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## ***Israel as Blessing: Theological Horizons***

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### **Israel and the Biblical Blessing**

Blessing appears in the Bible's account of the birth of the Jewish people as well as its destiny in human history:

“Be a blessing....I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” (Gen. 12:2-3)

The nexus between Abraham and blessing is not limited to this one textual reference nor to Abraham alone. Blessing as part of God's promise appears twice more to Abraham, in Gen. 18:18-1

“Since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him. For I have singled him out that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.”

and in Genesis 22:17-18:

“I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the heaven and the sand on the seashore.....All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants because you have obeyed My command.”

In Gen. 26:4 it is extended to Abraham's son, Isaac:

“I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs.”

And then to Isaac's son Jacob in Gen 28:14:

“All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants.”

Curiously, however, the theological idea (“*theologoumenon*”) of Israel as blessing does not appear again in the remainder of the Pentateuch. In the remainder of all Tanakh the blessing's reference to the Jewish people after Jacob appears *explicitly* only in the later

prophets.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the blessing's application to the post-patriarchal Jewish people is mentioned explicitly in the Gen. 18 verse ("his children and *his household after him*"), in the Gen. 22 passage ("All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves *by your descendants*") in the Gen. 26 reference ("all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves *by your heirs*"), as well as in the passage in Gen. 28 ("All the families of the earth shall bless themselves *by you and your descendants*"). Importantly Gen. 28 is directed at Jacob, and hence must refer to Jacob's progeny down through the generations.

It seems clear that blessing is also implicit in God's charge to the entire Jewish people at Sinai to become a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6)<sup>2</sup> and the prophetic call for Jews to function in history as a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:1-6). A primary function of the priest—particularly in the post-Temple life of Israel—is to be a conduit of God's blessing to the community, in which case the call to become "a nation of priests" implies bestowing blessing on the world community. "Light to the nations" also carries the undeniable connotation of providing goodness and understanding to the gentile world. If so the bestowal and predictions of blessing apply to the Jewish people over the sweep of their history, just as rabbinic tradition assumed that God's covenant with Abraham applies to Abraham's Jewish descendants in perpetuity. If these assumptions are warranted, blessing constitutes an intrinsic part of the Bible's understanding of Israel's theological calling and destiny. And as Abraham's progeny are called upon to extend blessing to "all the families of the earth," it should play a central role in defining the Bible's covenantal conception of the Jewish people's relations with the gentile world.

Despite these Pentateuchal and Prophetic references, the *theologoumenon* of Israel as blessing has not played a prominent role in past rabbinic biblical and talmudic interpretation. This may be due more to the trauma the Jewish people experienced throughout in diasporic history rather than to that the idea that blessing was not a central motif in the Torah's vision of covenantal theology. Jewish interaction with

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<sup>1</sup>Zachariah 8:13, Ezekiel 34:26, Jeremiah 4:1-2, and Isaiah 19:24-25, all of which will be discussed later in the essay.

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of "*mamlekheth kohanim*", see "A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation" by Alon Goshen-Gottstein in this volume.

gentile powers have often been tragic, thereby causing rabbinic commentaries to pass over the Bible's theological calling for the Jewish people to enter world history by influencing the gentile nations. Another possibility for why these texts have not enjoyed wide circulation is that it is primarily in modernity that Jewish readers are interested in developing the theological concept of Israel as blessing. Reading texts is not only about what the texts say but also about the interaction between what they say and what the reader seeks to find or is able to recognize. If so, different texts and themes may naturally belong to different periods. Some generations may have been less interested, or less able, to hear the notion that Israel is to be a blessing unto others. This points to a challenge of contemporary interpretations in our present times. To develop a theology of Israel that offers possibilities for how Israel should relate theologically to other peoples and religions, modern thinkers may be in a better position than were previous generations to hear messages in Jewish sacred texts and later rabbinic writings.

In order to preserve the coherence and integrity of the above texts, blessing should be understood as a constituent element of Israel's mission and election. Identifying the centrality of the biblical concept of blessing and how its uses were limited to specific contexts presents the theological challenge of developing the principles and application of the concept.

The Bible provides few details regarding the nature of this blessing and the dynamics of its transmission. However rabbinic tradition does provide a number of sources regarding these subjects, and they have significant implications for Israel's role in sacred history and its ideal relationship to gentiles. Studying these sources allow us to reveal important conceptions of Israel's covenantal mission, to engage in constructive theological thinking and to explore some of the covenantal challenges before Jews today.

This essay will survey the rabbinic interpretations of Israel's blessing, outlining their implications for different theological approaches to Jewish self-understanding as well as Israel's relationship to humanity. The different theologies, attitudes and practices that emerge from this variety all find expression in contemporary Jewish self-definition,

behavior and attitudes toward other religions. The goal of this survey is to promote fresh thinking that can contribute to future constructive Jewish theology.

