



5 thoughts on being chosen

Our Torah discussion (overleaf) invites reflection on a paradox embraced by Jews and Christians, albeit in different ways: God’s universal plan goes by way of a chosen people; a people called to live according to God’s ways, and entrusted with the task of bearing witness to the name of God in the world. Here are five thoughts on what it means to be ‘chosen,’ drawing on the analogy of marriage.

Identity. To be married is to be ‘chosen’ from all the men/women of the world to be in a love relationship with one’s spouse. Similarly, to be chosen by God doesn’t mean I am ‘better’ than other people, but rather that God has called me to a specific relationship as part of the divine plan.

Fidelity. Fidelity to one’s spouse is the starting point of married life. Similarly, for a people called into a covenantal relationship with God, fidelity to that core relationship is fundamental.

Life. Prioritizing one’s spouse within marriage does not mean being ‘closed

in.’ Rather, it is the fuel source by which marital love extends to children, family, community, and brings forth life to the world. So too for God’s chosen people. The relationship we enjoy is to be fruitful, sending us forth in love and service to others.

Joy. A fundamental stance of praise and adoration of the Lord God—and thanksgiving for creation and redemption—permeates the life of faith. Joy and thanksgiving are to be hallmarks of God’s chosen people.

Unity. In all this the unity of God’s people, their recognizable identity amidst the diversity of individuals, is paramount.

Light of Torah

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Why reflect on Torah?

To love the Lord is to do so not just for one’s own sake, but so that the Lord God will be known and loved by all. That is, God’s universal plan goes by way of *a people* called to live by God’s ways and to bear witness to the divine presence in the world. Today’s Torah discussion invites reflection on this paradox (of the particular and the universal) embraced by Jews and Christians, albeit in differing ways.

From the Jewish perspective, the core of this election is a life lived according to the Torah (‘Torah’ is used here in its comprehensive sense: the whole of the written and oral traditions of Judaism). For the Christian believer, the core of this vocation is a life lived according to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, ‘the Living Torah.’

While Jews do not actively seek converts, an urgency for the evangelization of peoples has long been part of Christian self-understanding. Within the Catholic Church this understanding has become delicately nuanced in recent times as a result of Jewish-Christian dialogue and respect for the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people. It remains a vital area of theological and pastoral reflection.



Numbers 13:1—15:41

Shelah Lekha
‘Send for yourself’



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 13:1—15:41

In the face of repeated rebellions by the Israelites, Moses is found pleading with the Lord to show mercy to the people. Such was the case after the Golden Calf, and such is the case in this week's Torah portion after the calamity stirred up by the Spies (ch.13-14). The Lord, bitterly disappointed in his people, threatens to "disinherit them" while Moses urges a divine rethink of such a drastic plan. Our focus today is on the wording of Moses' plea to the Lord. Read Numbers 14:1-25.

Tasting Torah

But Moses said to the Lord... "If you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, 'It was because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.'"

(Numbers 14:13,15-16)

Note the argument Moses advances as he intercedes for the Israelites in the face of divine wrath. Compare this to the strategy Moses employed after the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:11-13). What is similar? What is different?

Touching Torah

After the Golden Calf, Moses put to the Lord three good reasons to relent and preserve the Israelites: 1) Lord, they are after all your chosen people; 2) remember the patriarchs with whom you made a covenant; 3) don't bring your divine Name into disrepute among the nations!

After the Spies, however, Moses raises just one point: his fear that the divine Name will be brought into disrepute among the nations (the Hebrew term for this is *hillul hashem*).

Why would Moses reduce his strategy to this one element? Has he lost confidence in the Israelites as God's chosen people? Does he think their lack of faith so disturbing that even an appeal to the patriarchs will fail to evoke God's compassion? And is *hillul hashem* really the critical issue here?

Ponder the text carefully with a friend.

Depthing Torah

Abraham¹ presents the difficulty by asking why should God care about what the nations think? After all, God rules over every living creature.

Surely the Holy One blessed be He has no fear of the nations. What does it profit Him whether he is honored by the Egyptians or otherwise?

In answer, Leibowitz² reminds us of a Talmudic text: "*Wherever you find His greatness, there you find His meekness.*" Says Leibowitz, the Almighty's greatness may indeed transcend the world, but God is deeply concerned with the welfare of every creature. And how does God reach out and make God's oneness and majesty known to all? Through a chosen people (see Ezekiel at right); which leads Nahmanides³ to observe:

Were [God] to destroy Israel, the peoples of the world would forget God's deeds and the whole intention of human creation would be completely defeated. It was only logical therefore that the Divine will that had willed the creation of the world should desire the continued existence of the people of Israel since they knew him more than all the nations.

This was the argument Moses chose as he interceded, and which the Lord accepted saying, "*I do forgive, just as you have asked*" (14:20).

Doing Torah

Continue to ponder the Torah text, discussing Moses' strategy and the observations of the above commentators regarding God's relationship with Israel and the nations.



The prophet Ezekiel (36:22-23)

"Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes."

1. Isaac Arama, 1420-1494 Spanish Talmudic scholar.

2. Nehama Leibowitz, 1905-1997 Highly influential educator, Israel.

3. Nahmanides (Ramban), 1194-1270. Spanish scholar.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda).
Scripture: NRSV.