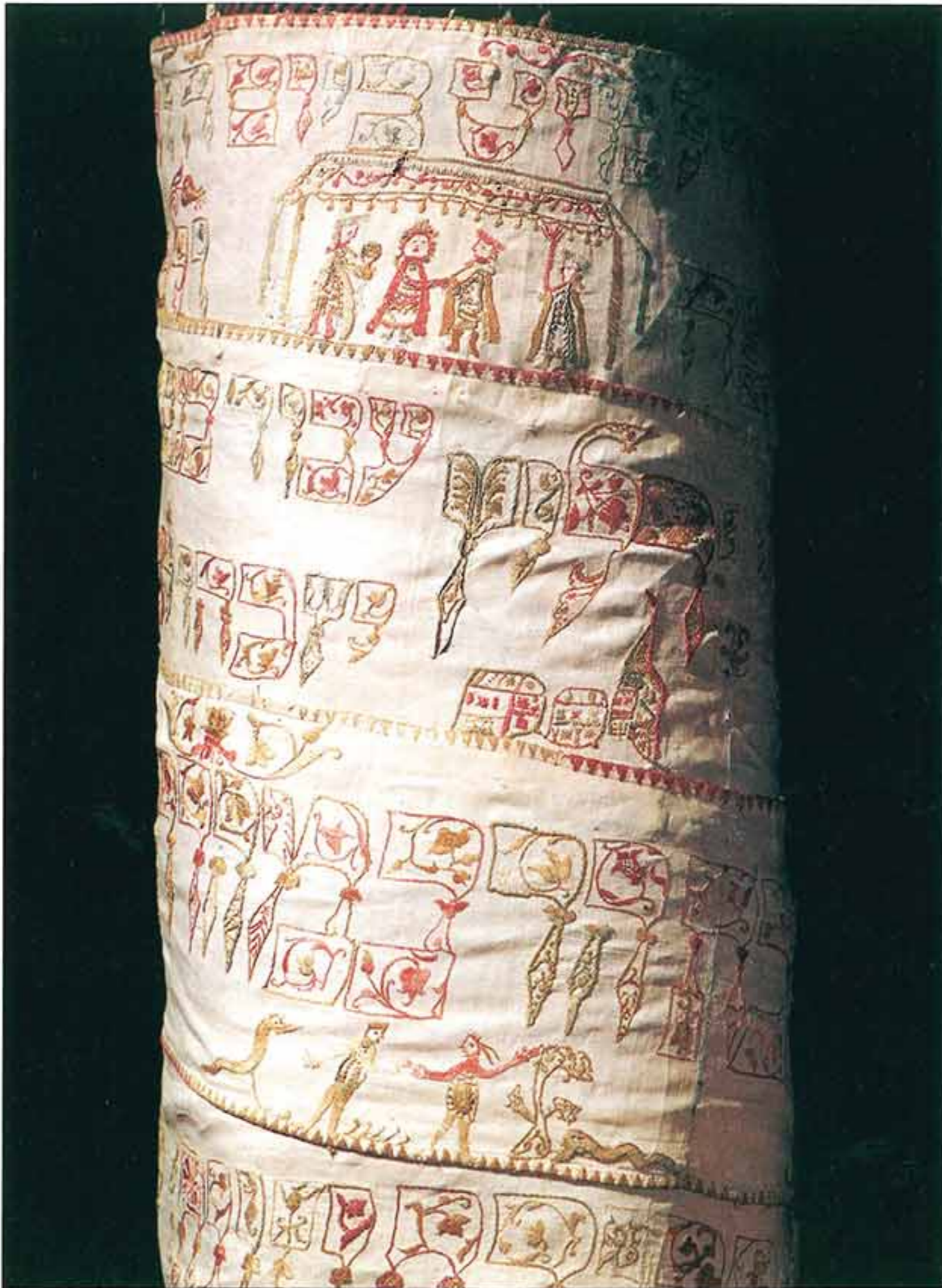




THE ILLUSTRATED WORLD'S RELIGIONS





CHAPTER VII

J U D A I S M

*Hear O Israel,
the Lord our God,
the Lord is One.*



*Above: The so-called "Stone of Moses" or Ka-Ka-Bal, on which
Moses is said to have demonstrated his magical skills. Left: A
covering for the Torah, 18th century.*



IT HAS BEEN ESTIMATED that one-third of Western civilization bears the marks of its Jewish ancestry. We feel its force in the names we give to our children (Abraham Lincoln), in our art (Michaelangelo's "David"), and our national life in sayings that feed our souls. ("Proclaim liberty throughout the land" as inscribed on the Liberty Bell). The real impact of the ancient Jews, however, lies in the extent to which Western civilization took over their perspective on the deepest questions life poses.

When, mindful of this impact, we go back to the land, the people, and the history that made this impact, we are in for a surprise. We might expect these to be as impressive as their influence, but they are not. Chronologically, the Hebrews were latecomers on the stage of history. When they finally settled down, the land they chose was equally unimpressive. One hundred and

fifty miles in length, about fifty miles in breadth, Canaan was a postage stamp of a country, about one-eighth the size of Illinois. Even Jewish history, when viewed from without, amounts to little. It is not dull, but by external standards it is very much like the histories of countless other little peoples. Compared with the histories of the great powers of the time, Jewish history is strictly minor league.

If the key to the achievement of the Jews lies neither in their antiquity nor in the proportions of their land and history, where does it lie? The lead that we shall follow is this: What lifted the Jews from obscurity to greatness was their passion for meaning.

Silver scroll containing the Book of Esther, from the Hebrew Museum in Prague.



MEANING IN GOD

IN THE BEGINNING GOD...." From beginning to end, the Jewish quest for meaning was rooted in their understanding of the Supreme Being. Whatever a people's philosophy, it must take account of the Other. There are two reasons for this. First, no human being is self-created, from which it follows that humankind has issued from something other than itself. Second, everyone at some point finds his or her power limited. Add therefore to the Other as that from which one has issued, a second meaning. At certain points it exceeds our control.

