YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**On Being Chosen:**

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

**Prof. Samuel Lebens**

**Shiur 39: Michael Wyschogrod and the “Carnal Election”**

Michael Wyschogrod (1928-2015) was a Jewish philosopher who escaped Nazi Germany at the age of 10 and moved to America. He studied Talmud (at Yeshiva University) under Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik while pursuing a PhD (at Columbia University) on the ontology of Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

There are many ways in which this series is indebted to Wyschogrod. He was in some sense the vanguard of constructive Jewish philosophy, during a period in which very few people were trying to articulate new directions in Jewish thought – especially new directions that grow from real and substantive conversation between Western philosophy and the Jewish tradition. Wyschogrod lamented the fact that academic study of Judaism, as practiced in the university world, was almost exclusively dedicated to the study of Jewish *history,* with little or no attempt to articulate any sort of vision for the Jewish present or future.

Wyschogrod recognized that Judaism cannot survive as a living culture merely by “a recounting of its history.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead, it requires philosophers who are emboldened to “think new thoughts, ask new questions, draw conclusions from recent events, and take the risk of advocating positions instead of just surveying the past.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Ultimately, of course, if there were “no Jewish thinkers, the intellectual historian of Judaism would be unemployed,”[[3]](#footnote-3) which is why there’s a certain irony when Jewish intellectual historians think it unacademic or unsightly to try, in the here and now, to articulate one’s own philosophy of Judaism.

The world of the modern yeshiva also does not tend to do what Wyschogrod was looking for. Here, the focus tends to be on the study of Talmud and *halakha*, rather than the development of Jewish philosophy. When the yeshiva world *has* (from time to time) given rise to creative trends in philosophy and theology, it hasn’t tended to be – as it was in medieval times – in conversation with the wider world of Western (or other non-Jewish streams of) thought.

Wyschogrod, an academic philosopher who dared to write constructive Jewish philosophy, was blazing a path that I am eager to follow in the present philosophical investigation of chosenness.

A second respect in which this series follows in Wyschogrod’s footsteps concerns the notion of God’s personhood. Wyschogrod insists that: “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.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This obviously accords with what I argued for in Lessons 27 and 28, where we discussed and critiqued the apersonal theology of many of the medieval rationalists. Like Wyschogrod, I have argued that we should relate to God as a perfect being, but also as a *personal* being – a *perfect* person. Wyschogrod’s route to that conclusion, however, is quite different from mine.

**God, the Perfect Person**

In lessons 27 and 28, I tried to provide philosophical arguments against apersonalism. Wyschogrod doesn’t. Instead, he appeals to the Bible. Medieval rationalists sought to demythologize the Bible’s presentation of God, and to interpret its anthropomorphisms as metaphors. Those metaphors, they insisted, must be cashed out in ways that reveal an underlying commitment to a perfectly unchanging, and *impersonal*, Unmoved Mover. These attempts at demythologization were motivated by a desire to preserve the absolute sublimity and transcendence of God; the philosophers were seeking to *praise* God. But Wyschogrod nevertheless disapproves:

We must praise God only as he wishes to be praised, no more and no less. If Hashem does not find his dignity impaired by being known as the creator of the world, the elector of Abraham, and the redeemer of Abraham’s seed from the land of Egypt, then it is not the task of man to protect Hashem’s dignity more than he wishes it protected. We must learn from the word of God which attributions constitute the proper praise of God and which do not. To heap the praise of the philosopher on God is to create a God in the image of man, [albeit] the image of philosophic man.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I find the prose here compelling, but the underlying argument doesn’t convince me at all. Wyschogrod wants his Jewish philosophy to be rooted in the Bible. I think that’s appropriate. But he was also aware that he might be accused of descending into a form of Karaism. Karaism was a sect of Judaism that rejected the Oral Torah and based itself solely upon the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic Judaism, by contrast, is *not* the religion of the Hebrew Bible alone. It is, rather, the religion of the Hebrew Bible as cast through the prism of Rabbinic (and later) tradition. And though Wyschogrod seeks to defend himself against the accusation of Karaism,[[6]](#footnote-6) I would argue that a truly traditional/Orthodox Jewish thinker has to take into account *both* the fact that God – in the Bible – is happy to be presented in personal terms, *and* the fact that God – in the Rabbinic tradition (from the apophaticism of Rabbi Chanina, who doubts that any words of praise can do justice to God,[[7]](#footnote-7) to that of Maimonides) – is often, so to speak, *unwilling* to be presented in personal terms. Those later layers of Jewish thinking cannot be lightly dismissed. At the very least, because they seem to be integral parts of the tradition, they deserve a philosophical rebuttal (following the general methodology laid out in lesson 1 of this series, according to which elements of the tradition can *sometimes* be dismissed, but only under the weight of significant philosophical pressure).

