

**Waldemar Piotr Szczerbiński**

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

heschel@poczta.onet.pl

ORCID 0000-0003-2946-7352

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## **Rejection of the Jewish Idea of the Chosen People as a Consequence of Theological Egalitarianism in the Thought of Mordecai Kaplan**

### **Odrzucenie żydowskiej idei Narodu Wybranego jako konsekwencja egalitaryzmu teologicznego w myśli Mordecaia Kaplana**

**Abstract.** In traditional Judaism, the truth that Jews are God's Chosen People was universal and constitutive of both individual and collective identity. Most modern currents of Judaism (Orthodoxy, Conservatism, Reformed) continue to preach the belief in chosenness, based on religious obligations, the so-called *mitzvot*, which define a uniquely Jewish way of life and lead to moral holiness. However, Jewish Reconstructionism — the most recent and the most liberal paradigms of the Jewish religion — negates the idea of a chosen people completely, reflecting the notions espoused by its founder, Mordecai M. Kaplan, a staunch opponent of the belief that God chooses one people over another, one nation over other nations. This paper demonstrates how Kaplan re-envisioned the traditional truth about the Jews as the Chosen People. Relying on his analyses, the author demonstrates that Kaplan's proposal arises from theological egalitarianism, on which the entire agenda of this current in Judaism is founded. The doctrine of chosenness is replaced in this case by the axiom of vocation, which does not elevate the Jews above other peoples, but presumes them to be equal with others. At the same time, Jews do not have to renounce their own path to salvation as a part of their civilization.

**Streszczenie.** W tradycyjnym judaizmie prawda o tym, że Żydzi są narodem wybranym przez Boga była powszechna i stanowiła konstytutywny element tożsamości zarówno indywidualnej jak i zbiorowej. Większość współczesnych nurtów judaizmu (ortodoksja, konserwatyzm, reforma) nadal głoszą wiarę w wybraństwo, które jest oparte na zobowiązaniach religijnych, tzw. *micwot*, określających specyficznie żydowski styl życia i prowadzących do świętości moralnej. Jednakże rekonstrukcjonizm żydowski, który uchodzi za najmłodszy i najbardziej liberalny nurt religii żydowskiej całkowicie neguje ideę narodu wybranego. Odzwierciedla to stanowisko założyciela tego odłamu, Mor-

decaia M. Kaplana, który stanowczo sprzeciwił się przekonaniu, że Bóg wybiera jeden lud zamiast drugiego, jeden naród ponad inne narody. W prezentowanym artykule zostanie ukazana Kaplana rekonstrukcja tradycyjnego rozumienia prawdy o Żydach jako narodzie wybranym. Przeprowadzone analizy pozwolą stwierdzić, że propozycja twórcy rekonstrukcjonizmu jest konsekwencją egalitaryzmu teologicznego, na którym opiera się cały program tego nurtu religii żydowskiej. Doktryna wybrania została tu zastąpiona doktryną powołania, która nie stawia Żydów ponad innymi narodami, lecz na równi z innymi, bez konieczności rezygnacji z własnej drogi do zbawienia w ramach własnej cywilizacji.

**Keywords:** Chosen People, Judaism, Jewish Reconstructionism, Mordecai Kaplan.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Naród Wybrany, judaizm, rekonstrukcjonizm żydowski, Mordecai Kaplan.

## Introduction

Mordecai M. Kaplan (see more broadly: “Kaplan Mordecai” 1971, col. 751–753; Scult 1991, 3–13; Hertzberg 1981, XIX–XXXV; Eisenstein 1963, 253–279) is the originator of Reconstructionism (see: “Reconstructionism” 1971, col. 1615–1617; Kaplan 1967; Kaplan 1981; Alpert and Staub 2000; Schulweis 1988, 755–759; Eisen 1998, 216–241; Szczerbiński 2007), the youngest and most controversial strand of Judaism. The principal aim of that Jewish thinker was to transform Judaism into a living reality and align traditional Jewish beliefs with the contemporary body of human thought. Etymologically, Reconstructionism derives from the Latin *reconstruo*, meaning to rebuild, renew, recreate. In Kaplan’s thought, however, the term “reconstruct” entails two assumptions (see: Alpert and Staub 2000, XV–XVI). First, it is presumed that each previous generation made a specific and significant contribution to the contemporary makeup of Judaism. In that process, traditional meanings have been subject to constant change. They were not always preserved in the past, and therefore should not be regarded as permanent today. Hence the postulation that what Judaism has inherited from the past be used as a foundation and a building block. The historical legacy should be taken advantage of and transformed in a way to make it needed, valuable and suitable for the contemporary generation. Second, the essential structures of Jewish life require to be seriously rethought. Above all, these structures include synagogues, Jewish organizations and the state of Israel.

According to the Reconstructionists, fundamental religious truths, such as the conception that Jews are the chosen people, should also be re-constructed and interpreted anew.

