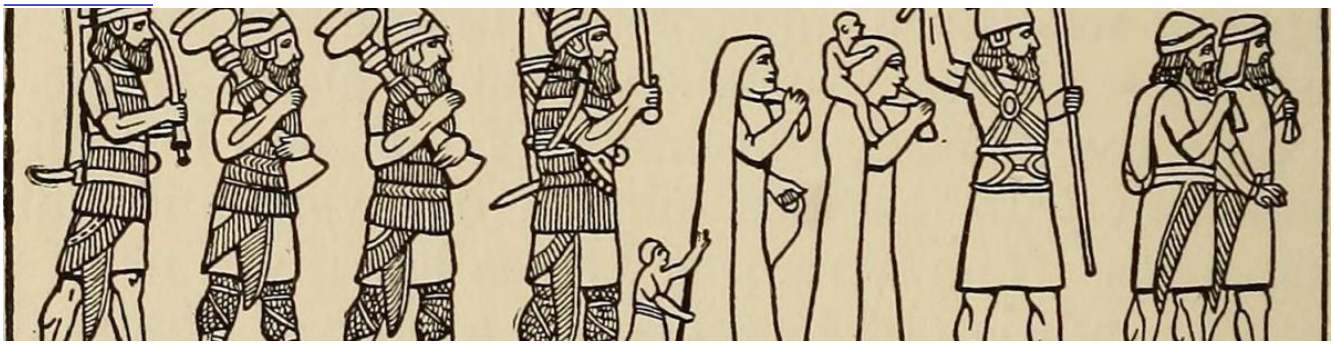
The Chosen People: An Ethical Challenge

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“The Chosen People”: An Ethical Challenge**[1]**

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. This essay will briefly consider the biblical and rabbinic evidence.

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, created in the Image of God. The Torah’s conception of humanity includes the potential of 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 divine commandments to do so. God held people responsible for their immoral acts without having warned them against such behaviors. Cain and the generation of the Flood could not defend

themselves by appealing to the fact that they never received explicit divine commandments.[2] They naturally should have known that their conduct was unacceptable and punishable.

At the time of Noah, God rejected most of humanity for their wickedness and restarted human history with Noah. 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 his descendants, creating an ideal humanity. Instead, the only recorded story of Noah’s final 350 years relates that he got drunk and cursed his grandson Canaan. Although Noah was a righteous man, he did not transmit his values to succeeding generations.

Only one narrative spans the 10 generations between Noah and Abraham, namely, the Tower of Babel. This story represents a societal break from God, marking the beginnings of paganism and unbridled human arrogance.[3] At this point, God chose Abraham and his descendants to model ethical monotheism and teach it to humanity.

This synopsis of the first twelve chapters of Genesis is encapsulated by Rabbi Obadiah Sforno (sixteenth-century Italy) in his introduction to Genesis:

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.[4]

There is no 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 his descendants thus became the Chosen People—a nation expected to do and teach what *all* nations ideally should do. 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. (Genesis 18:17–19)

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

Although 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) Is chosenness exclusively limited to Israel (either biological descendants or converts), or can non-Jews become chosen by becoming ethical monotheists, observing the seven Noahide laws?

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. (Exodus 19:5–6)

God’s covenant with Israel is a reciprocal agreement. If Israel does not uphold its side of the covenant, it appears that Israel would cease to be God’s treasure. The very beginning of Israel’s national covenantal identity is defined as conditional rather than absolute.

Later prophets highlight 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 its 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. (Hosea 1:8–9)

However, this was not a permanent rejection from the eternal covenant. Rather, alienation would approximate a separation for the sake of rehabilitating the marriage rather than being a permanent divorce. The ongoing prophecy in the Book of Hosea makes clear that God perpetually longs for Israel's return to an ideal 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. (Hosea 2:21–22)

The Book of Isaiah makes this point even more explicit as God insists that 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. (Isaiah 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 will 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. (Jeremiah 3:1)

Jeremiah elsewhere stressed the eternality 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. (Jeremiah 31:5–6)

To summarize, Israel's chosenness is conditional on its faithfulness to the covenant. However, Israel's 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 covenantal relationship between God and Israel is eternal.

This conclusion harks back to God's original choosing of Abraham. It is unclear in the Torah *why* God chose him to carry the religious torch for humanity. One could argue that Abraham's religiosity evidenced after God singled him out can be projected back as the reason for God's choosing him. From this perspective, God chose Abraham because of his righteousness.[5] Alternatively, Rabbi Judah Leib Lowe of Prague (Maharal) in his *Netzah Yisrael* maintains that God's initial act of choosing Abraham was not explicitly based on his righteousness, making that choice unconditional.[6] Therefore, God never will cancel His covenant with Abraham's descendants even when they sin.[7] As we have seen, there is truth in both positions. Israel's chosenness is contingent on faithful behavior, but simultaneously it 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. (Isaiah

19:18–25)

Similarly, Zephaniah envisions a time when all nations will speak “a clear language,” thereby undoing the damage of the 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. (Zephaniah 3:9)

God’s rejection of the nations at the time of the Tower of Babel 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).

