YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

**Prof. Samuel Lebens**

**Shiur #11: A Kingdom of Priests**

In last week’s lesson, we saw that, if they obey the terms of the covenant, Israel shall be a “treasured possession among all the peoples… a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We also explored what it means to be a “holy nation.” Our question this week is this: What is it to be a “kingdom of priests”? The template for this lesson derives from a comment of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: just like “the priest in the midst of a single people was this nation to be in the midst of universal mankind.”[[2]](#footnote-2) If we understand what the Bible requires of priests, within the Jewish people, we’ll have a better understanding of what these verses are demanding of the Jewish people, within the wider world.

**The Functions of Priesthood**

In the Bible, a sub-section of the tribe of Levi is set aside – indeed *sanctified* – to serve as an hereditary priesthood.[[3]](#footnote-3) Here is a non-exhaustive list of the functions that priestswere supposed to play:

1. bringing the Temple sacrifices,[[4]](#footnote-4)
2. maintaining the Temple (together with the other Levites),[[5]](#footnote-5)
3. interceding with God, on behalf of the Jewish people, by
	1. using the miraculous breastplate of the high priest, to receive communications from on high,[[6]](#footnote-6) and
	2. entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, to make atonement for the Jewish people,[[7]](#footnote-7)
4. teaching the Torah to the people of Israel, and rendering legal judgement,[[8]](#footnote-8)
5. diagnosing cases of the spiritual malady known as *tzaraat* – declaring infected people and buildings “ritually impure” and managing their recovery,[[9]](#footnote-9) and
6. blessing the Jewish people.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Given this blueprint, it doesn’t take much imagination to conceive of what it might mean for the entire people of Israel to function as priests, relative to humanity at large. Corresponding to item 1, the Jewish people would arrange for sacrifices to be brought for the welfare and wellbeing of the nations of the world. Rabbinic tradition – inspired by the table of nations[[11]](#footnote-11) – declares that the nations of the world sub-divide into 70 parent nationalities. On the festival of Sukkot, public funds would pay for the sacrifice of 70 bulls[[12]](#footnote-12) – one for each parent nation. The fact that this practice was suspended by the destruction of the Temple led Rabbi Yochanan to lament:

Woe unto the nations [of the world] that lost [something] and do not [even] know what they lost. When the Temple stands, the [seventy bulls sacrificed on the] altar [during the festival of *Sukkot*] atone for them. And now [that the Temple is destroyed], who atones for them?[[13]](#footnote-13)

Moreover, by financially supporting its own priesthood and the running of the Temple, the Jewish people made it possible for individual gentiles, who may want to bring voluntary sacrifices of their own, to do just that.[[14]](#footnote-14) This corresponds to the second item on our list.

The first two items might require a Temple in Jerusalem, but the others don’t. Just as Abraham interceded on behalf of the people of Sodom and Amora, Jewish people can intercede with God, on behalf of the nations. This corresponds to item 3a on our list – or, at least, to some part of it. The high priest would pose questions to God on behalf of the Israelites, and would then receive information back from God, via the illuminated stones of his breastplate. Jews praying to God on behalf of gentiles would parallel the posing of questions. In what sense might Jews provide a service for the gentile world that would parallel the sort of divine communication that the high priest received via the breastplate?

Joseph’s stewardship of the Egyptian economy, during its 14-year cycle of boom and bust, represents the injection of God’s wisdom into the political economy of a major gentile nation – note how Joseph emphasizes the brains behind his insights are not his own[[15]](#footnote-15) – and might parallel God’s wisdom being communicated to the Jews via the breastplate of the high priest. The various prophecies that Jeremiah receives for specific nations and cities,[[16]](#footnote-16) and the prophecy that Jonah receives to deliver to the people of Nineveh, also serve as parallels to the high priest receiving messages for Israel and communicating them. Perhaps even the outsized contribution that Jewish scientists, economists, and psychologists have made to the state of contemporary knowledge can be said to serve as a parallel to 3a. We’ll come back to 3b, and its notion of atonement, in the next section.

Just as the priests were tasked with educating Jews about God and their responsibilities to Him, the Jewish people can educate the nations of the world about God and *their* (Noahide) responsibilities to Him. This corresponds to item 4.

