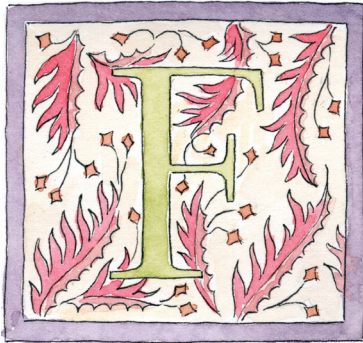


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Divine Election and Its Contradictions

On walking humbly with God



OR THOSE of us in the Jewish education business, the concept of Jewish chosenness can often present a challenge. Few would deny that fostering a strong, authentic sense of Jewish self-worth, resilience, and pride is a noble goal. Or that this sense of self-worth ought not diminish that of other identities, some of which Jews hold in tandem with their Jewishness. We do this work by creating educational programming that empowers students to understand, articulate, and live their Judaism with conviction, and by transmitting knowledge of Jewish texts: the Torah, the Talmud, and the works of Jewish thought and commentary. If only these texts, composed over the span of several thousand years, together presented a coherent definition of chosenness. The problem is, they don't.

The Jewish tradition contains many statements on Divine elec-

tion, and their contradictions are enough to humble any single approach. Midrash Tanchuma, Terumah 9, for instance, boldly declares,

If not for Israel, rain would not fall on the earth, and the sun would not shine, since it is in their merit that the Holy One illumines this world, and in time to come the nations of the world will see how bound up the Holy One is with the Jewish nation.

Yet the Hebrew Bible gives scarce evidence of this supposed merit. Taken as a whole, its 24 books could just as well serve as an extended indictment against the Jewish nation. Are the centuries of Jewish suffering a perverse reflection of Divine love, an indication of God's deep care and high expectations for the Jewish people? Or are they the opposite, an indication that God is through with the Jewish nation and its stiff-neckedness?

The many interpretations of this complex and central tenet of Jewish faith is rooted in the Bible's own multifaceted portrayal. The biblical texts themselves contain inherent tensions, as Harvard scholar Jon D. Levenson taught us in his seminal 1985 article "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism." While chosenness is undoubtedly a fundamental doctrine, there is no single, systematic, or precise philosophical approach to understanding it. Rather, the Bible speaks about chosenness in multivocal and mutually exclusive ways.

Here are some of them, explored via three orienting questions.

First, is Jewish chosenness eternal or conditional?

God's declaration to Pharaoh: "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exodus 4:22) portrays an unconditional, eternal bond, inherent and unbreakable like that between a parent and child. In contrast, just before the giving of the Torah, God tells the Israelites, "Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My

covenant, *then* you shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples” (Exodus 19:5). This verse introduces clear conditionality—Israel’s status as a “treasure” is contingent upon obedience. Both metaphors—that of a parent and child and that of a husband and wife—are common in biblical and rabbinic sources and beautifully capture this enduring tension between eternal and conditional status.

Second, is chosenness an established fact or a spiritual ambition?

This tension can be framed as one between receptive status and active responsibility. *Chosen people* is often taken to suggest an ascriptive status, an inherent quality of the people, whereas *God chose* emphasizes a status that results from God’s action. “You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2) is not a description but a command, an aspiration—holiness is something one must strive for and achieve through action.

However, when the Bible says, “For thou art a holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be His own treasure, out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6), it is as an established fact—you *are* a holy people, already chosen. This highlights a tension between a “quality-based” (or factual) and a “duty-based” (or responsibility-dependent) formulation of chosenness.

Third, what do the Jewish people mean to God?

Are the Jews uniquely special in God’s eyes, or held to a higher standard of universal accountability? The prophet Amos proclaims, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). This implies a unique relationship, but one that comes with heightened accountability and potentially harsher punishment for misdeeds.

Yet the same Amos remarkably states, “Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel? saith the LORD. Have

I not brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). This startling verse seems to level the playing field, suggesting that God’s involvement in the history of other nations is comparable to His bringing Israel out of Egypt. Is this a repudiation of Israel’s difference, or a powerful rhetorical tool to emphasize universal accountability?

These examples underscore the crucial fact that the Torah and later Jewish tradition do not offer a monolithic or systematic conception of chosenness. Instead, they present a richly paradoxical tapestry of ideas.



The very first story of chosenness in the Bible, often overlooked, holds a key to understanding this complexity. In Genesis 4, Adam and Eve’s firstborn son, Cain, brings an offering to God. Then, Abel, the secondborn son, brings an offering. “And YHVH paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering God paid no heed” (Genesis 4:4–5). Why was Abel chosen and Cain seemingly rejected? Classical interpretations offer various explanations. Some suggest that Abel brought a superior sacrifice reflecting greater devotion. Others, such as the commentator Isaac Abravanel, link Abel’s pastoral occupation to a more natural, uncorrupted way of life compared with Cain’s farming, a product of human artifice. For every explanation, a counterargument can be found within the text itself—Cain brought the first fruits, and agriculture was commanded to Adam.

