YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur #34: Rabbi Hirsch and the Letter and Spirit of the Law**

Over the last two lessons, we have traced the rise of the Two-Track Model of the election. According to this model, God created two tracks upon which humanity should serve Him: the gentile track and the Jewish track. Each track has its own advantages and disadvantages; neither one is truly privileged over the other. Moreover, the existence of the Jewish track is only justified by the role it plays in facilitating the gentiles along their track.

One might think it no surprise that European Jewish thinkers would begin to innovate this sort of worldly and humanistic conception of the election at precisely the point in history at which European countries were beginning to emancipate their Jews, holding out the promise of full and equal citizenship, for the first time in the history of their dispersion. But the two thinkers we’ve been engaging – the Tiferet Yisrael and Rabbi Hirsch – would surely contend that their theory of the election wasn’t *really* new. The Two-Track Model of the election was, they might say, merely harking back to an age of Jewish thought that hadn’t yet come under the sway of the impersonal theology of Aristotle or the mysticism of the Zohar. Indeed, they could well argue that the Two-Track Model of the election is simply the best fit with the Biblical and Rabbinic data. But the model certainly has some difficult questions to answer. This week I focus on the question raised at the end of our last lesson.

**The Question**

Rabbi Hirsch thinks the Jewish track contains two sub-tracks: the historical track (in which our mere history, irrespective of our behavior, functions as some sort of sign to the nations of the world) and the pedagogic track (in which our halakhic practices spread the message of ethical monotheism to the gentiles). We established last week that the historical track can only really be justified ethically, against the charge of treating the Jews as means to an end, to the extent that the pedagogic track can be defended as plausible. The pedagogic track can only be considered plausible if the following claim turns out to be true:

* If all (or most) Jews were observing Jewish law, then they really would stand a good chance of inspiring the entire world to serve God and to live lives of true human flourishing.

Rabbi Hirsch tried to paint a picture of halakhic observance that did just that. He showed how he could recruit each of the commandments into the service of this pedagogic project. But my worry was that, even if he described a real possibility, the resulting picture didn’t describe a halakhic reality. That is to say: the halakhic lifestyle as we find it in the real world is not, for all its many virtues, associated with social activism and environmentalism. In describing what Judaism *could be*, rather than what Judaism *is* – and given our belief that God has guided the evolution of Judaism into what it is today – isn’t Rabbi Hirsch’s defense of the pedagogic track missing the mark?[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The Mummification of Jewish Law**

Rabbi Hirsch addresses this difficulty in a remarkable passage of the *Nineteen Letters*:

What if I were to say that Israel, banished from the society of the rest of mankind, estranged from the world and its life, had lost contact and sympathy with the world and life, and no longer considered them in comprehending and interpreting the Law, but deemed itself fortunate to have rescued even its, [i.e.,] the Law’s, externals? Suppose I were to tell you that a dull and prosaic dialectic had reduced to merest mummies laws full to overflowing of life and spirit, and that Israel, concerned and apprehensive because of the errors and evils which it had often seen follow the efforts of the uncontrolled intellect, had driven it [i.e., intellect] away from the Law as one drives away a bird of prey from a dearly-beloved corpse?

Centuries of oppression and misery, which offered no opportunity for activity, which made patient endurance and resignation the sole duties; when only prayer could give strength, and passive contemplation afforded the only consolation for the ills of life, must they not of necessity depress the spirit and compel the development of the narrow and restricted?

