

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.

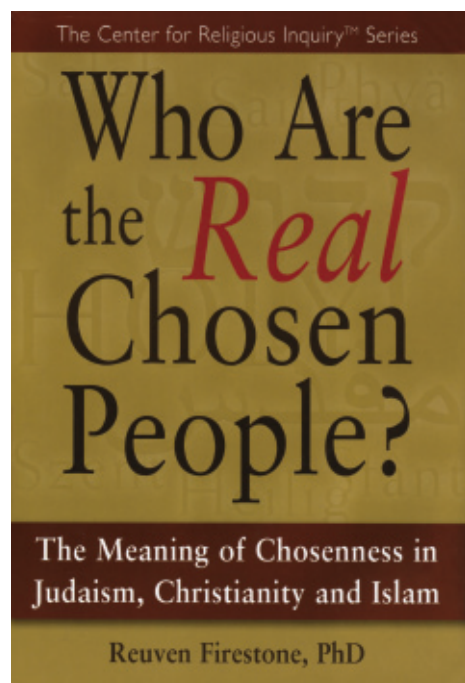
This book explores how the sages who wrote the foundation documents of rabbinic Judaism understood kinship and family. I will argue that while rabbinic literature constructs kinship broadly, asserting that family ties may be created through both blood and marriage, through both father and mother, the 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.

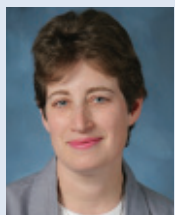
This work uses as its primary lens rabbinic discussions of levirate, an institution that involves the union of a man and the widow of his childless brother. Under normal circumstances, a marriage marks the beginning of a new family unit and/or the expansion or blending of existing families. Levirate, 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-



Dr. Dvora E. Weisberg

is Director of the School of Rabbinical Studies at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, where she also serves as Associate Professor of Rabbinic Literature and Director of the Lainer Beit Midrash. Her scholarly interests include gender issues in rabbinic texts, Rabbis' daughters in the Talmud, women and ritual observance, and Levirate marriage in ancient Judaism, the subject of her new book, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism*.

nomenon of chosenness, Reuven Firestone explores the idea of covenant, and the expressions of supersessionism as articulated through the scriptures of the three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He explores how and why the ongoing competition and friction between these religions came about, and offers thoughts about how to overcome it.

Choosing is something we do every day, from our choice of what to wear in the morning to our decision at the end of the day to turn out the light rather than read that next chapter. Choosing is an ordinary act. We choose which seat we prefer on the bus, which route to take to work, which pen to use to write this paragraph. To choose is to select something freely and after consideration. When a person chooses, that person shows a preference for one thing over something else.

Choosing is also limiting. It is an act of identifying, of distinguishing, of separating. Although it is possible to choose “a few” rather than one, it is understood generally as singling out. The act of choosing immediately establishes a hierarchy. What is chosen is somehow different than the others. Usually, that difference represents a higher location on the ladder. It can also mean choosing a loser, of course, but that would be unintentional; when you make a choice, you hope you are choosing a winner. Being chosen, therefore, would appear to be a special and positive status that places the chosen over and above the non-chosen.

If being chosen is generally a good thing, consider being chosen by God. Jews,

Christians, and Muslims – all three families of monotheistic religions – claim in one way or another to be God’s chosen community. Christian theologians have sometimes referred to God’s choosing for special favor as “election.” Whether called chosenness or election, the special nature of that divinely authorized status – its presumed superiority – has been glorified by religious civilizations when in positions of imperial power, and it has sustained religious communities suffering persecution. It has also made believers uncomfortable at times, especially in places where democracy, equality, and freedom are considered defining categories...

In his 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Noah Webster used biblical language to support most of his definitions. For his definition of *choose*, he includes, “To elect for eternal happiness; to predestinate to life.” He cites Matthew 22:14, “Many are called but few chosen,” and Mark 13:20, “For his elect’s sake, whom he hath chosen.” This is a big jump from choosing between your beige or navy slacks...

Those of us who live deeply within one of the three families of monotheism tend to accept the assumption of chosenness that is articulated within it at one level or another. It is good to believe that we live according to the will of God, and there is certainly nothing wrong about believing that we will receive divine reward for our religious activities or beliefs. For many of us, these beliefs represent deep and abiding aspects of who we are and what our purpose in life is. If we lived entirely

within our religious communities and with no interaction with people of other faith traditions, we would most likely not give the notion of being chosen a second thought. But we live in a multireligious world and bump up against people and situations that sometimes challenge our religious assumptions. This is especially true when we hear believers in different faith traditions articulating the deep and abiding belief that *they* belong to God’s chosen. That would imply that we do not. Can more than one be chosen? What about those of other faiths who seem so certain? Can a religious tradition that expects or requires different beliefs or behaviors than our own *also* represent God’s will as surely as our own?

Unless we cut ourselves off entirely from interacting with anyone outside our religious communities, we cannot avoid this kind of cognitive dissonance. Knowing something about how and why the notion of chosenness has become so important in the monotheistic traditions can be useful because it can help us navigate between our own beliefs and those of others, and it can help us make sense of our own unique place in a complex world.

At some deep level there is a lot at stake in being chosen – or not being chosen. Webster’s definition shows that chosenness is associated with scripture, with happiness and even eternal life, and with a divine sense of order. It remains for us to try to understand how and why the concept of preference of one person or people over others became so important in religion.

We will embark on this quest by traveling through the histories of emergence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and the early interaction between the believers in these religious traditions. And we will examine the scriptures of each as well. ■

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Dr. Reuven Firestone

is Professor of Medieval Jewish and Islamic Studies at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles and is a Senior Fellow of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. He is co-director of the Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement, a joint project of HUC-JIR, USC, and the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Foundation. His publications include *Who Are the Real Chosen People? The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*; *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*; *Jews, Christians, Muslims in Dialogue: A Practical Handbook*, with Leonard Swidler and Khalid Duran; *Jews, Christians, Muslims in Dialogue: A Practical Handbook*, with Leonard Swidler and Khalid Duran; *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*; *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*; and *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*.