

# The Chosen People

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Over the past year or so, a song by Harry Chapin has been stuck in my head. He wrote it more than forty years ago, but it feels as if it could have been written yesterday.

The song is called “[[The Town That Made America Famous](#)].” It tells the story of a picturesque American town -- a shining city on a hill,<sup>1</sup> blessed by God and chosen for greatness: “We lived in the town that made America famous ... six traffic lights, and seven cops, and all the streets kept clean, the supermarket and the drugstore and the bars all doing well.”

But of course, smoldering beneath the surface of the Town That Made America Famous, culture conflict burns. Neighbor distrusts neighbor. Factions form. Antagonism grows. By the song’s end, this culture conflict will literally set the town ablaze and threaten to fray the fabric of society beyond repair.

This year, I’ve spent a lot of time worrying that the fabric of our society may soon be at risk of fraying beyond repair. Neighbor distrusts neighbor. Antagonism has grown. This, despite my having grown up believing that there was something about America that made this country exceptional. I was taught that this was the greatest country on earth, that we had never lost a war. We were the envy of the world -- blessed by God and seemingly chosen for greatness.

But if I grew up believing in American exceptionalism, I believed equally in a similar idea: the idea that we Jews are God’s chosen people. Whether we recognize it or not, the feeling of chosenness pervades our Jewish lives. We read about it in the Torah.<sup>2</sup> We declare it in our prayers.<sup>3</sup> Even outside these religious settings, we feel chosen: our expectation of Jewish genius and our corresponding shame in Jewish scandal -- these are secular expressions of the core Jewish idea that somehow our people is destined for greatness.

In his book [Chosen Peoples](#), sociologist Todd Gitlin argues that the feeling of chosenness lies at the core of both the American and the Jewish experience. Chosenness can be a blessing, a

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<sup>1</sup> Puritan leader John Winthrop aboard the *Arabella* in 1630: “We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us” -- referencing Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14). Three and a half centuries later, President Ronald Reagan, in his election eve address: “I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining ‘city on a hill,’ as were those long ago settlers.”

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Exodus 19:5: “You shall be My treasured possession (*segulah*) from among all the peoples.”

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Aleinu l’shabeich* from the concluding prayers: “God has not made us like the nations of other lands, and has not positioned us like the other families of the earth, and did not make our portion like theirs, and has not made our destiny like that of the masses.”

spark of hope in dark times. But, as Gitlin argues, it can easily become a burden -- a sometimes misguided feeling that the chosen group can do no wrong.

I worry. I worry about America. Not about our politics, but about the fabric of our society. I worry that there may be great risk in thinking of our country as chosen. And so, if we are to keep the America that we love so much from fraying beyond repair, we had better more clearly understand exactly what it is that made America exceptional in the first place -- or as Harry Chapin put it, what it is that made America famous. To help us, let us look to the original discussion of chosenness. Let us look to our Jewish tradition.

Scholars of biblical history believe that the idea of Jewish chosenness was born in the wake of tragedy.<sup>4</sup> In the year 586 BCE, the Babylonian empire conquered the tiny kingdom of Israel. Our capital in Jerusalem was destroyed, our holy Temple laid waste, our leaders sent into exile, and our faith in God's protection shattered.

But in response to this tragedy, Judaism evolved. Our ancestors quickly realized that they could feel God's presence not only in the safety of their own land, but anywhere -- both in times of triumph and in times of defeat. God had not abandoned them. Their hope was restored, and our chosenness was born.

Not only after the Babylonian Exile, but throughout the many dark chapters of Jewish history, our chosenness has been a source of hope -- a reminder that even in the worst of times, we remain under God's care. Many tragedies would befall our people: the Roman destruction of Jerusalem; the Crusades; expulsions from France, England, Spain, and Portugal; the pogroms of Russia; the Nazi Holocaust. In these dark times, our chosenness was a warm flame that kept us alive -- a reassurance that this was not the end. Tevye puts it well in *Fiddler on the Roof*. "We are Your chosen people," he quips. "But once in awhile, can't You choose someone else?"