Faced with this ineluctable Other, people wonder if it is meaningful. Four characteristics could keep it from being so; if it were prosaic, chaotic, amoral, or hostile. The glory of the Hebrew search for meaning lies in its refusal to give in to any of these alternatives.

The Jews resisted the prosaic by personifying the Other. In this they were at one with their ancient contemporaries. The concept of the world as comprised mainly of lifeless matter is a late invention. The early world was alive and sentient, through and through.

Underlying the poetry of biblical descriptions of God lay the claim that ultimately Reality – the Other – is more like a person than like a thing. Of this claim two things are to be said. First, evidence against it is so lacking that as knowledgeable a philosopher-scientist as Alfred North Whitehead could embrace it in the twentieth century. Second, the claim is nobler than its alternative. The Jews were reaching out for the most exalted concept of the Other that they could conceive, and people had more depth and mystery than other analogical starting points.

Where the Hebrews differed from their neighbors was in focusing the personal traits of the Other in a single, nature-transcending will. For other Mediterranean peoples, each major power of nature was a distinct deity; whereas in the Bible, nature in its entirety was created by, and under the sovereignty of the Lord of all being.

Other gods are mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, but – being both derivative from Yahweh (wrongly rendered as Jehovah in early English translations) and mortal, they are not on his plane.

The significance of the monotheism the Jews arrived at precociously lies in the focus it affords life. If God is that to which one gives oneself completely, to have more than one God is to live a divided life. A consistent way that leads to human fulfillment calls for constancy – singleness – in the Other that supports it. That this singleness existed was the bedrock of Hebrew belief. "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*" (Deut 6:4).

There remains the question of whether the Other, now seen as personal and one, was either amoral or hostile. If it were either, meaning would again be compromised, for if this is not a moral universe, goodness cannot in the long run prevail. The odds against it are insuperable.

We come here to the supreme achievement of Jewish theology, which lay not in its monotheism but the character it ascribed to its single God. Two traits characterized the gods of the Jews' contemporaries. First, they tended to be amoral. Second, they had no concern for human beings. The Jews reversed both these points. While the gods of Olympus pursued beautiful women, the God of Sinai watched over widows and orphans. While Mesopotamia's Anu and Canaan's El remained aloof, Yahweh spoke the name of Abraham and lifted his people from anonymity.

Such, then, was the Hebrews' conception of the Other that confronts human beings. It was not prosaic, for at its center was a Being of awesome majesty. It was not chaotic, for it coalesced in a divine unity. It was neither amoral nor indifferent, for its goodness was "*from everlasting to everlasting*." There were solid grounds for the Jews' exultation as they exclaimed rhetorically, "*Who is like you among the gods, O Yahweh?*" "*What great nation has a God like the Lord?*"

MEANING IN HUMAN EXISTENCE

THE MOST CRUCIAL ELEMENT in a people's outlook is their self-image, and here too the Jews looked for meaning. The anthropological question interested them deeply, but not for theoretical reasons. They wanted to understand human nature so they would not miss its highest registers.

That the human self is limited they knew intimately. Compared with the majesty of the heavens, people are "dust." The powers of nature can crush them "like moths." Their earthly span is brief "as grass," and troubled "like a sigh" (Ps 8:4). There were times when the Jews wondered why God should give people a second thought.

The remarkable feature of their anthropology, though, was that without losing sight of human weakness they saw concomitantly its unspeakable grandeur. The word "unspeakable" is exact here, for the translators of the King James Version of the Bible refused to follow the Psalmist who positioned human beings only "a little lower than God" (Ps 8:5). That claim struck the translators as presumptuous, so they toned it down to read "a little lower than the angels." The one charge that has never been leveled against the Bible is that its characters are not completely human. Even its greatest heroes like David are presented in so unvarnished a fashion that the Book of Samuel has been called the most honest historical writing of the ancient world. Yet no amount of realism could dampen Jewish aspiration. The same creatures who on occasion deserve the epithets "maggot and worm" (Job 25:6) are also the beings whom God has "crowned with glory and honor" (Ps 8:6).

On the realistic side of this ledger we have cited physical weakness, but moral weakness weighed heavier

for the Jews. "I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5). It is altogether wrong to conclude from this verse that the Jews thought that human nature is depraved and that sex is evil. The verse does, however, contribute something of importance to Jewish anthropology. The word sin comes from a root meaning "to miss the mark," and this people repeatedly do. Their missteps, though, are not fore-ordained, for the Jews never questioned human freedom. People forge their destinies through freely chosen decisions. "I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life" (Deut 30:19).

Finally, it followed from the Jewish concept of their God as a loving God that people are God's beloved children. In one of the tenderest metaphors of the entire Bible, Hosea pictures God yearning over people as though they were toddling infants:

*It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
(Hos 11:3)*

What are the ingredients of the most creatively meaningful image of human existence that the mind can conceive? Remove human frailty, and the estimate lacks realism. Remove grandeur, and aspiration recedes. Remove sin, and sentimentality threatens. Remove freedom, and responsibility goes by the board. Remove, finally, divine love, and life becomes estranged. With all that has been discovered about human life in the intervening 2500 years, it is difficult to fault the Jewish assessment.



MEANING IN HISTORY

WHAT IS AT STAKE when we ask if there is meaning in history? Nothing less than our entire attitude toward the social order and collective life within it. If we decide that history is meaningless it follows that the social, political, and cultural contexts of life should not concern us. Our task would be to rise above them if possible, and weather them if not.