The texts under consideration come from a broad range of sources representing different periods and schools of Jewish thought. The essay's eclectic use of sources is designed to achieve several purposes. It makes us aware of the broad range of options available for Jewish theology. It allows us to revisit the fundamental dynamics of Jewish thought and the inherent tensions in performing the task of constructing a contemporary Jewish theology. Finally, it also allows us to recover voices sometimes overlooked in Jewish religious discourse, and thereby broaden the theological possibilities at our disposal.

### **Prophetic Conceptions of Israel as Blessing**

A number of prophetic texts mention the idea of blessing as essential to Jewish identity. Despite the existence of these texts, it is striking how little attention they have received in the history of interpretation and commentary, and how much most students of the Torah are unaware of them or their significance. Certainly no Jewish theology has been built around the centrality of blessing in Israel's covenant.

Israel as blessing appears in the prophets Zachariah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, as well as Isaiah:

And just as you were a curse among the nations, O House of Judah and House of Israel, so, when I vindicate you, you shall become a blessing. Have no fear; take courage!" (Zachariah 8:13)

"I will make these and the environs of My hill a blessing, I will send down the rain in its season, rains that bring blessing." (Ezekiel 34:26):

Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak), a primary rabbinic commentator on the prophets, relates the promises of blessing that appear in Zechariah and Ezekiel to the specific blessings to Abraham as recorded in Genesis 12:2-3.<sup>3</sup> This reinforces the idea that Abraham's blessing also applies to all of Israel in her relation to the nations. However we understand the meaning of being a blessing in relation to Abraham, these prophets

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<sup>3</sup> See Radak's commentary on those verses

extend it into a continuation of the promise for salvation. This might be understood as indicating that *the purpose* of salvation is Israel continually striving to function as blessing to the nations over the course of history, or alternatively, that the blessing will not occur within normal history, but only in the *eschaton*, i.e. only at the end of history (the messianic era) when salvation is fully realized will Israel become a blessing—and not before. And when the messianic era is understood to be a rupture or discontinuity with pre-messianic history, then Israel need not strive to be a blessing to the nations prior to that time. In effect, consigning blessing to the eschaton operates as a way of undermining the normative force of the biblical responsibility of blessing. As we shall see, these two interpretations represent two radically opposed understandings of how Israel should live out its covenantal responsibilities as it relates to the gentile nations.

The mandate or prediction to function as a blessing in Zachariah is couched between the promise of salvation and the encouragement to be fearless. This detracts from the force of the categorical message of blessing appearing in Genesis. Is this due merely to the literary style of the prophetic texts, or is it essential to prophetic visions and theologies? In either possibility the de-emphasis may have contributed to the blessing prophecy failing to achieve great popularity in rabbinic tradition.

Radak again sees Ezekiel’s reference to blessing as an extension of Gen. 12. However he appears to emphasize the divine bestowal of rain as the result of (or constituting) blessing with the actions of Israel functioning as the conduit for the blessing. This can easily elude the reader and thus relegate the prophecy of Israel as blessing to the background.

Israel as blessing also appears in Jeremiah 4:1-2:

“If you return, O Israel - declares the Lord - if you return to Me, if you remove your abominations from My presence and do not waver, and swear, “As the Lord lives,” in sincerity, justice, and righteousness - nations shall bless themselves by you (lit=him) and praise themselves by you.”

R. Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi), interprets the meaning of this verse similar to his interpretation of Genesis 12:2-3: “If you [Israel] does so, [i.e. return to the Lord] then nations will bless themselves by Israel. Every non-Jew will say to his son, “You shall be

like So-and-So the Jew.” Thus Israel seems to stand almost as an introverted religious model to be seen and emulated by the gentiles of the world.

Radak comments on this verse in Jeremiah: “Nations will bless themselves by him and will glory in him. There will yet come a time also when the other nations will bless themselves in Him and will take pride in Him and not in idols. It is also possible that the words ‘in him’ refer to Israel—i.e., if Israel will do all of this, then the nations will bless themselves by you, as it is written, ‘All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs’ (Genesis 26:4).” Similar to Rashi, this latter interpretation again seems to imply that Israel’s active return to God will occasion the blessing to the nations, with Israel’s direct relationship with the gentile nations being secondary.

Rashi’s strong reading of Jeremiah 4:1-2 suggests that *all* nations will be blessed through Israel. (Radak also recognizes this reading.) Similar to his reading of Gen. 12:2-3, Rashi highlights how Abraham serves as a model for others. In Gen. 12:2-3, as in his interpretation of Jeremiah, Rashi understands the verse to indicate that gentiles will say to their sons, “be like Abraham,” even though there is nothing in the biblical text to indicate that this blessing/role modeling should be in the framework of father-son relations. It may that Rashi implies here that Israel’s relationship to the nations should be regarded as parallel to that of a parent to a child: role model and teacher by example. In his second interpretation Radak appears to agree Rashi, but his first interpretation suggests that God is the one who is being blessed, not Israel. That the verse can be read in more than one way may have contributed to the limited influence that this verse has had over the generations in expressing the notion of Israel as a blessing to the nations.

Lastly, Isaiah announces blessing in 19:24-25:

“In that day, Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth; for the Lord of Hosts will bless them, saying, “Blessed be My people Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and My very own Israel.”

