



Carnegie Shul Chatter

December 30, 2021



Va'era in a Nutshell

Exodus 6:2–9:35

From Chabad.org

G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the “four expressions of redemption,” take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at “Mount Sinai”; He will then bring them to the land He promised to the Patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, “Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness.” Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron’s staff turns into a snake and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians.

Being Chosen

So we are the “chosen people.” Does that make us better than anyone else? Does that give us rights and privileges that no one else has? Is that a blessing or a curse?

There are many interpretations of what it means to be the “chosen people.” One that I liked said that it was a two way street – Abraham chose God and God chose Abraham and his descendants. But what were we chosen for?

To me it is not all that complicated. I believe we were chosen to receive Torah and its mitzvot, doing those mitzvot, and showing other people a righteous, Godly, way to live.

That is a very simple assignment, but it is also a very difficult assignment and too often we have not lived up to the task. Too often we have failed to follow the mitzvot, and too often we have turned our backs on Hashem.

But our God is a loving God. He is a forgiving God. And our covenant with Him endures despite our failings.

We chose God. He chose us. Let’s make sure we keep our end of the bargain.

The waters of the Nile turn to blood; swarms of frogs overrun the land; lice infest all men and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities; a pestilence kills the domestic animals; painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating hail. Still, “the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses.”



In this week’s parshah in a nutshell we find these words, “redeem them, and acquire them as His own chosen people at “Mount Sinai”. A “chosen people” – what exactly does that mean? In researching this Chatter I found numerous commentaries on the concept of the “chosen people” with numerous different interpretations. Here is one from jewishvirtuallibrary.org that I found very enlightening.

Judaism: The “Chosen People”

In Judaism, "chosenness" is the belief that the Jewish people were singularly chosen to enter into a covenant with G-d. This idea has been a central one throughout the history of Jewish thought, is deeply rooted in biblical concepts and has been developed in talmudic, philosophic, mystical and contemporary Judaism.

Most Jews hold that being the "Chosen People" means that they have been placed on earth to fulfill a certain purpose. Traditional proof for Jewish "chosenness" is found in the Torah, the Jewish bible, in the Book of Deuteronomy (chapter 14) where it says: "For you are a holy people to Hashem your God, and God has chosen you to be his treasured people from all the nations that are on the face of the earth." In the Book of Genesis (chapter 17) it also written: "And I [G-d] will establish My covenant between Me and you [the Jewish people] and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you."



In medieval Jewish philosophy the notion of the special status of the Jewish people found articulate and radical expression in Judah Halevi 's Kuzari. According to Halevi, the entire Jewish people was endowed with a special religious faculty, first given to Adam and then bequeathed through a line of chosen representatives to all of Israel. As a result of this inherited divine influence, the Jewish people were uniquely able to enter into communion with God and Israel's election implied dependence on a special supernatural providence.



This tradition of "chosenness," though, has often provoked antagonism from non-Jews.

With the rise of Christianity, the doctrine of Israel as the Chosen People acquired an added polemical edge against the background of the claim of the Church to be the "true Israel" and God's chosen people. In times of persecution, the "chosenness" doctrine was a source of great strength for the Jewish people. Similarly the talmudic explanation for chosenness - that the willingness of Israel to accept and obey the Torah was the reason for their election - helped maintain loyalty to tradition and to halakhah in periods of stress and forced conversion to other religions.

In the 1930s, as the Nazis were tightening the noose around the necks of German Jews, George Bernard Shaw remarked that if the Nazis would only realize how Jewish their notion of Aryan superiority was, they would drop it immediately. In 1973, in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, Yakov Malik, the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, said: "The Zionists have come forward with the theory of the Chosen People, an absurd ideology. That is religious racism." Indeed, the most damaging antisemitic document in history, the forgery known as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, is based on the idea of an international conspiracy to rule the world by the "Chosen People."

In light of these attacks, it is not surprising that some Jews have wanted to do away with the belief in Jewish chosenness. The most noted effort to do so was undertaken by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the small but influential Reconstructionist movement. Kaplan advocated dropping chosenness for two reasons: to undercut accusations of the sort made by Shaw that the Chosen People idea was the model for racist ideologies, and because it went against modern thinking to see the Jews as a divinely chosen people.

But does "chosenness" really mean the Jews were divinely chosen? After all, how did the notion of one God become known to the world? Through the Jews. And, according to Jewish sources, that is the meaning of chosenness: to make God known to the world. As Rabbi Louis Jacobs has written: "We are not discussing a dogma incapable of verification, but the recognition of sober historical fact. The world owes to Israel the idea of the one God of righteousness and holiness. This is how God became known to mankind."

Does Judaism believe that chosenness endows Jews with special rights in the way racist ideologies endow those born into the "right race"? Not at all. The most famous verse in the Bible on the subject of chosenness says the precise opposite: "You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth. That is why I call you to account for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Chosenness is so unconnected to any notion of race that Jews believe that the Messiah himself will descend from Ruth, a non-Jewish woman who converted to Judaism.

Why were the Jews chosen? Because they are descendants of Abraham. And why were

Abraham and his descendants given the task of making God known to the world? The Torah never tells us. What God does say in Deuteronomy, is that "it is not because you are numerous that God chose you, indeed you are the smallest of people" (7:7). Because of the Jews' small numbers, any success they would have in making God known to the world would presumably reflect upon the power of the idea of God. Had the Jews been a large nation with an outstanding army, their successes in making God known would have been attributed to their might and not to the truth of their ideas. After all, non-Muslims living in the Arab world were hardly impressed by the large numbers of people brought to Islam through the sword.

Nonetheless, perhaps out of fear of sounding self-righteous or provoking antisemitism, Jews rarely speak about chosenness, and Maimonides did not list it as one of the Thirteen Principles of the Jewish Faith.

The "Chosen People" idea is so powerful that other religious sects have appropriated it. Both Catholicism and Protestantism believe that God chose the Jews, but that two thousand years ago a new covenant was made with Christianity. During most of Christian history, and even among some adherents to the present day, Christian chosenness meant that only Christians go to heaven while the non-chosen are either placed in limbo or are damned.

Mohammed, likewise, didn't deny Abraham's chosenness. He simply claimed that Abraham was a Muslim, and he traced Islam's descent through the Jewish Patriarch.

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