Reconstructionism sets out with the conviction that the entire reality—not only its political and social dimensions—is in constant change. The overall vision of the world, inclusive of religion as a cultural domain, undergoes transformation. As Kaplan's disciples maintain (cf. Alpert and Staub 2000, 4), Jews, Christians and Muslims of the past shared a common belief in God, in holy Scriptures, in reward and punishment, in life after death. They differed in their detailed interpretations, but concurred with respect to the essentials. The situation of the Jews changed with emancipation. In Western Europe and North America, the traditional and widespread notions succumbed to the influence of humanism and the scientific revolution. Increasingly often and to an ever greater degree, people became concerned with human achievements and abilities rather than with the attributes of God; they looked towards happiness on this earth than to reward in heaven, sought for the causes of natural phenomena instead of attributing them to the will and power of God. Ultimately, Jews encountered a new reality in which all citizens became one people before God, regardless of their previous experiences. In such a reality, everyone had a sense of equality, which is why Jewish obligations seemed separatist or obsolete, while the Jewish idea of the Chosen People nothing short of anachronistic.

In contemporary theological thought, there is a continuing debate between proponents of religious exclusivism and inclusivism. Jewish proponents of inclusivism construct their theology on egalitarianism, which proclaims the inherent equality of all people and recognizes the principle of equality as the basis for resolving all theological problems. In the Jewish circles, the idea of the Chosen People does present such a problem, because chosenness conflicts with the universally accepted equality of every person, every nation, every religion. This paper will therefore delve into Kaplan's reconstruction of the traditional understanding of the truth about Jews as the Chosen People. The analysis will warrant stating that his proposal stems from theological egalitarianism, on which the whole entire agenda of that current in Jewish religion is founded on.

## 1. The Traditional Understanding of the Term “Chosen People”

The doctrine of Israel as the Chosen People not only plays a central role in rabbinic thought, but also finds a solid underpinning in the biblical account (see: Jacobs 1973, 269). The covenant at Sinai is closely linked to Israel’s having been chosen. “Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites.” (Ex. 19:5–6).<sup>1</sup>

A decisive turning point in the fate of the Jewish people takes place when Moses delivers God’s message to the people gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. Having heard that proposal of divine covenant, “the people all answered, ‘Everything the Lord has said, we will do.’” (Ex. 19:8). Exodus and Leviticus set forth the commandments and rules of conduct for the people who committed themselves to representing God in the world. The people of Israel were set apart from other nations and granted a special calling. For this reason, Jews were simultaneously called to holiness resulting from a unique relationship with God. Israel’s election involves a profound sense of responsibility on the part of the people, to act in accordance with what is right, just and proper, to act on behalf of God, doing His will in order to achieve happiness and set an example for other nations (see: Umen 1962, 46). In this context, chosenness is not so much a privilege and elevation, but rather a duty and a responsibility.

The covenant between God and Israel gives rise to the sacred myth of the Chosen People. It is a pact that is eternal and binding on both parties, by virtue of which they jointly accept the call to become an instrument of knowing God for the world, to bear constant witness to the one God by obeying his laws. At the same time, the people are recognised by God as a “special” (*am segula*), which indicates a relationship that is based on a unique intimacy and knowledge of God.

In traditional Judaism, the belief in chosenness implies an exclusive relationship based on mutual love. The prophets perceive the relationship between God and Israel as a matrimony. When the prophets condemn the people for committing idolatry during the monarchy, they compare Israel to an adulterous wife who violates her marital vows. They also remind the people of the loving devotion of God, who liberated them from Egyptian slavery and revealed the

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<sup>1</sup> All excerpts from the Bible cited from *The New American Bible* (1970).

Torah to them. Conversely, the Hebrew psalms call upon God to help his beloved people “for the sake of his Name” and in remembrance of the original covenant between God and the Jewish ancestors. The *Aleinu* prayer<sup>2</sup> begins by thanking God for having chosen the people of Israel for this special destiny, and ends by expressing the hope that the day shall come when all people are recognize the authority of the one true God.

The fulfilment of the mutual obligations arising from the covenant continually determines the destiny of the Jewish people. However, the very belief in chosenness has been redefined and reinterpreted in every generation in Jewish history (concerning the idea of Jewish chosenness see Ariel 1995, 108–133; Umen 1962, 45–48; Jacobs 1973, 269–275; Cohn-Sherbok 1963, 426–431; Novak 1995). The Jews themselves ask how it is possible that the universal God of all humanity chooses and favours one nation over all others. Moreover, they are now wondering how one can advocate equality, tolerance and religious pluralism while believing that God favours Jews and has designated them to play a special role. The very term of the “Chosen People” is occasionally associated with notions of superiority, exclusivity and intolerance. Since the belief that Israel are God’s Chosen People has many implications, the adherents of Judaism found it necessary to constantly redefine what that “chosenness” means.