These verses in Isaiah are unique in the Bible in that they appear to extend the covenantal blessing of Israel to Egypt and Assyria, thus implying that those nations have achieved (or will achieve) theological parity with Israel. They imply that at some future time, Israel will share its status with Ashur and Egypt, the two reigning empires of

Isaiah's time. Terms of status and endearment hitherto exclusive to God's relation with Israel are now shared with other peoples. They may suggest theologically that Israel's status and election are but instrumental, i.e., that Israel will influence Egypt and Assyria, who will in turn bestow blessing on other gentile nations. Thus ultimately God's design is for others to enjoy the same elected status and relationship that Israel enjoys. Since this diminishes Israel's unique character and religious calling, these verses also have not been stressed in rabbinic tradition and Jewish thought. Yet they may be fertile grounds for understanding Israel's instrumental role in shaping Christianity and Islam and these later religions in turn influencing humanity.

Radak comments on these verses:

“In that day, Israel shall be a third partner. They will share a third in the faith of God, and they will be a blessing in the midst of the land. For they will enjoy an advantage of blessings over the other nations for as long as they maintain their faith in God.”

Here Radak introduces the notion of faith in God as the foundation for the new status of Assyria and Egypt. Faith—presumably knowledge of the One God of heaven and earth—is the basis for shifting relations between Israel and the nations. One could reconstruct an understanding of this idea according to which Israel's goal is to spread the knowledge of God in the world. When Israel is successful, others will share in Israel's special status and enjoy its particular blessings.

According to Radak blessing is what the nations receive from God as a consequence of their true faith. This interpretation does not seem to have the rich understanding of “blessing” that characterized the interpretations of Gen. 12. While Radak emphasizes the three nations enjoying the advantage of blessings, one can also imagine that blessing conveys the idea of spreading the faith in God's to others and seeing Israel's special status as instrumental to the task of teaching humanity about God. This has obvious ramifications for Jewish understandings of other religions, and raises the questions for Jewish theology of identifying which conditions are necessary for others to recognize God, whether the other faiths must mirror the Jewish concept and worship of God, and whether other nations can be considered as sharing Israel's blessings and Abraham's

covenant. It also leaves open the question of how faith itself leads naturally to blessing understood biblically as peace, security and human flourishing.

### **Blessing as Active Universal Engagement: Teaching Theology and Morality**

How aware is Jewish thought, both throughout the generations and in particular today, of the idea of being a blessing to the nations? This question is related to the diverse understandings of what it means to be a blessing. Traditional interpretations of the biblical blessing oscillate between active understandings that promote Jewish engagement with gentiles and their culture, and more passive ones that restrict blessing to introspective Jewish modeling that naturally engenders gentile emulation. Thus we can imagine different degrees of activity, awareness and intentionality of the biblical blessing. Each of the understandings represents a paradigm for contemporary relations between Jews and gentiles, and for ideal Jewish interaction with humanity.

Nor is this strictly a theological or “metaphysical” question since different educational and social initiatives follow from the adoption of particular interpretations. Should Jews be “out there” doing good and striving to influence gentiles? Should they seek to share the knowledge of God as a way of being a blessing? If so should they seek to convert gentiles, either minimally to the Noahide commandments or maximally to the Mosaic covenant? Should Jews keep gentile humanity as part of their spiritual intention, even as they face God and practice their particular Mosaic covenant within the Jewish people? Alternatively, perhaps Jews need do nothing other than function as a model worthy of other’s praise, emulation and blessing. Ought Jews to focus inward exclusively with role modeling taking place without Jewish concern for the presence of others, or does it also involve some degree of intentionality toward others?

This presents a two-fold behavioral and spiritual challenge: What does blessing imply regarding ideal Jewish action and to what extent should Jews direct their actions toward others to extend blessing to them? Second, how closely should the rest of the world be present in Jewish thoughts and intentions, even as we serve God in the context of our particularist covenant?



One major understanding of the biblical blessing and charge sees blessing in active terms. God has challenged Abraham, and consequently Israel, to share their theological understanding with the nations. Thus teaching is a form of creating universal blessing. According to this view Abraham is the prototype of a teacher who shares Judaism's message with others. By emphasizing teaching, we begin to move from blessing peoples to recognition of their religions. This is most evident in Maimonides' statements about the theological and historical function of Abraham to bring theological truth, values and human flourishing to gentile nations and individuals:

“He [Abraham] began to call in a loud voice to all people and inform them that there is one God in the entire world and it is proper to serve Him. He would go out and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land of Canaan - proclaiming [God's existence the entire time] - as [Genesis 21:33] states: "And He called there in the name of the Lord, the eternal God." When the people would gather around him and ask him about his statements, he would explain [them] to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him. These are the souls of Abraham's house. He planted in their hearts this great fundamental principle, composed texts about it, and taught it to Isaac, his son. Isaac also taught others and turned [their hearts to God]. He also taught Jacob and appointed him as a teacher.”  
(*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Avodah Zarah* 1:4)

