

REASON, REVELATION, AND ELECTION: HERMANN COHEN AND MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD

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Abstract

The concept of election has posed challenges to Jewish thought when it has taken its most explicitly rationalist forms. Election doubly offends philosophy: first by claiming that God acted in history, and second by claiming that this action singled out a particular people, rather than the whole human race, for a special relationship. Here I examine two modern thinkers, Hermann Cohen and Michael Wyschogrod, in order to demonstrate the radical difference their philosophical starting points (Kant and Heidegger, respectively) make for their understandings of election. However, there are also significant commonalities between them, and I claim that exploring these reveals their most interesting difference to be located in an unexpected place: over the nature of worthy objects of love.

Keywords: Hermann Cohen, Michael Wyschogrod, Election, Philosophy, Kant, Heidegger, neo-Kantianism, ethical monotheism, David Novak, love.

It is well known how even in our days cosmopolitanism is felt to be in lively opposition to the consciousness of one's own nationality. How incomprehensible the origin of Messianism in the midst of a national consciousness must appear to us, inasmuch as it had to think and to feel the "election" of Israel as a singling out for the worship of God.

- Hermann Cohen

...No generalized philosophy of religious 'man' can adequately serve as propaedeutic to the faith of Israel. With the election of Abraham, a series of events is set in motion which, in a sense, shatters the unity of the human race...The election of Israel cannot be digested by any philosophy nor, for that matter, can any philosophy lay the ground for such an event.

- Michael Wyschogrod

There is nothing so whole as a broken heart.

- The Kotzker Rebbe (attributed)

Introduction: Liberalism and Chosenness

The idea that the Jewish people were chosen by the Creator of the Universe for a special relationship and task on Earth has long been a stumbling block for Jewish rationalists as well as a source of tension for the Jewish relationship to non-Jews. As soon as one begins to think seriously about this concept, questions arise: why would the God who created the entire world single out one people for a more personal relationship? If all of humanity is created *b'tzelem elohim* (in the image of God), what does it mean when God says to one particular people, “You shall be My people, and I shall be your God” (Jeremiah 30:22)? Can non-Jews ever possibly be expected to understand or accept this doctrine? How can God, considered philosophically, ever “choose” anything? These questions ignited the imagination of Paul and the rabbis in antiquity and were the subject of medieval debates for such figures as Maimonides and Judah Halevi. But the question has become especially urgent in the modern period, when emancipated, assimilating Jews have been confronted with the challenge of explaining and justifying Jewish tradition in language that both they and non-Jews might be able to understand and accept.

Modern Jewish thinkers have taken up the challenge of adapting Judaism to contemporary circumstances in varying ways. Some have argued that Jews should simply retain those parts of their tradition that can withstand scrutiny from science, reason, and the needs of pluralist societies, while discarding those parts that cannot. For such thinkers, the doctrine of election seems most ripe for elimination.¹ Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), for example, famously issued a Reconstructionist *siddur* in 1945, in which the classical prayer said by one called to the Torah was altered from *asher bahar banu mikol ha'amim*, “who has chosen us from all the peoples,” to *asher qervanu le'avodato*, “who has drawn us to his service.”² Other thinkers have been less comfortable discarding what impresses

¹ The first major challenge to election from a modern Jewish philosopher was Spinoza's, in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. However, Spinoza's argument was one of pure destruction; he did not struggle with the question of how to transform or adapt election to enable continuity in Jewish existence. The radicality of Spinoza's denial of election has the effect of making subsequent attempts by Jewish philosophers to deal with the topic appear as a kind of modern *kalām* (dialectic sophistry), seeking philosophical demonstrations of religious principles. David Novak deals with Spinoza's challenge to election in a philosophically lucid way in his *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22-49.

² David Novak, “Mordecai Kaplan's Rejection of Election,” *Modern Judaism*, 15, No. 1 (February 1995): 1-19. Kaplan is a complex figure and I may be caricaturing him slightly here by treating him so briefly. Like other modern Jewish thinkers, he called for a reinterpretation of election in terms of vocation or mission, though his idea of what such a mission would entail is distinctive.

them as a critical part of Jewish tradition. They attempt to reconfigure the doctrine of election so as to render it more palatable to modern tastes, although they may still wish to de-emphasize its centrality. It is this category into which Hermann Cohen falls and in this paper I will examine his attitude towards the idea of God's election of the Jewish people. I will then draw out some of the salient features of Cohen's concept of election through a contrast with a contemporary Jewish theologian, Michael Wyschogrod, who is known for his especially robust interpretation of chosenness. I will argue that this contrast focuses our attention first on the way in which a broader philosophical background informs a thinker's view on election and, second, on the views of both thinkers on the relationship between love and ideality.

1. Election in Quotation: Chosenness and Ideality in Cohen

In the context of the epigraph cited at the top of this paper, Cohen contrasts the unique national character of Israel with Greek philosophy. For Cohen, Israel's uniqueness emerges through its prophets, the first to have the idea of a united mankind. Greek philosophy, exemplified by Plato, addresses itself primarily to the individual and its idea of perfection is an idea of the perfected individual. Prophetic Judaism, on the other hand, addresses itself to the entire people of Israel, and through this mediating collectivity the individual is related to the eventual unity of all mankind. *All* the nations will come to Jerusalem and will learn the Torah that streams forth from Zion at the end of days. "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall the Lord be one, and his name one" (Zechariah 14:9). For Cohen, this means that "those peoples who join Israel will be unified with Israel. Like Israel, they will be for God his people. Hence the nationalistic idea of the election is completely overcome. This is the height Zechariah reaches."³

Yet before this can happen, Israel must transmit the message of the unique God. It does this through the example of its life. Its physical dispersion throughout the world symbolizes its intellectual and emotional adherence to the idea of universal mankind. Its ritual dedication and prayerful devotion to God bear witness to the Creator of the world in whose image mankind was made. This basic outline of Cohen's argument is present in his work as early as 1888 when he composed a pamphlet called "Die Nächstenliebe im Talmud," a print version of testimony he gave in a lawsuit against an antisemitic public school teacher who had claimed that the Talmud teaches Jews to be ethical towards each other while robbing and

³ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 288.

deceiving non-Jews.⁴ Cohen's response seeks to illustrate how a certain kind of national feeling can and indeed does lead Jews to a universal commitment.

