Chosenness and Its Enemies

Jon D. Levenson

FEW RELIGIOUS doctrines have attracted more virulent criticism than the idea of the chosen people. Over the past several centuries alone, both Jews and non-Jews have judged this key tenet of classical Judaism to be undemocratic, chauvinistic, superstitious—in short, retrograde in every way that matters to the progressive mind.

Nor is it just progressives who have found it deficient. It, and Jews who still believe in it or otherwise decline to assimilate to prevailing norms, have been savaged by everyone from captains of capitalism to Soviet commissars. Henry Ford, to cite a famous example, sponsored the publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the notorious forgery originating in czarist Russia and alleging a Jewish plot to achieve global domination. Things have been no better on the other side of the political spectrum. The Soviet Union viciously persecuted the Jews, even issuing a book equating Zionism with racism and Nazism long before such moves became the hardy perennial of anti-Zionist invective.

Not to be outdone, President Charles de Gaulle of France, in a press conference not long after the Six-Day war of 1967, identified Jewish separateness not only as a reflection of the noxious character of the Jews themselves but as the cause of anti-Semitism in others. The Jews, de Gaulle observed, have long been "an elite people, self-confident and domineering"—and, presumably for that reason, guilty of "provoking ill will in certain countries and at certain times."

And yet, like the Jews themselves, the idea of the chosen people will not die. Those drawn to it, moreover, are not always detractors. Last year, for example, the distinguished social critic Charles Murray published in COMMENTARY a much-discussed article in which he sought to explain what he called "the disproportionate Jewish accomplishment in the arts and sciences."[1] This record of achievement, he argued, correlates with the brute fact that "Jews have been found to have an unusually high mean intelligence as measured by IQ tests." Nor is this statistic simply a consequence of modern social history. Instead, Murray speculated, the higher average intelligence of Jews existed even in antiquity. And that raised a larger question, to which Murray offered a benignly provocative answer:

> Why should one particular tribe at the time of Moses, living in the same environment as other nomadic and agricultural peoples of the Middle East, have already evolved elevated intelligence when the others did not?
>
> At this point, I take sanctuary in my remaining hypothesis, uniquely parsimonious and

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[1] "Jewish Genius," April 2007. The letters elicited by Murray's article, and his response to them, appeared in the July-August 2007 issue.

> happily irrefutable. The Jews are God's chosen people.

Whether or not Murray intended his concluding words in full seriousness, what is curious is how readily the old theological idea of the chosen people came to the mind of "this Scots-Irish Gentile from Iowa," as he described himself. Alas, many a Gentile thinker has been decidedly less positive. In a recent study of the ancient teaching and its role in modern anti-Semitism, the Israeli diplomat and political scientist Avi Beker presents a broad assortment of contemporary attacks on the Jews that in one way or another echo the analysis put forward by Charles de Gaulle.[2] There is, for example, the acclaimed Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis, who not long ago told an interviewer that "today it is possible to say that this small nation is the root of all evil; it is full of self-importance and evil stubbornness." Asked by his (Jewish) interlocutor, "what is it that holds us Jews together?," Theodorakis—not coincidentally, the composer of the Palestinian national anthem—replied, "It is the feeling that you are the children of God. That you are the chosen."

And then there is José Saramago, the Portuguese writer and Nobel Prize laureate, who a few years ago described the Jews in perfervid terms as

> contaminated by the monstrous and rooted "certitude" that in this catastrophic and absurd world there exists a people chosen by God and that, consequently, all the actions of an obsessive, psychological, and pathological exclusivist racism are justified; educated and trained in the idea that any suffering that has been inflicted, or is being inflicted, or will be inflicted on everyone else, especially the Palestinians, will always be inferior to that which they suffered in the Holocaust.

As for the genealogy of this enduring set of attitudes, it stretches back all the way to early Christian writings that portray the Jews as a self-righteous and spiritually blind people, the enemies or even the murderers of God. In some of its inflections, it goes even farther back, to Greco-Roman depictions of Jews as culturally inferior newcomers and misanthropes whose religion forbids them to show goodwill to outsiders. Theodorakis, for one, exhibits the influence of both streams. He speaks of his grandmother's admonition to avoid the Jewish neighborhood on Easter because "the Jews put Christian boys in a barrel with knives inside. Afterward they drink their blood." But he also boasts: "They have only Abraham and Jacob, who were shadows, while we [Greeks] have Pericles."