“You shall love God,” i.e. make Him beloved among the creatures as your father Avraham did, as it is written, “The souls that he made in Haran.” (Gen. 12:5) Avraham, as a result of his deep understanding of G-d, acquired love for God, as the verse testifies, “Avraham, who loved Me” (Isa 41:8). This powerful love therefore caused him to call out to all mankind to believe in God. So too, you shall love Him to the extent that you draw others to Him.” (*Book of Commandments, Positive Commandment* 3)

In Maimonides' understanding Abraham is a Socratic instructor who dispenses blessings to the world by teaching the pagans around him about the true nature of God and correct faith. Aside from Abraham's correct metaphysical understanding that God is unique and non-physical, Maimonides believed that Abraham was aware only of the moral Noahide commandments, the commandment of circumcision and possibly the commandment to pray. It is likely, therefore, that Maimonides believed that Abraham taught those around him about the moral commandments as a necessary means to understanding theological truth. If so, according to Maimonides, the mission of Israel includes teaching humanity about the accurate nature of God and divine moral law. In fact, Maimonides acknowledged that these truths were spread to the nations of the earth

partially by both Christians and Muslims, whose religions were derived from Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Thus this idea of “blessing” has implications for how Jews should understand Christians and Muslims theologically in the context of sacred history.

In his commentary on Genesis 12:2, the medieval exegete, Don Isaac Abravanel (fifteenth-century Spain) also understands blessings this way:

“The purpose of the process referenced here and the phrase “You shall be a blessing” that God commanded him [Avraham] is that when he travels he should be a blessing among the nations in teaching and informing them about the true faith in a way that will complete the world through him and his teaching so that divine providence will extend to those who accept his teaching and study His faith. Regarding this it says, ‘I will bless those who bless you.’”

According to Abravanel Abraham’s success is measured by the fact that so many consider themselves to be his heirs, even though they are not genealogically related to him. This bold statement appears to be made without reservation, and likely constitutes an acknowledgement that Christianity and Islam—the religions to which Abravanel was exposed—were also carriers of a true teaching sourced in Abraham.

There is another more behavioral interpretation of “being a blessing.” Some sources highlight the cognitive knowledge of God, while others, highlight the path of righteous and moral living—*tsedekah* and *mishpat*—as emphasized in the reference to blessing in Genesis 18:18-19.

Whether God’s charge to Abraham to function as a blessing to the world connotes teaching the world about the reality and metaphysical character of God or basic moral norms of righteous and justice, under this conception of blessing Israel has an active mission toward gentiles. Its mission consists in sharing this teaching and following in the footsteps of Abraham, who is the first one to both share his theological awareness with others as well as acting as a defender of justice and righteousness (Gen. 18) and thus functioning as a model of ethical relations toward others. Hence Israel actively brings blessing to the nations in two ways. Teaching faith in God itself is an act of

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<sup>4</sup> See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and their Wars, 11:4 (uncensored edition).

blessing, while the moral consequences of that theological sharing are also a blessing to humanity as it leads to individual and social flourishing.

A third instance of interpreting the election of Israel as blessing to the world is offered by R. Naftali Berlin (Netziv). While not using the term blessing, he sees the Book of Exodus as the theological extension of the Book of Genesis, and Sinaitic revelation as the culmination of God's creation of the universe that proceeds from Genesis 1 through the covenantal blessing bestowed upon Abraham in Genesis 12 through Exodus 20<sup>5</sup>:

“It thus emerges that the giving of the Torah is the completion of creation, and this is identical with the Exodus from Egypt, as then Israel were fit to accept the Torah and to complete the Creation, and to come through it to the *telos* of their formation, in relation to the People of God. This is analogous to the function of human reason and forthright qualities in the Torah of Humanity, regarding which even though the land and what fills it did not reach this completion until after a long time after the creation of Heaven and Earth, and even nowadays there are many human beings that have not reached this height, nonetheless the matter is comprehended even by the nations of the world that only this is the *telos* of the advantage/raised status of the human being. Similarly we have reason to believe that even though Torah and her principles were not given until after the Exodus from Egypt, and even now there are many of Israel who have not achieved a Torah mind-set, nonetheless the Torah is the sole reason for the advantage/raised status of Israel, who were formed to be a covenantal people for a light unto the nations. Thus the book of Exodus is the second book of the first book (Genesis), as if they are one subject separated into two books of the book of creation....The general completion of the world is that there will be a nation who will be God's people. This was not achieved until Israel left Egypt and arrived at its goal that it be fit to be a light unto the nations and to establish the knowledge of God in the world.”

Rather than understanding revelation at Sinai in parochial or national terms, Netziv proceeds in the opposite direction, insisting like Isaiah (49:6) that Sinai revelation has universal value. The purpose of Sinaitic election is for the Jewish people to serve as “a light unto the nations” by teaching the world the true knowledge of God. According to Netziv, Israel's religious identity cannot be understood without Israel's connection to the gentile nations because Israel's election is the center of a universal strategy for disseminating divine truth to humanity. In other words, the world was not created for Israel; rather Israel was created for the world.