Why, however, does Cohen speak of the "election" of Israel, placing the term in quotation marks?⁵ He seems to be implying that "election" is not really election, or at least not as ordinarily conceived. Election is indeed, as traditionalists hold, a singling out for the worship of God. But it is not a mystery, as one might conclude from reading the disputes among the *meforshim* (biblical commentators), why Abraham was chosen to become a great nation. Nor is it a sign of the Jewish people being somehow superior or more deserving of God's love than other peoples. Election has a purpose, which is to generate within the national body of a people the unheard-of idea of a unified mankind, the prophetic ethic, the idea of Messianism. This seems counterintuitive to the modern, cosmopolitan consciousness, which assumes that any fellow-feeling in a national body must stop short of universalism and thus transmute into a base type of chauvinism. But Cohen argues that both Jews and non-Jews have suffered from their adherence to an inadequate concept of election, which neglects its teleological dimension and fails to properly emphasize its aspect of vocation. "Thus, chosenness is not a mark of arrogance; it is the battle cry for divine justice. Chosenness means Israel's vocation to proclaim the One God as the redeemer of mankind."⁶

Cohen sees the truth of this teleology in the etymological similarity of the words בחירה (*behirah*), "choice" or "election," and the term בן חורין (*ben horin*),

⁴ A brief account of this incident can be found in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* entry on Cohen, which emphasizes Cohen's notion that the idea of God as the protector of the stranger and alien mediates between elected Israel and united mankind. "Cohen, Hermann (1842-1918)," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Cohen, Hermann (1842-1918). As a whole, this entry, by Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, takes a view of Cohen's later work that was first elaborated by Franz Rosenzweig and has since been strongly disputed by Steven Schwarzschild; namely, that Cohen "turned" to religion in a way that was "revolutionary" when compared with his previous neo-Kantian system. Schwarzschild holds that *Religion of Reason* is analogous to Kant's own *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, in that it crowns and completes its author's system rather than breaking with it. As we shall see, the issue of election is an important one in considering this dispute.

⁵ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 243. The quotes are not an artifice of the translation: "Wie unbegreiflich muss uns da die Entstehung des Messianismus erscheinen innerhalb eines Nationalbewusstseins, welches die 'Erwählung' Israels für die einzige Gottesverehrung als eine Auserwählung denken musste und so auch fühlte." Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums: Eine jüdische Religionsphilosophie* (Wiesbaden: marixverlag, 2008), 304. In German, one can see the connection between the term in quotes, *Erwählung*, rendered by Kaplan as "election," and the term *Auserwählung*, rendered in Kaplan's English edition as "a singling out."

⁶ Hermann Cohen, "The Style of the Prophets," in *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans. and ed. Eva Jospe (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1993), 116.

“free man.” From Cohen’s neo-Kantian ethical perspective, freedom is the freedom to choose the good, and this is precisely also the content of Israel’s being chosen. When the people of Israel choose the good by directing themselves to God through worship and ethical action, the chosenness of Israel becomes, “through the development of Messianism... the chosenness of all mankind.”⁷ This conceptual subordination of Israel’s election to the unity of humanity is total and explains the quotation marks Cohen places around the word election. As Cohen sees it, God’s election of Israel has *no other* purpose than to eventually unify mankind: “We feel that those who think Judaism and its basic teachings are as a matter of principle reserved for the Jewish people alone deny the One God of Messianic mankind. We regard Israel’s chosenness *solely* as history’s means to accomplish the divine chosenness of mankind.”⁸

There is one other element, however, in Cohen’s concept of election, and it is perhaps this element that has made him either distasteful or irrelevant to large segments of the Jewish population today. I refer to his idea of the connection between election and suffering. Jews who lived through the horrors of the 20th century are at the least discomfited and more often repelled by passages such as this one:

This suffering within the human race has been primarily the suffering of *Israel*... This is precisely the theodicy, the moral that the story of Job is meant to teach us. Is not the people of Israel itself in need of suffering and of the recognition of its obligation to suffer? If this were not the case, Israel, too, could not be redeemed.⁹

One does not have to think hard to recoil from the disturbing idea of a need to suffer. Cohen may have offered this theology of suffering with a view towards ennobling the downtrodden, but according to one common line of contemporary thinking he missed the better response: taking up arms in self-defense and strong national self-assertion.

Unfortunately, such a response neglects the most critical component of Cohen’s idea of suffering. Understood together with all its implications, suffering

⁷ “On the Aesthetic Value of Our Religious Education,” in Cohen, *Reason and Hope*, 156.

⁸ “Religion and Zionism,” in Cohen, *Reason and Hope*, 171. My emphasis. The fact that Israel’s election is solely history’s means of accomplishing universal human election should not obscure the corollary that it is also history’s sole means of accomplishing this task. In the realm of lived reality, no other means can substitute for it. Despite this, from the perspective of theology and the hierarchy of values, Cohen’s view will be found wanting by Wyschogrod, as well as by Novak, both of whom emphasize the irreducibility of election.

