

WHO ARE
THE JEWS

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln

WHO ARE THE JEWS— AND WHO CAN WE BECOME?

Donniel Hartman



The Jewish Publication Society
Philadelphia

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Nebraska Press as a Jewish Publication Society book.
Manufactured in the United States of America.



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Hartman, Donniel, author.

Title: Who are the Jews-and who can we become? /
Donniel Hartman, the Jewish Publication Society,
Philadelphia.

Description: Lincoln, Nebraska: University of
Nebraska Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023007294

ISBN 9780827615618 (paperback)

ISBN 9780827619142 (epub)

ISBN 9780827619159 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Jews—Identity. | Judaism—21st
century. | Zionism—History—21st century. | Judaism
and politics. | BISAC: RELIGION / Biblical Studies /
History & Culture | RELIGION / Judaism / General

Classification: LCC DS143 .H278 2023 |

DDC 320.5409569409/05—dc23/eng/20230216

LC record available at

<https://lcn.loc.gov/2023007294>

Set in Lyon Text by A. Shahan.

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xv
PART ONE. What's Our Story?	
1. The Genesis Covenant and the First Jews	3
2. Exodus Judaism and the Covenant of Commandments	30
3. Conversion and the Rabbinic Synthesis of Genesis and Exodus	50
4. Good Jews and Bad Jews and the Art of Boundaries	62
5. Maimonides, Champion of Exodus	80
6. Emancipation from the Genesis Covenant	95
7. Zionism and the Resurrection of Genesis	106
8. The North American Homeland between Europe and Zion(ism)	118
PART TWO. A Zionism for the Twenty-First Century	
9. Foundations for a Twenty-First Century Liberal Jewish Story	137
10. Recalibrating the Religion-State Status Quo	142
11. Israel's Relationship with World Jewry	165

12. Unpacking a Not-So-“Basic” Law	175
13. Yearning Again for Peace	191

PART THREE. A Diaspora Future

14. At Home	211
15. Inter marriage and the Meaning of Jewishness	218
16. The Eroding North America-Israel Relationship	228
17. The Future of Liberal Zionism in North America	250
18. The Choice to Belong	264
Notes	277
Bibliography	301
Index	309

PART ONE

What's Our Story?

1

The Genesis Covenant and the First Jews

Can we find a way to talk about Jewish collective identity that infuses it with an enhanced sense of clarity, meaning, and purpose? Can we tell a story that considers both who the Jews are and what we can become?

In part 1, I argue that the metastory Jews have told about who we are since our earliest origins is born out of the active, living synthesis of two competing claims about the essential nature of Jewishness: the Genesis Covenant/Genesis Judaism and the Exodus Covenant/Exodus Judaism. In the Genesis Covenant, Jewish collective identity is grounded in who one *is* and the group to which one belongs, independent of what one believes and/or does. The Exodus Covenant, conversely, is grounded in one's relationship to an aspirational system of values, ideals, beliefs, commandments, and behaviors.¹ The friction generated by the encounter between these opposing concepts is a central creative tension that has defined Jewish collective identity.

Here, I aim to illustrate how the Covenants of Genesis and Exodus constitute a core lens through which to understand Jewishness, the warp and woof of the Jewish identity metanarrative, such that when one disappears or becomes too dominant, Jewish collective identity becomes threadbare and begins to unravel. Conversely, when they are held in constructive conversation, Jewishness becomes a nurturing, unifying resource. In the generative Genesis-Exodus interplay the sparks of a rich and compelling identity for our time may be found.

Tales of a Traveling Kippah

As an Orthodox Jew, I generally travel around the world wearing my kippah. A remarkable fact I do not take for granted is in how much of

North America I feel comfortable and welcomed as a Jew. I am aware of how unique—and recent—this feeling is against the broader canvas of Jewish history.

My kippah has been a catalyst for many unexpected connections, the most common being what I refer to as the “Jewish Nod.” Amid the daily rhythms of North America’s relatively tolerant multicultural landscape, very often some fellow traveler begins to stretch their neck in unnatural ways as they try to remain discreet while making “secret” eye contact. The bizarreness of the move attracts my attention, and the moment of eye contact is accompanied by a subtle, almost indiscernible nod of the head. And so, while the neck bends, the gaze remains firmly in place—silently communicating that I have been seen, and that they too are a Jew. We are an *us*.