The fact that the priests were tasked with diagnosing spiritual maladies might entail that the Jews, as priests for the entire world, are tasked with diagnosing the various spiritual maladies that can take hold of a given culture at a given time. This moves us back to the notion of the Jews as a counter-cultural voice in the conversation of mankind.[[17]](#footnote-17) This corresponds to item 5.

Item 6 on the list brings me to an anecdote. One year, on the festival of Sukkot, we found ourselves in South Bend, Indiana. We had just moved into town. On the morning of the first day, we realized we didn’t have a candle burning at home, which would allow us to transfer fire and heat up our food. Perhaps we’d lit a 24-hour candle, and it had gone out unexpectedly. Or perhaps, because we’d only just moved into a new home and life was somewhat chaotic, we’d forgotten to light it. I don’t remember.

The laws of a festival, unlike a Shabbat, allow for the *transfer* of a pre-existing flame, to cook one’s food, but not for the ignition of a new flame. I decided to go to the home of the nearest halakhically observant family, who would surely have remembered to light a long-lasting candle for the two-day festival. I went with my own candle in hand, hoping that I could walk a flame back home from their place. In the autumnal conditions of Indiana, this plan proved a little harder than anticipated. The flame kept getting blown out by the wind. I attempted the journey three or four times before I was successful.

Little did I know, but a non-Jewish family nearby was having their lunch and watching my peculiar behavior through their window. We later became close friends, and thus I found out about the discussion that my multiple attempts at candle transportation had inspired. Naturally, they were wondering what I was doing. One of them suggested that, since I was new to the neighborhood, I was walking around and blessing the streets surrounding my new home. What a beautiful idea. Biblical priests are charged with blessing the people of Israel, and the people of Israel are supposed to be to the world what their priests are to them. Accordingly, we *should* be concerned with blessing the people of the world. I was humbled – even embarrassed – by the prosaic explanation of my candle carrying. My new friends were reminding me that I had a greater role to play in this world, namely, to be a blessing to those around me.

**The Suffering Servant**

A key function of the sacrificial rites, overseen by the priests, was to bring atonement to Israel. This function is especially highlighted by item 3b of our list. Rabbi Yochanan implies that we can no longer play this role for the nations while the Temple lies in ruins.[[18]](#footnote-18) But Rabbi Yochanan’s claim might hang upon how we read the following passage from the book of Isaiah.

Behold, my servant will succeed. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were astonished at you – his appearance was disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness – so he will startle many nations. Kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will behold.

Who has believed what we have heard, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or beauty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should find him pleasing. He was despised, shunned by men, a man of suffering, and familiar with disease. As one who hid his face from us, he was despised, and we held him of no account. Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing, our pains that he suffered, while we accounted him plagued, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; He bore the chastisement that made us whole, and by his bruises we were healed. We all went astray like sheep, each of us going our own way; and God visited upon him the guilt of all of us. He was maltreated, yet he was submissive. He did not open his mouth; like a sheep being led to slaughter, like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her, he did not open his mouth… Out of his anguish, he will see and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will make the many righteous, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will give him a portion among the many and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he exposed himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, whereas he bore the sin of the many, and made intercession for transgressors.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Upon the crucifixion of Jesus, this text became supremely important to his followers. They claim that the servant who suffers, and ultimately dies, to atone for the sins of others, is the messiah. His suffering and death, they argue, offer the rest of us vicarious atonement. Though he was without sin, it was “our sickness that he was bearing, our pains that he suffered.” Though his compatriots rejected him, thinking him to be “plagued, smitten by God, and afflicted,” he was in fact, “wounded for our transgressions, … crushed for our iniquities,” and though other people “deserved the punishment,” he “bore the sin of the many.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Was Isaiah *really* referring to the messiah? It isn’t only Christians who read the text this way. In fact, Targum Yonatan explicitly identifies the servant with the messiah.[[21]](#footnote-21) The Talmud describes Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi meeting the messiah, at the gates of Rome, and finds him suffering in terms drawn directly from this passage of Isaiah.[[22]](#footnote-22) But other views have been more popular with Jewish readers.

