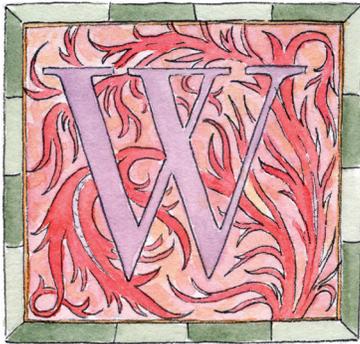


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Reading Isaiah in Tehran

Chosenness and its shadows



WHEN A JEWISH JOURNAL invited me—a former political prisoner in Iran—to reflect on the theme of chosenness, I was both honored and unsettled. Honored, because I’ve long admired the Jewish tradition’s moral seriousness. As my teacher, the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus, taught, the Hebraic theme of chosenness names a calling: to take responsibility in the embodied life of this world—what existentialists would later recast as the primacy of existence over essence. It stands in contrast both to the rational abstraction of Athens and to the world-denying escape of gnostic fantasy. It is a calling to encounter the full material reality of the world and to shun the desire to escape it.

And yet I was also unsettled. Because I have lived another side of chosenness—one that had nothing to do with moral calling and

everything to do with being marked as a figure, a threat, someone to be silenced.

In 2009, I was arrested and imprisoned by the Iranian regime. For a decade, I had worked with civil-society organizations promoting democratic reform. That work, and my identity as an American and Iranian dual citizen, made me a convenient scapegoat. I was not addressed. I was instrumentalized—disappeared into the apparatus of power. It was as though the regime wanted to escape my existence.

So chosenness cuts both ways. I became a symbol of the enemy. Not seen, but mis-seen. Not addressed, but purged. And so I learned: Being singled out can mark the beginning of responsibility or the end of personhood. It can be a summons or a sentence.

I have lived both. I was targeted. I was later received. This essay is an attempt to explore that doubleness—*chosenness and its shadows*—not to resolve it, but to sit inside its tension. What does it mean to be chosen, if we strip away both the pride and the punishment?



The Jewish concept of chosenness has long fascinated me, not as a theological claim to superiority, but as a philosophical framework for grappling with exile, moral burden, and the challenge of living with difference. I am not Jewish and claim no expertise in Jewish philosophy or debates about Israeli national identity. Yet I have found this tradition illuminating for two reasons: first, because of my own experience of being marked, mis-seen, and exiled; and second, because nations such as Iran—where belonging, power, and spiritual aspiration are deeply entangled—struggle in parallel ways with the ethical tensions of identity, justice, and collective purpose.

Chosenness, at its best, has meant being addressed, called not

to privilege but to answerability: to live in the world as if one were accountable to something beyond oneself. As I've come to understand it, chosenness names a call not to status but to moral seriousness. And by responsibility, I mean not mere obligation, but — drawing on what I've learned from thinkers such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas — the difficult work of seeing the other not as a mirror or a threat, but as a presence that demands response. “The *Thou* confronts me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one,” as Buber put it.

This broader sense of being summoned — chosen through relation, not inheritance — finds echoes within Jewish scripture. Cyrus, the Persian king, is called Mashiach (the anointed one) by Isaiah — not because of lineage, but because he served justice and liberation. Naaman, a Syrian general, is healed by Elisha not through entitlement, but through a humbled act of response. These are not Israelites, yet they are called, engaged, transformed. In turn, they answer, engage, and transform. Such figures affirm that chosenness can extend beyond inherited or tribal belonging into action, into encounter, into the difficult work of hearing and answering a call.

Of course, that ideal is not always sustained. The call to answer can become entangled in the compromises of history. When religious or political worldviews anchor their ideals in the structures of power, the result can be distortion. The distortion comes not necessarily out of malice, but from the tension between moral aspiration and the realities of statehood. Once embodied in law and sovereignty, even the most generous visions of reciprocity must coexist with borders, institutions, and coercive law. This is not unique to any tradition. It is a danger wherever fallibility is forgotten and certainty replaces humility.

At the extreme, when congealed into ideologies — what Eric

Voegelin called gnostic politics, which promise redemption through secret knowledge and world transformation — they mimic the structure of religious chosenness while discarding its burden. In Voegelin’s sense, gnostic political movements, whether religious or secular, begin with a hatred of the world as it is and end with an attempt to purify or destroy it in pursuit of a totalizing vision. These movements claim moral purity not for the purpose of wrestling with human fallibility, but to eliminate it — by purging the world of its impurities. This is both a scientific error and a moral one. For human fallibility is a scientific fact with moral and political implications.

The Iranian regime, akin to those primitive gnostic political ideologies in its glorification of a particular social group, marked me not for communion, but for erasure. To purge me from society as though I was not a fact of that society.

I felt the sharp edge of this inversion firsthand. When I was imprisoned by the Iranian regime for more than a year and held as a political prisoner and hostage under house arrest for a further six, it was not because I was ignored. It was because I was seen and mis-seen: reduced to a type, cast as a threat, turned into a warning. Their vision of divine order had no room for heterodoxy — for other ways of being, thinking, or imagining what it means to belong.

And yet, something in me resisted that erasure. Not out of heroism, but out of the fact that I was part of the culture that sought to banish me. I could not comply with their script. I could not let the language of chosenness be seized by its destroyers. I could not let morality be recast as theological narcissism.

