

# The Jewish Mother: A Theology

*Meir Soloveichik*

Of all the doctrines asserted by rabbinic Judaism, few are as surprising, or indeed as controversial, as “matrilineal descent,” the notion that the offspring of a Gentile mother and a Jewish father is a Gentile, while the offspring of a Jewish mother and a Gentile father is a Jew. This precept, accepted universally among the classic commentators, seems inconsistent with the rest of Jewish law, in which it is almost always the father’s ancestry that is determinative. It is the father, and only the father, who determines a child’s status as a priest or Levite, a member of the tribe of Judah or of Benjamin, a descendant of the Hasmonean house or the Davidic. Genealogy, indeed, is determined by the father regarding all categories except the most important: Whether a child is Jewish in the first place. Indeed, the principle of matrilineal descent appears so incongruous that the leading German rabbi of the first half of the twentieth century, Yehiel Jacob Weinberg, was moved to comment: “Why is a child as his mother? The answer is not quite clear.”<sup>1</sup>

The matrilineal principle is puzzling not only from the perspective of Jewish law, but from that of Jewish history as well. In *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, Harvard scholar Shaye Cohen points out that “throughout the ancient world the parent who mattered was, of course, the father. The

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children born of a marriage are *his* children, not the mother's." Aeschylus, Cohen points out, epitomized this attitude when he wrote that "The woman you call the mother of the child is not the parent; she is merely the nurse of the seed that was sown inside her." "What, then," asks Cohen, "are the reasons for the rabbinic matrilineal principle?"<sup>2</sup>

One of the most popular explanations asserts that paternal identity is less certain than maternal identity: Since we are more likely to know who the mother of a given child is, we are best off relying on her for definitive lineage. But as Cohen observes, this explanation fails for two reasons. First, the rabbis looked to the mother's lineage only with regard to Jewishness; if parental certainty were the central issue, then we would expect to see the matrilineal criterion for other questions of lineage. Second, the rabbis gave the mother legal standing to determine the identity of her child's father even in cases where paternity is the defining element. As Cohen notes, "if an unmarried woman is pregnant and declares that the father of her child is a priest, R. Gamaliel and R. Eliezer say that she is to be believed; if a woman becomes pregnant as the result of rape, the offspring is presumed to have the same status as the majority of the people where the rape occurred."<sup>3</sup> Thus, when paternity is uncertain, and we rely on the mother's testimony or location, it is never the mother's lineage that becomes definitive.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, Cohen says, the academic historian cannot explain matrilineal descent by appealing to any ordinary historical or social factors. Though "it is easy to believe" that rabbinic Judaism, in insisting on the matrilineal principle, "must have been compelled by some societal need," nevertheless, Cohen concludes, "there is little evidence to support this belief."<sup>5</sup>

To understand the principle of matrilineal descent, then, it is necessary to look beyond historical or sociological factors. I will propose here a theological explanation of the matrilineal principle, and show that far from being inconsistent with the rest of Jewish law, it follows from a proper understanding of the nature of Jewishness. Indeed, the principle of matrilineal descent lends insight into the Jewish view of parenthood, and even of the nature of religion itself.

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To speak of descent—matrilineal or patrilineal—itself implies a remarkable assumption: That Jewishness can be a matter of descent, rather than belief; that the foundation of Jewish identity is genealogy rather than theology. In Jewish chosenness, spiritual identity is inextricably bound up with familial identity. One born to Jewish parents is a Jew, a member of God's covenant, no matter the extent to which one conforms to the tenets of the Tora or accepts Jewish dogma. In this respect Judaism differs fundamentally from Christianity, in which participation is essentially a matter of faith, rather than descent.

Reflecting on the theological commonalities and differences between Jews and Christians, the Christian theologian R. Kendall Soulen notes:

Traditionally, Jews have understood themselves as God's chosen people descended from the patriarchs and matriarchs. Hence the ordinary way of becoming a Jew is to be born of a Jewish mother.... Most Jews are members of the chosen people by birth, and the privileges and obligations of the covenant fall to them accordingly. Christians, on the other hand, understand themselves as a fellowship that can be entered only through repentance and rebirth into the messianic community (that is, by getting washed!). Hence, no one can be born a Christian... one becomes a Christian through faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord, and through baptism in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Christianity, then, is a faith, while Judaism is also a family. Though Judaism involves a set of ideas, beliefs, values, and obligations, the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod notes that "these are, in a sense, superstructure rather than foundation. The foundation of Judaism is the family identity of the Jewish people as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."<sup>7</sup> To be a Jew is to see all other Jews not only as fellow believers, but as brothers and sisters. In choosing his monotheistic messengers, God bestowed religious obligations upon a natural family. Thus, Judaism is a faith founded on the

