Sephardic Heritage Update

A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information
Impacting our community and our culture
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"Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it." -Marian Wright Edelman

Contents **Michael Wyschogrod**

Introduction: The Jewish Primitivism of Michael Wyschogrod

It is highly unlikely that many Jews have heard of the late Michael Wyschogrod, but they are certainly familiar with the fundamentalist theological revolution that he has helped to inspire.

For those who are trying to better understand and process the current state of academic Judaic Studies and the dominance of the Neo-Con Tikvah Fund model in it, understanding Wyschogrod's thought is critical.

Although his primary work The Body of Faith is a very complex piece of religious writing, the primordial anti-Rationalism that it propounds has become integral to the thinking of the Jewish Right Wingers today.

Wyschogrod's thought is fundamental to a new generation of Jewish Radicals who have hijacked academic study, as their politics figure significantly into the current Trumpworld degeneracy.

I first became aware of Wyschogrod and his very confused – and confusing – doctrinal Jewish Theology in his 2010 article "A King in Israel" about Jewish Messianism, published by the radical Right Wing Catholic journal, First Things.

As I indicated in my comments to that article, Wyschogrod presented a very odd amalgamation of Neo-Con values with a very curious ambivalence about the Zionist project and its violent messianism.

I would subsequently discover in the coming years what this confusion was all about.

In my 2016 article on Wyschogrod and his devoted disciple Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, I highlight the very Ashkenazi disdain for Maimonides that is so central to their atavistic and hermetic understanding of Judaism; a Judaism which is largely based on a draconian literalist reading of the Hebrew Bible that eschews Sephardic Jewish Humanism and its openness to science and philosophy.

Indeed, Wyschogrod strongly believed in a corporeal, anthropomorphic deity and utterly disdained figurative readings of the Biblical texts. His Biblical literalism was so pronounced that many readers felt that he was indefatigably antagonistic to the Rabbinic tradition and its non-literal Midrashic hermeneutics.

It was Soloveichik who tried to save his mentor from the anti-Talmudic critique. In his 2010 dissertation, done under the supervision of fellow Tikvah Fund maven Leora Batnitzky of Princeton, Soloveichik valiantly tried to assert Wyschogrod's Talmudic bona fides, though to little avail.

For those who would like to explore the matter further, here is the complete dissertation:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ytYVvsu-He-LACFKWcSsYGguR5uX33u9/view?ths=true

Soloveichik's 2005 Azure article fixes in firmly on Wyschogrod's obsession with Israel's Chosenness; a factor that brought him into close contact with Christian thinkers and their own Supremacist religious values.

The article serves as an introduction to Wyschogrod for the Neo-Con Jewish world, as it seeks to publicize ideas that would become extremely important to what I have called The New Convivencia; the union of Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews under the Zionist rubric.

In 2009 Soloveichik wrote a somewhat shorter article on Wyschogrod for First Things, which once again looked to promote him as a Jewish figure who could serve as a model of integration with the Christian religious radicals.

Back in 2005, Rabbi Shai Held, currently of Mechon Hadar, wrote a lengthy review for the academic journal Modern Judaism of Wyschogrod's devoted Christian disciple R. Kendall Soulen's anthology of his mentor's writings, Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations.

Soulen, like Soloveichik, is a critical figure in the ongoing promotion of Wyschogrod. In his essay on the anthology, Held sees Wyschogrod as a Jewish Karl Barth. Indeed, Wyschogrod has also been compared to other Christian icons like Kierkegaard.

Held, another proud member of The Tikvah Fund family, namechecks Shaul Magid and Jon Levenson in the article's acknowledgements, showing us how smoothly the economy of Right Wing ideas travels in the Neo-Con Jewish world.

It is certainly no coincidence that Wyschogrod is presented in connection with Christian thinkers, as his ideas strongly resonate with classical Christological values of material Incarnation and Prophetic Biblical literalism.

When Wyschogrod died in December 2015, The Tikvah Fund's Tablet Magazine published a gushing tribute to him written by David Goldman. Once again, the Neo-Con Jews sought to make the larger Jewish community aware of Wyschogrod's atavistic thinking and its value for their radical political project.

The final article in this special newsletter is by the aforementioned Leora Batnitzky, who supervised the Soloveichik dissertation. Her Jewish Review of Books tribute to Wyschogrod came just a few months after the Goldman Tablet article. JRB, like Tablet, is a Tikvah Fund publication, and Batnitzky's discussion uneasily fluctuates between Abraham Joshua Heschel's universalism and Wyschogrod's particularist ahistorical neo-pagan Judaism.

Batnitzky is a devoted disciple of Leo Strauss and his debased attacks on the heritage of Jewish Humanism, from Maimonides to Moses Mendelssohn and Hermann Cohen. Her influential 2011 book How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought erased Sephardic Judaism from its presentation, as only Ashkenazi Judaism could be seen as "Modern."

I highlighted that offensively racist point in my comments to Jon Levenson's review of the book in the following SHU post:

https://groups.google.com/forum/#!searchin/Davidshasha/batnitzky/davidshasha/XidD6MJ87Dg/wkm6Nt63HjAJ

Indeed, you can see how tightly-knit this Tikvah Fund Neo-Con world really is. The names continue to recur as they reinforce the essential ideas that now dominate the field of academic Judaic Studies.

Batnitzky's assessment of Wyschogrodian Jewish chauvinism in the JRB tribute brings us right back to the problems generated by the Right Wing political extremism that emerged in the Neo-Con Revolution under the influence of its authoritarian hero Strauss, and how it connects to the even more debased religious fundamentalism of The New Convivencia.

Batnitzky's intemperate waffling on the vital matter of particularism and universalism in Judaism is the result of a lengthy conceptual-ethical process of emphatically rejecting the values of Sephardic Religious Humanism, as the Ashkenazi dysfunction and misanthropy takes over a Jewish world that has increasingly lost its moral bearings.

The Jewish Primitivism of Michael Wyschgrod thus represents a watershed moment in the ongoing erosion of the Andalusian Jewish heritage and its militant replacement by the chauvinist values of the Ashkenazi tradition. It is a truly dangerous step backwards in Jewish History, as it has sought to link arms with other religious radicals in a way that serves to threaten a free and open society and the Liberal values of pluralism, tolerance, and democracy that have been so vital to Jewish survival in the Modern era.

David Shasha

A King in Israel

By: Michael Wyschogrod

This is an extremely fascinating article that shows the profound ways in which Zionist ideals and the state of Israel have stymied discussion by religious thinkers. Many of the contradictions inherent in the European idea of a "Jewish state" have never really been addressed much less thought through.

It is taken for granted that Israel is a "Jewish" state without taking into account what "Judaism" really is.

To his credit, Professor Wyschogrod does take the idea seriously.

That he utterly fails to grasp the absurdity of his position is scary.

Rejecting the rabbinic tradition – as any good Zionist would – he goes whole hog (pardon the pun) and looks to the Bible for his model of Jewish existence. That the Bible has been transformed by rabbinic thinking and by the Halakhic tradition is of little concern here. In point of fact, Wyschogrod chooses to cite Maimonides in support of his thesis – even as Maimonidean tradition has been occluded in contemporary Jewish thought and in Zionist ideology.

The argument neglects the Talmudic traditions cited in the Mishneh Torah regarding the messianic age and the requirements of Covenant in that context. What the "constitution" Israel is to live by is not spelled out. Is it Halakhah or is it the current civil code of the state? How would Halakhah be instituted? We are left guessing.

In the end, Wyschogrod at least tries to resolve the issue of what a "Jewish state" means. It is thus disappointing to see how he attempts to bring Israel in line with that difficulty.

In the end, there remains a conflict between the Hegelianism of secular Zionist thought and the dialectical nature of rabbinic tradition. Haredi Orthodoxy and statist Zionism have not been able to resolve the issue. To then promote the outmoded 17th century idea of a King is to completely misread the exigencies of the moment.

It remains a complete and utter mess.

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Israel is a Jewish state but has not succeeded in defining just what that means in a national constitution. Although the 1948 Declaration of Independence called for the enactment of a constitution within months of the state's inception, nothing has been achieved beyond a fragmentary "Basic Law." Israel finds itself in the uncomfortable position of fighting for its status as a Jewish state without a clear vision of what that entails.

There appears to be an unbridgeable gap between three millennia of Jewish religious thought and the exigencies of modern governance. Yet Judaism's defining concept, the covenant, is inherently political, and a proper understanding of biblical and rabbinic theology might identify a solution to Israel's constitutional vacuum.

To discuss theological criteria for the constitution of a secular republic runs against the grain of modern political thought, even though constitutional restrictions on popular sovereignty imply reliance on an authority that is greater than human. In a republic the people are sovereign, yet the purpose of a constitution is precisely to restrict the power of any future majority. If popular sovereignty is absolute, what right has a constitution to frustrate a future majority by, for example, imposing some form of supermajority? In the extreme case, suppose a majority of the delegates to a constitutional convention enacts a constitution that forbids any change forever, or requires a 98 percent majority of the future legislature to enact any constitutional change.

This is no different in principle from the two-thirds supermajority that the United States requires for constitutional amendments. The only basis for a polity to accept severe restrictions on popular majority rule is the conviction that the founding constitution derives its power from a higher form of sovereignty than the voters in any given legislative session. Without such a theological foundation, a republic cannot feel bound by the rules laid down by its founders. A purely secular republic would self-destruct because it could not protect its constitution

from constant amendment.

To propose a constitution, in other words, is to ask the question: What form of sovereignty is higher than that of the present voters? America's Founders appealed to "nature and nature's God." Judaism has an answer to this question, elaborated in the oral and written Torah—however remote they appear, at first consideration, from the practical requirements of the state of Israel.

Judaism is founded on a covenant between God and Israel. Instead of unilaterally imposing his will on Israel, God enters into a relation of mutual obligations with a people. This relation is, in content, not only religious but political and legal, and it is understood in this fashion in the Bible and rabbinic literature, where God is called "the King of all Kings" perhaps more often than by any other appellation.

God, moreover, exercises his kingship through proxies. There are three religious institutions and persons in the biblical polity who are divinely sanctioned: the king, the prophet, and the high priest. But of these three offices, only the term *king* is routinely applied to human beings as well as to God. This is noteworthy because, of the three, the prophet and high priest hold religious functions while the office of king is largely secular. In the presence of a human king, the following blessing is recited: "Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, Who has given of His glory to flesh and blood." A human king thus participates in the glory of God. To see a human king is, in a sense, to see a proxy for God.

A world without God is a world in which nothing is hereditary but all glory is temporary and republican, elected for a period of time on the strength of the policy agreements of the day. God's election of Israel—which is, in a sense, a royal election—is based on none of these fleeting considerations but is as permanent as the throne of David, the most permanent of all the earthly thrones sanctioned by God. It is probably for this reason that monarchy is so repugnant to secularists. Jewish sovereignty existed in full measure only during the rule of the kings of ancient Israel. Saul was chosen by God in response to the demand addressed by the people to Samuel to "appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations." This is a request that did not please God, who informed Samuel that "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." Only after Samuel has outlined all the disadvantages of rule by a human king, and the people persist in demanding a king, does God reluctantly instruct Samuel to anoint a human king.

From the way Israel's monarchy was founded we can infer several things. First, human monarchy is not God's first choice for the governance of Israel. His first choice is the Kingship of God, who, because he does not speak to the people directly, uses a prophet to transmit the word of God to the people. In this form of rule, exemplified by Moses' rule over Israel, God employs the prophet to communicate not only generalities to the people but also concrete legal judgments, for example the request of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27:111) for a portion of the inheritance in the absence of direct male heirs. Moses presents the case to God, who rules that the daughters are to inherit on the same footing as their father's brothers.

A more concrete form of divine monarchical rule can hardly be imagined. While direct divine rule did not last very long, the fact that the First Book of Samuel explicitly raises the option serves, among other things, to refute the view that with the giving of the Torah, direct divine intervention is no longer possible or desirable. Whatever subsequent forms of rule are depicted in the Bible, nothing can match direct divine rule, which rules out the possibility of error.

This form of government can be termed Mosaic kingship: a form of monarchy in which God himself is the monarch who speaks through the prophet. The Mosaic monarch thus combines in himself two characteristics, that, in a way, are contradictory. On the one hand, Moses is the greatest prophet Israel has known because he speaks with God "face to face." On the other hand, this proximity to God diminishes Moses' personal authority because, when in doubt, he consults God and receives a direct answer. Moses, it seems, does not need to acquire the art of legal reasoning. His questions are answered by the Holy One. This may explain why Moses is not generally referred to as a king. Although he acts as a sovereign, God is the sovereign king and Moses, his spokesman.

The title of *king* is thus not an honorific for God, as if the title of *God* were insufficient. God is called *king* because he actually *is* the king, the ruler from whom all decisions emanate and whom human kings imperfectly resemble. The blessing of God "who has given of his glory to flesh and blood" encapsulates biblical and rabbinic political thinking: The human king is created in the image of the divine king—a statement we would not dare to make did it not mirror the statement that human beings were created in the image of God.

The advantages of monarchy over a republican form of government can be debated at length. Since the French Revolution, monarchies have been on the wane and republics, on the rise. The reasons are many, but the secularization of the modern world must be one of them because the institution of monarchy is deeply tied to its religious roots, and the authority of the king is not derived from the governed. This is perhaps the aspect of monarchy that most offends the secular mind, for which nothing is

more self-evident than the thesis that, ultimately, the people are sovereign, and rulers derive their legitimacy from those they rule. But this is not how Judaism understands the matter. God, not the people, is sovereign. Rulers are chosen by God, and it is only to God and his Torah that they are responsible.

In classical Jewish thought, the question was how to establish the closest possible approximation to God's kingship. From the beginning of kingship in Israel, there was a deep ambivalence about monarchy. But the fact that a human king is accepted and serves as a substitute for the divine monarch bestows on the human king a political and religious weight that no democratically elected politician can ever achieve.

There is no question that Jewish tradition favors monarchy, and Jewish religious authorities, prominently including Maimonides, consistently argue that the appointment of a king, in the line of David, is obligatory. (For the same reason, the New Testament traces Jesus' descent to David.) Jewish political thought seeks the political arrangement that most closely approximates the kingship of God, and, absent a ruler from the House of David, monarchy becomes a contingent affair—which is why Jewish religious authorities in antiquity rejected Jewish monarchies, such as the Hasmoneans, not founded on the House of David.

Of course, the question today is whether it is possible to reconcile the modern concept of a state with a religious concept of legitimacy more than three millennia old. I believe that it is indeed possible, and that such a reconciliation offers a practical solution to the longstanding constitutional dilemma of the state of Israel.

Israel must reconcile the requirements of its secular citizens, who wish to live in a modern parliamentary republic, and its religious citizens, who insist that religious and legal tradition must inform the Jewish state. The danger in secular rule is that modern Israel will fail to present itself unambiguously as a Jewish state and eventually lose the battle to remain a Jewish state. But the form of religious governance favored by the *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) segment of the Israeli public would put an end to Israel's republican character. I suspect that the ultra-Orthodox would prefer a state governed by a self-appointed body of Torah scholars, similar to the Council of Torah Sages (*Moezes Gedolei Hatorah*) of *Agudath Israel*, the Haredi quasi-political organization.

There never has been a moment in Jewish history, though, when the sovereign Jewish people were ruled by rabbinic scholars. Whether in the Babylonian exile or in medieval Europe, rabbis played an important role in guiding the lives of Jews, but this was always in the context of Jewish subordination to non-Jewish rulers. Jewish sovereignty existed in full measure only with the rule of Jewish kings.

The crowning of an actual Davidic monarch today would require prophecy to select the proper person. In the absence of prophecy, this is impossible—and the sages of Israel declared almost two thousand years ago that prophecy was gone from Israel. Israel nonetheless can be declared a Davidic monarchy without a reigning king. This action would build into the self-understanding of the state of Israel the messianic hope of the Jewish people, while excluding a messianic interpretation of the present state of Israel.

