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INTRODUCTION

What Are Jews For?

HISTORY AND THE PURPOSE QUESTION

We are not obliged to justify our existence by working for the world. Nobody, no other nation, has ever been put under such an obligation, and some of us see it as scandalous that unlike everyone else, we have to justify being Jews by serving some further purpose. No one asks a Frenchman why he is there. Everyone asks a Jew why he is there; no one would be content with the statement, I am just a Jew. Yet the Jew has every right to be just a Jew and to contribute to what he is by being just what he is. We are always asked to be something exceptional, something supreme, something ultimate. Maybe that very expectation will come to fruition one day, and perhaps then even the enigma of being the chosen people, which is not so easily discarded, will be resolved.¹

— GERSHOM SCHOLEM (1973)

WHAT ARE JEWS FOR? The question is at first sight absurd and impertinent, if not worse. Jews, like anybody else, live for the most part muddled and meandering lives, without any notably clear sense of purpose, either as individuals or as a collective. To single out any group of people as bearers of a designated role or responsibility in the world seems invidious: why them? To single out Jews feels particularly awkward. The perception of Jews as somehow irreducibly different from others has been a feature of various familiar tropes of anti-semitism. Is it not high time, then, for this question to be laid unambiguously to rest? Should we not today clearly insist that Jews, of all people, have no need to justify their existence, and should not in any sense be understood as performing some historical function for the rest of humanity?

And yet: this question cannot be easily evaded. The idea that Jews are endowed with a particular historical purpose occupies a central position both in the Jewish tradition itself and in the Christian and post-Christian frameworks that have structured Western thinking about the place of the Jews as a unique minority in the wider world. The question of Jewish purpose follows inescapably from Jewish chosenness, which lies at the heart of Judaism. God chose the Jews: but why, on what terms, and to what end? The biblical ‘election of Israel’—the setting apart of the Jews by God, as recipients of divine protection, and bearers of special holiness—gives rise to an array of further questions. What does it mean for a universal God to single out a particular people? Where does this leave those other peoples in the eyes of God, and in relationship to Jews? Can the election of Israel be rescinded, either for all Jews, or for individuals among them? What happens if individual Jews reject their covenant with God (whatever precisely that means)? For what specific role in the world, and in the messianic denouement of human history, did God select the Jews? And why, of all people, them? Cogitating on these questions, the early sages and rabbis developed various theological avenues of reflection, elaborating on the Jews’ unique intimacy with God, and their special place in the divine plan for the world. The church fathers, starting from the same biblical texts—particularly the books of Exodus and Isaiah—originated the tradition of Christian theological thinking on the election and historical purpose of the Jews, which both overlaps with Jewish perspectives and has been enduringly central to the tension between the two religions.

In the ancient Near East it was, it seems, unexceptional to believe that one’s own God was in some sense the only true God, and was certainly superior to those of other tribes and polities. In this respect the perspective of the Jewish Bible can be taken as broadly representative of the prevailing religious norms of the region around the eighth century BCE. The limited available evidence suggests that neighbouring peoples, such as the Moabites and the Ammonites, understood their intimate relationships with their own deities in terms broadly similar to those of the prophetic books of the Bible.² In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the monotheistic focus of the Jews marked them more clearly apart from the syncretic paganism of the dominant culture. It was only with the emergence of Christianity, though, that Jewish religious and ethnic separateness became firmly welded together, and conceived as the defining hallmark distinguishing Judaism from the universalist message and mission of the self-defined Catholic Church.

The significance of the Jews' separateness, and of their special relationship with God, was a matter of serious reflection among the early and medieval rabbis. However, for as long as Jews lived in a clearly subordinate position within Christian and Muslim states, which not only accepted but enforced their segregation, these issues had no direct practical significance, and were not a focus of contention between the three faiths. Early Islam was much more polemically engaged with Christianity than with Judaism, and evinced no particular concern with these matters.³ From a medieval Christian perspective, the dispersal and suffering of the Jews reflected their rejection by God for having failed to accept his son as the messiah, and any political implications of their status as nonetheless in some sense still God's chosen people were deferred to a distant future. Only when some Christians came to believe that a transformed future might be not distant but imminent, and, in a related attitudinal shift, that Jews should be treated on a more welcoming and tolerant basis, did Jewish particularity become a prominent topic of confusion and controversy. From the seventeenth century onwards, as European Jews and Christians developed new and shared languages of political thought, the question of the proper place of Jews in the present and future world became a matter of increasingly intense and ramified debate.

The modern history of the Jewish 'purpose question' really begins, then, in the seventeenth century, when Hebraic themes moved to the fore of political discourse in the two most dynamic states of the period—the Dutch Republic and England. Both Protestant polities claimed for themselves the mantle of divine chosenness as a means to justify and sanctify their special place in the world. In both countries there was also a close engagement with Jewish texts, and with Jews themselves. Shared Jewish and Christian excitement over the role of the Jews in the culmination of human history reached a peak in 1665, when Sabbatai Zevi was widely proclaimed as the Jewish messiah. Hebraic themes played a much wider role in the period, however, and this fascination also intensified the non-Jewish reception of the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza—the first Jew emphatically to reject the doctrine of the election of Israel. In the eighteenth century, several leading Enlightenment philosophers defined their ideas in contrast to the particularism represented by Judaism, while Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn—by far the most influential Jewish philosopher of the eighteenth century—offered starkly contrasting attempts to account for Judaism within an Enlightenment framework. The significance of these debates, for most of the long Enlightenment period, was predominantly intellectual. They

intersected, however, with questions of practical policy. Around 1780, the balance between these perspectives abruptly shifted, with the political and cultural transformation of Jews in order to harness their economic utility becoming one of the most intensely debated topics of the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras.