**Jeremiah**

Saadya Gaon argued that Isaiah is actually referring, through his image of the suffering servant, to Jeremiah.[[23]](#footnote-23) One might accuse Rav Saadya of a desperate attempt to move the focus away from the messiah, and therefore to undermine whatever force the Christians thought this passage to have. But that would be unfair. As Mordechai Schreiber demonstrates, there are elaborate and sustained literary allusions in this passage to the words and images of the book of Jeremiah.[[24]](#footnote-24)

As Schreiber notes: during the first commonwealth – before the Babylonian exile – many prophets, “from Samuel through [to] Jeremiah, failed to wean their people away from pagan practices and immorality…. The end result of Israel’s spiritual and moral waywardness was the destruction of the First Temple and the Exile.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Those who returned at the end of 70 years in exile, by contrast, were “believing Jews.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

They were no longer the Israelites and Judeans of old, a tribal people steeped in syncretism. Their encounter with the gods of Babylon and Persia did not turn them into pagans. On the contrary, it helped them assimilate the teachings of their prophets and become people of faith.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Schreiber goes on to argue that, more than any other prophet, it was Jeremiah who had planted the seeds of faith, on the eve of the exile, that allowed the religion to survive.

Jeremiah lived during the last years of the Judean monarchy. He foresaw the coming destruction of Jerusalem, and spent his years as a solitary voice calling his people to turn back from their evil ways. He was scorned and ridiculed, and on several occasions he came within a hair’s-breadth of losing his life. It was only after the fall of Judah that the exiles in Babylon began to realize that his was the voice of God… Indeed, Jeremiah should be credited for saving Judaism. He did much more than prophesy doom. With the help of the scribe Baruch ben-Neriah, he began the process of preserving the Law and transitioning Judaism from a religion centered around Temple sacrifices to a faith based on Torah, prayer and ethical behavior.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The second half of the book of Isaiah clearly refers to events that take place at the end of the Babylonian exile. And it should come as no surprise that, when the Jews returned from Babylon and cast their mind back to Jeremiah, who suffered greatly so that their religion should continue – whom their grandparents had tormented, and ridiculed, but who had actually suffered, so to speak, on their behalf – he should appear to them exactly as Isaiah describes him. Schreiber makes a strong argument, even before he turns to the various literary parallels between the book of Jeremiah and the passage in question. If the suffering servant is Jeremiah, the verses that appear to be describing a process of vicarious atonement should be taken figuratively. Jeremiah’s suffering didn’t wipe away anybody’s sins. But despite our sinful behavior, Jeremiah was willing to suffer on our behalf, so that our Judaism would survive the coming exile.

Perhaps the suffering servant *was* modeled on Jeremiah. But even so, a careful examination of the context of our passage will make it hard to deny that the servant is ultimately a metaphor for the Jewish people, taken as a collective.

**Israel is the Suffering Servant**

There are fourteen references to an anonymous singular servant in the book of Isaiah, leading up to our passage. Nine of them are very clearly references to Israel as a corporate entity.[[29]](#footnote-29) One of them is best understood as a reference to Isaiah himself (50:10). The other four are less clear; each one could be read either as referring to Israel or to Isaiah.[[30]](#footnote-30) Given this data, David Berger is right to claim that “a substantial argument can be made that as a matter of straightforward interpretation… one should come to Isaiah 52–53 with the expectation that the servant is Israel.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Moreover, the suffering servant, who first emerges in Isaiah 52:13, emerges after a passage in which Isaiah is talking explicitly about Israel, “in the sight of all the nations”:

Raise a shout together, O ruins of Jerusalem! For God will comfort this people, will redeem Jerusalem. God will bare a holy arm, in the sight of all the nations, and the very ends of the earth shall see the victory of our God. Turn, turn away, touch naught impure as you depart from there; keep pure, as you go forth from there, you who bear the vessels of God! For you will not depart in haste, nor will you leave in flight; for God is marching before you; the God of Israel is your rear guard.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Then, without an open paragraph break to indicate a change of topic,[[33]](#footnote-33) Isaiah continues into our passage, “Indeed, My servant shall prosper, be exalted and raised to great heights…” Apparently, Israel and the servant are in fact the same topic of discussion – indeed, they are one and the same thing.