⁹ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 229. The view also has significant precedent in Jewish tradition; medieval commentators often explained Israel’s suffering as attendant upon the unredeemed world, which was coexistent with the second exile; see, for example, Radak on Is. 40:1; 42:7; Ps. 97:1, and many other Psalms.

is one of the linchpins of Cohen's constellation of interdependent concepts. It is suffering, not in the sense of victimization by forces beyond one's control, but in the sense of guilt or recognition of one's own ethical failure that engenders the discovery of the self as an "I" for Cohen – the emergence of the individual as such. This new individual turns to God, the only one who can forgive ethical failure and provide the reconciliation needed to carry on with the project for which Israel was elected. This process, which exists in miniature during the daily *Tachanun* (supplication) prayer and in full grandeur at the peak of the Jewish calendar on the Day of Atonement, represents for Cohen the special task of religion in a system of philosophy. While (Kantian) ethics alone can work out the abstract responsibilities that beings have towards one another, only religion can address the failure of the concrete, fallible individual to live up to those responsibilities. Thus the sense of the phrase "Israel was chosen to suffer" takes on a different cast: Israel was given special responsibilities and an understanding of its correlation to God. When Israel fails to meet these responsibilities, each member undergoes a highly personal and individual suffering, which culminates in *teshuvah* (repentance), the turning back to God (which of necessity happens in public congregation rather than in solitude) that characterizes true repentance. *Teshuvah* gives birth to the true individual, the only one who is capable of recognizing his neighbor as a *mitmensch*, a fellowman, and thus capable of doing God's will by fulfilling his obligations to love this neighbor. Thus, only this process of repentance, which comes about as a result of *spiritual* suffering, fully illustrates the moral necessity of Cohen's God-Idea as a postulate that guarantees the eventual success of the human moral project, the fulfillment of the ethical ideal on earth, which abolishes the unnecessary *material* sufferings of poverty and warfare.

There is thus a connection between the two senses of suffering at work here. For Cohen, Israel's universalizing mission can be carried out only in dispersion, which strips Israel of the land, language, and sovereignty enjoyed by other nations. Israel really only *becomes* itself in exile. It is defined only by its Teaching and its task. The nations of the world, however, may not wish to hear the message that Israel brings them. They interpret the uniqueness of Israel, the fact that it lacks what all other nations have, in an arrogant way, as a sign of God's punishment. They therefore see themselves as superior to Israel and in this superiority they arrogate to themselves the right to make Israel suffer physically. Thus the necessary spiritual suffering of exiled Israel all too often leads to material suffering. Cohen's grand example here analogizes Israel to Job, whose friends assume that his misfortunes are divine recompense for sin. In truth, Job suffers for the sake of *others*. God loves the poor and the downtrodden and just as Israel was called to the task of ethics through the prophetic focus on the problem of poverty, so the nations ought to recognize Israel as the widow and the orphan among them: "...[T]his historical misery of a people without a state can truly vie with social poverty. Therefore Israel is in its history the prototype of suffering, a symbol of

human suffering, of the human creature in general.”¹⁰ Just as the poor man within Israel symbolizes the human situation as such, so Israel among the nations represents suffering humankind and, simultaneously, the possibility of redemption if only the ethical calling will be taken up. Like the “suffering servant” in Isaiah, Job’s and thus Israel’s suffering is vicarious. It demonstrates to others their own failings and thus is apt to be rejected. Leo Strauss sums up Cohen’s view in a sentence: “This is the meaning of Israel’s election: to be an eternal witness to pure monotheism, to be *the* martyr, to be the suffering servant of the Lord.”¹¹

There is theological power in this view, easily visible to anyone who lives in a largely Christian society. Cohen has displaced the idea of the individual Messiah, relegating it to the dustbin of history along with the other “mythological” ideas beyond which the religion of reason has “progressed,” and replaced it with the notion of a Messianic Age in which humankind would solve the problems of politics. Along with this displacement, however, comes a transference: the language of vicarious suffering, which Christians applied to Jesus as the singular Messiah figure who died for the sins of the world, is now applied to the whole people of Israel, God’s elected agent and the source of the eventual universal messianic transformation.

Part of the power of this move comes from the fact that a traditional rabbinic reading of Isaiah sees the suffering servant as a reference to the people of Israel. But Cohen takes this reading and integrates it seamlessly into his larger neo-Kantian project, emphasizing the priority of the ethical and the close logical connection between the idea of the unique God and the idea of the unified humanity. Cohen anticipates objections from opponents of his methodological procedure of idealization. He imagines them asking him how it can be possible to fulfill the Bible’s command to *love* God if God is “only an idea,” even our most exalted one. Cohen responds with a question of his own: “[H]ow is it possible to love anything *but* an idea? Does one not love, even in the case of sensual love, only the idealized person, only the idea of the person?”¹² Love for an idea is precisely what indicates “the power of the idea to realize itself.” Perhaps it is this single doctrine of pairing love and the ideal that has motivated the most vigorous opposition to Cohen’s conception of election.

2. Shattered Unity: Chosenness and Concreteness in Wyschogrod

In his introduction to the English edition of Cohen’s *Religion of Reason*, Leo Strauss characteristically offers a picture of the sharp break between the “starting

¹⁰ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 149.

¹¹ Leo Strauss, “Introductory Essay,” in Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, xxxiii.

¹² Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 160.

points” of religion and philosophy. For Strauss, what is special about Cohen’s project is the way it attempts to transcend the impossible choice between reason and revelation:

The Jewish religion might be understood as revealed religion. In that case the philosopher would accept revelation as it was accepted by Jews throughout the ages in an uninterrupted tradition and would bow to it; he would explicate it by means of philosophy and especially defend against its deniers or doubters, philosophic and nonphilosophic. But this pursuit would not be philosophic since it rests on an assumption that the philosopher as philosopher cannot make or on an act of which the philosopher as philosopher is not capable. Cohen excludes this manner of understanding the relation between philosophy and Judaism by speaking of the religion of reason. ‘Revelation is [God’s] creation of reason.’ Revelation is not ‘an historical act.’ For Cohen there are no revealed truths or revealed laws in the precise or traditional sense of these terms.¹³

Strauss, of course, doubts that such a solution is ultimately practicable, and the rest of his introduction dwells on the ambiguities and problems Cohen must confront as a result of his project. Most Cohen critics have felt that Cohen did not quite achieve his synthesis, that in the end he erred on the side of philosophy, although Cohen is such a sophisticated thinker that this argument is not so easy to make.

