YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

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Shiur #29: Chosenness

# Introduction

The notion of the Jews as the Chosen People is curiously not part of any of the standard renditions of the principles of the Jewish faith. This is perhaps merely a function of the philosophical focus of such lists and the difficulty that universalistic philosophy has with such a notion. Yet it is still curious, since it is very difficult to read Tanakh, and particularly the Torah, without appreciating the centrality of this idea. Being chosen, or special, can mean almost anything. I want to spend the following shiur outlining one very influential conception of the exceptionality[[1]](#footnote-1) of the Jewish people, its strengths and weaknesses, and then describing an alternative. Though I am not aware of a classic Jewish philosopher who articulates this alternative explicitly, I believe that this alternative is a good articulation of the notion of exceptionality in most of the *Tanakh* and a least a major part of *Chazal*. Something like this approach is implicit in any Jewish thinkers for whom the exceptionality of the Jewish people should not be viewed as some kind of essential characteristic but as a historical development (albeit one of epic significance).

# Rav Yehuda Halevi and *Ha-inyan ha-Elohi*

In his great work the *Kuzari*, Rav Yehuda Halevi delineates a genetic conception of holiness that has been very influential. One way of conceiving Rav Yehuda Halevi's idea of exceptionality is in terms of hereditary nobility or aristocracy. The importance of belonging to a noble house and of having a distinguished lineage is long out of fashion, particularly in those parts of the world under American cultural hegemony. Part of the American ethos is that one's lineage and family do not matter and "all men were created equal." Without even entering the question of the validity of Thomas Jefferson's famous line, it is clear that at least part of his intention was the rejection of European notions of the investment of power in hereditary nobility. Yet for thousands of years, the notion that being a member of a particular family grants one special rights, imposes special obligations and qualifies one for certain tasks, was accepted by virtually everyone. (There are still vestiges of this, even in the U.S.; think of the Bush or the Kennedy families.) Rav Yehuda Halevi conceived of the Jewish people as a kind of spiritual nobility, with the attendant rights and responsibilities. The responsibilities are primarily the keeping of the *mitzvot* while the benefits incurred involve a higher spiritual level such that only Jews are potential recipients of prophecy.

According to Rav Yehuda Halevi, Jews have an inherent spiritual quality that sets them apart from other people. He called this their "divine aspect" (*ha-inyan ha-Elohi*) which existed in Adam but was not passed to all of his children. This divine aspect passed to select people in each generation until it was manifest in all of Jacob's sons, and subsequently in all of *Am Yisrael*. According to the Kuzari, the divine aspect is not achieved or granted but inherited. It means that one is fundamentally a different, superior, type of human and this difference is manifest in the fact that only people who possess this divine aspect are in a position to be prophets – to rise to the level of speaking with God. Even converts do not have this potential and at best can be wise and pious. Prophecy, according to Rav Yehuda Halevi, is the pinnacle of religious life. Non-Jews and converts alike are barred from that status through no fault of their own; they simply lack the lineage required to achieve that level.

According to Rav Yehuda Halevi, the specialness of the Jewish people precedes and explains the covenants with the forefathers, the promises that their descendants will inherit the Land (the Land of Israel also has an intrinsically holy status), the Exodus and especially the giving of the Torah. The *berit* (covenant) with Avraham is, in a sense, only the explicit confirmation that he and his descendants are special and worthy of special attention from God. Only people who carry the *inyan ha-Elohi* will later be candidates to stand at Sinai and attain the status of prophets that he understands to be essential to that event.

# Is this Racism?

Many of us may feel discomfort at Rav Yehuda Halevi's position, with its emphasis on specialness as a "genetic" hereditary trait that can never be acquired – only realized and lived up to. My introduction of this idea by means of comparing it to hereditary nobility was meant, at least in part, to present this idea in a slightly more favorable light. It is much easier to accept the exceptionality of the Jews if it is framed as a spiritual aristocracy. As opposed to racist ideologies, the status one has a member of the aristocracy does not grant us any material or temporal power, yet is does impose upon us a great deal of added obligations. I believe this is a crucial distinction and saves Rav Yehuda Halevi's position from most of the moral failings of racism.

That being said, to understand Jewish exceptionality as a hereditary superiority remains troublesome. But before entering into a critique, and suggesting an alternative, I want to elaborate somewhat on how deeply rooted this idea is.