Moreover, Jewish philosophy from Saadya all the way down to Wyschogrod himself has been dedicated to interpreting revelation in the light of *reason*. Yes, the revealed word of God, in the Bible, presents God in personal terms. But if there are sufficiently strong philosophical *reasons* to deny that the Creator of the universe could be a personal being, then a Jewish philosopher will be duty bound to reinterpret Biblical appearances to the contrary. It was for that reason that we dedicated so much time (in lessons 27 and 28) to an examination of the medieval philosophical arguments *for* apersonalism. Only if those arguments can be dismissed, as I think they can (in light of lessons 27 and 28), would we have any right at all to take Biblical personalism at face value.

Wyschogrod’s route to personalism is thus too Biblical and insufficiently philosophical. In contrast, his path to the notion that God is *perfect* is – to my mind, at least – too philosophical and insufficiently Biblical. In the fourth chapter of his *magnum opus*, *The Body of Faith*, Wyschogrod arrives at his commitment to God’s transcendence and perfection in the wake of a sustained meditation on the nature of being. This meditation is conducted in close conversation with Heidegger and Kierkegaard. The upshot of that conversation is that, though we cannot sever the connection between God and personhood, we must also grapple with the fact that God is not merely a being among beings.[[8]](#footnote-8) He may be a person, but He isn’t a person like other persons, because unlike any other person, He is the source of all being. In fact, He utterly transcends both being and nonbeing.[[9]](#footnote-9) Indeed, God’s transcendence is what serves – for Wyschogrod – as the basis for God’s perfection, which then has to be balanced alongside Wyschogrod’s commitment to personalism.

As a philosopher brought up in the analytical tradition of philosophy, I feel ill-equipped to evaluate the Heideggerian reflections that lead Wyschogrod to his conception of God’s transcendent perfection. If I were to chase after an *a priori* foundation for the belief that God is perfect, my inclination would be to reflect upon the ontological argument of St. Anselm, including its most modern iterations in the work of Kurt Gödel,[[10]](#footnote-10) Alvin Plantinga,[[11]](#footnote-11) and others.[[12]](#footnote-12) At the very least, it seems to me, these arguments establish that *if* there exists some necessarily existent being at the root of the very possibility of all other things, then that being must be, in some sense or other, *perfect.* And yet, for a person conducting *Jewish* philosophy within the parameters that we established in lesson 1, there seems to be a much simpler root to the conclusion that God is transcendent and perfect, namely, by reading the Bible.

In Deuteronomy, we’re told that God’s work is perfect (*tamim pa’alo*) and that He is without iniquity (*E-l emuna, ve-ein avel)*.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the book of Psalms, God’s ways are said to be perfect (*tamim darko*),[[14]](#footnote-14) as is His law (*Torat Hashem temim*a);[[15]](#footnote-15) He is also described as righteous in His ways (*tzaddik Hashem be-khol derakhav*).[[16]](#footnote-16) His perfect beauty (His “*clal-yofi*,” whatever exactly that is supposed to mean) is said to shine forth from Zion.[[17]](#footnote-17) There are also numerous verses indicating God’s limitless power and knowledge.[[18]](#footnote-18) God’s transcendence is beautifully expressed by King Solomon at the dedication of the newly built Temple, when he says, “Behold! Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!”[[19]](#footnote-19) And, perhaps most famously, Isaiah has God declare that

[M]y thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways… As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.[[20]](#footnote-20)

God, as He is presented in the Bible, is both perfect and transcendent, and perfect in His transcendence. There is no significant protest against this implication of the Bible in later Jewish thought; to the extent that such protests have emerged, from time to time, they have been drowned out by the overwhelming consensus of Jewish thinkers from time immemorial until today. Accordingly, I don’t feel the need to arrive at the notion of God’s transcendence or His perfection in conversation with Heidegger or Kirkegaard, however valuable their insights into being might be.

Nevertheless, and despite the different ways in which Wyschogrod and I might have come to our conception of God as a perfect person, one should be able to see the ways in which this series is already Wyschogrodian. It is committed to the project of constructive Jewish philosophy, and it has arrived at a theology that is more personal than Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover. But, despite these Wyschogrodian underpinnings, I cannot accept the actual theory of the election that Wyschogrod proposes. In this lesson, we shall examine that proposal and my reasons for rejecting it.

**The Marriage Model Returns**

Wyschogrod’s theory of the election is, to my mind, the most developed account to date of the Biblical Marriage Model of the election, which we explored in lesson 9. Prior to Wyschogrod, the Jewish philosopher to give that model the most weight was Rabbi Joseph Albo and his suprarational account of the election.[[21]](#footnote-21) In order to lay the ground for Wyschogrod’s account, and to appreciate its specific strengths, we would do well to remind ourselves of Albo’s model and the problems to which it gave rise.

According to Albo, God loves the Jewish people, and only the Jewish people, with “*cheshek*” – a type of love that is radically free, and not beholden to reason. He loves us this way because He *chose* to love us this way, not because we have a property that other people lack, that somehow forced His hand.

According to this account, our special obligations to God, as manifest in the 613 commandments, are not primarily motivated by some sort of mission that we have to play in order to be a light unto the nations. Rather, the specific demands that God makes of us are simply the consequence of God’s special love for us.