Michael Wyschogrod gives up on Cohen’s attempt to exclude this manner of thinking about the relation between philosophy and Judaism. In a sense, Wyschogrod and other like-minded contemporary thinkers return to the pre-modern idea that one should start from revelation with philosophy serving as handmaiden to theology. Yet they are different from many medieval philosophers in that they accept Pascal’s distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As Wyschogrod puts it: “Although God is both the creator and ruler of the universe, he reveals himself to humankind, not as the conclusion of the cosmological or teleological proofs, but as the God of Abraham who took the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt and whose people this nation remains to the end of time.”¹⁴ Thus these thinkers do not attempt to “reconcile” revelation with reason, as medieval philosophers did. This may be due to the fact that the philosophy they use to explicate theology is likely to be Nietzschean or Heideggerian rather than Aristotelian or neo-Platonic.¹⁵

¹³ Strauss, “Introductory Essay,” in Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, xxiii.

¹⁴ Michael Wyschogrod, “Israel, the Church, and Election,” in *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 179-187.

¹⁵ Thus I note that while Wyschogrod certainly fits the mold of a thinker who accepts revelation and bows to it, explicating it by philosophy, he does not carry out the other tasks

Wyschogrod himself is also a German-Jewish thinker of sorts; he was born in Berlin in 1928 and attended Jewish school there until his family moved to Warsaw and then to Brooklyn in 1939. Although he was too late to participate in the thriving German-Jewish intellectual scene that was destroyed by the Nazi rise to power, he was able to study these thinkers at some remove, attending City College of New York in 1946 following six years of Orthodox day school and Talmudic education. Wyschogrod's introduction to the philosophy of religion came as an undergraduate, when he was exposed to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. In 1953 he wrote his dissertation for the Philosophy Department at Columbia University, later published as *Kierkegaard and Heidegger: The Ontology of Existence*. Since that time he has had a distinguished teaching career, primarily at New York City colleges.

Wyschogrod's interest in Kierkegaard and Heidegger indicates that he was influenced by the turn to the particular, characterizing so much 20th-century Continental thought.¹⁶ In the 1980's, Kierkegaard and Heidegger were sometimes grouped with Sartre and declared to form a loose school (or anti-school) of thought called "existentialism." This terminology was often applied to Jewish thinkers like Buber and Rosenzweig as well. Existentialism's fortunes as an academic trend have largely waned, but many of its characteristic concerns carried over into "postmodernism," a mood that dominated many U.S. intellectual circles in the latter decades of the last century. These concerns often involved a rejection of the universalizing, idealizing "totalism" of Western philosophy, from Plato to Descartes, with an especially vehement rejection reserved for the comparatively more recent idealism of Kant, Hegel, and their followers. This mood was felt in Jewish studies as well. As Wyschogrod puts it in a review of the first English translation of Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*: "The absence of an emphasis on ethics in the *Star* must be seen as a sign of Rosenzweig's understanding that the ethicization and universalization of Judaism which had become the specialty of

Strauss envisions for such a "Jewish philosopher" – namely, defending revelation against its deniers or doubters. Wyschogrod is too postmodern for that; he understands reason as itself tradition-constituted and thus he has a modest view of what he can expect others to accept. This leads me to another point, which is that I am being slightly reductive here. There is an important sense in which academic philosophers who have "returned" to religion as a result of a critique of modernist paradigms of reason, whether Heidegger's, MacIntyre's, or Peirce's, have seen their return as "authorized" by contemporary philosophy, and thus as reason and revelation reconciled. Wyschogrod's biography, however, suggests that he came to "philosophy" from "religion" and not the other way around, though this statement too is overly simplistic.

¹⁶ Wyschogrod has written that he "considered Heidegger one of the greatest philosophers of the century," describing himself as "deeply influenced by him," even while unequivocally condemning his "unrepentant Nazism." See "A Jewish Death in Heidelberg," in *Abraham's Promise*, 131-146.

Western-oriented, German liberal Judaism had outlived its usefulness and that a time had come for a new beginning.”¹⁷

It is hard not to see Hermann Cohen as the direct target of any attack on “the ethicization and universalization of Judaism.” Although he was not a founder of a liberal Jewish “denomination,” like Abraham Geiger or Zecharias Frankel, he was the philosophical exemplar of Kantian Judaism at its most developed and sophisticated. To be sure, Cohen’s legacy is contested in part because of comments made by Rosenzweig, one of Cohen’s greatest disciples, even if he was also an agent in a turning away from his teacher’s philosophy. Rosenzweig famously claimed that Cohen’s *Religion of Reason* represented “the last Cohen,” a shift and divergence in teaching away from the rigorous, doctrinaire ethical thinker who produced the *System der Philosophie* and towards a position more in tune with Rosenzweig’s own *Sprachdenken*, or “speech-thinking.”¹⁸ Wyschogrod does not engage or attack Cohen directly, but he clearly situates himself as a philosophical descendant of Rosenzweig who embraces the “new beginning” made possible by the critique of totalistic philosophy.¹⁹ Such a critique allows Wyschogrod to start from election, rather than assuming a philosophical standpoint outside of tradition that presumes to evaluate election:

No generalized philosophy of religious ‘man’ can adequately serve as propaedeutic to the faith of Israel. With the election of Abraham, a series of events is set in motion which, in a sense, shatters the unity of

¹⁷ “Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*,” in Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*. 121-130. The review was originally published in 1973.

