
FIRST THINGS

GOD'S FIRST LOVE: THE THEOLOGY OF MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD

by
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Paradox attends the influence of Michael Wyschogrod, perhaps the most original Jewish theologian of the past half century. An unapologetic defender of Israel's particularity and God's special love for the Jewish people, he has often found a warmer reception among Christian thinkers than among traditional Jewish ones. Twenty years ago, the appearance of his book *The Body of Faith* transformed the way many leading Christian theologians understand Judaism. Perhaps this is not surprising—for, over his long career, this American thinker, born in Germany in 1928, has proved extraordinarily willing to draw on Christian theologians: Karl Barth, for instance, whom Wyschogrod deploys in his efforts to free Judaism from dependence on such extraneous philosophical influences as Aristotle and Kant. For that matter, in his emphasis on the uniqueness of Jewish revelation, Wyschogrod has found surprising commonalities with Christians.

As an Orthodox Jew, Wyschogrod insists that his work rises and falls with the ability of traditional Jews to be moved by it: “Ultimately it is the Torah-obedient Jewish community that judges a work of Jewish thought,” he wrote in his 1989 masterwork, *The Body of Faith*. At the same time, it is precisely the Orthodox community that has failed to appreciate his work—perhaps because of his criticisms of Maimonides, one of the most beloved thinkers in Jewish history.

Maimonides, Wyschogrod insists, introduced extraneous influences into Judaism, partly in an attempt to reconcile Jewish religion with Aristotelian philosophy. Wyschogrod argues that Judaism concerns not a

philosophical doctrine but rather God's unique and preferential love for the flesh-and-blood descendants of Abraham. The election of the Jewish people is the result of God's falling in love with Abraham and founding a family with him. And, out of passionate love for Abraham, God continues to dwell among the Jewish people. Maimonides, in Wyschogrod's account, deviated from the biblical view to accommodate Aristotle's philosophy.

Along the way, Maimonides also attempted to banish all anthropomorphism from Judaism. An entire tradition of Jewish rationalism has followed Maimonides in this and has applied it to the concept of Israel's election. Thus many German Jewish thinkers, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, see Israel's election as symbolic of God's equal love for all of humanity"for surely a good God would not violate Kant's categorical imperative. The result is the loss of any reason for the election of Israel, a foundational idea of Judaism. The biblical insistence on God's indwelling in the living Jewish people, Wyschogrod observes, requires us to believe that God is present in the physical people of Israel.

To Jewish critics, Wyschogrod's emphasis on divine love and on the indwelling of the divine sounds more Christian than Jewish. Wyschogrod, however, insists on demanding that Jews refresh their religion from its original sources, arguing that a general and unspecific love is no love at all"and thus that God's particular love for Israel is what makes possible his love for all humanity.

Despite"or perhaps precisely because"he is so rooted in Jewish Orthodoxy and so persuaded of God's special love for Israel, Wyschogrod has not hesitated to engage Christians. One of his great contributions has been to transform the way Christian theologians understand Judaism. The Methodist theologian Kendall Soulen (editor of an anthology of Wyschogrod's essays) first read him when he was in graduate school studying Christian theology. He felt "an almost physical sense of discovery, as if I had bumped into a hitherto unforeseen rock. What I had just read was undoubtedly the most unapologetic statement of Jewish faith I had ever encountered."

Some Jews may bristle at Wyschogrod's belief that Christian thinkers such as Karl Barth can help correct errors that have crept into Jewish theology over the centuries. Yet at the same time, in his encounter with Christian thinkers, Wyschogrod has remained unabashed in his insistence on the exclusivity of Israel's election. One day in 1966, Wyschogrod visited Karl Barth in Basel and informed the great Christian thinker

that he had begun to refer to himself as a “Jewish Barthian.” Barth was much amused by the appellation, and a discussion ensued about the Jewish people versus the Church in the eyes of God:

At one point he said, “You Jews have the promise but not the fulfillment; we Christians have both promise and fulfillment.” Influenced by the banking atmosphere of Basel, I replied: “With human promise, one can have the promise but not the fulfillment. But a promise of God is like money in the bank. If we have his promise, we have his fulfillment, and if we do not have the fulfillment we do not have the promise.” There was a period of silence and then he said, “You know, I never thought of it that way.” I will never forget that meeting.