In this period of unprecedented upheaval, many European intellectuals, both Jewish and Christian, believed that the ancient religion served no further purpose, and that with emergence of a new era of rational universalism the 'euthanasia of Judaism', as envisaged by Immanuel Kant, was approaching.⁴ Those Jews who rejected this, but otherwise embraced the Enlightenment legacy, felt the need to advance new arguments for the value of perpetuating Judaism in the world. Leading nineteenth-century rabbis, particularly those at the fore of the German Reform movement such as Abraham Geiger, vigorously asserted that the Jews had an indispensable historical mission as teachers of ethics and spirituality to others. They also raised their voices against other very different conceptions of Jewish distinctiveness in this period, which linked the Jews, often but not always in negative terms, to the development of capitalism, or to anticapitalist political radicalism. The Zionist movement emerged in part as an attempt to normalize the place of Jews in the world, and as a challenge to the idea that Jews should justify themselves in the terms of others, which Zionists such as Ahad Ha'am regarded as cravenly assimilationist. However, various notions of Jewish historical mission have played an important role in Zionist thought, including, most famously, the idea that a Jewish state should be 'a light unto the nations'.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the historical role of the Jews was closely associated with their suffering. This link was drawn, in various ways, by both Jewish and non-Jewish philosophers, such as Hegel, Nietzsche and Hermann Cohen, and writers such as Walter Scott, Grace Aguilar, Heinrich Heine and Stefan Zweig. Antisemitic resentment, when it emerged as a political force in Europe in the late nineteenth century, was readily seen in this light as an unsurprising and perhaps even understandable response to Jewish election and specialness. Since the Holocaust, though, this argument has become almost impossible to entertain. Passive acceptance of Jewish suffering, once witnessed on such a scale, has almost universally been regarded as an untenable position. For many late twentieth-century Jews, particularly in the United States, the idea of Jewish chosenness has been troublesome for a different reason: this highlighting of special status has seemed to brush against the grain of Jewish efforts to 'fit in' within mainstream society. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the most

American form of Judaism, Reconstructionism, rejected the concept, and attempted to purge the religion of what he regarded as its unwarranted and outdated claims of exclusivity and superiority. The chosen people idea, however, has retained a tenacious presence in Jewish life in America, Israel and elsewhere.⁵ Many Jews today find it awkward to embrace but similarly difficult to abandon.

The leading British rabbi and theologian Louis Jacobs, writing in 1973, encapsulated the diffidence with which Jewish chosenness was approached in the postwar era. Suggesting that medieval Jewish thinkers already found the doctrine ‘something of an embarrassment’, Jacobs rejected the claim that Jews were superior to others, and was at pains to distance the chosen people idea from Nazi notions of racial supremacy. He nonetheless argued that despite the dangers of the notion, the Jewish people’s collective self-understanding as a chosen people valuably affirmed their commitment to the covenant and to a ‘sense of destiny’.⁶ Within mainstream Judaism, this has remained the consensus view. While the topic is relatively little addressed directly, serious attempts have been made to defend and develop the theology of the election of Israel, paying careful attention to its implications for the relationship between Jews and non-Jews.⁷ The question of Jewish purpose is, however, not exclusively a theological matter. The insistence, within the Jewish tradition, on the this-worldly dimension of the final redemption to which the Jews’ election in some way points—that this messianic moment will truly transform our world—has itself blurred the boundary between the religious and the secular, or, one might say, the political. Jewish distinctiveness has also been historically associated with a wide range of non-religious qualities and values: rationalism, textuality, intellectuality, idealism, ethical rigour, cultural vitality and collective cohesion.⁸ Jews today, if they choose to identify positively with Jewishness, may be integrating these associations into their personal and possibly entirely secular sense of Jewish purpose, without necessarily any sense of affiliation with other Jews or explicit belief in the chosen people idea.

How, then, should we make sense of this vexed and multifaceted topic? I would like to put forward three guiding principles. Firstly, we must approach it historically. Most Jews would probably consider their purpose in the world as Jews—if they acknowledge this as a meaningful question at all—either as a theological or as an existential matter, or perhaps as a mixture of both. However, the doctrine of the election of Israel took shape in the historical context of Jews’ diasporic existence among and under Christians and Muslims. In modern history, it has been centrally entangled not only in the evolving religious

confrontation between Judaism and Christianity, but also in the attempts, since the seventeenth century, to make sense of difference within a universalistic political and philosophical framework. As these debates developed and diversified, perceptions and significations of Jewish distinctiveness also grew in variety and complexity, and spread into the domains of culture, economics, sociology and nationalism. Our contemporary thinking on Jewish particularity and purpose takes place in the choppy slipstream of these historical debates, further churned and muddled by the central place of Jews in the tragedy and drama of twentieth-century history. We cannot ask, 'What are Jews for?' in innocence of this historical baggage. Rather, we need patiently to tease apart the various strands of thinking on this question, and explore how they have accreted, clashed and mingled, over the past four centuries in particular. Only through such a historical reconstruction is it possible to achieve a lucid understanding of the issues and choices that today rest on this question.

Secondly, and flowing directly from this historicity, we must recognize that the debate on Jewish purpose involves both Jews and non-Jews, in a shared conversation. It is increasingly recognized that in the early centuries CE, Judaism and Christianity took shape in large measure in relation to each other.⁹ For Christians, defining themselves as members of a new sort of grouping—a 'religion' in the creed-based sense that we largely understand it today—Judaism was constructed as an antithetical religion in contrast to which Christian truths were clarified. The early rabbis, spurred as much by the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE as by the rising challenge of Christianity, at first to some degree responded in kind, but by approximately the sixth century CE they had rejected the Christian conception of religion, and asserted instead a different understanding of Jewishness, defined by the given of ethnic peoplehood rather than by acceptance of a theological orthodoxy.¹⁰ For both Christians and Jews, this dissonance between Jewish ethnic particularity and Christian theological universalism was the central challenge in making sense of the other, and of themselves in relation to the other. The supersessionist theology of early Christianity nonetheless ascribed profound meaning to the Jews as God's chosen people, incurring divine punishment for their failure to recognize Jesus as the messiah, but destined to be restored to favour at the end of days. The early rabbis, rethinking Judaism in the wake of the loss of the Temple and the emergence of Christianity, developed in the Talmud an emphasis on the causal connection between the actions of Israel and the future coming of the messiah. These contrasting and competing notions of the role of the Jewish people in the unfolding of the

messianic destiny of human history remain inescapably at the heart of the theological relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

The future-oriented theme of messianism constitutes the theological underlay of the many secular forms into which the question of Jewish purpose has mutated in the modern era. When approaching the question in philosophical, political, economic or sociological terms, both Jews and non-Jews have repeatedly associated the Jewish role in the world with the movement of history toward a transformed future in which the differences and divisions between people would be profoundly altered, and possibly overcome altogether. Jews and Christians (or post-Christian secularists), despite starting from different perspectives on Jewish difference, have nonetheless often put forward very similar accounts of the significance of Jews in the emergence of this future. In conceptual terms, the uniqueness of Jews—as quintessential markers of minority difference, but also as bearers of a special role in the fulfilment of history—was fundamentally the same for both groups. Interpretations of Jewish modernity through the lens of postcolonialism have emphasized the role of Jews as resisters of the dominant cultural discourse.¹¹ In many contexts, however, and certainly in the educated Western milieu in which, since the seventeenth century, most developed thinking on the idea of Jewish purpose has taken place, Jews have more typically aspired to participate on equal terms within the dominant culture. The matter of their distinctive role in the world, far from necessarily being a focus of division between Jews and others, has often been a particularly rich terrain for Jewish interchange with non-Jews. It has also been a shared source of stimulation and debate on the shape of history and the nature of human purpose in general.