If, furthermore, we say that the literary sources of Judaism, in which its spirit is contained, being misunderstood and misinterpreted, themselves aided in corporealizing and disguising the spirit; that a perverted intellect comprehended the institutions which were designed and ordained for the internal and external purification and betterment of man as mechanical, dynamical, or magical formulas for the upbuilding of higher worlds, and that thus the observances meant for the education of the spirit to a nobler life were but too frequently degraded into mere amuletic or talismanic performances; would you not admit, after all this, dear Benjamin [*the fictional addressee of the letters*], that you know only external Judaism, only an unrecognized, uncomprehended, misunderstood Judaism, and even that in a most fragmentary and incomplete form?[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this audacious response, Rabbi Hirsch effectively concedes that the halakhic life, as it has been handed down to us, and as commonly practiced, is a pale reflection of what it could and should be. He blames this fact upon the pre-emancipation state of the Jews in exile. In that stage of our history, the historical sub-track was doing the work in providing a light unto the nations, since the pre-emancipation condition of Jewry didn’t allow for us to flourish along the pedagogic track But now that we have more freedom, we have the opportunity to reinvigorate the spirit of Judaism, revitalize our religious practices, and thereby switch the weight of our mission back onto the pedagogic track. That is why Rabbi Hirsch saw, in the emancipation of the Jews, both an opportunity and a threat:

I bless emancipation, when I see how the excess of oppression drove Israel away from human intercourse, prevented the cultivation of the mind, [and] limited the free development of the noble sides of character… But for Israel I only bless it if at the same time there awakes in Israel the true spirit, which, independent of emancipation or non-emancipation, strives to fulfill the Israel-mission; to elevate and ennoble ourselves, to implant the spirit of Judaism in our souls… I bless it, if Israel does not regard emancipation as the goal of its task, but only as a new condition of its mission, and as a new trial, much severer than the trial of oppression; but I should grieve if Israel understood itself so little, and had so little comprehension of its own spirit that it would welcome emancipation as the end of the Galuth, and the highest goal of its historic mission. If Israel regards this glorious concession merely as a means of securing a greater degree of comfort in life, and greater opportunities for the acquisition of wealth and enjoyments, it would show that Israel had not comprehended the spirit of its own Law, nor learnt aught from the Galuth.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The threat of emancipation is that it becomes an end in itself, while the promise of emancipation is that it will allow us to reinvigorate the mummified spirit of Jewish law. Indeed, the opportunity of the emancipation allows for us to:

become Jews, Jews in the true sense of the word, permitting the spirit of the Law to pervade our entire being, accepting it as the fountain of life spiritual and ethical; then will Judaism gladly welcome emancipation as affording a greater opportunity for the fulfillment of its task, the realization of a noble and ideal life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

But does this response to our concern not sit at loggerheads with the theory of revelation that I outlined in lesson 1? That view of revelation sees the holy spirit (*ruach hakodesh*) directing the general trajectory of the unfolding of the Oral Torah. It leads to the conclusion that at any stage of history, those forms of Jewish life found among the communities of the most faithful – Jews who are intentionally striving to live their whole lives as best they can in response to their understanding of the revelation at Sinai – provide us with the closest approximations that we could possibly have, at that time, as to what God’s will is for each and every Jew.

Rabbi Hirsch seems to be arguing, in contrast, that a giant wedge has been placed between Jewish law as practiced and Jewish law as it should really be. He speaks of its spirit having been mummified, with attention drawn away from its lofty ideals towards hair-splitting dialectics; its vision for global, political, and social transformation, in his view, has been spiritualized into a superstitious system of amulets and talismans, naively supposed to benefit the world magically, without our having to engage with external social realities.

How can an Orthodox Jewish thinker say such things? If he’s right, it seems that the forms of life found among the most faithful Jewish communities, of his times and ours, provide a deeply misguided barometer for assessing the will of God. Can an Orthodox thinker accept that the Oral Torah’s unfolding could have gone wrong to the degree Rabbi Hirsch seems to imply?

To answer that question, we must pay careful attention to what he says and what he doesn’t say. Rabbi Hirsch doesn’t think that the *external forms* of Jewish law have been perverted in transmission. On the contrary, we have faithfully and successfully preserved the demands of Jewish law in terms of its outward description. What we’ve failed to preserve is the *spirit* that is supposed to animate those observances. Of course, if we got the spirit right, we’d also engage in all sorts of actions that we aren’t explicitly commanded to perform, but which flow from the spirit of the law truly conceived. But at least we haven’t lost the external demands.

