

## By Norman Lamm

**T**he doctrine of *am hanivchar*—the election or chosenness of Israel—has been glorified and condemned, but mostly misunderstood, for the greater part of our history. Some have dismissed it with contempt and infamously compared it to the Nazi idea of the *Herrenvolk*; others have exaggerated its particularity as thoroughly genetic in nature; and yet others have diluted it to just about the point of making the notion both pointless and meaningless. Few other *ikkarim*, major principles of Judaism, have been subjected to such distortion.

The comparison to the foul ideology of Aryan racial superiority is a vicious canard that has been with us since the Enlightenment, but ratcheted up since the appearance of mass anti-Semitism in the twentieth century. The non-ideological discomfort that some modern Jews feel is more of a social nature; "what will my non-Jewish neighbors think of me/us when they hear of this boast?" underlies a good deal of the embarrassment with the *am hanivchar* idea. And not far removed from this concern is its enfeeblement and eventual excision by many liberal-modernist Jewish groups.

Equally fallacious, if somewhat less deplorable, is the interpretation of chosenness in some *Chareidi* and other circles, namely, that Jews are religiously and spiritually superior to the rest of mankind and that this pre-eminence is genetically determined. Placing the concept on a biological basis is good for the collective ego but is poor scholarship and is untrue to our sacred texts.

A critique of all these views will become explicit in the following paragraphs.

The doctrine of election is accepted by all great Jewish thinkers but not necessarily to the same degree. Thus, for instance, Rambam and a number of other Sephardic scholars of the Middle Ages accepted it, but did not give it the prominence accorded it by other Jewish thinkers. Rambam does not include it in his Thirteen Principles of Faith, the *Ani Ma'amin*. Other prominent sages, from Yehudah Halevi to the Maharal to Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, expounded the doctrine of chosenness and gave it an especially high place in the hierarchy of Jewish precepts. But even those who did not emphasize it to the same extent obviously approved of it; else how did they recite the Kiddush or the blessing before the Shema? Moreover, the Torah itself speaks of the Divine choosing of Avraham and, at Sinai, the people of Israel.

There are several questions that beg to be answered. Among them: Who chose whom at Sinai? Why was this

choice made in the first place? What does this chosenness imply? What about all the other nations of the world? Can strangers "join the club" if they were not originally Jewish?

The first to be chosen by God to bring His message to mankind was Avraham. His loyalty, his faith, and his self-sacrifice made him the chosen one, and his children after him (the "seed of Avraham") were to carry on this tradition despite all difficulties. At the Revelation at Sinai, the Divine Voice informed our ancestors that we are chosen to be a "holy nation" and His *segulah* or "special treasure," and that He desired us and chose us not because we were numerous or great, for we were the smallest of all the peoples. Rather, we were chosen because He loved us and had promised our forefathers that He would redeem us from slavery. He wishes us to know at all times that He is faithful and keeps His promise made to our forebears in the covenant with them, and extends His love for their descendants "unto a thousand generations" (Devarim 7:6-8).

There is nothing in these sacred texts that implies genetic or racial superiority of the "seed of Avraham," nor that other peoples are inferior or less deserving of Divine compassion, nor that we were destined to rule the world or be given any special privileges other than observing the Torah and the *mitzvot*. On the contrary, chosenness implies a commitment to serve Him and thus to become the teachers—willingly or unwillingly—to the rest of humankind. For in addition to declaring us a "holy nation," we were simultaneously commissioned to be a "kingdom of priests," a *goy kadosh*—a term which implies, as Yechezkel would later announce (22:26), that as a priest-people we were to teach the world the difference "between the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure." The best term to describe this Divine mission is the French *noblesse oblige*. God loves all humans and therefore provided a single people to undertake the noble and historic task of bringing God to them and them to God.

Who chose whom at Sinai? The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 2a,b) records two famous versions of the giving of the Torah. One has the Almighty offering the Torah to various of the ancient peoples, all of whom objected to certain basic commandments; only Israel accepted the Torah in toto. The second has God coercing Israel to accept by threatening to bury them under the falling mountain. The difference between them is this: the first tells us that the Jews chose God; the second, that God chose the Jews.

I believe that both versions must be read together; both, paradoxically, are equally and simultaneously true. There was and is a mutual "choosing." When we are born, we are inducted into the Covenant of Avraham and confirmed as members of the Chosen People—whether we like it or not. We are the chosen, not the choosers. But as we learn and mature, we come into our role not by coercion but by will and love and eagerness. Jews who reject the "yoke of Torah" are condemned to being the subject of Divine duress. They are—no matter how much they try—Jews by birth only.

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# Our choosing God is as important as his choosing us.


They often suffer from their Jewish identity—anti-Semitism and confusion about the State of Israel and spiritual rootlessness—and do not taste of the glory of Jewishness. Only when we turn around and choose Him and His Torah, of our own free will, do we experience the dignity and delight of being Jewish. Our choosing God is as important as his choosing us.

Finally, "Israel" is not described anywhere as a racial-genetic group, thus excluding all the rest of mankind from the opportunity to serve him as part of the "holy nation" and "kingdom of priests." Were this so, we would never be permitted to accept proselytes from other nations. Those who advocate such a narrow view must explain why, according to the Midrash, Abraham and Sarah were the first to enlist pagans as *gerim*, and why the Tradition affirms that the souls of proselytes of all generations were present at the Revelation—"those who are here standing with us this day ... and those who are not with us here this day" (Devarim

29:14)—a phrase that intends not only future generations of Jews from birth but also true proselytes (*Tosefta, Sotah* 7:3).

What binds the generations of Jews together is not biology but a culture of faith that is transmitted not by genes but by a shared history and a shared destiny, a faith of commitment to live and act in a manner that will yield holiness. Those bonds are powerful, but they are not impenetrable to those who yearn to accept upon themselves the *mitzvot*—and the *noblesse oblige*.

A few decades ago a scholar wrote a dissertation in which he conclusively demonstrated that, amongst the *Tannaim*, the more a *Tanna* emphasized the "doctrine of election," the more pronounced was his universalism. Not only is there no conflict between the two, but chosenness affirms universalism.

The more Jewish you are, the more do you care for the rest of the world. 

-- and should you --