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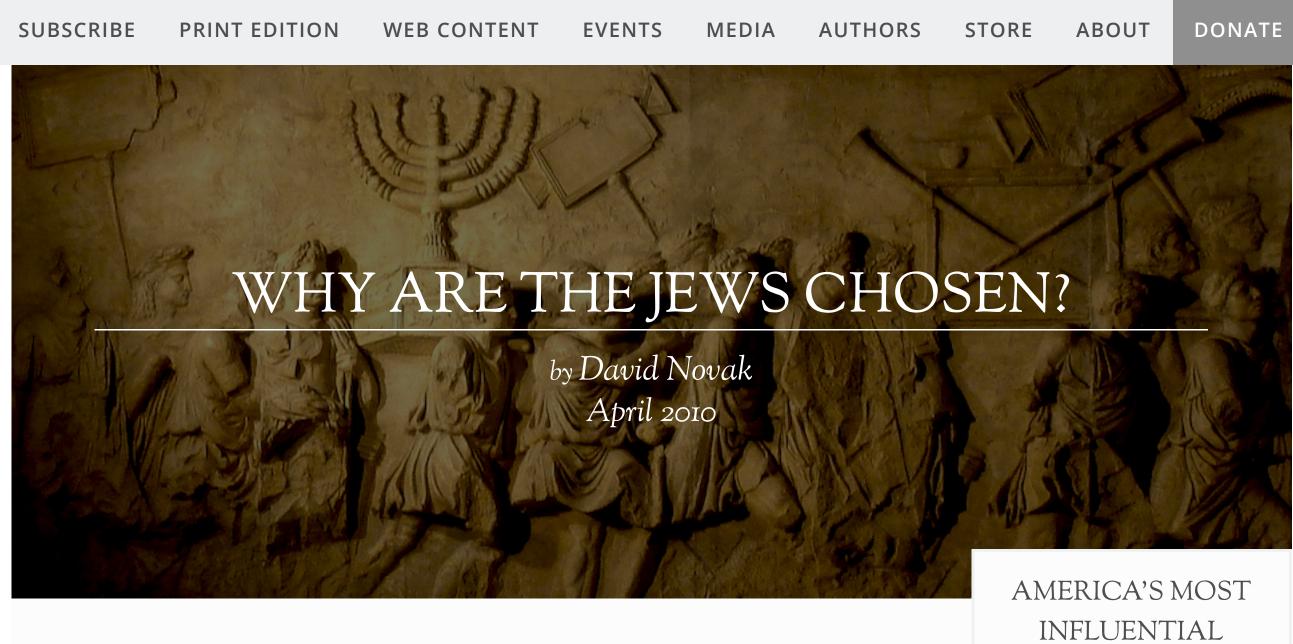
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ne way anti-Jewish sentiment has been interpreted is simply as a quid pro quo. Gentile animosity, in this view, does to the Jews what the Jews have done, or at least would like to do, to Gentiles —because we Jews present ourselves as the *chosen* people. In the seventeenth century, Baruch Spinoza suggested that the Jews made the Gentiles hate them by claiming to be God's people and setting themselves apart by their practice of circumcision—the bodily sign of God's covenantal election. In 1938, immediately after the Nazi pogroms of Kristallnacht, George Bernard Shaw wondered why the Jews were complaining so loudly; after all, wasn't this what the chosen people did to the Canaanites in the process of conquering the promised land?

In this view of Jewish chosenness—given its clearest expression, after the Holocaust, in George Steiner's 1999 novel The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.—envy of the Jews' claim made the Nazis do two things. The first was to accuse the Jews not only of having invented their chosenness but also of having invented the God who chose them. As Steiner's Hitler asks, "Was there ever a crueler invention, a contrivance more calculated to harrow human existence, than that of an omnipotent, all-seeing, yet invisible, impalatable, inconceivable God?" And the second was to argue that, because there can be only one chosen people, it must be either the Jews or (in this case) the Germans. One must extinguish the other from the face of the earth. There is no possible middle ground, no possible compromise.

There are Jews today who seem to hold this view, even if they do not like to ascribe it, as Steiner does, to Hitler. They have concluded that if the affirmation of chosenness by God is the cause of near extinction, Jews must root that affirmation out entirely. And for some Jews, this denial of election means denial of God—a denial that fits, unfortunately, with the atheistic agenda of some of the more radical Jewish secularists, who think they can build a thoroughly secular Judaism. The denial lives at a primal, emotional level: "Since God's choice of us Jews has led to death and destruction, we now unchoose Him!" This is the dead-god atheism of Nietzsche rather than the there-never-was-a-god atheism of Feuerbach.

