

# Judaism Doesn't Need This 'Genius'

A polemic against Bernard-Henri Lévy's new book

By Meir Y. Soloveichik

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who chose us from among the nations and gave us His Torah.

—*Talmudic blessing over the Torah*

Helen: Right now, honey, the world just wants us to fit in; and to fit in, we've just got to be like everyone else.

Dash: But Dad always said that our powers were nothing to be ashamed of; our powers made us special!

Helen: Everyone is special, Dash.

Dash: Which is another way of saying no one is.

—*The Incredibles*, a Pixar movie

JUDGING BY ITS TITLE, Bernard-Henri Lévy's *The Genius of Judaism* seems to be a celebration of the Jewish faith. The book, however, is actually an assault on Judaism's central doctrine. Its thesis is that the concept of the "election" of the Jews, of their being chosen by God, is a "scandalous, almost scabrous word on which, since Jews have been Jews, their misunderstanding with the nations hang." This millennia-long misunderstanding surrounding the chosenness of the Jews can now, apparently, be rectified, once our author strips the idea

"of the load of prejudice, bad literature, and stupidity that has weighed it down over time." It turns out, Lévy writes, that Israel is neither chosen nor elect, and Jews have misinterpreted the Bible in claiming to be so; indeed, he insists, chosenness is not central to Judaism at all, and overcoming this misconception is essential to healing the rift between the Jews and those who hate them.

That this silly thesis is presented as the book's main discovery is a shame, because there are admirable passages to be found in *The Genius of Judaism*. Lévy decries the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe; he lauds the contribution of Jewish ideas to the philosophical foundations of Western democracy, and of the culture of Europe; and he makes the case for being pro-Israel to his fellow leftists. Yet he stresses that his most important argument is that Jewish chosenness is

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## If we are in Exodus, then we are not at all where ‘the whole story starts,’ for there is another book before Exodus where the story starts and finds its genesis: It is called Genesis.

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not only false but also demonstrates ignorance of the Bible on which it is based. This is a terrible claim for a Jewish intellectual, who is also an influential celebrity, to make.

Lévy’s argument is founded on his own exegesis of the story of the Sinai revelation in Exodus. He writes, in the overly dramatic tone that marks the entire book:

We have to go back to the verse.

The first.

The one where the whole story starts, with its knot of misapprehensions that will poison twenty centuries of relations with Christianity and fourteen with Islam but that has its own share of truth.

We are in Exodus.

This is already problematic. If we are in Exodus, then we are not at all where “the whole story starts,” for there is another book before Exodus where the whole story starts, where the tale finds its genesis: It is called Genesis. In it we learn of a man named Abraham whom God loved above all others, and in memory of whom God would love one particular people above all others. That turns out to be central to the later biblical story of Sinai.

Lévy, however, ignores this point and proceeds to reflect on the story. God, who is described as creator and owner of all the earth, has chosen Israel as a *segulah mi-kol ha-amim*, a “treasure from amongst all the nations,” as well as an *am mamlekhet kohanim ve-goi kadosh*, a “nation of kingly priests and a holy nation.” Lévy does not cite the passage in full; he merely proceeds to tell his readers what he believes they need to know:

[God] told Moses this: “All the earth is mine.” Equally dear to my heart, without exception, are all of the peoples of the earth. I am the God of love of all the sons of Adam and thus of all the sons of Noah, who are, to this day, my equally beloved sons. But before God told him that, there was this other thing: “You shall be for me a treasure.” Among all the sons of Adam and Noah is one human population that I call

a treasure (*segula*, in Hebrew) and that I have placed “on eagle’s wings” so that they may be “brought to me.” I am God of all peoples, and I repeat that all peoples are equal in my heart. But there is one, here, at the foot of this rock, to which I say that it shall be, if it obeys my voice, a people precious among all others, a treasure, and that is the people of Israel.

Lévy’s argument, apparently, is that Israel is a treasure; all nations are “equally dear, without exception”; yet God considers one people as “precious among all others.” How can one alone be special if everyone is special? A quote from a Pixar film may not be as highbrow as the many French intellectuals—Levinas, Foucault, Proust, Chateaubriand—quoted by Lévy, but the problem posed by my epigrammatic citation from *The Incredibles* seems relevant: How can God consider all nations as “equally dear” and yet consider one as “precious among all others”? If Israel is more special than all others, how can everyone be “equally” special? Lévy never makes this clear. What he does make clear, however, is that while Israel is a treasure, it is definitely *not* chosen:

It will be noted, first, that at no point does the biblical text mention election or choice. Words were available in Hebrew to express that idea. There was the word *behira*, which signifies both “free will” and “choice,” and that would have expressed what the stock phrase implies in the words “chosen people.” But that is not the word that was selected and it does not appear, to my knowledge, in any of the verses that touch on this story.

But *behira* does indeed appear, and in a biblical discussion of the Sinai revelation to boot. It is stated explicitly in Deuteronomy, a text that Lévy appears to appreciate since he cites it elsewhere in his book. In Deuteronomy, Moses states the following:

Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire.