After the final rupture with Iran — my third exile, following an early uprooting to boarding school, the upheaval of the 1979 revolution, and then my imprisonment in 2009 and forced departure in 2016 — I stopped thinking of return. I had tried to love the country I was born into. But there comes a time when love without reciprocity

becomes a form of self-erasure. You cannot keep loving a nation that disappears you, imprisons you, denies your existence.

So I chose something else. I chose New York. And New York let me choose it. That, I've come to believe, is a higher form of welcome.

That might sound like a practical decision. But it was also existential. A choice about how to live and where to place meaning. In exile, you learn that identity is not only what you inherit. It is also what you move toward. To choose a city of strangers and friction, of languages that spill over one another, of secular cacophony and sacred fragments—that, too, is a kind of spiritual act.

In much of Jewish tradition, exile is not merely a punishment, but a condition of meaning. A people cast out, scattered, unhomed—yet still called to remember, to respond, to repair. Exile is not simply separation from a place. It is the unsettling awareness of estrangement—from certainty, from belonging, and sometimes from ourselves. And yet in that estrangement, meaning can begin. The famous Persian poet Hafez-e Shirazi captured this in his couplet: “Meaning lies counter to narrowed habit bound / For through life’s disheveled strands was my meaning found.”

That is how I came to see my own exile: not as negation, but as a form of ongoing responsibility.

To be unchosen by one land is not the end. It may be the beginning of a different kind of chosenness—the kind that isn't conferred, but claimed.



There was a moment—seared in memory—when the idea of chosenness took a strange and public form. In 2007, the Iranian regime imprisoned me and held me in a solitary-confinement cell in Evin Prison for more than four months and eventually used me as a politi-

cal pawn. As a dual citizen of the United States and Iran, I was chosen to be an example. That same year, President Ahmadinejad came to New York to speak at the United Nations. From that stage he, predictably but no less shamefully, denied the Holocaust and refused to acknowledge Iran's political prisoners, including me. In the theater of global diplomacy, I had been disappeared.

But something unexpected happened. Lee Bollinger, then president of Columbia University, introduced Ahmadinejad in an open forum — and said my name. He confronted a foreign leader on American soil and declared that a Columbia graduate had been imprisoned in Iran without due process and that I would have a place again at the university once I was free. Years later, true to his word, he welcomed me back to teach.

That gesture wasn't institutional policy. It was personal conscience. Bollinger, an eminent legal scholar of the First Amendment, spoke from a tradition of moral seriousness rooted in freedom of expression and human dignity. In a moment when he could have remained abstract or polite, he chose me in exactly the opposite way the regime had. He chose me for solidarity rather than sanction.

Perhaps this is what chosenness can look like: not privilege, but recognition. Not separation, but the refusal to let someone disappear. In that moment, Bollinger didn't speak in generalities. He named a person. He broke the silence that so often surrounds distant suffering. And in doing so, he affirmed that to be seen is to be remembered — and, sometimes, to be restored.

My experience of the Islamist regime in Iran taught me that the promise of otherworldly rewards — virgins in heaven, perfected glory — is more than a cliché of fanatical violence. It reflects something deeper and more enduring: a cultural and theological refusal to bear irony, paradox, and the brokenness and otherness at the heart of the human condition. It is an urge to escape the inescap-

able. In this view, there is no room for the stranger — not even the stranger within. I became the projection of the regime’s inability to recognize its own inner strangeness. Deaf to Freud’s insight — what Julia Kristeva called “the ‘other scene’ within us” — the mullahs could not tolerate the stranger in the world, because it could not endure the stranger in themselves. I came to see the Islamic regime as a species of gnostic politics that rejects the world as it is rather than try to redeem it or repair it. Instead of loving “the stranger who resides with you . . . as one of your citizens . . . as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34), it sought to banish this strange and inherent quality of the world as it is.

Reinhold Niebuhr understood this deeper structure of ethical and theological alterity. He saw in the biblical imagination a persistent ironic reversal: The preference for “the poor, the foolish, the maimed, the sick, and the weak” would lead to “ironic success” — those whose suffering awakens a humility unavailable to the triumphant. For Niebuhr, these reversals are not recorded by history; they belong to a deeper judgment — “to Him ‘who resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble.’” This, he wrote, is the symbol of a permanent tension between all historical achievement and the final meaning of life. True knowledge of the limits of human striving begins with awareness of that contradiction. “The divine wisdom and purpose must always be partly hid from human understanding,” he said, before reminding us of Isaiah’s words, quoting God’s: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8).

There is, I believe, a secular practical form of this awareness — what Karl Popper called fallibilism: the humility to live without final answers, to build a liberal open society rather than a perfect one. (I was imprisoned by the Iranian regime while serving as the representative of George Soros’s Open Society Foundations in Iran in

the 2000s—an effort to promote exactly that ethos, years before OSF lost its way.) That humility—of not pretending to know the whole—echoes the prophetic tradition of being addressed, not assured.

That was the spirit I tried to defend in Iran, and what I was punished for. The regime’s rejection of this openness, of this deeper sense of alterity, is what ultimately exiled me.

Chosenness, if it is to mean anything worth keeping, must make room for that contradiction. It must begin not with conquest or certainty, but with trembling: like Abraham, uncertain but answering; like Moses, stammering his way into speech; like the prophets, weary and still speaking.

In my own life, I have known what it is to be chosen by those who wished to break me. And I have also known what it is to be chosen—quietly, without fanfare—by those who saw in me something worth sheltering. Both moments leave their mark. One disfigures. The other restores.

That, I believe, is the enduring moral power of chosenness: not that it sets us apart, but that it requires us to answer. *

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