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natural familial bonds between Jews. It is for this reason that according to the halacha, or Jewish law, once a Jew is born to a Jewish mother, he cannot abdicate his covenantal obligations or undo his Jewishness. Though one can abandon a faith, family ties can never be severed.

Why does God choose a family, rather than electing only adherents of a faith? Why should kinship form the basis for spiritual responsibility?

The answers begin in the Jewish approach to man's embodied life. Man possesses not only spiritual but also physical dimensions. Any religion must therefore ask: How should man, who is a physical being, seek to relate to a nonphysical God? One possibility is to urge man to transcend the physical, to escape the body imprisoning his soul, and to establish thereby a relationship between the spirit and the Eternal. This, however, is not Judaism's solution. The Talmud insists that man's embodied existence, with all its drives and desires, provides man with the opportunity to serve God with every aspect of his humanity, and worship in a way that no purely spiritual being ever could:

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on high, the ministering angels spoke before the Holy One, "Sovereign of the universe! What business has one born of woman among us?" He answered them, "He has come to receive the Tora." They said to him, "That secret treasure... you desire to give it to flesh and blood!" The Holy One said to Moses, "Return them an answer".... He then spoke before them, "Sovereign of the universe! What is written therein?... 'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.' Do you then perform work, such that you have need for rest? What else is written therein? 'Honor your father and your mother.' Do you have fathers and mothers? Again, what is written therein? 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.' Is there jealousy among you? Is the evil Tempter among you?" Immediately they conceded to him.<sup>8</sup>

As this passage indicates, Judaism claims that the Tora was written for man in his totality, demanding not that he abandon the natural desires,

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inclinations, or weaknesses with which he is endowed, but that he embrace his humanity in its fullness and dedicate his whole life, body and soul, to the divine. Thus Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes that holiness is created by “man, by flesh and blood.” Though some faiths may focus solely on the spiritual, for Jews, he writes, “the earth and bodily life are the very ground of halachic reality.”<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the theologian Eliezer Berkovits notes that the role of the physical in religious worship lies at the center of the Jewish and Christian disagreement over the relevance of the ritual law. Should our spirit transcend our body, or should we direct the entirety of our human identity toward service of the Divine? If our spirit alone is central to our relationship with God, then faith, and not ritual acts, is of supreme importance. Judaism, however, argues that rituals are required in order to serve God not only spiritually, but physically. God created both body and soul; as such, our biological natures are not to be transcended, but sanctified by being directed toward the service of God. As Berkovits writes:

The so-called ritual laws are the only way for the physical component in man to become oriented toward the divine; through them, the body too may cleave to God. By fulfilling the commandments of God, the body too may enter into the relationship that is the essence of religion.... If the relationship to God is to be complete, it must engage man in his entirety. We can know nothing of the religion of a pure soul.... On the level of the soul, the relationship is spiritual and conscious, but it cannot be expressed in action; on the level of the body, the relationship has to become “materialized” in action. These two expressions of the religious life are not meant to exist parallel to each other as the religion of the soul and as that of the body. The *mitzva* is the union of the two... in the *mitzva* man is one; as a whole he related himself to the one God.<sup>10</sup>

If, however, man is supposed to transcend his body, then *true* familial bonds, true kinship, must be purely spiritual, and not in any way influenced by the natural or carnal. The book of Matthew makes this point explicitly:

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While he [Jesus] was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”<sup>11</sup>

Christianity is therefore not a familial association; members of the Church are bound together by their professed faith. As the influential Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas put it, “family is not at the core of our identity as Christians.”<sup>12</sup> After all, a Christian couple’s children are, prior to baptism and belief, not Christians at all, and must be converted to the faith.

