

The ‘Chosen People’ Concept

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The notion of “chosenness” in Judaism has long been one of its most debated and misunderstood doctrines. Its origins are rooted in the Torah and reverberate throughout the Talmud, medieval commentaries, and contemporary Jewish thought. The concept has often been misconstrued as a claim of superiority, both within and outside the Jewish community. Yet, upon careful examination, we find that chosenness is less about privilege and more about a sacred responsibility. This essay explores the ethical implications and universalistic thrust of Jewish chosenness, drawing on biblical texts and rabbinic insights to demonstrate that this notion is neither insular nor supremacist, but rather one of deep moral commitment and global responsibility.

The Biblical Foundation of Chosenness

The biblical basis for the concept of chosenness is firmly established in various passages that depict the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. In the Torah, God refers to Israel as His “treasured people” (עַם סְגוּלָה), a unique status He has conferred upon them. This is not an arbitrary favor, but a covenant grounded in ethical monotheism. In Exodus 19:5-6, God addresses the Israelites at Sinai, declaring:

“Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine, and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

This declaration establishes a reciprocal relationship: Israel is chosen not because of any inherent merit or superiority, but because of its willingness to accept a covenant that entails a mission—“to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This concept is further elaborated in Deuteronomy 7:6-8, where God affirms that Israel was not chosen for its numbers or might, but because of God’s love and His promise to their ancestors. Thus, chosenness is a call to service, not to self-aggrandisement.

Ethical Implications: Chosenness as Responsibility, Not Privilege

Jewish chosenness is fundamentally different from the pagan notion that a deity might favor one tribe or nation to the detriment of others. The Torah repeatedly emphasizes that God is “the Creator of all flesh, His mercies upon all of His creations.” This principle is reinforced by the biblical prophets, who emphasize that God does not judge the nations based on their religious affiliations but on their ethical conduct. For instance, the prophet Amos criticises various nations not for their idolatry, but for their sins against humanity such as oppression and cruelty (Amos 1-2). In this way, the Jewish understanding of chosenness does not imply a divine favoritism that devalues other peoples, but rather a specific role and responsibility assigned to Israel.

This role is encapsulated in the idea of being a “light unto the nations” (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). Israel’s distinction lies not in intrinsic superiority, but in a covenantal obligation to uphold and model a comprehensive code of laws and ethics that governs every aspect of life. These laws are designed to cultivate a higher moral standard and instil values of justice, compassion, and humility. Examples include the laws of charity (tzedakah), the prohibition against charging interest on loans to fellow Jews, and the laws of Sabbath rest, all of which aim to foster social responsibility and communal cohesion.

Examples of Ethical Conduct in the Torah

The Torah is replete with narratives that illustrate the ethical dimension of chosenness. The patriarchs and early leaders of Israel are depicted as engaging in peaceful and just interactions with their non-Jewish neighbors. For instance, Abraham forms alliances with local leaders such as Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre, the Amorites (Genesis 14:13), and later makes a covenant with Avimelech, the Philistine king (Genesis 21:22-34). Similarly, Isaac establishes a peaceful relationship with Avimelech despite previous hostilities (Genesis 26:26-31), and Jacob rebukes his sons Simeon and Levi for their excessive violence against the people of Shechem (Genesis 34:30).

These stories highlight the fact that, despite being the chosen people, the early Israelites sought to live peacefully and justly with their neighbours, respecting their rights and maintaining alliances. Another powerful example is the story of Joseph, who refuses to commit adultery with the wife of his Egyptian master, declaring, “How can I do this great evil and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:9). His moral stance is taken despite the fact that his master is not a fellow Israelite, demonstrating that the ethical standards of the chosen people apply universally and not exclusively within their own community.

Universalistic Dimensions of Chosenness

While the Torah emphasizes the distinctiveness of Israel, it also upholds the fundamental equality and dignity of all human beings. The Torah’s commandments concerning interpersonal ethics, such as the prohibitions against murder, adultery, and theft, are stated in universal terms. For example, the commandment “You shall not kill” is directed at all humanity, and the Torah refers to Egyptians as “neighbours” of Israel in the context of borrowing items before the Exodus (Exodus 11:2).

Moreover, the Torah’s laws governing treatment of strangers, such as “You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19), and “There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you” (Exodus 12:49), underscore an inclusive ethical framework that transcends the particularistic aspect of chosenness. The Jewish people are commanded to treat non-Jews with the same justice and compassion that they extend to their own, thus promoting a universal message of equality and human dignity.

Chosenness and the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity

The concept of chosenness is meant to foster a sense of universal brotherhood rather than superiority. Indeed, the Hebrew sees all men as the sons of one Father, all created in the image of God, and believes that no one is judged solely based on their beliefs but rather on their deeds. This perspective is beautifully illustrated in the prophetic vision of Isaiah 19:24-25, where Egypt and Assyria, two of

Israel's historical adversaries, are blessed alongside Israel, with God declaring, "Blessed be Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."

This vision encapsulates the ultimate goal of chosenness: to bring all humanity into a harmonious relationship with God. The chosen people are not an end unto themselves but a means to the greater end of universal redemption and the recognition of God's sovereignty by all nations.

Conclusion: Chosenness as a Mission of Humility and Service

The concept of chosenness in Judaism is a multifaceted and nuanced doctrine. It emphasizes a special covenantal relationship between God and Israel, not as a mark of inherent superiority, but as a mission to uphold and model ethical monotheism. The Jewish people's distinction lies in their adherence to the Torah's commandments and their role as a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation," tasked with setting an example of justice, righteousness, and compassion.

Chosenness, therefore, should not be seen as a privilege that entitles Israel to dominion over others but as a responsibility that calls for a higher level of moral conduct. This distinction, rooted in a deep sense of humility and universal brotherhood, underscores the inclusive and ethical nature of the Jewish tradition. As the prophet Micah succinctly puts it, Israel's true mission is "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

In this way, Jewish chosenness is not merely about being chosen but about choosing—choosing to live a life of moral integrity, choosing to respect all of humanity as created in the divine image, and choosing to lead by example in the quest for a better, more just, and compassionate world.