Our chosenness not only sustained us, it invigorated us. Our feeling of destiny drove us to make advances in every human endeavor -- in literature, philosophy, science, and the arts. We made a name for ourselves, worked to live up to our divinely ordained stature.

But all that striving for greatness can lead to the shadow-side of chosenness -- to the claim that Jews are somehow morally or intellectually superior to other people. This is a misunderstanding of chosenness. If anything, our biblical narrative goes out of its way to illustrate just how unmeritorious were our mythic forebears. It consistently portrays them as stubborn, stiff-necked, and short-sighted. Today, we may point to our people's many achievements as evidence that we are chosen, but as Rabbi Shai Held [reminds](#) us, "Nowhere does the Bible congratulate Jews on how many Nobel prizes they have won."

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<sup>4</sup> On the development of biblical monotheism and the "Mosaic distinction," see: Magid, Shaul. *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Post-Ethnic Society*. Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 83.

There is a recurring motif in Yiddish folklore of the imaginary town of Chelm -- a city of fools, where each person is more dimwitted than the next. Perhaps you've heard one such story -- [for example](#): of the night that the people of Chelm noticed the moon reflected in a barrel of water and, thinking that the moon had fallen from the sky, quickly sealed the barrel and tried to sell the moon for profit. Novelist Michael Chabon [asserts](#) that the fools of Chelm serve a literary purpose, as a comic foil for the Jewish people -- a caricature intended to highlight the absurdity of thinking that Jews are gifted with a superior intellect. The fools of Chelm serve as a safety valve against Jewish triumphalism.

And it is a necessary safety valve, at that. Our feeling of chosenness can easily cause us to expect too much of ourselves. We have high rates of anxiety. We expect too much of our kids. From the time they can talk, we dream of their futures at Ivy League medical or law schools. Ask any teenager in this community and they'll tell you: the pressure is immense. What's more, an overly prideful view of our chosenness can easily become fodder for people with an anti-Semitic agenda. They see our drive as evidence, in their eyes, that Jews control the world or that Jews think they're better than everybody else.

So we see that chosenness can work both for us and against us. In dark times, it gives us a reason to hope. But it can also easily become a dangerous tool for self-congratulation.

The same is true of American exceptionalism. Like Jewish chosenness, American exceptionalism was originally constructed as a symbol of hope. The idea dates back to the Puritans, who imagined these shores as a new Promised Land, chosen by God for them to fulfill their destiny. And despite the obvious atrocities that European settlers would commit on this continent, the theme persisted.

The specific term "American exceptionalism" wasn't coined until the 20th century. Jay Lovestone, a leader of the American socialist movement, [used the term](#) to explain why communism had never taken root in this country. Unlike in Europe, where centuries of aristocratic rule had pushed the lower classes to embrace socialism, America promised upward mobility -- the American Dream. Socialism was supposed to have a universal appeal. America was the exception to that rule.

America offered economic hope. Counter to popular imagination, historians have demonstrated that, by and large, Jewish immigrants came to America not to flee religious persecution, but to find wealth. Among the Jews of Europe, only the poorest of the poor risked the journey. At the turn of 20th century, nearly 40% of European Jewry made their living in business, medicine, or law. Among those who came to America, these professionals represented less than 5%.<sup>5</sup> Those who left, left because they had nothing. They came because America gave them hope. This was a chosen land, they believed, where the streets were paved with gold.

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<sup>5</sup> Hertzberg, Arthur. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*. Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 161.

Hope in the American Dream runs so deep that it has, on occasion, inspired near-messianic fervor. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Stanford political economist Francis Fukuyama famously declared [The End of History](#) -- his belief that free-market capitalism signaled "[the final form of human government](#)," the endpoint of evolution. It seemed that America was not the exception, but rather was becoming the rule. It would only be a matter of decades, Fukuyama hoped, before the American Dream would become a world-wide reality.

But decades passed. And hope began to run dry. Income inequality grew. Nation-building collapsed. And suddenly, the American Dream seemed to be no more than just a dream. And it is here that the shadow-side of American exceptionalism begins to show its face.