But the hoary resonances of such bigotry should not mislead us. In focusing on the very *idea* of a chosen people, these modern anti-Semites break with the classical Christian tradition to reveal an indebtedness to Enlightenment notions of universalism. The Church, as Joel S. Kaminsky points out in a highly illuminating recent book, not only accepted the idea of a chosen people; it also claimed to *be* the chosen people.[3] As a New Testament letter ascribed to the apostle Peter puts it: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." Christianity, that is, did not claim to replace the people Israel with an undifferentiated humanity; rather, with few exceptions, it claimed the status of Israel for itself exclusively.

Given the massive expansion of Christianity in the intervening centuries, it is easy to forget that the Enlightenment belief in a uniform humanity, loyal to reason alone and disregarding all claims of historical revelation and normative tradition, poses a formidable challenge to Christians as well as to Jews. Once upon a time, the question was, which is the real chosen people? For the past two centuries or so, the question has been, how can there be a chosen people at all?

Kaminsky's study, the work of a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, is exceptionally helpful in clarifying the first question— in which the second has perforce become entangled. For even ostensibly careful readers of the Bible fall captive to the historical animus against the doctrine of the chosen people. Among some Christian scholars, indeed, the traditional belief in the supersession of the Jews and of Judaism has often proved toxic, all the more so when melded with the Enlightenment commitment to universalism. Hence the common misconception that Christianity is open, inclusive, and universal, while Judaism is tribalistic, ethnocentric, and xenophobic.

Gerd Lüdemann, for example, a prominent German professor of the New Testament, writes that "the Nazis shamelessly directed ideas which were similar to those developed by Jews under Ezra and Nehemiah," two biblical leaders at the time of the Persian empire who strove to protect their endangered little community in Palestine from intermarriage. For her part, Regina Schwartz, an English-

[2] *The Chosen: The History of an Idea, and the Anatomy of an Obsession*. Palgrave, 240 pp., $35.00.

[3] *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election*. Abingdon Press, 242 pp., $29.50.

literature specialist at Northwestern, reads the Bible, and biblical chosenness, through the prism of today's invidious polarities of the "self" and the "Other":

> The Other against whom Israel's identity is forged is abhorred, abject, impure, and in the "Old Testament" vast numbers of them are obliterated. . . . The very idea that identity is constructed "against" suggests scarcity, as though there were a finite amount of identity itself, and so a space must be carved out for it and jealously guarded, like finite territory.

In countering such convergences of religious and anti-religious bias, Kaminsky has his work cut out for him. He begins by situating the biblical concept of election in the narratives of fraternal rivalry in Genesis. The primordial example is the story of Cain and Abel. The favor that God shows Abel, Kaminsky argues, is not "primarily dictated by [the two brothers'] human behavior," as embodied in the offerings brought by each; rather, it results from "a mysterious divine fiat." Efforts by readers to figure out what Abel did right and Cain did wrong—efforts that were already under way in antiquity—do violence to the narrative, which is revealingly focused not on the favored (and doomed) younger brother but on the non-elect, on Cain. The key words are those God directs to the angry future fratricide:

> Why are you distressed,
> And why is your face fallen?
> Surely, if you do right,
> There is uplift.
> But if you do not do right
> Sin couches at the door;
> Its urge is toward you
> Yet you can be its master.[4]

The point for Kaminsky is this: "God's 'unfairness' in choosing some over others is not simply a benefit for the chosen or a detriment to the non-chosen." Rather, chosenness "was always about God's plan for the whole world, the elect and the non-elect alike." For the latter, the task is learning to "accept that God's blessing flows through the world in mysterious ways that, while merciful, are not, strictly speaking, equitable."

