

The Chosen People: An Ethical Challenge

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The concept of the Chosen People is fraught with difficulties. Historically, it has brought much grief upon the Jewish people. It also has led some Jews to develop chauvinistic attitudes toward non-Jews. Nonetheless, it is a central axiom in the Torah and rabbinic tradition, and we therefore have a responsibility to approach the subject forthrightly. In this essay, we will briefly consider the biblical and rabbinic evidence regarding chosenness.

The Book of Genesis

A major theme of the book of Genesis is the refining process of the Chosen People. The Torah begins its narrative of humanity with Adam and Eve, the first people created in the Image of God. The Torah's understanding of humanity includes a state of potential given to every person to connect to God, and an expectation that living a moral life necessarily flows from that relationship with God.

Cain and Abel, the generation of Enosh, Noah, and the Patriarchs spontaneously brought offerings and prayed without any commandments from God to do so. God likewise held people responsible for their immoral acts without having warned them against such behaviors. Cain and the generation of the Flood could not appeal to the fact that they never received explicit divine commandments. God expected that they naturally would have known such conduct was unacceptable and punishable.

Adam and Eve failed by eating of the Tree of Knowledge, but they were not completely rejected by God, only exiled. Cain failed morally by murdering his brother—and he, too, was exiled. Their descendants became corrupt to the point where the entire human race was overwhelmed by immorality.

At this point, God rejected most of humanity and restarted human history with Noah—the "second Adam." After the Flood, God explicitly commanded certain moral laws (Genesis 9), which the Talmud understands as the "Seven Noahide Laws" (ethical monotheism). Noah should have taught these principles to all his descendants. Instead, the only recorded story of Noah's final 350 years relates that he got drunk and cursed his grandson Canaan. Although Noah was described as a good and righteous man, his story ends in failure. He did not transmit his values to succeeding generations.

As the only narrative spanning the ten generations between Noah and Abraham, the story of the Tower of Babel represents a societal break from God. It marked the beginnings of paganism and unbridled human arrogance. At this point, God appears to have given up on having the entire world perfected, and instead chose Abraham—the "third Adam"—and his descendants to model ethical monotheism and teach humanity.

This synopsis of the first twelve chapters of Genesis is encapsulated by Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno (sixteenth-century Italy). Only after these three failures did God select Abraham's family, but this was not God's ideal plan:

It then teaches that when hope for the return of all humanity was removed, as it had successfully destroyed God's constructive intent three times already, God selected the most pious of the species, and chose Abraham and his descendants to achieve His desired purpose for all humanity.... (Seforno, introduction to Genesis)

In The Nineteen Letters, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (nineteenth-century Germany) arrived at a similar conclusion.

Nor was there any genetic superiority ascribed to Abraham and his descendants. To the contrary, the common descent of all humanity from Adam and Eve precludes any racial differentiation, as understood by the Mishnah:

Furthermore, [Adam was created alone] for the sake of peace among men, that one might not say to his fellow, my father was greater than yours. (Sanhedrin 37a)

Abraham and descendants thus became the Chosen People—a nation expected to do and teach what all nations ideally should have been doing. Indeed, Abraham is singled out in the Torah as the first teacher of these values:

The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him. (Gen. 18:17–19)

The remainder of the book of Genesis revolves around the selection process within Abraham's family. Not all branches would ultimately become Abraham's spiritual heirs. By the end of Genesis, it is evident that the Chosen People is comprised of all Jacob's sons and their future generations.

Although the book of Genesis specifies the role and identity of the Chosen People, two difficult questions remain. 1. Once Israel was chosen, was this chosenness guaranteed forever, or was it contingent on the religious-ethical behavior of later generations? Could a sinful Israel be rejected as were the builders of the Tower of Babel? 2. Since the time of the Tower of Babel, is chosenness exclusively limited to Israel (either biological descendants or converts), or can non-Jews again become chosen by becoming ethical monotheists (either on an individual or national level)?

Israel's Eternal Chosenness

God addressed the first question as He was giving the Torah to Israel:

Now therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own treasure among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Ex. 19:5–6)

Thus, God's covenant with Israel is a reciprocal agreement. If Israel does not uphold her side, it appears from these verses that she would cease to be God's treasure. It is remarkable that the very beginning of Israel's national identity is defined as conditional, rather than absolute.

Later prophets stress this message, as well. Amos states that Israel's chosenness adds an element of responsibility and accountability. Infidelity to the covenant makes chosenness more dangerous than beneficial:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying: Only you have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. (Amos 3:1–2)

Amos's contemporary Hosea employed marriage imagery to demonstrate that Israel's special relationship with God is contingent on her faithfulness to the covenant. As the Israelites were unfaithful in his time, God rejected them:

She conceived and bore a son. Then He said, "Name him "Lo-ammi"; for you are not My people, and I will not be your God. (Hos. 1:8–9)

However, this was not a permanent rejection from this eternal covenant. Rather, the alienation would approximate a separation for the sake of rehabilitating the marriage rather than a permanent divorce. The ongoing prophecy in the book of Hosea makes clear that God perpetually longs for Israel's return to a permanent restored marriage:

And I will espouse you forever: I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy, and I will espouse you with faithfulness; then you shall be devoted to the Lord. (Hos. 2:21–22)

The book of Isaiah makes the point even more explicit: there was no bill of divorce:

Thus says the Lord, Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, with which I have put her away? Or which of My creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have you sold yourselves, and for your transgressions your mother was put away. (Isa. 50:1)

At the time of the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah took this imagery to a new level. There was a divorce, yet God still would take Israel back:

It is said, If a man sends away his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man's, shall he return to her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to me! says the Lord. (Jer. 3:1)

Jeremiah elsewhere stressed the eternity of the God-Israel relationship:

Thus said the Lord, Who established the sun for light by day, the laws of moon and stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves, Whose name is Lord of Hosts: If these laws should ever be annulled by Me—declares the Lord —Only then would the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation before Me for all time. (Jer. 31:5–6)

To summarize, Israel's chosenness is conditional on faithfulness to the covenant. However, failure to abide by God's covenant leads to separation rather than divorce, and the door always remains open for Israel to return to God. The special relationship between God and Israel is eternal.

