

Rabbi Noah Arnow
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“How Odd of God to Choose the Jews”

*How odd of God
To choose the Jews.*

This famous observation was, it seems, originally formulated in this way by British journalist William Norman Ewer.

It has generated several responses. The following, is attributed both American journalist Cecil Brown as well as poet Ogden Nash:

*But not so odd
as those who choose
the Jewish God
but spurn the Jews.*

Yiddishist Leo Rosten’s excellent response is also famous:

*Not odd
of God;
the goyim
annoy ‘im.*

The original observation, “How odd of God to choose the Jews,” feels kind of antisemitic coming from, well, an antisemite. But it’s something we’ve all probably wondered about.

Tevye, in the musical and movie version of Fiddler on the Roof, famously says, “I know we are the chosen people. But once in a while, can't you choose someone else?” It’s not exactly the same, but it’s similarly expressing discomfort with the Jews being the chosen people.

I can imagine that many of us feel somewhat uncomfortable with being the Chosen People, although maybe not the same discomfort Tevye had. Tevye saw being Jewish (and chosen) as putting a target on his back, as handicapping him and his family.

While that may be a piece of what we are feeling recently, my guess is that our discomfort, or at least mine, stems from the idea that God has favorites, and that we’re the favorite. What about everyone else—don’t they matter?

The theophany, or revelation of God’s self, at Sinai, which we read this morning, is seen midrashically, mystically, as the wedding of God and the Jewish people, of God and God’s beloved people being joined for eternity. That is a profound *act* of choosing.

In Exodus 19 (vv. 5-6) though, in the prequel to the revelation and the Ten Commandments, we have one of the great *declarations* of chosenness.

God tells Moses to tell the Israelites: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, *והייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ, ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש*, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

That phrase though, “*kee all the earth is mine*” is hard to parse. What’s the relationship between us being God’s treasured possession among all the peoples and the earth being God’s?

Our own Etz Hayim Chumash comments, “God, as Creator of the world, cares for all people. Israel has no monopoly on God.... The notion that the people Israel have been chosen is not a claim of superiority. The Bible never hesitates to chronicle and condemn the Israelites’ shortcomings and God’s disappointment with them” (pp. 437-438, on Ex. 19:6).

Another commentator said something similar, only about five hundred years earlier. “The difference between you and them”—between Israelites and everyone else—“is one of degree, for indeed *all the earth is mine*, and the righteous of all people are without a doubt dear to Me,” said Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno (on Ex. 19:6).

Or as 20th century Israeli bible scholar Umberto Cassuto paraphrased it, “I am not your God alone, but the God of the whole world.... I am the God of all the peoples” (on Ex. 19:5).

19th century German Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch added another dimension: The relationship into which you are now to enter with Me is not an exceptional relationship. Rather, it is the beginning of the renewal of the normal relationship that should exist between Me and all the earth. According to their destiny, all humankind and all nations are Mine, and I am educating them to become mine” (on Ex. 19:5).

I appreciate all of these takes—that we are not superior, that God loves all righteous people, that God is the God of the whole world and all the peoples, and that the relationship between God and Israel is a model of the normal relationship that should exist between God and all peoples.

These are all universalistic readings, at least to some extent, of a very particularistic text.

The practical implication of these interpretations of chosenness is that Jews are good and righteous and important, but not necessarily more so than any other peoples. If we say, or even think, that God loves us *more* than other people, we are mistaken. Thus, we are obligated to treat other peoples as also loved by God.

When we hear of Jews who seem to show no care or concern for other groups or nations, we feel in our *kishkes*, our guts, that that isn’t Jewish, it’s not a Jewish way of behaving or believing.

The problem is, it is Jewish. Very Jewish.

There are commentators who see the fact that “the whole earth is God’s” as meaning that God *can* choose one nation (see Chizkuni, for example). Others who read it as “even though all the earth is God’s, and God might love them all, God still chose us above everyone else.”

Rashi says, “Do not say you are the only ones I have and that I have no others beside you”—sounds great so far, right? But Rashi continues and says, essentially—how else but by having other nations can I make my love for you evident? And those other nations? “They are but nothing before me and before my eyes.”

One midrash, that earlier on quotes our verse, asks, “Why did the Holy Blessed One concern Godself from the very beginning of time with the genealogies of the nations? This may be likened to a king who dropped a pearl into sand and pebbles. The king was compelled to search the sand and the pebbles to recover the pearl. As soon as he recovered the pearl, however, he discarded the sand and the pebbles, for he was only interested in retrieving the pearl (Tanchuma Vayeshev 1:6).

The *nimshal*, the explanation of the parable, is pretty darn clear. God searched the whole world for the pearl that is Israel, and as soon as God found Israel, God could discard all the other nations because they were like sand and pebbles in comparison.

When people tell you that Judaism believes that every human life matters, and that Jewish lives are not more valuable than other lives, that God loves all people equally, believe them.

When people tell you that Judaism believes that Jewish lives matter more, that God loves Jews more than anyone else, believe them.

Judaism says both.

It’s our job, our responsibility, our opportunity, to focus on the strands of Jewish tradition and thought that we believe in, that we find meaningful and useful. This means we have to choose the theology, the understanding of what God is and believes and wants. Jews have been choosing their “version” of God for millennia.

Maybe it’s not
How odd of God
to choose the Jews.

But instead,
Not odd of Jews
to choose their God.
Shabbat shalom.