Jews have often believed that as a people they are possessed of a special genius or talent inherent in each of their kind, which made them significantly different from any other nation. Is there perhaps a mystical component in the Jewish people that distinguishes them from other nations? Some invoke the uniquely Jewish spirituality, the indefinable sense of inner identity as a Jew, a sense of brotherhood shared by Jews around the world, the ability to recognize certain people and their character traits as Jews, and the disproportionate participation of Jews in certain areas of life as evidence corroborating the uniqueness of the Jewish people (see: Ariel 1995, 109). The awareness of uniqueness is so potent that even Jews who do not consider themselves religious are often reluctant to sever their ties with the Jewish people or its destiny.

Today, as Jews have gained unprecedented acceptance in modern societies, the universalist proclivity has undermined the sense of a singular, Jewish identity. Many Jews feel that they are no different from other people, nations or ethnic groups, even though they have their own unique religion, history, culture, community, homeland and folk traditions. Jewish universalists emphasize that

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<sup>2</sup> *Aleinu* is an ancient synagogal prayer, exalting the oneness and supreme power of God.

although Jews once believed they were God's chosen people, there is no place for such a people in the present-day egalitarian world. Jews continue to struggle with the contradiction between their belief in the special destiny of the Jewish people and the notion that all human beings are created in the image of God.

The distinctiveness of the Jewish people has long been a principal issue of interest for Jews and non-Jews. The Jewish people are one of the few nations that have persisted uninterruptedly since the ancient times and have successfully adapted to the changing circumstances. Albeit faced with adversity, no other group has preserved such considerable devotion to its ancestral homeland, while developing methods to preserve its identity through the centuries of diaspora. For Jews and non-Jews alike, the very survival and longevity of the Jewish people is virtually miraculous.

The truth that Israel are the Chosen People functions in Judaism as the sacred myth of the nation, which begins with the description of how God chose the Jewish people from among all nations of the ancient world to be His special people (cf. Ariel 1995, 111). Initially, God chose Abraham, the only one among his contemporaries to recognize that there was one God who ruled the universe. God commands Abraham: "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1). God demands that he forsake all that is known to him and leave his homeland to settle in the land of Canaan and worship the true God. God promises that Abraham and his descendants will be God's chosen people: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a host of nations. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you. I will maintain my covenant with you and your descendants after you throughout the ages as an everlasting pact, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. I will give the land in which you are now staying, the whole land of Canaan, as a permanent possession; and I will be their God'" (Gen. 17:1–8). Israel's holiness understood as immaculate flawlessness (moral perfection) seems to be a condition for the Covenant and its permanence.

God also requires that Abraham be circumcised as a sign of the Covenant. Every Jewish male child is then received into the Chosen People through *brit mila*, a circumcision ritual that draws on God's covenant with Abraham. God renews the promise made to Isaac, Jacob and his sons, as well as Moses. Finally, the covenant is divinely given the form of the Ten Commandments.

At each step in Abraham's life, God foretells events which, in the human perspective, appear highly improbable and unpredictable. In every generation from Abraham to Moses, it is God who selects a person of his own choosing to be the leader of the nation, an individual no one had previously expected. God chose Isaac instead of Ishmael (Gen. 21). Jacob was chosen to be the heir to this promise instead of Esau (Gen. 27).

At each stage, God's intervention in history results in the re-election of Abraham and his descendants to play a special role. The Covenant is expressed as an agreement between God and Israel that is bilateral and reciprocal. If Israel accepts the Torah, God will guarantee the people a special status among all nations of the world.

In Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, in which God's commands to Moses are repeated, the Covenant is presented in a slightly different light: a gracious and entirely voluntary gift from God, which is the fulfilment of a promise. There is no indication that the Covenant is conditional on Israel's virtuous conduct, on holiness in the moral sense:

For you are a people sacred to the Lord your God; he has chosen you from all the nations on the face of the earth to be a people peculiarly his own. It was not because you are largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you and because of his fidelity to the oath he had sworn to your fathers. (Deut. 7:6–8).

Later biblical texts emphasize Israel's voluntary willingness to participate in the Covenant. Israel's consent entails an even more profound commitment, which includes responsibility for moral and ritual practices. When Moses' successor Joshua later assembles the tribal elders at Shechem, he reminds them of the once made promise not to worship other gods: "You are your own witnesses that you have chosen to serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:22). Those gathered uphold the earlier declarations and Joshua renews the Covenant in writing. This Covenant between God and Israel is a living commitment that is continually renewed and reaffirmed.

The Covenant is not an individual event as it involves the entire nation. It is an expression of the social (collective) responsibility of the Jewish people in pursuing justice and establishing a community based on God's law. It is a relationship that occurs between God and the nation, not merely a representative of that nation. This is not the individual who is chosen, but the nation. The Cove-

nant gives precedence to the Torah, which requires the moral life of the Jewish people to comply with its precepts. Chosenness has sometimes been seen as the inherent and inseparable status of the Jewish people. At times, Jewish thinkers believed that chosenness required Jews to regularly reaffirm the Covenant and its associated obligations.