The solution that I propose is by no means unusual for a constitutional monarchy. It is a common occurrence in monarchy that no king is present or that the present king cannot rule, for example, due to youth. In such situations, a regent is appointed as a placeholder for a king. Such a placeholder can either be appointed or elected. A regent safeguarding the Throne of David until such time that divine intervention identifies the rightful heir to the Davidic kingdom would thus assume the functions now performed by Israel's president, the symbolic head of state.

It would be quite possible for Israel's parliament to elect the regent who safeguards the throne just as it now elects Israel's president. None of the other mechanisms of parliamentary democracy in Israel would need to change. What is important is not the specific mechanism by which the Israeli polity might choose a regent, but, rather, for Israel to understand itself as a monarchy, albeit one without a reigning king.

This would acknowledge God's will that Israel be ruled by the House of David, and it would define the Jewish character of the Israeli state. If we concede that any constitutional constraints on popular sovereignty derive from an authority higher than the people, we must conclude that a constitution uniquely suited to a Jewish state should embody the political form through which this higher authority has been manifest in the Jewish concept of polity for the past three thousand years. To be a constitutionally Jewish state, Israel must understand itself as a monarchy temporarily without a king.

Such a constitutional monarchy is quite as compatible with modern parliamentary democracy as are the monarchies of Holland and England. But there would remain a fundamental difference between Israel and the European monarchies, which exist as a matter of historical happenstance. For Israel to establish its claim to be a Jewish state—the core issue of contention between Israel and many of its Muslim neighbors—it must do so in the unique way specified by the Bible and the undivided view of Jewish tradition.

Collateral benefits might ensue from such a declaration. For example, the fact that several Arab countries are monarchies (including Israel's eastern neighbor) raises the prospect that a Davidic monarchy in Israel might elicit a certain degree of respect. The symbolic importance of acknowledging the House of David as Israel's rightful ruler, moreover, would be a source of inspiration to many Christians who are favorably disposed towards the Jewish state.

The possible practical benefits, though, are incidental to the purpose of giving expression to the deep Jewish longing for Davidic restoration, expressed so frequently and with such deep emotion in the daily liturgy that Jews have recited for thousands of years, in which we beseech God to see a descendant of David on the throne of Israel.

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From First Things, April 2010, reposted in SHU 425, July 7, 2010

Michael Wyschogrod and Meir Soloveichik: Anti-Maimonideans in Action

I just read David Goldman's very revealing obituary of Michael Wyschogrod in Tablet magazine:

http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/196026/michael-wyschogrod-obit

I was immediately struck by the reference to our Sephardi-hating friend Rabbi Meir Soloveichik who currently leads the formerly-Sephardic Congregation Shearith Israel and quickly went to read his 2009 article in First Things:

http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/11/gods-first-love-the-theology-of-michael-wyschogrod

The complete articles follow this note.

It did not take long for Soloveichik to present the usual attack on Maimonides:

Maimonides, Wyschogrod insists, introduced extraneous influences into Judaism, partly in an attempt to reconcile Jewish religion with Aristotelian philosophy. Wyschogrod argues that Judaism concerns not a philosophical doctrine but rather God's unique and preferential love for the flesh-and-blood descendants of Abraham. The election of the Jewish people is the result of God's falling in love with Abraham and founding a family with him. And, out of passionate love for Abraham, God continues to dwell among the Jewish people. Maimonides, in Wyschogrod's account, deviated from the biblical view to accommodate Aristotle's philosophy.

Along the way, Maimonides also attempted to banish all anthropomorphism from Judaism. An entire tradition of Jewish rationalism has followed Maimonides in this and has applied it to the concept of Israel's election. Thus many German Jewish thinkers, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, see Israel's election as symbolic of God's equal love for all of humanity"for surely a good God would not violate Kant's categorical imperative. The result is the loss of any reason for the election of Israel, a foundational idea of Judaism. The biblical insistence on God's indwelling in the living Jewish people, Wyschogrod observes, requires us to believe that God is present in the physical people of Israel.

Soloveichik's argument confirms what I said in my article "Authentic and Inauthentic Jews" which reviewed the basic elements of the Maimonidean Controversy:

https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/davidshasha/x_7eaJfuUkM

It is a point well-noted by the Right Wing HASBARAH crowd at Mosaic magazine who used the title "Michael Wyschogrod's Anti-Maimonidean Theology of Love" when they re-posted the Soloveichik article this week:

http://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/2015/12/michael-wyschogrods-anti-maimonidean-theology-of-love/?utm_source=Mosaic+Newsletter&utm_campaign=73a86d7925-Mosaic_2015_12_22&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0b0517b2ab-73a86d7925-41171465

I have also provided some critical material in my article "Judaism Finds Christianity" on Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik, Wyschogrod's teacher, who was a loyal exponent of the Anti-Maimonidean viewpoint as it took root in the classical Ashkenazi tradition:

https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/davidshasha/qHwYbkphqg8

Once again we see just how deeply the Ashkenazim hate the Sephardim as our intellectual heritage is characterized as not being truly Jewish, while their tradition – naturally – is authentic in its fidelity to the Bible.

I have made my argument already, so will only note here the ongoing battle being waged by Ashkenazi haters like

Meir Soloveichik who seek to obliterate Sephardic Judaism with their Casuistry and hateful Right Wing fanaticism.

A short time after preparing this note I was made aware of a letter published in Tradition magazine that discusses this very issue:

http://traditionarchive.org/news/article.cfm?id=103860

Here is a passage from the 1970 letter that provides the conceptual background to Soloveichik's discussion:

Orthodoxy needs a considerable number of men like Michael Wyschogrod and Milton Himmelfarb, men who are devastating critics of "reflex liberalism." By placing intellectual barriers between itself and the general society, Orthodoxy will, paradoxically, be building bridges that the "lost souls" can cross.

What we see here is the way in which Modern Orthodox Jews valued Wyschogrod at the time of the Counterculture as a wedge against the Left in its ongoing attempt to transform Jewish identity.

Orthodoxy, as the letter states, is "placing intellectual barriers between itself and the general society"; a critical formulation that once again shows us just how we arrived at the current union of Orthodox Jewish intellectuals with the Evangelical Christian Right.

In this context the open discourse of Sephardic Jewish Humanism is rejected in favor of the standard Ashkenazi alienation.

David Shasha

From SHU 720, January 20, 2016

God's Beloved: A Defense of Chosenness

By: Meir Y. Soloveichik

One of Judaism's central premises is that God has a unique love for the Jewish people, in the merit of its ancestor Abraham, whom God loved millennia ago. This notion may make many readers uncomfortable, as they may feel that a righteous God would love all human beings, and therefore all peoples, equally and in the same way. Nevertheless, the notion of God's special love for Israel must be stated and understood, for without it one cannot comprehend much that is unique about Judaism's moral vision.

There is no question that to speak of the Jews as a "chosen nation" is to speak of their being charged with a universal mission: Communicating the monotheistic idea and a set of moral ideals to humanity. In designating Israel as a "nation of kingly priests" and a "light unto nations,"[1] God, according to the medieval exegete Obadiah Seforno, commanded the Jews to "teach to the entire human race, so that they may call in the name of God, to serve him together."[2]

It is, however, often overlooked that the doctrine of Israel's chosenness also contains a strongly particularistic idea: That God chose the Jewish people for this mission out of his love for their forefather Abraham. The book of Deuteronomy is unambiguous on this point:

To you it was shown, so that you might know that the Eternal, he is God; there is none else beside him.… *And because he loved your fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought you out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt*; to drive out nations from before you, greater and mightier than you are, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day.[3]

The Tora later states that God's love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was then bestowed upon their children:

The Eternal did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples. *But because the Eternal loved you*, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, has the Eternal brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.[4]

God loves the Jewish people because they are, according to Seforno, "the children of his beloved."[5] If the Jews are chosen to serve for all eternity as a light unto the nations, it is because God, in the words of the theologian Michael Wyschogrod, "sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved."[6] This unique, preferential love that is bestowed upon Israel, even when it sins, is often depicted in the prophets as being familial in nature: When God describes in the book of Jeremiah how he sustains Israel in its exile, he says, "I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, in which they shall not stumble; for I am a father to Israel."[7] The Jewish people also beholds God as a merciful mother: "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you,"[8] he assures Israel. So, too, in the book of Isaiah, does God respond to Israel's fear that "God has left me and forgotten me" after the destruction of the First Temple by asking, "Can a woman forget her suckling child, refrain from mercy on the child of her womb?"[9]

Here a powerful contrast emerges between the respective scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. The God of the Hebrew Bible, while a benevolent ruler of all nations, is described as bestowing a preferential love upon Israel. Or, as Rabbi Akiva explains in the Ethics of the Fathers, every man is beloved, "for he was created in the image of God," yet even more beloved is Israel, "for they are called the children of God, as it is written, 'you are children to the Lord

your God.'"[10] The Gospels, on the other hand, do not focus on God's love for Israel, and speak instead of a God whose love is universal: Jesus redeemed a sinful humanity, John informs us, "for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."[11] God's loving election is now no longer focused on the children of Abraham, but on the world. Everyone, Jesus argued, may be counted among God's elect: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."12 Paul, in like manner, authors an epistle addressed to "all that be in Rome, *beloved of God*, called to be saints." In God's loving election, Paul argues, "there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek," and all "are one in Christ Jesus."[13]

This, then, is the debate that has divided Jews and Christians for two thousand years: Is God's covenantal devotion universal or exclusive? The question relates not only to how we understand humanity's religious obligations. The quality of God's covenantal love is inextricably intertwined with the most profound questions about the kind of love that human beings are supposed to feel. The difference between the Jewish and Christian views about divine love, it will emerge, reflects a no less profound disagreement about what, exactly, it means to love.

II

Perhaps the most influential theologian to reflect on the nature of divine love in the past century was the Swedish thinker Anders Nygren. Nygren's central work, *Agape and Eros* (1953), begins by describing the different depictions of divine love found in Jewish and Christian Scripture; Nygren notes that while "in Judaism love is exclusive and particularistic," Christian love "overleaps all such limits; it is universal and all-embracing." In explaining the Christian perspective, Nygren contrasts human love, which he refers to as *eros*, with *agape*, the Greek word used by the New Testament to refer to God's love of man. A human being loves his beloved, according to Nygren, because he is drawn to some aspect of the beloved, something which he finds worth loving. God's *agape*, however, is "unmotivated"—that is, it is bestowed regardless of the beloved's worth and value. It is a love that demands nothing in response, no return on the emotional investment. Nor is it grounded in anything particular about the human being. Rather, God bestows love upon all humanity out of pure generosity. Unlike human love, Nygren concludes, God's love "has nothing to do with desire and longing."[14]

God's love is altogether spontaneous. It does not look for anything in man that could be adduced as motivation for it. In relation to man, divine love is "*unmotivated.*" It is this love, spontaneous and "unmotivated"—having no motive outside itself, in the personal worth of men—which characterizes also the action of Jesus in seeking out the lost and consorting with "publicans and sinners"…. In Christ there is revealed a divine love which breaks all bounds, refusing to be controlled by the value of its object, and being determined only by its own intrinsic nature. According to Christianity, "motivated" love is human; spontaneous and "unmotivated" love is divine.[15]

In support of this assertion, Nygren points to the Christian obligation to love your enemies. In the Gospels, Jesus instructs his followers to love even the egregiously evil, for all human beings are equally loved by God:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.[16]

It is precisely because divine love is unmotivated, Nygren argues, that God's *agape* is bestowed upon saint and sinner alike. Thus God's love, as depicted by Jesus, makes no distinction between Hitler and Stalin, on the one hand, and Mother Teresa on the other. After all, Paul's doctrine of original sin depicts a wretched humanity mired in moral depravity, from which only Christ's death on the cross can extricate it. Paul argues that all human beings enter this world evil at heart, all are enemies of the Lord, and all are thoroughly unworthy of God's love—yet all are recipients of God's love, nevertheless.[17]

It is wrong, Nygren insists, to say that God loves the righteous *because* they are righteous. For God loves no one because of who he is; rather, he loves all *despite* who they are:

When God's love is shown to the righteous and godly, there is always the risk of our thinking that God loves the man on account of his righteousness and godliness. But this a denial of *agape*—as if God's love for the "righteous" were not just as unmotivated and spontaneous as his love for the sinner! As if there were any other divine love than spontaneous and unmotivated *agape*! It is only when all thought of the worthiness of the object is abandoned that we can understand what *agape* is.[18]

God, therefore, according to Nygren, cannot love humanity as human beings love each other. His love could not possibly be grounded in a specific, love-worthy aspect of his beloved. It is instead an ethereal, un-human, unmotivated love that God bestows upon humanity. "To the question, 'Why does God love?' there is only one right answer," Nygren concludes: "Because it is his nature to love."[19]

Judaism, in contrast, argues against such a sharp distinction between divine and human love. After all, man was created in the image of God; the way we love is a reflection of the way God loves. Thus, as with human love, God can desire to enter into a relationship with us; he can indeed be drawn to some aspect of our identity.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Bible's depiction of God's love for Abraham. God's motivation in electing Abraham has long been subject to speculation. Some theologians, such as Wyschogrod, suggest that the Bible is deliberately obscure about God's reasons for loving Abraham, for love is often unexplainable.[20] Yet traditional Jewish exegetes have argued that God states quite clearly why he loved Abraham, and why he chose him to found a righteous family:

And the Eternal said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do—seeing that Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Eternal, to do what is just and right; that the Eternal may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him.[21]

It was precisely, then, because of Abraham's love of "what is just and right," and his desire to communicate these principles to his children, that God chose him to father a nation that would communicate these principles to the world. The medieval commentator Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi) argues that in these verses, God is not merely explaining why he chose Abraham, but why he longs for and is drawn to him:

***For I know him*: A loving phrase, such as "known to her husband," "does not Boaz know us," "and I shall know you by name," and the essential meaning is one of knowing, for one who loves a person draws him near and knows him and recognizes him. [God thus says:] And why do I [draw Abraham close] to know him? Because he commands his children regarding me to keep my ways.[22]**

This, then, is the Jewish understanding of Abraham's election: God fell in love with Abraham because he loved Abraham's desire to found a faithful and righteous family. God was drawn to Abraham's character and his hopes for the future. Most importantly, God *desired* to enter into a covenantal relationship with Abraham—to make Abraham's family his own family, Abraham's dream his own dream, and Abraham's children his own children. In forging a covenant with Abraham, God expressed his desire to be, along with Abraham, a father to the Jewish people, and it is on this familial basis that God's love for Israel is founded. Throughout the Bible, God declares that when Israel imitates its ancestor Abraham and pursues righteousness—such as during the reigns of David, Hezekiah, and Josiah—God will bless and strengthen Israel. When Israel fails to live up to Abraham's legacy, such as during the reigns of Jeroboam and Manasseh, then a betrayed God will punish Israel. Nevertheless, God emphasizes throughout the biblical texts that even when Israel is punished, it will never be fully abandoned. God will stand by Israel as a father stands by his children, in expectation that the Abrahamic trait of pursuing righteousness and justice will ultimately prevail.[23] While the God of the Gospels bestows love freely upon all, Hebrew Scripture speaks of preferential love, but conveys thereby the following extraordinary notion: God loves man *because* of who we are, not *despite* who we are.