It is temptingly straightforward to assume that group affiliation provides a key for understanding the underlying meaning of any statement a person may make about his or her own or another group. Very similar statements on, for example, the economic prowess of Jews, are on this basis readily ascribed to proud self-assertion when from a Jew (or to self-hatred if this attribute is viewed negatively), but to suspect and possibly antisemitic exceptionalist thinking when from a non-Jew. This crude simplification should, however, be rejected. The layered history of the Western debate on Jewish purpose can only be properly and sensitively understood if a third guiding principle is observed: the avoidance of judgmental categorizations. The study of non-Jewish thinking on Jews has most commonly been filed under the heading ‘antisemitism’, or the more carefully transhistorical term ‘anti-Judaism’. Much of this scholarship is excellent, and provides an essential framework for understanding the exclusionary

hostility and violence that has recurred through Jewish history, and the culmination of this in the Holocaust.¹² Hostility, though, is not the inevitable keynote of all non-Jewish thinking on Jews. The enormity of the Nazi genocide has very understandably led to an emphasis on this historical current, but as a result, historians have tended to overlook more positive attitudes to Jews, or to regard them with suspicion. Both the category ‘antisemitism’ and its sometimes controversial twin term ‘philosemitism’ assume the primacy of a binary determination on the attitudinal valence of a pronouncement on Jews. The two terms also assume a sharp distinction between what Jews and non-Jews say or think about Jews: it is not generally considered intelligible to describe a Jew as either antisemitic or philosemitic. With regard to Jewish purpose, these words are an impediment to understanding the evaluative openness and nuance of this idea in many contexts, and the deep interpenetration of Jewish and non-Jewish thinking on the topic.

Several other terms are also best avoided in our inquiry. Attitudes to Jews have often been described as ‘ambivalent’, or as a reflection in the modern era of a wider ambivalence toward economic and social upheavals, of which the apparently indeterminate status of Jews was widely seen as the archetypal symptom and symbol.¹³ As with antisemitism and philosemitism, though, this middling term carries with it the reductive assumption that reaching an evaluative judgment, as either good or bad, is the underlying aim of all thought on Jews. Settling on the label of ‘ambivalence’ to describe a perspective on Jews foregrounds a sense of uneasy hovering between these two poles, and can often foreclose careful consideration of the non-evaluative complexity of these ideas. Within the Jewish domain, reflection on the wider cultural position of Jews or Judaism is frequently assumed to relate above all to a quest for ‘identity’: a perspective that implicitly assumes the primacy of introspection and self-definition over more outward concerns relating to the wider world. Jewish thinkers are often considered as collectively in dialogue with the non-Jewish world, to which they offer their ‘response’.¹⁴ This last term positions Jews as structurally external to the cultural mainstream, not participating directly within and to some degree shaping the dominant culture, but only belatedly reacting to it. This again assumes a stark divide between the Jewish and the non-Jewish realms, obscuring the possibility of fine-grained interaction across the boundary between them. In order to approach the history of the Jewish purpose question with as much openness as possible to its own internal logics and cross-cultural resonances, we must set aside all these assumptions and the terms that unreflectively carry them.

Beneath its heavy historical and theological freighting, the issue of Jewish purpose poses an abstract problem that is vexed and pressing for us all: what sort of special role can and should any particular group perform in our shared world? How to live purposively as a Jew clearly has a special lived significance for Jews alone. Discussion of the topic, however, cannot be subject to cultural ownership, above all because it has been so deeply enmeshed over the past two millennia in Western thinking about the general relationships between religion, peoplehood, history and meaning. It is eminently understandable that any group of people might wish to define their own collective purpose without intervention from others. In the Jewish case, the weight of history, including, above all, the role of exceptionalist conceptions of Jews in marking the path to their genocide, has intensified this desire. However, far from leading to a normalization of the place of the Jews in the world, the Holocaust has deepened the over-determination of Jewish history, peoplehood and purpose. The establishment of the state of Israel, contrary to the hopes and expectations of many, has also not reduced, but rather heightened, the sense of uniqueness, controversy and confusion surrounding the place of Jews in the world. This question is often complicatedly embroiled in heated political controversies over antisemitism and Islamophobia, the Israel/Palestine conflict and the place of utopian radicalism in the world today. However much we might wish it to be otherwise, the meanings of Jewishness, and particularly of Jewish historical purpose, are profoundly intertwined with these central issues of global debate.

We might, though, not wish it to be otherwise. The meanings of minority status—of being different, as a group—have in the Western tradition been most venerably and extensively explored in relation to Jews. These reflections and debates provide a rich starting-point for thinking about the significance of any collective social identity as part of a wider human whole. Zionism was a belated nationalist movement, but the early modern formation of national identities, in the Bible-saturated Protestant world in particular, took place in conscious emulation of the Hebraic example. The actual and potential resonances of the case of Jewish purposiveness extend far beyond the realm of historical nationalism. Many different forms of identity are today jostling for status, meaning and value. What is the worth, though, in asserting a regional, supranational, ethnic, religious or sexual identity, as, say, Scottish, European, Black, Buddhist or bisexual (or any or even all of these at once) in today's mobile and multicultural world, in which our collective affiliations are more fluid and complex than ever? How are these identities defined, and in what way can or should they claim respect not simply as inescapable givens or as self-interested and competing

interest groups, but for whatever distinctive element they contribute to our shared planetary existence? These are difficult questions that concern us all. A promising place to begin, I would suggest, is with the modern history of the attempts to answer them with respect to Jews. If the Jewish case indeed proves to be a stimulating and illuminating guide in clarifying our thinking on collective purpose in general, then that itself offers a first answer to the question of Jewish purpose in this world.