Righteous Gentiles Can Be Chosen

Let us now turn to the second question, pertaining to God's rejection of the other nations after the Tower of Babel. Can these nations be chosen again by reaccepting ethical monotheism?

The answer is a resounding "yes." Prophets look to an ideal future, when all nations can again become chosen:

In that day five cities in the land of Egypt shall speak the language of Canaan, and swear by the Lord of hosts; one shall be called, The city of destruction. In that day there shall be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at its border to the Lord... In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the land; Whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance. (Isa. 19:18–25)

Similarly, Zephaniah envisions a time when all nations will speak "a clear language," thereby undoing the damage of Tower of Babel:

For then I will convert the peoples to a clear language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord. (Zeph. 3:9)

Thus, God's rejection of the nations at the time of the Tower of Babel similarly was a separation for rehabilitation, not a permanent divorce. Were the nations to reaccept ethical monotheism, they too would be chosen.

In halakhic terminology, non-Jews who practice ethical monotheism are called "Righteous Gentiles" and have a share in the world to come (see Hullin 92a). According to Rambam, they must accept the divine imperative for the seven Noahide laws to qualify as Righteous Gentiles. If they act morally without accepting this divine imperative, they should instead be considered "Wise Gentiles":

[Non-Jews] who accept the seven [Noahide] commandments are considered Righteous Gentiles, and have a share in the World to Come. This is on condition that they observe these commandments because God commanded them in the Torah.... But if they observe them because of reason, they are not called Righteous Gentiles, but rather, elah (printed editions: and not even, ve-lo) Wise Gentiles. (Rambam, Laws of Kings, 8:11)

[Regarding those printed editions that say ve-lo instead of elah: this appears to be a faulty text, and Rambam intended elah, i.e., that they are indeed Wise Gentiles. See Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, Asei Lekha Rav 1:53, p. 158; Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Abraham's Journey (2008), pp. 172–173; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah 89, vol. 1, pp. 99–100, quoted in Shalom Rosenberg In the Footsteps of the Kuzari, 2007, vol. 1 p. 161.)]

To summarize, then, one is chosen if one chooses God. For a Jew, that means commitment to the Torah and its commandments; for a non-Jew, that means commitment to the seven Noahide laws (see Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer 6, quoted in M. Greenberg, pp. 375–376). Non-Jews who are Righteous Gentiles are chosen without needing to convert to Judaism. God longs for the return of all humanity, and the messianic visions of the prophets constantly reiterate that aspiration.

Israel as a Nation of Priests

Although the door remains open for all descendants of Adam and Eve to choose God and therefore be chosen, Israel still occupies a unique role in this discussion. Israel was the first people to recognize God in this way. God calls Israel His "firstborn" (Ex. 4:22). Using the marriage imagery, Israel is God's wife, which carries with that a special relationship.

Perhaps the most fitting analogy that summarizes the evidence is Non-Jew : Jew :: Jew : Priest. God employs this terminology at the Revelation at Sinai:

Now therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own treasure among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Ex. 19:5–6)

Being Jewish and being a priest both are genetic. A priest also is a bridge between the people and God and serves in the Temple on behalf of the people. Similarly, Israel is expected to guard the Temple and teach the word of God. Just as priests have more commandments than most Israelites; Israelites have more commandments than the nations of the world. The one critical distinction is that a non-Jew may convert to Judaism and is then viewed as though he or she were born into the nation. Nobody can convert to become a priest (though a nazirite bears certain resemblances to the priesthood).

When dedicating the first Temple, King Solomon explicitly understood that the Temple was intended for all who seek God, and not only Israelites:

Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name—for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm—when he comes to pray toward this House, oh, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built. (I Kings 8:41–43)

In their messianic visions, the prophets similarly envisioned that Israel would occupy a central role in Temple worship and teaching the nations. All are invited to serve God at the Temple:

In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war. (Isa. 2:2–4)

Rather than serving primarily as an ethnic description, the Chosen People concept is deeply rooted in religious ethics. It is a constant prod to faithfulness to God and the Torah, and contains a universalistic message that belongs to the community of nations. All are descendants from Adam and Eve, created in God's Image. God waits with open arms to choose all those who choose to pursue that sacred relationship with Him.

Dr. Norman Lamm observes that "a truly religious Jew, devoted to his own people in keen attachment to both their physical and spiritual welfare, must at the same time be deeply concerned with all human beings. Paradoxically, the more particularistic a Jew is, the more universal must be his concerns" (Shema, p. 35).

For further study, see:

Symposium on "The State of Jewish Belief," Commentary 42:2 (August 1966), pp. 71–160, especially the articles of Rabbis Eliezer Berkovits, Marvin Fox, Immanuel Jacobovits, Norman Lamm, and Aharon Lichtenstein.



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