When *The Body of Faith* appeared in 1989, it seemed profoundly unlike any work of Jewish thought published before, including that of Wyschogrod’s teacher, the great Talmudist and philosopher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s best-known books are written from the perspective of the religious individual. *The Lonely Man of Faith*, for instance, tries to show how a religious man can reconcile secular endeavors with the existential experience that embodies the essence of faith. Similarly, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s classic, *Halakhic Man*, stresses how Jewish law is not merely a series of obligations but indelibly impacts the way the religious Jew experiences the world.

In Wyschogrod’s work, on the other hand, Jewish thought begins not with analysis of who the man of faith is but with who God is—not with how a member of the Jewish people approaches God but how God approaches the Jewish people. The Bible’s answer, he believes, is obvious: “It is the proclamation of biblical faith that God chose this people and loves it as no other, unto the end of time.” The clarity with which he focuses on the central biblical premise of election, God’s love for Israel, is what makes his work both so Orthodox as well as so original. For centuries Jewish thought has attempted to adapt itself to foreign philosophical categories, and Wyschogrod’s bold return to biblical sources provides a platform upon which to critique even such a revered figure as Maimonides.

Jewish theology must begin with the exclusive election of Israel, Wyschogrod argues, for it is the central principle of the Hebrew Bible. The chosenness of Israel is often described by Jews as consisting in the giving of the law. While this is doubtless an essential aspect of Israel’s election, it is a narrow account of it.

Yet, even in this narrow form, we are forced to a more basic question: Why did God choose Israel, of all the nations in the world, to receive the Torah?

Deuteronomy answers explicitly that he did so out of preferential love for Israel's ancestors: "Unto thee it was showed, that thou mightest know that the Lord he is God; there is none else beside him. Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: And upon earth he showed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt; to drive out nations from before thee greater and mightier than thou art, to bring thee in, to give thee their land for an inheritance, as it is this day."

Deuteronomy further declares that God's love was extended to Abraham's descendants. You were not chosen, Moses informs the Israelites, "because you were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers." As Wyschogrod puts it: "If God continues to love the people of Israel" and it is the faith of Israel that he does "it is because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved."

Maimonides' attempt to expunge anthropomorphism thus cannot be reconciled with this biblical idea of a God who showed an impassioned love for one particular human being and his descendants. For Wyschogrod, the legacy of Maimonidean rationalism is to enfeeble the biblical concept of election.

Many modern Jews are uncomfortable with this concept, assuming that a truly good God would treat all human beings equally and love all of them in the same way. In fact, many modern Jewish theologians and philosophers end up embracing, in the name of pluralism, an odd sort of religious relativism. The notion that Israel experiences a special love from God, vouchsafed by sacred texts more valid than any others, may be true from Jews' perspective but false from another. Israel, in other words, can experience what it fancies to be a unique form of divine love while other faith communities can, from their own perspective, be showered with an equal abundance of affection.

Other modern writers on Israel's election tend to avoid the subject of love entirely. In 1966, for instance, *Commentary* magazine conducted a symposium among prominent Jewish American academics called "The

State of Jewish Belief.” One of the questions put to the respondents focused on the doctrine of Israel’s election: “In what sense do you believe that the Jews are the chosen people of God?” While the Orthodox participants in the symposium defended Israel’s election and wrote of Israel’s obligation to observe the Torah and communicate monotheism to the world, they did not discuss the reason Israel alone was given the Torah; in fact, not one of them stressed the unique love that God maintains for the Jewish people.

So how is one to defend a perfect God preferentially loving a particular people? Over the years, many Christian theologians have expressed abhorrence at the idea of God’s preferential love. The twentieth-century Swedish theologian Anders Nygren, for example, contrasts the different depictions of divine love found in Jewish and Christian Scripture: “In Judaism love is exclusive and particularistic,” while Christian love “overleaps all such limits; it is universal and all-embracing.” God’s love stands in stark contradistinction to human love, absolutely “unmotivated.” It expects nothing back, no return on the emotional investment.