The Jewish estimate of history was the opposite of this attitude of indifference; they saw history as of towering significance. It was important, first, because they were convinced that the context in which life is lived affects that life in every conceivable way, positioning its problems, delineating its opportunities, and conditioning its outcomes. Second, if contexts are important, so is collective action; social action as we usually call it. There are times when the only way to change things is by working together – planning, organizing, and acting in concert. Third, history was important as a field of opportunity. Being governed by God, nothing within it happened accidentally. Yahweh's hand was at work in every event, fashioning it into lessons for those who have the wit to learn. Finally, history was important because the opportunities it offers are not on a par. All are important, but some – Abraham's call and the Exodus come to mind immediately – were decisive. History needed to be heeded, for lost opportunities would not return.

This last point – the uniqueness of events and decisiveness of some – was epitomized in the Hebrew notions (a) of God's direct intervention in history at certain critical points, and (b) of a chosen people as recipients of his unique commissions. Both are illustrated in the epic of Abraham. Noting history's deterioration, God was not inactive. He told Abraham to go to a new land

and found a new people. It was a watershed moment. Because Abraham answered Yahweh's call he became the first Hebrew, the first of a "chosen people."

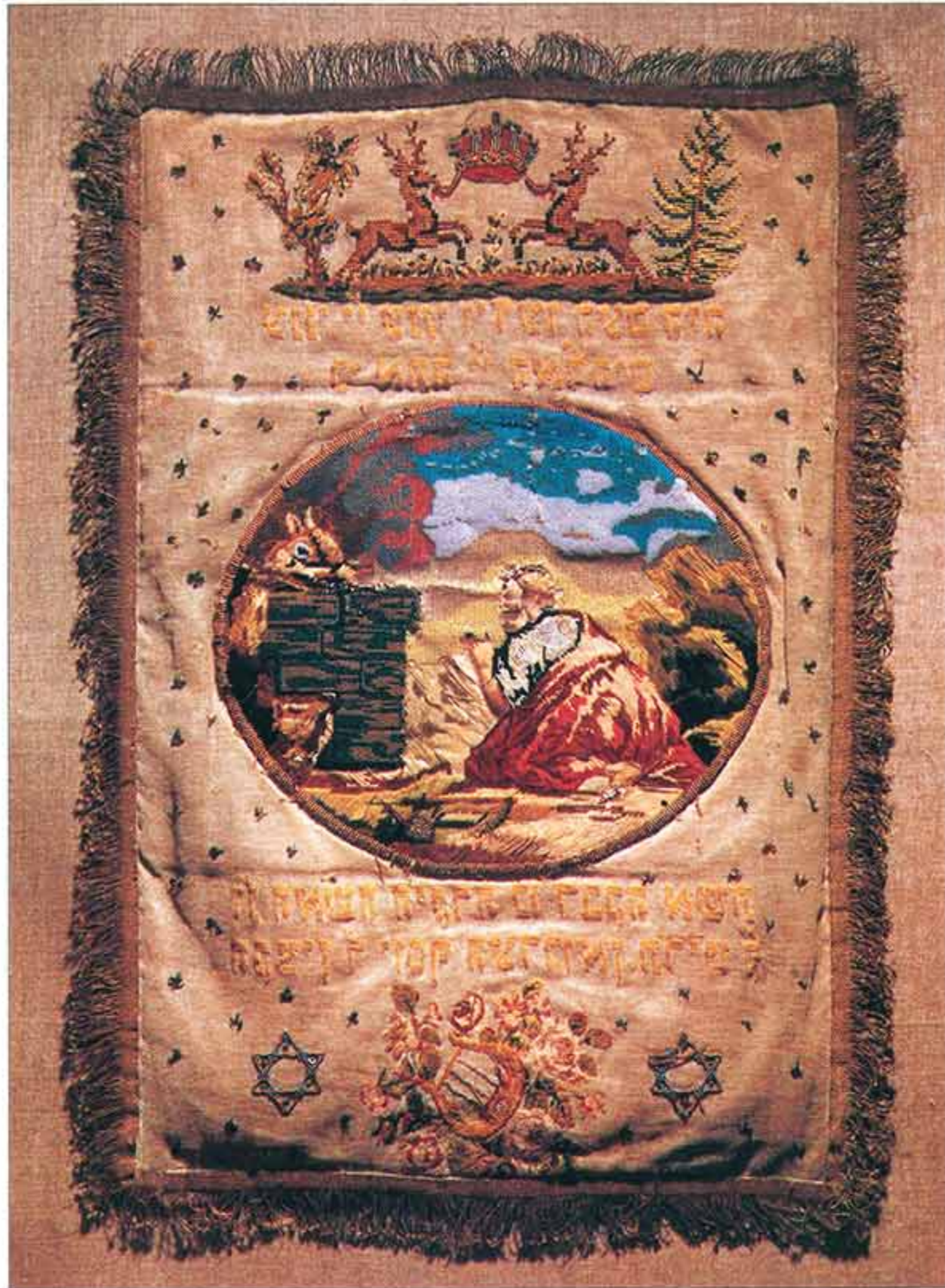
We shall return to this "chosen people" theme, but for the present we must ask what gave the Jews their insight into history's significance. We have noted the *kind* of meaning they found in history. What enabled them to see history as *embodying* this meaning?

For India, human destiny lies outside history altogether. Israel's neighbors, for their part, kept destiny within history, but in history as currently constituted, for they thought that the social order was as unalterable as the laws of nature. The Israelites' historical outlook differed from both these views because they had a different idea of God. God would not have created nature were it unimportant; at the same time, as nature's creator he could not be reduced to it. The consequence of distinguishing clearly between God and his handiwork was momentous, for it meant that the "ought" could not be assimilated to the "is." God's will transcended (and often differed from) what was happening in history.

By this double stroke of planting man solidly in nature – and in history as nature's human stratum – but not confining him to it (because God's will constitutes a different order from nature's claims), the Jews established history as both important and subject to review. For the Jews, history was always in tension between Yahweh's intentions and man's failure to cooperate with those intentions. As a consequence, Judaism laid the groundwork for the social conscience that has been a hallmark of Western civilization. When things are not as they should be, change is required. The prophets set the pattern. Protected by religious sanctions, the Hebrew prophets were a reforming political force which history has never surpassed, and perhaps never again equaled.