## 2. Chosenness in Reformed Judaism

The claim that the Covenant implies a responsibility to live according to the commandments of the Torah and to be “a light of nations” has been reinterpreted by contemporary Jewish thinkers. The greatest challenge to the idea of election as a central tenet of Judaism arose during the Enlightenment, as it became possible for Jews as individuals to be integrated into modern societies. It was difficult to reconcile Jewish uniqueness and chosenness with the idea of equality and the temptation of social and political acceptance. After all, being equal meant being the same nation as others, as opposed to a chosen and distinguished community. Reformed Judaism made the first to attempt to respond to the challenge. In the eighteenth century, the founders of the Reformed movement began to depreciate the role of the commandments whilst emphasizing the ethical dimension of Judaism. This shift of emphasis in Reformed Judaism was evident in the renewed focus on the role of the Jewish people as “a light of nations”. To underscore this role, the phrase was changed to “a light unto the nations” (Ariel 1995, 119). Such a subtle substitution stressed that Israel was not only to be a moral exemplar, but would also consider its religion a missionary one, capable of sharing its morality with others.

The forerunners of Reformed Judaism believed that the Jewish religion was a set of universalist teachings which had contributed greatly to the Western civilization. They introduced the concept of “mission-people” as an alternative to notion of “the chosen people”. The concept of a missionary people placed a two-fold responsibility on Israel: to fulfil the ethical requirements of the Covenant and to disseminate these ethical teachings to other peoples in the world. Having abandoned the ethnic and ritual dimensions of Judaism, the proponents of the missionary idea sought to transform Judaism into a universal ethical culture. Isaac Mayer Wise, a leading American Reformed rabbi in the twentieth century, believed that Judaism had a real chance of becoming the preferred religion of Americans if only it had been transformed into the purest form of ethical monotheism without the ethnic component.



The Reformed reinterpretation of the Chosen People into a missionary people began to function as a belief that Jews were not chosen by God, but rather chose themselves to be the collective social message. This was accompanied by the realization that Jews are no more chosen than others are, yet they are more predestined to address all injustices in the modern world because they possess “a social gospel” (Ariel 1995, 119). Hence, is there a point to being Jewish? Rabbi Leo Beck gave the following answer: “Jews possess a special genius for ethical monotheism which keeps the idea alive even today. Were the Jews and Judaism to disappear, ethical monotheism would lose its irreplaceable advocate and might itself disappear” (Ariel 1995, 119). The belief of the reformers that the Jewish people are the missionaries of ethical life proved inadequate in explaining why Judaism and the Jewish people should continue to exist and why the Jewish religion should be perpetuated. Ethical ideas are the intellectual property of all people, not just one nation. Unsurprisingly therefore, many Jews moved away from Judaism and the Jewish people, having been brought up with the belief that Judaism can be reduced to certain universal truths. The concept of a missionary people soon waned, but the idea that Jews should adhere to high ethical standards and also contribute to social justice persisted.

In 1975, Reformed Judaism decisively severed ties with its own past and restored much of what had been eliminated by its predecessors. Reformed Judaism thus reaffirmed the belief in Israel’s chosenness, national distinctiveness and the need to observe certain *mitzvot*, but continued to hold the view that the high standing of the Jewish people was due to their own ethical religion. That ideological shift reflected a return to traditional beliefs within the Reformed movement, as well as a growing recognition of the significance of the state of Israel and its people in modern Jewish life.

Jews have always understood their collective existence as one rooted in the pursuit of a higher purpose rather than a mere effort to uphold their ethnicity. No other nation feels compelled to justify its status. Attempts are made to portray Jewish life in two cultural realms—the Jewish and the Western—simultaneously. However, any effort to define Jewishness more universally through an updated truth of chosenness often fails to account for the continued Jewish distinctiveness and survival.

The question of what is special about being Jewish continues to engage contemporary Jewish thinkers. This is because being Jewish today is more a matter of choice and an irresistible destiny, and demands a clear answer to the following query: what is so distinctive about Jews and Judaism, and in what sense one can

still claim that Jews are the chosen people? The burning need to justify Jewish distinctiveness must lie in a value so absolute that nothing else can replace it. The distinguishing Jewish element must be so unique to Judaism that it cannot be found in any other culture or civilization. Israel's chosenness must constitute an enduring *raison d'être* to the extent that the continued existence of the Jewish people is understood as a duty or even a necessity for all modern Jews.

Does the truth about the Chosen People today mean that Jews are inherently better than others, or that the Jewish message is superior? What is it about believing in Israel's chosenness which lends meaning to Jewish existence? The answer to these questions is that the sacred myth of election conveys a belief in a special destiny for the Jewish people that goes beyond the mere survival of the nation. It does not consist in existing, but in fulfilling the purpose for which they exist. The destiny of the Jewish people goes far beyond mere survival. The collective end is to show other nations a way of life that follows with God's design. Chosenness is thus a spiritual concept which affirms that Jewish existence is in experiencing and perpetuating transcendent dimensions of life.