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## Lévy refers to a midrash that describes God offering the nations the Torah, with all of them refusing. But he cites this as if it were part of the Bible and a proof against chosenness.

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*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 (emphasis added).*

It does not get more explicit than this. God, the text stresses—*using the very word Lévy claims that it does not*—chose Israel; and He did so because of the profound, exclusive love He had for Israel’s fathers. As the theologian Michael Wyschogrod has put it, if God continues to love the people of Israel—and it is the faith of Israel that He does—it is because God sees the faith of His beloved Abraham on the face of every Jew, as a lover sees the face of his beloved on the faces of the children of the beloved. This is not an un-biblical fantasy invented by later Jews: It is explicit in the Bible itself. Lévy is free to reject this verse, but he is not free to make blanket claims about the Bible while ignoring basic biblical verses.

This verse, unfortunately, is not the only one Lévy ignores. Israel’s treasured status in the eyes of God, he further argues, is totally contingent: “For better or for worse, this quality of being treasured is tied to the unconditional faith that they swear when declaring, in a nearby verse, that they would obey and they would understand.” If Israel disobeys, however, “in that case, absolutely all of the texts are in agreement: The curses will be proportional to the blessing.” The curses, he notes, are that the Jews “will be as the last of the last, the lowest of the low, no longer the head but now the tail, no longer the cream of humanity but its dregs.”

The Bible does indeed assert that Israel, if it is disobedient, will suffer curses, but, to utilize Lévy’s phrase, the “texts are in agreement” that God will still love Israel and redeem Israel despite this, because God’s love for the patriarchs is extended to the children. Thus Leviticus concludes its discussion of God’s curses by emphasizing:

And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them:

for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord.

Perhaps even more bizarrely, Lévy also argues against chosenness by citing passages from the midrash—that, is from rabbinic authors who believed quite passionately in chosenness:

It will be observed, third, that God had offered this gift—sorry, he had proposed this pact (it is because you are unconditionally receptive to my voice that I deem you a treasured people)—to Edom, to Ishmael, and probably (Deuteronomy 14:2) to “all the peoples on the face of the earth.” And it was only after the entire earth had refused, after the other peoples had, without exception, found a good reason to wriggle out of it, that, in desperation, he had turned to this small group of people who finally accepted him.

Nowhere in the Bible is this written. Lévy here seems to be making reference to a midrash that describes God offering the nations the Torah, with all of them refusing. But he cites this as if it were part of the Bible itself and a proof against chosenness. That is nonsensical: It is a rabbinic tale describing, in allegorical fashion, the spiritual worthiness of Israel. In fact, the very same rabbinic tradition that gave us this midrash gave us the blessing recited daily by devout Jews: “Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who chose us from among all the nations, and gave us His Torah.”

There is no blessing more biblically based, more central to the Jewish consciousness, than this one. That Lévy does not seem to acknowledge this is headshaking. Does he not know that the same rabbis who gave us this midrashic allegory also spoke this blessing as they began their prayers each and every day? Does he not know that they declaimed these blessings publicly whenever they were called to read the Torah in synagogue? Does he not know that this blessing is itself based on a biblical text that explicitly makes mention of chosenness?

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**I**N TRUTH, Lévy may not know any of this. It is only upon arriving at the end of the book that we discover Lévy has buried the lede. In his preface, Lévy poignantly describes his discovery, as an adult, of Jewish texts and ideas. And yet at his book's end he informs us:

I can barely read Hebrew. I do not say daily prayers. I do not follow the dietary laws. I am, moreover, a lay Jew who seldom visits synagogues and has not devoted so much time or energy to study.

This is an astonishing acknowledgement to find in a volume that is not only a purported work of Jewish thought, but one that seeks to rethink a central—arguably, the central—doctrine of the Jewish faith. There are, of course, many Jews who do not attend synagogue, who do not observe the Torah, and who have little familiarity with Jewish texts in the original. But would they all claim to be qualified to write a book on chosenness, to propound an argument from Jewish texts about one of its most complex and central subjects? Lévy, at times, appears sensitive to this and writes rather defensively in support of his interpretations:

We are here far from the practitioners of competitive orthopraxy, who like trained lions can recite the Talmud by heart but whom the Kabbalists say border on knowing too much, because the mass of their knowledge will end up blocking understanding. (Don't they need to free up some space in their minds?) But we are close to Exodus.

One does not need to be fluent in the Talmud to realize that Lévy is ignoring, and failing to grapple with, basic passages in the Bible. So as a Talmud-studying Orthodox Jew, let me speak in defense of the transmitters of the Jewish tradition who have a massive knowledge of the Talmud: At least they have a deep familiarity with the texts of the faith in whose name they speak. *The Genius of Judaism*, in contrast, seeks to describe what Judaism means to the world without a real familiarity with Judaism.