Protocol requires that I respond immediately, in kind, with a reciprocal nod, thereby confirming that I have seen that they have seen me, and see them in turn. At times the formal ritual ends here. At other times a third nod is delivered, a declaration of acknowledgement that they have seen, that I have seen, that they have seen me.

The Jewish nod is brief and fleeting, for in reality, we are strangers to each other and have different short-term agendas—especially if we are on a plane and need to sleep. The alternate reality, however, remains true, and leaves its imprint: among the community of travelers, we are strangers but not *total* strangers; we share a perhaps distant, but still meaningful, connection. Our subtle communiqué is founded on an unexplained yet self-evident bond of a shared identity that transcends mundane reality.

Once, on the first day of a long-awaited ski trip in Colorado, I found myself at the top of a slope outside my skill set as a rabbi. While wiping out over a nasty mogul, I cut my knee on the edge of my ski and was quickly whisked off the mountain to the hospital for stitches. As I lay in the hospital bed, angry at myself and upset over my ruined vacation, a stranger approached me and asked, “Excuse me. Are you Jewish?”

I should mention here that, kippah notwithstanding, one of the main

reasons for going skiing in Colorado is to be anonymous. Throughout the year, I am entrenched in the Jewish community. This was my chance to commune with snow. I was not interested in being a Jew at that moment; frankly, I wanted to be left alone. But duty called, and I reluctantly answered in the affirmative.

“Great,” he responded. “I am also Jewish and live in Mexico. Do you possibly know someone who I can set up with my daughter?”

At that moment, the last thing I was interested in was someone else’s problems, let alone a stranger who wanted to find a spouse for a daughter I did not know.

Yet almost against my will I found my mind wandering . . . *Who do we know in Mexico? Does Adina (my wife) know anyone?*

This stranger had claimed me. He had laid claim to my interest, loyalty, concern, and care simply by virtue of some notion that we were both Jews.

These interactions are the products of a particular motif or thread or subplot within the story Jews tell ourselves about ourselves.

Jewishness without Judaism: The Golden Calf Motif

One of the threads weaving together the story of the Jewish people can be extrapolated from the biblical tale of the Golden Calf, in which even God is unable to complete the handing over of the Torah to Israel.

Fearing Moses has died after disappearing up a mountain forty days earlier, the people panic. Instead of maintaining their faith in the One who has just redeemed them from Egypt with “a mighty hand, an outstretched arm, and awesome power” (Deut. 4:34), they hastily fabricate a Golden Calf and proclaim, “*This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt*” (Exod. 32:4).

The Golden Calf isn’t just a moment in the Bible: it *is* the Bible, in a proverbial nutshell. Throughout the Bible, the Jews (in biblical terms, Israelites or Children of Israel) vacillate between monotheism (the belief in the existence of only one God) or monolatry (the belief in the existence of many gods, but with the consistent worship of only one)

and idolatry and remain largely indifferent to, and at times in open rebellion of, God's word.²

In other words, at such moments when we Jews wished to worship a Golden Calf, we were not necessarily who we were supposed to be, but who we were: Jews on a lengthy dialectical journey toward monotheism who did very little of what we have come to know as Judaism.

Claiming that the first understanding of being Jewish is distinct from most of what we think of as Judaism might sound strange, even heretical. In my defense, I might call as a witness the last chronological book of the Hebrew Bible, Nehemiah, which looks back at the Jewish people's seven-hundred-year journey and says: *Let me tell you what I just heard.*

Here is the prophet Nehemiah's summary of the biblical story:

Forty years, *you* God, sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out; their feet did not swell. *You* gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted them territory. They took possession of the land of Sihon, the land of King of Heshbon, the land of Og, King of Bashan. *You* made their children as numerous as the stars of heaven and brought them to the land that *You* told their fathers to go and possess. The sons came and took possession of the land. *You* subdued the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. . . . *You* delivered them, both their kings and their people. *You* captured fortified cities, rich lands, and took possession of houses filled with everything good. (Neh. 9:21-25, emphasis added)