We can now understand the distinct approaches of Judaism and Christianity to divine love. If God's love is unmotivated—if it is not grounded in anything unique about us, but granted freely to an otherwise doomed and wretched humanity—then divine love by definition cannot be exclusive, and must be universal. If, on the other hand, God loves human beings because he is drawn to something unique about them, then his love must be particular, and cannot be universal. That is to say, God finds something unique about an individual or a people that he does not find in another individual or people. As Wyschogrod writes:

Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or whatnot…. The divine love is concrete. It is a genuine encounter with man in his individuality and must therefore be exclusive. Any real love encounter, if it is more than an example of the love of a class or collectivity, is exclusive because it is genuinely directed to the uniqueness of the other, and it therefore follows that each such relationship is different from all others. But difference is exclusivity because each relationship is different, and I am not included in the relationship of others.[24]

A love directed at all humanity that is not grounded in one's unique identity, Wyschogrod concludes, is a love "directed at universals and abstractions rather than real persons." A child who is loved by his father only with universal, "unmotivated" love, and not because of anything unique about him—such as his shared kinship or his unique virtues—could correctly claim that he has not truly been loved. In a similar fashion, God loves human beings because he is drawn to them, and therefore God approaches man in all his uniqueness. And in approaching every member of the Jewish nation as an individual, and in loving what makes him unique, God cannot ignore one important facet of this nation that makes it stand out: Its Abraham-ness, the fact that its members are the descendants of Abraham, in whom both God and Abraham invested so much hope. God approaches Jews as a lover who "sees the face of his beloved in the children of his beloved."

III

At this point the objection may understandably be raised: Does this mean that Judaism rejects the equality of man before God? Can a Jew indeed affirm the democratic ideal, according to which "all men are created equal" on account of rights "endowed by their Creator?" The answer is that while Judaism argues against the universality of God's

love, it does insist upon the universality of God's *justice*,and affirms the equality of all men before it. While love requires focusing on one's beloved in his or her absolute individuality, justice involves looking beyond individuality, to what we all share as members of humanity. Thus one would assume that a father who does not love his child for his own unique attributes does not truly love him, but a judge who favors his son over another because of the ties of kinship acts unjustly.

In one of the most famous passages in the Bible, Abraham appeals to God in the book of Genesis on behalf of the doomed residents of Sodom. He does not focus on God's love for all humanity; he does not ask God to love the Sodomites "as you have loved me." Rather, in pleading for Sodom, Abraham stresses a very different attribute of the Almighty:

Then Abraham approached him and said: Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?[25]

In invoking God's justice, Abraham insists that while God must punish the wicked, he must also reward the innocent and the righteous; God need not love the denizens of Sodom, but he must act justly toward them. In other words, God's love may be bestowed more on some than on others, but God's justice is equally bestowed on all. For if love is truly love—that is, if it takes into account everything about the identity of the person being loved—justice is the opposite; one acts justly only if he takes nothing personal or familial into account in bestowing justice on another. Thus, what Paul asserted about God's love may be rightfully applied, in the Jewish view, when discussing God's justice—that indeed, "there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek." All are judged only according to their merits.

In Christian writings, however, God makes no substantive distinction between love and justice, nor can he be drawn to love some human beings to the exclusion of others. God cannot make distinctions in love because God is identified entirely with love. Put another way, in the Christian view, *God acts only out of love, because he is love*. Christian Scripture states it explicitly: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, *because God is love*."[26] As Peter Kreeft, an influential Catholic theologian at Boston College, has argued, the Christian God is understood to identify so deeply with love that all of his other attributes are driven by it:

Without qualification, without ifs, ands, or buts, God's word tells us, straight as a left jab, that love is the greatest thing there is. Scripture never says God is justice or beauty or righteousness, though he is just and beautiful and righteous. But "God is love." Love is God's essence, his whole being. Everything in him is love. Even his justice is love. Paul identifies "the justice of God" in Romans 1:17 with the most unjust event in all history, deicide, the crucifixion, for that was God's great act of love.[27]

Nowhere in Hebrew Scripture is God identified with love—nor, for that matter, with justice. His justice is not love, and his love is not justice. While the God of the Gospels is one who "so loves the world," and indeed *must* love all the world, Abraham's God, who loves preferentially and on account of individuals' uniqueness, remains also the "judge of all the earth," who must "do justice" unto all. If we wish to be loved by God, we must come to terms with the fact that his relationship with each of us will be different; but we must also realize that before God's justice, all are truly equal.

But this Jewish response to the reduction of all of God's actions to love goes even deeper. When theology places love above justice, then justice itself is often rendered theologically impotent. In order to understand this point, it is helpful to examine the relation of election to salvation. Many verses in Christian Scripture imply that only those who profess faith in Christ will be saved from eternal damnation, regardless of any independent measure of justice or righteousness. This is expressed through the metaphor of the narrow gate: When, for example, Jesus is asked in the Gospel of Luke whether many will be saved, he replies: "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able."[28] In Matthew, Jesus expresses similar sentiments: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."[29] "Many are called," Jesus adds, "but few are chosen."[30] "Taken in their obvious meaning," writes Cardinal Avery Dulles, the most influential Catholic theologian in America, "passages such as these give the impression that there is a hell, and that many go there; more, in fact, than are saved."[31] Indeed, it was on account of verses such as these that the Catholic Church for centuries held that only baptized Catholics, those who have taken part in God's loving covenant, are given the chance to avoid damnation.

For Judaism, on the other hand, the rewards of the afterlife are not linked to God's covenantal love, but to his justice. God loves preferentially and elects the family of Abraham, but God's justice demands that all who live righteous lives be rewarded in the hereafter. "The righteous of the Gentiles," the Talmud informs us, "have a portion in the World to Come."[32] While not all are loved by God in the same way, we are all held accountable for our actions, and are rewarded for a life well lived. The Talmud even depicts Rabbi Yehuda the Prince as informing the pagan Roman

leader Antoninus that he, too, would merit a share of the World to Come.[33]

In the twentieth century, Dulles notes, a new line of Catholic thought developed, represented by the writings of theologians such as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. These thinkers suggested that because God loves every member of humanity, and because all of God's attributes are ultimately founded upon his love, perhaps *everyone*, even evildoers such as Hitler and Stalin, are ultimately saved, and enjoy the beatific vision of the afterlife.[34] This, too, Judaism rejects, insisting that God's justice, which is an attribute separate from his love, demands that evildoers be held accountable for the lives they have led. Indeed, the Mishna lists several evil figures—both Jews and non-Jews—who one can be certain are eternally damned.[35]

"These three remain," Paul reflected in his letter to the Corinthians, "faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love."[36] He does not mention justice, which for Jews is no less important than love. Moreover, it was Abraham's belief in the importance of godly justice that earned him God's love in the first place. A believing Jew, it seems, can indeed endorse the democratic principle of equality, which itself is originally expressed in a biblical verse: "And God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him."[37] While human beings are each unique, and therefore loved differently by God, all those created in God's image stand equally before the justice of their Creator. In this sense, all men truly are created equal.

IV

We are now in a position to examine the major implications of the respective understandings of divine love in Judaism and Christianity. The first concerns the kind of love that human beings are enjoined to feel towards one another. For Christians, men ought to love with absolute *agape*,with unlimited love. "God's *agape*," Nygren notes, "is the criterion of Christian love. Nothing but that which bears the impress of *agape* has a right to be called Christian love."[38] In proving this point, Nygren points to Jesus' instruction to love the wicked as they are loved by God. "If you love them that love you, what thank have you?" Jesus asks. "For even sinners love those that love them."[39]

Judaism, however, insists that preferential, exclusive love is not a concession to human selfishness but an imitation of the divine. This endorsement of preferential love among human beings can be seen most vividly in the Bible's depiction of the friendship between King David and Jonathan, Saul's son. When the two part, never to see each other again, they pledge a bond of eternal love that has long been regarded as the archetype of friendship in the Jewish tradition:

David arose out of a place toward the south, and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed himself three times: And they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded. And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, seeing that we have sworn both of us in the name of the Eternal, saying, the Eternal be between me and you, and between my seed and your seed for ever.[40]

Jonathan dies on the field of battle, together with his father Saul. David, after Saul's death, ascends the throne of Israel and fulfills his pledge:

And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, *that I may show him loyal love for Jonathan's sake*? And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziva.… And Ziva said to the king, Jonathan has yet a son, who is lame on his feet.… Then King David sent, and fetched him.… Now when Mefiboshet, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come to David, he fell on his face, and bowed down to the ground. And David said, Mefiboshet. And he answered, Behold your servant! And David said to him, Fear not, for I will surely show you loyal love for Jonathan your father's sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your father; and you will eat bread at my table continually.[41]

David's supremely preferential love for Jonathan is thus extended to his son Mefiboshet. Mefiboshet did not earn David's love; but David loves him all the same. David sees Jonathan's face in that of his son, and because of this David and Mefiboshet are forever bound in a kinship of love—much as God sees Abraham in the face of every Jew. At the same time, however, David is depicted as a just king. He is praised by the Bible as one who "performed righteousness and judgment"[42] to all his subjects, and as such "the Eternal was with him."[43] Love between human beings, it would seem, is meant to be hierarchical. One is called upon to show preference for one's friends and family, even as one is obligated to be equally just to all.

Now, the question may arise: If Mefiboshet has done nothing to earn David's love, and if indeed that love is granted without regard for anything that Mefiboshet has said or done, in what sense is David's love really addressed to him in particular? Is this not in fact the opposite of the sort of preferential love we discussed earlier? At first glance, it may indeed seem more reminiscent of Nygren's "unmotivated" love, which loves without regard for the specific qualities of the individual.

In truth, however, the two loves are polar opposites. For while in the Christian view, God's love is universally bestowed, possesses no desire or longing, and stems purely from God's essence that is itself love, David's regard for Mefiboshet, like God's love for the children of Abraham, is filled with longing. His love for Jonathan is so profound that he looks for him even in the latter's children. It is a possessive love, one which may not flow from Mefiboshet's own deeds but nonetheless reflects a crucial part of who Mefiboshet, and no one else, truly is: The son of Jonathan. Perhaps Mefiboshet has done nothing to deserve David's love. Yet he is and remains a child of a father, and that leaves an indelible mark on his own unique essence. It is this uniqueness that wins David's love, just as it is the

uniqueness of the Jew as a child of Abraham that becomes the basis of God's own love.

These differing attitudes can be found throughout centuries of Jewish and Christian theological reflection. In approaching Jewish and Christian understandings of love, it is useful to study the striking contrast between the writings of two nineteenth-century contemporaries: Soren Kierkegaard, the foremost Protestant thinker of his time; and Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, known as the Netziv, who was the dean of the most important talmudic academy of his age, the Yeshiva of Volozhin. Both drew on their respective traditions in writing their reflections on the biblical obligation to "love your neighbor."[44]

Drawing on Jesus' parable, Kierkegaard contrasts neighbor-love, which he defines as loving someone solely because that person is a human being, with what he calls "preferential love," the love of one's family, friend, or spouse. Neighbor-love, he argues, is distinguishable from preferential love in that it is predicated not on personal affection or selfish need, but solely on religious duty. "If it were not a duty to love," Kierkegaard writes, "then there would be no concept of neighbor at all. But only when one loves his neighbor, only then is the selfishness or preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved."[45] Neighbor-love, he continues, is certainly superior to preferential love, in that one's love is impartial; it is not linked to the object of that love. Instead, one's focus is only on the obligation to love the neighbor:

Let men debate as much as they wish about which object of love is the most perfect—there can never be any doubt that love to one's neighbor is the most perfect love. All other love, therefore, is imperfect in that there are two questions and thereby a certain duplicity: There is first a question about the object and then about the love, or there is a question about both the object and the love. But concerning love to one's neighbor there is only one question, that about love. And there is only one answer of the Eternal: This is genuine love, for love to one's neighbor is not related as a type to other types of love. Erotic love is determined by the object; friendship is determined by the object; only love to one's neighbor is determined by love.[46]

A different approach can be found in the Netziv's commentary on Leviticus. He begins by citing Maimonides, who in his Laws of Mourning interprets the obligation to "Love your neighbor as yourself" as commanding us to love others "as we ourselves hope to be loved by them."[47] Berlin stresses the wisdom of Maimonides' interpretation by noting that the obligation to love our neighbor "as ourselves" cannot mean that we must love our neighbor's life as *much* as we love our own; for no one is expected to sacrifice his own life to save that of a neighbor. The Netziv then takes this a step further: Because we must love as we hope to be loved, then the obligation of neighbor-love obligates us to love preferentially. For one naturally expects to be loved by one's son or brother more than by another; the verse in Leviticus obligates one to return that love in a similar manner. As he writes:

***As yourself:* It is impossible to interpret this simply, as it is known that one's life comes before that of his neighbor. Rather, Maimonides explained [the verse] in the Laws of Mourning to mean, *as you would desire to be loved by your friend.* And it is obvious that a person would not foolishly think that one's neighbor would love him as much as himself, rather to the extent that is worthy based on the degree of relation and propriety. Based on that standard you are obligated to love human beings.[48]**

Preferential love, according to this view, is not wholly distinct from neighbor-love, but is rather an essential part of it. Nor does the command to "love your neighbor" demand that we see all human beings equally; on the contrary. If God has a family that he loves above all, then the only way to love correctly is to love as God loves. Kierkegaard, however, insisted that the superior form of love is of an impartial form, and to love impartially is to disregard anything unique about the object of love. Interestingly, Kierkegaard, in noting the uniqueness of every member of humanity, describes these differences as "earthly" and "temporal." Neighbor-love, he asserts, demands that we look beyond these differences to the spiritual equality that lies within:

Christianity… allows all distinctions to stand, but it teaches the equality of the eternal. It teaches that everyone shall lift himself above earthly distinction…. Distinction is temporality's confusing element which marks every man, but neighbor is eternity's mark on every man. Take many sheets of paper and write something different on each one, then they do not resemble each other. But then take again every single sheet; do not let yourself be confused by the differentiating inscriptions; hold each one up to the light and you see the same watermark on them all. Thus is neighbor the common mark, but you see it only by help of the light of the eternal when it shines through distinction.[49]

Judaism, on the other hand, insists that distinction is not merely "earthly" or "temporal," but is itself the foundation of God's love for us, and therefore an essential part of our love for others. Judaism believes that to love someone as an individual in his or her totality is to focus squarely on that distinctiveness. At times one's love for another is founded upon an essential, though unearned, part of their identities, such as a shared kinship, just as God's love for Israel is based on its shared kinship with Abraham. But this does not alter the fundamentally hierarchical, preferential aspect of this love. It is this kind of love which, in the Jewish view, forms the model for all human relations.

V

Yet if God expresses a familial love toward Abraham's family, and this preferential love represents an ideal form of

love, then a further implication of the Jewish approach to love is that the institution of the family is especially sacred. In this regard one of the most important differences between Judaism and classical Christianity emerges. Stanley Hauerwas, the renowned American Christian theologian, once noted the following:

Nothing distinguishes Christians and Jews more dramatically than our understanding of the family. Put simply, Christians are not bound by the law to have children. We must acknowledge that we are children by appropriately honoring our parents, but to honor our parents does not mean that we must make them grandparents. The stark fact of the matter is that Jesus was neither married nor had children.… What Jesus started did not continue because he had children but because his witness attracted strangers. Christians are not obligated to have children so that the tradition might continue; rather we believe that God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit has made us a people who live through witness. In other words, the church grows through the conversion of strangers, who often turn out to be our biological children.[50]

The point is not, Hauerwas assures his readers, that "Christians are antifamily or antichild"; but that individual Christians are not necessarily called to marriage. In other words, Hauerwas concludes, "family identity is not at the core of our identity as Christians."[51] Indeed, the catechism of the Catholic Churchconfirms that while the family is the moral bedrock of society, nevertheless the choice to avoid marriage and family is a legitimate one. The cathechism notes, without criticism, that "some forgo marriage in order to care for their parents or brothers and sisters, to give themselves more completely to a profession, or to serve other honorable ends. They can contribute greatly to the good of the human family."[52]

For Jews, by contrast, the election of a family, and the godliness of preferential love, makes childbearing and child-raising a form of religious devotion. This, for several reasons. First, if true love of a human being necessitates "a genuine encounter with man in his individuality," then the raising of children schools one in the art of truly loving. A fascinating law in the Talmud mandates that in order to serve on the Sanhedrin—in order to be considered qualified to judge one's fellow man, a candidate must have children; for parenthood teaches one to love someone not merely as a member of a class but as a truly unique individual.[53] Second, as Hauerwas points out, if it is Abraham's seed that is elected, then Judaism's redemptive mission to the world depends upon the continuity of Jews. In Wyschogrod's words, by refusing to have children, "the Jew refuses to replenish the seed of Abraham and thus contributes to thwarting God's redemptive plan."[54]

Yet there is a third, perhaps more important reason why familial love is integral to Judaism. If the Jewish people are indeed *banim lamakom*,members of God's family, then the raising of children is essential to one's own relationship with God. In bestowing, or receiving, parental love, all Jews come to comprehend the covenantal love that God has for them as members of the Jewish nation. For the Jew, to raise children is to replicate God's passionate, parental love for every member of the assembly of Israel.