Classical Judaism, however, insists that man is a divinely, and intentionally, created composite of spirit and body, and therefore to deny the significance of natural familial kinship is to deny a part of ourselves. Nothing illustrates this more than the fact that God sought in Abraham not only the father of a faith but of a family. “By electing the seed of Abraham,” Wyschogrod notes, “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.”<sup>13</sup> While the Church contended that the “new Israel was open to anyone who embraced the message of the Church,” Jews maintained that membership in Israel is bestowed by birth, because “God chose to embrace a people in the fullness of humanity,” and “this had to include the bodyness of this people alongside its national soul.” In the election of Israel we truly see that “the divine does not destroy the natural, but confirms it by placing it in its service.”<sup>14</sup>

Had God asked Abraham to found only a faith, and not a faithful family; had God chosen as his messengers to humanity a set of individuals who had no natural bond to one another, finding kinship only in their shared

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spiritual aspirations, then the message would have been that man must seek the spiritual by denying the physical aspects of his life. By choosing a family, God illustrates that the most basic instincts of man are not a profane shell that must be discarded by the spirit. They are, rather, the foundations of our spiritual existence.

The election of Abraham thus bespeaks Judaism's affirmation of familial bonds. Without question, no familial bond is stronger than that between a mother and her child. Inasmuch as the natural bonds of family are paradigmatic of the spiritual affinity among Jews, the significance of motherhood in Judaism takes on a special role. That this is the case is evident throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Motherhood first makes its appearance on the biblical scene by serving as the source of the first woman's name. As told in Genesis: "The man called his wife's name Eve (*Hava*) because she was the mother of all living things (*em kol hai*)."<sup>15</sup> Though the woman's name is integrally associated with motherhood, the name of the first man, Adam, is in no way connected to his serving as the progenitor of humanity. As Rabbi Soloveitchik has pointed out, Adam and Eve found themselves in a Hobbesian state of nature, one devoid of moral responsibilities and covenantal commitments. In such an environment, man is able to father children without taking responsibility for them, indeed without even knowing about them. Woman, on the other hand, is physically linked to any child she bears:

In the natural community, the woman is more concerned with motherhood than the man with fatherhood. Motherhood, in contrast to fatherhood, bespeaks a long-enduring peculiar state of body and mind. The nine months of pregnancy, with all its attendant biological and psychological changes, the birth of the child with pain and suffering, the nursing of the baby and, later, the caretaking of and attending to the youngster—all form part of the motherhood experience.... Physically, fatherhood implies

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nothing tangible and memorable. The male, bodily and mentally, does not experience his fatherhood.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, the mother in nature plays the central parental role. For this reason, in the Bible it is only after the formation of a divine covenant that there emerges a man whose very identity implies fatherhood: Abraham, the “father of many nations” (*av hamon goyim*).<sup>17</sup> At this point, fatherhood is endowed with tangible duties and spiritual responsibilities. Though not naturally bound to a child, the father Abraham accepts upon himself the responsibilities for transmitting ethical principles to the generations of the future: “For I know him,” God testifies about Abraham, “that he will command his children and his household after him, to perform righteousness and justice.”<sup>18</sup>

Here we see the distinction that the Bible draws between the ideal roles of mother and father. Whereas the mother is charged with the duty of giving the child its most basic spiritual and physical reality, its very substance of life, fathers are depicted as teachers, commanders, and discipliners—that is, providers of normative content. From its very beginning, the Bible paints diverse pictures of how mothers and fathers relate to their children, and the contrast continues throughout. The archetypal scriptural father loves his child, of course, but this love often manifests itself as educational discipline, as is stated in Deuteronomy: “For the Eternal your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son.”<sup>19</sup> The biblical archetype of the father, Rabbi Soloveitchik argues, “is basically a teacher... he gives advice, he offers opportunities, he blazes the trail for his offspring,” yet “he expects the children to learn to act on their own, to utilize the counsel they are given gratuitously, to take advantage of the opportunities and finally to attain complete independence and maturity.”<sup>20</sup>

The mother, on the other hand, will always see her child, no matter how old he may be, as the baby she bore. According to tradition, when the book of Proverbs describes a king reprimanded by his mother, it refers to Bathsheva’s reproof of her son Solomon after he married the pagan daughter of



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Pharaoh: "What, my son? And what, child of my womb?"<sup>21</sup> No matter how old a child may be, Rabbi Soloveitchik observes, for the mother, "the image of the baby, the memory of an infant held in her arms, the picture of herself playing, laughing, embracing, nursing, cleaning, and so forth, never vanishes. She always looks upon her child as upon a baby who needs her help and company, and whom she has to protect and shield."<sup>22</sup> He continues:

The mother can never forget the biological fact that her child was once a part of her, that she gave him her blood and that she brought him into the world with suffering and pain. When she says "my baby," she means to say: "Once we were one body. I gave you life. We together were involved in the same organic processes."<sup>23</sup>

The Bible employs these two archetypes in order to describe the ways that God relates to the Jewish people. God is, on the one hand, the father who expresses his love by educating us, teaching us to mature, disciplining us "as a man disciplines his son."<sup>24</sup> But God is also the mother, one who sees her sons and daughters as the children they once were. The Psalmist says: "Surely I have stilled and quieted myself, like a weaned child beside his mother; my soul within me is like a weaned child. Let Israel wait for the Eternal from henceforth and forever."<sup>25</sup> It is because of God's maternal relationship with Israel, Isaiah emphasizes, that the Jewish people will never be abandoned: "Can a woman forget her child, refrain from having mercy on the son of her womb?" In Rabbi Soloveitchik's view, while the love of a father, as depicted in the Bible, "consists in helping the child to free himself from paternal authority, in moving away from him," the love of a mother "expresses itself in steady intensification of her emotional attachment, in surging toward her child."<sup>26</sup>

**T**his view of the distinctive power of motherhood finds further expression in the rabbinic literature. In the Talmud and Midrash, the rabbis expanded on the biblical conception of mothers as more naturally inclined to bestow a nurturing love upon their children. The women of Israel are

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portrayed as the saviors of Jewish continuity, who desired to have children when their husbands were reluctant to do so:

“And there went a man from the house of Levi.” Did Amram, the man referred to in the verse, go anywhere? No, nowhere—so taught R. Judah bar Zevina, but rather Amram went and acted upon his daughter’s advice. He, as is well known, was the most eminent man of his generation. Aware that Pharaoh had decreed, “Every son that is born you shall cast in the river,” he said: “We labor in vain,” and was the first to divorce his wife. At that, all the others divorced their wives. Then his daughter said to him, “Father, your decree is more cruel than Pharaoh’s. For Pharaoh has decreed only against the males, while you decree against both males and females. Pharaoh decreed only concerning this world, while you decree concerning both this world and the world to come. Now, since Pharaoh is a wicked man, there is doubt whether his decree will or will not be fulfilled; but since you are a righteous man, your decree is sure to be fulfilled.” At once he went and took back his wife, and so did all the others.<sup>27</sup>

While Amram is one of the leading Jews of his generation, it takes a woman, his daughter, to recognize and impress upon him the danger to Jewish continuity that is implicit in his reaction to Pharaoh’s decree. Similarly, the rabbis said that “Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation,” since they seduced their husbands when the latter were unwilling to have children:

When they went to draw water, the Holy One for their sake caused so many small fish to be scooped up into their pitchers that only half of what they drew up was water and the other half fish. They would then heat two pots, one with hot water and the other with fish, both of which they brought to their husbands in the field. There the women washed their husbands, anointed them, fed them, and gave them to drink. There, lying secluded between mounds in the fields, they responded to their men.<sup>28</sup>

It is the woman’s natural maternal inclination that, for the rabbis, ensured the continuity of the Jewish people. In the picture painted by the midrash,

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the Jewish mother emerges as savior of the Jewish family. Here, too, we see the fundamental connection that the sages drew between motherhood and Jewish continuity. Jewish women are depicted as keepers of the most basic trust, that of preserving and continuing Jewish life from one generation to the next.

Indeed, the rabbis recognized the significance of these diverse parental roles, and gave them resonance within a conception of divinity that combined both masculine and feminine elements. The immanent divine presence, for example, is described by the feminine term *shechina* (“presence”). This is related directly to the conception of motherly love. “Whenever Rabbi Yosef heard the footsteps of his mother,” the midrash relates, “he would say: ‘Let me rise because the *shechina* is coming.’”<sup>29</sup> For the sages, to honor one’s parents is also to honor the distinct parental ways in which God interacts with the Jewish people. “Behind every mother,” Rabbi Soloveitchik comments, “young or old, happy or sad, trails the *shechina*. And behind every father, erect or stooped, in playful or stern mood, walks *malka kadisha*, the Holy King. This is not mysticism. It is *halacha*.”<sup>30</sup>