When subjecting Rabbi Albo’s account to scrutiny, I raised a concern about arbitrariness. Because it isn’t beholden to specific properties or reasons, there’s always going to be a sense in which Alboean *cheshek* is arbitrary. But a totally rational being, you might think, never makes arbitrary decisions without some overriding reason to do so. So, God wouldn’t fall in love with some arbitrarily chosen people unless He had an overriding reason to fall in love with some people or other. In thinking through this question, I came up with a possible answer, motivated by Albo’s thought: that God wanted to love some people or other, in order to provide an example to all of humanity of what real freedom looks like, and, perhaps, what true love can aspire to be; thus, He somewhat randomly (or arbitrarily) selected a people, in total freedom – freedom even from reason – whom He would then love with abandon. That people was us.

But this theory of the election raises two thorny questions:

1. Is God’s love, as Albo describes it, really an exercise of free will?
2. Is it fair, and therefore compatible with Divine justice, for God to love some of His human creatures more than others?

The first question is motivated by the fear that if a choice has *no* reason behind it, then, rather than being an expression of absolute freedom, it collapses into something that’s somehow *random*, more like a spasm than a manifestation of free agency. The second question is easy to understand: You, as a human being, don’t automatically harm anyone by falling in love romantically with just one person, because there are, as the old adage would tell us, plenty more fish in the sea. However, since there is only one God, if God really were to choose just one people to love, there would be a real sense in which others are harmed. There are not plenty of other gods in the sea, and thus, in loving just one people, God would be doing something unjust. Simply providing humanity with a perfect example of freedom, and of love freely rendered, doesn’t seem to overcome the great injustice of Divine favoritism. A perfect God, we might insist, would have no favorites.

Wyschogrod’s theory of the election, we shall see, has inbuilt responses to these two questions. In that sense, Wyschogrod’s view can be seen as a development of, and indeed, an improvement upon, the work of Albo.

**Favorite Children**

Like Albo, Wyschogrod relates to God’s love as suprarational. That is to say, God doesn’t love Abraham (or his progeny) because of any particular property or set of properties that Abraham (or his progeny) manifested. But, unlike Albo, Wyschogrod has no trouble explaining how a love like that doesn’t become *so* random as to collapse into something like a spasm. Albo’s God is more personal than the God of many medieval Jewish theologians, but Wyschogrod’s God is a fully-fledged person. If God is a person, Wyschogrod insists, then God has a *personality*.[[22]](#footnote-22) And if God has a personality, then it’s all but “inevitable that he will find himself more compatible with some of his [creatures] than [with] others.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Not because of any particular quality that Abraham has, so much as a certain *je ne sais quoi*. And thus, whether or not God’s falling in love with Abraham was an exercise of Divine *freedom*, and even though – as with romantic love in general – God’s love for Abraham cannot be explained in terms of some finite list of *reasons*, nevertheless, the love in question isn’t random or spasmodic. Rather, God’s love for Abraham can be said to flow from God’s very nature.

If that’s the case, then we might now have an account as to why God chose Abraham in preference to others – it was simply a matter of personal compatibility. But then we have to worry as to whether God’s choice, which certainly wasn’t random or spasmodic, was really so *free*. Could God have chosen anyone else if Abraham had the most compatible personality? Fundamentally, this question needn’t bother Wyschogrod too much. If the choice really was a natural consequence of God’s nature, and therefore less than perfectly free, Wyschogrod’s account of the election would be relatively unscathed. For Wyschogrod, the election isn’t supposed to be a revelation of God’s *freedom* – as it is for Albo. Rather, the election is a revelation of something else entirely. The election is a revelation of God’s love for all of humanity.

This surprising suggestion leads us straight to the second question that plagued Albo’s account. How is it fair for God to have favorites? Indeed, how on earth could that be a revelation of God’s love for *all* of humanity?

Wyschogrod *could* respond by saying it isn’t a matter of fair or unfair; it’s just a matter of God’s nature. If God is a person, even a perfect person, then God has a personality. And if God has a personality, it will be more compatible with some people than with others. It just so happens that God’s personality was most compatible with Abraham, whom He loved, and whose children He loves because of their connection to Abraham. The seeming unfairness here is just a consequence of accepting that God, even in His perfection, is still a perfect *person*. Persons have personalities, and no random pair of personalities will be equally compatible. To ask how this is fair is to misunderstand the nature of interpersonal relations. That’s just how things are.

