YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur #01: Choosing a Theory of Chosenness**

Among the three main Abrahamic religions and, with few exceptions, among most religions in the world, Judaism is, in one specific respect, peculiar. Our religion tries to strike a rare balance between the universal and the particular. We believe in a God who is the God of all humankind, but we don’t claim that becoming a member of our faith community is an obligation on all people. We do not actively seek out converts as do members of other religions. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks put it:

Judaism has a structural peculiarity so perplexing and profound that though its two daughter monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, took much else from it, they did not adopt this: it is a particularist monotheism. It believes in one God but not in one exclusive path to salvation. *The God of the Israelites is the God of all mankind, but the demands made of the Israelites are not asked of all mankind*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The idea that the Jews are the chosen people has led to no small amount of trouble. It can seem hard even to articulate the doctrine without its collapsing into an uncomfortable sort of Jewish supremacism. Are we Jews claiming to be more holy, more beloved by God, than the gentiles? Are we claiming to be, in some respect or other, *better* than them? If that’s the doctrine, then it’s no wonder that it creates a certain amount of animosity. The person who thinks that he’s better than his peers is likely to be hated by them.

However, despite the challenges, it would be impossible in the long run to *undo* the doctrine of chosenness. It is just too central to the entire edifice of Jewish thought. To see the centrality of the doctrine, consider the following questions. If not for the fact that we’ve been given a special role to play, that isn’t for everyone, but only for us, why don’t we try to convince more people to join us? If we don’t believe there is a *distinctive* value added to the world by the existence of a distinctive, and somehow *special*, Jewish people, then shouldn’t we cease striving to *be* distinctive? We should either assimilate or proselytize; either melt away into the Gentile majority or seek to convert the world to our way of seeing and doing things. The fact that neither of these options seems attractive to Jewish sensibilities goes to show how central the doctrine of chosenness really is (or seems to be). For only if we believe that we have a special role to play, bestowed upon us by fate, or destiny, or God, and thus only if we believe that – in some sense or other – we have been *chosen* (by fate, or destiny, or God), do we have a reason to doggedly avoid the temptations to proselytize or assimilate.

**Foundational Assumptions**

The project of this series is, as I have said, to articulate a doctrine of chosenness, sometimes described as the doctrine of the *election* of the Jewish people. We must begin by noting that every inquiry has a set of fundamental assumptions, within which the investigation can take place, and this inquiry is no different. In fact, I come to the table with a number of assumptions that will guide the way forward. My first guiding assumption is that God exists – which should come as no surprise for a course on the VBM! But my point is this: I’m not going to *argue* for God’s existence.[[2]](#footnote-2) I’m taking it as axiomatic, for the purposes of this investigation. Moreover, I’m going to assume that God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly beneficent being. I’m going to assume that He has a will, and that He can enter into personal relationships with individual human beings as well as with whole communities.

Some Jewish theologians would argue that God is too transcendent to be described with human words, and that to personify God (to treat Him as if He’s just an all-powerful and perfect person without a body) is to do violence to the Divine reality. Elsewhere I have delved more deeply into the theological questions raised by the limits of language,[[3]](#footnote-3) and as to whether God should, in the final analysis, be related to as a person.[[4]](#footnote-4) I refer interested readers to those earlier works. In the meantime, I think it’s safe to operate with the assumptions I’ve laid down, if only on the basis that whatever God may or may not be (in the final analysis), He is certainly *presented* to us, through Scripture and Jewish tradition, as a personal being who is:

* All-powerful: “Is the hand of God limited?” (Numbers 11:23);
* All-knowing: “His understanding is unlimited” (Psalms 147:5); and
* Ethically perfect: “The Rock, whose deeds are perfect, for all his ways are just; a faithful God, without iniquity, righteous and upright is He” (Deuteronomy 32:4).

So, I’m looking to articulate a doctrine of Jewish chosenness that’s bound by the assumption of a theism that believes in a perfect and personal God. I’m also going to be assuming a particular theory of revelation, according to which the Pentateuch is to be viewed as the unmediated word of God. Admittedly, Maimonides warns us to remember that the exact mechanism by which God’s will became holy writ is not something that we should think we could ever fathom. The image of God dictating words to Moses is, according to Maimonides, nothing more than an apt metaphor.[[5]](#footnote-5) But exactly how the text of the Pentateuch came to be – and how God’s inestimable will became embodied in a text – is not relevant to our investigation. What is relevant is that the Pentateuch must be viewed as the inerrant word of God.

