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## ***Chosenness On Our Mind***

**Review-Essay by JONATHAN D. SARNA**

*The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology.* By ARNOLD M. EISEN. Bloomington, Indiana. Indiana University Press. 237 pp., \$17.50.

JEWISH RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN AMERICA is "sadly neglected," observes Gershon Greenberg in a recent bibliographical essay. "There is no history, journal, undergraduate course or academic position in the area." Greenberg lists numerous studies of individual American Jewish thinkers and a few casual surveys of modern Jewish thought, but no full-scale histories of ideas and no systematic treatments of ideas in context. There is, he rightly notes, "a chronic absence of attention to sources."<sup>1</sup>

Arnold Eisen's masterful study, based almost entirely on primary sources, is a pioneering attempt to rescue American Jewish thought from this neglect. Rather than concentrating on any one thinker, Eisen boldly sets out to examine how a variety of thinkers — great and not-so-great — tackled what he calls "the essential dilemma facing American Jews": the problem of chosenness. As he poses it, the conflict over whether to remain apart as a "chosen people" or to participate fully in American life could hardly be more stark:

To abandon the claim to chosenness would be to discard the *raison d'être* that had sustained Jewish identity and Jewish faith through the ages, while to make the claim was to question or perhaps even to threaten America's precious offer of acceptance (p. 4).

The solutions offered by Jewish thinkers in America naturally looked toward neither extreme, seeking instead compromise, a middle ground where Jewish identity and American patriotism could coexist.

Eisen seems to have devoured almost everything worth reading on the subject of "Israel's election." At the same time, and unlike most writers in the field, he has equipped himself to speak knowledgeably about the larger currents of both Jewish and American thought. He has also acquired sufficient familiarity with history and the social sciences to place the ideas he describes in context, and to describe their function. But he does not allow his vast research to obscure the larger significance of his

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1. Gershon Greenberg, "The Pattern in Study of American Jewish Religious Thought," *Studies In Bibliography and Booklore*, 14 (1982): 29-40.

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subject. After the dust has settled over the greater and lesser minds who grappled with the chosen people problem, Eisen remains in touch with his central thesis:

[C]hosenness preoccupied American Jewish thinkers because it was essential to their maturing definition of who and what American Jews were. They would not be mere Americans — but, as part of the chosen people, would somehow stand apart. Yet they would be Americans — and if chosenness involved more exclusivity, a more demanding covenant, or a more avowedly elitist mission than was compatible with being Americans, then chosenness would have to be reinterpreted. So it was (p. 173).

Evaluations of the three principal American Jewish efforts to reinterpret chosenness form the core of this book. Chapters devoted to Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative Jewish ideas carefully describe and painstakingly analyze half a century of systematic and non-systematic thinking on the subject produced both by members of the so-called “Second Generation” (1930-1955), and by those of the “Third Generation” (1955-1980).

The three approaches to chosenness turn out to display far less development over time than one might have expected. Debate in Reform circles has continually centered around Judaism’s “mission unto the nations.” Reconstructionists, following Mordecai Kaplan, have repudiated the chosen people concept altogether in favor of the idea of Judaism as “vocation or calling.” And Conservative Jewish thinkers, at least in Eisen’s view, have merely “practiced and repracticed the art of cautious reaffirmation through manifold reinterpretation. They ended up nowhere in particular, but somewhere in-between” (p. 99). Since Orthodox spokesmen often ignored the problem of chosenness, being “largely immune to the external pressures upon chosenness that affected other movements,” Eisen considers them only briefly. He fixes his central focus squarely on those caught up in the tension between being Jewish and being American, not those who have evaded it.

Although not central to Eisen’s analysis, change over time does play some part in it. He feels that “Second Generation” American Jewish thinkers of all persuasions applied themselves to apologetics, gushing forth with expressions of love for everything American, and always looking to find new opportunities to prove the utter compatibility of “Judaism and Democracy,” “Sinai and Washington,” and “Jewish and American values.” By the “Third Generation” he finds that this wholehearted embrace of America had been withdrawn and, in its place,

Jewish intellectuals seized on the traditional vocabulary of chosenness and exile in order to articulate their distance from American middle-class culture and from the Jewish community which had adopted that culture (p. 147).