It should be noted that understanding Israel's blessing as active teaching (or universal mission) is an instrumentalist conception of election, and this, in turn, leads to a theological and national paradox: When Israel's uniqueness consists in its mission to bless and teach others, the very success of that blessing entails the loss of Israel's uniqueness. By succeeding in its mission Israel would no longer enjoy the benefits of its unique relationship with God. Isaiah's prophecy in 19:24-25 approaches this idea, and Maimonides and his rationalist theological followers developed this understanding of Jewish religious identity most fully and downplayed the meaning of Jewish election.<sup>6</sup>

### **Blessing as Passive Modeling**

We saw how Rashi and Radak often understood Genesis' blessing to Abraham as providing a model whose influence naturally spreads to the nations ("They [the gentiles] will say to their sons, 'be like Abraham'") without entailing any necessary Jewish intentionality toward gentiles. This is a significant difference between the first concept of blessing as active engagement with gentiles and this more passive modeling interpretation of blessing. Even in this model of blessing, however, it is clear that Jews need to be aware of the presence of gentiles and the impact of Jewish behavior on others, albeit that such awareness need not be the primary element in Jews leading their religious lives. Moreover, this model may function as an important stimulus for Jews to evaluate themselves in their spiritual and behavioral lives. It may demand that they continuously ask themselves, "Am I an admirable model? Are my actions worthy of emulation by others?"

The interpretation of blessing by Ovadia ben Jacob Seforno in sixteenth-century Italy represents an integration of these disparate conceptions. For Seforno, ideal Jewish religious intention is toward God, yet ultimately being a blessing to God results in human flourishing because God finds joy in correct human belief and progress. Focusing on God's joy is thus coupled with action in relation toward others. Relating to Gen. 12:2,

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<sup>5</sup> Commentary to the Bible, *Ha-Ameq Davar*, Introduction to Book of Exodus

<sup>6</sup> Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* does not mention Jewish "election." The end of his *Mishneh Torah* describes the fullness of the messianic era—i.e. when Israel's mission and blessing has been fully realized—in thoroughly universalistic terms. See Laws of Kings and their Wars, 12:5 (according to Yemenite ms.)

Seforno offers a synthesis of religious intention toward God and concrete action in relation to gentiles:

“The blessing of God is that He should rejoice in His creation, as our sages have said, “(God said to me,) ‘Ishmael, My son, bless Me.’ I replied, ‘May it be Your will that Your mercy may prevail over Your other attributes’ ” (BT, *Berakhot* 7a). Therefore He (God) says, ‘become a blessing to Me by (your) deep understanding (whereby) you will acquire perfection, and teach knowledge (of God) to the people.’”<sup>7</sup>

Seforno here couches his understanding of blessing in terms that relate to God directly: Being a blessing means being a blessing to God, so the correct understanding of Gen 12 is that God challenged Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing for Him. God finds joy in His creation—specifically when His human creatures achieve spiritual perfection. Abraham is commanded to reach spiritual perfection, through attaining the perfected understanding of God who acts toward His human creatures with the moral attribute of mercy. He takes this interpretation a step further by asserting that perfected knowledge is the basis for teaching others and hence Abraham is to share his knowledge with others. In the end it is this activity of teaching that makes Abraham a blessing to God.

Seforno’s cited the talmudic passage in which a righteous person (R. Ishmael) gains the upper hand over divine justice, implying that blessing increases divine joy because it allows for the continued existence of God’s children who will withstand divine justice with the aid of divine compassion. Thus, anything that advances the project of maintenance, evolution and perfection of creation can be considered a divine blessing. Unique to Seforno’s reading is that Abraham—and by extension all Israel—are simultaneously a blessing to themselves, to God, and to the world.

Yet who are the others that Abraham is bidden to teach and perfect spiritually? While it is possible that in Seforno’s mind Abraham is to teach his offspring exclusively (as suggested by Genesis 18:19), it is more likely that because the Jewish people had not yet been formed and according to rabbinic tradition Abraham converted the “strangers” around him, the others who Abraham was commanded to teach are those “souls” outside his biological family.

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<sup>7</sup> Commentary on Bible, Genesis 12:2, Pelcovitz edition, p. 64.

### **Blessing as Non-Relational Theurgic Agency**

While philosophical and rational schools of interpretation emphasized blessing as active teaching or influencing (either theologically or morally) and the medieval biblical exegetes emphasized passive modeling, still others stressed more solitary dimensions of blessing, and thereby avoided the possibility Israel's losing its unique status and covenantal role. One specific mode of this interpretation that is popular among kabbalistic thinkers is blessing that is directed toward, and connecting with, the supernal world. This is achieved through ritual and religious intent that draws the divine flux into the physical, human plane. Blessing refers to the drawing of a celestial reality to the human realm—almost exclusively to the life and experience of the Jewish people. The covenantal blessing emerges constitutes an important concept in this spiritual transfer. Abraham's specific blessing is understood in the context of the broader kabbalistic understanding of blessing, and thus biblical and classical sources are reread in light of the particularities of the kabbalistic understanding of how the celestial realm above relates to the human realm and below.