This is, to say the least, a much subtler vision than the drearily familiar picture of the chosen and the non-chosen facing off in deadly and inevitable opposition—a picture propounded by learned and unlearned enemies of chosenness alike. And if the little tale of Cain and Abel already sounds the themes that will characterize chosenness in the Hebrew Bible—God's mysterious favor, the dissension and alienation this produces within the human family, the special obligations and suffering of the chosen one(s), the possibility of reconciliation in the end—another version of the pattern appears in the figure of Abraham.

Here one element in particular is worth stressing. In the literature of post-biblical Judaism, the story of God's choice of Abraham is often embroidered with accounts of Abraham's own surpassing merit, most memorably as the son of an idol-maker who saw through the false ideas of his inherited culture and reasoned his way to the one true God. But as important as this tradition would become in Judaism—and Islam—it has no source in Genesis. There, the singling-out of Abraham comes as a bolt out of the blue, with no sense that the future patriarch has done anything extraordinary to deserve it.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the same idea recurs, now transposed to Abraham's Israelite descendants:

> For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people. It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the Lord freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.[5]

Here, once again, Israel's special status derives not from any special gifts or feats of its own. The chosen family—like, ideally, any family—begins in an act of love, a love that cannot be fully accounted for by a list of the beloved's attributes or a "scientific" argument for the beloved's uniqueness. There is something grandly unconditional in biblical chosenness, something that makes all rationalistic attempts to explain it seem cramped and uncomprehending.

But why should there be a division between chosen and non-chosen in the first place? If we are to

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Hebrew Bible are taken from *Tanakh* (Jewish Publication Society, 1985). This passage presents difficulties at a number of points.

[5] I have replaced "favored" with "loved," the better to capture the sense of a covenant.

understand the biblical vision in all its nuance and complexity, the context of family relations is essential and must not be hastily dismissed as primitive. For the God of the Hebrew Bible is nothing if not personal. He is not an abstract concept, a moral ideal, or a physical force. He is a personality, though a divine one, and His capacity for feelings is not an embarrassing impairment of that divinity but precisely that which makes it possible for Him to have relationships with human beings.

One of those feelings is love. As Kaminsky puts it: "No human lover loves his or her beloved in the same way he or she relates to all other people in the world. Nor does one love other families as much as one's own." As a judge, the biblical God is said to be impartial and impervious to bribery. But He is not only a judge: He is also a *father*. At the base of Jewish chosenness there stands neither an abhorrence of the Other nor the defensiveness engendered by "a finite amount of identity." Instead, there stands God's love for the people with whom He has entered into covenant and whom He has chosen to name as His own children—or, in a variant metaphor, as the bride to whom He has solemnly plighted His troth.

Detractors of the idea of a chosen people approach the matter from the opposite side. The subtle theology of God's surprising love and gracious election does not engage them. Their gaze is fixed instead on the plight of the *un*chosen, whom they see as the inevitable victims of Jewish ethnocentrism, racism, and malevolence. But Kaminsky points to an essential distinction that they miss. In the Bible, there are not two categories but at least three, which he names the elect, the non-elect, and the anti-elect.

That a group is non-elect does not necessarily mean that it is deficient, unworthy, or outside of God's care. The contrary idea derives mainly from the Christian tradition in which the "elect" are often synonymous with the "saved," and those who are not elect with the "damned"—the result being the longstanding and much-controverted question of whether there can be salvation outside the Church.

To be sure, traces of this dualistic system lie within Judaism itself, and specifically in the apocalyptic literature prominent among Jews about the time that Christianity emerged; remnants appear in later Jewish sources as well. But, on balance, both biblical and rabbinic thought affirm that the non-elect are deprived neither of dignity nor of the possibility of a portion in the world-to-come—the Jewish equivalent of "salvation."

In the Hebrew Bible, especially, it is all mankind, and not just the chosen, who in the famous words of Genesis are created "in the image of God." All belong to the same race—the human race—and descend, as the biblical account would have it, from the same parents. This alone shows how ugly and uncomprehending it is to brand ancient or modern efforts by Jews to maintain their peoplehood as the equivalent of Nazism or other forms of racism. Race, in the modern scientific or pseudo-scientific sense of the word, is irrelevant to the Hebrew Bible.[6]

Chosenness, then, need not entail implacable enmity on anyone's part; nor are the unchosen the enemies of God or of the Jewish people. The Other has dignity while remaining the Other. He is not required, in the biblical view, to be brought low, to convert, least of all to die.