The rabbis of the Talmud also recognized that the child reciprocates a mother’s intense, physically founded love. A child experiences his mother as the primary source of nurturing in his life, while the father is experienced as educator. A child is therefore more naturally inclined to revere his mother, and to fear his father:

R. Judah the Prince said: It is revealed and known to the Creator that a son honors his mother more than his father, as she sways him by her tender words. Therefore, the Holy One placed the obligation of honoring the father before that of the mother [in the verse “Honor your father and your mother”].<sup>31</sup> And it is revealed and known to the Creator that a son fears his father more than his mother because he teaches him Tora; therefore, the Holy One placed the obligation of fear of the mother before that of the father [in the verse “You shall fear every man his mother and father”].<sup>32</sup>

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Perhaps the most striking articulation of the rabbinic belief in the intensity of a child's love for his mother is the Midrash's statement that God himself referred to Israel as his mother, because that was the most intense analogy for love in human language:

R. Shimon the son of Yohai asked R. Eleazar the son of R. Yose: Have you perhaps heard from your father an interpretation of the verse "the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him?"<sup>33</sup> R. Eleazar replied: Yes. Said R. Shimon: How does it go? Said R. Eleazar: The verse may be understood by the parable of a king who had an only daughter whom he loved exceedingly. He called her "my daughter," but as time went on and his love kept increasing, he came to call her "my sister"—"My sister, My bride."<sup>34</sup> And finally, as his love grew more intense, he called her "My mother," as is indicated by the verse "Attend unto me, O my people, and give ear unto me, O my nation," where "O my nation" [*u'le'ummi*] may also be read "O my mother" [*u'le'immi*]. R. Shimon the son of Yohai [upon hearing this] rose, kissed R. Eleazar on the brow, and said: Had I come into the world only to hear this interpretation from you, it would have been enough for me."<sup>35</sup>

The Talmud's insistence that the mother is the source of a child's Jewishness, while at the same time insisting that the father determines one's spiritual and political framework, is intimately linked with the biblical and rabbinic understanding of the natural parental relationship. Jewish law asserts that the father is given the primary responsibility in training the child to develop an independent moral and religious existence. "The father is duty-bound to circumcise his son, to redeem him [if he is a first-born], to teach him Tora, to teach him a trade, and, some say, to teach him to swim as well."<sup>36</sup> If a child is Jewish, it is his father's identity that determines the child's religious, political, financial, and familial obligations. With respect to these responsibilities, the rabbis say, only "the father's family is considered family" while the mother's family "is not considered family." With respect to tribal affiliation, and tribal land inheritance, the father's family, too, is determinative.<sup>37</sup>

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At the same time, the halacha affirms that the natural familial bond is first and foremost forged through gestation and parturition. The mother provides a bodily, familial link to herself, and thereby to her Jewish family. One descended from a Jewish father but a non-Jewish mother may be genetically linked to a Jew, but has a much stronger familial connection to one who is not a member of the Jewish family.<sup>38</sup>

This point, that the intimacy of the mother-child relationship is the foundation of the matrilineal principle, finds powerful expression in two other talmudic dictums, each possessing far-reaching legal implications.<sup>39</sup> The first can be found in what is known as the Noahide law, the basic code of morality that the rabbis considered the foundation of any civilized society. According to normative rabbinic interpretation of this code, incest with one's sister is committed only when the two individuals in question share a mother, whether or not they share a father.<sup>40</sup> Although in the realm of covenantal responsibility, the rabbis insisted that it is the father's family that "is considered family," incest involves the violation of the strongest of natural familial boundaries. This interpretation of the Noahide incest prohibition reflects the rabbis' realization that motherhood is the strongest link in the chain that is the natural family, so that siblings who are both children of the same mother are related in a way that siblings who share only a father are not.

Second, the Talmud discusses the case of a woman who converts to Judaism mid-pregnancy. The child's genetic mother was not Jewish, but his birth mother is. Is the child a Jew, or a Gentile? The answer is that though the child was conceived by a non-Jew, he was borne by, and born to, a Jewish woman and is therefore a member of the Jewish family.<sup>41</sup> The doctrine of matrilineal descent does not imply that the mother's genetic contribution to the child at the moment of conception is more important than that of the father; it insists, rather, that the bond forged by childbearing and birth is stronger than any other familial attachment.