The idea that Jews have a special mission to others has a long history. Its most recent forceful rearticulation is by the prominent French Jewish intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy, who places the chosenness of the Jewish people at the core of his unabashedly self-congratulatory book *The Genius of Judaism* (2017). The Jews, Lévy argues, are a ‘treasured people’ not because of who they are, but due to their mission in the world. His privileged biblical text is the book of Jonah, in which God sends his prophet to the sinful foreign city of Nineveh, in order to bring its citizens to repentance so that God does not have to punish them. The prophetic corpus, and Jonah in particular, underscores for Lévy ‘the obligation of the Jew toward the non-Jew’. The Jewish people have, according to his exegesis, an orientation and a responsibility toward the other nations of the world, in the name of truth and in opposition to evil.¹⁵ Lévy casts this ethical argument in very concrete political terms. The ruins of Assyrian Nineveh stand on the outskirts of the Iraqi city of Mosul, occupied by Daesh (‘Islamic State’) from 2014 to 2017. The lesson of Jonah, Lévy argues in tenuous connection to this, is that Jews must lead the way in ‘looking the devil in the face’, by opposing political evil not only in Iraq, but in all its forms. He also relates this moral exceptionalism to what he describes as the extraordinary achievements of the state of Israel and of Jews in France, in both cases in the face of persistent and resurgent antisemitism.¹⁶ Lévy’s book is representative of the continuance into the present of attempts to deploy the notion of the Jews’ historical purpose in support of particular social and political arguments. Alongside the live question of whether this notion retains any meaningfulness at all, the issue of to what ends and in whose name it should today be mobilized remains a matter of heated contestation and major political significance.

Covenant, Chosenness and Divine Purpose: The Biblical Prooftexts

As soon as Abraham enters the biblical narrative, God declares a special bond with him, promising that ‘I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you’ (Genesis 12:2). Twice in the following verses this bond is reaffirmed as a

covenant, first with specific lands promised to Abraham's offspring (15:18–21), and the second time with a condition imposed: that Abraham and all his male offspring be circumcised, as a compulsory sign and component of their 'everlasting pact' with God (17:9–14). God's initial declaration, while emphasizing divine protection, already hints that Abraham's descendants are charged with some sort of higher purpose for the whole world: 'all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you' (12:3). This is soon expanded upon, although somewhat enigmatically. Preparing to punish the city of Sodom for the great sins of its inhabitants, God considers whether to hide from Abraham his intentions, repeating this same phrase and enlarging on it: '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' (18:19). When God does reveal to him the planned destruction of Sodom, Abraham objects to the potential injustice of this collective punishment. He persuades God not to destroy the city if fifty innocent people are found there, and then persistently bargains down this number—first to forty-five, then forty, thirty and twenty, and finally to ten (18:23–32). Abraham here holds God to account, insisting that the judge of the world should indeed act justly.

In the subsequent book of Exodus a divine covenant is forged once again. This time the setting is Sinai, God's interlocutor is Moses, and the covenant is made not only with Abraham's descendants but also with the 'mixed multitude' that fled from Egypt with them (Exodus 13:38). The reciprocity of this covenant is much clearer, being substantiated in a detailed body of law and religious observances that the children of Israel agree to follow. Before revealing any of this, though, God calls Moses from Mount Sinai, commanding him to tell his people these core principles underlying their covenant:

Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples [*li segulah mikol ha-amim*]. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5–6)

These verses are the prime source for the concept of the Jews as a 'chosen people', or, in more formal terms, the doctrine of 'the election of Israel'.¹⁷ The bond established here is grounded on obedience and intimacy. It is not, though, a purely private relationship between God and his treasured people: God is sovereign over all peoples, but has designated the children of Israel as special, both in their value in God's eyes and in their role in the world. Their priestly holiness suggests that they are superior or exemplary to others in some way. But the nature of this is left unclear—as, indeed, are other key aspects of the Sinaitic

covenant. The Exodus narrative explicitly states that the people pledge their assent to this agreement. They do so twice, unanimously voicing their obedience, in the same terms, both before and after God has revealed the divine commandments and laws (19:8; 24:3). The first agreement, though, hardly constitutes informed assent; still more problematically, the covenant is also taken as binding for all subsequent generations. An inviolable familial dimension, which is fundamental in the Abrahamic covenant, remains here, but now it is blurred with the conditional and voluntary legal aspect of this second covenant.¹⁸ This has given rise to a core ambiguity within the Judaic tradition: between the potentially inclusive nature of the legal covenant (as anybody can pledge allegiance to a system of laws) and the exclusive familial nature of the first covenant, reiterated at Sinai in its ‘chosen people’ form.

The ethical aspect of God’s design for the Jews, already suggested by Abraham’s argument with God over the collective punishment of Sodom, moves to the fore in the prophetic books of the Bible. It is particularly resonantly expressed in the book of Isaiah, in which the Jews are described as a ‘light unto the nations.’ This is the first and most extensive of the three appearances of this image in the book.¹⁹

I the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light unto the nations [*or la-goyim*], to open eyes deprived of light, rescue prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6–7)

Understood in historical context, it seems likely that Isaiah—or ‘Deutero-Isaiah’, as this section of the book was almost certainly written during the period of Judean exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, approximately two centuries later than the likely original authorship of the book’s first section—was here seeking to rally the spirits of his people, looking forward to a time in which the exile will be over and Jerusalem will be restored, thanks to the defeat of Babylon by King Cyrus of Persia, who is lauded in this section of the book. However, the ethical resonance of these passages is powerful, and, as we shall see, the ‘light unto the nations’ idea has featured prominently in some currents of Jewish thought, and particularly as an inspiration and a justification for Zionism.