The question we now have to ask is this: does an Orthodox theory of revelation allow for the possibility that, though the machinery of the *mesora* (i.e. tradition) and the institutions of the Oral Torah can be trusted to pass down an accurate presentation of what God demands from us in each generation, *formally*, or *externally,* it cannot be equally well trusted to make us understand how to perform those laws with the right spirit?

**Two Preliminary Responses**

Jewish law recognizes that the form of life lived by the masses of religiously observant Jews is, in and of itself, a source of legal authority. Indeed, in numerous cases the ancient Rabbis appealed to the practices of committed Jewry in order to resolve Rabbinic disputes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Widespread custom (*minhag*) has authoritative status. Moreover, the Rabbis are not permitted to create edicts that the religious community will not accept.[[6]](#footnote-6) And yet, notice that the authority here is vested in how the Jewish people *act*, but not directly in how they feel or think. This already suggests that Rabbi Hirsch may be right; that the *mesora* can be trusted to pass on the external form of the law, but isn’t necessarily authoritative, or as authoritative, regarding its spirit.

We should also remember the words of the Netziv, in his introduction to his commentary to the book of Genesis. There he says that the Sages called it *the book of uprightness* because they recognized that the narratives of the book of Genesis had the power to act as a *corrective* to the sort of religiosity that comes from too narrow a conception of Jewish law. This suggests that the Sages were always aware that the formal system of law could, in the religious life of some Jews, come adrift from the requisite *spirit*.[[7]](#footnote-7) This too suggests that Rabbi Hirsch was well within the parameters of Orthodox thought in his suggestion that Jewish law, as it was practiced in his day, needed to be reinvigorated with values such as one can gather from the narrative frame of the Bible.

These reflections provide Rabbi Hirsch with two answers to our question. A more robust defense of Rabbi Hirsch’s position requires us to delve into a fascinating (apparent) conflict between the prophets and the Sages of Israel.

**Ulterior Motives**

The Biblical prophets of Israel seem committed to the notion that serving God for the wrong reasons – which must be what you’re doing if you’re unable even to honor the image of God in your fellow human – is meaningless at best, and morally repugnant at worst. Witness the words of Isaiah:

“What need have I of all your sacrifices?” says God. “I am sated with burnt offerings of rams… Trample My courts no more; bringing oblations is futile; incense is offensive to Me … Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing… And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you… Your hands are stained with crime. Wash yourselves clean; put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Similar words appear in the books of Jeremiah[[9]](#footnote-9) and Hosea.[[10]](#footnote-10) Amos, as well, tells us that God will not accept our sacrifices if our social conduct is deficient. “Spare Me the sound of your hymns,” He says, “and let Me not hear the music of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

And yet, the Rabbis seem to *welcome* service of God that is performed for the wrong reasons:

Rava raised a contradiction: It is written: “For Your mercy is great *unto* the heavens [and Your truth reaches the skies]” (Psalms 57:11); and it is written [elsewhere]: “For Your mercy is great *above* the heavens [and Your truth reaches the skies]” (Psalms 108:5). How? [Does God’s mercy reach only *unto* the heavens, as per the first verse, or does it reach still *higher*, as per the second verse?]

Here, [in the second verse, it is referring to a case where] one performs [a mitzva] for its own sake; and here [in the first verse, it is referring to a case where] one performs [a mitzva] not for its own sake. [Even a *mitzva* performed with ulterior motives garners reward,] as Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: A person should always engage in Torah [study] and *mitzvot*, even [if he does so] not for their own sake [i.e., for an ulterior motive], since through [performing *mitzvot*] not for their own sake, [one gains understanding and] comes [to perform them] for their own sake.[[12]](#footnote-12)