But if chosenness no longer proved an embarrassment to American Jews, they did not, according to Eisen, suddenly revert en masse to a position of

Jewish apartness. Instead, to use his unabashedly Protestant term, the Jewish covenant with America became “a halfway covenant,” as did the Jewish covenant with Judaism. Jews sought to protect both of their identities, hoping for some future synthesis.

The boldness and breadth of this study bid fair to raise some exciting controversies. Eisen spares few major Jewish thinkers and no modern Jewish religious movement. One after another, he strips bare each major solution offered to the problems posed by chosenness, exposing its weaknesses for all to see. To be sure, Eisen is better at tearing down than at building up. Some thinkers deserve more credit than he gives them. But to deal here with all of the many issues that he raises would be impossible. In what follows, therefore, I shall limit my criticisms to the three that seem to me to be of particular importance.

(1) Eisen begins his study in 1930 on the argument that it was then (ca. 1930-1955) “that American Jewry and Judaism as we know them took shape” (p. 4). He defends his date on the basis of such developments as the 1937 Columbus Platform adopted by the Reform Movement, and the founding of Reconstructionism by Mordecai Kaplan. In making such a claim, however, he reveals a modernist and East European bias that causes him to overlook developments in the nineteenth century. Like far too many other American Jewish historians, he assumes, quite wrongly, that significant American Jewish history began only with mass East European Jewish immigration in 1881. In fact, American Judaism as we know it — with three major branches and various minor movements struggling for recognition — took shape no later than the 1870s. By century’s end, discussion had begun on almost all of the key theological and ritual controversies that convulsed American Judaism before the Holocaust, certainly the question of chosenness. Indeed, many of the positions that Eisen characterizes as beginning in the 1930s merely echoed earlier statements by luminaries of the previous era. That important developments took place in the twentieth century cannot be doubted, nor can Eisen be faulted for selecting the half century just past for analysis, rather than some earlier period. But by minimizing the nineteenth century roots of twentieth century discussions he does fall victim to what David H. Fischer calls “the telescopic fallacy.”<sup>2</sup> He makes a long story short, forgets distant origins, and thus misleadingly transforms an enduring theme in American Jewish intellectual history into one that seems to be of only recent vintage.

(2) Eisen organizes his book on the basis of what he calls “generational terminology,” the now standard sociological division of American Jews by generation of nativity. He devotes one part of his work to the “Second Generation,” one part to the “Third.” But where previous studies of the “second generation” — notably Deborah Dash Moore’s *At Home In*

2. David H. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies* (New York, 1970), pp. 147-149.

*America* — actually focused on those whose parents had been immigrants, Eisen does not. His “second generation” figures include both those who were themselves born abroad, like Mordecai Kaplan and Samuel Schulman, and those, like Joshua Loth Liebman, who descended from families already several generations in America. As for his “third generation” figures, a very high percentage of them, including Jacob Agus, Emil Fackenheim, Frederic Doppelt, Arthur Hertzberg, Jakob Petuchowski, and W. Gunther Plaut fall by most normal definitions into the “first generation” category — a phenomenon, incidentally, that deserves to be studied.

Eisen himself recognizes this problem. He frankly admits that “the generational terminology employed throughout this work is in one sense misleading and unjustified” (p. 8). But he uses the terminology, anyway, on the theory that

the phrases “second” and “third generation” denote a period and its population regardless of whether a particular thinker who joined in its debates and was subject to its influence was biologically its native son in the strict sense of the term (p. 9).

Hardly convincing. As far as I can tell, the American Jewish population has never been as homogeneous in generational terms as he imagines. Various studies in the late 1930s found that about 23% of American Jewish families were third generation or more<sup>3</sup> — this at the time when, according to him, the “second generation” was only starting to make itself felt! Periodizing according to pseudo-generations, rather than according to standard socio-historical criteria, thus obscures far more than it reveals. American Jewish intellectual history needs a proper periodization scheme of its own.

