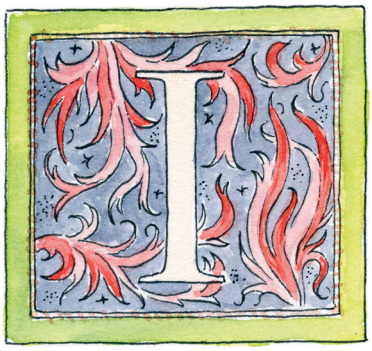
NOA KUSHNER

American Sinai

Jews were chosen not only by God but by America. Sometimes we can't tell the difference



I KNOW that the idea of Jews being "chosen" was at one time controversial, but in the circles I travel, it feels practically quaint. In 2025 San Francisco, talk about Jewish chosenness is more likely to elicit a polite shrug than a theological or philosophical crisis. Here, the concept of God is up for grabs. Not whose god, but God altogether. Religion that includes God, especially of the Western, organized variety? That's countercultural. Loving God, Torah, and the Jewish people with all our many obligations and contradictions? A rare position indeed.

And that is both a problem and an opportunity.

First, the problem. While most American Jews are aware they're a part of the "chosen people," many don't have the slightest idea what

chosenness means. Why are so few American Jews today even the least bit curious?

This disinterest is, in my experience, particularly prevalent among third- and fourth-generation American Jews of Ashkenazi extraction. And the reason for this, I think, lies in American, mostly Ashkenazi, Jewish history.

Ashkenazi integration into the American landscape has been so complete that it's hard to imagine American Jewish life as anything other than charmed. Even accounting for the latest serious waves of antisemitism, Jews whose grandparents or great-grandparents arrived penniless on these shores have become equal participants in the American project. This was no fortunate accident. While the emerging Ashkenazi American denominations from Reform to Modern Orthodox all had differing takes on God, Torah, and Jewish religious practice, they had one thing in common: They made a concerted effort to be chosen not only by God but by America, too. And often, these two objects of our affection were conflated — with God riding in the back seat of the Jewish American car.

One example: Theological giant Mordecai Kaplan, who arrived in the United States as a child in 1889, shortly before the establishment of Ellis Island, famously rejected the idea of Jewish chosenness, a position that became a cornerstone of the early Reconstructionist movement. What was it about chosenness that made it incompatible with this thoroughly American Jewish movement? Kaplan's position was a product of the kind of country America was a few generations ago, a newish kind of optimistic place where, at least in principle, no single religion took precedence over another and so could not be used as a basis for oppression.

I can easily imagine how, as partners in the work of creation of this most liberal project, "America," the idea that we Jews would then trumpet our special relationship with our God as superior and

singular could be perceived as out of step, jarring, ungrateful. Many Jews, not only followers of Kaplan, were (and are) universalists as well as Jews, caring about and aspiring to be equals with our fellow Americans in all ways. Looking back over the past few generations, I now think that much of American Ashkenazi Jewish life evolved to be presentable to the American eye, just in case a Christian neighbor might stop by. American Jews largely internalized that non-Jewish, "American gaze," a gaze we constantly carried with us, whether our neighbors ever actually stopped by or not.

Perhaps unwittingly, we have enacted a trade: to be chosen by our American neighbors over being chosen by God. Generally speaking, acceptance in the United States was not something we received without bartering away some of our particularity, tradition, and faith. Prioritizing our status in America often came at the expense of our relationship with God, a problem incidentally so old that it's one of the first warnings God offered us at Sinai: *I am your God, no one else.* And *nothing* else.

Today, in 5785, it's time we revisited the bargain. As revolutionary as America has been for Jews, and as natural it is for us to develop a Jewish life that is distinctly American, the trade has left many American Jews suspicious of their own tradition. Religion for the sake of the "American gaze," no matter how loving the embrace, no matter how seemingly self-evident or beyond critique, is a Judaism based on the perception of outsiders. God was right at Sinai: The only gaze we need internalize is the one from on high.

But what if the American experience is meant to teach us something else? Here is the opportunity. Just as America welcomed and chose us as partners, there are those in America whom we ought to be

choosing. If we reconsider the relationship between chosenness and Jewish ethnicity, we may discover another path forward. In our era (as well as others), spheres of Jewish commitment and Jewish ethnicity may overlap, but they are not the same. Rather than drawing our circle of chosenness solely around those who have converted or who were born Jewish, we might instead draw that circle wider, including *all* who participate in Jewish life, whose Jewish actions and faith speak repeatedly over time. It is possible that to be chosen is not only a designation at birth or conversion.

Who am I describing? In my role as a rabbi, I have met many of them. The curious boyfriends and girlfriends of Jews who show up to shul and help set up kiddush. The non-Jewish 13-year-old who just wanted to learn how to read Torah, her parents in tow, wondering how they ended up with such an apparently Jew-ish child. I could tell you about the person who was dating someone Jewish, but they broke up and he moved away, but could she still join us for Shabbat? The Catholic mother who came to shul with her kids and, when she was diagnosed with cancer, asked for a *Mi Shebeirach*. Or I could tell you about the stoic, secular philosopher grandfather of the bar mitzvah who was lifted in a chair for the hora and then never wanted to come down. "I didn't know I was allowed," he said afterward, tears streaming down his face.

