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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Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky z"l,

whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev.

May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM

be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements

exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Shiur #36: Franz Rosenzweig**

**Introduction: Why Rosenzweig?**

The next figure to appear in our historical survey, Franz Rosenzweig, is our first non-rabbi. He wasn’t merely un-rabbinic, though; he was also, in various respects, un-Orthodox. In his open letter to Martin Buber, called “The Builders,” Rosenzweig rejects what he takes to be the “all or nothing” attitude of Orthodox Judaism towards *halakha*. He argues that any particular Jewish law can only take on authority over a person as and when she experiences herself as addressed by it; the remainder of Jewish law can be regarded as that which doesn’t *yet* speak to her, and thus as not *yet* having authority. Rabbi Louis Jacobs (the founder of the British branch of Conservative Judaism) described how this attitude to *halakha* was manifest in Rosenzweig’s own life:

He did think that he would one day become a fully observant Jew, but believed in the gradual approach in which the observances slowly made their impact by “ringing a bell” for him. Typical of this approach is Rosenzweig’s answer to someone who asked him whether he wore *tefillin*: “Not yet,” he replied.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Many Orthodox rabbis endorse the notion that a formerly secular Jew, moving towards observance of Jewish law, ought to move gradually – not so quickly as to jeopardize the stability of the eventual transformation. But Rosenzweig seems to have thought that the laws themselves make no real claim until a person feels subjectively called by them. It’s one thing to say that, *ex post facto*, a person should move slowly in her observance of Jewish law; it’s another thing entirely to say that those laws have no authority over a person until they’re ready to observe them.

In the same open letter to Buber, Rosenzweig attacks the Reform movement too. He seems to have found it religiously empty – lacking the profound encounter between man, who stands commanded, and God, who commands. He accused the Reformer, Abraham Geiger, of merely painting “the facade of the new business and residential house of emancipated Jewry,” in the colors of a superficial commitment to charity. And thus, Rosenzweig was neither aligned with the Orthodox nor the Reform. His sense of religion, at least in relation to halakhic observance, was bound up with a deeply personal process, one that no institutionalized denomination was well placed to accommodate.

In the words of Rabbi Sacks, we cannot easily place Rosenzweig within the “conventional schema of religious commitment.” This isn’t merely because “he cuts across the traditional distinctions between Orthodox and Progressive,” but because

his thought lies along a completely different axis. Distinctions imply the existence of fixed points of opposition; whereas Rosenzweig is concerned to outline the form of a process or a series of transitions, and to share with us some of the perceptions that one who travels along his path will have.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Perhaps it will come as no surprise, given his transcendence of the distinction between Orthodox and Reform Judaisms, that Rosenzweig is sometimes claimed as a seminal thinker for *Conservative* Judaism. Indeed, when Benjamin Sommer comes to articulate his own Conservative theology of revelation, he takes himself to be working in the spirit of Rabbis Louis Jacobs, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and Franz Rosenzweig.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And yet, Rosenzweig seems to have seen himself as a person on a journey whose ultimate destination would have been outwardly indistinguishable from adherence to Orthodox Jewish law. His destination was a lifestyle in which every detail of that law would be experienced as an individual calling from God. This is a thinker who was clearly in conversation with Orthodox Judaism – which provided him with the outward form of his ultimate destination – and who was animated by a burning religiosity. His power to inspire shouldn’t be limited by denominational considerations.

For these reasons, Rosenzweig continues to have an influence and a hold over the thinking of many Orthodox Jews. Indeed, despite acknowledging both (1) the ways in which Rosenzweig cannot be accommodated by the label of “Orthodoxy,” and (2) the various reservations and criticisms that Orthodox thought would surely, and rightly, level against Rosenzweig, Rabbi Sacks still insists that “Rosenzweig is indispensable to us.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Like Rabbi Sacks, I take the work of Rosenzweig to contain vital insights for Jewish philosophy. Rosenzweig, having grown up almost entirely assimilated, came to Judaism relatively late in life, and died tragically young, struck down by ALS. Given the limitations of his Jewish education, it is often breath-taking to see how deeply his religious insights penetrate into the spirit of the Bible and the Rabbis. In lesson 8, I used the work of Rosenzweig to uncover what I take to be a deep vein of Jewish thought, rooted in the Bible and the Midrash, regarding the stance of the elect: that a Jew must embody a resident-alienation, and that a Jewish nation must be different from other nations in various respects. It would have been harder for me to see this had it not been for Rosenzweig.