J U D A I S M



A cover for the Torah, from a 19th century Spanish synagogue.



MEANING IN JUSTICE

IT IS TO A REMARKABLE GROUP OF MEN whom we call the Prophets more than to any others that Western civilization owes its convictions (1) that individuals are responsible not only for their face-to-face dealings, but for the social structures of their society; and (2) that the future of any people depends in large part on the justice of its social order.

Etymologically, a prophet is someone who speaks for, or on the authority of, another. In the biblical period it was used to refer to a distinctive group of persons who spoke for God.

A review of the prophetic movement shows it not to have been a single phenomenon. Moses stands in a class by himself, but the prophetic movement passed through three stages in each of which Yahweh worked differently.

The first was the stage of the Prophetic Guilds. Here we do not encounter individual prophets, for prophecy was a field phenomenon; a form of collective, self-induced ecstasy. With the help of music and dancing, itinerant prophetic bands would work themselves into fever-pitches of possession. Its members would lose their self-consciousness in a collective sea of divine intoxication.

Ethics was of no concern at this stage; it was only the ecstatic states of consciousness that came over these prophets that made them assume (along with the people among whom they moved) that they were divinely inspired. Ethics arrived with the second stage of the prophetic movement, that of the Individual Pre-Writing Prophets. At this stage the prophetic guilds launched individuals like rockets from their midst – Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, and others – but as prophecy was still in its pre-writing stage, no books are attributed to them. They stayed in touch with their support groups while being

less dependent upon them. Divine visitations could come to them while they were alone, and Yahweh voiced his concerns through them.

The story of Naboth shows how prominently justice figured in those concerns. Because Naboth refused to turn over his family vineyard to King Ahab he was framed on false charges of blasphemy and stoned; blasphemy being a capital crime, his property would then revert to the throne. When news of the incident reached Elijah, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, *“Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel. Say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord. You have killed and taken possession. In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.’”*

The story carries revolutionary significance for human history, for it is the story of how someone without official position took the side of a wronged man and denounced a king to his face on grounds of injustice. One searches history in vain for its parallel. Elijah was not a priest. He had no formal authority for the terrible judgment he delivered. The normal pattern of the day would have called for him to be struck down by bodyguards on the spot. But the fact that he was “speaking for” an authority not his own was so transparent that the king accepted his verdict as divinely decreed.

The third and climactic phase of the prophetic movement arrived with the great Writing Prophets: Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and others. They continued to be ecstatics, and the ethical note that the Pre-Writing Prophets struck was likewise retained, but with an important addition. Whereas Elijah registered God’s displeasure over an individual act – King Ahab’s – the Writing Prophets discerned Yahweh’s disapproval of injustices that were embedded in the social fabric.



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The Writing Prophets found themselves in a time that was shot through with inequities, special privilege, and injustices of the most flagrant sort. These threatened the internal stability of the Jewish nation, but the Writing Prophets saw them as threatening the international standing of the Jews as well. Israel's corruption, they heard Yahweh telling them, would result in attack by Assyria, Egypt, Syria or Phoenicia, its mighty neighbors.

We could easily miss the originality of the prophetic perception here, so it will be well to state it explicitly. The standard view of the time saw international relations as governed by might — if not the might of the states themselves, then the might of the gods that backed them. For the Jews, though, gods and nations were pieces on Yahweh's game board. Victory would go to the nation that conformed to God's unthwartable intent, which was to see that "*justice rolled down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.*" Here again we find the Jews opting for the position that induced the most creative response. If the fate of peoples turns solely on power politics, there is little a small nation can do. But where others saw only power plays, the prophets heard God's warning to shape up or suffer the consequences. Clean up your national act or be destroyed.

In abstract terms the Prophetic Principle comes to this: The prerequisite of political stability is social justice, for it is in the nature of things that injustice will not endure. Stated theologically, the point reads: God has high standards. Divinity will not put up forever with exploitation, corruption, and mediocrity.

The prophets of Israel and Judah are one of the most amazing groups of individuals in all history. In the midst of the moral desert in which they found themselves, they spoke words the world has never been able to forget. They came from all classes. Some were sophisticated, others as plain and natural as the hillsides where they lived. Yet one thing was common to them all: the conviction that every human being, simply by virtue of his or her humanity, is a child of God and therefore in possession of rights that even kings must respect. The prophets lived in a vaster world than their compatriots, a world wherein kings seem small and the power of the mighty is as nothing compared with purity, justice, and mercy. So it is, that wherever men and women have gone to history for encouragement and inspiration in the age-long struggle for justice, they have found it most pointedly in the proclamations of the prophets.

Left: "*The Prophet Jeremiah*," by Marc Chagall. The prophets of Israel and Judah brought a passion for social justice into a world where only might had ruled before.



MEANING IN SUFFERING

FROM THE EIGHTH TO THE SIXTH CENTURIES B.C. during which Israel and Judah tottered before the aggressive power of Syria, Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon, the prophets found meaning in their predicament by seeing God as serious in demanding that the Jews be just. *"Because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, your strongholds shall be plundered"* (Amos). To see things this way required moral energy, for it would have been easier to give up in defeat or assume that God would stage a last minute rescue. The climax, though, is yet to come. Defeat was not averted. In 721 B.C. Assyria wiped the Northern Kingdom from the map forever; and in 586 Judah, the Southern Kingdom, was likewise conquered, though her leaders survived and were taken captive to Babylonia. If ever there was a time when meaning seemed to be exhausted, this was it. The Jews had had their chance and had bungled it. Surely now the prophets might be expected to cap their people's downfall with a self-serving "I told you so." This retort, though, was not in the prophets' vocabulary. The most staggering fact in the Jewish quest for meaning is the way in which, when meaning had been exhausted at the deepest strata of experience they had thus far plumbed, the prophets dug deeper to uncover an entirely new vein. Not to have done so would have amounted to accepting the prevailing view that the victors' god was stronger than the god of the defeated, a logic that would have ended the bib-

lical faith and the Jewish people along with it.