One might suggest that, unlike the prophets, the Rabbis are talking about religious practice that lacks the appropriate *positive* intent; they don’t address, as the prophets did, religious practice conducted with *negative* intent (assuming again, that if you can’t even honor the image of God in your fellow human, then you’re not really doing it in your worship either but are rather worshipping God with an insulting hypocrisy). This suggestion would reconcile the apparent tension between the prophets and the Rabbis: the prophets were disparaging religious behavior with *negative* intent, and the Rabbis were encouraging religious behavior even if it comes with *neutral* intent – such as in the case of a reasonably decent individual who goes through the motions of ritual because her parents do, without much thought of her own. However, negative intent doesn’t exhaust the concern of the prophets. The prophets seem to attack religious practice in the absence of an unwavering concern for social justice; all of their attacks on religion are juxtaposed with the following sorts of exhortation: “devote yourselves to justice”;[[13]](#footnote-13) “let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream”;[[14]](#footnote-14) “break every yoke.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

If we want to resolve the tension between the Rabbis and the prophets, I think we have to recognize that the prophetic critique of the religious practices of Israel makes two claims – one about detestable practice, and one about ideal practice:

* + 1. **Detestable:** Religious practice with hypocritical or negative intent is detestable (indeed, hypocritical intent may well be so insulting to God as to be equivalent to negative intent).
    2. **Ideal:** Religious practice conducted properly is accompanied by activism and concern for social justice.

So, yes, the real disdain of the prophets *is* reserved for those who worship God from a hypocritical or negative mindset. The Rabbis can agree to that. The second claim of the prophets is that, religious practice should be accompanied by a concern for social justice. The Rabbis can agree to that too. The Rabbis merely see room for a third assertion, namely:

* + 1. **Non-ideal, but not detestable:** Religious practice not conducted so properly as to be accompanied by activism and concern for social justice, though not ideal, can still have value, so long as it isn’t accompanied by negative or hypocritical intent. Its value is that non-ideal service can lead to ideal service.

The upshot of this discussion, and the claim of the Rabbis, is this:

* So long as the external form of Jewish law is preserved over time, there always remains the potential that its ideal spirit will be rediscovered.

And thus, so long as God’s providence oversees the maintenance of the external form of Jewish law from generation to generation, the spirit will remain available to those who seek it. In other words, and quite consistent with Rabbi Hirsch’s views about the mummification of the spirit of Jewish law, an Orthodox theory of revelation only requires that providence oversees the preservation and evolution of the *external* forms of Jewish law and practice. Providential oversight over the preservation and evolution of the *spirit* of Jewish law – though I am committed to the notion that God oversees this process as well – can be much looser.

**Martin Buber on Ritual**

Martin Buber would seem to attack the conclusion of the previous section. He would question whether ritual devoid of passion can truly hold *any* religious value, even instrumental. He writes:

Ever since the destruction of the Temple, tradition has been at the center of Judaism’s religious life. A fence was thrown around the law in order to keep at a distance everything alien or dangerous; but very often it kept at a distance living religiosity as well. To be sure, to manifest itself in a community of men, to establish and maintain a community, indeed, to exist as a religion, religiosity needs forms; for a continuous religious community, perpetuated from generation to generation, is possible only where a common way of life is maintained. But when, instead of uniting them for freedom in God, religion keeps men tied to an immutable law and damns their demand for freedom; when, instead of viewing its forms as an obligation upon whose foundation genuine freedom can build, it views them as an obligation to exclude all freedom; when, instead of keeping its elemental sweep inviolate, it transforms the law into a heap of petty formulas and allows man’s decision for right or wrong action to degenerate into hairsplitting casuistry – then religion no longer shapes but enslaves religiosity.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Buber concedes that ritual without proper intention *can* keep a community together, but he doesn’t accept the Rabbis’ view that ritual without proper intention, when viewed as an immutable law, could ever lead to ritual with proper intention. On the contrary, he thinks that it leads to ossification – to what Rabbi Hirsch had described as the mummification of the spirit of Jewish law (even if, for Rabbi Hirsch, the situation can always be remedied, whereas for Buber, the fear is that it can’t). The result, he claims, is a spiritually stunted community. How might the Rabbis have responded?