The high profile of this idea in the modern era is, though, largely due to the special place of the book of Isaiah in Christianity and in polemics between Jews and Christians over the correct interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes known as ‘the fifth gospel’, Isaiah contains many of the passages taken by

Christians as the messianic prophecies most clearly fulfilled by Jesus. In particular, Isaiah's 'songs of the suffering servant' verses are taken in the Jewish tradition to refer to the people of Israel, while Christians have traditionally read them as prophesying the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The first of these passages occurs almost immediately before the 'light unto the nations' passage quoted above (42:1–4). The most famous, in Isaiah 53, immediately follows a lengthy prophecy of the redemption of Jerusalem, includes phrases that echo the covenantal language of ethical responsibility to others, and links this responsibility to suffering: 'My righteous servant makes the many righteous; it is their punishment that he bears' (53:11).²⁰ The association of chosenness with suffering, suggested in this phrase, has risen to prominence over the past two millennia through the diffusion of its Christian interpretation. The elevation of all these verses to the status of central and oft-repeated Christian prooftexts has placed the question of Jewish purpose close to the core of the theological tussle between the two religions, influencing the biblical reading and self-understanding of Jews as well as Christians.

The writings of Paul are by far the most important texts in this debate. Paul's central question was, as Daniel Boyarin has put it, 'How do the rest of the people in God's world fit into the plan of salvation revealed to the Jews through their Torah?'²¹ This universalistic concern arose naturally in Paul's Hellenistic philosophical environment, and other Jews of the first century CE were also exploring the same issue. This question was in no sense inherently un-Jewish or anti-Jewish—though this assumption has bedevilled Christian exegesis of Paul, which until recent decades typically read him as an ardent critic of Judaism.²² It is more accurate to interpret him, following Boyarin, as a 'radical Jew', offering an internal critique of Judaism in the light of the philosophical temperament of the time, and seeking to make sense of the biblical dual covenant. It is the initial covenant, with Abraham, that is for Paul most significant and lofty, because it was made purely on the basis of Abraham's faith in God. Addressing the Galatians, Paul argues that God's promise to Abraham that all the peoples of the world 'shall bless themselves by you' anticipates the extension of God's love to the Gentiles, through faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:8–14). He then poses the question of the purpose of the law revealed at Sinai. He answers that it was 'added because of transgressions' (3:19), and served to guide the children of Israel prior to Jesus Christ's 'promise by faith', and to prepare them for it:

The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a

schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:24–6, 28)

This famous passage, in which Paul asserts the supersession of the Jewish law by faith in Christ, has been widely taken as anti-Judaic or even antisemitic. However, Paul was unequivocal about his own kinship with other Jews, and his personal sense of connection and concern that stemmed from this. In his letter to the Romans, he states explicitly that God has not ‘cast away his people’, and that their ‘stumble’ in not embracing Jesus’s message does not presage their final fall: quoting from the prophecies of Isaiah, he declares that ultimately ‘all Israel shall be saved’ (Romans 11:1, 11, 26). Paul’s theology of Jews and Judaism was clearly intimate, complex and far from straightforwardly hostile.²³ He regarded the Jews as bearers of a crucial historical purpose, through their double covenant with God, in pointing the way to Jesus Christ. Their historical significance did not, though, end at that point, as their ultimate redemption, through faith in Christ, would mark the final fulfilment of Christ’s message.

Paul casts Jewish allegiance to the law as quintessentially particularist, in contrast both to the religious universality of Christian faith and to the philosophical universalism of the dominant Hellenistic culture (Jew versus Greek). This was not an obvious opposition. The Jewish world in the late Second Temple period was very considerably Hellenized. Although the Jews of Palestine were notably distinctive in their insistence on monotheistic worship and on the centrality of the Jerusalem Temple, the Jews as a whole were not in any clear-cut sense a ‘particularly particular’ people, set apart by differences categorically different from those between other peoples in the Hellenistic world.²⁴ The contrast that Paul draws between the Jewish and the universal is also highly complex and unstable. He locates in Abraham the originary example of the pure faith on which Christ’s message is based. He also does not seem to envisage the extinction of Jewish difference, except at the messianic moment, or in the messianic sense, in which all human oppositions, including gender and social class, will also disappear.²⁵ Paul’s intricate thinking on this issue positioned the Jews as enduringly and inescapably central in debates in the Christian tradition on the significance of the particular within a universalist theological or political framework.

Paul overlays this opposition with a number of powerful and highly influential allegorical binary contrasts, the most important of which is between the flesh and the spirit. The Jewish covenant is inscribed in the flesh through

circumcision, while faith in Christ is purely in the spirit: ‘circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter’ (Romans 2:29). The image of the circumcision of the heart occurs in the Torah (e.g., Deuteronomy 30:6), but Paul contrasts this to the mandating of physical circumcision in the Jewish law. While for Jews he sees circumcision as meaningful sign of their covenant with God (Romans 3:1–2), he argues strenuously that with regard to Christ it is an irrelevance, and that Gentile Christians do not need to be circumcised (Galatians 6:12–18). The ‘letter’ of the law is aligned with the flesh, and against the figural readings offered by Paul, as part of his wider conception of the supersession of the Jewish law by Christ’s teachings.²⁶ In this framework, the law is cast as an infantile phase—‘our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ’—in contrast to the maturity of faith. This developmental language is very significant for the future of the idea of Jewish purpose. Paul presents the Jews as blind and child-like: they have signalled the way toward the future that has now become present with the advent of Christ, but they also foreshadow this event and are destined to play a crucial role in its still future final fulfilment. This tangled theological temporality has underpinned the privileged signification of Jews in Western thought on the shape of historical change, particularly in relation to utopian or messianic hopes.

Mainstream Judaism in this period also registered the challenge of explaining the relationship of the Torah to the other peoples of the world. The rise of Christianity made this issue more pressing, as did the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, which prompted a turn in Judaism from the centrality of priestly rituals to an emphasis on the compilation and study of texts. In the *Sifre* commentary to the book of Deuteronomy, largely compiled in the tannaitic period (first and second centuries CE), an account is given of God offering the Torah to all of the nations of the world, each of whom, after asking for further details, declined it. First God approached the Edomites, who could not agree to the prohibition on murder; next the Torah was offered to the Ammonites and the Moabites, who balked at the interdict on adultery, as they were descended from the incestuous coupling of Lot with his daughters; the Ishmaelites then refused to assent to the commandment ‘thou shalt not steal’. Only after this pattern had been repeated with ‘every other nation’ did God bestow the Torah on Israel.²⁷ This account explicitly incorporates the entire world into the narrative of the election of Israel. It superficially appears to imbue that narrative with considerable modesty: for unexplained reasons, Israel was God’s last choice. However, the stronger implication is precisely the opposite. Only the children of Israel were ethically worthy of the Torah, and it was for this reason,

established according to this account through a thorough process of elimination, that they were chosen by God.