(3) Finally, a word must be said about Eisen’s analysis of “Reform Judaism and the ‘Mission Unto the Nations.’” As usual, the sources he cites are fascinating. They trace better than anyone has before the real dilemma that American Reform Jews faced when their interpretation of chosenness as Israel’s “mission” fell victim, on the one hand, to charges of elitism and, on the other, to charges that Israel’s “universalistic mission” contained far too little that was specifically Jewish in character. But Eisen is wrong in assuming that the problem was unique to Reform. The idea that God

has chosen us as His peculiar people, *to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* . . . an example unto the Gentile world of a life lived in God — upright, just and kind<sup>4</sup>

is also found in avowedly Orthodox works, in this case Leo Jung’s widely read “Jewish Library” volume on *Faith*. Michael Meyer’s observation on the “mission of Israel” theme in Europe applies to America as well:

3. Sophia M. Robison (ed.), *Jewish Population Studies* (New York, 1943), pp. 63, 94, 156.

4. Leo Jung (ed.), *Faith* (New York, 1968), p. 19, cf. p. 61.

This doctrine was not characteristic only of Reform. It was jointly held by various branches of modern Judaism, and should be ascribed more to the general process of Jewish integration into surrounding society than to the peculiarities of Reform Jewish ideology.<sup>5</sup>

Eisen seems to me to be equally wrong in his functional analysis of the "mission of Israel" theme. While I can only applaud his view that "American Jewish thought on election should be understood as 'religious ideology' rather than theology," and that as such it gave "meaning to those who created and received it in the particular context of their time and place" (pp. 8-9), I am unpersuaded that the *sole* function of "mission" was "to link the political and social commitments of Reform Jews to the demands of Jewish tradition" (p. 71). Certainly, Reform Jewish liberalism did legitimate itself on the basis of Israel's "prophetic mission," but the ideology served other imperative needs as well.

First of all, the mission of Israel justified Reform Judaism's opposition to intermarriage. Instead of having to resort to "tribalistic" or "chauvinistic" reasons for supporting endogamy, Reform leaders could appeal to high-minded ideals, "love being triumphed over by duty."<sup>6</sup> An intermarrying Jew was, so to speak, abandoning the battle in mid-course. Jews who did marry Jews, by contrast, were guaranteeing that Israel would be able to carry on its "vital mission" for yet one generation more. Second, the "mission of Israel" served as an effective anti-Christian polemic. For centuries, Christians had pointed to the Jewish diaspora as evidence that Israel labored under a Divine curse owing to its mistreatment of Christianity's founder. Now Jews had an answer: "We do not look upon this dispersion as a curse; on the contrary, we regard it as a blessing — a blessing for you and all mankind."<sup>7</sup> "Mission" thus served a myriad of ideological functions. To view it, as Eisen does, only in one dimensional terms is, it seems to me, to miss the point entirely.

If Eisen is not at his best in his analysis of Reform, he more than compensates elsewhere, offering brilliant insights, luminous quotations, and acute criticisms, all set forth in memorable prose. Faults, omissions and misinterpretations flaw all great works, and this one is no exception. In the final analysis, however, *The Chosen People In America* must rank among the most important volumes ever written on American Jewish religious thought. No serious student of the subject can afford to ignore it.

5. Michael A. Meyer, "Concerning D.R. Schwartz: 'History and Historiography — 'A Kingdom of Priests' as Pharisaic Slogan,'" *Zion* 46 (1981): 58 [translation mine]; cf. Max Wiener, "The Conception of Mission in Traditional and Modern Judaism," *YIVO Annual* 2:3 (1947-48), pp. 23-24.

6. Samuel Schulman (1909) quoted in W. Gunther Plaut, *The Growth of Reform Judaism* (New York, 1965), p. 256.

7. Bernhard Felsenthal, *The Wandering Jew: A Statement to a Christian Audience, of the Jewish View of Judaism* (Chicago, 1872), p. 5.