

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub: Parshat Bo — Why Chosenness is OK

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Among the many things I cherish about Judaism are its democratic and egalitarian traditions. Since our origins at Sinai 3200 years ago, we have been taught that religious leadership and learning, and ethical obligation are the prerogatives of all people, not just elites. You are what you study and practice, not what you inherit.

Still, the stories of Exodus stresses over and over the election of Israel. At his first meeting with Pharaoh, Moses says, “So says the Lord, Israel is my son, my first born” (Exodus 4:22). The plagues magnificently separate Hebrews, who are saved, from Egyptians, who are stricken. Three months after the Exodus, at Sinai, G-d explains that He lifted the Israelites out of Egypt, “to be for me a treasure among all the peoples” (Exodus 19:5).

As uncomfortable as it makes some feel, chosenness is an idea that permeates Jewish liturgy, texts and folklore. Traditional Jews pray every morning, “We, however, are Your people, partners to Your Covenant, son of your first born (Isaac) whom You especially loved” Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, of blessed memory, discussed how chosenness keeps its hold even on secular Jews: “The very Jews who insist that they are ‘just like everyone else’ want everyone to know that one in seven Nobel Prize winners are Jews, even though this small people is less than one fifth of one percent of the world’s population.”

Can openness and universalism co-exist with the idea of chosenness? Or are we hypocrites?

I think not, but to understand we have to appreciate the uniqueness of the Jewish concept of chosenness. Jewish election involves responsibility as much as privilege. Our Brit, covenant, binds G-d and us by the Torah’s injunctions about justice. Unlike Christianity and Islam, which took the idea of election and turned it into a proselytizing universalism, Judaism never insisted on the conversion of the nonbelievers.

That is the position of the Jew. Like the first borns in many families, we have been destined to lead unquiet lives. We are called more than others to teach, to try to make the world more just and more decent. Chosenness is not a simple gift, but a distinction and challenge for which we must be worthy. If we don’t keep Torah and Mitzvot, Rabbi Meir taught in the Talmud, then an ethical gentile is far greater than us. The first born status is one we honor because it reminds us of our mission to bring the moral message of one G-d to the world.

May we be worthy of this election.