

If Jews Are Chosen, What About the Rest of Us?

LYNDA SCHWARTZ

How do we — who were not born Jewish but have chosen to share our lives with Jews — think about the tribal concept of Jews as a chosen people? Some of us are Jews-by-choice still linked to their non-Jewish families of birth. Others participate in Jewish communal life but have not converted. Some of us retain deep connections to other traditions. If the Jews are the chosen people, what about the rest of us? Does “choseness” erect fences that cut through our family relationships?


When I married my husband more than 20 years ago, I did not become a Jew, but I became part of the Jewish community. Over the years, I have had warm, enriching and sometimes transcendent experiences with Jewish life, most recently when we celebrated our twins’ *b’nei mitzvah*. But I recognize that interfaith families feel barriers to engagement in Jewish life. We have a hard time finding rabbis to officiate at our weddings; we may, initially, feel like an outsider in the synagogue and ill-equipped to raise our children as Jews — even when we want to. We bump up against negative and ambivalent attitudes, and we hear people say that families like ours are a problem for the Jewish people.

Sometimes those attitudes are fueled by a tribal sensibility. I think it is time to set aside such insular thinking about who is in the tribe, and focus instead on the blessings and

opportunities that the “new-to-Jewish” bring to the community: our struggles, our questions, our energies, and our hopes for our children.

Everyone who participates in Jewish community is one of the “choosing people,” either a Jew or an ally. Forced to make explicit choices about our religious and communal life, interfaith families face both everyday and existential dilemmas: Do I participate in my sister’s neon-colored plastic Easter egg hunt? Should I say kaddish for my Lutheran father? Should I laugh at a Jewish joke? What does God want from me? As “choosing people,” we question and ponder, debate and reconcile. We wrestle with love and religion, and our choices shape our lives.

Even a traditional view of choseness should inspire a confident engagement with those who are new-to-Jewish. If there is a special responsibility to exemplify Jewish principles and ethical values, it cannot be for the benefit of insiders only. Everything I know about Judaism I have gleaned from the privilege of living within this community and learning by doing.

As I navigate the challenges of daily life, I suspect that it hardly matters whether I am one of the chosen people. After all, the Torah’s greatest challenge is the same for all of us who choose to accept it, whether Jews or fellow travelers: to live lives of meaning that exemplify its values. 



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S H M A . C O M

Lynda Schwartz is the board chair for InterfaithFamily. She is also the founder of Upland Advisory LLC, a forensic accounting firm. She lives in Newton, Mass. with her husband, Jay, and their 13-year old twins.

Rabbi Or Rose, a member of the *Sh'ma* Advisory Board, is the director of the Center for Global Judaism at Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass. He also serves as co-director of CIRCLE, a center for interreligious learning and leadership co-sponsored by Hebrew College and the Andover Newton Theological School.

Homayra Ziad is a scholar of Islam at the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore. A former assistant professor of religion at Trinity College, she earned a doctorate in Islamic studies from Yale University. Ziad, who is deeply involved in interreligious education and interfaith initiatives about Islam, is co-chair of the American Academy of Religion’s Interreligious and Interfaith Studies Group. She is a series co-editor for *Palgrave’s Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice*.

Chosen or Choosing: A Jewish-Muslim Exchange

In the following brief exchange, Or Rose and Homayra Ziad explore their personal reactions to the notion of choseness in Judaism and Islam. As scholars and practitioners, they also reflect on their approach to prayer and their openness to other religions.

Dear Homayra,

In thinking about the issue of choseness, the one constructive statement I can make most confidently is that I choose to be a Jew. I love Judaism and feel blessed to be an active member of this ancient, wise, and evolving civilization, even when I am frustrated with or disappointed by certain Jewish teachings or find myself at odds with other members of my community.

Theologically, however, I do not experience God as a personal being who chooses to

enter into covenantal relationship with certain individuals or groups and not with others. Inspired by various mystical and philosophical teachings — both Jewish and non-Jewish — I am more drawn to a spiritual worldview in which God is envisioned as the life force that animates, courses through, and binds all of reality. While I am by no means settled in my beliefs, this is the prevailing spiritual paradigm in my life today.

One context in which I actively engage with the language of choseness is at prayer.