God, in short, delivered on *Your* (our) side of the covenant, fulfilling all of our wants and needs. Everything God promised, God did. This, of course, made it all the more galling for God and the prophet when:

Defying You, *they* rebelled. *They* cast your teaching behind their back. *They* killed your prophets who admonished them to turn them back to you. *They* committed great impieties. You delivered

them into the power of their adversaries who oppressed them. In their time of trouble, *they* cried out to You; You in heaven heard them, and in Your abundant compassion gave them saviors who saved them. But when *they* had relief, *they* again did what was evil in Your sight, so You abandoned them again to the power of their enemies, who subjugated them. Again, *they* cried to You, and You in heaven heard and rescued them in Your compassion, time after time. You admonished them in order to turn them back to Your teaching, but *they* acted presumptuously and disobeyed Your commandments, and sinned against Your rules, which a person who practices will live by. *They* turned a defiant shoulder, stiffened their neck, and would not obey. You, God, bore with them for many years, admonished them. Your prophets did the same, but *they* would not give ear, so finally You delivered them into the power of the peoples of the land. (Neh:26–30; emphasis added)³

This is Nehemiah's summary of the Bible—a close to thousand-year snapshot of a people who remained Jewish, generation after generation, without doing much of anything that could be considered “Judaism.” The Judaism of the Bible existed primarily in the eyes and mind of God, who fantasized about a Jewish people who would be faithful to God and God's commandments. But for the Jews themselves, Jewish identity had little to do with . . . *doing*. They were raised on a different narrative, Genesis Judaism, in which being Jewish was just who you were. They were *Genesis Jews*—a form of Jewishness that first occurs in the book of Genesis and becomes the dominant Jewish identity of the biblical period.

Chosen People: An Inherited Identity

In the Genesis Covenant between God and Abraham, Abraham is chosen on condition that he leave his native land and embark on a journey to an unknown land that God promises to show him (Gen. 12:1). His

descendants are promised to be a great nation, God's chosen people, only by virtue of being Abraham's offspring:

And the Lord said to Abraham . . . "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the North and South, to the East and West, for I give all the land that you see to you and *your seed* forever. I will make *your seed* as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then *your seed* too can be counted." (Gen. 13:14–16; emphasis added)

Throughout Genesis, generation after generation inherits God's promise merely as a function of being Abraham's seed.⁴ The promise begins with Isaac:

And the Lord appeared to [Isaac] and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you. I will assign all these lands to you and to your seed, *fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham*. I will make your seed as numerous as the stars of heaven and assign to your seed all of these lands. And all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through your seed." (Gen. 26:2–6; emphasis added)

Then God passes down the promise to Jacob:

And the Lord was standing beside [Jacob], and He said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you are lying I will give to you and to your seed. Your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the West and to the East, to the North and to the South; all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves through you and your seed. Remember I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen. 28:13–15)

Abraham clearly earns his status as God's elect. He undergoes travail after travail—exile, famine, war, childlessness—culminating in the horrific test of loyalty known as the Binding of Isaac: “Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, ‘Abraham,’ and he answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, ‘Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you’” (Gen. 22: 1–2).

Early the next morning, Abraham rises, takes Isaac, and embarks on a journey to fulfill God's command. At the last moment, right before Abraham is about to slay his son on the altar of his loyalty to God, God stays the decree. Abraham's willingness to obey God is deemed sufficient to guarantee the chosen status of all his progeny:

By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: *Because* you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you, and make your seed as numerous as the stars of heaven, and the sands of the seashore. And your seed shall inherit the gates of their enemies. It is through your seed that all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, *because* you have obeyed My command. (Gen. 22: 16–18; emphasis added)

This is the essence of the Genesis Covenant into which the Jewish people are welcomed simply by virtue of the piety of Abraham and their association with him.