Even though my project takes place within an Orthodox framework, and though my survey is therefore restricted to thinkers and texts that an Orthodox Jew might regard as part of the unfolding revelation, we can start to see why Rosenzweig nevertheless belongs in it. Firstly, his thinking is often regarded by Orthodox Jews as making an important contribution to their worldview,[[5]](#footnote-5) such that, *de facto*,his work is influencing the trajectory of Orthodox Jewish thought. Secondly, when one *does* engage with his work, one often finds, as we did in lesson 8, that it helps a person to recover the beating heart of various Biblical and Rabbinic themes.

Another reason that Rosenzweig requires attention, in this survey, is simply that he puts forward a particularly radical – and even extreme – conception of the election. To ignore this noteworthy (because radical) view would be akin to ignoring the proverbial elephant in the room.

Personally, and despite my tremendous regard for Rosenzweig as a thinker and as a human being, I think that his theory of Jewish chosenness is deeply problematic. And so, part of the project of this lesson is to dismiss Rosenzweig’s account of the election, even as I celebrate the fact that other elements of his writing and thought continue to have an influence over the unfolding spirit of Orthodox Judaism.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Eternity and Redemption**

At the heart of Rosenzweig’s Jewish philosophy lies the idea that the Jewish nation has a different relationship to time than do any other people. Because they were given a Divine law by a God who transcends time, the national character of the Jewish people is shaped by a legal system that isn’t responsive to the constantly changing, and contingent features of the flow of history. Other nations only stay relevant, vital, and alive if their laws and customs constantly change: customs are the ways in which the nations commemorate their past – a past which keeps changing as it gets longer; laws are the means by which nations prepare for the future, and they have to change in order to reflect changing temporal horizons. As Rosenzweig puts it, “the peoples live in revolutions in which the law continuously sheds its skin.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The nation of Israel is the exception to this rule because its law and even its customs are eternal.

To render this thought plausible, consider the fact that the children of Israel commemorated the festival of Passover on the night *before* they left Egypt, which is to say, they were commemorating the Exodus from Egypt even before it occurred. According to Rabbinic tradition, in fact, the forefathers observed the festival of Passover *generations* before we were enslaved.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similarly, the 9th of Av, according to the Rabbis, was already a day of national mourning in the times of Moses – long before it became a commemoration of the destruction of the Temple.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus, not only the law, but even the customs that seem to reflect our historical past, are – at least in the Rabbinic imagination – thought to transcend history altogether. This means that whereas gentile nations live *within* the flow of history, the nation of Israel *transcend* it. Changes in customs and laws allow other nations to divide their history into past, present, and future, but the Jew lives in “an unchangeable present”[[10]](#footnote-10) that altogether collapses the distinction between past and future. The Jews lives in eternity.

The Jew is so removed from the flow of history that her life is experienced as simultaneous with every generation of Jews that came before. As we celebrate the *seder* night, for example, we view ourselves as if we were liberated that very evening, and thus the gap between *now* and *then* evaporates into the eternal present in which the Jew is called to live. This bonds the generations of Jewry into an indivisible bond. As Rosenzweig puts it:

[T]hrough this alliance the people becomes the eternal people; for when grandson and grandfather behold one another, they behold in each other at the same moment the last grandson and the first grandfather.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In a nutshell, this state of timelessness is the essence of the election. The Jewish people were summoned, according to Rosenzweig, to live beyond, above, and altogether outside of time. It is our timelessness which, for Rosenzweig, makes us holy. But Rosenzweig is also willing to acknowledge that there’s a sense in which this timelessness means we can never manifest the vitality of the nations who live in time, because we’re unchanging – like a lifeless statue. A life that is sanctified in this way is no longer alive.[[12]](#footnote-12) Summarizing Rosenzweig’s view, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits says, “In the midst of the time of the nations and history, the people of God enjoy a ‘lifeless’ life of holy eternity.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Some conceptions of the election emphasize the notion of a Jewish mission to the world, from the Genesis and Priesthood models of the Bible to the Two-Track conception of the Tiferet Yisrael and Rabbi Hirsch. Those views of the election tend towards a messianism according to which the election itself is supposed to usher in the ultimate redemption of the entire world. But for Rosenzweig, this conception would be mistaken for two reasons. First: it would be incongruent to think that the people of Israel have a role to play *within* history, because their “lifeless” life occurs entirely *beyond* history. Second: there’s a sense in which the Jews are ill placed to usher in the redemption, because they’re already there.