There are times in which Wyschogrod does seem to be making such a point. He writes:

God’s relationship to Abraham is truly a falling in love. The biblical text tells us this when it fails to explain the reason for the election of Abraham … In the Bible, it is not Abraham who moves toward God but God who turns to Abraham with an election that is not explained because it is an act of love that requires no explanation. 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… To much of philosophical theology, such talk has been an embarrassment in urgent need of demythologization. But theologians must not be more protective of God’s dignity than he is of his own because God’s true dignity is the sovereignty of his choice for genuine relation with man.[[24]](#footnote-24)

At the beginning of this excerpt, it seems as if Wyschogrod would tell us not to question the fairness of God’s choice, since even God was helpless. He fell helplessly in love. But the final sentence hints to the fact that even Wyschogrod, despite his deeply personal theology, wasn’t willing to render God totally helpless in this way. We must remember that even for Wyschogrod, God isn’t merely a being among beings. Rather, God *transcends* being. Such a God cannot ever be truly helpless – even if He is a person. Rather, Wyschogrod thinks that God *chose* to render himself helpless, so to speak. This is a type of *tzimtzum.*

Because God isn’t a human, and because God transcends all beings, He didn’t *have* to love His creatures in a distinctively *human* way. His love for humanity could have been of a more abstract form than the passionate love that holds between romantic human lovers. But, as far as Wyschogrod understands things, we have learned through the revelation that, “The love with which God has chosen to love man is a love understandable to man.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

In other words, God chose to love humanity in a human way. Once God has chosen to love man in that way, then He allows Himself to fall helplessly in love with the person most compatible with His own personality. That person was Abraham. But then, our second question comes back with greater force. If God only fell helplessly in love with Abraham because He *chose* to, then *why* did He allow Himself to, when the consequence would be an unjust favoritism that harms all those who are left out?

Wyschogrod’s answer is that if God’s love weren’t manifest in ways that involve partiality and result in favorites, His love wouldn’t be a love that humanity could fathom. To make this argument clear, Wyschogrod switches from the metaphor of God’s beloved wife to the metaphor of God’s favorite child. He writes:

If Abraham was especially loved by God, it is because God is a father who does not stand in a legal relationship to his children, which by its nature requires impartiality and objectivity. As a father, God loves his children and knows each one as who he is with his strengths and weaknesses, his virtues and vices. Because a father is not an impartial judge but a loving parent and because a human father is a human being with his own personality, it is inevitable that he will find himself more compatible with some of his children than others and, to speak very plainly, that he [will] love some more than others. There is usually great reluctance on the part of parents to admit this, but it is a truth that must not be avoided. And it is also true that a father loves all his children, so that they all know of and feel the love they receive, recognizing that to substitute an impartial judge for a loving father would eliminate the preference for the specially favored but would also deprive all of them of a father. The mystery of Israel’s election thus turns out to be the guarantee of the fatherhood of God towards all people, elect and nonelect, Jew and gentile.[[26]](#footnote-26)

How do gentiles know that God’s love for them is *real*? They know it because God has favorites. Though they’re not among the favorites, Wyschogrod seems to think they should rejoice in the existence of favorites. It is the fact that God favors others that, according to Wyschogrod, ensures that God’s relationship with the non-favored isn’t merely a formal and objective, quasi-legal, relationship, but a real, differentiating, and responsive *love*. God loves all people. And the love is real. How can we come to know this fact? In part, the answer to that question is *because God has chosen to love us in a human way*, with a love that we can understand. Consequently, His love isn’t blind. It flows from His personhood. It therefore has favorites.

To be sure, Wyschogrod recognizes that God’s favoritism will, at first, be hurtful to the non-elect. That’s why the Bible so clearly depicts the suffering of Esau. If we relate to the text as God narrating the facts, and if we recognize the sympathetic tones in which Esau’s suffering is recounted, we should realize that God, despite having His favorites, “shows Esau compassion,” when narrating the story, “even if Jacob does not.”[[27]](#footnote-27) But despite the initial hurt, Wyschogrod thinks the election of Israel offers an important consolation to the non-elect:

The consolation of the gentiles is the knowledge that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness. The choice, after all, is between [1] a lofty divine love equally distributed to all without recognition of uniqueness and [2] real encounter, which necessarily involves favorites but in which each is unique and addressed as such.[[28]](#footnote-28)

I have deep reservations with what Wyschogrod is saying here. So much so that it is hard for me to hold back my critical rejoinders. But before I let loose, there’s one last detail of the picture that must be put in place. One might want to know why God’s special love, initially directed primarily towards Abraham, then extends only onto his *biological* descendants rather than to his intellectual or spiritual heirs (some of whom will be his biological heirs, but some of whom will not be).

On Wyschogrod’s account, God sees Abraham’s face in Abraham’s biological descendants, irrespective of whether their beliefs and character traits align with their holy ancestor. God favors these people, on Wyschogrod’s account, even over individuals who are unrelated by lineage but whose non-biological resemblance to Abraham might be very great indeed, in possessing virtues more akin to Abraham’s. This seems peculiar. Wyschogrod raises the question much more vividly. He writes:

There still remains the problem of the national election of Israel. Even if we see the election of Abraham as flowing from the fatherhood of God, we can still remain in the darkest of puzzlement in regard to the election of a whole people, the seed of Abraham, unto all eternity. What is the meaning behind the spontaneous emergence of the nation at the moment God enters into romance with Abraham?... Is this not properly the domain of the “single one,” the man who stands alone before God and is able to hear God only because he has escaped the power of the crowd, which drowns out the voice from above? Finally, and perhaps above all, why a covenant with the carnal instead of the spiritual seed of Abraham? Are there not those who are Abraham’s children in the spirit who are more dear to God than a crass, perhaps unbelieving, Jew who is related to Abraham in the flesh but whose spiritual illumination is quite dim? Are not the real elect the aristocrats of the spirit, who derive from all peoples, cultures, and races?[[29]](#footnote-29)

It is in response to this question that Wyschogrod launches his defense of a carnal election.

