

Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780/2019
"Choosing to be Chosen"

A few years ago, I got on a plane bound for the east coast and was seated next to a lovely woman. We got to talking, as people on a plane often do. We talked about the weather, where each of us was going and from where each of us was coming. After chit chatting for a while, we got to the point where she asked me what kind of work I do. Now, when I tell people I'm a rabbi, I usually get some version of three different responses. The first is usually a question: Is that like a minister? the second tends to be an exclamation: I didn't know women could be rabbis! And the third is often an apology, either for not going to services or for swearing earlier in the conversation. But on this occasion, I got a response I didn't expect. This woman stated that Jews are very special people. She was Catholic, originally from a Central American country, and she explained that where she lived, Jews were the wealthy ones, they were educated and important people. Clearly, they were God's chosen people. Jews are special, she said.

It was a strange experience to hear all of these problematic Jewish stereotypes said with such admiration, and even affection. These same perceptions that make us targets, she saw as positive, enviable. She assumed that being God's chosen people meant that we got special perks and privileges.

Now, I suppose that's what most people think it means to be the chosen people. That we get special treatment, in a good way. That we believe ourselves to be special, that we think of ourselves as better than others. We are elitist. It's why the term makes many of us so uncomfortable. We don't see ourselves as better than others, nor do we want others to think that we see ourselves as better, and as a result, we wind up rejecting the notion all together, almost out of a sense of shame that it is written in our text.

Yet, I would argue that being chosen is fundamental to who we are. It's a key part of our identity, an essential piece to our survival over the millennia. But not because it asserts that we are better than anyone else, on the contrary. For so long, we have embraced chosenness because we saw ourselves as inferior to others. Being chosen gave us the inner strength to follow our convictions, even as we feared that we lacked the outward strength to carry them through.

From the start, we have been a tiny, insignificant people; a wandering band former slaves without direction, until we received Torah. A midrash recalls what happened at the moment we received it. "When God, who is everywhere, revealed Godself to give the Torah to Israel, God revealed Godself not only to Israel, but to all other nations as well." God first went to the children of Esau. They asked what was written in it, and when God gave them an example, they rejected it, explained that there were commands they could not follow. Then God went to the children of Ammon and Moab, and they likewise rejected it after asking about its contents. The same went for the conversation with the children of Ishmael. "There was not a single nation among the nations to whom God did not go, speak, and as it were, knock on its door, asking whether it would be willing to accept the Torah. At long last, God came to Israel. They said, *naaseh v'nishma*, we will do and we will harken" (Sif Deut, 343).

According to this tradition, God didn't see us as a special people at all, rather we were dead last on God's list, and for good reason. We had no stability, no establishment, how were we to carry the responsibility of Torah and of the covenant? We were God's last choice, but our eagerness for direction and purpose made us jump at the opportunity, even before we knew the terms of the deal.

Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780/2019
"Choosing to be Chosen"

As it turns out, our willingness to make that commitment without fully understanding the parameters, made us the perfect partners for the covenant, and has been a strength of ours throughout tradition. We don't always know what is going to be, what the world has in store for us, but we commit ourselves to figuring out, and to making it work. Parts of the Torah, too, have a similar kind of openness. *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice shall you pursue, is a good example of that openness. Torah does give us some specifics and parameters for a just society, but the openness of this verse also illustrates that it is not possible to spell it all out, we don't know all that will be required. Thus, we have to keep pursuing justice, Even if we never catch it, never arrive at justice, We must keep working at it, and keep reaching for it.

Kedoshim t'hiyu, you shall be a holy people is another example. The text does not say you are a holy people, rather, you shall be. You have to work at it. And while following the commands will help you attain that holiness, it is something that you have to work with, and seek to understand what it means on an ongoing basis. You have to figure it out, you have to try.

Even some of the commands that are more specific suggest a progressive process. Dated and problematic as they sometimes seem from our perspectives and experience, many of them are attempts to improve upon what was at the time. The rule of an eye for an eye, for instance, feels harsh, maybe even barbaric. But that practice replaced earlier systems wherein punishments could be much harsher than the crime, and depending upon where you were on the societal hierarchy, different punishments could be meted out for the same crime. With an eye for an eye, the rich couldn't hurt the poor without consequences, and the poor couldn't be punished more severely for their crimes than the rich. Additionally, many of the commandments are given to us in the future tense, when you enter the land, when you cross over, suggesting that the laws were not descriptive, but proscriptive. In essence, they were told, when you establish a new society, make sure you build on laws and practices that you know and evolve them to something better than they are today. Torah helped to condition our thinking, that life, law and society are not static, but ever changing in order to come closer to our ideals. Accepting Torah means accepting the responsibility to try to make things better.

This is a difficult commitment. From the start, the odds were against the Israelites success. Moses likely knew this, so in his address to the Israelites, as they were about to cross the Jordan into a new land, he bolsters them and tells them that they were uniquely chosen for this destiny.