The rejection of that logic rescued the Jewish future. A prophet who wrote in sixth century Babylonia where his people were captives argued that Yahweh had not been worsted by the Babylonian god Marduk; history was still Yahweh's province. This meant that there must have been a point in Israel's defeat, and the challenge was again to see it. The point that Second Isaiah saw was not this time punishment. The Israelites needed to *learn* something from their defeat, but their experience would also be *redemptive* for the world.



On the learning side, there are lessons and insights that suffering illumines as nothing else can. In this case the experience of defeat and exile was teaching the Israelites the true worth of freedom which they had taken too lightly. Lines have come down to us that disclose the spiritual agony of the Israelites as displaced persons — how heavily they felt

the yoke of captivity, how fervently they longed for their homeland. *"By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion."* But what the Jews might themselves learn from their captivity was not the only meaning of their ordeal. God was at the same time using them to introduce into history insights that all peoples need, but to which they are blinded by complacency. Specifically, Yahweh was burning into the Jews

Above: Detail of a silver platter showing the oppression of the Jews in Egypt. Right: Star of David painted in the surrealist manner, marked by symbols central to the Jewish faith.



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through their suffering a passion for freedom and justice that would spread to all humankind.

*I have given you as a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

(Isa 42:6-7)

Stated abstractly, the deepest meaning the Jews found in their Exile was that of vicarious suffering: meaning that enters the lives of those that are willing to endure pain that others might be spared it.

An Ethiopian Jew reads the scriptures. In Judaism, holiness and history are inseparable.



MEANING IN MESSIANISM

THOUGH THE JEWS were able to find their suffering meaningful, meaning climaxed for them in Messianism.

We can work our way into this concept by way of a striking fact. Historical progress is a Western idea — other peoples have now assimilated it, but it originated in the West. There is an explanation for this. The outlooks of other civilizations were forged by ruling classes who tend to be satisfied with the way things are, whereas during most of their formative period the Jews were either oppressed or displaced. They were underdogs, and underdogs have only one direction to look: up. This upward tilt of Jewish hopes and imaginings impregnated the Western mind. A better tomorrow is possible, if not assured.

Hope has more purchase on the human heart when it is concretized, so the Jews personified their hope in the figure of a coming Messiah, or Chosen One. During the Babylonian Exile they looked to this Messiah to effect the “ingathering of the exiles” to their native homeland. After the second destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the Messiah was expected to reverse the diaspora that ensued.

Thereafter the concept grew complex. Always fired by hope, the Messianic idea came to have two sides: a politico-national side (which foresaw the triumph of the Jews over their enemies and their elevation to a position of importance in world affairs), and a spiritual-universal side (in which their political triumph would be attended by a moral advance of universal proportions). Different scenarios were scripted in which hope fluctuated between these two versions.

A second difference concerned the way the Messianic age would arrive. Some expected an actual Messiah,

while others foresaw God dispensing with a human agent and intervening directly to institute an age of universal harmony.

A third tension reflected the restorative and utopian impulses in Judaism. Restorative Messianism looked for the re-creation of past conditions, typically the Davidic monarchy as idealized. But Messianism also accommodated Judaism’s forward looking impulse by envisioning the Messianic Age as a state of things that never before existed.

Finally, Messianists differed concerning whether the new order would be continuous with previous history or would shake the world to its foundations and replace it (in the End of Days) with an aeon that was supernaturally different in kind. As the power of the Jews dwindled in the face of a rising Europe, apocalypticism overtook hopes for military victory and they banked increasingly on a miraculous redemption. The Messianic Age would break in at any moment, abruptly and cataclysmically.

In all four of these polarities the alternatives were deeply intertwined while being contradictory in nature. The Messianic idea crystallized (and retained its vitality) out of the tensions created by its ingredient opposites. The vitality of the idea proved to be infectious. Christianity reshaped it into the Second Coming of Christ; seventeenth century Europe into the idea of historical progress; and Marx into his dream of a coming classless society.

But whether we read the Messianic idea in its Jewish, its Christian, its secular, or its heretical version, the underlying theme is the same. There’s going to be a great day!