### **3. The Rejection of the Idea of Chosenness in Mordecai Kaplan's Thought**

Of the four denominations of Judaism, the more traditional denominations of Orthodoxy and Conservatism continue to preach a belief in chosenness that is based on religious obligations—the so-called *mitzvot*—which define a uniquely Jewish way of life and lead to moral holiness. Ultimately, Jewish Reconstructionism came to reject the idea of the chosen people, reflecting the position of the movement's founder, Mordecai Kaplan, who strongly opposed the notion that God chooses one people over another, one nation over other nations. For Kaplan, God is nothing more than the impulse of goodness inherent in human nature, not a transcendent being with the ability to make choices. Moreover, the belief in the distinctiveness and otherness of the Jewish people went against Kaplan's belief in the American democratic egalitarianism. Reconstructionism, however, introduced a new understanding of the truth that Jews are “called to God's service”, whereby a religious responsibility falls on Jews to live and act in the world according to the teachings of Judaism. Jews are thus naturally called, as it were, to continual improvement of themselves and the world, but it is not necessarily God who calls them to do so in any particular way. Thus, the Jewish people are

the “choosing people” (following God understood as a Creative Force or Process) rather than the “chosen people” (singled out and called by a transcendent and personal God) (see: Ariel 1995, 120).

Reconstructionism effected a reinterpretation of the truth about Israel as the chosen people. As proponents of this current maintain, emancipation undermined the status of Jews as a people, and the Enlightenment undermined the status of Jews as a *knesset* or *ecclesia*. Kaplan has no doubt that the idea of Israel being the Chosen People should be understood as an idea belonging to a world of thought that had expired and in which we no longer live. The notion of election of the Jewish people was fitting and sufficiently rational in the past, but today it offers no succours, whether in comprehending our relationship with God and other people or in interpreting contemporary reality properly. The very idea that a nation can be chosen by God for perpetuity presupposes a certain conception of history. Nowadays, whoever calls themselves “chosen” maybe suspected of self-glorification. The paradox lies in the fact that the Jewish people are collectively inclined to self-glorification, while individually so many Jews are inclined to self-rejection (see: Kaplan 1967, 211).

The Jewish traditionalist belief that Israel was God’s Chosen People rested on the assumption that the miraculous events recorded in the Torah concerning the patriarchs and their descendants in Egypt represented actual truth. The most significant miracle was God’s self-revelation to Israel on Mount Sinai. At the time, questioning the factuality of those supernatural events was as unthinkable as questioning the reality of one’s own body. Under such circumstances, Jews could not see themselves except as the most privileged people of all nations. However, circumstances have changed. According to the Jewish Reconstructionists, the modern Jew is unable to construe the miraculous events spoken of in the Torah and other sources of Judaism other than as a legend. Hence, supernatural events cannot constitute proof that Israel is God’s chosen people. Any attempt to supply other evidence is a departure from tradition. This approach might be warranted if at least the new evidence were convincing. But is it?

Kaplan believed that even modern attempts to reinterpret the idea of the Chosen People had been half-hearted and no less dubious. Without rejecting Israel’s chosenness completely and unable to accept literally the traditional version of the doctrine of the chosen people, the religious wing of the *maskilim*, the early reformers and a group of Jews who identified themselves as the historical school, interpreted the doctrine in a manner which concurred with the theses of Kaufmann Kohler’s *Jewish theology*. Those theses include the following prop-

ositions: a) Jews possess hereditary qualities that give them an advantage over the rest of the world in religious and ethical terms; b) Jewish ancestors were the first to attain those religious and ethical concepts and ideals which will eventually become the universal property of the humankind and help it on its path to salvation; c) Jews possess the truest form of the religious and ethical ideals of the humankind; d) Jews have been entrusted with the task of conveying those ideals to the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup>

The doctrine of the Chosen People is treated as an anachronism in Reconstructionism for several reasons. First, the divine election is thoroughly incompatible with the evolutionary conception of religion. According to Kaplan, the defenders of Israel's doctrine of election do not even make the effort to consider the role of religion in human civilization critically. At one point, adherents of all traditional religions of the Western world maintained that religion was a supernaturally revealed truth. That this truth was passed on for centuries by only one nation was sufficient reason to treat it as a chosen people. Since it was assumed that salvation could only be achieved through revealed truth, being in possession of that truth imposed an obligation to communicate it to other nations and to usher (integrate) others into one's own "chosen" community through conversion.

