

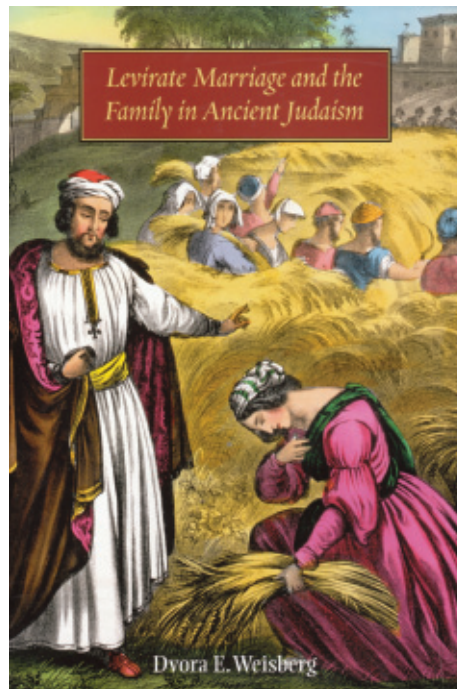
eral examples of rabbinic hermeneutics, which in this study are methodologies of interpretation applied by the Rabbis to the texts they regarded as scriptural. In rabbinic praxis, hermeneutics and *midrash* go hand in hand. The first generally produces the second. *Midrash* is by definition a form of interpretation of Scripture that goes beyond the text's most obvious meaning. Indeed, the Hebrew root of the word (d-r-s) means "to seek, to search," and clearly one need not search for that which is obvious and immediately accessible. This study, then, is on one level a standard academic rabbinics exploration of six interpretational methods: "even though there is no proof for this matter, there is a proof-text for it" (*af`al pi she-en r'ayah la-davar, zekher la-davar*), "the resolution of two contradictory verses" (*shenei ketuvim ha-makhishim zeh et zeh*), "transfer of the rules of one pentateuchal rubric to another" (*im'eino inyan*), "two verses that teach a single principle" (*shenei ketuvim ein melamedim*), "two restrictions" (*tere mi'utei*), and "these scriptural passages are necessary" (*tzerikhi*).

Consistent with that type of study, we analyze developments in the form, logic, and results of the interpretational methods under analysis. If there is chronological development, we chart it and try to account for it. Though this aspect of the study is mainly directed toward those in the field of historical-critical rabbinics, I have tried to make it accessible to those who are interested in the history of biblical interpretation, the development of rabbinic Judaism, or early rabbinic Jewish theology, all of which are also among the major concerns of this study.

In analyzing these *midrashic* methods, this work attempts to chart the interface between the rabbinic view of revelation and rabbinic *midrash*. I posit that because the *tannaim* connected the issue of revelation and canonicity primarily to the text of the Pentateuch, that text was almost the exclusive source for their *halakhic midrash*. Similarly, I hold that because the early *amoraim* extended equal canonical authority to the entire *TaNakh*, they applied *halakhic midrash* to the entire scriptural canon. Finally, because the late *amoraim* and *Babylonian Talmud's* redactors viewed rabbinic corpora

as divine revelation, they applied *midrashic* methods *mishnayyot* and *baraitot* as well. Since, however, their tannaitic and amoraic forbears' legacy was for them equivalent to Sinaitic *Torah*, their interpretations no longer extended the borders of *halakhah* but only maintained them.

As Martin Jaffee has proposed, the idea of Oral *Torah* was hardly existent in the tannaitic period, but it grew into a more defined ideology because of the requirement in amoraic rabbinic circles that a student study under a teacher in order to become a recognized *Torah* scholar. I would now add to this view that by the end of the period of the formation of the *Babylonian Talmud*, Oral *Torah* came to mean the entire legacy of those Rabbis whose views tradition had preserved. This rabbinic legacy, along with Scripture, was deemed to have been revealed by God and therefore to be canonical and, ironically enough given the later rabbinic emphasis on Oral *Torah*, "scriptural." ■



### Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism

Dvora E. Weisberg, University Press of New England, 2008

In this study, Weisberg uses levirate marriage (an institution that involves the union of a man and the widow of his childless brother) as described in biblical law and explicated in

rabbinic Judaism as a lens to examine the status of women and attitudes toward marriage, sexuality, and reproduction in early Jewish society. With her discussion rooted in rabbinic sources and commentary, Weisberg explores kinship structure and descent, the relationship between a family unit created through levirate marriage and the extended family, and the roles of individuals within the family. She also considers the position of women, asking whether it is through marriage or the bearing of children that a woman becomes part of her husband's family, and to what degree a married woman remains part of her natal family. She argues that rabbinic responses to levirate suggest that a family is an evolving entity, one that can preserve itself through realignment and redefinition.

To understand the constantly changing nature of families, just flip through a photo album. Begin by opening the album to a wedding picture. Captured on the page is a newly married couple, surrounded by parents and siblings. Before the wedding, the parents of the couple, together with their respective children, constituted two separate families. Now, those family units have been altered; each, according to our understanding, has gained a member. Moreover, the two original families' relationship to each other has been transformed; once unrelated, they are now each other's "in-laws."