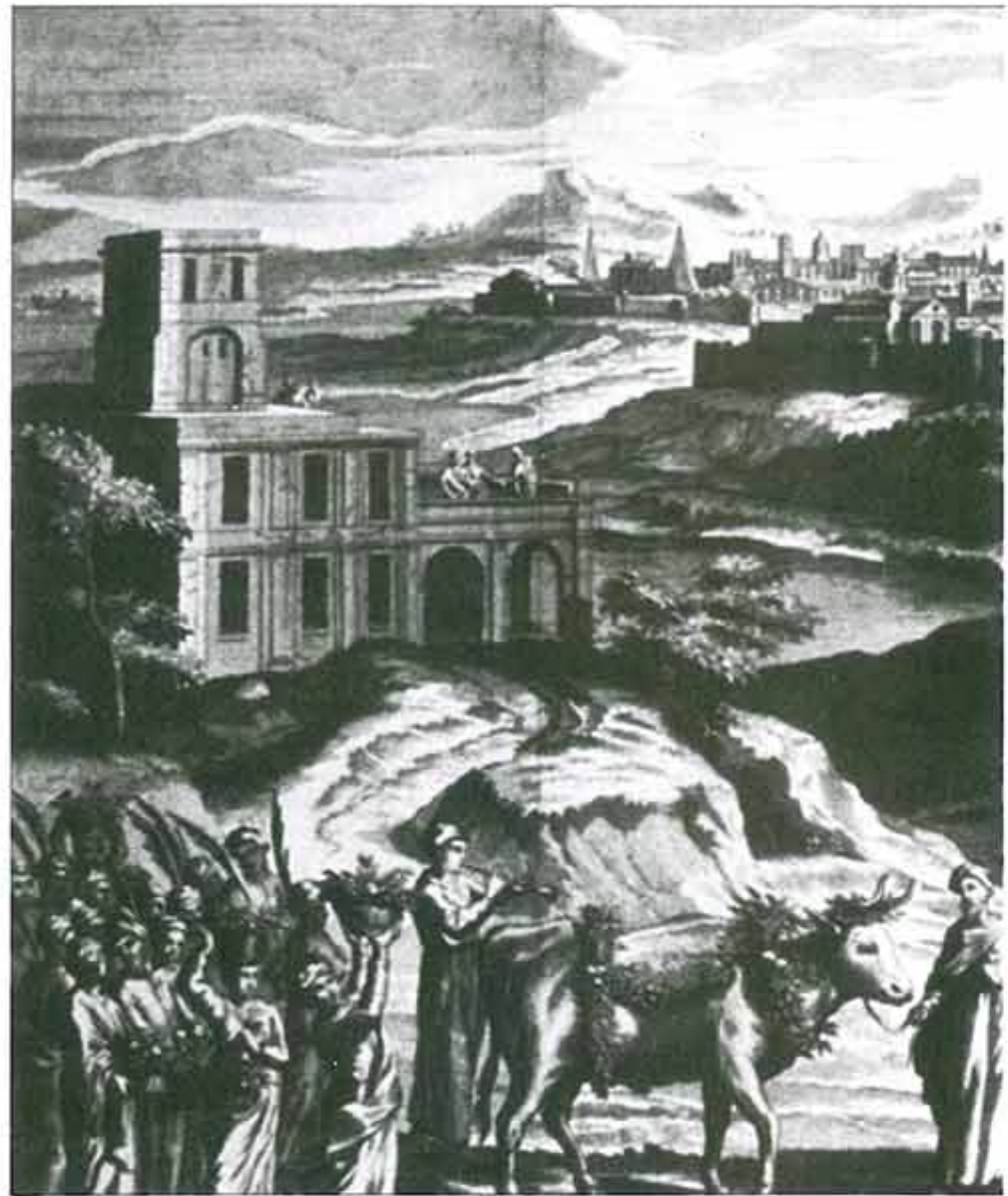
REVELATION

WE HAVE FOLLOWED THE JEWS in their interpretation of the major areas of human experience and found them arriving at a profounder grasp of meaning than any of their Mediterranean neighbors. This raises the question: What produced this achievement? The Jews answer with a disclaimer: they were not its source. The truths were revealed to them.

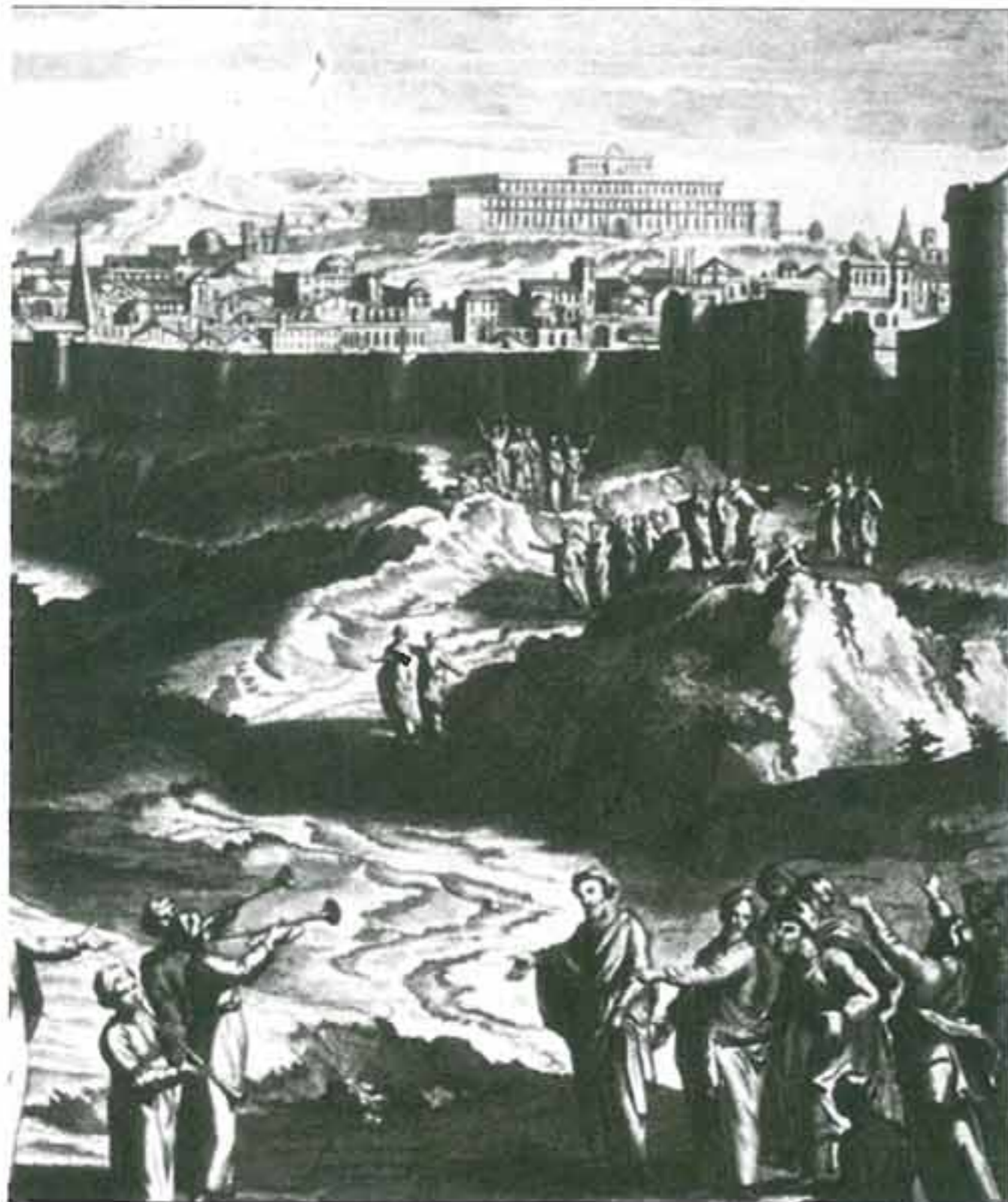
Revelation means disclosure; as a theological concept, it means divine disclosure. The Jews recorded Yahweh's disclosures to them in a book, the Torah, and commentaries on it. This, though, puts the cart before the horse, for the scriptures chronicle actions, and it was through those actions that God initially revealed himself. The most decisive of these actions was the Exodus, an incredible event in which God liberated an unorganized, enslaved people from the mightiest power of the age. This event not only launched the Israelites as a nation. It was, in addition, the first clear act by which Yahweh's character was disclosed to them.