And thus, whether or not the metaphorical figure is based upon Jeremiah, it’s quite clear that the figure stands for Israel at the end of days. We are, of course, converging upon the influential reading of Rashi.[[34]](#footnote-34) The suffering servant is Israel. But once we enter this reading, and we’re thinking about Israel in the end of days and in the eyes of the nations, then the notion of vicarious atonement comes back to the fore. The gentiles had seen the Jews as “plagued, smitten by God, and afflicted.” But in fact, we had been bearing their sins, for which they had deserved to be punished: “wounded for our transgressions, … crushed for our iniquities.”

Some argue that Rashi’s exegesis was motivated by the desire to comfort his flock in the midst of antisemitic Christendom, especially in the wake of the First Crusade. In this understanding, not only did Rashi want to undermine the Christian reading, according to which the suffering servant is Jesus, but he also wanted to uplift the Jews, by giving their suffering an eschatological significance and suggesting that, one day, their great sacrifices will be recognized by all.[[35]](#footnote-35) But David Berger is surely right to point out what a strange sort of consolation this would have been. It amounts to saying, don’t let your brutal oppression depress you too much, since your bloodthirsty oppressors will ultimately receive atonement through your suffering. This consequence of Rashi’s reading was so offensive to a number of other exegetes that they went to great lengths to avoid it.

Take, for example, the verse, “He bore the chastisement that made us whole, and by his bruises we were healed.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Rabbi Yeshaya of Trani interprets it such that the gentiles are saying, “when we bruised him [i.e., the people of Israel], we felt so happy that it was as if we were cured of our afflictions.”[[37]](#footnote-37) That is hardly the reading that jumps off the page. “What we are witnessing,” Berger concludes, “is the exercise of Herculean efforts to avoid what he would normally have seen as the straightforward meaning.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Read straightforwardly, the verse is describing Israel’s vicarious atonement for those who once abused her. Rabbi Yeshaya doesn’t want to allow Jewish pain to atone for gentile sin.

Rabbi David Kimchi (the Radak) couldn’t escape the conclusion that verses 4 and 5 of Chapter 53 were talking about vicarious atonement. But unlike Rashi, he “thoroughly and vehemently rejects this theology.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Instead, he argues that these verses report the falsehoods that the gentiles will utter when they first come to see the truth of Judaism. Still clinging to some of their faulty Christological theology, they will “speculate that Israel’s suffering in exile must have resulted from vicarious atonement.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Heaven forfend that such a thing could be *true*! Rather, it is a falsehood to which many gentiles will cling, in the course of their faltering journey toward enlightenment. But in verses 11 and 12, these speculations seem to receive Divine endorsement. To avoid this consequence, Radak must deny, against all appearances to the contrary, that verses 11 and 12 echo the content of verses 4 and 5. These later verses, he insists, declare that good will come, even to the gentiles, from Israel’s forbearance in the face of her suffering, and that Israel bore their suffering, inflicted by the sins of the gentiles, with grace.[[41]](#footnote-41) Nothing here, for the Radak, amounts to an assertion, by God or His prophet, that Israel’s pain brings *atonement* to anyone.

Finally, Berger turns to the polemical work of Rabbi Moshe ha-Kohen of Tordesilla.[[42]](#footnote-42) His exegesis causes him to transition quite suddenly from verse to verse. On his reading, the suffering servant is sometimes a metaphor for all of Israel, and the outside observers are the nations of the world. At other points, he insists, the suffering servant is a metaphor for the *righteous* among Israel, and the outside observers are the non-righteous *Jews*, who receive vicarious atonement from the suffering of their righteous brethren. As Berger concludes, Rabbi Moshe “sees vicarious atonement as the unavoidable interpretation” of certain verses in our passage, “but is unwilling to have the Jewish people suffer in order to atone for the nations.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Righteous Jews can suffer for their non-righteous brethren, but not for antisemitic gentiles.