Drawing blessing from above focuses exclusively on the relationship between Jewish faith/behavior with the celestial world, and is largely divorced from any conscious or direct Jewish interaction with others. That this type of theurgic agency could, in principle be achieved in complete Jewish isolation from the rest of humanity highlights the fact that this understanding eliminates the need for Jews to be concerned with gentiles while they lead their religious and spiritual life. Blessing is thus the natural effect of living in accordance with the divine commandments between Israel and God—a radically more introverted way of generating blessing than either active engagement or passive modeling.

This concept is expressed by the kabbalist R. Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla of thirteenth-century Spain:

“This is the secret of the blessing that God, blessed be He, granted to Abraham. For the abundance of bounty and emanations that are drawn from the Supernal Eden, which is called *keter* (crown), and subsequently flow through the conduit of *tiferet*, which is called *nahar* (river), are all gathered into the tenth pool which is the secret of *malkhut* (kingship), and this is the pool that the stories of the wells of Abraham and Isaac refer to. God entrusted Abraham with this pool

through which all the nations shall be blessed. This is the meaning of what He said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). What is the meaning of “be a blessing”? That the *shekhinah* (the immanent presence of God) that is the pool shall dwell in you....Even though God gave Abraham the pool He did not give him nor Isaac the gate, because their progeny contained dross, i.e. Ishmael and Esau; but He did give the gate to Jacob whose progeny did not contain any dross. The meaning of God’s words to Abraham, “and all nations of the earth shall be blessed in you” is clear and well-understood, for the seventy families attach themselves to Abraham and Isaac. This is the meaning of the word ברכה (“blessing”), which comes from the word והרכבה הברוך (to graft unto), i.e. that the seventy nations are grafted unto and spiritually connected to Abraham and Isaac.”<sup>8</sup>

The author here plays on the Hebrew words *berakhah* (blessing) and *berekhah* (pool). The tenth sphere of *malkhut* (divine kingship) is the pool, into which all higher blessings gather and which is also associated with the notion of blessing. The divine grant of blessing to Abraham means that God provided him with access to *malkhut*. As *malkhut* is responsible for the drawing forth of all blessings to the physical world, it is also the source of sustenance and bounty for gentiles. God granted this to Abraham so that the nations may also receive blessings. Hence blessing for the nations is inherently linked to this *sefira*, and it is only through the access entrusted to Abraham that blessing is available to others. Blessing is a form of spiritual graft, of extending spiritual power from God to Israel to the nations. Only Abraham’s blessing keeps gentiles connected to the divine.

Note that blessings to the nations stem from the metaphysical endowment God bestowed upon Israel rather than from any knowledge that Israel possesses or actions that Israel manifests. This concept does, however, stress the importance of Israel maintaining a high spiritual state to remain connected to “pool” of divine kingship of *malkhut* and hence blessing.

R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Rebbe of Lubavitch in twentieth-century America, follows a related line of thinking:

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<sup>8</sup> *Gates of Righteousness*, First Gate.

“This is the meaning of the verse, “Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol Him, all you peoples, for great is His steadfast love toward us” (Psalms 117:1-2)... how is the demonstration of God’s love to us [Israel] a reason why other nations should praise Him? The explanation is well known; the intensification of God’s love toward us causes a purification, refinement, and elevation among the Gentiles and nations, to the extent that they visibly recognize its effects and as a result, they extol and praise God. This process is accomplished through the offering of the seventy oxen and similarly through the service of ‘Instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips’ (Hosea 14:3), i.e., prayer.”<sup>9</sup>

This teaching provides a further proof for Israel’s continuing obligation to serve as a blessing for the nations. Gentile nations rejoice because whatever God’s grace is shown to Israel also extends to the nations. Israel, then, becomes a—perhaps the exclusive—spiritual conduit of blessing for the nations. Because the blessing is fully observable to the nations, it induces them to offer praise to God. However this interpretation again omits any explicit reference of Jewish mindfulness toward gentiles when experiencing God’s love. Israel “earns” God’s blessing through ritual (the sacrifice of 70 oxen on the festival of Tabernacles) or through prayer—both of which are actions directed toward God alone.

This raises an important theological question: To what degree should the energetic transfer of blessing to gentiles be conscious and intentional in Jewish spiritual life? One possible interpretation of this teaching is that throughout the religious life of the Jewish people, Israel and the nations engage in a conscious exchange of blessing, an extension of divine love that reaches out to all humanity, in turn leading to the praise of God. And this extension of divine love should be a spiritual aspiration for Jews not only annually during the festival of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), which anticipates the era of complete blessing for all nations<sup>10</sup>, but also every day as Jews engage in daily prayer.

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<sup>9</sup> *Torat Menachem*, pt. 1, p.131.

