

Chosenness

In this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh, God speaks to Moses, saying:

Exodus 28

1. Bring close to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel to serve Me [as kohanim -- as priests]: Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.
2. You shall make holy garments for your brother Aaron, for honor and glory.
3. And you shall speak to all the wise hearted, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, and they shall make Aaron's garments to sanctify him, [so] that he serve Me [as a kohen].
4. And these are the garments that they shall make: a choshen, an ephod, a robe, a tunic of checker work, a cap, and a sash. They shall make holy garments for your brother Aaron and for his sons to serve Me [as kohanim].

So Aaron and his family are CHOSEN by God for special service. They are set apart from the rest of the Jews. Just like all Jews were CHOSEN by God from among all peoples, and set apart from the rest of the nations.

Chosenness. Holiness. Separateness. All concepts very central in Judaism.

"Who do you think you are, setting yourselves up above everyone else?", many Gentiles have told us over the ages. "We need to bring you down a peg or two. All people are equal, you know."

"They are right", say many liberal Jews. "We want no part of this arrogant, elitist, even racist concept and completely reject it! Our goal is an egalitarian society."

"You may not reject God's gift!", reply the traditionalists. "We did not choose ourselves; God chose us. God said,

- You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation -
mamlekheth kohanim vegoy kadosh.
- You shall be a light unto the nations.

This does not call for arrogance, but for humility. We were chosen to give the world a conscience, to introduce monotheism, to spread a moral code. Could we have done it without this charge? And how can it be elitist and racist if anyone can convert to Judaism?".

Let's talk about all this.

First, a definition. What does chosenness mean?

The Torah implies: Chosen for a mission, chosen to perform a function.

The Torah **explicitly** rejects the notion of the innate superiority of the Jews.[1]

In the Torah, God says: I did not choose you because you were the most numerous; you were not.[2] I did not choose you because you were the most virtuous; you were not [3]. In fact, you are a stiff-necked people.

This last line is repeated eight times in the Torah! In my more whimsical moments, I like to think that we were chosen BECAUSE we are stiff-necked. God was saying, in effect, "I need someone with the determination, the endurance, the staying power, to follow my commandments and spread my word in spite of the inevitable persecutions that will ensue." It takes stubbornness to do that.

The Midrash compares Israel to an olive. Just as the olive yields its oil only after being squeezed hard, so Israel must endure great oppression and hardship in order to yield its wisdom.

-Many Jews have felt the urge to tell God, like Tevye in **Fiddler on the Roof**, "Can you choose somebody else?"

But willy-nilly, Jews have marched through history with the deep feeling of being chosen.

This feeling has served the world well.

The result was that, consciously or unconsciously, Jews have always felt imbued with a sense of mission.

We tend to be very passionate in everything that we do.

You will find us in every camp, in every field, frequently in leadership positions; including camps in which **I** don't particularly care to find Jews.

This passion, in no small measure, is behind Jewish achievements throughout the ages:

-Material wealth is the most visible aspect of that success,

- But there is also intellectual wealth (only one person in 350 is Jewish in the world, yet more than 30% of Nobel Prizes go to Jews),
- There's economic prowess (Israel's meteoric rise in the world of modernity and technology),
- There's military prowess (tiny Israel victorious against large and mighty combined Arab armies - or Greek armies, as the case may be),
- There's disproportionate representation in the professions - physicians, lawyers, accountants, teachers, researchers, etc.,
- There's disproportionate representation among holders of college degrees,
- And there's disproportionate representation wherever revolutionary ideas are brewing.

These are just facts - there is no triumphalism there.

- Yet we have been told that we should divest ourselves of chosenness because it brings us antisemitism.
- I disagree. It is not chosenness itself that has angered many Gentiles to the point of merciless persecution of the Jews. It is the achievements spawned by the feeling of chosenness that we are not forgiven for.
- After all, if you never achieve anything worth mentioning, who cares if you call yourself chosen? Who would even waste time mentioning you, let alone resent you? So, if you took away chosenness, but left the achievements, there would be just as much antisemitism.

Many years ago I participated in a formal dialogue with Episcopalians.

- The local bishop at the time got up and told the group, with great emphasis: "No more chosenness! No more goyim! We are all the Children of God! We are all equal!"
- I got up and said,
 - "I believe EVERY group must find ways, within its own tradition, to make itself feel special, to make itself feel chosen for a mission in life.
 - Deny chosenness to the Jews, and everybody loses.
 - Look for ways to make every group feel special in some way or other, and everybody wins.
 - Don't be angry at the Jews for fulfilling the will of God.
 - Allow everybody to peacefully fulfill the will of God in the way **their** tradition understands it, and everybody will benefit.
 - Raise yourselves rather than try to lower the Jews."

Now I'd like to hear from you. What do you think? How do YOU understand chosenness?

Notes

[1] Deut 7: 6. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a special people to himself, above all peoples that are upon the face of the earth. (Not innate, but assigned.)

[2] Deut 7: 7. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples;

[3] Deut 9:6. Understand therefore, that the Lord your God gives you not this good land to possess it for your righteousness; for you are a stiffnecked people.

[4] Ex. R. 26.

Summary of portion:

* Eternal light: The Children of Israel are commanded to bring pure olive oil for the ner tamid, "a constantly burning light," above the sanctuary. (Exodus 27:20-21)

* Chosenness: Aaron and his sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, are chosen to serve God as priests. (Exodus 28:1)

* What to wear in the sanctuary: God instructs Moses to make special clothes for the priests. (Exodus 28:2-43)

* Aaron and his sons are ordained in a seven-day ceremony. (Exodus 29:1-46)

* Aaron is commanded to burn incense on an altar made of acacia wood every morning and evening. (Exodus 30:1-10)

=====

Deut 7

6. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a special people to himself, above all peoples that are upon the face of the earth.

7. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples;

8. But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn to your fathers, has the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and

Deut 14

2. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a special people to himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth.

Ex19

5. 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;

6. 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.

Deut 9

6. Understand therefore, that the Lord your God gives you not this good land to possess it for your righteousness; for you are a stiffnecked people.