The anti-elect, however, are another matter, and much more challenging. By this term, Kaminsky means such groups as the sinful Canaanite nations, whom God enjoins Israel to annihilate in order to take possession of the promised land, and the Amalekites, a tribe that is reported to have savagely attacked the Israelites as they journeyed in the desert and that became an enduring symbol of murderous anti-Semitism. In both cases, "genocide" is a fair description of what God commands to be done.

But even here qualification is needed. "While some have compared the [Bible's] anti-Canaanite polemic to certain Nazi policies," Kaminsky writes, "no biblical text ever advocated the pursuit and slaughter of Canaanites who lived outside Canaan or fled its bounds." Moreover, archaeology has cast grave doubt on the claim that the Canaanites were indeed ever annihilated, a claim that is similarly undermined by a close reading of the biblical text. Today, in fact, many scholars see evidence for the proposition that Israel itself originated from a community of marginalized Canaanites.

The genocidal command is further attenuated if we juxtapose to the biblical text the relevant sources from later rabbinic literature. Kaminsky points to talmudic interpretations that propound a counternarrative in which genocide would have been averted had the Canaanites repented and sued for peace. Maimonides, the great medieval legal authority and philosopher, says the same thing about the Amalekites. Other talmudic passages declare that no currently living individuals or peoples can be identified with the Bible's abominated nations, in effect rendering the offending passages of historical interest only—except for the enduring

[6] See Hillel Halkin, "Jews and their DNA," in the September 2008 Commentary.

lesson that Jews must shun the idolatrous practices associated with the Canaanites, be ever-vigilant to the lethal dangers symbolized by the Amalekites, and demonstrate exclusive devotion to their God.

Some things are gained when the idea of the chosen people is viewed from the vantage point of the anti-elect—but not so much as is asserted by their latter-day advocates and defenders. Meanwhile, much is lost.

The complicated dynamics of chosenness come together in their tightest and most highly developed form at the end of the book of Genesis, in the story of Joseph: a gem of biblical narrative and a highly sophisticated theological text. The favor received by the young Joseph, marked by the distinctive coat given him by his father, enrages his ten older brothers, nearly brings his life to an end, and results in his being sold into slavery in Egypt. Yet it is precisely his experience in Egypt—where he again meets with favor, first from his master, then from the warden of his prison, and finally from Pharaoh—that saves the lives of these same brothers when, beset by a worldwide famine, they come looking for food.

Where the first story of sibling rivalry in Genesis results in the murder of the favored son Abel and the exile of his older brother Cain, the final story offers a vision of potentially lethal rivalry defanged and turned to good, through the uncanny workings of providence and for the rescue of the entire family—indeed the entire world. At the end of the narrative, the younger brother, Joseph, is still in charge, his mysterious chosenness intact. His authority, however, is no longer a burden to his brothers but a blessing, and a family rent by strife has been reunited and become the recipient of immense favor of its own.

Kaminsky sees in this tale of familial discord and reconciliation a reflection on the wider issue of Israelite chosenness, which can work to the benefit not only of the chosen but of the unchosen, including those altogether outside the chosen family. Like Pharaoh in the Joseph story, Gentiles who are kindly disposed to the Israelites benefit richly. And here one is put in mind of the words of God's initial call to Abraham, assuring him that "all the families of the earth/Shall bless themselves by you" (or "be blessed through you").

Finally, the tale of Joseph is a tale of profound transformation within the chosen one himself. The protagonist, once a brash teenager who appears to accept his adolescent dreams as so many guarantees of dominance, succeeds, not without much travail, in becoming a skilled courtier and administrator, able to keep his counsel, devise elaborate plans, and earn the appreciation of both his family and his lord.

