

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Chosenness



Context

The idea of being a chosen people has often been a sticky issue for Jews, and a source of tension with those we live amongst. It can sound arrogant to describe ourselves as ‘a light unto the nations’, or simply fantastical in a context where we have been a community so often trampled by others. This is born out in a well-known Jewish joke that begins with Mr Cohen asking God if we are The Chosen People. It ends with Mr Cohen enquiring of God “Next time, can you please choose someone else?”

*It has been the justification of both Anti-Semitism and Philo-Semitism. So how are we to understand this idea? We might frame it as the ancient hopes of a trampled minority, or as an eternal challenge demanding that we attempt to be a blessing. In the following article **Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz** of Sinai Synagogue in Leeds explores the tension of universalism and pluralism that ‘Chosenness’ presents to us, and offers us a positive way to embrace this ‘special’ status, while challenging ourselves not to accept it at face value.*

Content

In a world where fast-paced images of political conflict and oppressive religion bombard the many screens in our lives, we as Progressive Jews are challenged to ask hard questions and live with a profound sense of discomfort. How do we respond to the values of our own religious and ethical traditions? Claims of (absolute) truth, mission and chosenness should make us feel uncomfortable. But they can also prompt us to think deeply about our place in the world: what does being, and doing, Jewish mean in a world as colourful, yet torn, as ours? What is our sense of purpose and mission? Who belongs to our community—who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’? Is it good modestly to turn inwards or better boldly to step outwards? Looking at notions of chosenness and covenant may help us come to some meaningful conclusions.

Chosenness in the Biblical and Rabbinic tradition is not a stand-alone concept designed to affirm our superiority. It is always seen as relational, covenantal and conditional: it requires emotional investment, trust and a sense of self-criticism. We aren’t perfect (or expected to be) but we have something to share and give. We are called upon to be *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex. 19:6), even though we are *the smallest of peoples* (Deut. 7:7) and likewise, we are enjoined not to be self-congratulatory: the prophet Amos reminds us both of the exacting moral standard chosenness implies: *You alone I have singled out of all the families of the earth—that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities* (Amos 2:3) as well as the realization that God’s covenant with Israel does not preclude Divine covenants with other peoples *To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians—declares the Eternal. True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir* (Amos 9:7). This powerful idea of God’s multiple covenants and relationships with all peoples is reflected in the Rabbinic tradition through the famous statement *the righteous of all the nations have a share in the world-to-come* (Tosefta Sanhedrin 13). Chosenness, then, is not about superiority or ultimate truth but about spiritual intimacy, obligation and relationship and encourage us to ask ourselves in the immediacy and intimacy of our own Jewish lives: what does being Jewish mean, what does being in relationship with God entail and what can it bring to my world?

In the early modern era, the concept of chosenness started to be challenged and redefined by Reform thinkers. In a more open and democratic society where the walls of the ghettos came down, chosenness became less of a matter of cultural distinction and more of a matter of moral mission. Perhaps one of the boldest proclaimers of this sense of mission is Rabbi Leo Baeck who suggested in a lecture in 1949:

“Mankind is hungry and thirsty for that which Judaism can say, what Jews full of Judaism can say...”ⁱⁱ (teaching us the fine balance between universalism – ‘Mankind is hungry’ – and particularism – ‘Jews full of Judaism’.)

Inspired by the Prophetic injunction to be *a light unto the nations* (Isaiah 42:6), Reform Judaism emphasises our calling as Jews: to be the bearers of ethical monotheism in the world, a concept that finds expression in *‘tikkun olam’*, repairing the world, as well as affirming choice and pluralism of both Jews and non-Jews. We are proud to embrace our uniqueness and particularism: through love of ritual and tradition, Israel, the Hebrew language, Jewish culture and our sacred texts. In many cases, Progressive Jews have reclaimed traditional practices of Judaism for compelling, contemporary reasons: because they give us meaning, belonging and community and lead us down a path of both shared history and individual transformation.

To do away with chosenness would be just as dangerous as to embrace it uncritically. Growth and insight lies in the creative tension where we, like Yisrael on the banks of the river, have to wrestle with the Divine imperative of the Hebrew Bible and the Rabbinic Tradition (not to mention what we as individual Jews may believe or not believe about God!) Chosenness and covenant can actually help us shape a Progressive Judaism that is both authentic and dynamic. Chosenness places the individual Jew amongst his or her sense of history and connectedness, balances universalism and particularism, unifies mission with pluralism—one cannot exist without the other.

Asher bachar banu mikkol ha-ammim, v’natan lanu et torato – “Who has chosen us from among all the nations and Who has given us the Torah” is the blessing we recite upon receiving an *aliyah* (‘call up’) to the Torah. The blessing reminds us that we have a special destiny in the world—not one based on ethnic pride or cultural superiority but a mission that can only be fulfilled under the banner of diversity. We are a voice in the symphony of humanity. Each culture and religion has its place, both in the marketplace of ideas as well as in Divine relationship and we can learn just as much from others as we can share with them.

In fact, one could argue that chosenness from a Progressive Jewish perspective can help protect us against a false universalism of ultimate truth claims that negate the dignity of other worldviews or faith traditions. The blessing also reminds us that chosenness is contingent on the Torah and how we live the values of the Torah—as Reform Jews, in the broadest sense of the world.

The Aleinu prayer states *“Itakkein olam b’malchut shaddai”* – “to repair the world under the Kingdom of the Almighty”. Within our own lives, our communities, our societies and our world, our mission as Progressive Jews awaits us. We can be bold in our vision for redemption and justice, to assert the ancient-yet-ever-relevant Jewish message of ethical monotheism; that we are all created equally in the Divine Image. At the same time, we can be gentle in how we advocate and share that vision. Not through power, not through might but through a spirit of integrity, mutual respect and an ever ongoing loving-yet-critical conversation both with our own tradition and the world entire.

So when we as Progressive Jews are confronted with the fast-paced images of a world on fire, we can brace ourselves for the role we can play: to raise our voice in the marketplace of ideas and speak for justice, for pluralism and for humanity. Our covenant demands it of us.

Contemplation

In this essay we are challenged to understand chosenness more as a task than a gift. If this is the case, then in effect we choose to be chosen; we choose to place ourselves in a covenantal relationship of responsibility. If so, are we all today Jews by choice? If so, what does this mean for our understanding of our role in the world and the future of Judaism?

ⁱ *You Don’t Have to be Jewish* 1965, Bob Booker and Cast (Audio CD)

ⁱⁱ *The Mission of Judaism*; lecture delivered to the sixth international conference of the World Union of Progressive Judaism