¹⁸ See footnote 2 above for reference to Schwarzschild’s rejection of Rosenzweig’s view that *Religion of Reason* is “post neo-Kantian and pre-existentialist.”

¹⁹ Wyschogrod actually mentions Cohen quite rarely. At one point in his best-known book, he makes the powerful, common, and problematic Zionist argument that the Jews have “returned to history” by re-assuming state power. Private morality and state morality are not the same. “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 ahistoricity of rabbinic Judaism must be supplemented by the historical Judaism of the Bible.” The double use of “therefore” here, emphasis on which is mine, would seem to argue for a close tie between Wyschogrod’s *political* context and his rejection of ethicizing philosophies of religion. However, I think the critique of Cohen that Wyschogrod offers is much stronger and more coherent if situated in its wider *philosophical* context, and thus I prefer to present it that way. The critique from Zionism is shallower, less developed, and less coherent, since it would require establishing first that Zionism necessarily subscribes to the political-theoretical view that state morality and private morality are separate realms, second that a religiously Jewish Zionism could endorse such a view, and third that this view is correct. See Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 181. Interestingly, later editions changed the subtitle to *God in the People Israel* – a reading so embodied as to be incarnational. It was then altered again to *God and the People Israel*.

the human race...The election of Israel cannot be digested by any philosophy nor, for that matter, can any philosophy lay the ground for such an event.²⁰

Wyschogrod assumes the standpoint of a spokesperson for a traditional type of Judaism and does not worry overmuch about possible critiques of that tradition from outside of it. His writing is largely free of apologetic justifications for possibly embarrassing doctrines. Indeed, his whole theological project is characterized by a strong embrace of that doctrine considered most embarrassing by such modernizers as Geiger and Kaplan: election. In the subtitle to his book, *The Body of Faith*, he even stresses the *corporeal* nature of election, emphasizing that the chosenness of the Jews is not a spiritual achievement, but an empirical quality, which passes through the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob until the present generation. Wyschogrod goes further, using the phrase *Judaism as Corporeal Election* to make the claim not only for a physical understanding of the phenomenon of election but also for the centrality of this doctrine to Judaism. Indeed, for Wyschogrod, Judaism just *is* election: “Judaism means to me the election of the seed of Abraham as the nation of God, the imposition upon this people of a series of commandments which express God’s will for the conduct of his people and the endless struggle by this people against its election, with the most disastrous consequences to itself as well as the rest of mankind.”²¹ This emphasis on election is tied directly to his embrace of a post-Nietzschean attitude towards the philosophical tradition, seen when Wyschogrod criticizes Christian theology for having developed over the centuries in an intimate acquaintance with philosophy:

All attempts to transform its election into a universal election of all people in faith can be interpreted by Israel only as the beginning of that movement toward the universal which, fully developed, culminates to the universal truth of a philosophy antithetical to the concreteness of the God of Abraham. The philosophical component in Christianity, its deep involvement with Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and the myriad problems brought about by this involvement, is thus not merely an accident of intellectual history, but rooted in the Christian kerygma itself.²²

²⁰ “Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*,” in Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 129.

²¹ “Divine Election and Commandments,” in Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 25-8. This essay, originally published in 1961, highlights Wyschogrod’s early commitment to the centrality of Judaism as election.

²² “Israel, the Church, and Election,” in Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 184. κήρυγμα here refers to the initial “preaching” meant to bring a new believer to Christ (as opposed to διδασχλή, proper Christian “doctrine”).

Such a particularistic and embodied interpretation of election naturally leads Wyschogrod to oppose all forms of Jewish rationalism, from Cohen back to Maimonides. Wyschogrod asserts bluntly that “Maimonides’ demythologization of the concept of God is un-biblical and ultimately dangerous to Jewish faith... no personal relation is possible with an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover.”²³ Without a personal relationship, the nature of election as a choosing, let alone a love relationship, becomes problematic; hence Maimonides’ near-total lack of a theology of election and his transmutation of revelation into something akin to philosophical insight. Similarly, Cohen entitles a chapter of *Religion of Reason* “The Problem of Religious Love.” In that chapter Cohen is forced to hold that “monotheism began with human love,” rather than divine initiative, and it is only through the human appreciation of God’s love for the poor (i.e., the moral obligation to the fellowman) that humanity becomes aware of God’s love. Most offensive from Wyschogrod’s point of view, Cohen claims that “God does not love Israel more or differently from his love for men in general, nor, needless to say, could God’s love for Israel limit and impair his love for the human race.”²⁴ Wyschogrod would agree with the latter part of that statement. He holds that election requires us only to recognize that God loves Israel *differently* than he loves the rest of the world. Thus he would see the former part of Cohen’s statement as a blatant contravention of numerous statements throughout the Bible. Cohen would respond that passages that seem to contradict this message, which is the true and ideal message of Judaism, represent mythological relics of Judaism’s ancient origins, which must be read properly and idealized by the religion of reason.

The disagreement between Wyschogrod and Cohen about election, then, seems to turn on many axes of the modern/postmodern split in general: critical vs. postcritical approaches to hermeneutics, universalizing vs. particularizing tendencies, idealization vs. attention to the concrete. But even between these two seemingly diametrically opposed philosophical-religious approaches there, nevertheless, turns out to be a substantial amount of agreement. This agreement begins in a surprising place, since it is located in what I described earlier as the most controversial part of Cohen’s doctrine: the relationship between election and suffering.

Like Cohen, Wyschogrod sees election as a situation that puts Jews at risk by subjecting them to gentile misrepresentation:

As the nation in whom God dwells, Israel is in grave danger, a danger inherent in the strategy of election that God has chosen as his way of relating to humanity. At first, God did not envisage the election of a particular people for particular proximity to God. All of humanity created in the image of God would be the elect of the creation. But the

²³ Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, xiv.