Circumcision and the Sign of the Covenant

The one major exception to this rule is the commandment placed within the Genesis Covenant whereby Abraham and his descendants must circumcise their sons:⁵

God further said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. Such shall

be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep; every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you . . . Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin (people); he has broken My covenant.” (Gen. 17:9–14)

The inherited and unconditional Genesis Covenant has one condition—circumcision—which, if not followed, constitutes a breaking of the covenant and requires banishment from the community. However, note the language: circumcision is designated as “the *sign* of the Covenant between Me and you.” While clearly a condition, it is not the covenant itself but merely an external sign, marked on the flesh, attesting to one’s status and acceptance of belonging to the community of Genesis Jews.⁶ The core Genesis Covenant remains a mode of being and not doing.⁷

That said, the notion of a sign of the covenant as a requirement within Genesis is nevertheless critical. It means that while one inherits one’s status as a Genesis Jew, Genesis still demands that one actively embrace this status. It defines one’s Jewishness only to the extent that one actively chooses to be a Jew. While failing to do so, as we will see, does not engender a loss of Jewishness, it is nevertheless a requirement which generates sanctions for those who fail to comply.⁸

A Story of Flawed Ancestors

In keeping with the notion of Genesis as an inherited covenant, and quite distinct from its treatment of Abraham, the Bible makes no effort to associate noble qualities with Abraham’s seed. None of Abraham’s descendants distinguish themselves through heroic acts of faith or particular greatness of character. While Isaac and Jacob do maintain a faith in God and worship the God of Abraham, the Bible depicts

the two as mediocre at best.⁹ When one descendant is chosen over another, as is the case between Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau, no grounds such as claims of moral or spiritual superiority are given to justify the particular selection (Gen. 21:9–13; 25:23). In the case of Esau and Jacob, the Bible actually portrays Esau in far more positive and sympathetic terms than Jacob, certainly in terms of Esau’s caring for his father (Gen. 26:28; 27:4).

As for the next generation, the children of Jacob who inherit Abraham’s blessing—and become the backbone out of which the nation of Israel is formed—the Bible renders them as somewhat morally challenged. They disobey their father, plot to kill their brother Joseph, relent and merely sell him as a slave, and torture their father emotionally with a story of his death at the hands of wild beasts (Gen. 37:18–35). Shimon and Levi appear as devious, murderous thugs (Gen. 34). Reuven sleeps with one of his father’s half-wives (Gen. 35:22), while Judah sleeps with prostitutes and mistakenly impregnates his own daughter-in-law (Gen. 34). Joseph, the supposed “good apple,” comes across as spoiled, arrogant, and self-aggrandizing as he assembles his father and brothers to share his dreams in which they will all one day bow down to him (Gen. 37:5–10).

These Genesis Jews of inherited status become the collective “Children of Israel” (the family of Jacob, whose name is converted to Israel)—and with this identity they go down to Egypt. There they proliferate and grow into a people (Heb. *am*), eventually filling the land of Egypt. The Children of Israel are no longer simply a nuclear family but a nation, and as a result the Bible struggles with their name: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the *People* of the Children of Israel (Heb. *Am B’nei Yisrael*) are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase’ . . . But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Children of Israel” (Exod. 1:8–12; emphasis added).

Here they are no longer merely the literal children of Jacob, but a people distinct from the Egyptians in whose midst they live. And

for a moment, through the mediating words of Pharaoh, the Bible recognizes this transition by calling them, “the *People* of the Children of Israel”—the only instance in the Bible in which this term is used. Henceforth, the nomenclature “people” is dropped, and they revert back to simply being the “Children of Israel”: a nation now, but one still identified and defined through its ethnic roots.

In essence, after Abraham, Jewishness comes to be defined by the totally passive act of being born into Abraham’s family.

“I Have Remembered”: Salvation and the Guaranteed Covenant

The laconic, unblinking assessments of our ancestors’ flaws and dysfunctions do not end with the original patriarchs of Genesis. The book of Exodus never distinguishes the character of the Children of Israel from that of their Egyptian taskmasters—some superior attribute by virtue of which they might warrant salvation and the gift of liberation from Egypt. All that is mentioned is their—and God’s—connection to their forefathers:

And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, this My appellation for all eternity.’ Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: ‘The Lord, the God of your Fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, “I have taken note of you, and what is being done to you in Egypt, and I have declared, I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey”’” (Exod. 3:15–17).