The distinction between the classical Jewish and Christian teachings on the family finds expression in myriad ways, but perhaps the most striking is in their respective attitudes towards the relationship of the clergy to the institution of family. Upon ordination, for example, the priest is ordered to renounce family life as an earthly distraction from the love of God, and "to observe chastity and to be bound forever in the ministrations of the altar, to serve who is to reign."[55] This renunciation is drawn from the writings of Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians:

He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Eternal, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife: And he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin think on the things of the lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit. But she that is married thinks on the things of this world, how she may please her husband. And this I speak for your profit, not to cast a snare upon you, but for that which is decent and which may give you power to attend upon the Eternal without impediment.[56]

This is not to say that Christianity is opposed to family life; on the contrary, Christian society has always provided one of the most important defenses of the traditional family as a bulwark of human society. At the same time, however, it is significant that on the highest level, the service of God is seen by classical Christianity as conflicting withthe creation and maintenance of a family. The priest and nun are chaste, for they must forsake the distractions of family life in order to serve God.

For Judaism the opposite is the case. Even those who have consecrated their lives to the service of God are obligated to marry and to bring children into the world. The archetypical priest, Aaron, is depicted as a family man, and indeed passes on the priesthood through his progeny. As opposed to the Christian approach, in Judaism the priest is to love preferentially and partake of the same forms of family as the rest of God's beloved. Perhaps the most important example appears in a striking passage in the book of Leviticus, which obligates the priests who serve in the Temple to attend to the burial of their close family members, even as their sanctity prevents them from attending any other funerals.[57] Maimonides takes this a step further. In his view, not only are the priests required to set aside the concerns of purity for the sake of their loved ones, but in so doing they set the example from which all the laws of mourning are derived. In other words, it is from this extreme case that all Jews can understand what it means truly to mourn our loved ones:

How weighty is the commandment to mourn! On its account, concern about the impurity from his deceased relatives is put aside, so that he might tend to them and mourn for them, as it is written, "except for his kin that is near unto him, for his mother... for her he shall defile herself." This is a positive commandment, and if the priest does not wish to defile himself, he is made to do so against his will.[58]

The holiness of the priests does not prevent them from loving preferentially; on the contrary. *The priests are archetypes of preferential love and family life.* By loving and serving all Israel, but loving their immediate kin in a unique way, the priests learn, and in turn teach Israel, that to love means that our love must be individuated. The example of the truest love, the love that defines the ideal way in which man should treat his fellow, is not in the universal, undifferentiated, unmotivated *agape*, but in the overwhelming longing and preferential concern that is the core of family life. It is the family that teaches us the meaning of love. And it is the institution of the Jewish family in which the divine love of Abraham's children, the chosen nation, is fully manifest.

VI

During the most difficult moments of their history, through centuries of exile, the Jewish people were sustained by an enduring faith. Yet the question of how they were sustained—what it was, exactly, that gave them the strength to preserve their identity in the face of unfathomable challenges—remains something of a mystery. Some have suggested that the secret lay in their system of laws, which provided a stable political and social framework for the preservation of their communities. There is truth in this, yet one suspects this answer is insufficient: Other peoples have failed to survive dispersion despite a set of practices deeply rooted in tradition. Others have suggested that what sustained the Jews was a belief in the Jewish historical mission—the idea that the Jews were placed on earth to communicate God's message to humanity. But again, one wonders whether an abstract mission is enough to give life to a persecuted and exiled people beyond a single generation, or whether it is more likely that most Jews would readily abandon such a mission in exchange for personal security and opportunity.

Rather, in studying the legendsand liturgical poetry composed over these terrible centuries, one discovers a theme that appears time and again in theological expressions of Jewish grief. It is the belief in a God who bestowed upon the Jewish people a special love, and who continues to love them still; a God who appears to his people as the *shechina begaluta:*A divine Father who accompanies his children in their exile, comforting and consoling them. The Jews who endured the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the pogroms expressed belief in a God who so loved the Jews that he made their joys his joys and their suffering his suffering. One midrash reads as follows:

The relationship between God and the Jewish people is like the relationship between twins. When the head of one aches, the other feels it, too. Therefore, we see that the Holy One said to Moses, 'I am with him in distress' (Psalms 91:15) and again, 'In all their afflictions, he [God], too, was afflicted. (Isaiah 63:9) Are you not aware that I am wracked with pain when Israel is wracked with pain? Take note of the place from where I am speaking to you—from the midst of a thorn bush. I am, as it were, a partner in their pain.'"[59]

It is worth noting that in composing passages such as these, Jews rejected one of the central philosophical tenets of Maimonides. In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides argued that any anthropomorphic description of the divine is merely language inserted for the weak-minded, and offers nothing of theological significance to the philosophically sophisticated. Biblical descriptions of God's emotions—of his love, his anger, his sadness—are merely "attributes of action." To speak of God as loving the Jews is not to ascribe the feeling of love to God; rather, the Bible merely means that God acts benevolently toward the Jewish people. It is therefore blasphemous, Maimonides declared, to compose prayers and religious reflections that speak of God in an anthropomorphic manner. While God may at times speak anthropomorphically in revelation, we ourselves are not allowed to speak anthropomorphically of God, whom we cannot, and therefore should not, attempt to comprehend.[60]

Maimonides' approach was rejected by those persecuted Jews who spoke not only of a God who bestowed loving actions upon them, but who *loved* them, and who was deeply pained by their suffering. God, in the Bible, tells the Jews that he loves them and that he is "with them in distress."[61] This could not be theologically insignificant. Some of the composers of these midrashim acknowledged that their sentiments were doctrinally unsettling, but insisted that the Bible allows for such descriptions of the divine:[62]

When the Holy One saw them [exiled from Jerusalem], immediately [we read]: "And on that day did the Eternal, the God of Hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation, and to baldness, and girding with sackcloth." *Had the verse not been written, one could not have stated it.* And they went weeping from this gate to that, like a man who deceased lies before him, and the Holy One wept, lamenting, Woe for a king who prospers in his youth and not in his old age.[63]

It is not unreasonable to suggest that this, indeed, was the key to Jewish survival: The belief that the individual Jew must maintain his Jewishness because he is the beloved of God. This belief found expression not simply in creed but also in Jewish practice. The dedication of generations of Jews to Jewish law was not out of a blind sense of duty, but out of a firm belief that these laws were the expression of the Creator's special love for the Jewish people, and their betrayal would be a betrayal of that love. It is this belief,

perhaps above all else, which sustained Jewish communities through the hardships of exile, persecution, and pogrom. And it may still.

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Notes

1. Exodus 19:6.
2. Seforno on Exodus 19:6.
3. Deuteronomy 4:35-38.
4. Deuteronomy 7:7-8.
5. Seforno on Deuteronomy 7:8.
6. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996), p. 64.
7. Jeremiah 31:8.
8. Isaiah 66:13.
9. Isaiah 49:15.
10. Mishna Avot 3:18.
11. John 3:16.
12. Matthew 28:19.
13. Romans 1:7, 10:12.
14. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), p. 201.
15. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, pp. 75-76.
16. Matthew 5:43-45, 48.
17. "While we were still sinners," Paul writes, "Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" Romans 5:8-10.
18. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 77.
19. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 75.
20. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*.
21. Genesis 18:17-19.
22. Rashi on Genesis 18:19.
23. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, p. 64.
24. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, p. 61.
25. Genesis 18:23-25.
26. I John 4:7-8.
27. www.peterkreeft.com/topics/love.htm
28. Luke 13:24.
29. Matthew 7:13-14.
30. Matthew 22:14.
31. Cardinal Avery Dulles, "The Population of Hell," *First Things* 133 (May 2003), pp. 36-41.
32. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Repentance 3:4; Sanhedrin 108a.
33. Jerusalem Megilla 3:2.
34. Cited in Dulles, "Population of Hell," pp. 36-41.
35. See Sanhedrin 107b, 111b.
36. I Corinthians 13:13.
37. Genesis 1:27.
38. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 92.
39. Luke 6:32-33.
40. I Samuel 20:41-42.
41. II Samuel 9:1-3, 5-7.
42. II Samuel 8:15.
43. I Samuel 18:12.
44. Leviticus 19:18.
45. Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 58.
46. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 77.
47. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Mourning 14:1.
48. *Ha'amek Davar*,Leviticus 19:18, s.v. *ve'ahavta.*
49. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 97.
50. Stanley Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics in Jewish Terms: A Response to David Novak," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*,ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Peter Ochs, David Novak, Michael Singer, David Sandmel (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000), p. 138.
51. Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics," p. 139.
52. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2231.
53. Sanhedrin 36b; see Rashi, s.v. *zaken*.
54. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*,p. 254.
55. See Catholic Encyclopedia, "Celibacy of the Clergy," at www.newadvent.org/cathen/03481a.htm
56. I Corinthians 7:32-35.
57. Leviticus 21:1-2.
58. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Mourning 2:6.
59. Shemot Rabba 2:5.
60. Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Dover, 1956), 1:26, pp. 34-35.
61. Psalms 91:15.
62. For an elaboration on this point, see Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," in *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Living* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2004), pp. 140-142.
63. Lamentations Rabbati, Petihta 24.

From Azure, Number 19, Winter 2005

God's First Love: The Theology of Michael Wyschogrod

By: Meir Y. Soloveichik

Paradox attends the influence of Michael Wyschogrod, perhaps the most original Jewish theologian of the past half century. An unapologetic defender of Israel's particularity and God's special love for the Jewish people, he has often found a warmer reception among Christian thinkers than among traditional Jewish ones. Twenty years ago, the appearance of his book *The Body of Faith* transformed the way many leading Christian theologians understand Judaism. Perhaps this is not surprising for, over his long career, this American thinker, born in Germany in 1928, has proved extraordinarily willing to draw on Christian theologians: Karl Barth, for instance, whom Wyschogrod deploys in his efforts to free Judaism from dependence on such extraneous philosophical influences as Aristotle and

Kant. For that matter, in his emphasis on the uniqueness of Jewish revelation, Wyschogrod has found surprising commonalities with Christians.

As an Orthodox Jew, Wyschogrod insists that his work rises and falls with the ability of traditional Jews to be moved by it: "Ultimately it is the Torah-obedient Jewish community that judges a work of Jewish thought," he wrote in his 1989 masterwork, *The Body of Faith*. At the same time, it is precisely the Orthodox community that has failed to appreciate his work perhaps because of his criticisms of Maimonides, one of the most beloved thinkers in Jewish history.

Maimonides, Wyschogrod insists, introduced extraneous influences into Judaism, partly in an attempt to reconcile Jewish religion with Aristotelian philosophy. Wyschogrod argues that Judaism concerns not a philosophical doctrine but rather God's unique and preferential love for the flesh-and-blood descendants of Abraham. The election of the Jewish people is the result of God's falling in love with Abraham and founding a family with him. And, out of passionate love for Abraham, God continues to dwell among the Jewish people. Maimonides, in Wyschogrod's account, deviated from the biblical view to accommodate Aristotle's philosophy.

Along the way, Maimonides also attempted to banish all anthropomorphism from Judaism. An entire tradition of Jewish rationalism has followed Maimonides in this and has applied it to the concept of Israel's election. Thus many German Jewish thinkers, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, see Israel's election as symbolic of God's equal love for all of humanity" for surely a good God would not violate Kant's categorical imperative. The result is the loss of any reason for the election of Israel, a foundational idea of Judaism.

The biblical insistence on God's indwelling in the living Jewish people, Wyschogrod observes, requires us to believe that God is present in the physical people of Israel. To Jewish critics, Wyschogrod's emphasis on divine love and on the indwelling of the divine sounds more Christian than Jewish. Wyschogrod, however, insists on demanding that Jews refresh their religion from its original sources, arguing that a general and unspecific love is no love at all and thus that God's particular love for Israel is what makes possible his love for all humanity.

Despite, or perhaps precisely because, he is so rooted in Jewish Orthodoxy and so persuaded of God's special love for Israel, Wyschogrod has not hesitated to engage Christians. One of his great contributions has been to transform the way Christian theologians understand Judaism. The Methodist theologian Kendall Soulen (editor of an anthology of Wyschogrod's essays) first read him when he was in graduate school studying Christian theology. He felt "an almost physical sense of discovery, as if I had bumped into a hitherto unforeseen rock. What I had just read was undoubtedly the most unapologetic statement of Jewish faith I had ever encountered."

Some Jews may bristle at Wyschogrod's belief that Christian thinkers such as Karl Barth can help correct errors that have crept into Jewish theology over the centuries. Yet at the same time, in his encounter with Christian thinkers, Wyschogrod has remained unabashed in his insistence on the exclusivity of Israel's election. One day in 1966, Wyschogrod visited Karl Barth in Basel and informed the great Christian thinker that he had begun to refer to himself as a "Jewish Barthian." Barth was much amused by the appellation, and a discussion ensued about the Jewish people versus the Church in the eyes of God: **At one point he said, "You Jews have the promise but not the fulfillment; we Christians have both promise and fulfillment." Influenced by the banking atmosphere of Basel, I replied: "With human promise, one can have the promise but not the fulfillment. But a promise of God is like money in the bank. If we have his promise, we have his fulfillment, and if we do not have the fulfillment we do not have the promise." There was a period of silence and then he said, "You know, I never thought of it that way." I will never forget that meeting.**

When *The Body of Faith* appeared in 1989, it seemed profoundly unlike any work of Jewish thought published before, including that of Wyschogrod's teacher, the great Talmudist and philosopher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. Rabbi Soloveitchik's best-known books are written from the perspective of the religious individual. *The Lonely Man of Faith*, for instance, tries to show how a religious man can reconcile secular endeavors with the existential experience that embodies the essence of faith. Similarly, Rabbi Soloveitchik's classic, *Halakhic Man*, stresses how Jewish law is not merely a series of obligations but indelibly impacts the way the religious Jew experiences the world.

In Wyschogrod's work, on the other hand, Jewish thought begins not with analysis of who the man of faith is but with who God is not with how a member of the Jewish people approaches God but how God approaches the Jewish people. The Bible's answer, he believes, is obvious: "It is the proclamation of biblical faith that God chose this people and loves it as no other, unto the end of time." The clarity with which he focuses on the central biblical premise of election, God's love for Israel, is what makes his work both so Orthodox as well as so original. For centuries Jewish thought has attempted to adapt itself to foreign philosophical categories, and Wyschogrod's bold return to biblical sources provides a platform upon which to critique even such a revered figure as Maimonides.

Jewish theology must begin with the exclusive election of Israel, Wyschogrod argues, for it is the central principle of the Hebrew Bible. The chosenness of Israel is often described by Jews as consisting in the giving of the law. While this is doubtless an essential aspect of Israel's election, it is a narrow account of it. Yet, even in this narrow form, we are forced to a more basic question: Why did God choose Israel, of all the nations in the world, to receive the Torah?

Deuteronomy answers explicitly that he did so out of preferential love for Israel's ancestors: "Unto thee it was showed, that thou mightest know that the Lord he is God; there is none else beside him. Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: And upon earth he showed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt; to drive out nations from before thee greater and mightier than thou art, to bring thee in, to give thee their land for an inheritance, as it is this day."