He says "you are a people consecrated to the Eternal your God: of all the peoples on earth the Eternal your God chose you to be God's treasured people" (Deut. 7:6). Their task at hand was going to be terribly difficult. They were supposed to build a new kind of civilization in a new land. But those who had previously visited the land told them that the people who live there now are giants. There was no reason that they should think they could succeed, except that Moses assured them that this was their destiny. And feeling chosen, feeling treasured, gave them strength, and confidence, and hope.

That feeling of chosenness has helped us get through many difficult times in our history. When we faced grave and dangerous challenges, feeling that we had a special role, a particular destiny, one that was divinely chosen for us, likely helped us to transcend the difficulties we faced. Chosenness gives us a unique strength to persevere.

Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780/2019
"Choosing to be Chosen"

As our story continues, our sense of responsibility grows. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet speaks to the people to reignite their sense of who they are as they prepare to return to the land of Israel from exile, and in so doing, expands their understanding of their responsibility.

On God's behalf, he says, "I, the Eternal, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light to the nations, opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement, from the dungeons those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:6-7). Prior to this text, much of our responsibility focused on building our society, but Isaiah proclaims that isn't enough. We are not only responsible for ourselves, rather, we are responsible to build a better world for all people. Now, that's a lofty goal for us to set for ourselves. Who are we at this point? An exiled people with no national autonomy, still small in number and now dispersed throughout the known world. Yet, Isaiah charges us with the responsibility of all of humanity. After all, we do not live in isolation. There is no better world for us if it doesn't include others. At the same time, that is some serious chutzpah. What in the world would make us think that we could be capable of being a light to the nations? Yet, Isaiah empowers us. It's our chosenness. We were selected to do this. This is the path we have always been destined to take.

Belief in our chosenness is the source of our chutzpah, our audacity, to think that we could make any kind of difference in the world. But, being chosen meant we had the responsibility, and feeling chosen gave us confidence in our abilities. That chutzpah has enabled us to contribute and be influential in every society in which we have ever lived.

It was helpful, as well, for us to think of ourselves as a light to the nations because when we have found problems and issues in the world, they aren't a surprise. We have no expectation that things should already be perfected or completed, rather, we expect that we have to help to work for change.

So, chosenness gave us strength and hope when we lived through hardship. And chosenness gave us the confidence and the responsibility to contribute and attempt to reach to greater heights. Believing that we were the chosen people has helped us survive, thrive, and find meaning and purpose.

But we live in a very different time, place and context. If chosenness helped to strengthen and empower us when we felt small, insignificant, and completely vulnerable, then do we still have a use for the notion today?

We live in a rather unique time in Jewish history. As American Jews, we aren't assessed any special Jewish taxes, we are not restricted in our movement, our education, our professions. The government doesn't keep track of who is Jewish. It doesn't say so on our birth certificates or our passports. If people know, it is because we have, in one way or another, volunteered that information. We have so much freedom in fact, that we could decide not to be Jewish. It would be really easy. We wouldn't have to convert, we wouldn't have to denounce anything, there would be no paperwork involved. We could just walk away. That freedom is so complete, that the choice to be Jewish actually becomes a courageous one, because it is the choice to stand out when it would be so easy to blend it.

And we stand out because we continue to call for a better world. Our destiny as the Jewish people is the same as it has always been. We believe that something better is possible, and we believe that we have both the ability and the responsibility to help lead all of humanity to that better place. However,

Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780/2019
"Choosing to be Chosen"

when we point out the problems, when we say the world is not what it should be or could be, we challenge the status quo. And, when we challenge the status quo, we challenge those to whom the status quo gives power and influence. People will always resist change when it threatens their status and their power. So, when we push for change, we make ourselves adversaries to powerful people. We risk being singled out and targeted.

Ultimately, that is the source of the difficulties we face today. That's what they said in Charlottesville, that's what was said in Pittsburg. We were targeted because of Jewish communal support for immigrants and refugees. We were singled out for working to fulfill our charge in Isaiah, "to open eyes deprived of light, to rescue prisoners from confinement, from the dungeons those who sit in darkness." We are targeted because we assert that the world can be kinder, more compassionate and more just. For us, choosing to be a light to the nations means choosing to be more vulnerable than we have the freedom to be. It takes courage to claim that legacy; it takes courage to be Jewish.

And that courage, I believe, comes from the strength and confidence that chosenness gave to our forebears. We believe we can make a difference, because they did. We accept our responsibility, because they did. Our courage is supported by their strength and by their success. Judaism is a choice for us, and we choose to be chosen; to do what we must to realize our people's ancient vision of a redeemed world.

Being the chosen people has never been about the special privileges. And it has never been about asserting ourselves as better than other people. Rather, it is about acting upon the belief that the world itself can be better, and believing that efforts to make the world better can come from the least likely places and the least likely people. As people who choose Judaism, may we feel the strength, the hope, the optimism, and the courage of all those chosen before us. May we build on their legacy. May we build a better world.

Kein yihi ratzon.