<sup>10</sup> When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, 70 oxen were sacrificed on the festival of Sukkot. That Talmudic rabbis (BT, *Sukkah* 55b) understood these oxen to correspond to the seventy gentile nations of the world. This conception continues in Jewish religious life today when prayer has replaced animal sacrifices and the Musaf prayer of the Sukkot festival refers to the 70 sacrificial oxen. The prophetic reading for that festival (Zechariah 14) describes the ascent of the nations to worship God in the Temple. Thus Sukkot becomes a time of praying for the gentile nations as well as an intimation of the messianic era when all nations will recognize God and be blessed to offer sacrifices in the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem.



A third expression of blessing as theurgic agency is provided by R. Elimelech of Lizhensk, the influential hasidic master in eighteenth-century Poland:

“This is the meaning of the verse, “See... I set before you blessing and a curse” (Deut. 11:26): The word “see” hints at and refers to the righteous ones [*tsaddikim*] who are on the level of (serving God with) love, which is also identified with sight. “I set before you a blessing and a curse,” refers to the curse which is placed upon the nations, and the blessing consists of compassion for Israel. All this is delivered in your hands (i.e. is in your power); by virtue of your righteousness, you will be able to accomplish the foregoing.”<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the two earlier sources that highlight blessing between Israel and the nations, R. Elimelech portrays Jewish-gentile relations in diametrically opposite terms, corresponding to good and evil and similar dichotomies. This counterpoint of Israel and gentiles is not uncommon in kabbalistic and hasidic writings, in which blessing to Israel carries a theological concomitant of curse for gentiles. The righteous (Jewish) *tsaddikim* are on the level of love and they extend that love, expressed through compassion, upon Israel. In contrast, they stimulate the opposite of blessing—“curse”—upon the nations. The duality of blessing and curses is paralleled by the duality of Israel and the nations. Gentile curse is the dialectical concomitant of Israel’s blessing, rather than as a conduit to universal blessing, as Gen. 12:2-3 indicates. It also ensures Israel’s enduring uniqueness and superiority.

It may well be that historical circumstances led to this polarized worldview. Whatever its genesis, it is now firmly entrenched in a number of rabbinic writings and presents contemporary Jews with the challenge of understanding, evaluating and potentially adopting this worldview.

With its active and missionary emphasis, the philosophical tradition allowed for natural sharing between Abraham and the world, between Israel and humanity. By contrast, kabbalistic tradition largely focuses on ritual and interior spiritual life as the arenas of religious activity, with its correlative de-emphasis of Jewish-gentile relations. The first interpretations present the flow of blessings from Israel to the nations, a desirable sharing in divine bounty. The latter present a discontinuity and limit, positing the

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<sup>11</sup> *Noam Elimelech, Re'eh.*

nations as polar opposites of Israel. The extreme version of this theology is R. Elimelech's teaching in which divine intent of blessing for the nations is replaced by a curse upon them. The spiritual depth of that theology is matched by oppositional, even hateful, statements concerning gentiles, projecting Jewish-gentile relations as theologically undesirable and to be strenuously avoided.

How should we evaluate this strand of interpretation? Do we accept it as a permanent truth of Jewish theology and spiritual life, merely as a temporary insight resulting from difficult historical circumstances, or as a denial of the biblical aspiration for Jews to spread the divine blessing all God's children, and hence to be rejected?

In summary we have seen that interpretations of the concept of Israel as blessing run the gamut of Jewish-gentile relations—from proactive and potentially harmonious relations offered by interpreting blessing as active engagement, to the possible indifference and potential self-critiquing function posed by the passive model interpretation, to possible obliviousness and perhaps adversarial relationship posed by the theurgic interpretation of blessing.

Since these three modes of interpreting blessing demonstrate sometimes contradictory ways of relating to the gentile "other", a fundamental challenge for theological Jews today is to consciously choose one understanding of blessing over the others—with both its spiritual and behavioral implications. We are thus forced to examine varying motifs within Jewish tradition and make critical choices that yield the most fruitful results for our given social, cultural and spiritual circumstances. In the process we come to understand that the tradition is neither monolithic nor consistent, and that some aspects of tradition need to be reinterpreted constructively. The act of favoring one theological motif over another is also an important way of purifying tradition from within.

### **Blessing, History and the State of Israel**

The introverted understanding of blessing, i.e. the theurgic agency model, may be interpreted as Israel standing outside the realm of history and political life. In such a

view Israel is a source of blessing to the world because of its spiritual life and religious observance. However, by the same logic, Israel's flawed worship stemming from its exile and the Temple's destruction might be considered an impediment to fulfilling the divine biblical mandate to the Jewish people to share its blessing with the nations. In the more extrovert understanding (active engagement), the harsh historical reality of exile proved to be a hindrance to Israel's fulfilling its blessing mission realized as its vocation to teach the human family. When diaspora Jews experience oppression and exclusion, these historical conditions undermine the theological value of activism prescribed by this interpretation of blessing. Thus the more passive or introverted understandings of blessing flow more naturally.

