

The Purpose of a “Chosen People”

By Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein
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[Chant Blessing before Torah]

“Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has chosen us from among all the peoples, and given us the Torah. Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives the Torah”

This blessing, known to most of you, usually studied in preparation for our becoming a bar/bat mitzvah, proclaims two articles of faith: that God gave us the Torah and that we were chosen from among all other people to receive it.

Some of us comfortably accept the notion of Divine election, that we Jews have an unimpeachable role in history and that, indeed, we are different from other religious groups.

Others, squirming under the ideological and historical burden of chosenness, fundamentally reject the concept at its core and, in fact, disdain any presumption that we Jews are special.

Students in my Confirmation class usually fall in this second category: They reject the idea that we are a chosen people. And they even go further and wonder whether we have brought on ourselves our tortured history of oppression and genocide by implying that we are better than others.

Today I invite this congregation to think about the implication of chosenness: from the blessing of lofty vision and meaningful mission to the sin of xenophobic exclusion and arrogant prejudice.

Larry Hoffman, a Jewish theologian and scholar, writes that the Frenchman Edmund Fleg, an assimilated Jew, reawakened to Judaism “only with the trumped-up charges of treason and the trial of Alfred Dreyfus” in 1894. As with Theodor Herzl, who also disclaimed Jewish identity at first, Fleg regretted not having attached himself sooner to Jewish life and to the tradition that preceded and would follow him.

Larry Hoffman comments Fleg initially thought “he inherited Judaism through blood, but realized that blood is insufficient...which is why he insisted on finding...meaning in his [Jewish] legacy, a legacy that gave him value and which he came to believe would give value to anyone who chose it.

“Fleg’s tortured musings are the opposite of the halachic issue of who is a Jew, set from the outside by Hitler” who killed Jews singly defined by their parentage and set on “the inside by the state of Israel” who accept as citizens Jews singly defined by their parentage. *[From “Why be Jewish? Principle, Story and Myth in the Liturgical Search for Identity”]*

Though Jewish law traditionally defines a Jew as born to a Jewish mother or by conversion many people intuitively sense that Judaism is not transmitted by birth alone. For them Judaism, Jewishness is a choice of faith, history and identity that is not predetermined by blood, or race or genetics.

The Torah elegantly makes the point.

The book of Exodus reports about these happenings on Mt. Sinai. As God was giving the Ten Commandments, God also dictated to Moses the terms of what would be of the Israelites' special status: "*Eem sha-mo-a tish-ma-oo b'kol-ee*" "If you obey Me (God) faithfully and keep My covenant you (the Israelites) shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples." From this Hebrew text, we heard the notion that the Israelites and therefore we, their descendants, are an "*am segulah*" a treasured people, but as the text indicates it is also our choice. (*Ex 19.5*)

According to the Torah no unilateral assignment was imposed on us. Like our ancestors we have a decision to make. We also have the option of faith: to accept what Martin Buber names our "vocation of uniqueness" or not; either to translate "into reality the Divine words" transmitted by the Torah, and "to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God" or to turn our back and walk away from that mission.

The decision is never predestined. The Midrash reminds us that the covenant was initially offered to other nations: first to the children of Esau who refused it because it commanded, "You shall not kill" and they were unwilling to accept that restriction; then to the children of Lot, and then to the children of Ishmael, then to the other nations. All of these tribes rejected the Torah's commandments because of the obligations they would not accept for themselves. In the end, God came to Israel. We were God's last resort.

Our traditional texts offer two very different accounts of our acceptance of the Torah and our responsibility for it.

The first, a more virtuous depiction, tells that even before our ancestors knew what would be their covenantal obligations they gleefully sang out "*Na'aseh v'nishmah*" "We promise to do it, and then we'll listen." This is a commendable portrayal of our uncommonly trusting ancestors. We like to tell this story to our children.

And there is another Midrashic account, in my mind a far more realistic depiction. It is one of my favorites. The story starts in the same way. The people were at Sinai. They had been told that God would soon speak directly to them. For three days they and their leaders purified themselves in preparation. The sun rose on the day of revelation but not everybody even got out of bed. So God brought thunder and lightening not as a demonstration of Divine power, but for no other reason than to wake them all up. (*Messengers of God, p 194*) Still our recalcitrant ancestors adamantly refused to take the Torah. They did not want the responsibility of being an *or la-goyim*, a light to the nations. They, too, like the other peoples, had no desire to change their ways.

So, God intimidated them. God picked up Mt. Sinai, held it over their heads and threatened: Accept the Torah or your grave will be under this mountain. It was either the Torah or death. Finally, the people came to their senses. In order to survive, the Israelites accepted the Torah and probably resentfully uttered: "*Na'aseh v'nishmah*." If that is the way it has to be, "*We will do and be obedient*."

In this traditional narrative, there was nothing inherently meritorious about our ancestors. They were no worse and obviously no better than other peoples at the time. But, in the end, we were given the Torah and with it "came our reason and power for survival as a

people” (*Elie Wiesel, Against Silence V.1, 266*). We have lived by that Torah for the last three millennia.

The point of the Exodus story is to remind us that each of us has an option: to wear the mantle of Jewish life, to bear the responsibility of a “treasured people” or not.

The Torah portion we read on Yom Kippur morning puts the choice clearly in front of us: You can live as a Jew if you “*lishmor mitzvotav*” “keep the teachings of your God.” “*V’eem yif-neh l’vav-cha*” “But if your heart turns and you are lured away” you will not live as part of this people.

Jewish peoplehood, for all who choose it, derives from shared faith, values and tradition and a commitment to perfect the world under the rule of God. Jews are not a closed membership. Jewish life and identity is not singularly guaranteed by our birth or defined by our genetics. We are not a race.

