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**

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**Shiur #24 – Election Reductivism:  
Rabbi Netanel and the Prophet Mohammed**

Last week I outlined Saadya Gaon’s understanding of the election. Admittedly, that outline was somewhat speculative, since Saadya’s view had to be reconstructed from fragments scattered throughout his magnum opus, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions.* The somewhat surprising results can be summarized as follows:

1. God never left His human creatures without a true religion, demonstrated to be true in the eyes of the masses by way of tangible miracles. Judaism was not the first such religion.
2. The Jews are the only nation that succeeded in preserving the true religion that they had been given by God, handing it down from generation to generation.
3. God has no particularly special relationship with the Jewish people *per se*. Whenever the Bible speaks as if God has special affection for them, as opposed to any other nation, the verses are to be taken as an encouraging figure of speech.
4. All worthy people will share in a universal afterlife.
5. It’s true that the Bible promises special treatment for Jews in the messianic age that will *precede* the universal afterlife. This special treatment is nothing other than a just reward and compensation for their efforts and pains (including the suffering of antisemitism) in preserving their true religion over the course of history, when other communities abandoned and/or forgot their own.

I subjected this view to scrutiny, and found it to be in deep tension with the weight of Biblical, Rabbinic, and liturgical traditions. Those tensions could be navigated in various ways. Verses could be massaged. Non-halakhic writings of the Rabbis might legitimately be overlooked, according to some *Geonim*, when philosophical considerations pull us in other directions. Liturgical descriptions of the election could be interpreted as some sort of Divinely endorsed, encouraging mantra, without being taken literally. But the view also gave rise to some philosophical concerns:

1. It posits the existence of true (and therefore monotheistic) religions, underwritten by grand public miracles, before the rise of Judaism. But this is an empirical claim that has no evidence to back it up. The Bible certainly talks of individual theists before Abraham, but does it mention whole monotheistic religions backed up by public miracles? Is there any non-Biblical evidence to substantiate this claim?
2. Despite being motivated by the desire to render the election compatible with God’s justice and fairness, the resulting picture still seems unfair. Non-Jews born today are not to blame for the fact that their ancestors forgot their religion. Admittedly, the fact that Judaism has survived means that God might not feel the need to reveal another true religion, since gentiles can be guided by Judaism. But Judaism doesn’t actively seek out converts, and if gentiles learn about the Torah and decide to observe the seven Noahide laws without converting, they still miss out on the additional reward that goes to the Jews. This constitutes a massive opportunity cost that seems incompatible with Divine justice.

Saadya is unmoved by the first problem. Even without external evidence, God’s justice “behooves us to believe” that such religions must have existed.[[1]](#footnote-1) In response to the second problem, Saadya could claim that he has removed any hint of Divine favoritism from the doctrine of the election. Any remaining injustice is a matter of the basic social inequality of birth, and therefore a problem that all theists, and not just believers in the election, must confront.

But there may be ways to extend Saadya’s view of the election while avoiding our two philosophical concerns altogether. This route is suggested by the work of Rabbi Netanel al-Fayumi.

**The Garden of Wisdom**

Rabbi Netanel al-Fayumi was born in 1090 and died in 1165. His name indicates that, like Saadya Gaon (Saadya ibn Yusuf al-Fayumi), he hailed from the Egyptian town of Fayum – although it may be that his family adopted this name purely in deference to Saadya Gaon, despite having no roots in Egypt.[[2]](#footnote-2) Rabbi Netanel was a leader of Yemenite Jewry. His son, Rabbi Yaakov, became the Rosh Yeshiva of the Yemenite community, and was the addressee of the Rambam’s famous *Iggeret Teiman* (Epistle to Yemen). Indeed, in that letter, the Rambam heaps praise upon Rabbi Yaakov’s father, lamenting his passing and suggesting that it was in Rabbi Netanel’s merit that his son rose to be the leader of the Yemenite community.