But that’s not where our assumptions about revelation end. In addition to the Pentateuch as the word of God, Orthodox Jews believe in the authority of the Oral Torah, which unfolds over time. So, even though the text of the Pentateuch is fixed and inerrant, our *understanding* of that text, as it refracts through the unfolding of the Oral Torah, is more dynamic.[[6]](#footnote-6) The thought is that, although the Rabbis demonstrate their autonomy and utilize their own faculty of reason – so that, famously, they might sometimes rule on halakhic issues contrary to how God Himself would have ruled (and, indeed, they are encouraged to do so)[[7]](#footnote-7) – the general trajectory of the unfolding of the tradition is nevertheless very much under the purview of God’s providential hand. For example, Maimonides rules that a certain defect in a myrtle branch is halakhically inconsequential for the mitzva of the four species on Sukkot. The Raavad disagrees, saying, “the *holy spirit* has already appeared in our *beit midrash* [over the course of] many years, and has raised us up [to the view] that [such a myrtle branch] is forbidden.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Again, the idea – presupposed by the Raavad in this instance – is that over time, the hidden hand of God makes sure to steer the Oral Torah in the right general direction.

This is a process that Jerome Yehuda Gellman calls top-down moderate providence. He compares the process to his “pouring sugar through a funnel into a bowl. When pouring,” he says, “I do not attend to the micro-path of any granule of sugar at any time, yet I see to it that the granules end up in the bowl.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Gellman doesn’t direct each granule, and doesn’t much mind where exactly in the bowl any given granule ends up. All that matters is that the sugar, as a whole, ends up in the bowl, as a whole. In a similar way, God needn’t intervene with the particular decisions of any given rabbi; each one rules as he sees fit. And yet, God can make sure that the general result, at a macro-level, looks right. This will be the attitude I take to the trajectory of the entire Jewish tradition.

On this assumption, it follows that every historical stratum of Jewish thought and literature, every idea clung to by Jewish communities of the faithful, should be seen as part of an unfolding revelation. The job of the Jewish philosopher will therefore be to subject these traditions to philosophical scrutiny and seek to emerge with the most philosophically attractive way of finding a best fit between them.

So, the question that I’m looking to answer in this series isn’t an historical one. The question isn’t what *did* chosenness mean to one generation of Jewish thinkers, or another. The question is: What might God be trying to communicate to *us*, through the various strata of Jewish thought, about what chosenness really *is*? Accordingly, this isn’t intellectual history. This is Jewish philosophy.

**Ethical Considerations**

Having laid out the foundational assumptions within which this investigation will proceed, I want to introduce a further constraint that I think has been laid down by Jewish tradition itself. The Talmud states, in the name of King David, “There are three distinguishing signs of this nation: they are merciful, they have a sense of shame, and they perform acts of kindness… Anybody who has these three traits is fitting to cleave to this nation.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Maimonides takes this source so seriously that when he draws up the laws of forbidden sexual relationships and codifies the prohibition on Jews marrying non-Jews, he writes:

Any family that is presumed to be Jewish, one can marry into [without the need for further proof]. Even so... anybody that has within him arrogance, or cruelty, or hatred towards God’s creatures, and does not act with kindness towards them, he is greatly suspected, lest he be a Gibeonite [i.e., somebody who lives among Jews but is not really Jewish]. Regarding the Gibeonites, it is written (II Samuel 21:2) “And the Gibeonites are not of the children of Israel,” since they were arrogant, and did not seek peace, and had no compassion on the children of Israel...[[11]](#footnote-11)

In fact, Maimonides takes it for granted that, even when some area of Jewish law permits acting with cruelty and callousness in a particular situation, a Jew in touch with her identity wouldn’t act in such a way; nor is it really permitted. Even if one chapter of the law allows such cruelty, it would violate the obligation of *imitatio Dei*. For example, he admits that the laws of slavery, narrowly conceived, allow for a Jewish slave master to work his gentile slaves with no regard for their human dignity. But then he writes:

[But] one should not press his heavy yoke on his slave and torment him, but should give him to eat and drink of everything. The sages of old were in the habit of sharing with the slave every dish they ate, and they fed the cattle as well as the slaves before they themselves sat down to eat.... Nor should a master disgrace his servant by hand or by words; the Biblical law surrendered them to servitude, but not to disgrace. He should not madly scream at his servant, but speak to him gently and listen to his claims and complaints.... Cruelty is frequently to be found only among heathens who worship idols. The progeny of our father Abraham, however, the people of Israel upon whom God bestowed the goodness of the Torah, commanding them to keep the laws of goodness, are merciful toward all creatures. So too, in speaking of the divine attributes, *which he has commanded us to imitate*, the psalmist says: “His mercy is over all his works” (Psalm 145:9). Whoever is merciful will receive mercy, as it is written: “He will be merciful and compassionate to you and multiply you” (Deuteronomy 13:18).[[12]](#footnote-12)

These sources themselves may strike a casual reader as embodying a spirit of racism, according to which Jews are nice and non-Jews are nasty; therefore, it’s important to note that the tradition recognizes that non-Jews (especially if they’re not idolaters) *can* (and often do) have these traits just as prominently as any Jew. Moreover, the tradition – as Maimonides understands it – isn’t making some essentialist claim that mercy, a sense of shame, and kindness are written into the Jewish DNA, as ethnic traits. Rather, these are the traits that God “bestows” upon the community which receives his Torah. They are a gift. Somebody who has these traits on their own is worthy to join the Jewish people, should they want to convert. But they don’t have to. They can remain among the righteous of the nations. Moreover, somebody who doesn’t have these traits can only be considered a member of the Jewish community in an attenuated sense; Maimonides rules that you shouldn’t marry such a person, lest it turn out that they’re not really Jewish.