These were people who heard something, who experienced something and then couldn't let it go. They wanted and they want to be a part of it, not as polite observers or as grateful recipients. They don't want to stand on the side, they want to carry the weight of the tradition and be carried by it.

In my community, we ask for the action, the participation, first. Instead of asking a newcomer whether he or she is Jewish, we ask: "Are you coming for Shabbat on Friday?" Or, "Can you stay and help collect the siddurim after services?" Or, "Do you need to stand for

Mourner's Kaddish?" Because, as we like to say, you can be Moses himself, and if you're not willing to do anything Jewish, then there's not much we can do with you. On the other hand, if you've no background whatsoever but you're willing to enter our Shabbat and let your life be changed by it, then it seems we have a lot to do together.

And while I officiate at many conversions, many people resist converting as a prerequisite to acceptance. Can you blame them? But when they are accepted first, they start showing up, learning how to do things over time, and their participation knows no bounds.

This post-ethnic approach to Jewish chosenness may help resolve our "chosen" dilemma. It is possible to display commitment to the covenant, even if that covenant is not sealed. If the barrier to entry is not primarily one's pedigree but rather one's participation, sustained over time, the commitment is undeniable. In this version of chosenness, any claim of ethnic bias or genetic superiority as it relates to "chosenness" is unfounded. Being chosen is now equal opportunity, a lesson gained from America itself.

Our being chosen immediately raises the question: Chosen for what? If we cannot answer this question, let alone live up to it, it is no wonder that the claim of being chosen seems arbitrary or chauvinist, even to us.

Luckily there's an answer, and we don't have to be especially bold or creative to find it. The Torah is unequivocal, repetitive: We are chosen, beloved by God, to be an *am segula*, a treasured people, not in order to luxuriate in or obsess over our Jewish selves but to keep our covenant with God. There is much we can say about this covenant and what keeps us in good standing. But one thing is clear: There is no being chosen without obligation.

To use a metaphor popular with the rabbis, Sinai may have been the wedding, but Jewish life is the marriage. Participation in Jewish religious life signals our ongoing commitment to the covenant. Through this lens we can start to see the folly of separating our being chosen, loved, treasured, or cherished from 1) our choosing or loving, treasuring or cherishing God ourselves, that is, our agency in the matter, and 2) what being chosen and choosing entail, that is, our upholding the marriage or covenant.

Can you imagine the pain of a marriage in which one partner doesn't choose the other? Where someone is left, bereft and ashamed, after the wedding party is over? That's precisely how the rabbis see it when we break our covenant with God. They say we're like a bride running off with another. How about a marriage where the couple makes big, bold promises under the huppah, only for mistrust to take root in the years that follow, growing and strengthening in force until the couple cannot take another step forward together?

Now we can see that God choosing us communicates not a disdain for all other possible spouses, or a rejection of the fundamental equality of all possible wedding couples. Rather, it speaks of an irreplaceable, particular love between the two parties who are both chosen and choosing. I hope and suspect that peoples of other faiths or religions have their version of this love with their own God, too. My love does not preclude that of others. My wedding does not detract from yours. We can all be brides.

In the end, our understanding of chosenness now has a kind of good-news, bad-news quality. Here's the good news: If you felt vaguely uncomfortable about Jewish "chosenness" as if it were a trust fund you did not earn but that came with unarticulated yet ominous strings attached, your intuition was right. To define "chosenness" in a vacuum, without explaining its accompanying demands, renders it useless and problematic. It would be like a groom "choosing" a bride

without her consent and without outlining any expectations for the marriage. If this makes you nervous, that's the Jewish version of good news, because you are right to be nervous. The good news is that Jewish "chosenness" actually requires our faith, obligating us to keep the commandments. Far more demanding than some kind of ethnic lottery, Jewish chosenness is also less unnerving precisely because it is clear and honest. There's no such thing as being chosen without choosing, and no such thing as being chosen without at least trying to consistently fulfill what it is we were chosen to do.

There's a midrash that, at the burning bush, Moses asks God why God is freeing Israel from slavery. "After all," Moses wants to know, "what have the Israelites done to deserve your redemption?" "It's not what you have done, but what you will do," says God, "I'm not freeing you for who you are now but for who you will be, because one day you will accept my Torah and make a covenant with me" (Exodus Rabbah 3:4). In other words, God is saying, "I am freeing you so that one day you will be my people and I will be your God."

And so, it seems the bad news is not really so bad. The bad news is that we're not ready yet, and our task is to become ready, not once but many times, "when we lie down and when we rise up." The bad news is that there is quite a lot to learn and to do, in order to guard a covenant as precious as this, a God-given opportunity if there ever was one. ✳

NOA KUSHNER is the founding rabbi of The Kitchen, a synagogue in San Francisco. Her forthcoming book is *Pretend You Believe*.