**The Carnal Election**

The central idea here is that God wants to sanctify and redeem not just our minds, but our bodies too; not just our individual selves, but our families too; and not just our families, but the nations within which our families flourish. All of these things (the mind and the body of the individual, and the family, and whole nations) can be enfolded into the religious life and brought into relationship with a God who showers them all in love. This harks back to what we saw in lessons 2 and 3. God, as He’s presented in the Bible (especially in the first eleven chapters), wants to create a world in which individuals can flourish within communities that nourish and enrich the identities of their individual members while respecting their individual sanctity. These communities can then take their place within nations that respect the sanctity of their constituent communities, and then, within a community of nations that collectively respects and celebrates the dignity of difference.

Accordingly, when God falls in love with Abraham, He falls in love not just with his mind, but with his whole human being – body and soul. And because God sanctifies the notion of a biological family, God’s love for Abraham extends quite naturally to Abraham’s biological family. Moreover, because God sanctifies the notion of well-governed nations taking their rightful place in the march of history, God’s love for Abraham’s biological family extends quite naturally to the nation of Israel that grows out of that family. Though this is all a consequence of God’s love for Abraham, none of it is inevitable, and Wyschogrod doesn’t claim to have come to these conclusions on the basis of philosophical introspection alone. Rather, Wyschogrod comes to these conclusions on the basis of his reading of God’s revelation in the Hebrew Bible. As far as philosophy (when unaided by revelation) is concerned,

God could have played a godly role, interested in certain features of human existence, the spiritual, but not in others, the material. He could even have assigned man the task of wrenching himself out of the material so as to assume his spiritual identity, which is just what so many religions believe he did. Instead, the God of Israel confirms man as he created him to live in the material cosmos. There is therefore no possibility of a divine requirement for the discarding of a part of human existence. Instead, there is a requirement for the sanctification of human existence in all of its aspects.[[30]](#footnote-30)

This is why God loves Abraham, and Israel, both in spirit and in body.

Israel’s symbol of the covenant is circumcision, a searing of the covenant into the flesh of Israel and not only, or perhaps not even primarily, into its spirit. And that is why God’s election is of a carnal people. By electing the seed of Abraham, God creates a people that is in his service in the totality of its human being and not just in its moral and spiritual existence. The domain of the family, the most fundamental and intimate human association, is thereby sanctified, so that obedience to God does not require hate of father and mother.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Where Franz Rosenzweig hears God commanding Abraham to leave behind his father’s home, Wyschogrod hears God enfolding Abraham’s new family life into his relationship with God. Of course, he is first “commanded to leave his land, birthplace, and father’s house.”[[32]](#footnote-32) If things had been left there, then God would have been wrenching Abraham away

from his natural setting, from the bonds that tie him to his parents, brothers, sisters, and the whole world into which he was born and that gives man his natural security. If the divine command went no further, if it merely instructed him to leave his birthplace and then preach a moral vision or religious discovery, then the natural would have been slain once and for all and Kierkegaard would be right in saying that a real relation with God excludes real relations with human beings. But the divine command does not stop there. After commanding Abraham to leave his father’s house, it promises to make a great nation of his seed. The natural is now reinstated, projected into the future instead of rooted primarily in the past, and, above all, sanctified as a natural community. The divine does not, therefore, destroy the natural but confirms it by placing it in its service.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Wyschogrod is aware that people will “recoil” from the notion of a carnal election.[[34]](#footnote-34) But this, he argues, is only because we have internalized the Western philosopher’s “respect for the spirit and contempt for the body.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The Hebrew Bible rejects the “Gnostic spiritualization that sees man as spirit fallen into the shadow world of the material from which he seeks desperately to extricate himself.”[[36]](#footnote-36) When God elects the Israelites, He elects them in the “fullness of [their] humanity”[[37]](#footnote-37) – body and soul:

God therefore loves the spirit and body of the people of Israel and it is for this reason that both are holy. The enemies of God who strive to destroy God by destroying his people cannot rest content with the destruction of the Jewish “religion” or Jewish “culture” but must also, or perhaps primarily, destroy the body of Israel.[[38]](#footnote-38)

At this point, Wyschogrod embraces something akin to the Rabbinic incarnational view of the election.[[39]](#footnote-39) Because God loves the spirit and the body of the people of Israel, their physical bodies become, collectively, something like the location of God in the physical world. And it is because the people of Israel are to serve as God’s redemptive presence in the material world that the election had to be carnal, and transmitted through the body.[[40]](#footnote-40) Moreover, by associating Himself with the physical and biological people of Israel, God anchors His presence in this world in the most unconditional way:

Had God chosen a people on the basis of purely spiritual criteria, such a people could have abandoned its election by rejecting the teachings that were the basis of its spiritual election. But God chose a carnal people, whose physical being in the world is a sign of the existence of God.[[41]](#footnote-41) This people is in the service of God no matter what ideas it embraces or rejects. It cannot escape the service of God because its face is known in the family of man as that of the people of God.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Here, of course, Wyschogrod is leaning into the Biblical Name-Bearing Model of the election, and tying it into the Marriage Model.[[43]](#footnote-43) By favoring Abraham, and by attaching Himself to the body of Israel, God communicates to all of humanity that He loves them all with a real, responsive, differentiating, and human love. By choosing Abraham in the fullness of his humanity – body and soul – God communicates to all people that the love He has for *them* also extends to the fullness of their humanity, that their bodies can be sanctified as well as their spirits. By choosing Abraham’s biological family, rather than his spiritual descendants, God anchors Himself into the world *unconditionally*. By making Abraham’s biological family into a *nation*, and favoring that nation over others, He reveals to every nation that the realm of nation-building and history, from which many spiritualizing religions would have us flee, can be a site of redemption and a magnet for God’s true, discerning, and responsive love. Once again, the fact that Israel is God’s *favorite* is what lets every nation know that the love He has for them all is *real* and concrete, rather than abstract and formal.

These incarnational and Name-Bearing themes reach their pinnacle in the memorable final words of Wyschogrod’s book. He writes:

The circumcised body of Israel is the dark, carnal presence through which the redemption makes its way in history. Salvation is of the Jews because the flesh of Israel is the abode of the divine presence in the world. It is the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Finally, you might ask, can this carnal – indeed, *biological* – doctrine of the election make room for the notion of conversion to Judaism? Can non-native people become a part of the body of Israel, to which God is attached? Wyschogrod insists that they can. How?

By means of a miracle. A gentile who converts to Judaism miraculously becomes a part of the body of Israel. This is far more than merely sharing Jewish beliefs and practices. To become a Jew, a gentile must become seed of the patriarchs and matriarchs and that is what she becomes, quasi-physically, miraculously… This does not, of course, imply that the biological miracle that accompanies a conversion can be observed under the microscope as changes in the DNA of the convert. It is [rather] a theological-biological miracle.[[45]](#footnote-45)

**Gellman Rather than Wyschogrod**

My primary reason for rejecting Wyschogrod’s account of the election is quite simple. I reject Wyschogrod’s claim that every parent has a favorite child. I am the father of three children. I love all of them. I certainly love them differently, because they’re different people. I love them so differently, perhaps, that to weigh up which I love most is both perverse and wrong-headed. Perverse, because comparisons would be reductive of something unquantifiable. Wrong-headed, because the loves are incommensurate. I find it difficult to sympathize with a parent who has a favorite child. Admittedly, I understand why, in the very particular circumstances of the life of Jacob, he would have a soft spot for the only child whose birth didn’t kill the only woman he had ever wanted to marry. But even so, his favoring of Joseph is clearly presented by the narrative as something regrettable, that had terrible consequences.

We shouldn’t assume that all parents have a favorite child. We shouldn’t insist that love is only human, particular, and responsive, when it has *favorites*. And once these assumptions have been denied, Wyschogrod’s justification for the election altogether crumbles. God needn’t favor one nation over others to demonstrate that His love for every nation is real. God can love all of His children without favoring any of them. How then *should* we deal with the Marriage Model, which comes from the Bible, and which seems to condemn God as irredeemably capricious, impugning His righteousness with the corruption of favoritism? Wyschogrod’s defense of the model rests upon a patently false premise. So, what should we do?

First, we might ask, how seriously does the Bible take the model itself? Amos is one of the prophets who declares that God has known only the Jewish people intimately, and that – because of this unique intimacy – God punishes the Jews, when they sin, more severely than He punishes others.[[46]](#footnote-46) And yet Amos is also the prophet who tells us that we’re not special at all; that just as He brought us out of the land of Egypt, He also brought the Philistines out of Caphtor, and the Arameans out of Kir.[[47]](#footnote-47) And thus, we might say that even the Biblical proponents of the Marriage Model were less than persistent.

Should we go as far as Saadya Gaon and reduce all talk of God’s special love for the Jews into a figure of speech that basically has no cognitive content at all, that is intended merely to lift us up and make us feel good?[[48]](#footnote-48) Isn’t that to take too much liberty with the text?

I would suggest a compromise. The Marriage Model, as it appears in the Bible, should be seen as a metaphor that aptly expresses the fact that God loves us, and aptly conveys the moral severity of Jewish backsliding, by comparing it to marital infidelity. But we shouldn’t allow the aptness of the metaphor to lead us to believe that God actually prefers Jews to gentiles. If good parents needn’t prefer one child over others in order for their love to be real, then a good God needn’t perform such an injustice. In fact, Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman has proposed an account of God’s special love for Israel that renders His love to be both personal and free of any hint of favoritism.