Abandoning revelation as a supernatural phenomenon has certain ramifications. As Kaplan argues: "If religious truth is independent of any historical self-revelation of God to a particular people, then it is no different from scientific truth in being accessible to and attainable by all mankind. Indeed, one of the main criteria of truth is its universal applicability to and conformity with universal reason" (Kaplan 1967, 220). Consequently, the theory put forward by Kaufmann Kohler and Abraham Geiger that Jews, as a race, have a special religious sense (see: Kohler 1918, 326; Geiger 1911, 47) cannot be treated seriously today by anyone. Jewish Reconstructionists are convinced that differences in cognitive ability and in transmitting truth in the religious field—just as in any other human field of knowledge—occur to a greater extent among individuals of one group than between one religious group and another. The propagation of a particular religious truth cannot be a feature that differentiates any group. Distinct religions may indeed represent the same truth about God, albeit in various ways. Moreover, in any religion, truth must always confront religious error and superstition. Religion amounts to an organized striving of a people for salvation,

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<sup>3</sup> Kaplan's critique of how modern Jewish thinkers construe the idea of election may be found (Kaplan 1967, 215–219).

supporting those who live in the civilization of a given people to achieve their destiny as human beings. In the course of their efforts to achieve salvation, people discover religious truths and values which, like all others, are universal. Kaplan underlines that no religion holds the monopoly on truth and values of life as the same truths and values can also be discovered by other groups. Religions differ not so much ideologically, but rather existentially, since each religion represents a particular area of collective life delineated by the sancta of the group, and it is the latter which sets religions apart. They are the product of the group's unique historical experience. Such sancta as important persons and heroes, literature, particular places, symbols and everything that has been hallowed by a specific people because of their connection with the quest for salvation are found in every religion. Although the sancta are indeed different in each religion or civilization, they play the same role within the group and lead to the same goal.

Religion is not one of the many elements of human nature, but a process that fuses all these elements into a single whole. Religion is what personality is to the individual and nationhood is to the nation. The Jewish religion is at once particular and universal. It is particular insofar as it functions in and through Jewish life, whilst being universal insofar as it seeks to integrate Jewish life with the universal life of humanity through the worship of the one God by all people and all nations. In Reconstructionism, holiness is nothing other than the attainment of fulfilment in this world on an individual, communal and universal level. Meanwhile, sanctification in Judaism consists in functioning within the Jewish civilization according to the ethical requirements of one's own civilization and in integrating with the universal values of humanity.

The second argument against the idea of Israel's election is associated with the question of missionality and imperialism of Judaism. One might say that the concept of Jewish mission derives from the tension between the belief in the one God, the creator of the entire world, and the conviction that God has revealed his purpose for human life solely through the Torah, which belongs to the Jewish heritage. The particularist notion of Israel's exclusive possession of revealed truth had to be reconciled somehow with the universalist concept of God's unity. According to Kaplan, the missionary idea is a compromise between universalism and particularism.

Indeed, the assumption that only accepting one's religion or acknowledging its dominance can save the world is the religious equivalent of political imperialism, as Kaplan maintains. There were times when this phenomenon was considered only right and proper. The Romans were convinced that by expanding

their empire they were spreading not only Roman civilization but civilization in general, and took enormous pride in the Pax Romana. Relatively recently, the British boasted the civilizing influence of their colonial empire, seeing their imperialism as a favour to humanity and even regarded it as a mission, a “white man’s burden” to ensure welfare of the “inferior” or “backward” races. Imperialism is a singular state between national isolationism and the federation of states. It represents a preparatory stage for the terminus of development, where humanity is recognised as an organic whole and all peoples are equally involved in and equally responsible for the common good.

Similarly, according to Kaplan, the missionary activity of a religion represents an intermediate step between a situation in which a particular people believed that their gods cared for them only and persisted in the conviction that they alone knew the only path to salvation from which all others were excluded, and an ideal situation in which the religion of all humankind will reflect the oneness of God (see: Kaplan 1967, 222).

That ideal situation will not see the reign of a cosmopolitan religion as argued by rationalists who failed to understand history; instead, there will be a single universal religion guided by the following principles: (a) all people and all nations seek salvation or the fulfilment of their human destiny; (b) all groups seek salvation in accordance with their own collective experience, drawing on their own cultural heritage; (c) the ultimate salvation of humanity depends on embracing the truth that no nation can achieve full salvation until all nations have achieved it; (d) all nations can achieve salvation only when it is acknowledged that God is equally accessible to all religious groups, through correct development and interpretation of their own sancta.

The idea of the Chosen People cannot be endorsed in Reconstructionism, because all nations are chosen to the same degree. The holiness which resulted from divine election and applied to one nation has been reduced to the universal sanctity of all humanity, which subsists in the attainment of the fullness of life and remains subject to human choice.

As one works towards that ideal situation, the religious tolerance which lacked in the past is becoming increasingly necessary. In Kaplan’s view, tolerance is the only way to overcome religious imperialism and missionality.

When rival imperialisms coexist, as in the modern world, the inevitable consequence is warfare on a global scale. Religious imperialism has likewise been a source of warfare. Not only Islam, but also Christianity, was spread by the sword. The Thirty

Years' War was motivated by rival imperialistic claims of Protestantism and Catholicism to universal hegemony. Only after Europe had been bled white and the fighting ended in a draw, did the world begin to conceive the need for religious tolerance, the actual achievement of which awaits the future (Kaplan 1967, 222).