That God was a direct party to their escape from Pharaoh, the Jews did not doubt. By every known sociological law, they should never have become a people, let alone survived. Yet here was the fact: A tiny, loosely-related group of people who had no real collective identity and were in servitude to the great power of the day had succeeded in making their getaway, eluding the chariots of their pursuers. It seemed impossible to the Jews that their liberation was their own doing. It was a miracle. *"I am the Eternal your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt"* (Ex 20:2).

Vividly cognizant of God's saving power in the Exodus, the Jews proceeded to read their earlier history in the light of this divine intervention. As their libera-



tion had obviously been engineered by God, what of the sequence that led up to it? The Jews saw God's initiative at work in every step of their journey. It was no vagabond impulse that prompted Abraham to leave his home in Ur and assume the long, uncharted trek toward Canaan. Yahweh had called him to father a people of destiny. So it had been throughout. Isaac and Jacob had been providentially protected, and Joseph exalted in Egypt, for the express purpose of preserving God's people from famine. From the perspective of the Exodus everything fell into place. From the beginning God had been leading, protecting, and shaping his people for the decisive Exodus event that made of the Israelites a nation.



And what was the nature of the God that the Exile disclosed? First, Yahweh was powerful – able to outdo the mightiest power of the time and whatever gods might be backing it. But equally, a God of goodness and love. Though this might be less obvious to outsiders, it was overwhelmingly evident to the Jews who were its direct recipients. Repeatedly their gratitude burst forth in song: “Happy are you, O Israel. Who is like you – a people saved by Yahweh” (Deut. 33:29). Had they themselves done

The offering of the first fruits of the harvest being carried to the Temple of Jerusalem.

anything to deserve this miraculous release? Not as far as they could see. Freedom had come to them as an act of sheer, gratuitous grace, a clear instance of Yahweh’s unanticipated and astonishing love for them.

Besides God’s power and love, the Exodus disclosed a God who was intensely concerned with human affairs. Whereas the surrounding gods were primarily nature deities, the Israelites’ God had come to them not through sun or storm or fertility but in an historical event. That realization changed Israel’s agenda forever. No longer would they be party to cajoling the forces of nature. They would attend to Yahweh’s will and try to obey it. Given these three basic disclosures of the Exodus – of God’s power, goodness, and concern for history – the Jews’ other insights into God’s nature followed readily. From his goodness it followed that he would want people to be good as well; hence Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were established as the Exodus’s immediate corollary. The prophets’ demand for justice extended God’s requirements for virtue to the social sphere – institutional structures, too, are accountable. Finally, suffering must carry significance because it was unthinkable that a God who had miraculously saved his people would abandon them completely.

We entered this chapter via the Jewish passion for meaning, but as our understanding of the religion deepens this needs to be recast. Meaning was secured, but not (from the Jewish perspective) because they sought it exceptionally. It was revealed to them. But why was it revealed to the Jews? Their own answer has been: because we were chosen. This raises a problem. The Jews had begun by thinking of Yahweh as exclusively their God, but in time they came to see him as the God of all peoples. Why, then, did he direct his revelation to them, and seemingly them only?



THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

THE JEWISH DOCTRINE of their election begins in a conventional mode – almost all peoples consider themselves special – but it soon surprises us. For unlike other peoples, the Jews singled themselves out for responsibilities rather than privileges. They were chosen to serve, and to suffer the trials that service would often exact. By requiring that they “do and obey all that the Lord hath spoken,” their election imposed on them a far more demanding morality than was exacted of their peers. Nor was this all. We have seen that Second Isaiah’s doctrine of vicarious suffering meant that the Jews were elected to shoulder a suffering that would otherwise have had to be distributed more widely. Still, the problem is not resolved. For grant that God called the Jews to heroic ordeal, not sinecure; the fact that they were singled out for a special role in the redemption of the world still looks like favoritism.

This rankles. Flying as it does in the face of democratic sentiments, it has provoked a special theological phrase to accommodate it: “the scandal of particularity.” It is the doctrine that God’s doings can focus like a burning glass on particular times, places, and peoples – in the interest, to be sure, of intentions that embrace human beings universally. We shall not be able to validate this

doctrine, but we can understand what led the Jews to accept it, and what it did for them.