Gellman claims that we needn’t distinguish between God’s greater and lesser love, as it applies to different communities of humans. On the contrary, God loves us all equally. Rather, we must distinguish between “manifestly revealed love and less than manifestly revealed love.”[[49]](#footnote-49) If God revealed the full extent of His love to every single human, it would be overwhelming. Accordingly, God has selected just one people, perhaps at random, whom He will overwhelm by more *manifestly* revealing His love for them. In so doing, all other human beings can catch a glimpse of the love that God has for everyone. Gellman writes:

I can love two people perfectly equally, but for good reason reveal that love in a much more open and free manner to one rather than to the other, and for the good of the other. God loves all equally, all the time. God has made his love of the Jews more explicit, overwhelming them at Mt. Sinai, while giving indications of love for all.[[50]](#footnote-50)

On Gellman’s account, the election is something of a burden for the Jews. Recall Amos, and his claim that because we are chosen, we are subjected to more severe punishments when we sin. Moreover, Gellman says, in tones that are reminiscent of the Tiferet Yisrael, there is “greatly more value in people coming close to God in freedom than in being coerced into relationship with God.”[[51]](#footnote-51) And yet, God wants all people to have some idea of the love He has for them, if only to encourage them “to turn to God in freedom, returning love to God.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Gellman calls this the figurational account of the election because all people on earth will witness, in God’s relationship with the Jews, “a living figuration of God’s present love of them and a prefiguration of God’s obvious love for them,” which will be more manifestly revealed in the eschaton.[[53]](#footnote-53)

In some respects, Gellman’s account of the election, and of God’s love for Israel, resembles Wyschogrod’s. They both relate to God’s love for Israel as conveying an important message to the rest of humanity. For Wyschogrod, it conveys the claim that, while God prefers the Jews to all other people, His love for all of humanity is real, personal, and responsive, rather than formal, impersonal, and abstract. For Gellman, it conveys the claim that, while God doesn’t want to overwhelm all of humanity, as He has overwhelmed the Jews, He does, nevertheless, love *all* people just as much as He loves the Jews. But Gellman, unlike Wyschogrod, isn’t taking the Marriage Model more literally than he should. Instead, he has woven the notion of God’s overwhelming love for Israel into a version of a Two-Track Model. By overwhelming the Jews with a revelation of His love for them, God basically forces them into His service – that is the Jewish track. This forced servitude will play a role in encouraging voluntary servitude from the rest of humanity, whom God loves with equal passion even if He doesn’t reveal this love as manifestly before the end of days – that is the gentile track.

Gellman’s account of God’s love for Israel is much more philosophically compelling than Wyschogrod’s account, for two reasons. First, because it relies on no faulty premise about personal love necessarily entailing favoritism. Second, because it is closer to the Biblical data than Wyschogrod’s. Indeed, it can explain the ambivalence of prophets like Amos regarding the Marriage Model, and the more general ambivalence of the Hebrew Bible regarding the exclusivity of God’s love for Israel.[[54]](#footnote-54) Gellman does this by regarding the Marriage Model as a metaphor that aptly conveys some elements of God’s relationship with Israel, but which shouldn’t be taken too literally. It barely merits mentioning that Gellman’s theory also allows us to escape from the unsightly notion that conversion to Judaism entails some sort of undetectable biological miracle.

**Rabbi Sacks, Wyschogrod, and Rabbi Soloveitchik: On Fate and Destiny**

Judaism, for Wyschogrod, is nothing much more than the Jewish people. “Separated from the Jewish people,” he insists, “nothing is Judaism. If anything,” he continues, “it is the Jewish people that is Judaism.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Rabbi Sacks responds as follows:

To be sure, the early rabbinic literature had speculated on which of the two terms of the covenant took priority: Torah or the people of Israel. But the halakhic as against the mystical tradition had seen holiness not as a predicate of objects and persons but of acts and intentions. A Jew was holy not in what he was but in what he did. Hence Saadia’s insistence that Jewish law *constituted* the Jewish people. It did not merely regulate a people whose defining characteristics lay elsewhere. Wyschogrod writes within the halakhic tradition, but argues that peoplehood is religiously prior to that tradition.[[56]](#footnote-56)

This was not something with which Rabbi Sacks could agree. In fact, as I shall explain in what follows, I find Rabbi Sacks’ explicit critique of Wyschogrod to be surprisingly restrained.