An answer emerges when we focus on the following difference between Buber and the Rabbis. Buber thinks of religiosity primarily in terms of an encounter between the individual and God – an *I* and a *Thou*. Traditional Jewish thought, by contrast, thinks of the religious encounter between the *I* and the *Thou* as dependent upon the *I* being a member of a *We*. That is to say: traditional Jewish thought sees the individual as rooted in a community, such that he or she only becomes a fully-fledged and autonomous agent by virtue of the language, conceptual resources, and cultural legacy that she inherits from the communities to which she belongs.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Ritual, the Rabbis would insist, is part of what glues a community of faith together. Even Buber accepted that claim – except that in his opinion, the glue that holds communities together often creates religions too rigid to allow for individual religious experience. The Rabbis, by contrast, would claim that, if there were no communities of faith, individuals would be too intellectually and culturally impoverished ever to hear the word of God.

I’m with the Rabbis. But the response to Buber that we’ve offered on their behalf does give rise to a dilemma: on the one hand, ritual and law – even immutable law – are necessary in the constitution of a community of faith; on the other hand, ritual does always run the risk of becoming ossified. But this risk is mitigated, according to Rabbis, because – in their view – the spirit of the law never sinks so far beneath the surface that it cannot be recovered. Rabbi Sacks writes:

The power of the great religions is that they do more than offer a vision of the good. That could equally be said of philosophical systems. Unlike philosophical systems, however, they embody it in the life of a community. They make it vivid and substantial in prayer and ritual, in compelling narratives and collective acts of rededication.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The notion that a religious community expresses philosophical truths in the language of ritual is, I think, exactly what Rabbi Hirsch would say. The language of Jewish law and ritual, performed by the bodies of those who observe it, is complex, embodying the values of the Bible and the Rabbis. As a language, it has been preserved by tradition, even if its meaning has sometimes been forgotten. We could compare it to a text that was transmitted by accurate scribes who copied the shapes of the letters faithfully but who didn’t always know how to read. The meaning is still there, in the text that has been preserved. As long as Jewish law has been preserved in its external form, and as long as we have the Bible and the Midrash, i.e., the “literary sources of Judaism, in which its spirit is contained,”[[19]](#footnote-19) then we will always have the ability to rediscover the spirit of the law.

Ultimately, Rabbi Hirsch is simply repeating the prophetic refrain: there *is* something substandard with our ritual, and our religious practices. The fact that we’re not sufficiently concerned with social justice for all people is a sign that there’s something wrong. Why? Because religious ritual is supposed to embody a vision of the good, such that if a person holds the Bible’s vision of the good vividly in mind, then she will automatically be concerned with social justice. To hark back to our lesson on holiness[[20]](#footnote-20) – she would see all things as God’s creations; she would hold them in such awe that she wouldn’t be able to bring herself to act at all immorally, so long as she continues to view the world through the symbolic landscape that her religion has given her.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Radical Consequences**

The pedagogic track is rendered plausible by a construal of Jewish law that sees the entire halakhic system as animated by justice, love, and the promotion of justice and love to the rest of the world. This characterization of Jewish law doesn’t require any revision or reform of the external form of the law, but does require us to concede that over the course of time, the true spirit of the law has been somewhat deadened or suppressed, and that it now stands in need of revitalization. None of this requires us to deny any of the foundational assumptions of Orthodox Judaism. All this, I think, is true, but what is rarely recognized is the extent of Rabbi Hirsch’s radicalism.