The talmudic tractate *Avodah Zarah*, composed in Babylon between the third and the fifth centuries CE, opens with an elaborate depiction of the Last Judgment, which puts forward a more audacious version of essentially the same argument. God commands each nation to approach separately and to claim their reward for upholding the Torah. The Romans enter first, and claim that all their commercial activity and creation of wealth has been ‘for the sake of Israel, that they could occupy themselves with the Torah.’ The Persians then make the same claim for their construction and warfare, and the other nations of the world make similar arguments—but God rejects them all, declaring that they have acted only in their own interests. The nations then ask for another chance to accept and follow the Torah. God commands them to perform the ‘easy mitzvah’ of constructing and living in a *sukkah*. As soon as the sun blazes down on them through the unenclosed roof of this temporary structure, they abandon their test—and God laughs at them.²⁸ In this account, not only God, but also the higher nobility of the Torah, is in some sense recognized by all, including the Roman and Persian superpowers of the era. The fairness, and thus also the universality, of God is underscored by the granting of a second chance to the nations of the world. The swift abandonment by all the other nations of the burdens of the Torah highlights once again, though, that only Israel is worthy of election.

This passage, like much of the *Avodah Zarah* tractate, was also engaging in polemic against Christianity. God’s concluding laughter is an allusion to Psalms 2:4—‘He who is enthroned in heaven laughs’—which was widely used as a proof-text for the Christian account of the Last Judgment, and of which the rabbinic sages here offered their own interpretation.²⁹ The partition of Judaism and Christianity was a protracted process over the course of late antiquity, from which emerged a new notion of ‘religion,’ defined not in terms of allegiance or practice but by a set of doctrines established as theological orthodoxy, and through the rejection as ‘heresy’ of beliefs deemed incompatible with those doctrines.³⁰ A matter of particular contestation was the theological meaning of Israel, the mantle of which, for Christians, had through allegorization and spiritualization passed to them. In pointed contrast to this belief, the talmudic sages placed increased emphasis on a familial or genealogical understanding of Israel. Once Christianity became the establishment religion of the Roman world, its challenge to Judaism was also political, and this spurred the sages to conceive of Israel politically, as a nation. Israel was represented in the Talmud

as an idealized entity, simultaneously both family and nation. As in the narrative of the Last Judgment given in *Avodah Zarah*, the merit of Israel justified its election and its divinely promised ultimate reward.³¹

Rabbinic Judaism thus consolidated around the notion of the election of Israel, and its messianic redemption in the future. Messianic eschatology is absent from the tannaitic Mishnah, but is frequently present in the later Talmud. The messianic orientation of the Talmud was in part a reaction to the messianism of Christianity, and has been aptly summarized as repeatedly following the formula ‘if you do x, the messiah will come; if not, the messiah will tarry’.³² In this formative period and into the medieval era, the focus of Jewish life was inward, and there was little theological emphasis on outward-oriented understandings of Jewish election and purpose. This was also in part a reaction to Christianity: a caution that stood in contrast to the elaborate theology of Jewish purpose developed by the church fathers, according to which the dispersal and suffering of the Jews was central to their historical purpose for Christians. This ‘Jewish witness’ doctrine was most influentially articulated by Augustine of Hippo (354–430):

But the Jews who killed him and refused to believe in him, to believe that he had to die and rise again . . . were utterly uprooted from their kingdom [and] dispersed all over the world. . . . [T]hus by the evidence of their own scripture they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ . . . We recognize that it is in order to give this testimony, which, in spite of themselves, they supply for our benefit by their possession and preservation of those books, that they themselves are dispersed among all nations, in whatever direction the Christian Church spreads.³³

Like Paul, Augustine believed that the Jews remained God’s chosen people, and would ultimately be restored to divine favour. However, he transposed the doctrine of Jewish election and universal mission into a form that justified Christian domination over Jews throughout the medieval period and beyond.³⁴ In the face of this instrumentalist Christian understanding of their purpose, Jews could only look forward with quietly expectant hope to their own messianic redemption.

At the end of antiquity, Jews and Christians each conceptualized their collective nature largely in relation to the other, and their understanding of history in terms of their very different theologies of the election and mission of Israel. These lines of antagonism established the framework for relations between the two religions for the next millennium and beyond. It is important to note, however, that other religious traditions were also of great importance

in the shaping of Christianity and Judaism in this period. For Augustine and other early Christian leaders, the traditional polytheistic practices of the Roman world were of much greater concern than the numerically and politically weaker challenge posed by Judaism. This notably applies to Augustine's contemporary John Chrysostom (349–407), whose polemical *Adversus Judaeos* sermons against the Jews and Judaizing Christians of his home city of Antioch rank among the most intensely anti-Jewish texts of late antiquity. Chrysostom vehemently asserted the sharp separation of Christianity from Judaism in order to present the new religion as the more attractive proposition of the two for the majority pagan population of Antioch.³⁵ Many Jews, meanwhile, including the Babylonian talmudic sages, lived far to the east of the centres of Christianity, and were soon to find themselves under Islamic rule. Nonetheless, both Jews and Christians came to define themselves most fundamentally in relation to the other, and based their self-understanding on contrasting interpretations of the intertwined notions of peoplehood and purpose put forward in their common scripture. Multiple layers of interpretation—Jewish, Christian and secular—have accreted upon these prooftexts, which have remained a key point of reference in Western debates on universalism, peoplehood and political hope.

In recent years—to offer just one prominent example of the continuing afterlife of these biblical and early post-biblical arguments—the interpretation of Paul has returned to the fore in political philosophy. For the French philosopher Alain Badiou, Paul's message, and his rejection of the particularistic aspects of the Jewish law, stand at the helm of the Western tradition of optimistic, life-affirming and universalistic political activism. Badiou's declared aim is to revivify this tradition, blending Paul and Marx into a new rallying call for mass political agency in the name of all.³⁶ His Pauline universalism has been criticized for drawing on arguments that echo the Christian *adversus Judaeos* tradition, and has been widely labelled as antisemitic.³⁷ This controversy highlights the enduring incendiary power of the Jewish purpose question. Whereas for Badiou Paul's stance on this question provides the indispensable basis for a radical universalistic politics, for many of his critics he seeks to wrest the Jewish scriptural message from Jews themselves, and to deny the meaningfulness and value of Jewish difference. In order to understand the significance of these heated current arguments, we need to relate them not only to their antecedents almost two millennia earlier, but also to the intricate and layered intellectual history of the Jewish purpose question over the intervening period.