As Kaplan critically notes, Jewish apologists maintain that the missionary effort of Judaism cannot be compared to that of Christianity and Islam because it had always relied solely on persuasion and recognized that "the pious ones of the Gentile nations have shared in the world to come" (Tosefta, *Sanhedrin*, XIII). However, the truth is that even peaceful missionary activity is an expression of ill will. It is also a historical fact that at the height of Hasmonean power, Jews actually imposed Judaism on the Idumeans by force of arms.

Still, the truth that the Gentiles could achieve salvation by adhering to the ethical laws revealed to the humankind by Noah was not as widely recognised in Jewish tradition as modern Jewish liberals would like it, Kaplan argues. He cites Maimonides' view on the matter:

Maimonides, for example, maintained that for a Gentile to conform to the Noahitic laws was not enough. To obtain salvation he must look upon those laws as revealed by God. Since the only evidence of any revelation to Noah is to be found in the Torah of Israel, the achievement of salvation by the Gentile was thus made to depend on his recognizing Israel as the chosen vehicle of divine salvation for mankind (Kaplan 1967, 223).

The idea of election is further countered in Reconstructionism using the argument that election is not necessary for Jewish survival. Kaplan sees no point in upholding the concept of the Chosen People because fewer and fewer Jews believe in the factual nature of the biblical stories.

Since the proponents of the various interpretations of the doctrine of the Chosen People no longer believe in the factual truth of the Patriarchal stories, or the miracles and the Sinaitic theophany, why are they at such pains to reinterpret that doctrine? The reason often suggested for their insistence upon retaining the doctrine of Israel's election, namely that it permeates the whole of Jewish tradition, cannot be true (Kaplan 1967, 224).

Meanwhile, as the founder of Reconstructionism observes, even the proponents of Reformed Judaism still cling to Israel's chosenness, though not out of

loyalty to tradition, but due to the entrenched conviction that Jewish survival is inextricably linked to the idea of election. As Reconstructionists argue, such an association is neither necessary nor justifiable because it rests on false premises. "The Jewish will to live cannot be fortified by spurious means. Any claim to moral or spiritual superiority, that is not based on incontrovertible proof, either supernatural or natural, is spurious and unworthy even of ordinary morals, to say nothing of a high spiritual standard" (Kaplan 1967, 224). Hence, modern Judaism cannot afford to proclaim a doctrine that would be contrary to the ethical foundations of democracy, in which the intrinsic value of the individual human being is independent of the race or denomination to which they belong. According to Kaplan, the belief that Jews are the Chosen People and are therefore entitled to an extraordinary value (holiness) undermines the foundations of democracy, which in itself constitutes the supreme social value and the ultimate sanctity in America. Kaplan reasserts that "ethical democracy goes one step further and calls for the treatment of all peoples, races and churches as equals in all respects" (Kaplan 1967, 224).

In Kaplan's eyes, the belief that Israel has been chosen is at the root of the Jewish maladaptation to modern reality. This is another argument against the idea of election, which Reconstructionism considers to be so anachronistic as to be untenable, just as the notion of a transcendent and personal God.

Far from being a factor for Jewish survival, the doctrine of Israel's election is henceforth bound to be, ideologically, a definite hindrance. In its traditional form, that doctrine belongs to the same universe of discourse as the one which God was conceived as a magnified human being, sitting on a great throne in the heavens, surrounded by hosts of angels and demons who were at His beck and call, ready to carry out His will on earth (Kaplan 1967, 225).

The future of Judaism must not rely on the traditional idea of election, but on a reconstruction of all the truths of faith and departure from the belief that the Jews are the chosen people. As Kaplan points out, those are not only Jews who are predestined to salvation and not only Jews who are likely to attain it. On the contrary, "all normal human beings are endowed with a capacity for striving to achieve their human destiny, provided that, individually and collectively, they coordinate their conduct and their institutions with the conception of God as the Power within and without them that makes for salvation" (Kaplan 1967, 226). Therefore, holiness understood as a state of moral perfection is not the result of



exclusive election, but of inclusive pursuit of salvation understood as fulfilment on this earth. Any other understanding of holiness, confined only to the Jewish people, does not agree with the Reconstructionist notion of Judaism.

Jews should find their existential incentive in the idea of being leaders in the universal pursuit of happiness, not in the idea of being chosen. “A far nobler motive for Jewish people than the assertion of a claim to spiritual superiority is the need for a people always to strive to outdo itself, always to keep on growing in moral and spiritual capacity” (Kaplan 1967, 226). Moreover, rejection of the idea of chosenness is, to Kaplan, a prerequisite for the continued existence and development of Judaism. “Retaining a doctrine like the election of Israel, which is so out of harmony with the modern world-outlook, is bound to produce further maladjustment in the Jew and to stunt the growth of Judaism” (Kaplan 1967, 226). Kaplan defines persevering with the idea of chosenness of Israel as a romantic attitude, while the rational approach, and the only right way forward for Judaism, is to reject it. He states explicitly that

the rational type of Jew insists on clear and distinct thought in religion. This does not mean that he will not admit into religion anything but that which is scientifically demonstrable, or that he has no feelings, or that he is averse to mysticism [...]. The rational type of Jew knows very well that, in religion, symbols and metaphors are indispensable, and that we cannot always articulate clearly what they imply (Kaplan 1967, 226).