It follows from Rabbi Hirsch’s view that very few Jews, even among the most pious and halakhically observant communities, are doing their Judaism right. Given what we outlined in last week’s lesson, we can safely say that as long as Jewish practice runs free from a passionate concern for social justice (for all humans) and for the ecology, it’s being practiced – according to Rabbi Hirsch –with the wrong spirit. Indeed, it seems to follow from his views that Jewish communities that deliberately isolate themselves from the rest of the world, though they may have played an essential role in preserving the *form* of the law, are holding back the very purpose of the election.

Another dimension of Rabbi Hirsch’s radicalism emerges when thinking about the relationship between his views and Zionism. Rabbi Hirsch was an opponent of the nascent Zionist movement in his days. It’s relatively easy to understand why. As far as he was concerned, exile makes it possible, especially after the emancipation, to contribute to the life of all of the nations among whom we are scattered. Not until we’ve completed the task of bringing all of humanity into the tent of ethical monotheism can we be ready for a return to our own land. Having said that, I think a Zionist should have no problem endorsing Rabbi Hirsch’s overall philosophy of Judaism. But if Zionism *is* to be accommodated by an otherwise Hirschean outlook, there will – at the very least – be some radical consequences. We shall uncover those consequences in conversation with Rabbi Hirsch’s understanding of the mandate given to Abraham.

**Back to Genesis 12**

Rabbi Hirsch sees the foundation of his entire model condensed into the words that God first says to Abraham (then called Abram) in Genesis:

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth [*lekh lekha*; more literally, “Go for yourself”] from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you and curse one who curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

In these words, Rabbi Hirsch sees two elements of the election – a personal and a collective element. The collective element then divides into two distinctive stages. Let’s take these ideas one by one. First, the personal element.

Focusing on the words “*lekh lekha*,” Rabbi Hirsch argues that Abraham is being told he must “venture out on his own,” and he must “dare to be alone, to stand by [him]self.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This is of fundamental importance to Rabbi Hirsch. It may happen that a Jew will find herself living in an age in which nobody practices Judaism with the right spirit, but she shouldn’t feel disheartened, since she is called upon to “dare to be alone.” Abraham, too, was just one person, and yet God was able to create a nation from him. As Rabbi Hirsch writes in the *Nineteen Letters*:

If only one remains – one Jew with the book of the law in his hand, with Israel’s law in his heart, Israel’s light in his spirit – that one suffices; Israel’s cause is not lost. When Israel had grown unfit for its mission, the All-One desired to permit the law and the mission of Israel to be borne by the one Moses, and the prophet tells us timid ones the same truth: “Gaze upon the rock from which we were hewn, upon the fountain-hollowing mallet with which ye were dug! Gaze upon Abraham, your father; upon Sarah, destined to bear ye. One only was he when I called him; I blessed him and made him many.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

That is the personal element of the election – the *lekh lekha*. Next, we move to the collective element. Rabbi Hirsch sees this as occurring in two stages: first, as a sovereign nation in its own land; second, if need be, as a people dispersed throughout the exile.

When Israel finds itself as a sovereign nation in its own land, the words of God to Abraham tell us that we are to *be a blessing*. According to Rabbi Hirsch, this goes against the natural tendencies of diplomacy and politics. Nations, as a rule, strive to be blessed, not to be a blessing to others. Indeed, Rabbi Hirsch adopts the political philosophy known by its adherents as *realism*, according to which nation states always, and only, act for self-interested reasons. In his words:

The honesty, humanity and love which one still demands from individuals is regarded as folly in the relation of nation to nation, have no meaning in diplomacy and politics. Deception and murder which in individuals lead to prison and gallows, if exercised on a grand scale in the “interest of the state” are crowned with laurel and medals.[[25]](#footnote-25)

As a sovereign state, in its own land, the nation of Israel is to be the exception to this realism:

In the midst of a world of men who stamp נעשה לנו שם [we shall make for ourselves a name – Genesis 11:4] as the motto on all their endeavours… the People of Abraham, are, in private and public life to follow the one calling: היה ברכה to become a blessing. To dedicate themselves with all devotion to the Divine purpose of bringing happiness to the world and mankind, thereby as models, to re-establish Man to its original pure calling of אדם [Adam], then God will grant His blessing to fresh activity of life and to the awakening and education of the nations to similar efforts and make the name of the People of Abraham shine forth far afield.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The second stage of the collective election happens in the dispersion of the exile. This stage wouldn’t have been necessary, had we succeeded in the first stage. Had we done that, then the Messiah would already have come. Nevertheless, the notion was already alluded to in God’s words to Abraham that we might one day be scattered, so as to spread the light of God as individual ambassadors of Judaism in the midst of the nations, rather than as one sovereign nation in the community of nations. As Rabbi Hirsch reads those words, God hints towards a time in which the blessing, or the lack of blessing, enjoyed by the Jewish people, would be dependent on humankind:

… where men would have the power to bless them, and men the power to curse them. This would be the stage of גלות [exile] which would await this people if they would forget their mission, and instead of striving להיות ברכה [to be a blessing] would give themselves up, like the other nations להיות ברוכים [to be blessed]. And here for this Galut, where it is scattered amongst the nations and dependent on them and apparently abandoned to them for their blessings and curses, God pronounces this weighty Word: ואברכה מברכיך, “those that bless thee, will I bless,” those that bless you, help you, who recognise and appreciate your principles, and submit to your moral sensibility and your honouring God, those will I bless.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Only those individuals and communities who are moved by the plight and the story of the Jews, and inspired by their religion, will find themselves flourishing. Here, the picture might seem unrealistic, unless you recognize that flourishing doesn’t have to be measured in terms of material success, or wealth. Rather, a nation that respects its minorities, and celebrates their values, is likely to be a nation that flourishes in terms of its own ethical and moral development. A nation that has the largeness of spirit to bless its Jewish minority will be a nation that flourishes.

To bring this message home, Rabbi Hirsh notes that the verses use one word for blessing but two different words to refer to curses – *aror* and *klala*. *Aror*, according to Rabbi Hirsch, refers to an internal curse – a curse that inhibits the *inner* life of a people, its ability to flourish. *Klala*, by contrast, refers to a curse that attacks only the *material* (i.e., external) well-being of those that it afflicts. And thus, as Rabbi Hirsch reads the verses, a nation that curses the material well-being of the Jews will suffer an internal curse from God. Antisemitic nations may well remain materially wealthy for a time, but there can be no sense in which their inner moral lives will flourish.[[28]](#footnote-28)

And thus, it isn’t hard to see how a Hirschean can accommodate a form of Zionism. There are simply two ways for the pedagogic track to work, both alluded to in God’s words to Abraham. Halakhically observant Jews who find themselves in the diaspora for whatever reason, or who find themselves – in this new global economy of ours – in contact with individual gentiles, will have the ability to function as a light unto the nations through the personal example they set in their midst. But there is also the ability for Israel, as a sovereign nation in its own land, to live up to the mission of its election collectively.

The radical consequence is this: a State of Israel is only worthy of existing to the extent that it strives to be interested in the welfare of all people – its own citizens, and also the citizens of the rest of the world. It must strive to be a potent counterexample to the realism of the rest of international politics. Whenever Israel enters into agreements or arrangements with other countries purely motivated by self-interest, it undermines its Divine calling.

For many Jews, the dream of Zionism was the dream of returning to our homeland, regaining independence, and creating a haven from the ravages of antisemitism. These are worthy goals, but – like the emancipation – Rabbi Hirsch wouldn’t be able to endorse them if they were to be treated as ends in and of themselves. We have no right to relinquish the mandate of the election.