²⁴ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 149.

string of failures recorded in the first eleven chapters of Genesis causes God to change course. The welfare of all humanity remains God's ultimate goal as evidenced by his remark to Abraham that "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12:3). But it is worth noting that the first half of the verse just quoted reads 'I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse.' However much the election of Abraham is intended to serve the welfare of all, God seems aware that the very act of election, even if this involves imposing a higher standard of conduct on the elect, will generate resentment and there will be those who will curse Israel. On the other hand, there will be those who will accept God's sovereign choice in love and obedience and they will be blessed.²⁵

The situation is compounded as a result of the fallibility of the Jews, who resist their calling from the very beginning. They either misunderstand their calling as a mark of superiority, puffing themselves up in a way to which they have no claim and thus forgetting to serve God by paying attention to the rest of the world, or they resist the yoke of heaven and try to chip away at its heavy burden of responsibilities with endless rationalizations. Either way, the Jews call down upon themselves the numerous punishments reiterated over and over throughout the Bible, which will occur as a consequence of failure to keep up the covenant. No matter what they do, however, the Jews can never abrogate the covenant completely because God's election is irrevocable and God's promise to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham is unbreakable.²⁶ The other nations, meanwhile, ignore the fact that God intends to bless them through Abraham and chafe at their non-election. They mock the failings of the Jews and misinterpret their sufferings as a sign that election has been revoked. They may even arrogate to themselves the role of the new elect or the true Israel, as the Christian Church did for millennia. By doing so, they ensure that they will never achieve the blessedness that comes from drawing near to God, which can only happen for gentiles by recognizing and accepting their place in the world.

A surprising result of this doctrine is that it endorses as Jewishly "authentic" Cohen's much-maligned *telos* for election. Wyschogrod too, it seems, drawing on God's promise to bless the families of the world through Abraham, understands election as ultimately embracing all humanity: "[T]he election of Abraham and his seed, while in many ways separating the history of Israel from

²⁵ "Incarnation and God's Indwelling in Israel," in Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, 175.

²⁶ Ambiguous here is the question of whether and how, despite the irrevocability of Israel's election, a Jewish *individual* may ever forfeit his or her election. Wyschogrod rarely mentions the most famous modern Jewish excommunicate, Spinoza, and when he does it is often simply to list him among other rejected rationalist/universalist philosophers; cf. Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, 126; Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, 41, 166. Also see Novak's criticism of Wyschogrod on this score at *Election of Israel*, 246.

those of the nations, cannot rest with such a separation... Israel cannot therefore be ultimately isolationist, however vital it be that it be so penultimately.”²⁷ Even “penultimate isolationism,” however, allows for the possibility of gentiles forming a relationship with God, by forming a relationship with the people of God. The theologian who thought most deeply and had the most influence on the question of how gentiles could do this was Paul, and Wyschogrod sees a misinterpretation of Paul’s thought lying behind both the historical Christian and contemporary modernist objections to the concept of election.

In this misinterpretation, the New Testament is a critique of the idea of carnal election, arguing that it makes more sense for God to elect a people spiritually. When they believe in Him and do His will, they will be elected, and when they do not, they will be cast aside. Descent from Abraham ought to confer no advantage (“God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham,” as John the Baptist says in Luke 3:8), and it is not necessary for Jewish believers in Jesus to continue observing the Law. Wyschogrod’s response to this is rooted in his Heideggerian concern for concreteness and particularity. For God to truly encounter the human being, he must encounter it in its body as well as in its spirit:

Here we are at the heart of God’s election of Israel. He loved Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and therefore he loves their descendants. And he loves not only their souls but also their bodies. This is so because, from the first, God knew that man was an ensouled body. He is not a disembodied spirit temporarily connected to a body. Because man is his soul and his body, he brings his body into the relationship with God. And when God relates to a family, he is not unaware of the corporeality of this family. He confirms this corporeality by not ignoring it but by including it in the covenant.²⁸

Wyschogrod uses family analogies constantly to describe the relationship between God and Israel. God’s love for Israel is related to his love for the patriarchs as a man’s love for his children is to his love for their deceased mother. The fractious relationship between different groups of Jews is as predictable as the relations within any family, but also as unbreakable and as binding as those relations. Human beings live in bodies and have families. By opting to love a family God opted to love the complete human being. What is interesting here is that by providing this philosophical explication and defense of the idea of election,

²⁷ “Why Was and Is the Theology of Karl Barth of Interest to a Jewish Theologian?” in Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 212. A great deal would seem to hang on what Wyschogrod means by penultimate isolationism.

²⁸ “A Theology of Jewish Unity,” in Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 49-50.

Wyschogrod too argues that the whole world may benefit from God's choice of Israel.²⁹

Gentiles who attain the proper understanding of Israel's election may choose to join the people of Israel. If, however, they "wisely" choose to refrain from assuming the full yoke of heaven with its risks of failure and, instead, observe only the Noahide covenant, this too constitutes a relationship with Israel since it is Israel's Torah that teaches the Noahide covenant.³⁰ As for Christians, Jews think they have made a mistake by attempting to relate to God through one Jew instead of the whole people. But even this mistaken path represents an attempt to form a relationship with the God of Abraham through a relationship to his people—Christians rejected Marcion's attempt to abandon the Old Testament because they recognized that the sacred history of Israel was the foundation of their faith and identity.