If we turn the pages forward to the couple's twentieth anniversary, we will see more changes. The couple now has children. Brothers and sisters have married and may also have children. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles who were present at the wedding have died. Young relatives of the couple have grown up.

It is not uncommon today to hear people lament changes in the family. Families, they claim, are not as close as they used to be. Families are also seen as increasingly unstable, owing to rising rates of divorce and remarriage. In addition, definitions of family are being challenged by an increase in same-sex couples, blended families, open adoption, and couples living together for extended periods of time without marrying. But as our photo album demonstrates, the family is by its very nature a constantly changing entity. Individual families change, swelled by marriage,

birth, and adoption, and made smaller by divorce and death. A society's definition of family can also change, reflecting patterns of settlement, understanding of marriage, and other factors.

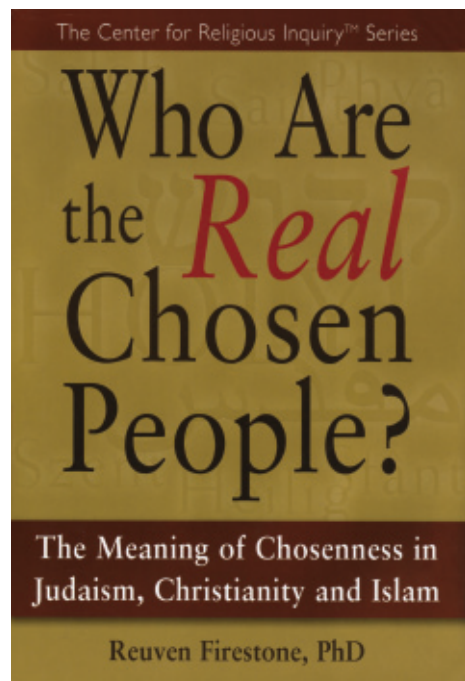
This book explores how the sages who wrote the foundation documents of rabbinic Judaism understood kinship and family. I will argue that while rabbinic literature constructs kinship broadly, asserting that family ties may be created through both blood and marriage, through both father and mother, the primary family unit discussed in rabbinic literature is the nuclear family, comprising a husband and wife and their children. This family is defined by the obligations the individuals in it have to each other, in particular the obligations between husband and wife, and between father and children. This focus on the nuclear family prioritizes an adult man and woman's obligations to their "new" family, the family created by their marriage, over those to their families of origin. Those earlier bonds are not dissolved – a woman remains part of her family of origin (she may inherit from her parents and other relatives, she is required to mourn for her parents and siblings, she is still obligated to honor her parents), as does a man. In fact, the bonds are extended; each spouse becomes "kin" to his or her in-laws, assuming obligations with regard to mourning, incest prohibitions, and testimony. However, the focus of family law is the nuclear family, and it is the obligations of the husband and wife to each other that take center stage in shaping their relationship with other family members.

Furthermore, this focus on the nuclear family over the extended family or clan is accompanied by an emphasis on the self over the extended group. The decisions an individual makes about taking on family

obligations, specifically obligations to spouse and children, are seen in rabbinic literature as personal decisions rather than decisions made by or for the sake of the extended family. The early rabbis regard marriage and procreation as religious obligations, and these obligations fall on every individual (or, more precisely, on every male Jew). While rabbinic law does assign individuals specific rights and responsibilities in connection to relatives beyond the nuclear family, the individual remains the focus of religious law. When individuals are considered members of a group, that group is more likely to reflect marital status, physical disabilities, or priestly status (to name a few) than kinship ties. Individuals are labeled divorcees, priests, or deaf-mutes rather than members of a kindred. An individual man or woman may be part of many groups from the perspective of the law, but he or she will not necessarily have obligations to other members of that group.

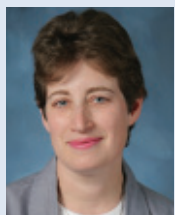
This work uses as its primary lens rabbinic discussions of levirate, an institution that involves the union of a man and the widow of his childless brother. Under normal circumstances, a marriage marks the beginning of a new family unit and/or the expansion or blending of existing families. Levirate, on the other hand, comes into play when a family experiences the loss of a member. As such, it offers an opportunity to study the family at a moment of breakdown and restructuring. And, I will argue, it allows us to consider one response to the collapse of a family, namely, an attempt to mend that which has been broken, reconstituting one part of a family by rearranging its members and realigning their relationship to each other. However, as we shall see, the rabbis' unique construct of levirate results in that institution's

creating an entirely new family rather than reforming the one broken by the husband's death. This rabbinic understanding of levirate supports my claim that the central family unit in rabbinic Judaism is the nuclear family and that an individual man or woman's primary obligations are to an existing spouse rather than to the extended family, as represented here by a deceased spouse or sibling. ■



**Who are the Real Chosen People?**  
**The Meaning of Chosenness in**  
**Judaism, Christianity and Islam**  
 Reuven Firestone, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2009

Religious people who define themselves as monotheists have often advanced the idea that their relationship with God is unique and superior to all others. Theirs supersedes those who came before, and is superior to those who have followed. This phenomenon tends to be expressed in terms not only of supersessionism, but also "chosenness," or "election." Who is most beloved by God? What expression of the divine will is the most perfect? Which relationship reflects God's ultimate demands or desire? In this fascinating examination of the religious phe-



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