Wyschogrod takes issue with just this sort of understanding. The Hebrew Bible does not depict such a radical distinction between divine and human love. Humanity was created in the image of God; our love is a reflection of his. God can desire to enter into a relationship with us; he can be drawn to some aspect of our identity. In the Hebrew Bible, writes Wyschogrod, God’s love is “a love very much aware of a human response. God has thereby made himself vulnerable: He asks for man’s response and is hurt when it is not forthcoming.” Further, because “God’s love is directed toward who we are . . . there are those whom God loves especially, with whom he has fallen in love.”

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Bible’s depiction of God’s passionate, preferential love for Abraham, and it is here that Wyschogrod defends divine love for Israel. Indeed, he does more than defend the doctrine: He insists, strikingly, that everyone “Jew and Gentile” has a stake in God’s preferentially loving some more than others. If God loves human beings and seeks to relate to them because he is drawn to something unique about them, then his love must be exclusive and cannot be universal. He loves individuals because he has found something unique about them worth loving, which he may not find in another individual. As Wyschogrod writes, “Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or what not.”

In contrast, divine love is concrete “a genuine encounter with man in his individuality” and must therefore be exclusive. A love directed at all human beings without any grounding in their unique identities is a love “directed at universals and abstractions rather than real persons.” A daughter whose father loves her with only unmotivated love and not for anything unique “shared kinship, unique virtues and traits” could correctly claim that she has not truly been loved. For Wyschogrod, Hebrew Scripture speaks of preferential love and conveys thereby the extraordinary notion that God loves men *because of* who we are, not *despite* who we are.

Of course, Wyschogrod is not insensitive to the fact that this sounds hurtful to non-Israelites. If God is a father, motivated by genuine desire to be with us, then the fact that his love is a love founded in our uniqueness means that it is therefore dispensed unequally. Ultimately, however, according to Wyschogrod, it is precisely God’s preferential love for Israel that guarantees the possibility that each one of us can have a genuine relationship with God. Chosenness expresses to everyone, Jew and Gentile, “that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness”:

When we grasp that the election of Israel flows from the fatherhood that extends to all created in God’s image, we find ourselves tied to all men in brotherhood, as Joseph, favored by his human father, ultimately found himself tied to his brothers. And when man contemplates this mystery, that the Eternal One, the creator of heaven and earth, chose to become the father of his creatures instead of remaining self-sufficient unto himself, as is the Absolute of the philosophers, there wells up in man that praise that has become so rare yet remains so natural.

This, then, is our choice: to be loved by God for whom we uniquely are and thus risk being loved less than others, or to be loved by God equally but not uniquely and therefore not truly. It is a choice between a genuine relationship and bland benevolence.

In fact, this account of Israel’s exclusive election has not offended many orthodox Christians but reassured them, for just the reasons Wyschogrod presents: God’s special love for his first love, Israel, shows that he can love them in their own uniqueness and particularity as well.

Maimonides, by contrast, rejects the notion of God's passionate love for humans as an anthropomorphism. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, he insists that, when the Bible describes God's love, "of course God is not experiencing the feeling of affection or tenderness." These are mere references to what he describes as "attributes of action." The Bible's message that God loves the Jewish people is merely a statement that he acts in a loving manner toward them.

Wyschogrod starkly states that it is with Maimonides that much of Jewish thinking about God went awry: "Maimonides' demythologization of the concept of God is unbiblical and ultimately dangerous to Jewish faith. Jewish faith cannot survive if a personal relation between the Jew and God is not possible. But no personal relation is possible with an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover." The Bible speaks of God's love and anger, and the religious reader is obligated to take these statements, to some extent, literally. Refusing to take literally the Bible's accounts of an emotionally engaged Almighty, for Wyschogrod, amounts to subjugating the text of the Bible to an external agenda.