The rest of the world may be marching towards the redemption of the eschaton, but the Jews are, somehow or other, living there already. The Jew is especially conscious of this on Shabbat, which is described as a taste of the world to come.[[14]](#footnote-14) On the Days of Awe, the Jew feels, most palpably, a sense of living in the midst of a world already redeemed, in which our sins have already been wiped clean. Standing in a *kittel*, so reminiscent of a death shroud, and – like a corpse – eating no food and drinking no fluid, the Jew “will be judged: so here he goes in perfect loneliness, a dead man in the midst of life… already beyond the grave in the midst of life. Everything is behind him.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The sensation of time-transcendence is most palpable on those holy days, but this “lifeless” life of holy eternity is the very essence of redemption on any day of the year. Thus, the *Yom Kippur* experience distills and encapsulates the general experience of the Jew. And thus, when the Jew bows down on Yom Kippur, not while confessing her sins, but simply in worship of God – she is celebrating redemption, as only a Jew can, “for only we live a life in the eternity of Redemption and hence can celebrate it.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The Jewish people, like the individual worshipper in his *kittel*, is a holy corpse amidst the life of the nations. It embodies, in the midst of time, the timeless redemption towards which all of the other nations, or at least, those who will survive, are marching.

**Blood and History**

Among those who have sought to racialize the Jewish identity, we have met the Rihal – who was trying to explain the basis upon which an impersonal God could have selected a singular nation[[17]](#footnote-17) – and we have also encountered various representatives of the mystical tradition, some of whom seem to have been influenced by the dualistic tendency to essentialize the distinction between the children of the light and the children of darkness.[[18]](#footnote-18) Rosenzweig is another philosopher who ends up racializing Jewish identity, but for a different reason entirely.

The paradox of Jewish identity, for Rosenzweig, is that we’re physically present, and embodied, in this unredeemed and physical world, but we’re somehow living, at the same time, a “lifeless” life of eternity, already in redemption. Just as philosophers have puzzled over the relationship between mind and body, and how the two can be connected and interact with one another, Rosenzweig’s conception of Jewish eternity creates a puzzle as to how the physical bodies of Jews in time can be part of a timeless experience that transcends life itself. Rosenzweig’s suggested solution to this puzzle has him appeal to the Jewish bloodline.

Because other nations tie their identity to a land, he says, they will be willing to die to protect it. Once the land is lost, then so too is the life of the nation. The Jewish identity, in contrast, is not dependent upon continued sovereignty over the land. Indeed, as far as Rosenzweig is concerned, statehood is actually an unnatural condition for the Jewish people, because it thrusts them into the tempestuous flow of history when they have been called to live outside of time.

As we saw in lesson 8, Rosenzweig believes that even when we have had sovereignty over the land of Israel, we have been warned to be resident-aliens there – never to feel so bound to the land, or to the institutions of state, that we might take our identity to be bound to them. Instead, the identity of the Jew is bound to her blood. The same blood that flowed through the veins of Abraham flows through us and will flow through every generation of Jews until the end of days.

The community of the same blood alone feels even today the guarantee of its eternity running warmly through its veins. For it alone time is not an enemy … in the natural propagation of the body it has the guarantee of its eternity.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The only reason we continued to long for a land while in exile was so that we shouldn’t come to think we had a home in some *other* land. Zionism, for Rosenzweig, was therefore a massive mistake. It sought to thrust the Jewish people into history. But Rosenzweig says that, for an eternal people, “the will to be a people cannot cling here to any dead means,” such as a state. “[T]his can be realized only by means of the people itself; the people is a people only through the people.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Through its blood. Israel is not to be our home, but the place towards which we long. Rather than providing a home, it is what ensures that we shall always feel homeless.