Levenson, again, is helpful here. In *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, Levenson notes that in God’s preference for Abel lies the key to understanding chosenness: its inexplicability. The Bible offers no explicit reason for God’s choice, and the absence of an explanation in the text is deliberate and meaning-

ful. This pattern of seemingly unfathomable Divine selection will repeat itself time and again throughout the Book of Genesis, the Bible, and history. God's choices are mysterious, and attempts to solve the mystery will always tie his creatures into knots.

The clearest articulation of this is found in the story of Joseph and his brothers in chapters 37–50 of Genesis. Here, the “chosen” son Joseph suffers terribly at the hands of the “unchosen,” his brothers. This narrative highlights two critical stages: First, Joseph, the chosen one, initially misunderstands himself. He is an immature youth with dreams of grandeur, believing that the favor his father shows him entitles him to superior treatment by his brothers. He infers nothing from his chosenness beyond personal privilege. The brothers, feeling rejected and threatened by him, tragically attempt to eliminate the chosen one.

Reconciliation, the second stage, becomes possible only when both sides prove able to accept their various roles within God's larger plan. As Joseph famously declares to his brothers at the end of their saga, “It was not you who sent me here, but God” (Genesis 45:8). And it is only after the brothers, having been tested by Joseph (to see if they would now sacrifice themselves for the sake of Jacob's new beloved son, Benjamin), prove that they are changed men — with Judah willing to take the heat — that Joseph is finally able to reconcile with them. The basic lesson of the story is that God makes choices for reasons that may not be immediately clear. It is a lesson in humility and the limits of human perception.

But there is a deeper lesson about humility in the story, and it is about the limits of chosenness. The hero of the story is not only Joseph but Judah, the fourth son who, by virtue of his own courage, leadership, and commitment to his younger brother's safety, becomes the father of kings. Judah is chosen by no one but himself. And in this choice, Judah forces the distinction between two easily conflated concepts: chosenness and greatness. Chosenness

is relational, particular to someone else's decision. Greatness is objective, universal, and dependent on one's own choices.

The distinction between chosenness and greatness in the Bible could hardly be clearer, and yet it is so easily missed. In the Bible, the supposedly “unchosen” are not rejected. Ishmael, Abraham's literal firstborn, becomes the father of another great nation of 12 tribes. Esau becomes a chieftain, inherits a land and blessing from his father Isaac, and also reconciles with his younger brother. Neither chosenness nor greatness guarantees or precludes the other.

For this reason, Tosefta Sanhedrin 13, among other rabbinic sources, declares that salvation, entry into the world to come, or a direct relationship with God is predicated not on Jewishness, but on individual conduct. This establishes that spiritual greatness is universally attainable through good deeds. Jacob is Jacob, heir to the covenant. Joseph is Joseph, the apple of Jacob's eye. Judah is Judah, the father of kings. Levi is Levi, the father of priests. Ishmael is Ishmael, and Esau is Esau, both the fathers of nations. All with their great differences and different greatness.

So, where does this somewhat perplexing exploration leave us? The doctrine of Divine election, of chosenness, is inextricably woven into the fabric of the Jewish story and faith. At the core of that story is an unearned affection. God loves and chooses the Children of Israel simply because God loves and chooses them—an ultimate act of Divine grace that remains, in essence, beyond our comprehension. The source of this choice is not only unknown but unknowable, which is exactly the point. The point is to know how unknowable it is, and to be humbled by the limits of that knowledge.



To interpret chosenness as a warrant for arrogance, supremacy, or privilege is to be Joseph at the beginning of the story rather than the end: ignorant, self-absorbed, and naïve about the complexities of God's mysterious design. It is a version of chosenness that is self-satisfied and smug, and a Judaism based on this version of chosenness will remain stale and complacent at best.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is about the mystery of God's plan, and its lesson is humility. We do not know the whole story, and we can't. The path of the chosen is as uncertain as that of the unchosen. It compels us, as the prophet Micah says, to "walk humbly" with our God, making generous space for and deeply appreciating the immense value that other nations, cultures, and religions bring to the world. You are here to learn about God and his world, to teach what you learn to others, and the rest of God's children are here for that as well. We all have different lessons to learn and teach.

The ability to appreciate the mystery of God's world and yet embrace our role in it is the deep lesson of Divine election. The Jewish tradition has a word for this ability: *bitachon*. Various translations as faith, confidence, or security, it is the recognition of the small but crucial role every person and every nation play in God's unfolding script. Understood correctly, it fosters a dynamism, accountability, and thriving in the face of adversity. This ability can be cultivated only with humility. A version of Divine election that lacks humility will fail in its mission. It will conflate chosenness with greatness and thereby misunderstand both. *

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