

Is the Chosen People a Racist Idea? – JewishClarity.com

Part 1: Defining the meaning of “Chosen People”

The Questions – “Chosen People” raises many different questions:

1. Why does *any* group need to be chosen or different from everybody else?
2. Is the existence of a single chosen group within mankind an ideal situation?
3. What exactly does it mean to be chosen?
4. If we were, in fact, chosen, what were we chosen for?

What was man created for?

In order to answer these questions, we first must address a more fundamental issue — Why did G-d create us, and what is the purpose of mankind? Since G-d is perfect and lacking nothing, the creation cannot be in any way for G-d. It can't be because, for example, G-d was bored, curious, or lonely. The purpose must, therefore, be for the sake of the creation. *Derech Hashem* explains that this is why the creation must be for the benefit and pleasure of mankind — the most elevated aspect of the entire creation.

G-d therefore placed man in *Gan Eden* (a “garden of paradise”). The single “flaw” of *Gan Eden* is that G-d did not make it complete and eternal. He gave that job to mankind (*Adam* and *Chava*); they were supposed to use their free will to make it complete. This process would then bring the world to its final and ultimate perfection. In other words, if *Adam* and *Chava* would have used their free will correctly, they would have transformed *Gan Eden* from a temporal paradise into the permanent paradise it was meant to be. Then, they and all of their descendants would have lived there and related to G-d forever, without ever having needed to die. Mankind would then have been able to enjoy this bliss for all of eternity.

Mission Unchanged

Having failed this task, however, *Adam* and *Chava* (i.e., mankind) were forced to leave *Gan Eden*, and to live within our temporal world. Still, mankind's goal to perfect the world remained unchanged. This meant that people would need to use their free will within the temporal environment of this world to transform it into a permanent existence. The goal of history and of mankind has, therefore, always been to return to *Gan Eden* — post-test.

What actually happened?

Every generation from that point on could (and should) have chosen to connect with G-d to thereby achieve this perfection. As time went on, however, each succeeding generation actually drifted further and further **away** from G-d.

Pirke Avot (5:2) tells us that the ten generations from *Adam* to *Noach* all angered G-d increasingly (which show us the greatness of G-d's patience), until He finally brought the flood. At this point, after the flood, *Noach* and his family were the entirety of mankind. And they were still capable and obligated to achieve this perfection. Unfortunately, not only were they unsuccessful in perfecting the world, but they continued the process of the breakdown of the world. The world became more and more immoral, corrupt, and evil.

Pirke Avot (5:3) continues that there were “Ten generations from *Noach* to *Avraham* to show G-d's [continued] patience, all angered Him increasingly until *Avraham* came and received the benefit of them all.”

Right before *Avraham* was the Tower of Babel, where mankind openly rebelled against G-d. G-d stopped the rebellion by mixing up their languages and dispersing mankind all over the world. The timing of this dispersion is very significant in terms of the ability of mankind to fulfill their purpose. The goal of every generation since the very beginning had been to perfect the world. This obviously required people to have physical proximity, and the ability to communicate with one another. While the scattering that followed (Gen. 11:7-9) was necessary to end the rebellion, its price was very high. Not only would this prevent a unity for evil, but even a unity for good (i.e., to perfect the world) would now seem to be beyond the grasp of mankind.

Ensuring mankind's future

It was at this critical juncture that *Avram* came onto the scene. He first achieved a deep relationship with G-d, and then began teaching others around him. However, *Avram* was only one person; how many people could he reach? He was also mortal; what would happen after he died? So, when *Avram* was 99 years old, G-d established a direct covenant with him and his offspring — forever.

For people to be successful in this world, to really accomplish something, they need to have some sort of a group or a lobby. And that was exactly what the covenant that G-d made with *Avram* and his offspring accomplished. It transformed the Jews into an eternal lobby — the “G-d lobby.” (And, at that point, *Avram* became *Avraham*.)

Let’s think back for a moment. Neither the generation of *Noach*, nor the generation of *Avraham* had the merit to continue on its own. Why did G-d save only the generation of *Avraham*? Not only was *Avraham* a *tzadik* (righteous) himself, but through his outreach and the subsequent founding of the Jewish People, he ensured that all of mankind would eventually fulfill its role to perfect the world. This is what gave his generation the merit of continued existence.

This is what it means that the Jews are a Chosen People. Since *Avraham* who, quite literally, embodied the entire Jewish people, used his free will to choose G-d, he and his descendents were then chosen by G-d to help the rest of the world to choose reality and monotheism forever.

What seems problematic about this?

1. It sounds racist because it seems to say that Jews are both different and better than non-Jews.
2. It seems unfair because it implies that Jews can live more meaningful lives than non-Jews.