This raises another intriguing parallel between Cohen and Wyschogrod. Both, in some sense, discover strong parallels between Judaism and Christianity through their discussions of election. We saw earlier that Cohen read the "suffering servant" passages of Isaiah as referring to the people of Israel, rather than to a personal messiah figure. In Cohen this carries so far that the Jewish people suffer for the sins of the world, just as Jesus does in Christian theology. Wyschogrod, meanwhile, works from his corporeal view of God's election of Israel and holds that Christology can be seen as a logical extension of Biblical teaching: "My claim is that the Christian teaching of the incarnation of God in Jesus is the intensification of the teaching of the indwelling of God in Israel by concentrating that indwelling in one Jew rather than leaving it diffused in the people of Jesus as a whole."³¹ Potentially, this means that Christians can interpret their religion as a branch grafted onto the Jewish tree – Jesus was a Jew, and it is through this Jew that gentiles become associate members of the household of God. This is the

²⁹ As for why Israel was chosen specifically, Wyschogrod falls somewhere between Rosenzweig's view that God simply fell in love with Israel and the old view that Israel's election is a mystery. The closest Wyschogrod comes to answering this question may be in this ambiguous passage: "And then suddenly Abraham appears and God's love flows over him and Israel without limit. Perhaps it is because God has observed the consequences of his anger and has been chastened. Whatever the reason, we now witness an outpouring of love for an individual and his descendants that becomes the central motif of the rest of the Hebrew Bible." See "Incarnation and God's Indwelling in Israel," 171.

³⁰ Wyschogrod uses the word "wisely" to describe a gentile's decision not to convert, but it is unclear to me what the basis is for this within his theology. A theory of election as robust as his does not seem to me to be able to easily stop short of evangelicalism. He usually defers, however, to the rabbinic view that gentiles should not convert simply because it is harder to observe the Torah than not to observe the Torah, and Torah observance is not required for gentiles in the Torah itself.

³¹ "Incarnation and God's Indwelling in Israel," in Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, 165-178.

correct interpretation of Paul for Wyschogrod. The incorrect interpretation, unfortunately the one adopted by the Church for most of its history, is the one that sees new converts attempt to assume “favored son” status and claim that God has evicted the elder child from the house. With this, their opportunity is lost. However, Wyschogrod sees great commonality and thus great potential for dialogue in the common commitment of Jews and Christians to the idea of God’s indwelling in the carnal body of Israel, and this is behind his great interest in Karl Barth and *Nostra Aetate*, separate but equally strong signs of emerging Christian non-supersessionism.³²

This is perhaps the great advantage of Wyschogrod’s abandonment of Cohen’s idealizing methodology. Where Cohen’s schema is and must be vague on just how it looks when the Jews *succeed* in spreading the religion of reason and thus moving closer to the messianic age (unless it looks like high German culture, a federation of socialist welfare states, and increasing influence of rationalist universalism), Wyschogrod specifically addresses Christianity and Islam and sees their spread across the earth as something anticipated within Jewish scriptures:

The wonder is that nations not of the stock of Abraham have come within the orbit of the faith of Israel, experiencing humankind and history with Jewish categories deeply rooted in Jewish experience and sensibility. How can a Jewish theologian not perceive that something wonderful is at work here, something that must in some way be connected with the love of the God of Israel for all his children, Isaac as well as Ishmael, Jacob as well as Esau?³³

Pre-modern religious thought was unable, by and large, to accommodate the persistence and success of other religions except by imputing error to their believers or hypothesizing that God was trying the truly faithful by assailing them with unbelievers.³⁴ Modern religious thought, emerging from a secularizing context that itself partially arose to stifle and end religious warfare, could only posit an inner syncretism to different religions, arguing that they might eventually converge as they discarded their idiosyncratic rituals or myths and realized that in essence, they were about the same thing. In the strong yet easily overstated

³² It is unclear how Wyschogrod would address Islam theologically, since Muslims claim to worship the God of Abraham without ever acknowledging his carnal presence or “indwelling” on earth. I must also refrain here from going into the details of Wyschogrod’s interpretation of Paul, which focuses heavily on his reading of Acts 15.

³³ “Why Was and Is the Theology of Karl Barth of Interest to a Jewish Theologian?” in Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 213.

³⁴ Maimonides’ claim that Jesus “only served to clear the way for King Messiah” by making “the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments... topics of conversation (among the inhabitants) of the far isles and many peoples” is cited approvingly by Wyschogrod—one of his rare positive references to Maimonides. *Ibid.*

differences between Cohen and Wyschogrod, we see perhaps a move to a new paradigm—one that returns to sacred history and seeks to integrate the “others” within it in a fashion that could be described as minimally nonviolent, maximally positive—without relinquishing the elements that make one’s own tradition most sacred.

Conclusion: Meditation on the Whole and the Broken

I would like to conclude by briefly returning to the theme of love, which is a critical part of any discussion of election. If it seems that I have favored Wyschogrod over Cohen in the preceding pages, this is perhaps due to the fact that Cohen’s positions are better known. On the question of love, however, and its relation to election, I think there is room for further exploration of the positions of both thinkers.

Cohen and Wyschogrod start from very different philosophical places but share wide areas of agreement. Both offer “purposes” of sorts for God’s election of Israel, however defined. Both make reference to the messianic age in which all peoples will come together to worship Israel’s God, and both assume that some educational task devolves onto Israel as a result of this vision. On the question of how election comes about, however, they differ strongly. Cohen emphasizes that the people of Israel awaken to the idea of the unique God and that they then embark on a process of recognition of themselves as creatures, of the suffering of their neighbors, and of their own failures to live up to their ethical responsibilities. In all of this, God is the driving force, but as an idea—a necessary idea, a foundational idea, but an idea. Cohen holds that it is this idea that Israel loves, and he attempts to escape the shadow of Spinoza by putting forward ways in which this idea somehow loves Israel in return. Finally, however, when it comes to the question of atonement for sin, Cohen acknowledges that Israel and God have a relationship that is “personlike.” Cohen argues that love is love of the ideal and that such love is the only thing that can move our broken world to more closely approximate that which it ought to be. Cohen cannot allow subjectivity to enter the picture. “The love of the neighbor is dependent upon God’s creation of man, and not upon the subjective feeling with which I love myself or somebody else. ‘This is the book of the generation of man... in the likeness of God made He him.’ Upon this principle rests the history of mankind.”³⁵