To summarize, 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. 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 Kingdom of Priests

Although the door remains open for all descendants of Adam and Eve to choose God and therefore be chosen, Israel occupies a unique role. Israel was the *first* nation to recognize God in this way. Using the marriage imagery, Israel is God’s first wife (Isaiah 54:6), a status that carries with it a special relationship. God calls Israel His “firstborn” (Exodus 4:22). That said, all of the nations are God’s children. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains that the firstborn child must serve as a role model to the younger children.[8]

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. (Exodus 19:5–6)

Commenting on these verses, Sforno remarks:

> “And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests”: and in this manner you will be a treasure, for you will be a kingdom of priests to teach the entire human race to call in God’s Name and to serve Him alike. As it is written “you shall be called God’s priests” (Isaiah 61:6), and as it is written, “for Torah will come from Zion” (Isaiah 2:3).

Being Jewish and being a priest both are genetic. A priest 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.

When dedicating the first Temple, King Solomon 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 emphasized that Israel would occupy a central role in worship and in 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. (Isaiah 2:2–3)

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 it contains a universalistic message that Israel belongs to the community of nations. All are descendants of 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."[9]

Conclusion: Jews and Non-Jews

The Torah embraces universalistic values that apply to humanity. All people are descended from one couple so there is no room for racism (Sanhedrin 37a). All people are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26). There is a universal morality demanded by the Torah, codified in the Talmud as the Seven Noahide Laws. The messianic visions of the prophets foresee that all humanity will one day live in harmony by accepting God and the requisite moral life demanded by the Torah.

Simultaneously, God made a singular covenant with the people of Israel through the Torah. Israel plays a unique role as a "kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), has a separate set of laws revealed by God, and occupies a central role in the covenantal history between God and humanity.

Some within the Jewish community focus almost exclusively on the particularistic elements of tradition, and consequently think less of non-Jews and non-observant Jews. Other Jews focus almost exclusively on the universalistic vision of Judaism, ignoring Jewish belief, law, and values in favor of modern Western values. Needless to say, the respective espousing of half-truths distorts the Torah and leads to rifts within the community.

Tradition teaches a sensitive balance of universalism and particularism. The Torah has a special vision for Jews and simultaneously embraces all of humanity in an effort to perfect society.

For further study:

- Rabbi Marc D. Angel, “The Universalistic Vision of Judaism,” *Conversations* 12 (Winter 2012), pp. 95–100.
- Rabbi Marc D. Angel, *Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1991), pp. 197–207.
- Rabbi Marc D. Angel with Hayyim Angel, *Rabbi Haim David Halevi: Gentle Scholar, Courageous Thinker* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2006), pp. 189–198.
- Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, trans. Maxwell Luria (New York: Paulist Press, 1995).
- Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- Alan Brill, *Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).
- Alan Brill, “Many Nations Under God: Judaism and Other Religions,” *Conversations* 2 (Autumn 2008), pp. 39-49.
- Moshe Greenberg, “Mankind, Israel, and the Nations in the Hebraic Heritage,” in *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), pp. 369–393.
- Rabbi Haim David Halevi, *Asei Lekha Rav* 8:69.
- Menachem Kellner, “On Universalism and Particularism in Judaism,” *Da’at* 36 (1996), pp. v–xv.
- Menachem Kellner, “Rashi and Maimonides on the Relationship between Torah and the Cosmos,” in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), pp. 23-58.
- Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Boston: Brill, 1996), pp. 143–169.

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002).
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Jewish Identity: The Concept of a Chosen People," at www.chiefrabbi.org/ReadArtical.aspx?id=454.
- Symposium on "You Have Chosen Us from Amongst the Nations," *Jewish Action* 65:1 (Fall 2004), especially the articles of Rabbis Chaim Eisen and Norman Lamm.
- 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.

[1] This article appeared originally in *Conversations* 8 (Fall 2010), pp. 52–60; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 25–34.

[2] Several Midrashim maintain that God commanded Adam six of the seven Noahide Laws, with the exclusion of eating limbs torn from live animals (since eating meat was not permitted until after the Flood). See, for example, Genesis Rabbah 16:6; 24:5. We are following the account as it appears in the Torah.

[3] See Hayyim Angel, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in Combining Traditional and Academic Bible Methodologies," in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel, *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 135–143; reprinted in Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 201–212.

[4] Genesis Rabbah 39:5 suggests a similar approach, that God told Abraham to go to Israel after the failings of the generation of Enosh, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel.

[5] Nehama Leibowitz quotes Ramban and Genesis Rabbah 32:3 in support of this position (*New Studies in Bereshit-Genesis* [Jerusalem: Eliner Library], pp. 116–119). The many Midrashim that fill in Abraham's righteous behavior prior to

the Torah's account of him likewise cast God's choosing him as a result of his righteousness.

[6] See further discussion of Maharal's position in Byron Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent: The Life and Works of Judah Loew of Prague* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), pp. 83–93.

[7] See also Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 43–44, 115–116.

[8] *Chumash Mesoras HaRav: Shemos*, compiled and edited by Dr. Arnold Lustiger (New York: OU Press, 2014), p. 39.

[9] Dr. Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), p. 35.