Defining Jews as a race misconstrues our sacred mandate to live by the ethical teachings of our tradition.

Hitler labeled Jews as a race and thereby justified our extermination. A racial definition of Jews is not only unacceptable, it distorts our self-understanding to such a point that we come to believe in our alleged superiority in high intelligence and exorbitant creativity.

The statistics that circulate among us comparing the world’s infinitesimal Jewish population and large number of Jewish Nobel Prize winners to another religious group’s infinitely larger population and far fewer Nobel Prize winners is not a meritorious reason for religious pride or smug haughtiness.

When I sense an insidious proposition of racial superiority among us, I am concerned about the effect it has on the well-being of our congregation and the Jewish people.

In its crudest manifestation, we let no one else in. Racial definitions of Jews disallow full Jewish identity for converts or people who don’t look Jewish, according to some eastern European stereotype.

I continue to be stunned when people say to me, “You are married to a non-Jew.”

As I mentioned last year, Kerry converted prior to our marriage but what these people tacitly say is that converts can never “*really* be Jewish.” They reason that you are either born into Jewish peoplehood or not. Nothing else counts.

Even more puzzling is that people assume that our Cantor, Angela Buchdahl, must be a convert. Because of her Korean ancestry, they reason that Cantor Buchdahl could not have been born and raised a Jew though she was. She is regularly told that she doesn’t look Jewish. She doesn’t fit the stereotypic profile.

Let us lift up our heads and take a look around. The face of the Jewish people is changing. Growing awareness of Ethiopian Jews compel reconsidering what it means to look Jewish. We have children in our religious school who fit no stereotype. They are of Asian and African and South American and Scandinavian and countless other backgrounds. They are born to parents of different ancestry. They are adopted. They are conceived through new technologies. And they are all Jewish, as Jewish as any of us

descended from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, as Jewish as any of us born from the German migration or from Sefardic Mediterranean roots.

The face of the Jewish community is changing and it is good. “What Makes Someone a Jew?” is the name of this book we give to our children and parents of varying ethnic backgrounds. The answer to which we should all hearken is “Judaism starts when you live Jewishly.”

In addition to closing the doors to Jewish identity, there is an even more nefarious implication of equating peoplehood with race. It allows us to judge and disdain others who are different.

This is difficult for me to say. I will try to do it gracefully. Yiddish words used, often casually, for non-Jews, non-Jewish men and women, and for African-Americans are not benign.

Good people believe that calling non-Jews *goyim*, in a joke or otherwise, is an unbiased description. But it is not benign to talk about *the goyim* or a *shiksa and sheygitz*. I know because I’m in the club. I know the roots of these words, *shiksa and shaygitz* from the Biblical Hebrew word meaning abomination. I know that these words are used mostly pejoratively often preceded by demeaning adjectives. I cannot even mouth the Yiddish word for blacks. It makes me cringe. These words have no place in our vocabulary, no more than the vicious code words other people use for Jews. Let us re-examine our behavior, the bias these words express.

Yom Kippur is our time to judge our behavior by the highest standards of decency.

Our history has given us reason to be distrustful of others, but also we are challenged to another way of being. It requires us to self-examine the prejudices we hold and the bigotry we harbor. We read from the Torah on Yom Kippur afternoon “the strangers who live with you shall be to you like citizens, and you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Where there is bias among us let us root it out.

It is difficult to change but it is crucial, especially now in this time. We Jews know the danger of bigotry. We are mandated to transform the impossible and keep alive the dream of a better future.

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke of this historic economic cycle and of our need to lift our heads and to be courageously optimistic. Now I speak about a presidential election that is also historic. This is the first time that an African-American is on either ticket, that a woman is on the Republican side and if elected John McCain would be the oldest person to ascend to the presidency.

To use Tom Friedman’s words, I believe both candidates are of “presidential timber” though I know that some of you would strongly disagree with me.

With regard to their positions on Israel, the Middle East and foreign affairs, my sense is that Israel would be protected and treated well under either administration as long as our own nation is strong. Voting for a candidate on the basis of policy is proper.

But there is something more that we know as Jews that gives us a level of insight about this election.

We have noticed polls indicating that the Jewish community is behaving differently than it has in past presidential elections and that, at least in some areas of this country, unusual numbers within the Jewish community still believe the fabrication that Senator Obama is not a Christian. Some theorists write that whatever the reasons given, race remains a decisive, though non-verbalized issue for Jews and for the rest of this nation.

In Nicholas Kristof's column this weekend, we read what we intuitively sensed and what many have talked about. While conscious prejudice seems to have decreased over time, "unconscious discrimination—what psychologists call aversive racism—has stayed fairly constant." (*Racism without Racists, NYT 10/5/08*) According to this theory a person who does not consider him/herself a racist will deflect their racial bias to more publicly acceptable areas of doubt like policy or religion or experience.

This is the time to raise a mirror to our own souls and to be honest about the hidden prejudices, the nagging bigotry, and the rampant ignorance we, yes, even we Jews, have about "others", people who by reason of race, religion, age, or gender are different from us.

This is a trying time.

John McCain's rallying cry in his acceptance speech was "Change is coming." Barack Obama calls for "Change we can believe in" and "change we need." Both candidates affirm this is a time for change. Let us listen to them.

Let the change begin here: from narrow-mindedness to righteousness, from tribalism to inclusion, from xenophobia to embrace, from despair to hope.

We choose as our mission to take responsibility for each person, inspire this nation, welcome the stranger into our midst as our own, and to allow the decency of our people's spirit to flow forth. We can do it. We have each other. We have faith. This is our mandate, to be a beacon to humanity, a light to the nations. For this we have been given the Torah and for this our people has been given life. Let the change begin here! Let the change begin now for each of us, for all of us and for this nation! Let us be strong with God's help.