Deuteronomy further declares that God's love was extended to Abraham's descendants. You were not chosen, Moses informs the Israelites, "because you were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers." As Wyschogrod puts it: "If God continues to love the people of Israel, and it is the faith of Israel that he does, it is because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved." Maimonides' attempt to expunge anthropomorphism thus cannot be reconciled with this biblical idea of a God who showed an impassioned love for one particular human being and his descendants. For Wyschogrod, the legacy of Maimonidean rationalism is to enfeeble the biblical concept of election.

Many modern Jews are uncomfortable with this concept, assuming that a truly good God would treat all human beings equally and love all of them in the same way. In fact, many modern Jewish theologians and philosophers end up embracing, in the name of pluralism, an odd sort of religious relativism. The notion that Israel experiences a special love from God, vouchsafed by sacred texts more valid than any others, may be true from Jews' perspective but false from another. Israel, in other words, can experience what it fancies to be a unique form of divine love while other faith communities can, from their own perspective, be showered with an equal abundance of affection.

Other modern writers on Israel's election tend to avoid the subject of love entirely. In 1966, for instance, *Commentary* magazine conducted a symposium among prominent Jewish American academics called "The State of Jewish Belief." One of the questions put to the respondents focused on the doctrine of Israel's election: "In what sense do you believe that the Jews are the chosen people of God?" While the Orthodox participants in the symposium defended Israel's election and wrote of Israel's obligation to observe the Torah and communicate monotheism to the world, they did not discuss the reason Israel alone was given the Torah; in fact, not one of them stressed the unique love that God maintains for the Jewish people.

So how is one to defend a perfect God preferentially loving a particular people? Over the years, many Christian theologians have expressed abhorrence at the idea of God's preferential love. The twentieth-century Swedish theologian Anders Nygren, for example, contrasts the different depictions of divine love found in Jewish and Christian Scripture: "In Judaism love is exclusive and particularistic," while Christian love "overleaps all such limits; it is universal and all-embracing." God's love stands in stark contradistinction to human love, absolutely "unmotivated." It expects nothing back, no return on the emotional investment.

Wyschogrod takes issue with just this sort of understanding. The Hebrew Bible does not depict such a radical distinction between divine and human love. Humanity was created in the image of God; our love is a reflection of his. God can desire to enter into a relationship with us; he can be drawn to some aspect of our identity. In the Hebrew Bible, writes Wyschogrod, God's love is "a love very much aware of a human response. God has thereby made himself vulnerable: He asks for man's response and is hurt when it is not forthcoming." Further, because "God's love is directed toward who we are . . . there are those whom God loves especially, with whom he has fallen in love."

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Bible's depiction of God's passionate, preferential love for Abraham, and it is here that Wyschogrod defends divine love for Israel. Indeed, he does more than defend the doctrine: He insists, strikingly, that everyone, Jew and Gentile, has a stake in God's preferentially loving some more than others. If God loves human beings and seeks to relate to them because he is drawn to something unique about them, then his love must be exclusive and cannot be universal. He loves individuals because he has found something unique about them worth loving, which he may not find in another individual. As Wyschogrod writes, "Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or what not."

In contrast, divine love is concrete, a genuine encounter with man in his individuality, and must therefore be exclusive. A love directed at all human beings without any grounding in their unique identities is a love "directed at universals and abstractions rather than real persons." A daughter whose father loves her with only unmotivated love and not for anything unique, shared kinship, unique virtues and traits, could correctly claim that she has not truly been loved. For Wyschogrod, Hebrew Scripture speaks of preferential love and conveys thereby the extraordinary notion that God loves men *because of* who we are, not *despite* who we are.

Of course, Wyschogrod is not insensitive to the fact that this sounds hurtful to non-Israelites. If God is a father,

motivated by genuine desire to be with us, then the fact that his love is a love founded in our uniqueness means that it is therefore dispensed unequally. Ultimately, however, according to Wyschogrod, it is precisely God's preferential love for Israel that guarantees the possibility that each one of us can have a genuine relationship with God. Chosenness expresses to everyone, Jew and Gentile, "that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness":

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. And when man contemplates this mystery, that the Eternal One, the creator of heaven and earth, chose to become the father of his creatures instead of remaining self-sufficient unto himself, as is the Absolute of the philosophers, there wells up in man that praise that has become so rare yet remains so natural.

This, then, is our choice: to be loved by God for whom we uniquely are and thus risk being loved less than others, or to be loved by God equally but not uniquely and therefore not truly. It is a choice between a genuine relationship and bland benevolence.

In fact, this account of Israel's exclusive election has not offended many orthodox Christians but reassured them, for just the reasons Wyschogrod presents: God's special love for his first love, Israel, shows that he can love them in their own uniqueness and particularity as well.

Maimonides, by contrast, rejects the notion of God's passionate love for humans as an anthropomorphism. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, he insists that, when the Bible describes God's love, "of course God is not experiencing the feeling of affection or tenderness." These are mere references to what he describes as "attributes of action." The Bible's message that God loves the Jewish people is merely a statement that he acts in a loving manner toward them.

Wyschogrod starkly states that it is with Maimonides that much of Jewish thinking about God went awry: "Maimonides' demythologization of the concept of God is unbiblical and ultimately dangerous to Jewish faith. Jewish faith cannot survive if a personal relation between the Jew and God is not possible. But no personal relation is possible with an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover." The Bible speaks of God's love and anger, and the religious reader is obligated to take these statements, to some extent, literally. Refusing to take literally the Bible's accounts of an emotionally engaged Almighty, for Wyschogrod, amounts to subjugating the text of the Bible to an external agenda.

It is this insistence, that we must accept the truths presented to us in Scripture without reinterpretation, that led Wyschogrod to refer to himself as a Jewish Barthian. In *The Body of Faith*, he notes his admiration for how Karl Barth "plunges his reader into the world of faith without defensive introductions." Reading Barth is like "shock therapy," because "it introduces the reader or the listener to a frame of reference that attempts only to be true to itself and its sources and not to external demands that can be satisfied only by fitting the Church's message into their mold, a mold foreign to it and therefore necessarily distorting."

Maimonides' attempt to expunge anthropomorphism from Judaism has led later Jewish thinkers to assume that ascription of affection to God is a primarily Christian idea. Consider the modern Orthodox Jewish philosopher Eliezer Berkovits. While not especially influential in his lifetime, his writings have gained currency in the Modern Orthodox community, thanks to their recent republication. In an essay attacking Abraham Joshua Heschel, who spoke of the Bible's "God of pathos," Berkovits dismisses the notion of a passionately loving God as fundamentally Christian. Judaism "abhors any form of humanization" of divine nature, he writes. "The theological climate is determined by a long tradition of affirmation of divine impassibility in face of numerous biblical texts to the contrary . . . . Dr. Heschel's theology of pathos and religion of sympathy seem to be offspring of theologically oriented fancy."

From a Wyschogrodian perspective, however, Berkovits' desire to stress the uniqueness of Judaism forces him to excise an essential aspect of Jewish faith. That God loves Israel is a fundamental tenet not only of the Bible but of the rabbinic writings of late antiquity in the Midrash. And through the centuries, the Jewish people were sustained not by a belief in Maimonides' God of the philosophers but by what the Midrash calls the "Divine Presence in Exile," the God who dwells among his persecuted people, making their travails his travails and their suffering his suffering.

Because the Jewish community was so devastated by the Holocaust, there is a tremendous temptation to give it a prominent role in one's theology. For traditional theologians, especially the Orthodox, there are dangers in this. Giving the Holocaust pronounced theological prominence can lead Jewish thinkers to dilute or relativize Judaism's theological foundation. More, it allows the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism in the past to influence unduly theological attitudes toward Christians today.

Wyschogrod has criticized Jewish theologians who place the Holocaust at the center of theology. Emil Fackenheim, for instance, is famous for insisting that after the Holocaust Judaism must add what he calls a "614th commandment" to the 613 commandments of the Torah: an obligation to provide for the continuity of Judaism after the Holocaust. Indeed, Fackenheim argues that the Holocaust unites both religious Jews and secular Jews, for even if Jews no longer believe the Bible, they are obligated not to allow Hitler to succeed in his attempt to obliterate Judaism.

In reply, Wyschogrod warns against making Hitler and the Holocaust an argument for Judaism. There is, he observes, only one true reason to remain Jewish: God's election of Abraham and his selection of his descendants to serve as

a light to the nations. Fackenheim's argument amounts to what he terms "negative natural theology""an argument from evil that, in Wyschogrod's words, is "as serviceable to the secularist as it is to the believer." For Wyschogrod, Hitler rather than Abraham, and Auschwitz rather than Sinai, becomes the foundation for Fackenheim's Judaism. "One is almost driven to the conclusion," writes Wyschogrod, that in the absence of the Holocaust, for the secularist, "no justification for the further survival of Judaism could have been found. With the Holocaust, amazing as it may appear, Judaism has gotten a new lease on life." But if the Holocaust becomes "the dominant voice that Israel hears, it could not but be a demonic voice it would be hearing. There is no salvation to be extracted from the Holocaust, no faltering Judaism can be revived by it, no new reason for the continuation of the Jewish people can be found in it. If there is hope after the Holocaust, it is because, to those who believe, the voices of the Prophets speak more loudly than did Hitler, and because the divine promise sweeps over the crematoria and silences the voice of Auschwitz."

A faith founded on God's eternal love of Israel emphasizes instead our experience of God's salvation and redemption, which we once experienced and, Judaism declares, we will experience again. Israel's faith, Wyschogrod writes, "has always centered around the saving acts of God: the election, the exodus, the Temple, and the Messiah." Acts of destruction were remembered in minor fast days "while those of redemption became the joyous proclamations of the Passover and Tabernacles . . . . The God of Israel is a redeeming God; this is the only message we are authorized to proclaim, however much it may not seem so to the eyes of nonbelief."

Other Jewish theologians, reflecting on the Holocaust, have drawn radical theological conclusions not about the faith of the Jews but about Christians. Berkovits, for example, argues in *Faith after the Holocaust* that the Holocaust taught us "a straight line leads from the first act of [Christian] oppression against the Jews and Judaism in the fourth century to the Holocaust in the twentieth." After the Holocaust, he therefore believes, any notion of a special bond between Jews and Christians is impossible: Judaism's main message to Christianity is that Christians must "keep your hands off us and our children!" Indeed, "It is not interreligious understanding that mankind needs but interhuman understanding, an understanding based on our common humanity and wholly independent of any need for common religious beliefs and theological principles . . . . These goals of freedom, peace, and social justice have universal validity. It would be extremely foolish to seek their realization by means of a narrowly Jewish-Christian front." As Stanley Hauerwas notes, Berkovits fails to understand that "societies putatively founded on values of 'universal validity' cannot help but interpret the particularistic commitments of the Jewish people as morally retrogressive." In contrast, many Christians have come to appreciate, and even celebrate, God's special relationship with the Jewish people. Wyschogrod, in his description of God's election of Israel, notes that anti-Semitism is, at its core, a resistance to, and jealousy of, this election. "Instead of accepting Israel's election with humility," he writes, the nations of the world all too often "rail against it, mocking the God of the Jews, gleefully pointing out the shortcomings of the people he chose," for "Israel's presence is a constant reminder to them that they were not chosen but that this people was." At the same time, as Kendall Soulen notes in his excellent introduction to Wyschogrod's thought, for Wyschogrod, it is through God's love of Israel that we come to know his love for all the world, or, in Soulen's words, "God also desires to be Redeemer of the world as the One whose first love is the people of Israel." Thus Soulen cites Wyschogrod: "Because [God] said: 'I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; in you shall all the families of earth be blessed' (Gen. 12:3), he has tied his saving and redemptive concern for the welfare of all humankind to his love for the people of Israel."

What this means, for Christians such as Soulen, is that Wyschogrod has transformed even the issue that most divides Christians from Jews, the incarnation of Jesus, into a challenge for Christians to recognize the holiness of Israel. As Wyschogrod wrote in the essay "Incarnation and God's Indwelling in Israel": "If the Jewishness of Jesus is not contingent, then it is for Christians the climax of the process that began with the election of Abraham." In other words, while the incarnation remains a central disagreement between Jews and Christians (see my January 2009 article in First Things, "No Friend in Jesus"), fealty to God's word in Hebrew Scripture requires a recognition by Christians of God's love for, and presence in, the Jewish people. Recognition of this election requires Christians, in Wyschogrod's felicitous phrase, to be even "more Barthian than Barth."

Today, decades after Berkovits insisted that Jews join the rest of the world to support values such as "social justice" that have nontheological, "universal validity," secular supporters of social justice often seem remarkably concerned about justice for all individuals except for Jews. Meanwhile, in America, support for Israel and the well-being of the Jewish people has been found first and foremost among traditional Christians who, contrary to critics, are motivated mainly not by apocalyptic expectation but rather by a rejection of moral relativism and a belief that the Bible promises to bless those who stand by the Children of Abraham. We live in a world where, for the first time in many centuries, there are Christians who believe that participating in God's love for the Jewish people is demanded by the divine in Hebrew Scripture. To conclude from the Holocaust that we ought to dismiss this outpouring of love and support is not only unwise but, for the reader of Wyschogrod, a profound theological error. A world where Jews are threatened physically by fundamentalist Islam and morally by secularism, a world where Jews and

Christians ought to go their separate ways, is one where Israel, both the people and the country, will be very much alone. And, in an age when Jewish theology must reject relativism on the one hand and instinctive anti-Christianity on the other, it is, I believe, Michael Wyschogrod who has shown us the way.

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Review Essay: The Promise and Peril of Jewish Barthianism: The Theology of Michael Wyschogrod

By: Shai Held

Michael Wyschogrod, Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish–Christian Relations, ed. with an introduction by R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

Michael Wyschogrod is Maimonides' worst nightmare. For the medieval philosopher and legist, the unity and incorporeality of God, established incontrovertibly by philosophy, are foundations of the Jewish faith. Not surprisingly, then, *The Guide of the Perplexed* opens with an extended attempt to undermine the initial impression created by scripture—that God has a physical reality and is given to a range of intense and dramatic emotions. To believe this about God—in other words, to read the Bible literally—is, for Maimonides, to be guilty not merely of wrongheadedness but also of out-and-out idolatry. Idolatry can be avoided only by reading scripture through the lens of philosophical metaphysics.

Wyschogrod will have none of this. To suggest that the God of Israel is somehow equivalent to the God of metaphysical speculation is to commit a crime against scripture and authentic Jewish thinking. The God of Israel is a "specific person . . . [who] . . . does not hesitate to assume a proper name" (p. 40), and the Bible itself "does not hesitate to speak of him in personal and anthropomorphic terms" (p. 42).

The Bible shares none of Maimonides' discomfort with divine corporeality and mutability; only "improperly understood" can the God of Abraham be turned into some kind of "metaphysical Absolute" (p. 30). Maimonides is thus a kind of tragic figure for Wyschogrod, a Jewish thinker who "stakes his Judaism" on a set of philosophical concerns entirely alien to the heart of Jewish theology. All of Maimonides' tortured theologizing leaves us, according to Wyschogrod, with little more than "an overly rarefied God who is so beyond all conception that he cannot be distinguished from no god at all" (p. 177).

The divide between the two theological projects could not be more stark. For Maimonides, to speak of God in biblical terms unrefined by philosophical reflection is to flirt with idolatry; for Wyschogrod, to dilute biblical language in the alien waters of metaphysical speculation is to come perilously close to atheism. Wyschogrod is this generation's most eloquent and emphatic critic of Maimonides; he is at his most compelling in insisting upon the irreducible tension between scriptural, covenantal monotheism, on the one hand, and abstract, philosophical monotheism, on the other. No amount of creative (i.e., destructive) Maimonidean exegesis, Wyschogrod insists, will ever be able to bridge the unbridgeable divide between philosophy's God and revelation's. Thus, for example, Wyschogrod demonstrates quite convincingly that the Shema is not a philosophical formulation of God's metaphysical oneness but, rather, an impassioned declaration of covenantal fidelity—"Adonai Echad" means not that "God is one" in His inner nature but that "God alone" is to be worshiped. If philosophical monotheism is concerned with abstract truths about a transcendent deity, its scriptural counterpart is concerned with the concrete interactions of a personal God and His people.