Berger’s three examples (Rabbi Yeshaya, the Radak, and Rabbi Moshe), and the “manifestly forced acrobatics” that they adopted “in order to avoid” Rashi’s interpretation, serve as convincing evidence for the exegetical fit between Rashi’s reading and the Biblical text.[[44]](#footnote-44) It’s almost as if the other commentators protest too much! On this basis, Berger concludes that Rashi likely endorsed his reading *despite* its running contrary to his theological interests. It didn’t offer him much comfort. Yet, he offered this reading because it was the most compelling and straightforward understanding of the Biblical metaphor at hand. Other exegetes tried to escape the implications of vicarious atonement by suggesting that the suffering servant suffers not *for* the sins of his oppressors, but simply *because* of their sins – i.e., their sinful oppression of him.[[45]](#footnote-45) But even if this strategy works for some of the verses, it’s a stretch to make it work for them all. Rashi’s interpretation is, I have come to believe, the most plausible reading of what the text is actually trying to tell us.

I have always struggled with the Christian notion that a person – however perfect – should have to suffer unjustly in order to atone for others. Despite reading various accounts of the Christian doctrine of “the atonement,” I have never been able to understand the mechanics, justice, or necessity of such a divine transaction, in order for sinners to find atonement. Vicarious atonement doesn’t make sense to me. With Rashi’s reading of the suffering servant – a reading that strikes me as the straightforward intention of Isaiah’s words – the questions only become harder.

How can it possibly be fair, and consistent with God’s goodness, that the suffering of the Jews should help their *oppressors* achieve salvation? Once again, my disappointing answer is that we’re not yet looking for philosophical justifications of the Biblical data. That will come later in this project. Instead, I merely want the question placed on the table. Part of the Bible’s model for the Jewish election does seem to suggest that the Jewish people serve as both the priest and – in some respect – the sacrificial lamb for the nations. Through our suffering, we bring them atonement. It doesn’t seem fair. It doesn’t seem right. But it does seem to be there in the Bible.

This also relates to last week’s investigation of holiness*.* If there’s a sense in which Israel lies more squarely than other nations at the center of God’s attention, and if it’s true that God’s providence flows more directly to Israel than to other nations, then we might expect that Israel is more often a target for Divine retribution and justice in general, as well as for vicarious atonement. The litany of curses in Leviticus and Deuteronomy make it clear that being God’s covenantal partners will bring a terrible price for non-compliance.

Perhaps those terrible curses appear more as a threat than as a promise. We have a principle that negative prophecies, unlike positive prophecies, need not necessarily come true. They can, in general, be related to as *threats*. God reserves the right, so to speak, to revoke any threat.[[46]](#footnote-46) Indeed, God threatens Adam and Eve with the prospect of dying on the day that they transgress His commandment.[[47]](#footnote-47) But they don’t die on that day.[[48]](#footnote-48) The Torah tells us that God punishes later generations for the sins of their ancestors[[49]](#footnote-49) – even though humans are forbidden from punishing children for the sins of their fathers.[[50]](#footnote-50) Ezekiel later tells us that God would *never* punish a later generation for the sins of their ancestors.[[51]](#footnote-51) Perhaps the best way to relate to this is to imagine that, as humanity develops, and theological understanding becomes more widespread, the God who presents Himself to a younger humanity as a fearsome force can later be known more intimately. Fearsome, He certainly is, but also merciful and just. God wasn’t *deceiving* us, in His earlier descriptions, since they had the status of a *threat*; a threat can’t straightforwardly be called *false* just because the being that issues the threat reserves the right to revoke it (and characteristically will do so). This is perhaps the best way to understand the teaching of Rabbi Yossi bar Hanina:

Moses said: “He visits the transgression of the fathers upon the sons” (Exodus 34:7). Ezekiel came and revoked it: “The soul that sins, it shall die [but not the children of that soul]” (Ezekiel 18:4).[[52]](#footnote-52)

Surely, Ezekiel can’t *revoke* what Moses said – not if Moses was the greatest of all prophets.[[53]](#footnote-53) Instead, perhaps the idea is that, in the time of Ezekiel, God was ready to dial down the pedagogic force of the *threats* found in the Pentateuch, in order to reveal more of Himself to His people.