Lévy presents his book as an exciting new ap-

proach to Judaism, but it actually embodies a trend as old as the Enlightenment: a Jewish intellectual who believes that if only Jews would rid themselves of the concept of chosenness, all would be well. Lévy makes note of the midrashic comparison between the word “Sinai” and the Hebrew word for hatred, *sin'ah*, suggesting that in the Jewish claim to chosenness the hatred for Jews was born. In truth, he claims to tell the world, Jews are not chosen. Rather, the genius of Judaism lies in the fact that “the Jew exists only as a function of the nations, in his relationship with them and for them,” in the way that Jewish wisdom enriches humanity, serving as what Lévy calls a “secret universal.”

Traditional Jews have always resisted a false choice between particularism and universalism. They have always insisted that they are at once chosen—that is, especially loved by God—and that their destiny is to have an impact on all the world. This point is made manifest at the very origins of the faith itself, when, we are told, God loved Abraham above all others while still promising that through Abraham's children “all the families of the world will be blessed.”

It is possibly true that anti-Semitism is linked to a jealousy of Jewish chosenness. But it is also true that what sustained Jews through centuries of hate was the belief in their chosenness, and they therefore preceded their daily Torah study with the blessing of God “who chose us from the nations.”

Lévy is free to reject their blessing, and their belief. Yet to assert that these Jews were mistaken in their reading of the Bible, when it is he who has not “devoted much time to study” and they who lavished love on the Torah, poring over it every day of their persecuted lives, is bizarre.

**I**N ONE OF THE less troubling portions of *The Genius of Judaism*, Lévy reflects that “it is so tiresome to have to defend Israel. So distressing to have to present the same evidence over and over.” I empathize. It must indeed be difficult to constantly defend Israel to Europeans, and so tiresome to have to point out the obvious: that rather than a colonialist pariah, Israel is a beacon of democracy, and that Jewish nationalism and particularism are not irreconcilable with a universal concern for human rights.

Yet it is equally tiresome to have make the case,

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again and again, for Jewish chosenness to Jews like Lévy who create false choices, stereotypes, and confluences of their own, and misuse the Bible in the process.

In one telling example of this, Lévy cites the biblical character Korah, who leads a rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, telling the people that “the entire people is holy, and God dwells among them.” Lévy then writes:

The idea of a fast track and special access to the holy of holies, the idea that because one is Jewish one is on God’s short list and that there is nothing left to do but show up, enjoy it, and congratulate yourself for the good luck that deposited you one fine day at the foot of the little mountain: That may be what some Jews believe; it is most assuredly what the anti-Semites are thinking with their fantasy about the chosen people and its election; but for Moses, faced with Korah and the Korah impulse, it is the worst of errors, the most monstrous of superstitions, and it certainly is not what he understood up there when God spoke to him.

I know many Jews who believe, as I do, that Jews are chosen. But I know of no Jew who believes that because he is chosen, all he has to do is “show up and enjoy it.” It is *so tiresome* to point out, again and again, that religious Jews consider their lives to be both of election and profound obligation, that the Hebraic tradition has succeeded in maintaining both the concept of Jewish chosenness and universal concern, and that it gave to the world the doctrine of the God who links His name to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but who creates every human being in His image.

Jews do indeed believe, as Korah put it, that the entire people is holy, and that God is among them. Korah’s sin was not in stating this obvious fact, but

in utilizing it to argue against the election of Moses’s brother Aaron to the priesthood. To put it another way, Korah’s sin was arguing that a *divinely dictated* election—the raising of Aaron’s family above others in Israel—was without foundation. The lesson of the Korah story, then, is to beware the charismatic individual who claims that the Word of God regarding chosenness is actually a human invention. And as Korah ignores the fact that Aaron, though elected by God, cared passionately for those who were not priests, Lévy ignores the fact that one can believe that the Jews are God’s chosen, “a nation of kingly priests,” while still caring for the rest of the world, knowing that ultimately through Abraham all the world will be blessed.

*The Genius of Judaism* is an attempt to redefine Jewish theology absent any serious grappling with some of the elemental texts of Judaism. If Lévy wishes to truly understand what Judaism believes, perhaps he should do what he admits he has not done before writing this book: devote more time to studying Judaism. At the same time, if he wishes to truly understand Judaism, he should immerse himself in Jewish life: Go to synagogue, pray in the language of his ancestors, and perhaps even attempt keeping kosher. After all, Judaism, more than any other faith, is more than a system of doctrines; it is a way of life.

Judaism must be understood from within. It is in obeying its rules that one comes to understand the complex dialectic of ideas at the heart of the Jewish faith: that often action and habits form character and thought, rather than the reverse; that through ritual and commandments, the more prosaic parts of life take on a radiant sanctity; and that it is possible to be both apart from, and a part of, humanity, to stand in the synagogue blessing the God who chose us from the nations, while still caring about the rest of the world. Therein lies the wonder of Judaism; indeed, it may even be said that therein lies the essence of its genius. 