

DISTINCTIVENESS AND UNIVERSALISM: HOW TO REMAIN JEWISH IF JEWISH ISN'T BETTER

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More than 90 percent of those who identify themselves as Jews in North America today do not accept the Orthodox belief that the Torah's authority derives from its literal dictation by God to Moses on Sinai nor the belief that halakhah (rabbinic interpretations based on the premise of revelation at Sinai) represents the will of God. Without these beliefs, the meaning of the Jews as the "chosen people" becomes unclear. If Jews were not literally chosen to observe the mitzvot (God's commandments), then in what sense are we chosen?

This question is part of a larger set of questions: Must our beliefs about religion harmonize with our ways of thinking about everything else? Are particularistic religious traditions like Judaism part of a universalistic discourse that asserts the legitimacy of multiple paths toward lives of virtue and meaning and insists on the fundamental equality and worth of all human beings? Or should our beliefs be qualitatively distinct, unbound by these principles, and thus either in conflict or living uncomfortably side-by-side with them? In other words, is it possible to believe that all people

are created equal and to believe that Judaism is superior to other religions?

In its earliest expressions, the Jewish religion, like others of its era, asserted supernatural revelation; in this premodern theology, a hierarchy of religions and peoples existed, and how that hierarchy was ordered depended on one's place in the world. Given this context, it is not surprising that Judaism asserted that Jews held the status as God's chosen.

The onset of modernity – the rise of scientific rationalism and the emergence of the modern nation-state, which drew its authority less and less and finally not at all from supernatural sources – challenged religion's explanation for who people are and how we should behave. Jews were intensely affected by these developments. Jews became individual citizens, free to make decisions we had never before faced, free to assume a range of identities never before imagined – including secular or purely cultural ones. "Be a Jew in your home and a man [sic] on the street," Judah Leib Gordon famously proclaimed in the mid-19th century.

In 20th century America, deeply

informed by democratic principles, Gordon's bifurcation of private and public identity was widely embraced as a "solution" to preserving Judaism in the modern world. In the postwar, suburban Conservative Judaism in which I was raised, religion was not only private, but also particularistic, quite unlike the universalistic messages I was taught in school (though not necessarily in competition with them). The scientific method of my public school lessons addressed itself to "how" questions. The religious principles taught by my rabbi and Hebrew school teachers addressed themselves to "why" questions. In ways implied but never explained by any of my teachers, America's democratic principles, based in natural law – most especially the claim that all people are created equal – would reconcile any conflicts or, if need be, would supersede any supernaturally based, particularistic claims.

That response – that somehow we all are equal and yet Jews are chosen – did not satisfy me. I turned to Reconstructionism in part because Reconstructionists reject the divide between religion and science, locating Jewish authority in the Jewish people, the one constant throughout all of the various permutations of Judaism in its long history. Judaism (along with all particularistic religions) is part of a universal discourse, united in a shared search to discern the divine. Jews are

bound by the same constraints and obligations as are others, including the liberal requirement of not harming or limiting another unless the collective whole is somehow threatened by his or her behavior. Particularistic expressions of Judaism – prayers, rituals, texts, symbols – are the means that the Jewish people have developed over the ages to aid us in our search for the divine, but they are not inherently superior to other cultures' expressions; they are just the most meaning-filled for Jews.

By framing religion within a universal discourse, the Reconstructionist approach asserts that Judaism can and should influence all areas of our lives and touch all facets of our behavior. The goal, contrary to premodern Judaism, would be not to separate and segregate Jews from the wider world, but rather to empower us as Jews, out of our rich tradition, to contribute to the overall well-being and improvement of the whole of human society. By asserting that universalistic values ultimately take precedence over particularistic ones, Reconstructionism harmonizes the divide between modern and religious sensibilities. What is necessarily set aside is the belief in Jewish chosenness.

It was Mordecai Kaplan's rejection of the belief in Jewish chosenness – rather than his introduction of the *bat mitzvah*, his provocative definition of Judaism as civilization, or any of his

other innovations – that finally led to Kaplan’s excommunication by ultra-Orthodox authorities in 1945. Yet, in my view, setting aside the concept of the Jews as God’s chosen people is one of the most significant theological choices we should embrace in this post-Sept. 11, postmodern era.

The specific reasons for setting aside Jewish chosenness are long and detailed, but can be summarized by these points:

The concept of “chosenness,” only hinted at in the Hebrew Bible, was developed during periods of Jewish history when Jews were deeply persecuted and searching for some supernatural explanation for their suffering. Like other practices and beliefs, it need not be retained simply because it once existed in the Jewish canon of beliefs.

We no longer believe that God contravenes nature or acts in history. If God is not a person, then who is choosing the Jews?

Even if the concept is reinterpreted (e.g., to emphasize that the Jews are choosing to be God’s chosen, to assert that being chosen entails a set of responsibilities, or to

suggest that other peoples are chosen for their own distinct missions), it still implies a hierarchy and thus lends itself far too quickly to chauvinism and other anti-democratic behavior.

In an era that values diversity and multiplicity, in a worldview that asserts universalistic ends even by particularistic means, Reconstructionists conclude that “chosenness” cannot be reconstructed.

For some Jews, even ones who subscribe to the religious principles advanced by a Reconstructionist vision, even ones who otherwise reject all religious expressions of Judaism, the concept of the Jews as the chosen people is too dear to set aside. For them, being chosen is the point of being Jewish.

We humans are particularistic: We understand ourselves and our world through story and through symbol. Taking advantage of the specificity of our rich inheritance enables us to connect vertically, drawing on the spiritual resources of our ancestors, as well as horizontally, as we seek to foster connection and establish justice with other Jews and, indeed, with other peoples. Particularism has its value. However, I believe that means and ends must work in accord rather than against each other.

In the postmodern world, where

boundaries are fluid and Jewish identities are multiple and multiply defined, where many Jews seek at once to preserve Jewish heritage and to participate fully in the broader society, setting aside the concept of the Jews as the chosen people is not a concession or a loss, but a positive course of action. Rejecting chosenness is an explicit embrace of a modern discourse pointing toward universal truths; it is an articulation of harmonious and consistent principles out of competing voices. Rejecting chosenness is about getting down to the hard work of being one of the many peoples of the world, jostling with one another on the path toward the divine, rather than holding ourselves separate and nurturing a belief in God-given superiority. As postmoderns, we may

have the capacity to hold multiple and conflicting values. When it comes to chosenness, I would argue that that we should not indulge in this capacity; by moving beyond chosenness, we make a deliberate statement about our highest values.

The Reconstructionist prayer book sets aside the traditional Torah blessing, “Blessed is God... who has chosen us from among the people of the world,” to replace it with more activist language that does not imply hierarchy: “Blessed is God...who has drawn us to perform God’s service.” The Jewish people retain a vocation that emerges authentically out of Jewish history. It is responsive to the current environment, which it seeks to shape. May we all be strengthened to work for peace, justice, and lovingkindness.