

By Norman Lamm

**T**he doctrine of *am hanivchar*—the election or cho-senness 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'amins*. 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 Abraham 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

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# The idea of a special relationship with God lies at the root of our status as a chosen people.

itself before applying it to the subject of *bechirat Yisrael*.

We all do our best to relate to others with dignity, respect and empathy; we try to help others when they are in need, to understand and support them in times of crisis and to rejoice with them in times of happiness and achievement. Nevertheless, for family we reserve special treatment. The relationship we have with family—our sense of identification with and our willingness to help them—is qualitatively different than that which we have with strangers.

Were someone to accuse us of having a discriminatory attitude towards non-family members, we would reply that we are not discriminating against strangers by denying them their proper due as human beings, rather it is our relatives who are being singled out for extraordinary treatment because of our intimacy with them. It is not that we are doing less for others, it is that we are doing more for *mishpachah* (family).

The reason for this is that our connection to family is rooted in an I-Thou relationship—as the very use of the word “relatives” to designate family implies—that exists between us as persons rooted in a common existential and social situation and not in a logical formula or moral imperative. Chazal’s dictum to treat others as we would like them to treat us, “*Mai desani elech lechavercha lo ta’avod*,” the obligation to act fairly and honestly in our dealings with fellow human beings and other ethical standards that we abide by are rooted in the realm of reason and obligation. As such, they are universal codes of behavior that must be observed towards all, without exception—friend and foe, neighbor and stranger, Jew and non-Jew. Our relationships with our friends and family, though, are due to an interpersonal connection that reflects an emotional bond. It is not the rule of the mind but the affinity of the heart that is the focal point of these relationships.

Therefore, we do not relate to mere acquaintances as we do to close associates and relatives; and neither do our acquaintances expect us to relate to them as if they were the latter groups. Fairness and respect of all humankind as beings created in His image are our universal obligations, but the special relationship that exists between kin—and that is often expressed in preferential treatment—is not required of us towards strangers.<sup>1</sup>

It is this same duality that governs our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. God is Master of the Universe, the transcendental Prime Mover who towers above man and the world. His supremacy and rule demand total allegiance and obedience from humankind, who is subordinate to Him. This relationship, defined by Chazal as *avodah miyirah* (worship of awe), is the experience that the Torah focused

upon when it distilled the basic religious experience expected of man into a concise formulation of obedience: “Now Israel, what does Hashem, your God, demand of you? Only to fear Hashem, your God, and to observe His *mitzvot*.” Regarding Jews, man’s subordination to the Almighty is established through the system of the 613 *mitzvot*, while the obligation of non-Jews towards Hakadosh Baruch Hu is expressed in a more general commitment of ethical and moral behavior, accompanied by a recognition of Hakadosh Baruch Hu that is formulated in the Seven Noahide Laws. Nevertheless, all are obligated by a commitment to act as God imposes upon man.

This, though, is only part of the story, since the man-God relationship is represented in Tanach not only as a master and servant, but also as a husband-wife/groom-bride metaphor, as an intimate I-Thou experience. From this perspective, God is not distant and transcendental, to be perceived from the infinite distance of eternity, but rather close to man who is lodged in His bosom.

Thus, we have a dialectical relationship with the Ribono shel Olam that is rooted both in the numinous awe of *middat hayirah* and the intimate love of *middat ha’ahavah* (the attribute of love). There is, though, a basic difference between the two. The former is a universal claim that the Lord of the Universe imposes upon all of mankind, since it is rooted in a condition that is common to both Jew and non-Jew. From the transcendental perspective, all humans are a drop in the bucket and are totally subordinate to the Master, regardless of race, creed or gender. However, this is not so regarding the latter; it is an existential relationship that is not rooted in a universal claim based upon the objective status of man but is a subjective relationship between two entities that retains the particular nature unique to such contact. Therefore, from the vantage point of relationships and their legitimate particularism, disparity between different groups is possible. It is this effect that enables the concept of *bechirat Yisrael* to be valid while remaining consistent with God’s mercy and justice vis-a-vis humankind.

The metaphor of groom and bride as an expression of man’s involvement with the Almighty was understood by Rambam as the quest of the individual soul that longs for contact with God. Presumably, this is a universal state that applies to all of humankind. Rashi, though, interprets Shir Hashirim as representing *Am Yisrael*’s unique bond with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. As a nation, the idea of a special

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relationship with the Ribbono shel Olam is what lies at the root of our status as a chosen people.