There are verses that make it seem as if God takes pleasure in punishing the Jewish people when they transgress.[[54]](#footnote-54) Other verses make it sound as if the punishments are nothing more than the consequences of God hiding His face from us, rather than directly *causing* the curses to come.[[55]](#footnote-55) To render these verses consistent with one another, and with the theological axioms laid down in lesson 1, we should allow that some verses are uttered for their pedagogic effect – as threats rather than promises – and that other verses cut closer to the theological heart of the matter. But even with these caveats in place, it’s clear that being chosen is not always going to be easy. In the very verse in which God declares that we are the only nation He has known intimately, He also tells us, “That is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Other nations don’t get punished as often, or as harshly. Gentile nations don’t suffer to atone for the sins of others. In the words of Tevye the milkman, “I know. I know. We are your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?” The fairness of this arrangement, especially if it includes vicarious atonement for those who sinned but didn’t suffer, is something to which we’ll have to return.

One final feature to note about the chosen people being a kingdom of priests: it allows for the status to be at once a burden, a responsibility, a privilege, and yet *not* to entail any inherent excellence or supremacy. This might not be as easy for a gentile, who hasn’t grown up as a member of a people with its own hereditary priesthood, to grasp. But regular Jews, as far as I can tell, don’t tend to feel at all inferior to *kohanim*. We know that God has chosen them to be, in a sense, an elect within the elect. He has chosen them to minister to Him,[[57]](#footnote-57) and they have a holiness that doesn’t fall upon other Jews.[[58]](#footnote-58) But we don’t think that they are *better* that us, or closer to God, or more beloved. Most of our greatest religious role models are not *kohanim*. To model the election of the Jews upon such a priesthood is, therefore, to prevent a descent into Jewish supremacy.

