genesis. Jews who are nurtured by the rich biblical story of Abraham through Moses as told by rabbinic tradition and *midrash* know that Abraham was the first Jew. Yet, in what ways was Abraham a Jew?” We can ask in legal terms “Was Abraham obligated by the 613 *mitsvot* given at Sinai or did he observe only the seven commandments of Noah?” When we pose the question this way, we will understand that most rabbinic authorities did not see Abraham as a Jew similar to us because they believed that he was not obligated by or observe the Sinaitic commandments.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Abraham was no mere Noahide. According to most rabbinic authorities, Abraham was a theological Noahide: He observed the fundamental Noahide laws and other individual *mitsvot*, such as circumcision. Abraham’s uniqueness—and the reason we claim him as our father—lay in his recognition of the One Creator of Heaven and Earth, in his understanding of the theological foundation for the Noahide moral laws,<sup>31</sup> and in his public witness to these beliefs. This is

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*According to most rabbinic authorities  
Abraham was a theological Noahide*

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the significance of Abraham repeatedly “calling the Name of the Lord.” This gesture was testimony to all his neighbors of God’s existence and it constituted a public prayer announcing God’s continuing involvement with His children.<sup>32</sup> God’s covenant with Abraham, then, was the seed for the covenant at Sinai but was far from identical with it.

29. In the Torah also, knowledge of God and fulfillment of His covenant yield blessing, harmony and human security. See Lev. 26:3-13; Deut.28:1-12

30. See commentaries on Genesis 26:5 of Rabbis David Qimḥi (Radaq), Ovadiah Seforno, Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides), Abraham Ibn Ezra, Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), Hizqiyah bar Manoah (*Hizqum*). See also Maimonides, *MT*, Laws of Kings, 9:1. For a contemporary expression of this position by a traditionalist rabbinic authority, see Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Abraham’s Journey*, op cit. p. 58. These interpretations comport well with the Biblical text, which indicates that the patriarchs violated some of the Sinai commandments, and they eliminate the need for historical anachronism. (How could Abraham observe Passover in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt, which was yet to occur?). They have no reason to ascribe prophetic powers to Abraham to enable him to know later biblical or post-biblical Jewish history. As such, they are more rational than the minority view of the Talmudic sages R. Nahorei (*Qidushin* 82a) and Rav (*Yoma* 28b) and of Rashi. See note 4.

31. None of the Noahide commandments requires a positive theological commitment.

32. According to the talmudic sages and later authorities, Abraham established the practice of the morning prayer (*shaharit*). See BT, *Sanhedrin*, 26b and Maimonides, *MT*, Laws of Kings, 9:1. This also the way that medieval rabbinic biblical commentators understood “calling the name of the Lord.” For Rashi, it was an act of prayer and for Naḥmanides it was public proclamation of God’s existence. See their respective commentaries on Gen. 12:8.

Our patriarch Abraham was the pre-halakhic man, and he remains our paradigm of the faithful Jew. *Mitsvot and halakhab* are built upon *berit Sinai* and *Torat Mosheb*, but Jewish theology is rooted in Abraham and his covenantal life—and just as Judaism would be unthinkable without our patriarchs and matriarchs, the full understanding of God’s *mitsvot* cannot be detached from Abraham’s covenantal life and its theology.

This intrinsic connection between the covenant’s theology and our religious life dedicated to *mitsvot* is why the Torah does not begin with the first divine imperative to fashion Jewish time around the new moon of Nisan (Exodus 12), but with the noble experiences of our ancestors throughout Genesis. It is why the TaNaKH cannot end with the last *mitsvah* of *hakbel* uttered in Deuteronomy 12, but continues through the covenantal experiences of *Am Yisra’el* and the messianic visions of the prophets.

Without the life and historical mission of Abraham our covenant would be devoid of theological purpose. And without the account

of the historical trials of God’s treasured people that will culminate in the messianic dream, the covenant at Sinai would lack historical significance and spiritual direction. Only when we combine the *mitsvot* with their underlying theology does Jewish covenantal life and its spiritual destiny blossom into full splendor:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and the God of Jacob, that He teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths....Let the peoples beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war anymore. Let every man sit under his vine and under his fig tree; and no one shall make him afraid....Let all the people walk, each in the name of his God; and we shall walk in the name of our Lord our God forever and ever.” (Micah 4:2-5)

This is the religious dream of Abraham, of Moses and all the prophets of Israel. Indeed, it is the dream of the Creator of Heaven of Earth Himself, the God of Israel, and of all His children who are faithful to the covenant.