# From Moral Superiority to Theological Superiority

In Halakha, the most notable expression of hereditary exceptionalism (though lacking some of the detail found in the Kuzari) is expressed in terms that imply a lower level of holiness for non-Jews, even after they convert. Converts are a distinct class, according to the *mishna* in *Kiddushin*,[[2]](#footnote-2) who are not bound by the prohibition against marrying bastards (*mamzerim*), though anomalously they are permitted to marry *Kohanim* (priests) as well (at least according to the Gemara's conclusion). It should be noted that there is another opinion cited there, that a child born of two Jewish parents (and hence not a convert at all), if both of her parents were converts, she is forbidden to marry a *Kohen*.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is not the place to delve into halakhic conceptions of *yichus* (lineage) and their significance (there is far from a consensus on these topics), but it does serve as an indicator that there exists some notion of hereditary exceptionalism already in *Chazal*.

In some parts of the Kabbalistic tradition, and through that in the Chasidic tradition (especially *Chabad*), Jewish exceptionalism took on theological overtones. Jewish souls are essentially a divine spark, while non-Jewish souls are of a different, lesser nature, thus making the ultimate goal of union with God accessible only to Jews.[[4]](#footnote-4)

On the folk level, the conception of Jewish exceptionalism on hereditary, or maybe tribal lines, is very deeply rooted: Consider the incredible efforts made, and vast sums spent, in the interest of preventing intermarriage and assimilation. Many of the Jews who contribute both money and of themselves to this cause (at some point it was dubbed "Jewish Continuity") are themselves exceedingly assimilated and neither practice nor believe very much that is Jewish. Theirs is a "tribal" consciousness that has almost no modern parallel (do third generation Italian Americans worry about their kids marrying Italians?); it is rooted, I believe, in the tradition of Jewish exceptionalism. There are other examples of this phenomenon (the "Jewish genius," the "*pintale* Yid"), but I think I the point has been made.

# The Problem and The Alternative

The problem, I believe, with Rav Yehuda Halevi and his intellectual descendants' vision of hereditary Jewish exceptionalism is twofold. First of all, it turns Divine choice into a forgone conclusion. The Biblical description of God choosing Avraham and his descendants, and especially choosing the Children of Israel in the covenant at Sinai, is the description of a covenant forged in Divine election and human acceptance:

… if you will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own treasure [= *segula*] from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

If the covenant depends upon the fact that the people have an essentially different nature, as the only ones possessing the "*inyan ha-Elohi*," it loses a great deal of its significance. The notion that God chose Avraham and his descendants receives its significance from the fact that Avraham was an extraordinary example of a human being rather than a different species altogether. It does not make sense to say that the redemption of the world (and not just the Jews) is meant to proceed by means of a chosen people *amongst the nations*, a kingdom of priests, unless those chosen are fundamentally of the same type as the rest. We can even say what the common feature is: Jews and gentiles are both, as human beings, created in God’s image. Our status as chosen depends upon the common humanity between us and the nations, because chosenness requires a base of sameness to be meaningful.

This brings me to the second point. We may manage to attenuate some of the negative overtones implicit in the concept of hereditary exceptionalism by pointing out that the election of the Jewish people never implied greater power or entitlements for the Jews. But nonetheless the metaphysical assumptions of such a position, that Jews and non-Jews are of a radically different nature, are extraordinarily hard to accept. Given how easily and readily massive numbers of Jews have (sadly) assimilated themselves into their surrounding culture, and how readily significant numbers of non-Jews have joined the Jewish people over the generations, it is exceedingly hard (at least for me) to conceive of the essence of Jewishness as hereditary and of the election of the Jewish people by God as quasi-biological. That is not to deny there is a tribal component to Jewish identity (I will return to that below), but to deny that Jewish identity is fundamentally dependent on lineage.

The alternative, I believe, is not to reject the idea of Jewish exceptionalism or election. Our self-conception as the chosen people really is a kind of principle of faith – a foundational part of what Judaism is about. Rather, the alternative is to recall that the Jewish exceptionalism stems from divine election and not the other way around. That is to say, we are special, or chosen, or *segula*, because God chose us and our forefathers, rather than God choosing us because we are special. What was chosen was not an individual or even a bloodline, but a family, which eventually became a nation. A Jew is special insofar as he or she is part of *Am Yisrael* – thus, the exceptionalism stems from the collective rather than from the individuals.