Rabbi Berkovits suggests that, if we follow “the inherent logic of Rosenzweig’s position,” we’ll have to say that:

“[T]he holy land” is the landless land, just as “the holy life” is lifeless life. The longing for it guarantees Israel’s homelessness for the sake of the preservation of its timeless existence.[[21]](#footnote-21)

By being rooted only in our blood, we end up tying ourselves to eternity because we root ourselves in nothing that is external to us. As Rosenzweig puts the point:

[W]e have taken root in ourselves, without roots in the earth, eternal wanderers therefore, yet deeply rooted in ourselves, in our own body and blood. And this rooting in ourselves and only in ourselves guarantees our eternity for us.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Judaism and Christianity**

If the Jews already live in the redeemed state of eternity, how are the rest of the nations of the world supposed to know how to bring about redemption for themselves? It is in response to this question that Rosenzweig’s philosophy of the election reaches its most extreme and distinctive conclusion. The Two-Track model of the election (which we explored in lessons 32-35) is sometimes criticized – rightly or wrongly – on the grounds that it gives the Jews a function, as ambassadors of ethical monotheism, that is (arguably) better played today by members of other religions. Maimonides recognized that the spread of Christianity and Islam might have a role to play in God’s Divine plan for bringing the eventual redemption.[[23]](#footnote-23) But, on a two-track model of the election, this fact can start to become somewhat embarrassing. It turns out that other people are (potentially) doing a better job in the very role that was supposed to justify the election of the Jews.

Rosenzweig rejects the Two-Track model because his conception of Jewish eternity wouldn’t allow the Jewish people to function *in history* as God’s active emissaries. In fact, Rosenzweig has to go further even than Maimonides. He doesn’t merely think, as Maimonides did, that it might be possible for other religions to nudge the nations closer to redemption. He thinks this role simply *had* to befall those other religions (or, at least, one of them). This was, for him, the only possible option, since the Jews can’t play that role at all. The Jewish people embody the *destination*. We function like a lighthouse, sending rays of eternity into the fog of history. That is the sense, presumably, in which we are a light unto the nations. It must fall to other nations to chart a course *through* history that leads to that proper destination. As far as Rosenzweig is concerned, Christianity is the religion best suited for this role.

For Rosenzweig, if Judaism is the destination, Christianity is the *journey*. For this reason the Jew is born a Jew, because she is born outside of time, bound to eternity by dint of her blood. She stands already (at birth) at the destination. The Christian, by contrast, has to be “born again” because she is always at the beginning, always young.[[24]](#footnote-24)

One shouldn’t be fooled into thinking that this view of Christianity commits Rosenzweig to a sort of religious pluralism in which both of these religions are true. On the contrary, Rosenzweig utterly rejects the notion that God became man in Jesus. He thinks this is a pagan way of thinking. But Christianity, for Rosenzweig, represents a path along which those who are born *into time* can inch ever closer to the ideals that are already embodied in the “lifeless” eternal life of the Jewish people.

And yet, it seems clear that Rosenzweig doesn’t take literally the messianic promise that there will come a day, *in time*, in which the Jews will return to Israel; a time in which there will be some sort of brotherhood of monotheistic humanity. Instead, he seems to think that the approach by which Christianity walks towards Judaism is an asymptote – that is, a line that curves towards infinity, getting ever closer to, but never reaching, its goal. Judaism, he says, is eternal life. It is never in time. Christianity, in contrast, is the eternal path. It never reaches its end.

Eternal life and eternal way – they are as different as the infinity of a point and of a line. The infinity of a point can only consist in the fact that it is never wiped away; therefore it is preserved in the eternal self-preservation of the blood that continuously begets. The infinity of a line however stops when it would be no longer possible to extend it; it consists in this possibility of unlimited extension.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This is also why Christianity must continue to expand, via missionary efforts. Its growth is part of its historical vitality. The Jews have no such aspirations, nor – according to Rosenzweig – should they. Indeed, following his racialized logic, he thinks that by refraining from proselytism, the Jewish people preserves “the pure source of blood from foreign admixture.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Moreover, Christianity can only be effective at *its* proselytism because of the element of falsehood at its heart – namely, its belief that God became flesh in Jesus. Because the Jew is born into a state of being that all but transcends the earthly realm, she has no need for the belief in a God who becomes physically incarnate. But for people born more fully into the physical realm – i.e., the gentiles – it turns out that:

[F]lesh and blood only let themselves be subjected by their like, by flesh and blood, and precisely that “paganism” of the Christian qualifies him for the conversion of the pagans.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Far from endorsing a religious pluralism that sees truth in multiple religions, it’s as if Rosenzweig thinks that Judaism is too true to come into the world without a miracle. Judaism is so true, and so exclusive in its truthfulness, that the world cannot contain it, other than in the miraculous phenomenon of the Jewish people whose eternity is a function of the eternity of the Torah, which was miraculously revealed to them at Sinai. It’s as if God requires a slightly less true religion to, without miraculous interference, bring the natural world ever closer to an ideal toward which it can strive, even if it’s an ideal that can never be reached within the natural world itself. Rosenzweig says:

Before God therefore, both, Jew and Christian, are workers on the same task. He cannot dispense with either… To us, he gave eternal life by igniting in our heart the fire of the Star of his truth. He placed the Christians on the eternal way by making them hasten after the rays of that Star of his truth into all time until the eternal end. We see therefore in our heart the true likeness of truth, but for that we turn away from temporal life and the life of time turns away from us. They on the contrary follow the river of time, but they have the truth only behind them; they are certainly guided by it, for they follow its rays, but they do not see it with their eyes.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The history of Christian antisemitism is liable to create, in Jewish thinking, a sort of stigma against all things Christian. How can a Jewish thinker who believes in the eternal law of the Torah and in the chosenness of Israel, and who believes that the heart of the Jew burns with the likeness of God’s truth (whatever it is, exactly, that he means by that) also believe that the rise of Christianity, which brought such hardship upon God’s chosen people, is an essential part of God’s plan for the world – such that God can spare neither religion?

Rosenzweig’s response to this sort of question is that, precisely because Judaism represents the whole truth, it cannot fully enter into the natural world, which forever remains imperfect and on the way towards perfection. In fact, because we have to turn our back on temporality and live aloof from the world, there’s a sense in which we behold the truth with our eyes, but are unable to bring it fully down to earth. Our hearts burn with the *likeness* of God’s truth, but not with that truth itself.

The truth, the whole truth, belongs therefore neither to them nor to us. For though we indeed carry it in us, yet for this reason too we must first sink our glance into our own inside if we want to see it, and there we do see the Star, but not—the rays. And belonging to the whole truth would be that one would see not only its light, but also what is illuminated by it. They [the Christians] however are destined all the same for all time to see what is illuminated, [but] not the light.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Moreover, the hatred many Christians feel towards the Jews shouldn’t surprise us, in Rosenzweig’s perspective, since:

[The] existence of the Jew forces upon Christianity in all times the thought that it has arrived at neither the goal nor the truth, but always – remains on the way. This is the deepest ground of Christian hatred of the Jews, which took possession for the inheritance from the pagan hatred. It is ultimately only self-hatred, aimed at the annoying silent admonisher who admonishes only through his existence – hatred against his own incompleteness, against his own not-yet.[[30]](#footnote-30)

At his most messianic, Rosenzweig imagines the day on which the Messiah comes to unite us all. On that day, the tree of Christianity will come to praise the root that they had despised.[[31]](#footnote-31) But it seems, at least to me,[[32]](#footnote-32) that Rosenzweig’s talk of such an era is – once again – the talk of an ideal that we approach but never reach, since he explicitly describes this messianic utopia as the point at which the eternal way ends in eternity. This is no different from an asymptote ending in infinity. Mathematically speaking, infinity is where it ends. But it also never ends, because it’s infinite!

Whether or not the messianic epoch will actually materialize at some point, we can say that – for Rosenzweig – a full account of the election of the Jews cannot be given without an account of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Beautifully summarized by Rabbi Berkovits, we can say that:

Rosenzweig makes room for Christianity by removing Judaism from history, but the Christian will find eternal life by returning to Judaism. In time, Christianity is triumphant; in eternity, it is Judaism. The Christian is needed, for there is a job in the undreamed world which the Jew, already living the “lifeless” life of redemption, cannot perform.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**Scrutinizing Rosenzweig**

In one way or another, Rosenzweig’s account of the election is able to accommodate most (if not all) of all the Biblical data, even if sometimes only at a stretch. The notion that the Jews have a mission to perform on behalf of the world – a notion which emerges from the Genesis and Priesthood models – is retained in the work of Rosenzweig, but spiritualized. The Jews are not going to bring blessing to all of the families of the earth by playing an active role in history. Instead, they will be a blessing by providing an embodiment of a spiritual destination towards which the other nations will journey. The priesthood of the Jewish nation isn’t to be lived, in the midst of time, among the nations to whom they are called to minister, but in the hermitage of eternity.

