

# CHOSEN TO BE THE OTHER

DO JEWS HAVE A PARTICULAR OBLIGATION TO WELCOME “THE STRANGER”?

## TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Buchdahl writes:

There may be no concept more unsettling and embarrassing to the modern Jew than the idea of Chosenness. In an age of increasing multiculturalism, diversity and intermarriage, thinking of ourselves as the Chosen People feels both exclusive and arrogant. It reeks of racial superiority, or even supremacy. Unless we ask ourselves, “Chosen for what?” Jews were not chosen to be better, but to *make things better*. We were chosen to uphold the particular traditions and teaching of Torah – with our own particular language, customs, and *chutzpah*.

Now in a world that increasingly celebrates the global and universal, embracing particularism can sometimes feel too narrow. Too provincial. Too tribal. But we all need our tribes. Our families, our congregations, our sports teams, our book groups. They give us roots and a community. They help us find our own unique place and purpose. We Jews need our tribe. So we can know and live out our particular story. So we can understand to whom we belong and what we were chosen to do. Chosenness is not about being chosen *above others*. Jews have been chosen to *be the other*.

What do I mean by that? Chosen to *be the other*? With apologies to Rabbi Hillel, if I had to sum up the entirety of our Jewish teaching while standing on one foot, I would say, “You were a stranger, therefore love the stranger as yourself. All the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Does the idea that Jews are “chosen,” or have a particular mission, resonate with you?
- (b) Do you agree that “we Jews need our tribe”? When have you felt a sense of tribal connection to the larger Jewish community? What other “tribal” identities have been important in your life?
- (c) If you were to identify something that the Jewish people has been “chosen” to do, what would it be?

## OTHER VOICES:

Rabbi Buchdahl cites “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus, an excerpt of which appears on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty:

### **The New Colossus**

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Lazarus names the statue “Mother of Exiles.” Does that name carry a different connotation than “Lady Liberty”? What is the connection between exile and freedom, in this poem and in our own tradition?
- (b) To what extent is this poem universalistic? To what extent is it particular to America?
- (c) How do the images of light in this poem relate to Isaiah’s prophecy that the Israelites would be a “light unto the nations.” Do you think America aspires to be a light unto the nations? What are the pros and cons of this kind of Jewish or American “exceptionalism”?

Rabbi Buchdahl draws a comparison between the experience of Jewish refugees during World War II and those currently fleeing Syria. *New York Times* columnist Nick Kristoff made a similar argument in a column entitled *Anne Frank Today is a Syrian Girl*,<sup>1</sup> which was accompanied by the photographs below.

“On April 30, 1941,” Kristoff writes, “a Jewish man here in Amsterdam wrote a desperate letter to an American friend, pleading for help emigrating to the United States. ‘U.S.A. is the only country we could go to,’ he wrote. ‘It is for the sake of the children mainly.’” One of those children was Anne Frank, whose entry to the United States was denied, resulting in her death.



Anne Frank, left. At right, Rouwaida Hanoun, a Syrian 5 year old wounded during an airstrike in Aleppo.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) Do you think the analogy that Rabbi Buchdahl and Nick Kristoff make is apt? How does our collective memory of being “the other” affect how we understand events like the Syrian refugee crisis?
- (b) Do you think our experience requires that we respond differently to the current refugee crisis than we would if we were not Jewish? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> NY Times, Aug. 25, 2016.

## **Bonus Text:**

Rabbi Buchdahl also refers to John Winthrop's famous sermon, "City Upon a Hill":

### **"City upon a Hill," 1630**

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other's necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make other's conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways. So that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are a going.

I shall shut up this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. Beloved there is now set before us life and good, Death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his Ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship and serve other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we

pass over this vast sea to possess it; Therefore let us choose life that we, and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) What does Winthrop mean when he says that “we shall be as a city on a hill”? Is he holding his community to a higher standard than those that surround it? Do you think that the Jewish community should hold ourselves to a higher standard?
- (b) What values does Winthrop promote? Is there any relationship between the experience of exile and the values he espouses?