# *Kedushat Am Yisrael* and the Covenant at Sinai

I believe that something like this is the mainstream if unarticulated position amongst *Chazal* and at least non-Kabbalistic Jewish thought throughout the ages. The national/tribal component of Jewish identity has always existed alongside the ideological/ religious component. To be Jewish is to be expected and obliged to believe, think and act in specific ways, or at least within certain constraints (i.e., those of the Torah). At the same time, even people who do not live up to these standards are Jewish. It is precisely because we regard them as Jewish that we consider them obligated. They have *kedushat Yisrael,* i.e., holiness that stems from being a member of the Jewish people and bound by the covenant. Converts have *kedushat Yisrael* no less than born Jews. The ultimate proof that Jewishness is national rather than racial/hereditary lies in the fact that converts are full-fledged Jews (whatever technical constraints are included in their status), who are fully bound by the covenant to the extent that once conversion takes effect, they do not have the option of opting out any more than any other Jew. In converting, a person is joining *Am Yisrael* by means of accepting the covenant that was made at Sinai. That covenant was between God and the pre-existing nation of Israel. It is not personal – between God and a group of individuals – but national, between God and a people. It is also *constitutive* – once God entered into the covenant with the Jewish nation, it is participating in that covenant that defines the nation. The only way of accepting the covenant is by joining the people and the only way of joining the people is by accepting the covenant. The essence of Jewish uniqueness lies in the fact that though Jews are people just like any other, their national identity is radically different from all others. It is not just the convergence of historical, ethnic, linguistic, and territorial circumstances around some group of people and their descendants and fellow travelers. It is rooted in the event of one such national conglomeration entering into a covenant with God, with this covenant subsequently entering into the fabric of what holds that people together.

# *Am Yisrael*

Resistance to this idea can stem from either side. From the continuing need people have to explain everything in terms of metaphysical essences springs the idea of Jewish exceptionalism as a sort of metaphysical biology. This is a philosophical vice, which can be excused in people (like Rav Yehuda Halevi) who recognized the uniqueness of Jewish national identity but lived in an intellectual era in which the explanation of such a phenomenon could only be in terms of metaphysical essences. We do not have this luxury. The racial essentialism of Rav Yehuda Halevi, even when purified of its master/slave associations, is intolerable after the Holocaust. That is not because of the obscenity of Nazi ideology; Rav Yehuda Halevi's sensibility bears no traces of that. It is because of the extravagant baselessness of the notion of "races" carrying spiritual value, even positive spiritual value. Our intellectual culture has become aware of how contingent ethnic and social identity is and how detached it can be from heredity.

The contingency of identity need not and should not lead to the opposite extreme of radical individualism, in which only individuals are sources of value and collective identities are merely aggregative. Western culture has given birth to this idea as well and it is very much alive. But people are much more than just individuals – they are connected to one another in ways that make the whole much more than the sum of the parts. It is an intellectual/cultural scandal that this point even needs to be argued – anyone who has experienced family relationships should know it and we all have seen what happens to cultures in which family bonds deteriorate. Each of national and ethnic consciousness, when healthy, is the extension of family ties to a larger circle, with the appropriate modification of the nature of the bonds. The living idea of *Am Yisrael* takes this widespread social structure and adds to it a covenantal commitment between *Am Yisrael* and God. That is what makes *Am Yisrael* unique, and the eternity of *Am Yisrael* is derived directly from its covenant with the eternal God. The covenant, and the attending uniqueness, is of the whole people, while the individual identity of each and every one of us remains contingent and fluid.

# Conclusion

In my discussion of *Am Yisrael*, I have allowed myself to depart from my usual practice of trying to present both sides of a question in favor of defending a specific position. At least part of the reason for this is my belief that the necessary tension of ideas that is almost always where the truth resides is already present in the tension between each of our individual identities and our collective identity as members of *Am Yisrael*. The position I have argued against, that of Rav Yehuda Halevi and his intellectual descendants, still has plenty of adherents. To be perfectly frank, the fact that a significant percentage of at least the Orthodox community is comfortable with the idea of a Jewish racial identity is frightening to me. This is not merely because I fear that it bears potential of deteriorating into an insidious superiority complex (which is not just a danger but a reality in some places). Even beyond that, the notion of the Jewish people as a race is so completely detached from reality, and so much an instance of the imposition of ideology rather than the search for truth, that I fear where the insistence upon it will lead.

1. I am having a hard time finding a good English word for *Segulat* *Am Yisrael*, i.e., the specialness or chosenness of the Jewish people. For now I have settled on exceptionality, which lacks some of the metaphysical undertones of *segula* but is the best I can do. Suggestions welcome. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The opinion of Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov in *mishna* *Kiddushin* 4:7. This opinion is recorded in the halakha as the ruling *lekhatchila*, though if it happens, we do not force such a couple to divorce. See *Shulchan Arukh Even ha-Ezer*, 7:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I once again must apologize for the poverty of my knowledge and understanding of the Kabbalistic/Chasidic tradition. I feel I must at least mention this tradition in this context because of its profound influence on modern Jewish consciousness but I am not capable either of elaborating very much or of furnishing a defense in response to those who might be offended by this idea. Suffice it to say that such defenses exist and the discomfort inherent in asserting the theological superiority of the Jewish people is not lost on those imbued with the Kabbalistic way of thinking. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Shemot* 19:5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)