The Marriage model is well secured by the notion that only the Jews live, so to speak, in eternity with God. Rosenzweig can easily accommodate the notion that the Jews are God’s spouse in eternity. The Name-bearing model and the notion of *zekhut avot* can also take root in Rosenzweig’s conception of the election. We bear God’s name in that only we carry the “fire of the Star of his truth” in our hearts.[[34]](#footnote-34) And the link that we have to our forefathers, our *zekhut avot*, is preserved and even racialized by Rosenzweig’s notion of a community of blood.

Though he isn’t explicit about it, I would imagine that Rosenzweig would take sides in the Rabbinic debate between the eternal-cosmic and the historical-relative schools. The election of the Jews would seem to transcend the contingent and the historical because the Jews, for Rosenzweig, represent an eternal present that transcends time altogether. That would seem to resonate with the Rabbinic metaphor that God chose Israel before He created the world. In fact, it’s as if the eternal-cosmic school of thought – and even the incarnational views in which the Jews carry something of God within them – is the one that accurately represents the election of the Jews, while the historical-relative school turns out to be a somewhat accurate description of the parallel election, so to speak, of the Christians. This illustrates the radical extreme of Rosenzweig’s view regarding Christianity but shows how his view of the election of the Jews (at least) can be rooted in Rabbinic doctrine (i.e., in the eternal-cosmic and incarnational schools of Rabbinic thought).

Rabbinic meditations on Jewish stubbornness, however, make no appearance in Rosenzweig’s account. Rosenzweig would also have to reject the Rabbinic view according to which only the Jews come under God’s direct providence in history. Indeed, the notion that the Jews should enjoy any providential relationship with God *in history* would be anathema to Rosenzweig. On the other hand, perhaps he could reinterpret Rabbinic talk of Israel being exempted from the sovereignty of astrological forces as a metaphor for their being taken out of history altogether.

To the extent that our identity as an eternal people is rooted in our relationship to God’s eternal law, one can detect in Rosenzweig’s thought an echo of the Rabbinic notion of a heavenly Father-in-law. According to that way of thinking, our relationship to God will only be as close as our relationship to His Torah. But, to the extent that Rosenzweig sees our identity to be rooted in nothing other than our bloodline, rather than in our observance of the Torah, the conception of a heavenly Father-in-law, and the Torah as our wife, quickly recedes.

Given his extremely heterodox account of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, readers shouldn’t be surprised to discover that – on further inspection – the apparent synergy that we’ve seen, between Rosenzweig’s view and the Biblical and Rabbinic tradition, turns out to be superficial. For example, one of the central developments of the Hebrew Bible was to break free from the myth of eternal return, a myth according to which time is cyclical, and all experiences are lived over and over again. In its place, the Hebrew Bible introduces humanity to the notion of linear time – from the creation of the world to its ultimate redemption in the eschaton. Rosenzweig abandons linear time, leaving it for the Christians; in so doing, He cedes to them what the Bible very clearly seems to bequeath upon the children of Israel – which is to say, a central role in the unfolding history of Biblical-linear time. This is just one of the many ways in which accepting Rosenzweig’s views ends up distorting the foundations upon which he sought to build.

It’s as if Rosenzweig unintentionally accepts the well-worn trope of Christian antisemitism, which sees Biblical Israel – at least as it pertains to its central role in the unfolding of history, and the march towards redemption – as having been replaced by the Church. Rabbinic Judaism – which can have no place in its canon for the Christian New Testament – cannot accept this view. Rosenzweig cannot deny that the Jews have, in a sense, been replaced. The weight of the Jewish tradition, I suggest, would protest that the marriage and the covenant between God and Israel are in time and until the end of time.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Rosenzweig’s conception of holiness is also completely out of kilter with the notion of holiness as we find it in the Bible. For Rosenzweig, to be holy is to be removed from this world. But, as we saw in lesson 10, the Bible seems to think that holiness emerges not in isolation, but in *relation*; not in transcendence from the world so much as from a certain sort of engagement with it. On a properly Biblical conception of holiness, I would argue, there would be no reason to think that Israel’s holiness requires it to abandon an active role in history. There is no reason to think that holiness can only emerge in the dizzy heights of eternity. On the contrary, the first thing to be sanctified by God was a stretch of time itself – the Sabbath.