1. Exodus 19:5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Letter 8 of the *Nineteen Letters*. See also Seforno to Exodus 19:6, s.v. *atem tihyu li mamlekhet kohanim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Numbers 8:14-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g., Leviticus 1:1-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E.g., Numbers 3:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Exodus 18:12-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Yom Kippur service is outlined in Chapter 16 of Leviticus. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Deuteronomy 33:10, in the context of Moses’s blessing to the tribe of Levi. Since the priesthood was maintained by public taxes, they would be able to dedicate their time to study of the law. This explains why the Torah presumes the judges in the high court of Jerusalem would be priests – referring in Deuteronomy 17:9 and elsewhere to the “Levitical priests” to be found there. However, the Torah is at the same time explicit that this is nothing more than a presumption; it anticipates that there will be learned individuals who are not supported by taxation, who emerge on their own merit to become experts in the law and thereby qualified to judge. Accordingly, the verse describes a process in which people seek judgement from “the Levitical priests” or simply from “the judge who shall function at that time” (ibid.) – i.e., not *necessarily* a “Levitical priest.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Chapters 13 and 14 of the books of Leviticus deal with these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Numbers 6:22-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Lesson 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Numbers 29:12-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. BT *Sukkot* 55b [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Rabbis understood this to be the case, given their reading of Leviticus 22:18, in BT *Menachot* 73b. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Genesis 40:8, 41:16. Indeed, Pharaoh himself seems to recognize the Godly source of Joseph’s wisdom (Genesis 41:38-39). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, Jeremiah Chapters 46-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This notion first came up in lesson 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As we cited him above, BT *Sukkot* 55b. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Isaiah 52:13-53:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See John 12:38 and Romans 10:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Targum Yonatan* to Isaiah 52:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. BT *Sanhedrin* 98a. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Joseph Alobaidi (ed. and trans.), *The Messiah in Isaiah 53: The Commentaries of Saadia Gaon, Salmon ben Yeruḥam, and Yefet ben Eli on Is 52:13–53:12* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Mordecai Schreiber, “The real ‘suffering servant’: Decoding a controversial passage in the Bible,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37/1 (2009): 35-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Note that we’re talking about the Jews who returned from Babylon. We’re not talking about the very assimilated Jews that the returnees discovered, in Israel, upon their return. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., pp. 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Isaiah 41:8–9; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Isaiah 42:1; 42:19; 43:10; 44:26; 53:11. Berger (cited below) seems to count the verses differently. He counts seven unequivocal references to Israel as a servant (41:8–9; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 49:3), where I count nine. He counts one that probably refers to the prophet (50:10), and a remaining five, which he takes to be unclear. But he doesn’t give references for these five verses, so I wasn’t able to compare and contrast his reading and my own. Either way, the data has much the same import on both counts. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. David Berger, “Rashi on Isaiah 53: Exegetical Judgment or Response to the Crusade?” In Ehud Krinis, Nabih Bashir, Sara Offenberg, and Shalom Sadik (eds.), *Polemical and Exegetical Polarities in Medieval Jewish Cultures: Studies in Honour of Daniel J. Lasker* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 301-315, p. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Isaiah 52:9-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. There is merely a *closed* paragraph break, signalling a new theme within the same overall topic. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Rashi, to Isaiah 53:3, s.v. *nivzeh v’chadal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. As adherents to this view, Berger cites: Avraham Grossman, “The Commentary of Rashi on Isaiah and the Jewish-Christian Debate,” in David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Elliot R. Wolfson(eds.) *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012); Judah Rosenthal, “*Ha-Pulmus ha-Anti-Notzri be-Rashi al ha-Tanakh*,” in Judah Rosenthal, *Mechkarim u-Mekorot* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1967); and Harvey Sicherman and Gilad J. Gevaryahu, “Rashi and the First Crusade: Commentary, Liturgy, Legend,” *Judaism* 48 (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Isaiah 53:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Avraham Yosef Werthaimer (ed.), *Peirush Neviʾim u-Ketuvim le-Rabbeinu Yeshayah ha-Rishon mi-Trani*, (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 179–80. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Berger, “Rashi on Isaiah 53,” p. 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., p. 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., citing Radak’s commentary to Isaiah 53:4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. I recognize that I’m moving between speaking of Israel as a collection of people and speaking of her as a single entity. This mode of speech is almost forced on us by the fact that Isaiah does the same thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Yehudah Shamir, *Rabbi Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and His Book, Ezer ha-Emuna – A Chapter in the History of the Judeo-Christian Controversy*, 2 vols. (dissertation) (Coconut Grove, FL: Field Research Projects, 1972), part I.4 (edition of the Hebrew text). The relevant passage of *Ezer Ha-Emuna* is reproduced, in English, in Samuel R. Driver and Adolf Neubauer (trans.), *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters* (Oxford, 1877), volume 2, pp. 116–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Berger, “Rashi on Isaiah 52,” p. 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See, for example, the Ibn Ezra on Isaiah 53:4-5, and on verse 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. This can be inferred from Jeremiah 28:9, and from the fact that Jonah’s “prophecy” (i.e., Jonah 3:4) didn’t come true, once the people of Nineveh repented. Rabbi Sacks sees the revocability of negative prophecy as sitting at the heart of what Biblical prophecy is all about. He writes, “The very concept of prophecy is the warning of a future that will happen unless—unless there is a change of heart. Israel had prophets; Greece had oracles. The difference between them is that an oracle predicts the future, while a prophet warns against it. If the foretold future comes to pass, the oracle has succeeded, but the prophet has failed. Judaism is therefore the systematic rejection of tragedy in the name of hope.” Jonathan Sacks, *Letter in the Scroll: Understanding our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Genesis 2:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Although some argue that God’s word was fulfilled since, on that day, they became mortal. See Ramban, Genesis 2:17, s.v. *lo tokhal mimenu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Exodus 20:5, 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Deuteronomy 24:16. See BT *Brachot* 7a, for a resolution of the tensions between Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 24:16; one that doesn’t relate to Ezekiel. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ezekiel 18:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. BT *Makkot* 24a. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Deuteronomy 34:10, and see the 7th of Maimonides’ 13 principles of faith in his commentary to the Mishna, introduction to Chapter 10 of Tractate *Sanhedrin*. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Deuteronomy 28:63. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Deuteronomy 31:17-18; 32:20, and Isaiah 54:7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Amos 3:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. E.g., Numbers 18:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. E.g., Leviticus 22:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)