

The Chosen

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I cannot begin to tell you how much I dislike the expression “The Chosen People”. It is not that I have any problem with what the Bible says. To me it is the most essential text (and also its Talmudic expansion). But the fact is that some of its ideas and laws have fallen by the wayside, even as it remains a source of moral and legal guidance, an inspiration to some and the word of God to others.

It should be obvious that certain aspects of a document revealed in time would be time-bound. Slaves were common currency then and needed regulation and protection. Biblical laws about slaves are no longer relevant other than in symbolic ways. The Canaanites no longer exist. Amalek cannot literally be identified, only figuratively. And Biblical diseases that attacked humans, buildings, and clothes might be called leprosy but it is not what we call leprosy. Nazirites are pretty rare nowadays and no husband gets to bring his rebellious wife to the priest. As for the Temple, recently an eager youngster asked if we will be allowed to use modern technology to rebuild it. I replied that I’d be amazed if we could ever agree on who the architect would be without Divine intervention but we have been told by our sages to leave all that to Elijah to sort out.

The idea of “The Chosen People” falls within this category. It is an idea that was indeed relevant in its pagan context and at a time when Judaism offered a dramatic and the only ethical alternative. But no matter how rabbis twist, turn, and squirm to remove the implied sting of superiority, it must now be consigned to those ideas no longer in currency.

The Biblical source is in Exodus 19:5-6: “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.”

In a pagan, primitive world, a nation of slaves emerges into the Sinai desert and there at Sinai they are given a new constitution. They need inducements (all the more so because of the large number of restrictions) and God promises them a special relationship if only they can adhere to His program. This relationship with God is part of the reciprocal Sinai Covenant.

The history of the succeeding years shows how the Israelites did not succeed as a nation to do this and, as a result, headed slowly and surely towards disaster. The amazing thing is that there were enough individuals who were indeed loyal and did succeed in keeping the flame of the Torah alive. Chosenness has never protected us from ignominy and destruction. If anything, it has been our stubbornness that has kept us alive. God called us that too more than once, “a stiff-necked nation” (Exodus 33).

It is true that even today when we are called to the Torah we recite a

blessing thanking God for choosing us from other nations through giving us the Torah. But that is no more than statement of delight in and commitment to our religion and our constitution. That is no more pernicious than saying, "I am glad I am an American" (or whatever).

But here's the issue. We Jews are still attacked for claiming we are Chosen. What does that mean? Does it mean that we are automatically guaranteed salvation? No. But that's what most Christians think they are. How often, even in America, do little kids come home from school in tears because a pious Christian has informed them that they will burn in hell because they have not accepted Jesus? Why does nobody accuse Christians of being God's Chosen? If you answer because it is a matter of choice, so too is being a Jew; we still accept converts. (We do make it rather difficult, but that is, in part, because we don't think you have to be a Jew to be "saved".)

In how many Muslim Madrassas are Jews described as the doomed Dhimmis who will not enter paradise for rejecting Mohammad? Aren't Muslims guilty of thinking they are chosen by Allah? Other religions claim only their members are saved. Jews have always claimed that goodness and a relationship with God are the universal criteria, rather than notional membership. Only one's actions can ensure a relationship with God.

The problem is that many Jews, from across the spectrum, actually seem to believe they are superior in one way or another. I find it to be spiritually and intellectually ridiculous, unsustainable hogwash that anyone should automatically, by birth, be better. That is prejudice. It may be a defense mechanism and a response to the constant delegitimization and prejudice that simply will not die. But I find it really offensive. Not only is it offensive, but it flies in the face of the famous Talmudic statement that we are all the children of the one God and descended from one source and we can all say, "The world was created for Me" (Sanhedrin 37a).

I am not objecting to the desire to perpetuate the people by encouraging Jews to marry Jews. That is a choice and no different than, say, money marrying money or aristocrats marrying aristocrats. I haven't heard anyone trying to ban that. Though I have to say, the way to perpetuate the people is not simply by marrying a coreligionist, but by living a Jewish life together and passing it on to one's children. The mere act of marriage guarantees nothing.

Then what can the idea of being Chosen actually mean? I suggest nothing more than a historical statement of how we came to be different. You might say it's no different than choosing a football player for a specific position he's most suited for. This does not make him a better person. And if he's no good at what he does he gets replaced. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the Almighty decided we had not done a good enough job in spreading monotheism and decided to give Christians, Muslims and Hindus a chance. But this does not mean we could not come back and try again. Neither does it mean that the Johnny-come-latelies did a better job (though if numbers matter, they certainly did).

I'd put this idea of thinking Chosen means "better" in the same bracket as thanking God for not making me a woman. That might have meant something when

women were uneducated and subjugated. Nowadays, with more of them getting a degree than men, being successful in every aspect of modern life, I'd be more inclined to ask to be on their side!