It is this insistence that we must accept the truths presented to us in Scripture without reinterpretation that led Wyschogrod to refer to himself as a Jewish Barthian. In *The Body of Faith*, he notes his admiration for how Karl Barth "plunges his reader into the world of faith without defensive introductions." Reading Barth is like "shock therapy," because "it introduces the reader or the listener to a frame of reference that attempts only to be true to itself and its sources and not to external demands that can be satisfied only by fitting the Church's message into their mold, a mold foreign to it and therefore necessarily distorting."

Maimonides' attempt to expunge anthropomorphism from Judaism has led later Jewish thinkers to assume that ascription of affection to God is a primarily Christian idea. Consider the modern Orthodox Jewish philosopher Eliezer Berkovits. While not especially influential in his lifetime, his writings have gained currency in the Modern Orthodox community, thanks to their recent republication. In an essay attacking Abraham Joshua Heschel, who spoke of the Bible's "God of pathos," Berkovits dismisses the notion of a passionately loving God as fundamentally Christian. Judaism "abhors any form of humanization" of divine nature, he writes. "The theological climate is determined by a long tradition of affirmation of divine impassibility in face of numerous biblical texts to the contrary Dr. Heschel's theology of pathos and

religion of sympathy seem to be offspring of theologically oriented fancy.”

From a Wyschogrodian perspective, however, Berkovits’ desire to stress the uniqueness of Judaism forces him to excise an essential aspect of Jewish faith. That God loves Israel is a fundamental tenet not only of the Bible but of the rabbinic writings of late antiquity in the Midrash. And through the centuries, the Jewish people were sustained not by a belief in Maimonides’ God of the philosophers but by what the Midrash calls the “Divine Presence in Exile,” the God who dwells among his persecuted people, making their travails his travails and their suffering his suffering.

Because the Jewish community was so devastated by the Holocaust, there is a tremendous temptation to give it a prominent role in one’s theology. For traditional theologians, especially the Orthodox, there are dangers in this. Giving the Holocaust pronounced theological prominence can lead Jewish thinkers to dilute or relativize Judaism’s theological foundation. More, it allows the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism in the past to influence unduly theological attitudes toward Christians today.

Wyschogrod has criticized Jewish theologians who place the Holocaust at the center of theology”Emil Fackenheim, for instance, is famous for insisting that after the Holocaust Judaism must add what he calls a “614th commandment” to the 613 commandments of the Torah: an obligation to provide for the continuity of Judaism after the Holocaust. Indeed, Fackenheim argues that the Holocaust unites both religious Jews and secular Jews, for even if Jews no longer believe the Bible, they are obligated not to allow Hitler to succeed in his attempt to obliterate Judaism.

In reply, Wyschogrod warns against making Hitler and the Holocaust an argument for Judaism. There is, he observes, only one true reason to remain Jewish: God’s election of Abraham and his selection of his descendants to serve as a light to the nations. Fackenheim’s argument amounts to what he terms “negative natural theology””an argument from evil that, in Wyschogrod’s words, is “as serviceable to the secularist as it is to the believer.” For Wyschogrod, Hitler rather than Abraham, and Auschwitz rather than Sinai, becomes the foundation for Fackenheim’s Judaism.

“One is almost driven to the conclusion,” writes Wyschogrod, that in the absence of the Holocaust, for the secularist, “no justification for the further survival of Judaism could have been found. With the Holocaust,

amazing as it may appear, Judaism has gotten a new lease on life.” But if the Holocaust becomes “the dominant voice that Israel hears, it could not but be a demonic voice it would be hearing. There is no salvation to be extracted from the Holocaust, no faltering Judaism can be revived by it, no new reason for the continuation of the Jewish people can be found in it. If there is hope after the Holocaust, it is because, to those who believe, the voices of the Prophets speak more loudly than did Hitler, and because the divine promise sweeps over the crematoria and silences the voice of Auschwitz.”

A faith founded on God’s eternal love of Israel emphasizes instead our experience of God’s salvation and redemption, which we once experienced and, Judaism declares, we will experience again. Israel’s faith, Wyschogrod writes, “has always centered around the saving acts of God: the election, the exodus, the Temple, and the Messiah.” Acts of destruction were remembered in minor fast days “while those of redemption became the joyous proclamations of the Passover and Tabernacles The God of Israel is a redeeming God; this is the only message we are authorized to proclaim, however much it may not seem so to the eyes of nonbelief.”