Part 2: “The Chosen People” sounds both racist and unfair

Does Judaism view Jews as “better than the rest”?

For decades, the U.S. had separate school systems for white and black children, claiming that, although the school systems were separate, they were equal. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared (in the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*) that the concept of “separate but equal” was unconstitutional, because separate necessarily implied **unequal**. Does Judaism’s view of Jews being different from non-Jews, therefore, imply that Judaism also views Jews as being better than non-Jews?

To begin to answer this question, let’s examine one of the fundamental concepts of the United States, as well as much of the Western world — “all men are created equal” (from the Declaration of Independence). What exactly does this mean? There are many obvious ways in which people are clearly **not** created equal; for example, in talent, intelligence, appearance, etc.

“All men are created equal” — The Jewish outlook

There are, however, two understandings of “all men are created equal” which Judaism does agree with, and which are relevant for both Jews and non-Jews.

The first is that all people are created “*b’tzelem Elokim*” — “in the image of G-d” and, therefore, all are deserving of basic dignity and respect.

The second understanding requires some prerequisite knowledge as to how greatness is understood. The Western concept of greatness is: How good you are compared to **others**. We see this clearly from the various marks of greatness within the Western world, which are all comparative — an “A” in class, a gold medal, a Nobel Prize, etc.

Greatness in Judaism is understood very differently. In contrast to predestination or predetermination, the Torah teaches that one’s moral stature is a function of one’s independent free will choices. As the *Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva, 5th Perek)* wrote – **Anyone** can become as righteous as *Moshe* or as evil as *Yerovam ben Navat* (the one that began the process which eventually caused the northern ten tribes of Israel to be lost). Just as *Moshe* used his free will to maximize his potential and accomplishments, any other human being can as well. The Jewish definition of greatness is, therefore, the maximization of one’s own unique potential — not being better than others, but being as good as you **yourself** can be.

This is the second and most profound way that Judaism understands all people to be equal. Since our greatness is measured only against ourselves, we all have an **equal** ability to maximize our potential and thereby achieve greatness! This is relevant for all human beings, both Jews and non-Jews alike.

“Chosen People” is, therefore, not a racist idea

We can, therefore, honestly say that the Torah does not view Jews as being greater than non-Jews. There is, in fact, no meaning to saying that any one person is greater than any other person. Since every person is unique, the only comparison that makes any sense is for one to be compared to oneself. The reason that this is so important is because what bothers people about racism is not differences between various groups per se, but rather the claim of superiority by one group over another one.

While all people clearly have different potentials, all can become equally great. Therefore, even though Judaism says that Jews and non-Jews have some spiritual differences as well as different potentials, this doesn’t affect their ability to become equally great (i.e., in terms of the maximization of whatever potentials they do have).

Is this difference in potential unfair?

One may then ask: But if a Jew, in fact, has a greater potential to perfect the world, then isn’t that difference itself unfair? And if a Jew can accomplish more of this perfection through maximizing his or her potential than a non-Jew can, G-d seems to be giving them more potential for meaning in their lives!

The obvious answer to this question is conversion. In other words, any non-Jew that wants to increase his meaning and potential in the world certainly can. However, the flip-side to this increased meaning and potential will be that, just like Jews, he will then have much more responsibility and work to do.

A non-Jew considering conversion needs to realize that being Jewish will demand significantly more effort for him to utilize this increased potential. Failure to do this will, therefore, result in significantly less greatness, which will be a tragedy for him, the Jewish People, and the entire world.

According to Judaism, a non-Jew has three possible paths towards greatness available to him or her, all three of which can result in eternal existence and benefit (i.e., life in the world to come):

1. Fulfill one's basic responsibility (i.e., observe the seven *mitzvot* that were given to the non-Jewish world – not to murder, steal, have illicit sexual relations, blaspheme G-d, worship idols, or eat the limb from a living animal, plus the one positive obligation to set up a court system) and therefore be a righteous person.
2. Fulfill more than one's basic responsibility (i.e., beyond the seven *Mitzvot*), by contributing to the world however he or she wants, and be an even greater person.
3. Take upon oneself a much more extensive system of responsibility to bring the world to its perfection by converting to Judaism.

Jews, however, have only option C available to them, whether they want it or not, and whether they feel capable of it or not. And if they don't fulfill at least the minimum of this greater degree of responsibility, then both they and the world will be much worse off for it.

In summary, Judaism says that while all people are different from one another, there is still an inherent spiritual difference between Jews and non-Jews (just as there is an inherent spiritual difference between Jews that are *Kohanim*, *Levi'im*, or *Yisraelim*). This, however, does not mean that Jews are better than non-Jews, and there is nothing at all which is either racist or unfair about this spiritual difference.