During times of Jewish flourishing, optimistic Jewish thinkers taught that exile held the greater opportunity for Israel's active fulfillment of blessing because it affords the Jewish people positive interaction with gentiles and their cultures. This was particularly true in Jewish homiletical, rabbinic and philosophic writings following the Emancipation and the European Enlightenment<sup>12</sup>, as it is true in America today, where the theme of *tikkun olam* has become commonplace among centrist and liberal American Jews. It is no accident that following the post-Emancipation era the question of the Jewish people's role for the nations surfaced as a more conscious theological direction. When Jews live in relative harmony among gentiles, the question of positive Jewish relations toward gentiles become sharper and more desirable.

Analyzing the concept of Israel as blessing relating to the changing historical and political conditions of the Jewish people requires us to examine the *theologoumenon* in light of the existence of the State of Israel and Jewish sovereignty. This theological task flows from the recognition that today Jews are living in a new moment in history. Its novelty derives not merely from modern developments in interreligious relations and global interdependency—with the recognition that “no religion is an island”—but also from the reality that with sovereignty and independence the State of Israel has become the primary representative of the Jewish people Israel to the world community. These

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<sup>12</sup> The nineteenth-century German rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch and the early twentieth-century Jewish German philosopher, Hermann Cohen, are examples. For Hirsch, see essay by Alon Goshen-Gottstein in this volume.

transformed political conditions require us to reassess Israel's relationship to gentile nations, which takes on new importance when "Israel" is not only a people, but also a state. Hence it seems clear that the current Jewish existential and political conditions mandate new thinking, or at least new implications of prior theological options. Moreover, these theological ideas are not limited to theory but have dramatic political, cultural and historical consequences today.

Today's State of Israel generates a theological paradox: On the one hand Israel's prolonged continuous fight for survival in a threatening region where the majority of its neighbors refuse to acknowledge its *de jure* legitimacy and its *de facto* existence naturally fosters a Jewish inward turn that focuses on self-concern. In this condition the theological option stressing internal religious values without primary consciousness of their effect on the world, i.e. passive modeling, has great currency. Further still, the state affords a significant percentage of Israelis the freedom to be fervently Orthodox Jews (*haredim*), and to go about their religious lives based on the model of non-relational theurgic agency. Their theological orientation is to live outside of history and politics, convinced that only isolated spiritual immersion and individual Torah study will bring blessing and security to the Jewish people. If the gentile nations achieve blessing it will only be directly initiated by God in the *eschaton*, not in empirical history as we know it. As one would expect, kabbalistic theology, with its portrayal of Jews and gentiles as polar opposites, are popular in both groups

Yet Israeli sovereignty and independence also provide the Jewish people with unprecedented voice in the family of nations and influence in world events. It has led to the recognition of Jewish dignity and equality in Israel's relations with others. One need only contrast the acceptance of the full dignity and influence of Jewish people today with the Jewish conditions in medieval Christian Europe or during the Shoah in the twentieth century to see that Israel represents an unparalleled historic opportunity for the Jewish people to exercise influence on and foster progress for the nations of the world. Whether it be through its technological and security achievements, its democratic and humanistic values that are unique in the Middle East, its demanding military ethics or its academic prowess, Israel today plays a significant role in world culture and events.

Never before has the Jewish people had such an opportunity to teach and influence others on a global scale, and with it the opportunity to spread blessing by contributing to the cultural and economic flourishing of human life.

For the first time in 2,000 years, Israeli sovereignty allows Jews today to play a role similar to that of the biblical Abraham, to whom the first blessing mandate was given. The Bible and rabbinic tradition portray Abraham as actively engaged with his surroundings, a man of action and influence. His landedness, wealth, status and military prowess enabled him to exercise influence on the people around him, to dispense “blessing” to his neighbors.<sup>13</sup> While persecution and anti-Semitism have not disappeared today, the success of modern Zionism has bestowed upon the Jewish people many of those same biblical conditions and opportunities. As it was for Abraham, it appears that the active engagement model of blessing is a realistic and fruitful interpretation for the Jewish people today.<sup>14</sup>

Yet as the rabbinic sources divide on the meaning of Israel as blessing and how that blessing is best achieved, so also do contemporary Jews divide on how their lives can realize this *theologoumenon* and the means to achieve this blessing. Do Jews and the State of Israel have a universal mission to teach the world? If so, is that teaching exclusively theological or does it also include the keys for moral, political and technical progress? Should Jews ignore the gentile nations and attend only to their own spiritual and physical security, leaving it up to God alone to spread blessing? Lastly, should Jewish religious life connecting to divine blessing be above all history and politics, focusing instead on exclusively spiritual and theurgic matters?

In sum, what should the religious, moral and political aspirations of the State of Israel and the Jewish people be? Many options exist, both religious and secular, but for Jews who measure their individual lives and the life of their people in spiritual terms, the answers to this question cannot be divorced from the theological reflection that the

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<sup>13</sup> Gen. 12-18.

<sup>14</sup> The overwhelming majority of Jews today reside in Israel and the United States of America. In America too, Jews have prospered and exercise significant influence on nearly every aspect of American culture and politics.

Bible charges the children of Abraham be a blessing, and “that through them all the families of the earth be blessed.” And for them, Jewish destiny and Jewish mission will be driven by what theological interpretation they give to the central covenantal notion of Israel as blessing.