For you, his son, have risen in his stead to promote religion and observance, to further justice and righteousness, to obey His precepts and laws, and to abide by His covenant.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Rabbi Netanel’s work had very little influence over subsequent Jewish thought; his reputation remained mainly in Yemen. Nevertheless, he represents a significant link in the chain of Yemenite Judaism, responsible for keeping Judaism alive in that corner of the world, and was somebody who commanded the respect of Maimonides. In his book, *The Garden of Wisdom*, he writes:

Know then, my brother, that nothing prevents God from sending unto His world whomsoever He wishes whenever He wishes, since the world of holiness sends forth emanations unceasingly from the light world to the coarse world to liberate the souls from the sea of matter – the world of nature – and from destruction in the flames of hell. Even before the revelation of the Law He sent prophets to the nations, as sages of blessed memory explain, “Seven prophesied to the nations of the world before the giving of the Torah: Laban, Jethro, Balaam, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.”[[4]](#footnote-4) And again after its revelation nothing prevented Him from sending to them whom He wishes that the world might not remain without religion.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As in Saadya Gaon’s account, we have here a God who doesn’t want the world to “remain without religion.” But a key difference is this: even *after* the revelation of Moses, Rabbi Netanel sees no reason why God might not *continue* to send prophets to nations other than the Jews. Rabbi Netanel insists that the Torah can never be altered or replaced. The fact that the Torah testifies that its teachings “shall not be forgotten from the mouth of [Israel’s] seed”[[6]](#footnote-6) is, he writes, “proof sufficient that it will not be annulled or abrogated.”[[7]](#footnote-7) But non-Jewish prophets can continue to be sent to enlighten the non-Jews.

This makes room for Rabbi Netanel’s most distinctive and controversial claim. He suggests that Mohammed was a genuine prophet sent by God to the gentile populations of the Arabian Peninsula. Mohammed’s message wasn’t relevant to the Jews, but that doesn’t mean that it was false, or that it didn’t come from God. Readers may be quick to jump to the conclusion that Rabbi Netanel was writing under the weight of religious persecution, at the hands of Muslim power, and so said things he couldn’t have seriously believed. I will discuss that claim later. In the meantime, let’s engage with the content of his arguments, without paying attention to the possibility of unstated motivations, if only to see where those arguments lead.

Later Muslims may have corrupted some of the teachings of their prophet, but the Koran itself, Rabbi Netanel argues, is perfectly consistent with continued Jewish commitment to Judaism. His analysis of Koranic verses leads him to conclude: “Mohammed was a prophet sent to them but not to those who preceded them in the knowledge of God. And [Mohammed] said [to the Jews], ‘O People of the Book, [God] shall not accept a deed of you unless ye fulfill the Torah.’”[[8]](#footnote-8)

If we were to supplement Saadya Gaon’s account of the revelation with this claim of Rabbi Netanel, then we would no longer have to posit the existence of monotheistic religions that have been long forgotten. Islam hasn’t been forgotten.

At first, Rabbi Netanel only considers the possibility of prophets who don’t contradict the teachings of the Torah. That’s why he seeks to demonstrate the underlying compatibility of the Torah and the Koran. But a few pages later, Rabbi Netanel seems to make room even for *conflicting* revelations. God binds us through the Torah. He may bind others by way of other religions, even if there seems to be conflict between them. He writes:

Know that God commanded that all the people should serve according to the Law; and He permitted to every people something which he forbade to others, and He forbade them something that He permitted to others, for He knoweth what is best for His creatures and what is adapted to them even as the skilled physician understands his patients, and even more...[[9]](#footnote-9)

Rabbi Netanel only relates explicitly to the idea that two Divinely revealed systems of law can make conflicting *demands* of its respective adherents. But can they conflict in their description of reality or history? Can it be that one religion, for example, relates to Jesus as the Messiah, and that another religion denies that claim, while each was sent to its respective population by the one and only God? Rabbi Netanel doesn’t say any such thing explicitly, but the logic of his physician metaphor *would* seem to extend that far. There may be certain falsehoods that are therapeutic for certain cross-sections of society. It’s hard to deny that this must have been Rabbi Netanel’s view, since eventually he develops his argument in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to exclude Christianity from its scope. He writes:

[T]he Creator – magnified be His praise! – knows the ruin of this world and the abode of the future world. He therefore sends prophets in every age and period that they might urge the creatures to serve Him and do the good, and that they might be a road-guide to righteousness... It is incumbent, then, upon every people to be led aright by what has been communicated to them through revelation and to emulate their prophets, their leaders, and their regents. Not one people remained without a law, for all of them are from one Lord and unto Him they all return.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It seems that according to Rabbi Netanel, there isn’t a single people left in the world without a law that came from God and which will ultimately lead back to God. Of course, if we are willing to countenance a God who tells lies for the greater good – telling some people that Jesus is the messiah, for example, and telling others that he isn’t – then we will have to accept the possibility that our religion may also contain certain falsehoods. And yet, that might not be as bad a consequence as we think, so long as we believe that we’re all in the hands of the best doctor. This doctor has given Judaism to the Jews as *our* eternal law. And He knows best.

We’re commanded to listen to our prophets, just as other people are commanded to listen to theirs. But if that’s the case, and if Saadya Gaon’s only grounds for expecting a special role in the eschaton is that the Jews alone among humanity preserved their God-given religion, then, in the picture that Rabbi Netanel has sketched for us, we can no longer expect any such extra reward over and above the reward due to other righteous people. Plenty of nations have preserved their religions. Perhaps the messianic age will be a time in which these seemingly incompatible religions find a way in which to be reconciled in the service of one God.

**Two al-Fayumis Combined**

If we were to supplement the view of Saadya Gaon (ibn Yusuf al-Fayumi) with what we’ve seen in the writings of Rabbi Netanel al-Fayumi, we arrive at the following picture:

1. God never left His human creatures without a true religion.
2. The Jews are not special by dint of preserving their truly God-given religion. Other communities have done so too.
3. God has no particularly special relationship with the Jewish people *per se*.
4. All worthy people will share in a universal afterlife.
5. The eschaton holds nothing special in store for Jews over and above what it has in store for all people.

This combination of views completes the reductive process that Saadya Gaon began, regarding the election of Israel. In so doing, it escapes both of the philosophical problems that challenged his view. We no longer posit the existence of unheard-of religious traditions. We also avoid a picture that leaves gentiles with a bad deal. And yet, by amending the fifth clause, which had originally promised the Jews a special role to play in the eschaton, we have been left without any real vestige of an election at all. The tensions that Saadya’s picture generated with the Bible, the Rabbis, and the liturgy are therefore exacerbated. In fact, it feels as if we’re beginning to push the envelope of Orthodox thought further than it can go.

Rabbi Netanel provides us with the resources for supplementing Saadya Gaon in this way, but I must point out that it’s far from clear that Rabbi Netanel would have accepted all five of the claims that emerge when we combine their views. Even though Rabbi Netanel views multiple other religions as coming from God, he still holds onto a robust doctrine of the election. Indeed, he seems explicitly to deny points 3 and 5 of our new outline. He denies point 3 when he writes:

Us He chose and exalted from among the nations, not because of our surpassing excellence but because of His regard for our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... God chose us, revealed unto us His laws and ordinances, and imposed upon us a weighty task such as He did not impose upon anyone before or after us, in order to make our reward great...[[11]](#footnote-11)

And:

Since He regards us as pre-eminent, He holds us to strict account in this present fleeting life, as it is written, [Amos 3:2:] “Only you do I know from among all the nations of the earth. Therefore I visit upon you all your iniquities.” The full meaning of “I know” is “I know your superiority”...[[12]](#footnote-12)

Regarding point 5, he certainly clings to the notion that the Jews will be the primary beneficiaries of the eschaton. He writes:

Verily God has promised to revive the dead at the hand of the Messiah... Through him [Israel] will enjoy crescive prosperity, and so happy will their state be that the nations who used to revile them will boast by them; those who reduced them to servitude will serve them, and those who upbraided them for their shortcoming will pardon them. God has promised all that and what is even grander and more complete.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In other words, a case could be made that Rabbi Netanel, despite saying things about other religions that could supplement Saadya Gaon’s reductive account of the election, would have personally resisted any such reductivism. Unlike Saadya, Rabbi Netanel was committed to the idea that the Jews possess some sort of superior quality, which causes God to treasure us. At the same time, we should be wary of reading too much into that commitment to the election. Perhaps the substantive notion of the election that Rabbi Netanel endorses lies merely in its being a part of the religion that God has given *us* – something that God has called upon us to believe, whether or not it’s actually true. (These are the sorts of questions and possibilities that creep in once one countenances the idea that God is willing to lie to His creatures, even if only for their long-term benefit.) If that is indeed how Rabbi Netanel understands the election, we have once again made room for an alliance between the two al-Fayumis regarding the election. The substantive notion of the election, to which Rabbi Netanel seems committed, is just a fiction that God gave to the Jews, while the reductive account of the election is objectively true.

Moreover, even if Rabbi Netanel really does retain a thicker conception of the election than does Saadya Gaon, he still seems to strip that conception of any notion of our having a mission to be a light unto the nations. The nations have their own prophets to worry about them:

It is not proper to contradict those who are of another religion since their irreligion and their punishment are not our concern but that of the Praised and Exalted One.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Rabbi Netanel is the rabbinic figure who provides his readers with the greatest resources for completing the reductive tendencies of Saadya Gaon. Having said that, however, it remains unclear to what extent he would have endorsed that reductivism himself. Moreover, there are legitimate concerns that could be raised about the circumstances in which Rabbi Netanel was writing, concerns that we have so far been placing to one side.

Rabbi Yosef Qafih produced a Hebrew translation of Al-Fayumi’s work.[[15]](#footnote-15) In his introduction, he describes the persecution to which the Jews of Yemen were subjected by their Muslim neighbors and rulers. There were two questions, in particular, that Muslims would lay as traps for their Jewish interlocuters. They would question whether the Torah’s authority was truly eternal, and they would ask, presumably seeking to provoke a Jew into slandering their prophet, whether Mohammad was a genuine messenger of God. Rabbi Qafih assumes that Rabbi Netanel was trying to provide his Jewish readership with the tools to withstand such questioning without invoking the deadly wrath of their neighbors.

If that was the true intention behind Rabbi Netanel’s writing, then it’s unsurprising, perhaps, that he doesn’t follow his own reductionist logic to its most extreme conclusions. And yet, if his purpose was specifically to avoid the ire of Muslim oppressors, one might wonder why he explicitly extends his views to accommodate many more religions than just Judaism and Islam. This suggests that his views may have been more sincere than Rabbi Qafih implies.

Whatever the true motivations underlying his work, Rabbi Netanel’s beautifully written book does provide us with a glimpse into how Saadya Gaon’s reductionism could have escaped from the philosophical problems it provoked – though only at the expense of pushing Orthodoxy to its very limits and embracing the dangerous notion that God is willing to tell conflicting stories to His creatures, even if only for their own good.

1. Saadya Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, translated by Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale Judaica Series, 1976), p. 33 (*Hakdama*)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is the theory proposed by Rabbi Yosef Qafih in the introduction to his translation of *The Bustan Al-Ukul* (*Gan Ha-Sikhlim* (Kiryat Ono: Machon Mishnat Ha-Rambam, 2001)). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Iggeret Teiman*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Compare this tradition with the very similar tradition cited in BT *Bava Batra* 15b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rabbi Netanel al-Fayumi, *The Bustan Al-Ukul* [The Garden of Wisdom], translated by David Levine (New York: AMS Press, 1966) pp. 103-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Deuteronomy 31:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Bustan Al-Ukul*, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 105, citing Koran 5:68. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., pp. 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Gan Ha-Sikhlim* (Kiryat Ono: Machon Mishnat HaRambam, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)