In this perspective, the mere fact of chosenness provides no exemption from turmoil, peril, or the need for inner growth. To the contrary, it would seem to entail a high degree of suffering. And this, as Kaminsky points out, tells us something very important about the Hebrew Bible:

> The ability to sense one's chosenness and also to see one's character flaws is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the Israelite religious mind. It creates a sense of ultimate meaning for one's nation, but it does so in ways that mitigate movement toward an unfettered . . . triumphalism.

If Kaminsky centers his attention on the Bible, Avi Beker in *The Chosen* focuses on Jewish history, especially the history of anti-Semitism. His book is sweeping in its range and rich in examples and quotations, including the ones by Mikis Theodorakis and José Saramago cited earlier. But the paucity of social and historical context renders his discussion somewhat thin.[7]

Beker's handling of Christian theology is particularly weak. He writes that the apostle Paul in the New Testament "made a conscious and, in the event, historic decision to turn the new faith away from its Jewish origins," that Paul "treats the Jews like the devil," and that the "hatred first propagated by Paul" is still to be found among Christian anti-Semites.

This is simplistic if not wrongheaded. In his own mind, Paul was not turning away from Judaism or founding a new religion but following out the logical implications of living in a period when the biblical promises of messianic redemption were in the process of being fulfilled, especially the promises centered on the Gentiles. His arguments with Judaism were based, for the most part, on his reading of the Hebrew Bible, which he quotes abundantly and interprets using methods familiar to the Jews of the time. Yes, Paul thought that the God of Israel had done something new through the advent of Jesus that voided the Mosaic commandments (which never applied to the Gentiles anyway). It is also undeniable that his thinking about his fellow Jews was shifting and unstable, and that misread-

[7] The manuscript could also have used a good fact-checker. For example, Beker quotes the reaction of the philosopher Martin Buber to the Israeli capture of the Western Wall in the Six-Day war—no small feat, since Buber had died two years earlier.

ings of it have fueled fierce theological anti-Semitism over the centuries. But that does not excuse a restatement of such misreadings as settled fact.

To his credit, Beker acknowledges the profound changes in Christian thinking that have occurred in the last decades and the ample presence today of devout Protestants and Catholics who repudiate the Church's historical teachings of contempt for the Jewish people. He also takes note of the positive effect that a profound immersion in the Bible has had on British and American statesmen, including Arthur Balfour, David Lloyd George (prime minister at the time of the Balfour Declaration committing Great Britain to the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine), and Harry Truman. He might have added George W. Bush to the list. What this suggests is that even before the recent momentous changes in Church doctrine, a strong Christian faith did not necessarily entail anti-Jewish attitudes or policies.

Beker's principal contention is that anti-Semitism is traceable primarily to jealousy over the Jews' unique status as the chosen people. This idea, too, has been around for a long time, having been propounded by no less than Sigmund Freud. In elaborating it, Beker notes that while Christianity and Islam have also insisted on being chosen, "only the Jews are condemned for continuing to claim the title." Actually, not quite: Muslim attacks on Christians for persisting in the claim of chosenness begin as early as the Qur'an itself. Nor, historically, has Christianity been welcoming of the Muslims' own assertion of specialness. For that matter, as I noted earlier, democratic societies with a strong investment in egalitarianism tend to look askance at all claims of chosenness. Among secular liberals in America, this is one source of the powerful prejudice against evangelicals and traditional Roman Catholics.

Still, the Jewish claim to be the chosen people does indubitably attract the greatest attention. Why it does so seems to me to have a simpler solution than jealousy.

Unlike most Christians and Muslims, Jews have for thousands of years constituted a small minority in almost every country in which they have lived; today, they continue to be a small minority everywhere except in Israel, which is itself a tiny minority in its Arab/Muslim region. When a group claiming chosen status is a vast majority, the idea of chosenness loses its social edge and can easily fade from mind. When a minuscule group makes the same claim, the majority may well resent it—all the more so when that majority adheres to a religion that sees itself as having superseded the one from which the claim derives. Add to this the fact that Judaism entails practices, like dietary laws and Sabbath observance, that continually draw attention to distinctions and render fraternization with members of the host culture difficult, and it is not hard to see how the non-Jewish mind would be drawn to dwell on the difference that being Jewish makes.