I remember this myth being thrown in my face little more than ten years after the Holocaust, when, as a Jewish teenager, I was confronted in our Chicago high school by another Jewish student—Sam, who screamed at me for wanting "to be chosen by that god," after most of his family in Europe was murdered in Auschwitz. Compared to Sam's anger, the occasional taunts from Gentile classmates were mild. And ever since that afternoon in 1956, I have tried to think of what I should, or could, have said in response.

Along the way, I also have found that Sam is legion.

e might begin with the obvious point that biological identity is natural while national identity is constructed. Even when God chose Israel, he did not create the people of Israel as he created its human members, as natural beings. Instead, God formed the people of Israel from individual human beings already living in the natural world, calling them into a new historical identity.

lives without some sort of political-cultural identity, and all politicalcultural groups are made up of individual human members—but persons are not a people, and a people is not a person. Most Jews, like most rational persons, know that their personal identity

and their ethnic identity are not one and the same. Some Jews, in fact,

against their individual biological survival. If there is a much greater

seem to have concluded that their political-cultural survival might work

These identities are necessarily related, but they are not the same. No one

chance that I and my children will be killed because we are identifiable as Jews than if we become (or pass as) Gentiles, then isn't assimilation the most reasonable means? Some evidence for this exists in the extremely low birth rate among more secularized Jews, their high intermarriage rate, and the fact that they are much more likely to convert to other religions than are religious Jews. They've chosen to be unchosen, and many of them have been quite successful in their practical denial of election, at least by thisworldly criteria. To reach the idea that physical survival trumps ethnic survival, however, we have to assume that ethnic survival must be for the sake of personal survival. Jewish tradition teaches the opposite: The survival of the Jewish

people takes precedence over the survival of individual Jews. A Jew is required to marry, bring children into the world, and rear them with a Jewish identity, even if this means that their chances of individual survival will be lessened. Under the most extreme conditions, the cultural-religious survival of the Jewish people altogether trumps the physical survival of any individual Jew. Privileging ethnic survival makes sense only when one understands that the survival of the Jewish people is not self-justifying: As a genuine task for Jews, survival requires a transcendent purpose and reason for

existence, and a claim that without ethnic survival, Jews will sink into individual or collective nihilism. Even though, according to Jewish theology, Jews cannot, de jure, cease being Jews, they can, de facto, hide that theological fact from human eyes. Moreover, a Jew can terminate his Jewish familial lineage by siring Gentile children with a Gentile woman. According to Jewish law, a Jewish woman can give birth to Jewish children sired by a Gentile father; the chances are great, however, that such children will not identify with the Jewish people in any tangible way, and their descendants will be even less likely to do so. Jewish ethnic and religious survival thus depends on the active choice of Jews to advocate Judaism in authentically Jewish ways"which means Jews

God has chosen Israel for an everlasting covenant, the constitution of which is the Torah. And this requires that the Torah be taught, and its commandments kept, as much as is humanly possible. ll of this is a way of expressing what I should have told Sam all those years ago: There is a necessary connection between the

must actively choose to be chosen. They confirm the theological fact that

God's election of Israel in the giving of the Torah. The centrality and ultimacy of the Torah is expressed in one of the most famous stories in the Talmud: the story of the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph. This event occurred around 135 C.E., when the imperial

choice of the Jewish people to survive and the central doctrine of

Roman authorities in Palestine had outlawed the rabbis' public teaching of Torah. The Romans, no doubt, regarded the Jews' public religious gatherings as potentially revolutionary, and in the case of Rabbi Akiva, an outspoken supporter of revolutionary leader Simeon bar Kokhba, they were right. When Rabbi Akiva defied the ban, he set himself up for an inevitable, painful execution. When another Jew asked him why he was engaging in what seemed, to someone of little faith, to be a suicidal course of action, he

answered with this parable: A fox was walking alongside a river and saw

fish, who were forming groups in the stream. He asked, "What are you fleeing?" And they answered, "From the nets humans cast over us." He said to them: "Wouldn't you like to come up here to dry land so that I and you can dwell together like my ancestors dwelt with your ancestors?" They said to him: "You're the one reputed to be the smartest of the animals! You're not smart, but a fool! If in our vital habitat [bi-mqom hayyutenu] we are afraid, in a place where we will certainly die, how much more so?" For Rabbi Akiva, the Torah is the vital public habitat of the Jews. As scripture says, "It is your life [hayyekha]." Without Jewish engagement in the public teaching and learning of Torah, the Jewish people as a distinct community cannot survive. Neither can individual Jews survive as Jews in