Ultimately, I will endorse a conception of the Jewish election that isn’t exclusivist or xenophobic, but that sees the Jewish mission as tied up with promoting the welfare of all humankind. There is clearly room in logical space to imagine a doctrine of the election, informed by Jewish texts, that would express a very different attitude. But, if your doctrine of the election is unlikely to inculcate compassion and encourage good deeds to all of God’s creatures – indeed, if your doctrine of the election is animated by some sort of arrogance or chauvinism – then we have *prima facie* reason to suspect that your doctrine isn’t really *Jewish*, since it is out of kilter with the sensibilities that define the Jewish character according to Jewish law: (1) mercy, (2) a lack of arrogance (which is the flipside of what our sources call *baishanut* – a keen sense of shame, which is also related to *modesty*), and (3) a propensity towards loving kindness.

**Roadmap**

To summarize, the project at hand is to articulate a doctrine of the election that constitutes a best fit between the multiple voices of the Jewish tradition, from the Hebrew Bible to contemporary times, animated by the belief that this tradition constitutes an ongoing revelation from God. Moreover, the doctrine that we endorse must be guided by the Jewish sensibilities of modesty, compassion, and the impulse to do good deeds. We are searching for an authentically Jewish, and philosophically sophisticated, account of our chosenness.

With this in mind, a roadmap for our inquiry begins to take shape. First, we’ll look at the Biblical data at the root of the notion of chosenness. Then, we’ll move onto the Rabbinic data that we can gather from the Talmud and Midrash. In the context of this data, we shall move on to investigate various medieval models of the election, from Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi (at the beginning of the medieval period) to Rabbi Yosef Albo (towards its end). We shall then move on to early-modern, modern, and contemporary models of the election from Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi all the way down to Professor Gelman. It is between these competing models, and in light of the Biblical and Rabbinic data, that I shall seek to find a path of best fit.

Finally, once we’ve homed in on a particular articulation of the doctrine of the election, we will have to put that doctrine to work. What halakhic ramifications might our doctrine hold, how will it impact our relationship with the Zionist project, how will it interact with the Jewish conception of the Messiah and the eschaton, and what ramifications might it have for the relationship between Judaism and other religions? These questions and more will be explored in light of our theory of the election, once that theory has taken on a definite shape.

Inevitably, this inquiry will be opinionated and will likely provoke disagreement among its readers. It will also not shy away from exploring the political consequences of the views it examines. But the journey will be sincerely undertaken, and I will try to buttress my conclusions in the sources and to make my arguments as clear and explicit as possible. Readers should of course feel free to disagree with various steps I make along the way, but I hope, at least, that you will give my arguments a fair hearing and that any remaining disagreements will be among those that our sages categorized as arguments for the sake of heaven.[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, 2nd edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have done that elsewhere, if readers are interested. See chapters 7 and 8 of my book, *A Guide for the Jewish Undecided: A Philosopher Makes the Case for Orthodox Judaism* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books and Yeshiva University Press, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See chapter 1 of my book, *The Principles of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Samuel Lebens, “Is God a person? Maimonides, Crescas, and beyond,” *Religious Studies* 58/1 (2022), pp. 35-60; “Is God a person? Maimonidean and Neo-Maimonidean Perspectives,” in S. Kittle and G. Gasser (eds.), *The Divine Nature: Personal and A-Personal Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 80-105; “Classical Theism and Jewish Conceptions of God,” in J. Fuqua and R. C. Koons (eds.), *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God* (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 167-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishna*, Introduction to *Perek Chelek*, Tractate *Sanhedrin*, eighth principle of faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more on my theory of revelation, see part 2 of *The Principles of Judaism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. BT *Bava Metzia* 59b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Hasagot Ha-Raavad* to *Hilkhot Sukka Ve-lulav,* 8:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *The People, The Torah, The God: A neo-traditional Jewish theology* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023), p. 93. See also his book, *This Was from God* (Brookline, MA.: Academic Studies Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. BT *Yevamot* 79a. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Issurei Bia* 19:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., *Hilkhot Avadim* 9:8, my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Mishna Avot* 5:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)