It is the romantic attitude that saps the vitality and productivity of Judaism and, as the Reconstructionists saw it, this is what happened to the doctrine of the election of Israel. Romantic self-conceit brought a state of “dangerous somnolence” on Jews.

So long as the Jew takes it for granted that he belongs to a people that is divinely chosen, he can see no need for canvassing the problem of the political and religious status of the Jewish people. In seeing no such need, Classical Reform and extreme Orthodoxy (Agudaism) display the same romantic type of mentality (Kaplan 1967, 228).

For Kaplan, coupling the holiness of Israel with the election of Israel is utterly unjustified and unacceptable.

While rejecting the doctrine of Israel’s election, Reconstructionism comes forward with the doctrine of Israel’s vocation instead: “Vocation is a valid substi-

tute for the doctrine of election” (Kaplan 1967, 228). What would this vocation of the Jews in the modern world involve? Kaplan assumes that the survival of Jews hinges entirely on their achieving a kind of moral realism. What does it consist in?

Jewish survival depends entirely upon our achieving a moral realism which, on the one hand, will wean us away from the futile compensatory mechanism of imagined superiority, and, on the other hand, will enable us to find the basis for intrinsic worth of Jewish life in the daily round of contemporary living. The only kind of Jewish survival that would constitute a creative adjustment to the world as it is today is one in which the two elements of our tradition would continue to function, namely, Jewish peoplehood and Jewish religion. But what peoplehood and religion represent today must be stated in different terms from those which were current in the past (Kaplan 1967, 228).

However, the Jewish religion must be grounded in objective scientific research which demonstrates the function of religion in the life of a people. “That function is so to inspire and direct the energies of a people as to help its individual men and women to achieve their destiny as human beings, or to make the best use of their lives” (Kaplan 1967, 229). The Reconstructionist position is that the Jewish religion should not only serve to elevate the lives of the Jewish people, but to enrich all of humanity by revealing the “cosmic purpose of human life”. The vocation of Jews comes down to commitment and dedication to the good of all humankind without the need to abandon or deny their own religion, understood as the Jewish civilization.

## Conclusions

As may be seen, the belief in the distinctiveness and otherness of the Jewish people conflicted with Kaplan’s conviction of American democratic egalitarianism. However, Reconstructionism introduced a new understanding of the truth that Jews are “called to God’s service”. This means that Jews bear a religious responsibility to live and act in the world according to the teachings of Judaism. Jews are thus naturally called, as it were, to improve themselves and the world continually, but this is not necessarily a mission they were entrusted with by God in any particular way. Hence, the Jewish people are the “choosing people” rather

than the “chosen people”: set apart from others and called by a transcendent and personal God. Kaplan has no doubt that the idea of Israel as the Chosen People must be discarded since, in his opinion, the belief is the underlying cause why Jews prove maladapted to modern reality. The future of Judaism must no longer rely on the traditional idea of election, but be striven for by reconstructing all the truths of faith and abandoning the belief that Jews are the chosen people. As Kaplan underlines, Jews are not the only ones predestined to salvation, nor do they have the exclusive capacity for attaining it. Holiness—a state of moral perfection—does not stem from exclusive election but results from inclusive pursuit of salvation, understood as fulfilment on this earth. Any other notion of holiness which is reserved to the Jewish people, goes against the Reconstructionist view of Judaism.

Arguing for a rejection of the chosenness doctrine, Reconstructionism formulates the alternative doctrine of the vocation of Israel. Kaplan assumes that the Jewish survival depends entirely on whether they achieve a kind of moral realism that does not revolve around uniqueness, otherness and superiority, but on the intrinsic value of being Jewish today. The Reconstructionist position is that the Jewish religion should not only be instrumental in elevating the life of the Jewish people, but serve to enrich all humanity. The vocation of Jews lies in being committed and dedicated to the good of all humanity, yet it does not require them to abandon or deny their own religion, construed as the Jewish civilization. Given such a standpoint, it is not possible to attribute holiness to the Chosen People as it is taken for granted in traditional Judaism.

Kaplan recapitulates his position as follows:

All these considerations make it clear that, whether we apply rational or pragmatic criteria, the traditional formula concerning Israel’s divine election is objectionable. Rationally, it has no place in the realm of discourse from which belief in the supernatural revelation of religious truth has been excluded. Pragmatically, it is objectionable, as barring the way to peace and harmony among religions, and as making for self-righteousness and cant. All the genuine values that once attached themselves to this belief can be maintained by substituting for it the doctrine of vocation (Kaplan 1967, 230).

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