Other Jewish theologians, reflecting on the Holocaust, have drawn radical theological conclusions not about the faith of the Jews but about Christians. Berkovits, for example, argues in *Faith after the Holocaust* that the Holocaust taught us “a straight line leads from the first act of [Christian] oppression against the Jews and Judaism in the fourth century to the Holocaust in the twentieth.” After the Holocaust, he therefore believes, any notion of a special bond between Jews and Christians is impossible: Judaism’s main message to Christianity is that Christians must “keep your hands off us and our children!” Indeed, “It is not interreligious understanding that mankind needs but interhuman understanding”an understanding based on our common humanity and wholly independent of any need for common religious beliefs and theological principles These goals of freedom, peace, and social justice have universal validity. It would be extremely foolish to seek their realization by means of a narrowly Jewish “Christian front.”

As Stanley Hauerwas notes, Berkovits fails to understand that “societies putatively founded on values of ‘universal validity’ cannot help but interpret the particularistic commitments of the Jewish people as morally retrogressive.” In contrast, many Christians have come to appreciate, and even celebrate, God’s special relationship with the Jewish people. Wyschogrod, in his description of God’s election of Israel, notes that anti-Semitism is, at its core, a resistance to, and jealousy of, this election. “Instead of accepting

Israel's election with humility," he writes, the nations of the world all too often "rail against it, mocking the God of the Jews, gleefully pointing out the shortcomings of the people he chose," for "Israel's presence is a constant reminder to them that they were not chosen but that this people was." At the same time, as Kendall Soulen notes in his excellent introduction to Wyschogrod's thought, for Wyschogrod, it is through God's love of Israel that we come to know his love for all the world"or, in Soulen's words, "God also desires to be Redeemer of the world as the One whose first love is the people of Israel." Thus Soulen cites Wyschogrod: "Because [God] said: 'I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; in you shall all the families of earth be blessed' (Gen. 12:3), he has tied his saving and redemptive concern for the welfare of all humankind to his love for the people of Israel."

What this means, for Christians such as Soulen, is that Wyschogrod has transformed even the issue that most divides Christians from Jews"the incarnation of Jesus"into a challenge for Christians to recognize the holiness of Israel. As Wyschogrod wrote in the essay "Incarnation and God's Indwelling in Israel": "If the Jewishness of Jesus is not contingent, then it is"for Christians"the climax of the process that began with the election of Abraham." In other words, while the incarnation remains a central disagreement between Jews and Christians (see my January 2009 article in *FIRST THINGS*, "No Friend in Jesus"), fealty to God's word in Hebrew Scripture requires a recognition by Christians of God's love for, and presence in, the Jewish people. Recognition of this election requires Christians, in Wyschogrod's felicitous phrase, to be even "more Barthian than Barth."

Today, decades after Berkovits insisted that Jews join the rest of the world to support values such as "social justice" that have nontheological, "universal validity," secular supporters of social justice often seem remarkably concerned about justice for all individuals except for Jews. Meanwhile, in America, support for Israel and the well-being of the Jewish people has been found first and foremost among traditional Christians who, contrary to critics, are motivated mainly not by apocalyptic expectation but rather by a rejection of moral relativism and a belief that the Bible promises to bless those who stand by the Children of Abraham. We live in a world where, for the first time in many centuries, there are Christians who believe that participating in God's love for the Jewish people is demanded by the divine in Hebrew Scripture. To conclude from the Holocaust that we ought to dismiss this outpouring of love and support is not only unwise but, for the reader of Wyschogrod, a profound theological error. A world where Jews are threatened physically by fundamentalist Islam and morally by secularism, a world where Jews and Christians ought to

go their separate ways, is one where Israel”both the people and the country”will be very much alone. And, in an age when Jewish theology must reject relativism on the one hand and instinctive anti-Christianity on the other, it is, I believe, Michael Wyschogrod who has shown us the way.

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