Rosenzweig’s notion of the Jew living in the presence of redemption, and living already in the midst of eternity, definitely resonates with all sorts of Jewish rituals, practices, and passages of liturgy, as well as plenty of Rabbinical and Biblical data. I’ve already spoken of the Rabbinic traditions according to which the exodus from Egypt, for example, was already celebrated before it happened; I also mentioned the popular notion that the Sabbath, for example, provides us with a taste of the world to come. This entire dimension of the Jewish experience is beautifully developed by Rosenzweig such that a Jew familiar with a life of Torah observance can hardly fail to be moved by his descriptions of living within the rhythms of the Jewish calendar.[[36]](#footnote-36) But as is so often the case in the thought of Rosenzweig, it seems as if he has taken one side of a Jewish dialectic and neglected the other. Let me explain what I mean by this.

It is true that the Jew – according to multiple voices in the tradition – is somehow offered, in the midst of time, a taste of redemption. But the fact that the Hebrew Bible introduces humanity to the notion of linear time should lead us to be wary of emphasizing the eternal too heavily over the temporal. What seems more appropriate, for a person seeking a best fit through all of the Biblical and Rabbinical data, is to think in terms of some sort of *balance* between the eternal and the temporal. Rabbi Sacks argues, for example, that what the Jewish calendar seeks to do is to take the timeless lessons that concern the philosopher, and somehow translate them into the temporal flow of our lived experience. Rather than delegating eternity to Judaism and temporality to the Christian, I would argue – along with Rabbi Sacks – that the tradition calls upon us to conduct some sort of conversation between eternity and time. I agree that we are given a taste of the redemption on the Sabbath. But I would argue that we are only given that taste so that we will rededicate ourselves, during the week, to the historical process of creating the conditions, in space and time, for redemption to materialize.

A similar critique can be levelled against Rosenzweig’s treatment of the land of Israel. In lesson 8, I used Rosenzweig’s writings to explain what I take to be a spiritual innovation of Abraham, who sought to see himself as both a resident and alien wherever he found himself. Rosenzweig certainly helped me to make sense of this insight. But in Rosenzweig’s own work, it’s as if he only has room for the alienation, and no room at all for the notion of residence – of living in this world, being a part of it, and playing an active role in its history.

As I tried to explain the dialectic in lesson 8 – the secret is to find a balance between creating the conditions for our own security and flourishing (being a resident) without ever becoming inured to the pain and suffering of others, or to the brokenness of the pre-messianic world (being an alien). This balance leaves plenty of room for a form of Zionism. As Zionists, we seek to be residents in the land that God has promised to us. But the balance between residence and alienation leaves no room for a *chauvinistic* form of nationalism, since we also have to recognize that we are aliens upon a land that ultimately belongs, not to us, but to God. Rosenzweig sees no room for Zionism because he has come down too heavily on just one side of a dialectic, when in fact, I would suggest, the weight of the tradition calls upon us to find a balance between both sides – for we are called upon to be resident-aliens in God’s world, just as we are called upon to carry the torch of eternity in the midst of time.

Like so many Jewish philosophers before him (including Saadya Gaon, Netanel al-Fayumi, Bachya ibn Pakuda, Maimonides, the Tiferet Yisrael, and Rabbi Hirsch), Rosenzweig tries to make space for other communities and even for other religions (or, in his case, just *one* other religion) to be called into the service of God alongside Israel. The existence of this veritable chain of thinkers creates – within the Jewish tradition – a certain sort of imperative: to see if we too can make such room for others, within our theology and within our thinking about the election. But I would argue that the specific approach by which Rosenzweig seeks to make that space comes at too high a cost. He distorts too many central themes of Jewish thought, and he too often emphasizes only one pole of a dialectic when the tradition calls upon us to navigate a path between both of its poles – be it the tension between living in time and living in eternity, or the tension between being a resident and being an alien.