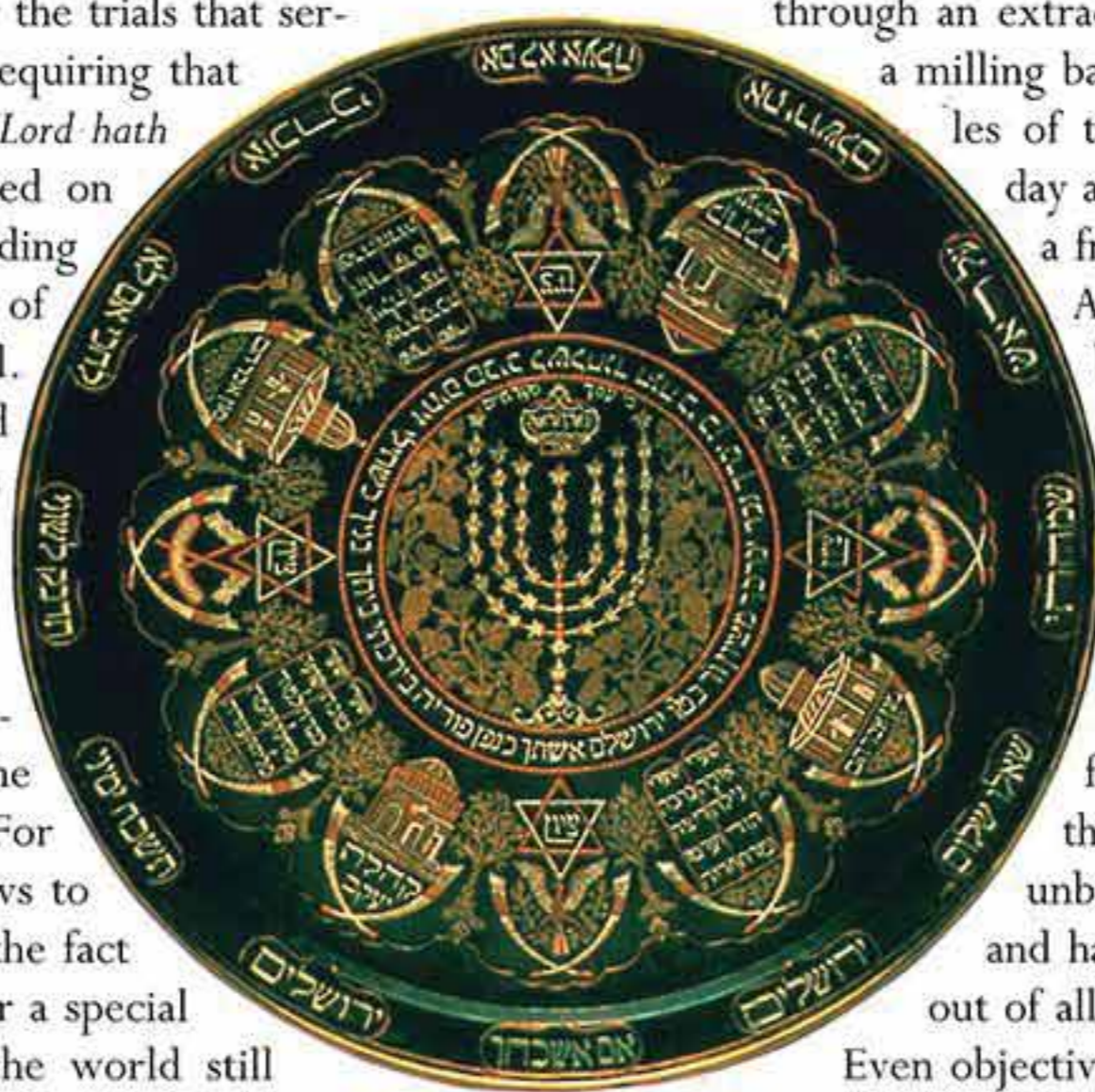
Our search for what led the Jews to believe that they were chosen will carry us past an obvious possibility – national arrogance – to the facts of their history that have already been rehearsed. Israel came into being as a nation

through an extraordinary occurrence in which a milling band of slaves broke the shackles of the tyrannical power of their day and were lifted to the status of a free and self-respecting people.

Almost immediately this brought an understanding of God that was immeasurably above that of their neighbors, and standards of morality and justice that still challenge the world. Through the three thousand years that have followed they have continued their existence in the face of unbelievable odds and adversity, and have contributed to civilization out of all proportion to their numbers.

Even objective assessments must grant that the Jews have been unique. Their rise as much as their continuance, historians generally agree, is rationally inexplicable.

If that is the case, there are two possibilities. Either the credit belongs to the Jews themselves, or it belongs to God. Given this alternative, the Jews instinctively turned the credit Godward. One of the striking features of this people has been their persistent refusal to see any-





thing innately special about themselves as human beings. So the specialness of the Jewish experience must have derived from God. Chosenness, a concept that appears at first to be arrogant, turns out to be the humblest interpretation the Jews could give to the facts of their origin, survival, and exceptional contributions to civilization.

It is possible, of course, to resent particularism even here, but one must ask whether in doing so we would not be resenting the kind of world we have. For like it or not, this is a world of particulars, and human beings are saddled with them. Nothing registers on human attention until it obtrudes from its background. What follows from this fact for theology? God probably blesses us as much through the air we breathe as through other gifts, but if piety had had to wait for people to infer God's goodness from the availability of oxygen, it would have been long in coming.

The same holds for history. If relief from oppression were routine, the Jews would have taken their liberation for granted. Chalk it up to human obtuseness – the fact remains that divine favors could envelop humanity as the sea envelops fish; were they automatic, people would consider them routine. Perhaps it was only by acting exceptionally – uniquely – that Yahweh could get humanity's attention.

Today Jewish opinion is divided on the doctrine of the election. Some Jews believe that it has outgrown whatever usefulness or objective validity it may have had in Biblical times. Other Jews believe that until the world's redemption is complete, God continues to need people who are set apart; peculiar in the sense of being God's task force in history.



Opposite: Traditional wedding plate. This page, top: Celebrants at a Bar Mitzvah, initiation ceremony for young men in the Jewish faith. Bottom: The western wall of the Temple of Jerusalem.