the sake of the survival of the Jews, or the Jews survive for the sake of the Torah. Because the Jewish people are chosen by God and commanded by him to "choose life," and because this life means more than mere physical existence, a Jewish life can be lived cogently only when its purpose transcends its own contingent presence in the world. God chose us to live both in body and in soul, but the body functions for the sake of the soul more than the soul functions for the body.

This leaves open, of course, the question of whether the Torah exists for

private without the public dimension of their covenantal religion.

The perfect Torah "restores the soul," as the Psalms say, which means the soul does not restore itself without being in a strong covenantal relationship with God—a relationship constituted by the Torah and nothing else. Without the public teaching and practice of Torah, not only have the Jews lost their reason for existing but the whole world has lost its reason for existence. To emphasize creation's dependence on the Torah, the Talmud cites Jeremiah 33:25: "Were My covenant not by day and by night, I would not have made the very structures of heaven and earth."

Only humans can be the free subjects of commandments. And only

humans can freely relate back to God—the perpetual giver of the Torah—

as the active recipients of the Torah, in the context of God's covenant. As

in God's covenant with all creation at the time of Noah, both covenanted partners are irrevocably pledged to remain faithful forever. There are no exit clauses in this asymmetrical mutual partnership in which God is the senior partner and the elected community is the junior partner. The covenanted community should have been universal humankind, uniquely created in the image of God. But since the debacle of the Tower of Babel, there has been no universal human community—only the

separate and distinct peoples in this world. Indeed, a real universal human

community is only a messianic desideratum, not a human project. That is

why—as it seems from the juxtaposition in Genesis of the Tower of Babel event and the life and career of Abraham—God chose Abraham and those born from him (and those who have attached themselves to his house) to be the covenanted community that God needs for the Torah to do its work in the world. God seems to see, in a way that is hidden from human eyes, potential in the children of Abraham for the Torah to be kept in their midst until the end of days. That potential will be fully actualized in the future; it is not reward for past meritorious human achievement. Jews by themselves cannot actualize their covenantal potential.

cceptance by Jews of our chosen status—when we do accept it is much more an acceptance of God's electing claim on us than a demand that the world recognize our this-worldly superiority, whether moral, political, or even religious. Whatever George Steiner's fictional Hitler and others more real might think, we are a chosen people, not a master race. We were chosen to be the trustees of God's Torah, and this is why we must survive as a people, even if it entails walking a dangerous path in this world. Just as a commandment is best fulfilled when

a Jew understands why God gave each commandment the way he did, so the Jews' chosenness is best lived for—and died for—when we understand the uniquely divine purpose for which God chose us. Here and now, this prepares us to understand how we can survive the shadow of the Holocaust, surviving it without forgetting it. We must survive, even living as fully as possible in this world, because God needs Israel for the sake of his holy Torah, so that God's presence does not vanish from the earth because there is no place for it here. We do not

know why we have suffered; we know only for what and for whom we have survived our suffering. Those who have truly made God's Torah their purpose in this world will survive not only the Holocaust but also the memory of all the lesser holocausts; they will remember them without ever being done in by them. They will live again to see the time when God's Torah will "be written on their hearts" (Jer. 33:31–33), and they will keep its commandments freely. They will not commit the suicide of the Jewish soul by succumbing to the despair that follows when the Holocaust becomes our central point of

reference rather than something the Torah teaches that God Himself will conquer, when he "will destroy death forever, and will wipe away tears from every face" (Isaiah 25:8). The Holocaust, taken by itself, is a black hole. To look at it directly is to be swallowed up by it. The Holocaust can be glanced at only sideways, from the safe haven of being God's chosen people, here and now. Only everlasting life will finally explain death. Death can never explain life; it can only try to destroy it. "I shall not die but live to declare the works of the Lord" (Psalms 118:17), doing the work that God has placed before Jews

yet to come. Yet even that anticipation never lets us forget the agony of this world, even as it helps us survive it. David Novak, a member of the FIRST THINGS editorial and advisory board, is the J. Richard and Dorothy Shiff Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto.

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