Jewish Purpose in History: An Outline

In the medieval period Jews and non-Jews developed contrasting and separate concepts of Jewish purpose in the world. In the Jewish world, Judah Halevi took the view that Jews were inherently superior to non-Jews, whereas Maimonides thought that the special feature of the Jews was their philosophical inclination, and that their election was therefore implicitly conditional on the perpetuation of their special role as thinkers. For medieval Christians, meanwhile, building on the ‘witness people’ theology of Augustine, the purpose of Jews was to provide evidence—through their dispersal and suffering, and their dogged preservation of the scriptural texts that they nonetheless so woefully misinterpreted—of the truth of Christianity. All three of these approaches have remained important through to the present. However, it was not until the aftermath of the Reformation that Jewish and non-Jewish thinking on the subject began to clash and cross-fertilize. In this new environment of theological competition within Western Christendom, the interpretation of Jewish matters became a key ground on which Protestant and Catholics sparred for political and intellectual legitimacy. The seventeenth century was the heyday of ‘political theology’: the discussion of politics through the language of scripture. This subject, in that period, will therefore be the central focus of the first chapter of this book. In the two most dynamic Protestant states of the early modern period—the Dutch Republic and England—identification with Jews provided the theological underpinning for these nations’ own self-image as divinely chosen, and the theological grammar for their internal political arguments. The ‘Mosaic Republic’ was a key reference point in both polities in the seventeenth century, and political fascination with the Jews was an important force in shaping more welcoming policies toward them (most notably the readmission of Jews to England in 1656). In the Interregnum period in England, arguments from Jewish texts, by thinkers such as John Selden and James Harrington, were fundamental for establishing the case for republicanism and for the primacy of common law. It is erroneous to claim that Jewish texts were therefore the source of these early proto-liberal arguments heralding the advance of democracy and the rule of law: Selden and others knew what they were looking for in their Hebrew texts, and their work should not be seen as a transmission of Jewish arguments into the Christian domain, but as emerging from the interplay and overlap between these traditions. This also applies to the thought of Baruch Spinoza, who in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) parochialized the

Jewish Bible as simply the fanciful historical record of one particular people, and thereby profoundly shook the foundations of European political theology.

Spinoza was the hero of radical thinkers in the next two generations and beyond. In the ardent discipleship that characterized the phenomenon of ‘Spinozism’, we encounter a paradox: Spinoza was feted for his universalistic overcoming of the particular, but this achievement was rooted in his own particularity as a Jew who had rejected Judaism. The special significance of the figure of the ex-Jew as the purest possible universalist extends back to Paul and forward to Badiou (and beyond), but it is in the eighteenth century that it comes most clearly into focus. The second chapter of the book, therefore, will centre on the eighteenth century as the period in which the primary purpose of Jews was to sharpen the elaboration of key philosophical concepts, sometimes by standing as the antithesis of universal reason, but also at times flipping into standing as its embodiment. A particularly rich terrain for exploring this is the work of the Rotterdam Huguenot philosopher Pierre Bayle, whose *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1700) baffled eighteenth-century readers, and continues to baffle many today, among other things over its elusive positioning of Judaism as the marker of the limits of rational philosophy. The vexed preoccupation of Voltaire with Jews stems from his structurally similar but stylistically and temperamentally extremely different positioning of them as fundamentally antithetical to Enlightenment reason. It is common for these exceptionalist treatments of Jews to be treated with unease, and indeed to be viewed as antisemitic. However, it is important to recognize that the same paradigm of exceptionalism framed the work and reception of Jewish thinkers in the period, including, most significantly, Moses Mendelssohn. The penetrating mind and noble character of Mendelssohn was the model for the dramatic hero of his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s masterpiece *Nathan the Wise* (1779), in which Jewish purpose was cast as the exemplification of rational universalism. For Mendelssohn himself, this flattery was awkward but also indispensable. In his own work, he cautiously embraced Lessing’s understanding of Jewish purpose, while simultaneously trying, in his *Jerusalem* (1783), to establish a basis for Jewish normalcy.

In the nineteenth century—the subject of the third chapter of the book—philosophical abstraction was displaced as the crux of thinking on Jewish purpose by efforts to make sense of the dramatic social, political and economic changes of the era. Jews, once they were brought into the political mainstream in the wake of the French Revolution, became the key test case of the reach, not

of philosophical ideals, but of political reforms. In many different ways, over the long nineteenth century, both Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers cast Jews as the bearers of a special role in pushing or leading Western society to its developmental destiny in any number of key respects. Jews proudly presented themselves as cosmopolitans (Ludwig Börne, Heinrich Heine), as morally lofty teachers (Heinrich Graetz, Hermann Cohen), or as ethnically superior builders of the future (Benjamin Disraeli). These idealizations overlapped with each other, and drew on earlier traditions. Claims that Jews had a vital mission to perform in the world found wide readerships among non-Jews, and resonated with the admiration for the fortitude of the Hebraic tradition in the writings of non-Jewish thinkers such as Matthew Arnold and Friedrich Nietzsche. The identification of the Jews' mission with the advancement of capitalism had a more complex impact, as this was variably seen in negative, positive or elusively ambivalent terms. A case in point is Werner Sombart's *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (1911), which has been widely excoriated as an antisemitic blaming of Jews for the ills of modern economic inequality, but at the time of its publication was celebrated by many Jews as a confirmation of the unique resourcefulness of their people. In the work of Sombart's fellow sociologist Georg Simmel, multiple currents of thinking on Jewish purpose are drawn together. In his famous essay on 'The Stranger' (1908), Simmel casts Jews as simultaneously cosmopolitan, capitalist and intellectual. All three features, for Simmel, are hallmarks of the figure of the stranger, of whom the Jew is the quintessential example, and who is also the key driving figure of the connected commercial, cultural and psychological transformations of modernity.