Wyschogrod's theology is fundamentally a theology of election. The God of Israel has "fallen in love" with Abraham and elected his seed as his own nation, seared his covenant into their flesh, and given them an array of commandments that they must obey. God loves and seeks to redeem all of humanity, but Israel is God's favorite child, and God "loves it as no other, unto the end of time" (p. 28). The nations are understandably jealous of Israel's status, but they must learn to accept it and to discover that "non-election does not equal rejection" (p. 172); Israel, in turn, must learn that election is intended as the basis not for vain pride but for universal responsibility, since, as God tells Abraham in their very first encounter, all the nations of the earth must receive blessing through him (Gen 12:3). Israel can disobey God's word but only with "the most disastrous consequences" (p. 26), both for itself and for the larger world. Israel's God is a God of love but also a God of wrath, and though love will ultimately win out over wrath, in this world Israel can be—and indeed has been—punished with dramatic severity for its iniquities.

Wyschogrod readily admits that from the perspective of "human religious consciousness" there is much here that is very troubling. Why is divine election a function of birth rather than of "religious sensibility"? Why, in other words, does God choose a family rather than a church? Isn't a robust theology of election blatantly chauvinistic and "inexcusably arrogant" (p. 26)? Wyschogrod responds that indeed it would be, "were it the self-election of a people. As it is, it is a sign of God's absolute sovereignty which is not bound by human conceptions" (p. 26). In other words, from a *human* perspective, Israel's election is quite disturbing. But what we have in scripture, according to Wyschogrod, is not a human but a *divine* perspective. The task of the

Jewish theologian is neither to dilute the biblical proclamation nor to subject it to human moral standards; the Jewish theologian must unapologetically affirm the absolute, unconditioned freedom of God and the choices God makes. Israel (and, as we shall see, the entire world) must accept God's decision in love and obedience.

To the theologically educated reader, the echoes of Karl Barth should not be difficult to hear. For the giant of twentieth-century Protestant theology, a true encounter with the Bible reveals truths both strange and unexpected. The truths of revelation are not available elsewhere and certainly not through purely human philosophical reflection: "We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God's sovereignty, God's glory, God's incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God! . . . Not human standpoints but the standpoints of God! . . . It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men."1

Barth serves as a kind of mentor-hero for Wyschogrod: the former's consistent emphasis on God's freedom and sovereignty, his unabashed fidelity to scripture and to divine revelation, and his refusal to be cowed or rendered "helpless before the mighty technology of 'scientific' biblical scholarship" are all models the latter seeks to emulate. Wyschogrod's faith, like Barth's "is not grounded in some alleged eternal verities of reason or on some noble and profound religious sensibility that is shared by all men or by a spiritual elite, but on a movement of God toward man as witnessed in scripture" (pp. 214–215). At core, Wyschogrod tells us, Barthian theology shares a common foundation with Jewish theology—an unwavering commitment to "obedient listening to the Word of God" (p. 216). Wyschogrod's goal, then, is to articulate a Jewish Barthianism, a Jewish theology unremittingly committed to the "data" revealed by scripture.

But there is ultimately something incongruous about aspiring, as Wyschogrod does, to be both an impassioned Barthian and an Orthodox Jew (let alone an Orthodox Jewish thinker). With his relentless focus on scripture and its authority, Barth is perhaps *the* quintessentially Protestant theologian. But contra Wyschogrod, Jewish theology has never been based on a direct encounter with scripture but, rather, on an encounter with scripture as read and interpreted by the Jewish tradition; *sola scriptura* is, Jewishly speaking, an utterly alien idea. A theology that takes the oral Torah seriously is, in some critical sense, necessarily more Catholic than Protestant—in other words, it takes tradition at least as seriously as it takes scripture. Put differently (and perhaps more traditionally), a Jewish "theology of the Word of God" must emphasize that the Word of God includes both the Written and the Oral Torah and that the former is consistently read in light of the latter. At some level, Wyschogrod is aware of this, and he periodically gestures toward the Oral Torah or emphasizes its continuities with scripture. But his theology is, almost exclusively, a theology of scripture; it is scripture, and not its rabbinic commentators, that ultimately interests him. This is, to put it simply, Jewishly unorthodox—and, quite obviously, Jewishly un-Orthodox.

Wyschogrod's readings of scripture are often striking in their daring and originality, but his work as a whole suffers from a critical lack of methodological reflection. Thus, despite his commitment to biblical theology, Wyschogrod pays no attention at all to the plurality of texts and voices within scripture and offers no guidance as to how a contemporary theologian might choose or prioritize among them. Thus, for example, Wyschogrod eloquently criticizes right-wing religious Zionism, insisting that "a high degree of nonviolence" is ultimately more important than exercising the Jewish right to live anywhere in biblical Israel: "Nonviolence rather than residence in Hebron," he tells us, "is the deepest layer of messianism" (p. 106). One can share many of Wyschogrod's moral and theological commitments (as I do) and yet still be struck by the lack of hermeneutical thinking here: On what basis does Wyschogrod prioritize peaceful prophetic visions over the genocidal impulses of Deuteronomy? By what criteria does he establish that nonviolence represents a "deeper layer" of Jewish messianism than some other, like the restoration of biblical lands to Jewish sovereignty? Of course, one could argue this point either from the weight of Rabbinic tradition—by the time the Rabbis are done with the book of Deuteronomy, parts of it are simply unrecognizable—or from what we might call extrascriptural moral intuitions, but Wyschogrod has seemingly closed himself off to either avenue. He is, after all, fundamentally a scriptural theologian (in other words, a Protestant rather than a Catholic Jew) who wants to de-emphasize the ways the Rabbis read scripture creatively and even rebelliously, and he expresses repeatedly his concern that secular moral thinking runs the risk of compromising the absolute sovereignty of God and his commandments. But despite his protestations to the contrary, I suspect that Wyschogrod's reading of the Jewish tradition is influenced both by Rabbinic tradition and by a basic commitment to moral universalism. Wyschogrod is, in some sense, a better theologian than his methodology (or lack thereof) would dictate. Like any responsible and creative Jewish thinker, he chooses to prioritize some biblical texts over others, centering some values and ideas while marginalizing others. Although he claims otherwise, his theology is no mere "obedient listening to scripture"—and it is the better for it.2

Theologians traditionally expend vast quantities of time and effort in exploring the nature of God language—but not Wyschogrod. As a self-proclaimed Jewish Barthian, Wyschogrod feels no need to pass his theological

categories through any sort of philosophical crucible or filter. If the Bible tells us that God is a personal being who cares for all humanity but has "fallen in love" with Abraham and eternally elected his seed, then Wyschogrod will simply affirm these claims without either hesitation or elucidation. If scripture attributes emotion to God, then God is an emotional being; if it tells us that the human being is created in the image of God, then indeed, God's being must have some "physical aspect." More than almost any other contemporary Jewish thinker (David Blumenthal is a possible exception), Wyschogrod is both courageous and relentless in his refusal of what Heschel wonderfully called the "anesthetization" of God. But I wonder whether his uncompromising dichotomization between philosophy and revelation leads him, at times, to unnecessary extremes: Are there no alternatives between Wyschogrod's extreme personalism (revelation) and what he regards as the Maimonidean abyss (philosophy)? Does sustained reflection on whom and what we mean when we say "God" necessarily compromise our commitment to affirming the Word of God? Wyschogrod seems to fear that any sustained reflection on the nature and meaning of God language would represent an unacceptable compromise of his scriptural commitments, when in fact such reflection might well serve to deepen and sophisticate his theological thinking.

A rarity among Orthodox Jewish thinkers, Wyschogrod has spent a great deal of his career in theological dialogue with Christians and Christianity.3 Wyschogrod is aware, of course, that many in the Orthodox world consider dialogue with Christianity misguided at best and dangerous at worst: "There is perhaps no more efficient method of committing Orthodox Jewish suicide," he writes, "than admitting that any part of my interpretation of Judaism is the result of contact with Christianity" (p. 205). But Wyschogrod is undeterred by this cultural threat. Jews who take seriously God's promise that all of humanity will be blessed through Abraham cannot possibly be "ultimately isolationist"; they must "maintain a vital interest in the spiritual life of the nations with whom [they are], in a sense, jointly embarked on the path to redemption." But if the Jewish theologian must therefore take an active interest in the religious life of all humanity, she or he must take particular interest in Christianity, which "has mediated the vocabulary of the God of Israel to all parts of the earth." A Jewish theologian cannot help but perceive that "something wonderful is at work" in the spread of Christianity, "something that must in some way be connected with the love of the God of Israel for all his children, Isaac as well as Ishmael, Jacob as well as Esau" (pp. 212–213).4 It will not do simply to dismiss Christian ideas as idolatrous, since Jews are expected to teach the world the Noachide Laws, which include a prohibition on idolatry: "If I, as a Jew, believe that the Trinity and the Incarnation are false doctrines that either border on or constitute idolatry, then it is my duty as a Jew to persuade my Christian friends to abandon these teachings" (p. 158). Moreover, an engagement with the extraordinarily rich tradition of Christian theological reflection can help to deepen Judaism's own theological thinking—provided, Wyschogrod hastens to add, that we are not thereby led to exchange the "scriptural" for the "philosophic."

Wyschogrod forcefully dismisses the claim that Jewish theology must reject a priori Christian notions of divine incarnation, "as if the Jewish philosopher can somehow determine ahead of time just what God can or cannot do, what is or is not possible for Him, what His dignity does or does not allow." If Judaism denies the incarnation, it is not because there is something intrinsically idolatrous about it but, rather, because Israel "does not hear this story, because the Word of God as it hears it does not tell it and because Jewish faith does not testify to it" (p. 215). But Wyschogrod attempts to narrow the gap between Jewish and Christian theology even further. Scripture reports that God dwells both in a particular place—the Temple and the Tabernacle—and, as a result of God's intense love, amid a particular people—the children of Abraham. Of course, Wyschogrod recognizes that there is a crucial distinction between God dwelling in Israel's flesh and God actually becoming flesh," but nevertheless, he insists, "My claim is that the Christian teaching represents an intensification of the teaching of the in-dwelling of God in Israel by concentrating that in-dwelling in one Jew rather than leaving it diffused in the people of Israel as a whole" (p. 187). Conversely, Wyschogrod writes that he "detect[s] a certain diluted incarnation" in the Jewish idea of God dwelling in the Temple and the people (p. 177). Wyschogrod is engaged in a delicate theological dance here, seeking to "narrow" the gap between Jewish theology and Christian without "eliminating" it.5 If the Christian idea of divine incarnation is ultimately a theological "mistake" (but note well, a mere "mistake" is a far cry from the sin of idolatry), it is one from which Jewish theology can learn much about its own "incarnational elements." I would quibble with Wyschogrod's less-than-careful use of language—I am not sure how much we gain by referring to God's immanence as "diluted incarnation," and the move from the former to the latter strikes me as more than a mere "intensification"—but the general thrust of his argument is undoubtedly correct: educated Jews should move beyond facile and self-serving dismissals of Christian theology and should be open to the ways in which exposure to Christianity can lead them to rediscover crucial elements of the Jewish tradition. To allow God's love and immanence to be the sole property of Christian theology, for example, is to perpetuate a crime against the very heart of Jewish theology and practice.

But if Judaism must be more generous in its understanding of Christianity, Christianity in turn must rethink some of its most cherished and deeply held assumptions. First and

foremost, Christian theology must take seriously Paul's assertion that "the gracious gifts of God and his calling are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29) and realize that "God's election of Israel is not just an historical curiosity but a contemporary reality." Christianity, in other words, must jettison the idea that the election of Israel has been superseded, "leaving Israel out in the cold" (p. 208). Gentile jealousy over the election of Israel is understandable, but it must not be allowed to obscure the fact that even after the coming of Jesus, God's covenant with the Jewish people endures.

Similarly, Christian theology must reexamine its relationship to Jewish Law. Christianity has often derided Jewish Law as a "potent poison" that bestows guilt, and therefore death, on those who seek to adhere to it. Turning away from the Law and the damage it inflicts, "Christians place their trust in Jesus, and are saved because they know that faith saves and law condemns." But fortunately, another, very different approach to the Law can also be found in the New Testament. Wyschogrod goes to great lengths to develop a revisionist reading of Paul, according to which the latter affirms the continuing vitality and validity of Jewish Law for Jews. Acts 15 describes a dispute brought before the Jerusalem church over whether gentile Christians need to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul argues that circumcision is unnecessary; his opponents disagree. After lengthy debate, Paul's position is vindicated, and the church teaches that the legal burden placed upon gentile Christians should be limited to the Noachide Laws. Wyschogrod places a great deal of stock in his Talmudic reading of this story: From the fact that the early church was divided over whether gentile Christians were obligated by the Law, we can deduce that it was clear to everyone involved that Jewish Christians remained so obligated: "The possibility of the Torah not remaining binding for Jews never occurred to anyone in Jerusalem" (p. 194). Paul's negative comments about the Law must now be read in a new light: His goal was "to dissuade gentile Jesus-believers from placing themselves under the obligations of the Torah. Were he writing to Jews, his evaluation of Torah observance would have been different" (p. 163). Paul was thus, in a sense, continuing the Rabbinic tradition of discouraging potential converts to Judaism; for Paul, the Christ event rendered such conversion superfluous.

According to Wyschogrod's Paul, then, the Christ event achieved different ends for Jewish and gentile Christians: The latter are brought into the house of Israel as "associate members" (p. 191) or "adopted sons and daughters" who are welcomed without needing to undergo circumcision, while the former "are freed from the danger of punishment if they disobey the Torah because God is all mercy now" (p. 197). Christ's coming did "narrow" in very dramatic ways the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, but it did not "erase" it (pp. 189–190). Thus, since God's covenant with Israel has not been superceded, Christians must recognize that the "disappearance of the Jewish people from the world cannot be an acceptable development." But much more radically, they must encourage Jews who convert to Christianity to resist intermarriage (presumably, Wyschogrod wishes them to marry other Jewish Christians) and thus "to maintain their identity as the seed of Abraham" (p. 197). Further, and still more radically, since "neither Jesus nor Paul taught that any portion of the Law of Moses had become outmoded for Jews" (p. 209), Jewish Christians "must also remain loyal to the Torah and its commandments, with their faith in Jesus Christ as the only characteristic differentiating them from other Jews" (p. 198). Wyschogrod goes so far as to write a letter to Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris, encouraging him, a born Jew who has insisted that "in becoming Christian I did not intend to cease being a Jew" (p. 204), to return to the observance of Jewish Law. Lustiger's Christian faith, Wyschogrod suggests, requires no less of him. Of course, his best intentions notwithstanding, Wyschogrod leaves himself open to the charge that he has grossly understated what it means for a Jew to convert to Christianity; there is something almost bizarre about describing faith in Christ as "the only characteristic" separating one from mainstream Judaism—this "only" contains a great deal. Apostasy is not merely *a* sin in Judaism like some other (some of us violate the Sabbath, others worship Christ), it is in many ways *the* sin.