Wyschogrod laments the fact that too many Jewish thinkers had “reduced Judaism to ethics.”[[57]](#footnote-57) The “Ethical Judaism” of nineteenth-century liberal Judaism was, to his mind, less authentic than the “ethnically rooted Judaism of eastern Europe [which] never shared this focus on the ethical.”[[58]](#footnote-58) We shouldn’t misrepresent Wyschogrod on this point. He didn’t deny the fact that the “ethical is central in the deepest layers of Jewish consciousness.”[[59]](#footnote-59) But, because the ethical dimension of Judaism is, for Wyschogrod, secondary to the ethnic and national identity of the Jewish people, and since the survival of nations often requires the making “difficult decisions that inevitably lead to the deaths of many, including many innocent [people],”[[60]](#footnote-60) Wyschogrod could insist that the ethical dimension of Judaism was important, but not *paramount*. Indeed, he explicitly concedes that his book “To some extent… reduces the centrality of the ethical in Judaism.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Moreover, he wrote:

Interpretations of Judaism that focus almost exclusively on the ethical, such as those of Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas are therefore no longer adequate. Judaism is once again living in history and therefore the ahistory of rabbinic Judaism must now be supplemented by the historical Judaism of the Bible.[[62]](#footnote-62)

This is why I find Rabbi Sacks’s restraint in critiquing Wyschogrod so surprising. First of all, Rabbi Sacks argues that everything that the Torah contains, “not only [its] mitzvot but also [its] narratives” appears in the Torah “solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction.”[[63]](#footnote-63) That being so, Rabbi Sacks would surely reject any philosophy that places the ethical any distance away from the foundation of a Jewish philosophy – even if our being embedded in a communal context is to be viewed as equally foundational.

Secondly, the notion that “rabbinic Judaism must now be supplemented by the historical Judaism of the Bible” sounds perilously close to the rallying cry of the most extremely right-wing of religious Zionists, the fanatics who regard the ethical sensibilities of the Rabbis as *galuti* and who (while misunderstanding the ethics of the Bible) call for a return to the ethics of the Bible.[[64]](#footnote-64) Rabbi Sacks, by contrast, insists that our recovery of sovereignty, in our own land, has no power to dislodge the centrality of ethics from our Jewish lives. “This is not ‘*galut* mentality’,” insists Rabbi Sacks, “nor is it the ethic of a timorous minority. It is Judaism plain and simple.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

Rabbi Sacks was always deeply impressed by Rabbi Soloveitchik’s distinction between the Jewish covenant of fate and the Jewish covenant of destiny. To be bound by a covenant of fate is to be an *am* (a people). Jews are bound by such a covenant because we all suffer from the slings and arrows of outrageous Jewish fortune. Irrespective of our individual differences, our different beliefs, practices, and levels of religious observance – as far as fate is concerned, to be a Jew is to be subject to the possibility of antisemitic persecution. To be bound by a covenant of *destiny*, by contrast, is to be a *goy* (a nation). Jews are only bound by such a covenant to the extent that they actually share a common purpose and vision for the future.

In his restrained critique of Wyschogrod, which, as we’ve seen, could have gone much further, Rabbi Sacks complains that Wyschogrod reduces Jewish identity to a “state of being rather than of doing.”[[66]](#footnote-66) As far as Rabbi Sacks is concerned, this is to reduce Jewish identity entirely to a covenant of fate. But the election of the Jews, as we shall see next week, holds little meaning for Rabbi Sacks unless it gives rise to a “shared religious destiny” which alone can give our otherwise insignificant kinship “substance and sense.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), pg. xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., pg. xxxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., pg. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the preface to *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Berakhot* 33b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, especially, Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, pg. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., pg. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kurt Gödel, “Appendix B: Texts Relating to the Ontological Proof” in Solomon Fefermann (ed.), *Kurt Gödel: Collected Works*, Volume III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 429-438. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), chapter 10; and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row,1974), part 2c. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, for example, Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God*: *A New Defense of Perfect Being Theism,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Deuteronomy 32:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Psalms 18:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 19:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 145:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 50:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Some of these were cited in lesson 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I Kings 8:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Isaiah 55:8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See lesson 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Indeed, the third chapter of *The Body of Faith* is entitled, “The personality of God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., pg. 65. Admittedly, this quote was originally about a human father, rather than God, but it’s clear that Wyschogrod thinks that this consequence of a father having a personality applies equally to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., pg. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., pp. 64-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., pg. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., pp. 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., pp. 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., pg. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. See lesson 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., pg. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., pg. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See lesson 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith,* pg. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Here, Wyschogrod is borrowing from the Bible’s Name-Bearing Model of the election; see lesson 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., pg. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See lesson 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Wyschogrod*, The Body of Faith,* pg. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *The Body of Faith*, pg. xviii-xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Amos 3:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Amos 9:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See lesson 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman, *The People, The Torah, The God: A Neo-Traditional Jewish Theology* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023), pg. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., pg. 7. See lesson 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., pg. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. See lesson 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, pg. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought After the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pg. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, pg. xxxiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., pg. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., pg. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., pg. xxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Rabbi Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible,* volume 1 (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), pg. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Having said that, it should be noted that Wyschogrod’s own politics, as a cautious supporter of the Oslo peace process, were decidedly moderate; see *The Body of Faith*, pg. xxvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Chief Rabbi’s Notebook,” *Le’ela* (September 1994), pp. 2-5, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Rabbi Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant*, pg. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)