In any social system, whatever negative feelings already exist about a minority group will surely be exacerbated when that group claims to be nothing less than God's chosen. In democratic societies, where accidents of birth are thought to be subordinate to the self-determination of the individual, it can be all the more galling that God should be thought to have chosen a *people*—chosen, that is, not only arbitrarily but on the basis of family rather than individual merit. In this respect again, modern secular liberalism, however sworn to the ideal of tolerance, is as susceptible of bigotry as the most "benighted" religious tradition.

Given the animosity that the very idea of a chosen people generates in the modern West, it is hardly surprising that many Jews over the last two centuries have sought to reformulate their religion so as to downplay or eliminate the offending doctrine. Kaminsky notes the forthright statement of the Berlin Reform Congregation in the prayer book it adopted in 1844:

> [T]he concept of holiness and of a special vocation arising from this has become entirely foreign to us, as has the idea of an intimate covenant between God and Israel which is to remain significant for all eternity. Human character and dignity, and God's image within us—these alone are signs of chosenness.

Here, chosenness falls victim to death by redefinition and dilution: because all mankind has become the chosen people, no people is singled out and thus none is really chosen.

Somewhat less radical is an approach taken by many Jews whereby chosenness is primarily defined as a special Jewish vocation to be, in words from the book of Isaiah, "a light unto the nations," spreading monotheism, social justice, lovingkindness, or their equivalents to the great masses of humanity that have not yet seen the light. This supposedly renders an inherently non-egalitarian doctrine more palatable to a culture in which inequality of any sort is deemed offensive. The general

idea was well captured by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*:

> [T]he avant-garde (usually used in relation to art) and the vanguard (usually used in relation to politics) are democratic modes of distinguishing oneself, of being ahead, of leading, without denying the democratic principle. The members of the vanguard have just a small evanescent advantage. They now know what everyone will soon know.

Perhaps, indeed, some of the appeal of political progressivism to modern Jews is owing to its affinities with traditional notions of chosenness, now transposed into a very untraditional—and often explicitly anti-traditional—key. But whether a stance of progressivism—of being not *above* everybody else, just *ahead* of everybody else—escapes the charge of elitism that so offends the egalitarian mind is open to much doubt. Nor, from the standpoint of Jewish identity, does it satisfy as a replacement for the concept of chosenness. For it is surely hard to justify the enormous sacrifices that the survival of Jewish identity has required over the centuries if the Jews' special status is both evanescent and about to become universally available.

Besides, according to traditional theology, much of what Jews are commanded to observe is not intended for Gentiles at any time; nor is it a light waiting to shine on the unknowing. It is, rather, the patrimony and the obligation of the Jewish people alone.

For all their differences, both Joel Kaminsky and Avi Beker steer clear of such contemporary apologetics and write as firm proponents of the classical idea of the chosen people. For Beker, Jewish differentness, despite the ready availability of conversion and assimilation, is inescapable. In this vein, he faults those of his fellow Israelis who imagine that redefining the Jews as a territorial people will cure the world of the longstanding disease of anti-Semitism. "Many Israelis fail to realize," he remarks, "how the features of the Chosen have made Israel the main object of anti-Semitism in the 21st century."

For Kaminsky, too, as we have seen, chosenness inevitably entails suffering, including the suffering inflicted on the chosen by the unchosen. But he also stresses the possibility that election may work to the benefit of all, as part of a providential plan in which jealousy and enmity are not the last words. Can we, then, see the recent changes in Christian teaching as heralding an age in which the Jewish theology of chosenness will cease to be a neuralgic point? Will the different groups claiming the title of the biblical chosen people come to find, in that claim itself, a deep commonality and not just mutual rejection?

Perhaps; but perhaps not. What seems more certain is that, despite the determined efforts of so many, Jews and Gentiles alike, to do away with the idea of the chosen people, this ancient idea, like the Jewish people itself, is likely to be around for a long time to come—poorly understood, but hardly neglected.