The upshot of this in relation to *bechirat Yisrael* is that we must draw a distinction between these two realms of religious experience when attempting to understand the meaning of *Am Yisrael*'s election. Regarding the perspective of reason and awe, the difference between Jew and non-Jew is essentially quantitative, as both groups are subsumed under the category of humanity. The controlling metaphor of Tanach in this regard is that of the master and servant. However, it is also expressed in the parent-child relationship, since there is an element of obedience and subordination in the child's obligation to his parents that accompanies the love and care between them. The use of the image of the *bechor* regarding *Am Yisrael*'s status is very instructive, since the *bechor* is the eldest son who is first among equals, i.e., all are considered members of a common family despite the differences in rank (see Yeshayahu 19:24-5 and commentators ad loc.), but the *bechor* has an added value that is due to a deeper relationship and to his existential status as representative of the father.


On the other hand, the bride-groom relationship between man and God is unique to *Am Yisrael*. There can be many family members, but there can only be a single mate so that an unbridgeable qualitative gap is posited.

This duality expresses itself both in our expectations from non-Jews and in our relationships with them. It is our expectation that non-Jews recognize Hakadosh Baruch Hu, worship Him and obey the dictates that relate to them (be it the Noahide laws or natural law and morality), and it is our obligation to treat them with respect, dignity and honor for their rank in the universe as creatures created in the Divine image and subordinates to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. What we cannot grant them is the status of having *Am Yisrael*'s intimate relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. This is a special relationship that is limited to members of *Am Yisrael* alone.

Therefore, it is evident from this analysis that there are absolutely no grounds for discriminating against non-Jews as human beings, but there is legitimacy to deny their participation in our special relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Our obligations towards them should be analogous to our obligations towards a stranger who must be treated with respect and fairness but need not receive the special treatment that we reserve for family.

Practically, this means that anything inherent to the human condition that is not a function of our special relationship applies to non-Jews and should be recognized as such. Therefore, denying non-Jews the legitimacy of their humanity (for example, the need to grieve, laugh, play, work, worship, et cetera)<sup>2</sup> is a racist position and is counter to the Torah's values. Moreover, there is a recognition on our part of a common human condition vis-a-vis God, even if manifested in varying degrees of obligation. This is what enables us to benefit from the insights of non-Jewish thinkers and writers who reflect upon the human condition and the universal religious experience. However, values and *mitzvot* that are a function of the unique Jewish frater-

nity need not be extended to non-Jews. Thus, the *halachot* that the Torah imposed upon us as a supra-moral obligation to assist fellow Jews as members of a common brotherhood (for example, *ribbit*, charging interest for a loan; *hashavat aveidah*, returning lost items; et cetera) do not apply to non-Jews, while the prohibitions that are rooted in their rights as human beings (for example, theft, murder, et cetera) relate to them as well. In a similar manner, we exclude non-Jews from experiences that are a function of our special relationship, such as engaging in *Torah Shebe'al Peh*, while granting recognition to universal expressions of man's position in the world, such as *tefillah* and *korbanot* (sacrifices) that apply to all of humankind.

**I**ronically, the position presented here is not too far from that expressed by Rabbi Yehudah Halevi in his classic work, *Sefer HaKuzari*. Although indeed the thinker who created the widest possible chasm between Jew and non-Jew by advocating a philosophy that denied non-Jews the ability to approach Hakadosh Baruch Hu through the religious medium that we use in our relationship with Him, the popular perception that he did so by denigrating the status of non-Jews is incorrect. A careful reading of *Sefer HaKuzari* will illustrate that all of the spiritual life inherent within natural religion, which is dictated by reason or experience, is expected of all humanity and incumbent upon them. Only the special *relationship* between man and God, which he termed *ha'inyan ha'Eloki*, i.e., the capacity to communicate with Hakadosh Baruch Hu through a non-rational spiritual experience, is limited to Jews. In other words, he draws a distinction between universal, natural religion and a *relationship* that is unique to His people. Since Rabbi Yehudah Halevi believed that the realm of reason was limited and could not provide the necessary religious fulfillment, his position denying non-Jews a basic religious experience is problematic and not easy to defend. However, the idea implicit in his model, viz, that *bechirat Yisrael* is not less but more and that natural religion, be it rational or mystical, is universal while relationships alone are particular to us, is a paradigm that we can readily adopt. 

### Notes

1. The ideal that *Chazal* posited for us is that we develop the necessary sensitivity to regard all fellow Jews as our brethren and bestow upon them the special relationship that we reserve for family. This is the meaning of the famous statement that all Jews are brothers to each other.

2. To American ears, the need to emphasize the legitimacy of a non-Jew's right to such basic elements of the human condition must seem bizarre. But unfortunately, such a denial of legitimacy, either implicit or explicit, is not uncommon among certain religious circles in *Eretz Yisrael*. The justification for such a position on a theological level, or the understanding exhibited towards such attitudes due to the political circumstances of conflict, do not prevent the *chillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name) engendered by such a position.