This, then, is Wyschogrod's theology of the Jewish Christian reality: "God's election of Israel is eternal, but God has made use of Christianity to spread word of Him throughout the globe. Paul sees Christ as opening the house of Israel to Gentiles, a claim that Jews should not dismiss lightly; the reality of Christianity should force Israel to "ask itself how it envisages the relation of the nations to its God" (p. 171). Put even more starkly, it is "particularly important for Judaism to examine what Christ is alleged to have accomplished, even if Judaism maintains its dissent that it is he who has accomplished it" (p. 199). In other words, a particularistic Jewish theology must avoid the temptation to obliterate its universal horizon; if all the nations of the earth are beloved of God, Jews must not deny the possibility that God reaches out toward them as well. There is much about Paul's theology that Jews can and must reject. But "the non-election of the gentiles cannot be as deep and permanent as Judaism has often assumed. This is," according to Wyschogrod, "the truth of Paul" (p. 200). A chauvinistic exclusivism is Jewishly—because biblically—unacceptable.

Strangely, Wyschogrod rests his reading of Paul on an interpretation of the book of Acts, a New Testament text authored by Luke, rather than on actual Pauline writings. Such an approach to Paul is untenable, since, as Paula Fredriksen has noted, "Luke's Paul, c. 100, and Paul's

Paul, c. 50, are two different people," and one cannot reliably learn about the latter from the former.6 Wyschogrod would have been on firmer—though still controversial—ground had he chosen to rely on revisionist readings of Paul's own writings (such as Romans and Galatians), according to which the latter did not regard the Law as obsolete for Jews.7 But historical reconstructions of Paul may well be beside the point. In other words, Wyschogrod's reading of Paul may well be historically wrong but theologically right. In his Barthian fervor, Wyschogrod needs his suggestions (prescriptions?) for Christian theology to be firmly grounded in scripture (in this case, obviously, the New Testament). But, contra Wyschogrod, Christianity's ability to reform itself does not rise and fall with divergent interpretations of Paul. Despite Barth and Wyschogrod's claims to the contrary, theology can learn crucial truths from sources other than scripture, and there will therefore undoubtedly be many Christians who reject supersessionism and anti-Judaism *whether or not Paul would have agreed*. Such revisions of Christian theology—authentically Pauline or not—are imperative, since, as Wyschogrod puts it, "Jews cannot view with much sympathy a Christianity that adheres to the teaching of contempt for the Torah of Moses" (p. 163).

One final note: Wyschogrod is trained in philosophy rather than history, and at times it shows. We have already seen that he implausibly conflates Paul himself with Luke's portrayal of him. Similarly, Wyschogrod's suggestion that Christianity raised Jesus to the status of divine being as a response to Israel's rejection of him as messiah lacks any historical foundation. Third, he fails to reckon with the creativity and originality of Rabbinic Judaism and with its many discontinuities with biblical religion; the claim that the Rabbis were "essentially obedient to the voice of scripture" (p. 227) requires, to put it mildly, some defense and elaboration. Finally, Wyschogrod uses the terms *Orthodox* and *Orthodoxy* in astonishingly ahistorical ways. Let one example suffice: Wyschogrod's suggestion that "Paul was, after all, an Orthodox Jew" (p. 234) is at once wildly misleading about Paul and woefully anachronistic about Orthodoxy—just what was orthodox (let alone Orthodox) in first-century Judaism? As Jacob Katz long ago demonstrated, Orthodoxy is a thoroughly modern phenomenon; it seems strange, to put it mildly, for Wyschogrod to simply retroject it into antiquity—and to describe the father of Christianity no less!

As we have seen, there is much in the work of Michael Wyschogrod that is extremely problematic—the ultimately impossible marriage of Judaism and Barthianism, the methodological and hermeneutical naïveté, and the utter lack of sophisticated historical thinking. But despite all this, Wyschogrod remains one of the most interesting and theologically provocative Jewish theologians of our time. His unapologetic affirmation of the God of Israel, his dialectical embrace of covenantal particularism and theological universalism, his courageous explorations of the very heart of Christian theology, and his often arresting readings of scripture render him a thinker worth reading and rereading. Our time is not blessed with an abundance of substantive and important Jewish religious thinkers; in Wyschogrod we have one for whom we ought to be most grateful.

Notes

I am grateful to Shaul Magid, Ben Sommer, and especially Jon Levenson for several fruitful conversations about the contents of this essay.

1. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York, 1957) pp. 45, 43.

2. For a provocative and methodologically much more sophisticated approach to prioritizing the ethical over the narrowly (or chauvinistically) nationalistic in the Jewish tradition, see Moshe Greenberg, "Keitzad Yesh Lidrosh et Ha-Torah Ba-Zeman Hazeh?" in *HaSegullah Veha-Koah* (Tel-Aviv, 1985), pp. 49–67. A (very slightly modified) English version, "On the Political Use of the Bible in Modern Israel: An Engaged Critique," appears in David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurwitz, (eds.) *Pomegranates and Silver Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, IN, 1995), pp. 461–471.

3. It is quite striking, of course, that Wyschogrod's collected essays are being brought to print by a Protestant Christian publishing house (Eerdmans). One has the impression that Wyschogrod has had a much wider readership and has enjoyed a much greater influence among Christians than among Jews.

4. In an important essay unfortunately not included in this collection, Wyschogrod goes so far as to declare: "Basically, I suppose, I am motivated by a feeling that in some sense Christianity is part of Greater Judaism. Christianity is not just another faith, as far as Judaism is concerned. . . . Christianity is, in a sense, the Judaism of the Gentiles" (Michael Wyschogrod, "A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation," Modern Theology, Vol. 12, No. 2 [April 1996], p. 205, pp. 195–209. Here, as often in Wyschogrod's writings, the reader wishes for expansion and elaboration upon a provocative claim: Are Christians part of God's covenant with Israel, or are they part of a new, second covenant? How do Wyschogrod's views compare with those of Christian theologians who have struggled with single and double covenant models for understanding Jewish–Christian relations? For a useful summary of recent Christian positions on these questions, see John T. Pawlikowski, "Single or Double Covenant?

Contemporary Perspectives," in *Peace, in Deed: Essays in Honor of Harry James Cargas*, (ed.) Zev Garber and Richard Libowitz (Atlanta, 1998), pp. 147–162.

5. Wyschogrod's commitment to narrowing the theological gap between Judaism and Christianity without eliminating it is reflected in his approach to the trinity as well: "In the final analysis," he writes, "the Jewish understanding of God is intact as long as no power or structure is posited that is equal to God and that is in a position to oppose successfully the will of God. In spite of all the difficulties Christian trinitarian teaching poses for Judaism, the absence of the theme of conflict among the persons of the trinity maintains trinitarianism as a problem for rather than a complete break with Judaism" (p. 42). Unfortunately, Wyschogrod does not develop or expand upon his fascinating attempt to soften the scandal of trinitarianism for a Judaic understanding of monotheism. It should be noted that Wyschogrod is in some important sense unique among Jewish theologians reflecting on Christianity and Jewish–Christian relations. While other thinkers—Franz Rosenzweig, for example (following, to some extent, Maimonides and Halevi)—will similarly emphasize Christianity's role in bringing the gentile nations to God, they will make no attempt at all to mitigate what they see as Christianity's dilution of Judaism's core truth. They are thus left with the somewhat paradoxical claim that news of the God of Israel is brought to the nations of the world by a religion that at once propagates and dilutes genuine monotheism. As we have seen, Wyschogrod, too, sees trinity and incarnation as "mistakes," but he still works hard to show that these mistakes are less severe than they might appear at first glance. In this latter project, Rosenzweig would surely not have joined him. For the latter's views on Christianity and on its relationship to Judaism, see Leora Batnitzky's seminal essay, "Dialogue as Judgment, Not Mutual Affirmation: A New Look at Franz Rosenzweig's Dialogical Philosophy," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 523–544.

6. Paula Fredrickson, "Torah – Observance and Christianity: The Perspective of Roman Antiquity," *Modern Theology*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (April, 1995), p. 199. For a classic essay distinguishing Paul himself from Luke's presentation of him, see Phillip Vielhauer, "On the 'Paulinisms' of Acts," in *Studies in Luke– Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville, 1966), pp. 33–50.

7. For such revisionist readings of Paul, see, for starters, Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver, 1987); and, more recently, John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford, 2000). The literature on Paul and the Law is immense and growing. A useful bibliography (covering the years 1980–1994) may be found in James D. G. Dunn, ed., *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2001). The approach represented by Gaston, Gager, and others is surely a minority view but nevertheless a defensible one held by respected scholars; the view that Paul's theology can be accurately reconstructed based on the book of Acts, in contrast, is totally implausible and would be rejected by virtually all critical scholars. In general, Wyschogrod seems to lack any real awareness of the findings of critical research, either on the Hebrew Bible or on the New Testament.

From Modern Judaism, 25:3, October 2005

Michael Wyschogrod, Dean of Orthodox Jewish Theologians, Dies at 87

By: David P. Goldman

The Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod died Dec. 17 at the age of 87, after a long illness. He was old enough to have stood with his father across the street from Berlin's main synagogue as it burned on *Kristallnacht*, when the Brownshirts unrolled a Torah scroll in the street and charged passersby the equivalent of a dime to trample the length of it. Wyschogrod escaped Germany with his family early in 1939 just as the gates were closing, obtaining an American visa thanks to an uncle in Atlanta whose employer knew a U.S. senator. He was a brand plucked out of the fire. And he was, perhaps, our last living link to the engagement of yeshiva-educated Orthodox Jews with continental philosophy.

Educated at the Yiddish-speaking Orthodox day school Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, Wyschogrod attended City College and then earned a Columbia doctorate with a dissertation on Kierkegaard and Heidegger. At the same time he attended Rav Joseph Soloveitchik's Talmud class at Yeshiva University. He admonished observant Jews to master Western philosophy, the better to comprehend their own tradition, but he proposed a uniquely Jewish solution to the 20th-century crisis in Western philosophy. His influence was enormous; Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks once told me that Wyschogrod was the closest thing we have to a systematic theology of Judaism. But it was not as great as he hoped it would be in the community he averred would be the ultimate judge of his work, namely Torah-obedient Jews. That has changed in the last several years, and Wyschogrod's numerous writings will guide Jewish scholars for years to come.

His favorite Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, pictured the "Knight of Faith" who is so secure in his relationship to God that his daily life becomes a continual source of joy. Wyschogrod was a knight of Kierkegaard's order. In his wife, the distinguished philosopher Prof. Edith Wyschogrod, he found a lifelong soulmate as well as an intellectual peer. When Edith was offered a position at Rice University in Houston, Wyschogrod moved from the CUNY system to the University of Houston and was delighted to teach undergraduates who knew the Bible by heart. They had two children and five grandchildren.

Michael Wyschogrod looked at the world with irony but without a trace of rancor. Shortly before his final illness he took his grandchildren to Berlin to see where he spent his boyhood. Recalling *Kristallnacht*, he noted that the Berliners did not seem at all happy with the Nazis' rampage. He joked about German anti-Semitism, formed close ties with German colleagues, and saw his major work published in German.

His doctoral dissertation became the first English-language work on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, whose Nazi party membership (and refusal to apologize for it) remains a scandal in the philosophical world. Wyschogrod refused any contact with Heidegger but never joined in the ritual excoriation of the philosopher for his anti-Semitism. Far more interesting, Wyschogrod observed, is why Heidegger's anti-Semitism was so muted; he refused for example to remove the dedication to his Jewish teacher Edmund Husserl from the 1935 edition of his principal work. It was a measure of Wyschogrod's character that he found it more worthwhile to understand than to denounce.

God's preferential love for Israel was the great theme of Wyschogrod's own writing. Jewish history begins with an act of inexplicable love: God fell passionately in love with Abraham and for his sake loved his descendants.

Wyschogrod's most-read book, *The Body of Faith*, asserts that "Judaism is a religion of the body," whose purpose is to sanctify the real, physical Jewish people so that it can be a fit vessel for God's Indwelling (*Shekhinah*) in this world. His study of Kierkegaard and other Christian philosophers strengthened his argument that Judaism is an incarnational religion: The divine is physically present in the Jewish people. Without knowing the Christian concept of incarnation, Wyschogrod wrote, he would not have understood Jewish tradition as clearly.

His teacher Joseph Soloveitchik eschewed theological dialogue with Christians, although he encouraged dialogue on ethical and moral issues. Wyschogrod disagreed and made distinguished contributions over half a century to Jewish-Christian dialogue. Even if Christianity is wrong to worship a man-god, he argued, the Christian idea of Incarnation sheds light on a fundamental Jewish concept: that God's Indwelling is present in the physical Jewish people. As the sages of antiquity said, the *Shekhinah* went into exile with the Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple.

Unlike Christian theologians, who characterize Judaic particularism in contrast to Christian universalism, Wyschogrod asserted that God's first love for Israel did not exclude love for all humankind. On the contrary, "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. And when man contemplates this mystery, that the Eternal One, the creator of heaven and earth, chose to become the father of his creatures instead of remaining self-sufficient unto himself, as is the Absolute of the philosophers, there wells up in man that praise that has become so rare yet remains so natural."

Instead of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover as depicted in the philosophical writings of Maimonides, Wyschogrod looked to the biblical God, "*El kanna*," the passionate (or "jealous") God. As a philosopher he focused on Kierkegaard's claim that passion was the source of Being and that man's impassioned relationship to God resituated the age-old paradoxes of philosophy. From Aristotle to Heidegger, Western philosophy tries to force God into a logical framework, proving his existence or attempting to discern his attributes. In such discussions, he wrote, "a framework that is broader than God is presupposed and God is made subject to this framework. But the God of Israel is the lord of all frameworks and subject to none. This is the remarkable power of God; the Bible does not hesitate to speak of him in personal an anthropomorphic terms. It shows a God who enters the human world and into relation with humanity by means of speech and command. At the same time, this God transcends the world he has created and is not subject to any power or force."

The unabashedly biblical spirit of his writing put Wyschogrod out of step with his peers, the philosophers. His disagreement with Rav Soloveitchik on the matter of dialogue with Christians, moreover, perplexed the Orthodox Jewish world. And he was most at odds with the Jewish public intellectuals of the 1950s and '60s who eschewed religion entirely. In a 1968 article, he quoted the former editor of *Commentary* magazine Eliot Cohen, qualifying this current as "self-hating Jews who were only too eager to bury their Judaism if this meant admission to the literary salons of Manhattan."

Wyschogrod nonetheless was widely read. During the 1970s and '80s he was almost a cult figure among young Christian theologians, and it was the Methodist scholar R. Kendall Soulen who published the first collection of his essays under the title *Abraham's Promise*. Soulen saw hope for Christians in Wyschogrod's impassioned portrayal of God's love for Israel, explaining, "God also desires to be Redeemer of the world as the One whose first love is the people of Israel." As Wyschogrod wrote, "Because [God] said: 'I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; in you shall all the families of earth be blessed' (Gen. 12:3), he has tied his saving and redemptive concern for the welfare of all humankind to his love for the people of Israel."

It was perhaps beshert that the Rav's grandnephew Rabbi Meir Soloveichik would encounter Wyschogrod's work—not at Yeshiva University but in the work of Christian theologians—and would write his doctoral dissertation on Wyschogrod. As Meir Soloveichik wrote in a 2009 essay in *First Things*, "What this means, for Christians such as Soulen, is that Wyschogrod has transformed even the issue that most divides Christians from Jews—the incarnation of Jesus—into a challenge for Christians to

recognize the holiness of Israel. … A world where Jews are threatened physically by fundamentalist Islam and morally by secularism, a world where Jews and Christians ought to go their separate ways, is one where Israel—both the people and the country—will be very much alone. And, in an age when Jewish theology must reject relativism on the one hand and instinctive anti-Christianity on the other, it is, I believe, Michael Wyschogrod who has shown us the way."
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Michael Wyschogrod and the Challenge of God's Scandalous Love
By: Leora Batnitzky

Michael Wyschogrod, perhaps the boldest Jewish theologian of 20th-century America, died at the age of 87 this past December. More than any other 20th-century Jewish theologian, Wyschogrod went against the grain of the dominant trends of modern Jewish thought that emphasized Judaism's rationality and fundamental confluence with ethical universalism. In doing so, he also rejected the entire tradition of Jewish philosophical rationalism, running from Maimonides to his own teacher Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

Much like his older contemporary Martin Buber, though for different reasons, Wyschogrod has, at least so far, had his profoundest influence not on Jews but on Christians. Whereas liberal Protestants found in Buber an important and moving account of Christian grace, post-liberal Protestant theologians have found in Wyschogrod a deep articulation of the idea of incarnation and its relevance for rethinking Christianity's claim to have superseded Judaism. The respective Christian receptions of Buber and Wyschogrod may also reveal what many, though certainly not all, Jews have found less appealing about the two theologians: Buber's well-known rejection of the authority of Jewish law and Wyschogrod's almost exclusive focus on the Bible as opposed to rabbinic literature. Yet while Buber self-consciously rejected not just Jewish observance but also traditional Judaism as it came to be practiced in the modern world, Wyschogrod understood himself as a traditional Jew. This apparent disconnect is part of what makes Wyschogrod's thought so interesting and challenging for our present moment.