Michael Rainsbury captures what I take to be the spirit of a Hirschean Zionism when he writes:

While we should still celebrate the 2,000-year-old dream of Jewish independence, we need to dig deeper and go further. We need to rediscover the 3,000-year-old dream of building an ethical, responsible, God-fearing society, in our ancestral homeland. Or, in the words of an as yet unwritten stanza in our beautiful national anthem: “התקווה בת שלושת אלפים לרפא עולם שבור”: The 3,000-year-old hope of healing a fractured world.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**Radical Consequences Continued**

So far, the Two-Track Model of the election stands up well to the criticisms we’ve raised – but the responses to those criticisms reveal just how radical the model is. If it’s true, then Jewish practice, even of the most pious and observant communities, is in serious need of a wholesale reinvigoration.

A Hirschean might be able to justify the creation of a State of Israel, especially in the wake of the Holocaust,[[30]](#footnote-30) as a means for providing them with safety, but in the final analysis, a Jewish State will constitute a *retreat* from the election – unless its entire body politic is dedicated to the practice of love and justice, directed to all, in recognition that we are all the children of God.

On one extreme, we can find religious Zionist writers who argue that, in our return to Israel, we have to return to what they see as “the values of the Bible” – having little to no mercy for the civilian population of our enemies[[31]](#footnote-31) and subjugating non-Jewish citizens to a second-class status, subservient to our sovereignty.[[32]](#footnote-32) Readers of this series will know that I take these views to be frankly abhorrent, and deeply mistaken as to what the values of the Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism really are.

But now we can see that a Hirschean Zionist would reflect a very different extreme. On this view, the success of the State of Israel is to be measured not in terms of military strength, or political independence, but in terms of the contributions it makes to all of humanity. Indeed, as a people who have experienced what it is to be a minority in the diaspora, and without ignoring the various challenges that the State of Israel has to face in a hostile geo-political neighborhood, a Hirschean might think that our success will be measured, in the long-term, by how well we manage to treat our own minorities.

In short: the Two-Track Model has radical consequences. Having radical consequences needn’t be an indicator of falsehood. Indeed, what else should we expect? The doctrine of the election, after all, would seem to be a radical doctrine to begin with. But the Two-Track Model has other criticisms to face, as we shall see next week.

1. Lesson 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Letter 10 of the *Nineteen Letters.* Passages from this work are taken from the Bernard Drachman translation, 1899, available at Sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., letter 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Berakhot* 45a, *Eruvin* 14b, and *Menachot* 35b. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Avoda Zara* 36a. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the *Netziv*, see lesson 14. See also *Chiddushei Aggada* of the Maharalon *Bava Metzia* 30b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Isaiah 1:11-17. JPS translations from Sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jeremiah 6:20; 7:22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hosea 8:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Amos 5:22-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Pesachim* 50b. Translation and explanation from the William Davidson edition, available at Sefaria.org, with some edits. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Isaiah 1:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Amos 5:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Isaiah 58:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York: Shocken Books, 1973), pp. 91-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I argued for this conception of agency in lesson 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rabbi Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2nd edition, 2003), p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Letter 10 of the *Nineteen Letters*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Lesson 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Recall that for Rabbi Hirsch, the *torot* are a family of laws that command us not merely to believe certain things but to try to experience our place in the world through the prism of those beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Genesis 12:1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *The Pentateuch: Translated and Explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch*, Vol. I. Genesis, rendered into English by Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 2nd Edition, 1982), p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Letter 18 of the *Nineteen Letters*, quoting Isaiah 51:1-2 and in reference to Exodus 32:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *The Pentateuch*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/rewriting-hatikva-the-significance-of-president-herzogs-speech/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Yehuda Levi argues that Rabbi Hirsch would, given his various philosophical commitments, have come around to the Zionist project in light of various developments and events that occurred in the twentieth century – not least the passing of the partition plan by the UN General Assembly. See his article, “Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch—Myth and Fact,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 31/3 (1997): 5-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This attitude was famously apparent in *Torat Hamelech* by Rabbis Yitzchak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In the words of Rabbi Meir Kahane, a non-Jew should only be allowed to live in Israel “if he also accepts the conditions of tribute and servitude.” Meir Kahane, *They Must Go* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1981)*,* p. 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)