Sombart's most enthusiastic Jewish admirers were Zionists, who saw his research as securing the case for the likely success of a Jewish state. The Zionist movement has throughout its history had a complex relationship to the idea of Jewish purpose. In seeking to establish a state for the Jews in a world increasingly organized around the ethnic nation state, Zionism sought to normalize the place of Jews in the world. The energy and inspirational power of the Zionist idea, however, for non-Jews and for Jews, has however always derived to a large extent from the exceptional hopes and theological significance bound up with the notion of Jewish purpose. The fourth chapter of the book focuses on the purpose of the Jews in relation to the potential and meaning of nationhood, in both Zionist and non-Zionist contexts. This is primarily a twentieth-century story, but it has earlier roots: Moses Hess, writing in Germany in the 1860s, linked a profoundly negative view of the Jews' diasporic role as arch-capitalists to his irenic view of the role of the Jews in his Zionist vision of the future. Zionist

grappling with the idea of Jewish exemplarity runs through the twentieth-century history of the movement, and is fascinatingly visible in the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am, and in the political rhetoric of David Ben-Gurion, who repeatedly invoked Isaiah's 'light unto the nations' as his vision for the Jewish state. The relationship of Jewish exemplarity and purpose to the broader political life of the nation state has also been a rich and complicated seam of debate within twentieth-century thought. For Franz Rosenzweig, Jewish exemplarity and purpose resided precisely in standing outside politics. For Jacques Derrida, in contrast, the Jewish case is what one might call, in Weberian terms, the 'ideal type' of collective nation formation, and of the claims to exceptionalism that accompany this.

In contemporary debate, we hear frequent calls for Jews, and particularly Israel, to be regarded and judged on the same basis as all others, with any deviation from normal treatment often condemned as antisemitic. However, this call sits somewhat awkwardly alongside the ubiquity, historically and into the present, of the theme of Jewish exceptionality and special purpose. The fifth chapter of the book will focus on the question of normalcy and its relationship to twentieth-century notions of Jewish distinctiveness and purpose. The idea of a special Jewish mission initially thrived within the American Reform movement, but as the urge to integrate within American society gathered strength among Jews, this notion waned in prominence. Jewish exemplarity was most influentially presented in relation to specifics of the American context, through the competing 'melting pot' and 'orchestra' metaphors of Israel Zangwill and Horace Kallen. In Central Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, the hope of Jewish normalization was perceived by sharp observers, such as Karl Kraus, Theodor Lessing and Sigmund Freud, as illusory: all three men put forward their own distinctive analysis of the value of Jews as outsider figures. The horror of the Holocaust cast a profound chill over the idea of Jewish instrumental purpose—but it has also brought about a renewal of the idea, in relation to the ethical and historical lessons imparted by the Nazi genocide itself. The universalistic Jewish Left, meanwhile, has, despite waning in numerical terms, retained its intellectual significance as a prominent current of political argument. From the revolutions in Bavaria and Budapest at the end of the First World War through to recent and contemporary debates on cosmopolitanism and human rights, Jewish arguments for universalism have struck a resonant and paradoxically distinctive note.



What, then, *are* Jews for? Across much of the Jewish world in the late twentieth century, anxiety over the long-term viability of Judaism threatened to overwhelm this question. European Jewish life in the aftermath of the Holocaust was shadowed by a sense of mournfully dutiful traditionalism and anxiety over the continued presence of antisemitism. The temptation and increasing ease of assimilation was perceived as a further threat to Jewish continuity, not only in Europe but also in the United States and elsewhere in the New World. Faced with the prospect of a ‘vanishing diaspora’, it was clear to some Jewish leaders that the postwar focus on communal survival lacked the inspirational power to renew Jewish life.³⁸ A return to the idea of Jewish purpose, despite its awkwardness, has been an indispensable element in multiple currents of Jewish religious and cultural revival since the 1970s, which in the new millennium have collectively become so robust that earlier anxieties over Jewish disappearance or dilution have been largely allayed.

In recent decades, vigilance toward antisemitism—widely understood as a key lesson of the Holocaust—and identification with the state of Israel have become central to the sense of Jewish meaningfulness of many Jews. As the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has become increasingly bitter, entrenched and entangled with controversies over antisemitism, two opposing conceptions of Jewish purpose have clashed in public debate. Hard-line Zionist arguments, emphasizing Jewish security and collective interests, are opposed by liberal or leftist perspectives stressing universal ethical and political principles in relation to the conflict. This has exposed a stark cleft within the Jewish world over the essence of the idea of Jewish purpose, and its place in global politics and visions of the future. The broader resonance of the Jewish purpose question has meanwhile in no sense diminished. Intense interest in the question has been an important factor in sustaining and framing the prominence in public consciousness across much of the contemporary world of both Holocaust remembrance and the Israel/Palestine conflict. With the rise of nationalist assertiveness and strongman leadership in many countries, including in America under President Trump, this conflict has come to emblemize, with unique symbolic intensity, the profound division in contemporary global politics over the fundamental nature of national collective purpose. The rhetoric of Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies aligns with the unabashedly self-interested outlook of many nationalist governments and political parties across the world; the universalist arguments mobilized on the opposing political wing are widely invoked in support of a range of internationalist and solidaristic visions of collective political responsibility and purpose.

Universalism, at least in the domain of human relations, is a troublesome idea and in an important sense an illusory ideal. We are all, as numerous philosophers and others have argued, bounded in our perspectives on the world by the intellectual and cultural traditions that have shaped us and with which we affiliate. We view the world from our own particular vantage points, and without access to any panoptic position of omniscience or neutrality.³⁹ The idea of universalism as the ultimate religious or philosophical destination and goal of humanity has, however, been a central feature of the closely connected Jewish, Christian and Western traditions with which this book is concerned. (The significance of universalism in Islamic and other traditions, and the nature and extent of the intertwinement of those lineages with those discussed here, would require careful and separate attention.) The utopian vision of a harmonious future in which the divisions of our world will be overcome has been fundamental to the temporal thinking and to the political energies of Judaism, Christianity and the various avowedly secular outlooks that emerged during and after the European Enlightenment. The idea of universalism is thus an inescapably fundamental cultural and political reference point in Western history.⁴⁰ The question of how we can collectively contribute to human progress toward this ideal has been most concretely invested, in Christian and post-Christian thought, in the destiny and purpose of the Jewish people. The Jewish purpose question has therefore been foundational to thinking on collective purpose in these globally dominant traditions. In the early twenty-first century, amid assertive and in some ways unprecedented challenges to universalistic ideals, hopes and commitments, this intellectual heritage is perhaps of crucial importance for the future of the idea of collective purpose itself.

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