All the Jewish people need to do to warrant God’s salvation is to be the descendants of their ancestors. As God’s chosen people, their

suffering alone is sufficient to activate divine intervention on their behalf: “I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, *and I have remembered My covenant*. Say therefore to the Israelite people: ‘I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and through extraordinary chastisement’” (Exod. 6:5–6; emphasis added).

Here, too, as with Abraham’s circumcision, redemption of the Genesis Jews is conditioned on the people’s willingness to publicly distinguish themselves from their surrounding culture, to choose to belong and identify with their Genesis-based Jewishness. Only those who mark their doorposts—a symbol for the home—with the blood of the Passover sacrifice (see Exod. 12) are in turn distinguished by God from the Egyptians and their fate. As in the case with circumcision, here the blood is similarly designated with the word “sign” (Heb. *ot*) (see Exod. 12:7, 13).¹⁰

Following the model of the Exodus from Egypt, in the future, when God’s patience and compassion run out and God pours God’s wrath upon us—even to the extent of banishing us from the Promised Land—one dominant Genesis-influenced biblical motif posits that ultimately, redemption, a return to the land and God’s blessing, is guaranteed. Like the Children of Israel in Egypt, we too are guaranteed redemption by mere virtue of our pedigree and the suffering we experience:

Even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling my covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God. I will remember in their favor the covenant of the ancestors, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the Lord. (Lev. 26:44–45)¹¹

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah declares: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her *that her term of service is over, that her iniquity is expiated*; for she has

received at the hands of the Lord double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:1–2; emphasis added).¹²

Comfort and redemption are guaranteed and will come when the allotted time arrives, as a result of God’s grace and as the consequence of the original covenant. As was the case in Egypt, future salvation is in no way contingent on our behavior, on our earning or deserving it.

“A Stiff-Necked People”: The Genesis Jews of Exodus (and Beyond)

Both during the Exodus from Egypt and afterwards, in classic “Genesis mode,” the Bible continues to depict the Jewish people as uninspired by the divine word. In what essentially encapsulates the story of Moses’s prophecy, when God tells him to tell Pharaoh to let God’s people go, Moses replies, “The Israelites will not listen to me” (Exod. 6:12)—and as the continuation of the story reveals, he is right.

At every step of their Exodus journey to their Promised Land, the Children of Israel seem a reluctant party at best. Despite witnessing God’s miraculous power, at any crossroads of danger or uncertainty, they complain, rebel, sin, and even plead to be allowed to return to a life of slavery in Egypt:

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Lord. And they said to Moses, “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying: ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” (Exod. 14:10–12)¹³

Summarizing their life together over forty years in the desert, as Israel is about to be brought into the Promised Land, predating but echoing Nehemiah’s reading, Moses avows:

Hear O Israel! . . . *It is not because of your virtues and your rectitude that you will be able to possess this country*; but it is because of their wickedness that the Lord your God is dispossessing those nations before you, and in order to fulfill the oath that the Lord made to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *Know, then, that it is not for any virtue of yours that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess; for you are a stiff-necked people.* Remember, never forget, how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the wilderness: from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you reached this place, you have continued defiant toward the Lord. (Deut. 9:1–7; emphasis added)

The Bible takes great care to consistently depict the Jewish people as nothing more than a people with a story of shared ethnic roots. They inherit the status of God’s “Chosen People” not because they embody unique values or noble attributes, but as a family heirloom, and this inherited status seems to exhaust the content of their Jewish identity.

“Saving” the Book of Genesis

For many years, I returned again and again to the book of Genesis, and each time was left deeply troubled by its content and message—or rather, its seeming emptiness. While rich in human drama and insight, with the possible exceptions of Abraham and Rebecca, no figures seem worthy of emulation; no outstanding individuals emerge who seem suited to be role models of any kind. Since the Bible is clearly not a book of history—but a book aimed at shaping the values and thoughts that ought to embody our lives—what purpose do we find in the fifty chapters of overtly mediocre-to-worse ancestors? What lessons about Judaism does it mean to teach us?

I wondered, along with the Rabbis, why it was necessary to include this book in our canon. Isn’t the Bible essentially a book of commandments and laws—and if so, why not begin with the first commandment given to the Jewish people (Exod. 12:2), skipping over a patriarchal