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**T**he doctrine of matrilineal descent is thus far less incongruous with the biblical and rabbinic traditions than it would seem at first glance. On the contrary, it follows naturally from them. God chose people to serve him in the fullness of their humanity, not only with their souls but also with their bodies. This, in turn, could not be accomplished through the election of individuals, but only through the founding of a faith upon a natural family. But if we are to celebrate, and sanctify, our God-given human instincts, including and especially kinship, then no form of kinship is stronger, more natural, and more human, than motherhood. The angels' choice of words, in a debate they are said to have had with Moses, is noteworthy; to be human, they scornfully said, is to be "one born of woman." Thus God's embracing of our humanity involves taking the most intensely physical of experiences—the giving of one's body to the creation of another physical human being—and sanctifying it by placing it in the service of God. Motherhood becomes the medium for the continuity of the chosen people.

Judaism is a faith founded primarily on familial identity. In the Bible, it is male figures who most often shape the familial character of our faith. God is known through history as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He elected Aaron and his seed to minister to him in his Temple. And he chose David to rule and to produce an heir, a male messiah through whom the Davidic line would be reborn, the enemies of Israel defeated, and the world redeemed.

Yet precisely because Judaism involves the election of a natural family, it is Jewish women rather than men who serve as the foundation of our familial faith. If, despite disinterest and disregard for one's heritage, a Jew cannot sever his or her bond to nation, family, and covenant, it is because the Almighty guarantees, to paraphrase Isaiah, that a mother cannot forget her child, nor refrain from having mercy on the child she bore, and that

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God, therefore, will not forget Israel either. Anyone born to a Jewish mother is bound, by her motherly love, and by God's motherly love, to the Jewish family and to every other Jew. The centrality of mother-love in Judaism thus means that all Jews are linked by familial ties that can never be undone. Born into a Judaism that is not just a faith but a family, we are all joined for eternity to God—and to each other.

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## **Notes**

1. Cited in Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999).
2. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, p. 283.
3. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, p. 291.
4. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, p. 291.
5. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, p. 307.
6. R. Kendall Soulen, "Israel and the Church," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 2000), p. 172.
7. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996), p. 57.
8. Shabbat 88b-89a.
9. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), p. 33.

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10. Eliezer Berkovits, *God, Man and History*, ed. David Hazony (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2004), pp. 123-124.
  11. Matthew 12:46-50.
  12. Stanley Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics in Jewish Terms: A Response to David Novak," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, p. 139.
  13. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, p. 67.
  14. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, p. 67.
  15. Genesis 3:20.
  16. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (New York: Toras HaRav Foundation, 2000), p. 106.
  17. Genesis 17:4.
  18. Genesis 18:19.
  19. Deuteronomy 8:5.
  20. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, p. 162.
  21. Proverbs 31:2.
  22. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, p. 163.
  23. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, p. 163.
  24. Deuteronomy 8:5.
  25. Psalms 131:2-3.
  26. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, p. 165.
  27. Sota 12a.
  28. Sota 11b.
  29. Kidushin 31a.
  30. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, p. 168.
  31. Exodus 20:12.
  32. Leviticus 19:3; Kidushin 30b-31a.
  33. Song of Songs 3:11.
  34. Song of Songs 5:1.
  35. Exodus Rabba 52:5.
  36. Kidushin 29a.



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37. Yevamot 99a.

38. It is important to note that while Judaism places an emphasis on the centrality of motherhood in defining identity, it is possible to become a Jew without being born to a Jewish family—that is, through conversion. Still, a convert does not simply proclaim Jewish faith, but becomes a full member of the Jewish family—an identity which, like the identity of someone born Jewish, cannot be undone. It is thus no coincidence that the paradigmatic convert, Ruth the Moabite, was a woman who converted by declaring to Naomi not only “your God is my God,” but also “your people is my people” (Ruth 1:16). Nor is it a coincidence that the rabbis refer to a convert as one who is “like unto a newborn child” (Yevamot 97b). To become a convert is to acquire an intense familial bond to the people of Israel and to the God of Israel, akin to the familial bond between mother and child. The theme of matrilineal descent is thus stressed in the context of conversion as well.

39. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, p. 291.

40. Sanhedrin 58a.

41. Yevamot 97a-98a.