A Bolt from the Blue

SHAI HELD

The surest way to misunderstand the Hebrew Bible is to insist upon a stark binary distinction between the particular and the universal. The Torah begins by looking through a wide lens: It deals not with Abraham, but with Adam; not with the Promised Land, but with the whole world. Neither the people of Israel nor the land of Israel is considered primordial, written into the fabric of creation itself. As Genesis progresses, the Torah narrows the scope of its lens, focusing — primarily, but not exclusively — on God’s relationship with one particular people, but the broader universal horizon is never effaced or forgotten: God is the God of the whole world and of all humanity. And yet one cannot get around the fact that one of the central claims of the Bible as a whole is that God has fallen in love with, and entered into an eternal covenant with, Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and then Jacob. Biblical theology is at once profoundly universalistic and unabashedly particularistic.

But what does God’s election of Abraham mean? Does the Bible assert that Jews are somehow better than other peoples? Reading Deuteronomy, one gets the sense, as biblical scholar Walter Moberly has noted, that Israel is at once startled and delighted by God’s love, almost like a young lover who is overwhelmed by his good fortune and cannot quite believe that his beloved really loves him. Israel is so small, and yet God loves it: “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord desired you and chose you — indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because God loved you and kept the oath God made to your fathers...” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8) And God is so great, and yet God loves Israel: “Mark, the heavens to their uttermost reaches belong to the Lord your God, the earth and all that is in it! Yet it was your fathers that God desired in God’s love for them, so that God chose you, your lineal descendants, from among all the peoples.” (Deuteronomy 10:14-15)

Standing at the border of the Promised Land, the people are reminded of God’s deep and abiding love. But God’s love for them is thoroughly entwined with God’s passion for their ancestors. Surely, their ancestors must have done something to earn God’s favor? Remarkably, though, the stories we know about Abraham’s pre-covenantal greatness — shattering his father’s idols, searching for God in the face of a world consumed by flames — are all midrashim, interpretive attempts to understand why God singles out this one man.1 As for Genesis itself, God’s election of Abraham comes, according to biblical scholar Jon Levenson, like “a bolt from the blue,” an act of divine grace rather than a reward for human merit. According to the Bible, Israel did nothing to earn its privileged status. Accordingly, an authentic biblical theology of election cannot be self-congratulatory, as if Israel had been chosen for embodying this quality or that. In truth, says the Bible, we don’t know what God was thinking in choosing Israel. (In an ironic way, secular appropriations of chooseness are necessarily triumphalistic, having no choice but to focus on the Jewish people’s purported merits, or virtues, or achievements. Nowhere does the Bible congratulate Jews on how many Nobel prizes they have won.)

Election is not tied in any obvious way to merit. Nor, it is crucial to emphasize, does it guarantee impunity. The prophet Amos was concerned about affirming Israel’s election without allowing it to succumb to chauvinism and triumphalism. Faced with the people’s smug self-satisfaction, Amos proclaims in God’s name: “You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth...” One can imagine Amos’ followers nodding complacently, perhaps expecting to hear words of affirmation from their divine patron, but Amos upends their assumptions, thundering: “Therefore, I will call you to account for all your iniquities.” (Amos 3:2) Amos’ “therefore” is intended to jolt his listeners. The people may assume that, as God’s elect, they are immune to punishment and entitled to a bounty of privileges. But God is no patron; on the contrary, with “great privilege” comes “great condemnation.” Amos seeks to clarify and purify Israel’s shallow and self-serving understanding of chooseness; nowhere does he suggest abandoning it.

A careful reading of scripture, therefore, makes clear that election, or chooseness, is not a function of merit, nor does it give the

---

people a moral blank check. Moreover, God’s highly particularistic covenant with Abraham is intended to bless all humanity. So central is election to the Bible that contemporary Jews who wish to have a theology rooted in scripture have no choice but to reckon with chosenness. To jettison the language of chosenness, I fear, is to jettison the Bible itself.

The notion of election faces many challenges in contemporary Jewish culture. In order to speak of election coherently, one has to affirm a God capable of making a choice — that is, a personal God who has a will. (It is no coincidence that Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, denied both the biblical God and the concept of chosenness; he understood how entwined these two concepts really are.) Moreover, we live in a time when, in some quarters, even speaking of the Jews as a people is considered troubling and outdated; after all, do we not live in a “post-ethnic America”?

Amos’ words should be sobering. They may be bad theology, but triumphalistic notions of election are not rare. And so, chosenness leaves us with a paradox: From a biblical perspective, Jews are elected to serve God and, by extension, to question themselves.

In confronting chosenness, Jewish theology faces many questions, none of them easy: In this day and age, do we find it plausible to believe in the kind of God who loves and chooses? Can we talk about covenant without chosenness? Can we affirm election without deluding ourselves into thinking that we have a monopoly on God’s love? Is it enough to affirm election as a subjective, experiential claim, but not as a metaphysical one? One thing is clear: To be an inheritor of the Jewish tradition is to grapple with the powerful, mysterious, enchanting, disturbing idea that we are God’s chosen people.

Are Jews ‘Chosen’?

In an exchange of letters, Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi and Aryeh Bernstein discuss how their thinking about chosenness has changed over time — whether chosenness, today, is a notion that is instructive or detrimental to Jewish life. They consider how chosenness influences our relationships with Israel and the concept of peoplehood.

Shalom, Aryeh,

What does chosenness mean for us as Jews today? Should it still guide how we act? I believe that the idea of chosenness must remain central to how we understand ourselves. That we are a chosen people is a core aspect of what it means to be Jewish. It is rooted in the origins of our people, in the biblical narratives of Abraham (Genesis 12) and in the redemption and revelation that made us who we are. Exodus 19 says it in three different ways. First, we are an am segulah, precious to God, as well as mamlkhet kohanim, God’s nation of priests, and a holy nation or people, a goy kadosh. It is significant that this is how God names us at the moment we are given the Torah with its commandments to create an ethical society. I understand these three statements to mean that from ancient times to the present era, whether we were celebrated or decimated, we understood ourselves to be precious, priestly, and holy.

Many Jewish thinkers have questioned this idea of chosenness — including the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan. And today, many who criticize the notion of chosenness for its particularist commitments — especially those on the far left who believe in a more universalist approach — are often the same people who most severely criticize the State of Israel. But I feel that a deep understanding of chosenness allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of nationhood and statehood. Given our modern universal ethics and pluralist contexts, chosenness may seem foreign. But chosenness does not mean we see ourselves as superior to others. Rather, it affirms that we have a particular role to play and a particular relationship with God that demands creating and sustaining an ethical society. The command to protect the most vulnerable in the ancient world is no less essential today. And Israel, today, has the obligation and opportunity to be the nation that most protects the vulnerable and most ensures the rights of all its citizens. This is what it means to be a holy nation.

In order to maintain this possibility of both peoplehood and ethics, it is essential that all Jews understand their role as a chosen people, chosen to create and sustain Israel in all its struggles and in all its strivings. Whether we lovingly critique or more easily embrace the specific policies of any particular government, the value of supporting the state of the Jewish people should remain foundational.