Born in Berlin, Wyschogrod escaped Nazi Germany as a young boy in 1939 and immigrated to the United States. He studied at City College, Yeshiva University, and Columbia and went on to a long career as a professor of philosophy, first in the City University of New York system and then at the University of Houston. From the beginning of his intellectual life, Wyschogrod never shied away from intellectual controversy. In 1954, he published the first book-length study of Martin Heidegger's philosophy in English, Kierkegaard and Heidegger: The Ontology of Existence. In a 2010 essay published in First Things, he continued to insist on Heidegger's philosophical greatness, despite the fact that, as he put it, Heidegger was "a committed Nazi and a liar." Strikingly, Wyschogrod contended that aspects of Heidegger's thought could be saved because, despite a traditional Catholic upbringing in which the Bible was not central, Heidegger was "a thinker whose spiritual life was largely determined by Hölderlin and Rilke [and therefore] could not break with the religious power of the Hebrew Bible." Despite Wyschogrod's own philosophical training and acumen, it was an engagement with what he regarded as the anti-philosophical essence of the Hebrew Bible that stands at the center of his Jewish thought.

Wyschogrod announced his central theological claim and its reliance on a kind of biblical literalism in his now classic book of 1983, The Body of Faith. The motivating impulse of the book was his contention that God, Judaism, and the Jewish people are "not grounded in some alleged eternal verities of reason or on some noble and profound religious sensibility that is shared by all people or by a spiritual elite, but on a movement of God toward man as witnessed in scripture." For Wyschogrod, the Jewish people are the body of faith because God literally dwells within the bodies of Jewish people:

It is of course necessary to mumble a formula of philosophic correction. No space can contain God, he is above space, etc., etc. But this mumbled formula, while required, must not be overdone. It must not transform the God of Israel into a spatial and meta-temporal Absolute . . . With all the philosophic difficulties duly noted, the God of Israel is a God who enters space and time . . . God dwells not only in the spirit of Israel . . . he also dwells in their bodies.

The philosopher in Wyschogrod was not after consistency but rather, like Heidegger, provocation. Just as Heidegger lamented the forgetfulness of being, Wyschogrod bemoaned the forgetfulness of faith in God, which he regarded as the root of Jewish being. In this, Wyschogrod, once again, finds company in Buber, who also sought to revive Jewish faith, albeit through a humanistic interpretation of the Bible and Hasidism. Faith, for Buber and Wyschogrod, is existential, not cognitive. As Buber points out, the Hebrew word most often translated as faith, "emuna," refers to a trusting relationship with God and not propositional knowledge about God. Buber and Franz Rosenzweig's translation of Exodus 3:14 is relevant here for appreciating what Wyschogrod means by the body of

faith. While a number of Greek, Latin, German, and French translations of the Bible (such as Luther's and Calvin's) render "I am that I am" (eheye asher eheye) as a statement about God's being and God's eternity, Buber and Rosenzweig insist that this misunderstands the Hebrew, which is not about God's essence but about God's presence. Buber and Rosenzweig translate Exodus 3:14 as Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde (I will be there, howsoever I will be there). Like Heidegger, Buber and Wyschogrod prioritize existential presence, or being-there (Dasein), over ontological essence (Sein).

Put another way, God's presentation of God's self to Moses is not, as Maimonides and Hermann Cohen thought, for the sake of clarifying philosophically what kind of being God is or is not. Instead, God presents God's self to Moses to let him know that God is literally there with him and the children of Israel. Wyschogrod parts with Buber in making the perhaps astonishing claim that God is not just present with the people of Israel but that God is literally present, incarnated, in the people of Israel.

The Jewish God, for Wyschogrod, is a personal God who loves his chosen people passionately and, indeed, erotically. In describing God's special love of the Jewish people, Wyschogrod is at great pains to distinguish between what he calls Jewish eros and Christian agape, that is between a joyful, romantic love and one that is selfless and sacrificial. In doing so, Wyschogrod inverts centuries of Christian criticisms of Jewish particularism and carnality by arguing that Christian agape is not ultimately love:

Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or what not.

To be sure, a God who loves some people more than others is a difficult concept for modern people to swallow. Yet Wyschogrod insists that far from limiting God's love for all of humanity, God's special love for the people of Israel actually makes it possible for God truly to love all people: "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."

Despite Wyschogrod's sharp contrast between Judaism and Christianity, the connection between "the body of faith" and a Christian conception of incarnation is obvious, and Wyschogrod acknowledges as much:

[T]he Christian proclamation that God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is but a development of the basic thrust of the Hebrew Bible, God's movement toward humankind . . . [A]t least in this respect, the difference between Judaism and Christianity is one of degree rather than kind.

The similarity and the difference between Judaism and Christianity, then, come down to their respective commitments to scripture. For Jews, the Hebrew Bible alone is scripture. For Christians, the Hebrew Bible (or as they call it, the Old Testament) and the New Testament together are scripture. Jews do not reject Christ, according to Wyschogrod, for philosophical or theological reasons. Rather, Jews reject Jesus because no such story appears in the Hebrew Bible. In Wyschogrod's words, Judaism "does not hear this [Christian] story, because the Word of God as it hears it does not tell it and because Jewish faith does testify to it."

The connection between Wyschogrod's claims and what Jews today often think of as a Christian notion of incarnation is not incidental. As Wyschogrod tells his readers, The Body of Faith is a testament to what he learned from Karl Barth, the most important Protestant theologian of the 20th century. Following Barth, Wyschogrod declares that faith consists in "obedient listening to the Word of God," which is found in scripture. This theological starting point makes sense of Wyschogrod's rejection of the Jewish philosophical tradition. As Barth insisted, revelation ought never be confused with, and cannot be mediated by, human reason. Yet as a number of Wyschogrod's critics have rightly noted, "obedient listening to the Word of God" is not an especially Jewish view.

In fact, as Barth emphasized, "obedient listening to the Word of God" is nothing other than Luther's notion of sola scriptura (by scripture alone). The irony of an Orthodox Jewish theologian approaching the Bible in this way should be clear. Even if we leave aside any defense of Jewish philosophical rationalism, traditional Jews have never read the scripture "alone" but always as mediated by the history of rabbinic exegesis. It is simply a truism that for Judaism the written Torah (scripture) always stands alongside the oral Torah; indeed, it is clear that, for rabbinic Judaism, written Torah is only authoritative through the medium of the oral interpretive tradition. In following Barth (and Luther) in his approach to scripture, Wyschogrod would seem to be rejecting rabbinic Judaism. Yet, again, the fascinating and indeed important thing about Wyschogrod's theology is that he claims not to be.

There can be no doubt that Wyschogrod was well aware of this tension, if not contradiction, in his thought. After all, he obviously knew that his Orthodox biblicism was anomalous,

and, in many ways, closer to non-traditionalist Jewish thinkers, such as Buber, with whom he was otherwise at odds. But before trying to figure out what Wyschogrod was after in making these claims as a self-consciously traditionalist Jew, it is necessary to appreciate the inherent tension between his theology and his traditionalism in his conception of Jewish election as well. For Wyschogrod, "the body of faith," that is to say the Jewish people, is not only a testament to God's revelation but God's revelation itself. As such, the people is the source of its own salvation. In a striking formulation, he writes that, "Separated from the Jewish people, nothing is Judaism. If anything, it is the Jewish people that is Judaism."

In understanding this extraordinary claim, it is helpful to consider briefly Barth's extension of John Calvin's notion of election. For Barth and Calvin, Christ remains separate from the believer. This is the basis of faith: To have faith in Jesus is precisely not to believe in oneself. Here Wyschogrod parts from Barth and Calvin: The body of faith believes in itself. Jewish faith is, at least in crucial part, the Jewish people's belief in the very being of the Jewish people. This is where Wyschogrod's Protestant hermeneutic, i.e., his implicit affirmation of sola scriptura, converges with his definition of the body of faith. The biblical narrative, in Wyschogrod's reading, allows only one meaning: A personal God with human qualities and human emotions falls in love with Abraham, who (literally) fathers the body of faith.

According to Wyschogrod, there is simply no room for any other interpretation—rabbinic, mystical, philosophical, or otherwise. Ironically, by equating the Jewish people with Judaism, Wyschogrod's theology, which aims to fully acknowledge God's scandalous love, ends up removing both God and Torah (oral as well as written) from the conversation. Such theological reductions are not new. We may be reminded here of the Zohar's famous statement that "Israel, the Torah, and God are one," a seemingly pantheistic claim that in the 20th century would be turned around and adopted by humanists and nationalists. Yet such a conception would seem to be almost self-refuting for Wyschogrod, given that the central impetus for his claims is refusal to trade the real presence of the biblical God for any form of pantheism or humanism.

As Wyschogrod himself acknowledges, Barth, rather than rabbinic, kabbalistic, or medieval rationalist theology, is his primary influence. I mention this again not to suggest that this influence is, in and of itself, by definition not authentically Jewish but instead to point out the contradiction that it produces: a theology of election premised on God's absolute sovereignty that makes the Jewish people, and not the Torah, into Judaism. While Wyschogrod is at pains to avoid these implications, it is difficult not to conclude that he has cut God out of the conversation either by presenting a kind of Jewish humanism in the vein of Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism or Ahad Ha-Am's Cultural Zionism or, far more problematically, that he has divinized the Jewish people.

We might be tempted to attribute Wyschogrod's single-minded focus on Jewish election to the influence of Barth's hyper-Calvinism. But there are Jewish precedents for Wyschogrod's contentions. Most obviously, the medieval Jewish philosopher and poet Judah Halevi along with Franz Rosenzweig—who considered himself Halevi's 20th-century incarnation—made such claims about Jewish election. In light of God's election of the Jewish people, Halevi famously (or infamously) declared Jews biologically and spiritually superior to non-Jews, even going so far as to claim that "Any gentile who joins us [as proselytes] unconditionally shares our good fortune, without, however, being quite equal to us." (Kuzari 1:27) And Rosenzweig came pretty close to describing the Jewish people and Judaism as "the body of faith" in maintaining that:

While every other community that lays claim to eternity must take measures to pass the torch of the present on to the future, the blood-community [i.e., the Jewish people] does not have to resort to such measures. It does not have to hire the services of the spirit; the natural propagation of the body guarantees it eternity.

Yet for all of his resonance with Halevi and Rosenzweig, the context and timing of Wyschogrod's arguments are deeply puzzling. Whatever one makes of Halevi and Rosenzweig, it is necessary to recognize that they made their hyperbolic claims about Jewish election in contexts in which Jews were deeply hated and often persecuted. We need but note the subtitle of Halevi's Kuzari, "In Defense of the Despised Faith" as well as Rosenzweig's repeated musings on Christian anti-Semitism to see this:

This existence of the Jew constantly subjects Christianity to the idea that it is not attaining the goal, the truth, that it ever remains—on the way. That is the profoundest reason for the Christian hatred of the Jew.

In contrast to Halevi and Rosenzweig's historical circumstances, Wyschogrod made his arguments about Jewish election in late 20th–century America, when, arguably, Jews had never had it better. To be sure, Wyschogrod's claims about the body of faith are a response to the Holocaust. Indeed, Wyschogrod implies that far from repudiating Jewish faith, the attempted Nazi genocide of the Jewish people only confirms the Jews' special status:

[S]in does not drive Hashem [God] out of the world completely. Only the destruction of the Jewish people

does. Hitler understood that. He knew that it was insufficient to cancel the teachings of the Jewish morality and to substitute for it the new moral order of the superman. It was not only Jewish values that needed to be eradicated but Jews had to be murdered.

Yet Wyschogrod's Jewish triumphalism still seems especially jarring in a time in which Jews, as one recent Pew survey has it, are the most popular religious group in America.

But perhaps it is precisely the timing of Wyschogrod's theology that offers us a clue to what he was largely after, as well as to his enduring relevance. Toward the end of The Body of Faith, he mournfully observes, "That Orthodox Judaism is more easily compatible with a career in nuclear physics, medicine, or law than with being a novelist, composer, or poet is an alarming development." This, he writes, "bespeaks an ossification in its spirituality of the most serious sort." Wyschogrod was a traditionalist, but he was also deeply disturbed by the lack of theological, indeed spiritual, engagement within modern Jewish Orthodoxy. His provocative theological claims were, in part, attempts to awaken Jews, and especially traditional Jews, from their spiritual slumber to the joy of their unique relationship with God. Wyschogrod's contemporary, Abraham Joshua Heschel, similarly sought to awaken traditional Jews from what he called "pan-halachism," which he described as "a tendency toward legalism…which regards halacha as the only authentic source of Jewish thinking and living." Heschel, like Wyschogrod, never denied the centrality of Jewish law for traditional Jewish life, but he also, like Wyschogrod, despaired over its myopic effects on the Jewish spirit. Heschel, like Buber, believed that the universalism he associated with Hasidism offered the best chance for reawakening the Jewish people, and the rest of the world, to the joyful love of God. In contrast, Wyschogrod insisted that the vitality of Judaism depends upon God's special love for the Jewish people and the continued proclamation to the world of God's scandalous love for them. But is theological triumphalism the best means for reawakening the Jewish spirit?

It is important to reiterate that Wyschogrod's theological triumphalism has been more appreciated by Christian theologians than by his Jewish contemporaries. Wyschogrod may, in fact, have engaged in deeper theological dialogue with Christians than any other major 20th-century Jewish thinker. He sought out Barth personally, and his work seems to have been important both to John Paul II and Pope Benedict. Perhaps this is precisely because he returned Jewish-Christian dialogue to its most classical and most primitive terms: Which child does God love more? The question that has to be asked, however, is whether this is the right question—not for Christians but for Jews and Judaism today.

In my own view, developments in the Jewish world, especially in Israel, since Wyschogrod published The Body of Faith in the early 1980s strongly suggest that Halevi-like claims about Jewish election are not only theologically disturbing but politically dangerous. Such rhetoric may have made historical sense in contexts in which Jews were politically weak and continually beleaguered, but it is hard to see what good such claims can do for Judaism today, as well as for the relation between Jews and non-Jews. This doesn't mean that election is not an important theme of Jewish theology, but it is not the only theme.

It also doesn't mean that Wyschogrod's theology has nothing to teach us today. Judaism and Jewishness are particularist and collectivist. And it is a deep point that human love, as we actually know it, is particular and directed at unique individuals. Moreover, as Wyschogrod emphasizes, it is only through such particular loves that justice and love for all of humanity can emerge. God's promise to Abraham encapsulates the complex dialectic between the particular and the universal that is found throughout the Jewish tradition and of course in the Hebrew Bible as well: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." (Gen. 12:2)

Michael Wyschogrod's theology is a testament to the tension between the particular and the universal in Judaism. Finding the right balance, or perhaps even simply recognizing that such a balance is necessary, remains the challenge facing all Jews today, religious and non-religious alike, as well as much of the rest of the world. In challenging, even provoking, us to rethink this balance Wyschogrod was, and remains, a thinker for our times.

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