

## Being Chosen, Being Distinct

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Jewish distinction has been in the news this past week. In **a NY Times Op-Ed column**, Jewish novelist Michal Chabon (of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*) reacts to the Gaza flotilla affair with a lament that Jews appear to be no smarter than any other people, chosenness notwithstanding. This reaction opens an exploration of the concept of Jewish distinction:

This is, of course, the foundational ambiguity of Judaism and Jewish identity: the idea of chosenness, of exceptionalism, of the treasure that is a curse, the blessing that is a burden, of the setting apart that may presage redemption or extermination. To be chosen has been, all too often in our history, to be culled... Now, with the memory of the Mavi Marmara fresh in our minds, is the time for Jews to confront, at long last, the eternal truth of our stupidity as a people, which I will stack, blunder for blunder, against that of any other nation now or at any time living on this planet of folly, in this world of Chelm.

Leaving aside questions of Jewish superiority, **a Newsweek article from June 3rd** reports that

the Jews of the Diaspora share a set of telltale genetic markers, supporting the traditional belief that Jews scattered around the world have a common ancestry. But various Diaspora populations have their own distinct genetic signatures, shedding light on their origins and history. In addition to the age-old question of whether Jews are simply people who share a religion or are a distinct population, the scientific verdict is settling on the latter.

The question of Chosenness has long been a sore point for antisemites, a point of affection for philosemites, and, naturally, a point of discomfort for many Jews.

Perhaps most famously, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, rejected the notion of chosenness. As George B. Driesen noted **in The Reconstructionist in 1995**, Kaplan "believed that the notion of a chosen people conflicts with a non-supernatural conception of divinity." Driesen quotes Kaplan directly as writing that "it is deemed inadvisable, to say the least, to keep alive ideas of racial or national superiority, inasmuch as they are known to exercise a divisive influence, generating suspicion and hatred." Driesen goes on to trace the development of liturgical innovations in the non-Orthodox movements which sought to erase ideas of Jewish chosenness. (For more on the theme of Jewish chosenness as manifested in liturgy, read Gordon M. Freeman's **analysis of the prayer Aleinu as a political statement.**)

Arnold M. Eisen, now Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, **argued in 1990** that the idea of chosenness has been critical to the formation of American Jewish identity, allowing 20th Century American Jews "to make their way, yet remain distinct." This idea, he writes, has "provoked... an outpouring of interpretation, while others (exile, messiah, revelation) were virtually ignored".

What do you think? Is the idea of the Jewish people as the Chosen people an eternal truth, or an outdated concept? Does it imply superiority? Does it imply inferiority? Is it compatible with the notion of human equality? Let's hear some opinions in the comments section.

My own personal view (as always, not reflecting any official position of the BJPA) is that Jewish chosenness need not be seen as implying superiority of any kind. One can just as easily conceive of it as a special responsibility given to the Jews, a responsibility to foster ethical monotheism in the world, but with the knowledge that other peoples, cultures and individuals may also be chosen for other different and important tasks. Indeed, one might say that each person on earth is chosen for a unique and vital purpose. But enough homiletics; what say you?