

# LIGHTS IN THE FOREST

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Rabbis Respond to Twelve  
Essential Jewish Questions

EDITED BY  
Rabbi Paul Citrin



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## RABBI GEORGE D. GITTLEMAN

### 1

My notion of *b'rit* (בְּרִית), or “covenant,” functions on both the horizontal plane, between one Jew and another, and the vertical plane, between God and the Jewish people. The *b'rit* is most alive for me on the horizontal plane, in the sense of tribal responsibility Jews can feel for each other by being a part of *Am Yisrael* (עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל), “the Jewish people.”

I feel this bond not just with Jews themselves but also with our heritage. Our obligation to follow the traditions of our ancestors is driven not solely by their divine origin but rather by our own need, as a people, to connect with and depend on those who came before us. The *shalshelet kabbalah* (שְׁלֹשֶׁת קְבָלָה), “the chain of Jewish tradition,” is not just about what God “said” or “commanded”; it is also about how our past experience has shaped who we are today.

On the vertical plane, between us and God, the concept of *b'rit* becomes considerably more challenging. In light of our tortured history, I struggle to accept the traditional understanding that the covenant detailed in the Torah governs the history of the Jewish people to this day. However, jettisoning the idea of covenant or chosenness is an equally unacceptable option. In doing so, we cast ourselves off into the chaos

of history and lose any opportunity to ascribe meaning to our suffering and purpose to our existence. My approach is to “to build a heart with many chambers” (*Tosefta Sotah* 7:12). In one of them, I place the literalist view of covenant and election, and in another, I live my doubts, born out by history and affirmed by reason. In a third compartment, I nurture a more practical notion of covenant, as a way to make meaning and give hope as we journey through the vicissitudes of time and space. Depending on my need, I access one of those chambers.

Torah is the incomplete record of ancient Israelite life, lore, law, and mythic history, reflecting our ancestors’ best attempt to write down and pass on their encounters with the Divine and what they believed were their most salient developments as a people. On the horizontal plane, the Torah binds us to our origins as a people and provides a foundation for who we have become as an evolving civilization.

The Torah is a living covenant when we bring our lives to it and challenge it to respond.

## 2

Rabbi David Hartman has taught that in this age of doubt and antagonism toward religion, just the desire to pray is a prayer in itself. This radical redefinition of prayer aptly describes what it means, from a liberal perspective, to be a religious Jew, “in the game,” in dialogue with Judaism and Jewish life. One may question, argue, disagree, and doubt any and all elements of our tradition, but as long as one is leaning in rather than walking away from the myriad of challenges Jewish religious life poses, one is “religious.”

It’s instructive to note that Rabbi Hartman’s definition of prayer ignores the question of “faith” and focuses rather on the religious act of prayer. Like our mythic ancestors who in response to their overwhelming sense of God’s presence at Sinai said *Naaseh v’nishma* (נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע), “we shall do and [then] we shall understand” (Exodus 24:7), faith is

born out in our actions rather than in our theology. We work toward *tikkun olam* (תִּיקּוּן עוֹלָם), “repair of the world,” because it is the right thing to do, not because of our faith that “God is with us.” In being the hands and feet of God, we make God’s reality our reality. Thus, true faith requires believing that what we do makes a difference and that ultimately we help make sure, as Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of saying, “the arc of history bends toward justice.” In communal prayer, we are reminded that the values of our tradition, not the marketplace, provide our lodestar for redemption and that we are not alone in our struggle for meaning and purpose in life. Our ancestors struggled as well and somehow made their way; they left us a road map, a spiritual guide, in the prayers of the siddur. In communal prayer, we move both backward and forward in time, honoring and celebrating the past, while reaching out toward the promise of the future.

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In Genesis we are told that all *b’nei adam* (בְּנֵי אָדָם), “earthlings,” are created *b’tzelem Elohim* (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), “in God’s image.” Yet during the revelation at Mount Sinai, God says to Moses that if *B’nei Yisrael* (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), “the Israelites,” follow God’s commandments, they will be “a special treasure to Me above all people . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6). This tension between the particular and the universal evident in Torah deepens in Rabbinic literature.

Jewish tradition greets the concept of “chosenness” with ambivalence. Yet, our tradition never rejected the idea altogether. If nothing else, “chosenness” was a hopeful light at the end of the dark tunnel of Jewish history. Israel would bear the burden of its special place in God’s plan knowing that someday God would make good on God’s word. We would be as we were promised, an *am s’gulah* (עַם סְגוּלָה), “God’s treasured people” (Deuteronomy 14:1–2). (I prefer the teaching of Rabbi

Chanan Brichto, z”l, whom I heard say once that “anyone is chosen if he chooses to live a holy life.”)

Jews “go messianic” when life is so harsh that our only hope seems to depend on divine intervention on a grand scale. Messianism, in all its forms, serves as an antidote to despair over the human condition. The fantastic rise of science and the Industrial Revolution offered the illusion that we could solve all our problems and create heaven on earth; human advances could lead to near perfection of the world. But by the mid-twentieth century, two world wars, the Shoah, and the threat of atomic annihilation shattered the illusion of infinite progress.

If I lean toward messianism at all today, it is to pray, cry out, and beg for God to enter history again, with the “mighty hand” and “outstretched arm” of our mythic past (Deuteronomy 7:19), to free us from the Egypts of our age and take us—all of humanity—home in the full sense of the word: *Bayom habu yib’yeh Adonai echad ush’mo echad* (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה יְיָ אֶחָד וְשְׁמוֹ אֶחָד), on that day, *Adonai* will be one, and God’s name will be one (Zechariah 14:9).

#### 4

Any obligation Jews might feel to enter into dialogue with members of other faith communities arises from our liberalism and not from traditional Judaism. To be sure, there has always been a concern from within the tradition *mipnei darchei shalom* (מִפְּנֵי דַרְכֵי שְׁלוֹמִים), which literally means “because of the ways of peace” but is better understood in this context as “for good relations with the gentiles.” For example, the Talmud teaches that Jews should “feed non-Jewish poor together with Jewish poor, visit their sick together with Jewish sick people,” not because it is our moral obligation, but rather *mipnei darchei shalom*, “because of the ways of peace,” that is, to foster good relations with the non-Jewish world (*Mishnah Gittin* 5:8). I share our tradition’s concern

for *darchei shalom*; ignorance breeds hatred, and thus good relations with the gentiles is usually fostered by interfaith dialogue.

Nevertheless, a desire to get along with our gentile neighbors does not add up to an obligation. My desire for interfaith fellowship and discourse comes not from a sense of obligation, but from my commitment to pluralism and my belief that God is most present in the space in between people when they meet each other as “thou,” manifestations of the Divine. Some of my most profound religious experiences have arisen from interfaith dialogue when we approach each other from a place of respect and intense interest. In addition, nothing clarifies my own beliefs more than encounters with other faith traditions or belief systems.