1. #  Louis Jacobs, “Franz Rosenzweig and the Founding of the Lehrhaus: A review of the life, thought, and work of this influential 20th-century existentialist thinker and Jewish educator,” published on *My Jewish Learning* (<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/franz-rosenzweig-and-the-founding-of-the-lehrhaus/>).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jonathan Sacks, “The Path of Return: A Preface to the Reading of Rosenzweig,” in *Tradition in an Untraditional Age: Essays on Modern Jewish Thought* (London: Valentine, Mitchell & Co., 1990): 259-266, p. 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bejamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 2-6, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jonathan Sacks, “The Path of Return,” p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In this regard, a comparison could be drawn between Rosenzweig and Rabbi Heschel. Rabbi Heschel taught in non-Orthodox religious institutions: first at HUC (of the Reform movement), and then, for a longer period, at JTS (of the Conservative movement). And yet, despite his affiliation with these institutions, Rabbi Heschel – like Rosenzweig (and perhaps more so) – continues to have an influence (and indeed, a *growing* influence) over Orthodox Jewish thought. Having drawn the comparison, though, I should note a key difference. Rabbi Heschel’s affiliation with non-Orthodox streams of Judaism was predominantly a matter of where he taught and had little to do with his otherwise pretty straightforwardly Orthodox practices and beliefs. As we’ve seen, by contrast, Rosenzweig’s beliefs and practices were not in conformity with Orthodoxy at all. Admittedly, Benjamin Sommer recruits Rabbi Heschel’s work in his own articulation of a distinctly non-Orthodox theory of revelation, but I would argue that Sommer moves further away from the Orthodox mainstream, in his attempt to eradicate the distinction between the Oral and Written law, than Rabbi Heschel ever went. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My exposition of Rosenzweig’s account of the election will draw exclusively from his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). I have gained much from my intermittent engagement with this book over the years. It should be noted, however, that interpreting his writing poses formidable challenges. I would have had no hope, I fear, of making sense of the finer details of his account of the election without the help of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits’s masterful book, *Major Themes in Modern Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974). My exposition of Rosenzweig therefore carves pretty closely to Rabbi Berkovits’s presentation (although, see footnote 31 below, for one minor point of difference). There are of course, more contemporary secondary sources to which interested readers might turn. Dana Hollander, for example, has worked extensively on Rosenzweig’s account of chosenness (see her “The Significance of Franz Rosenzweig's Retrieval of Chosenness,” Jewish Studies Quarterly 16/1 (2009): 146-162, and her book, *Exemplarity and Chosenness: Rosenzweig and Derrida on the Nation of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). And yet, very few writers on Rosenzweig achieve the clarity and precision of Rabbi Berkovits. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rosenzweig, *The Star,* p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Bereishit Rabba* 48:12, and Rashi to Genesis 19:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Bamidbar* *Rabba* 16:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 367. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Eliezer Berkovits, *Major Themes,* chapter 2, §I.1. Available at Sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for instance, Mishna *Tamid* 7:4 and BT *Berakhot* 57b. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, pp. 346-347. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lesson 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. These opinions were discussed in lesson 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, pp. 317-318. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Rabbi Berkovits, *Major Themes*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rosenzweig, *The Star,* p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:6-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, p. 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., pp. 438-439. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., p. 402. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Indeed, this is the only point at which my interpretation of Rosenzweig differs from Rabbi Berkovits’s reading. It seems that Rabbi Berkovits takes Rosenzweig to be committed to the notion that the messianic epoch will actually materialize, rather than function forever as a regulative ideal. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Rabbi Berkovits, *Major Themes.* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, p. 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The extent to which Rosenzweig had imbibed antisemitic attitudes and sought to redeem them from within the Jewish tradition is explored by Rabbi Berkovits (in his *Major Themes*). I leave that discussion to others. My interest isn’t to uncover where these views come from so much as to assess whether they can really take their place – however unsavory their historical origin – in a plausible Jewish theology, within the parameters laid out in lesson 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Rosenzweig, *The Star*, pp. 327-347, which includes powerful descriptions of Shabbat, the three pilgrimage festivals, and the days of awe. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)