

Are We "The Chosen People?"

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Our Bible makes it clear that our fathers considered themselves to have been chosen by God as His special people (Ahm S'gulah). For hundreds of years, Jews who inherited the tradition of Abraham have been puzzled by the concept of "Choseness." If God "chose" the Jews, why, then, have the Jews suffered? The question reveals a misunderstanding of the subtleties of the doctrine of choseness.

When Abraham was chosen by his God, it was an era when all the surrounding peoples considered that they, too, were chosen by their particular chief god. The concept of choseness includes, as its corollary, the notion that the people also chose. They each chose a god whom they wished to follow, even as the god "chose" them. Each people entered into a covenant or contract with a particular god. The difference between the Hebrews and their contemporaries was not that the Jews were chosen and the other peoples were not. The difference was in the god with which each people chose to ally itself in contract.

To covenant with a god meant to follow his laws. The significance of the Hebraic covenant with their God was the unmatched excellence of the laws associated with Him. Since these laws were on a much higher ethical level than the laws associated with Baal or Moloch or the other "gods." The particular choice that the Hebrews made resulted in an extra burden for them. The other side of "Choseness" was commitment, partnership.

Only the unlearned Jew has interpreted "Choseness" to mean that the Jew would get special rewards. The prophet Amos dramatically pointed out (8th century B.C.E.) that since God was the Father of all peoples, "Choseness" for the Jew meant only that as His first child, the Jew would be required to perform in more exemplary fashion.

In the end, then, the question, "Are the Jews the chosen people?" can only be answered by the Jews of each generation--for themselves. We are chosen if we assumed the covenant of following the laws associated with our God. We demonstrate our choseness by our actions. We are chosen to be the special representative of God, if we are in the vanguard of those who mediate His qualities to the world about us.

There is a special obligation involved in this inherited doctrine of choseness. If we do not admit to its validity in the present, then we are betraying generations of Jews who lived and died to make it true. Can it have been true for our fathers, but not for us? Alas, if it is not true for us, also, then, it was not true for them, either. Can we make a lie of four thousand years of noble history? I trust not.