Wyschogrod, on the other hand, explains why election should be conceived as a love relationship between God and Israel, and why that love must be thought of as an embodied love, a corporeal love. But when it comes to the question of why it is Abraham and not anyone else with whom God falls in love,

³⁵ Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 119.

this is just as much of a mystery as why any two human beings fall in love. At the same time, the choice that God made to love a human family and never to give up on them means that God must endure their numerous and unending lapses, rebellions, rejections, and infidelities. These are the source of the wrath God displays in the prophetic books: what Cohen might construe as a metaphor for the suffering Israel endures as a result of their turning away from their responsibility to do justice, Wyschogrod reads literally as the jealousy of a spurned lover. Yet it is precisely this flawed people, living in this broken world, that God loves and will love until He decides that the world's time is up.

Cohen and Wyschogrod, then, have a disagreement about love for the broken and the whole. Does one love the broken only because such love is the single force that has mending power? In this case, the whole is really the only thing that is worthy of love. Or does one love the broken because the peculiar sadness of compassion is called forth by broken things? In this case, the promise of wholeness is simply folded into love for the broken, which never has to account for itself. The paradox of such a situation is perhaps best captured by the Hasidic saying: "There is nothing so whole as a broken heart."³⁶

Unscientific Postscript on Conversion

Debate now rages in the State of Israel, since radical elements of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate have moved to condition conversion on observance and render it reversible. In 2008, the Chief Rabbinate "retroactively annulled" thousands of conversions performed by Rabbi Haim Druckman and the state-sponsored Conversion Authority he headed. In 2010, while the Israeli High Court was considering a case from the Center for Women's Justice, asking it to invalidate the annulment, the Chief Rabbinate submitted a brief in which it went further, declaring that all conversions were subject to reversal at any time, at the discretion

³⁶ This saying is frequently attributed to Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, though I have not been able to find a primary source attesting to his authorship of it. One recent work containing this attribution is Aviva Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken, 2009), 124. The saying clearly plays off Psalm 51:9 ("The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit / a broken and crushed heart, O God, you will not despise"), which is cited in the Babylonian Talmud at Sotah 5b, where humble prayer is said to be equal to all the old sacrifices. These sources may seem to tilt the tradition in favor of Wyschogrod; I would mention in Cohen's defense only that while he may continually recall the *telos* of ideality, his system takes its first major departure from Kant's in its recognition of the value of *teshuvah* for the broken, failed ethical agent.

of any rabbinic judge.³⁷ The politics of the issue are tangled, involving both intra-Orthodox power struggles and pressure to increase the Jewish population of the State of Israel, but the religious and philosophical elements of the question are, if possible, even more important. The inquisitorial fervor of the Chief Rabbinate calls to mind the attitude of the Christian mendicant orders of 14th-century Spain and Portugal, who approved of mass Jewish conversion until they found themselves suspicious of the quality of those conversions. Neither the mendicant orders then, nor the Chief Rabbinate now, were able to tolerate the possibility that one could convert to a new religion and then be a “bad” member of that religion in terms of practice. Yet this toleration is exactly what is required in order to consistently maintain a view of the religious community as ontologically constituted, along the lines that Wyschogrod suggests, and as proposed by the Talmudic maxim (“Israel, though she sins, is still Israel”).³⁸

Interestingly enough, David Novak, despite his strong agreement with Wyschogrod on the irreducibility of election, extending to converts (converts are “retroactively elected”), criticizes the theory of the latter for being inadequate to the “genuine dialectic between grace and merit, between election and obligation, within classical Jewish teaching,” and reminds us that there are red lines beyond which it is possible for a Jew to forfeit his or her election.³⁹ For Novak, Wyschogrod swings too far in the direction of “grace,” and thus runs a considerable risk:

...one has to search the tradition for a view of the Torah that applies equally, even if only on certain points, to both Israel and the nations of the world. Only such a discovery can save us from confusing—God forbid—the idea of the chosen people with the odious idea of a *Herrenvolk*, an idea whose adherents are directly responsible for our greatest agony in history.⁴⁰

I suspect, however, that Prof. (Rabbi) Novak would agree that sensitivity to this dialectic, and the admission of the theoretical existence of red lines, is a different matter from giving any rabbinic authority full discretion to revoke conversions at

³⁷ Cnaan Liphshiz, “Religious Advocates Decry Rabbinate Statement Calling Conversions Reversible,” *Ha’aretz*, January 15, 2010, via *Haaretz.com* (<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1141294.html>)

³⁸ I point this out as a historian, not a *posek* (legal authority) or theologian; obviously, for Wyschogrod, Israel is the only ontologically-constituted religious community, and thus no analogy to the behavior of Christians could ever quite work. The Church is merely a group of Gentiles who are, at their best (and only at their best), doing the best that Gentiles can possibly do to live in a relationship with their Creator, and who *may* be part of an ineffable divine redemptive plan.

³⁹ Novak, *The Election of Israel*, 246.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

any time on the grounds of insufficient observance. Indeed, to continue speaking in Novak's terms, one could perhaps see the authors of the era from the 1391 massacres and conversions to the 1492 expulsion, surely among the contenders for Israel's second-greatest agony in history, as replicating outside Israel the swing too far in the direction of "merit," and away from "grace." Casting suspicion on the sincerity of conversions has led to untold disaster in other times and places. One can only hope that cooler heads prevail in the current struggle.⁴¹

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⁴¹ For a different Orthodox take on the conversion question, drawing on the ideas of Rav Soloveitchik, see Irving Greenberg, "On Joining the Covenant," in *Jewish Ideas Daily*, January 14, 2010.