As the American Dream crumbled, a new explanation was needed for what makes America exceptional. To fill that void, a centuries-old nativism has reemerged from the depths of our national psyche. It started out small: an [uptick](#) in hate crimes; a swastika [scrawled](#) on a subway map. But as in Harry Chapin's *Town That Made America Famous*, our culture conflict continued to smolder. In Portland, two train passengers [stabbed](#) to death for intervening against the verbal assault of a fellow rider in hijab. In Charlottesville, the [chants](#) of "go back to Africa" and "Jews will not replace us."

The truth is, America's founding myth as a new world blessed by God has always only been half the story. If anything, the feeling that America is chosen may be responsible for many of our country's darkest moral stains. In a [recent book](#), journalist Liel Leibovitz makes exactly this case. He links our feeling of being exceptional to our mistreatment of indigenous peoples, the atrocity of slavery, the persistence of racial violence, even our excessive consumption of natural resources. Leibovitz's book begins with an epigraph from Abraham Lincoln. Like many American presidents, Lincoln believed that America was chosen. But unlike most presidents -- and keenly aware of our nation's obvious flaws -- Lincoln, notably, only ever used the word "chosen" with a key modifier. "I shall be most happy indeed," Lincoln wrote, "if I shall be a humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty -- and of this, [God's] almost chosen people."<sup>6</sup>

And so we see two parallel stories: of a Judaism and an America that declare themselves chosen. Their special status serves as a symbol of hope. But left unchecked, that special status easily shows its shadow-side. And so we must seek a new and different understanding of our chosenness -- one that acknowledges the moral complexity of claiming to be chosen while still allowing that idea to provide spiritual uplift.

To do so, we must uncover an important truth: Jews are not chosen -- Judaism is. There's nothing morally or intellectually superior about the Jewish people. There is, however, something morally and intellectually insightful embedded in the tradition that our people carries. The same

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<sup>6</sup> Attributed by Leibovitz to Abraham Lincoln, in an address to the New Jersey State Senate, February 21, 1861.

is true of America. America is special -- not Americans. Both of these systems, Judaism and America, have at their core a great idea, an idea so special that it gives these systems and the people who participate in them a sense of eternal, transcendent value.<sup>7</sup> Although these ideas are embedded in Judaism and in America, they are not, at day's end, primarily about Judaism or America. They are universal ideas, of value to all humanity.

The great universal idea at core of Judaism is the concept of covenant. Covenant is one of those fancy religious words that is easy to say but difficult to understand. A helpful synonym is "agreement" or "partnership." The Jewish people agrees to be partners with God in helping to advance the good in the world. While other ancient peoples believed that God was unconcerned with human actions, entirely detached from the universe, our ancestors insisted that God needs us. God is lonely, our tradition declares, and is in search of good people to help advance the good of all humanity. We, among others, have raised our hand for this task -- hoping, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, to serve "as a light unto the nations."

Similarly, America has at its core a great universal idea. That idea is summed up in the opening line of the Declaration of Independence: that all people are created equal, and are endowed with certain unalienable rights. Notice the scope of Jefferson's claim. He did not write that all American citizens are created equal, but rather, that all people are created equal -- regardless of their nationality. Paradoxically, the great idea at the core of this country is an idea that, by its very logic, must extend to all countries.

This is the paradox of chosenness: Judaism's great idea -- that we are God's partners in advancing the good -- and America's great idea -- that all people are created equal -- these ideas are the property of all humankind. Yes, our traditions exemplify greatness -- but it is the greatness of all the world.

This paradox is embodied by the High Holy Days. We, the Jewish people, come together to a Jewish building on the Jewish new year to recite Jewish prayers in a Jewish language. And on these, the holiest days of the Jewish calendar, what are the prayers that we recite? When we review our list of shortcomings, what faults come to mind? Not once does the High Holiday prayerbook ask us to confess for not observing Shabbat, or not studying enough Torah, or eating non-kosher foods.<sup>8</sup> The High Holidays are entirely unconcerned with these specifically Jewish behaviors. Instead, we confess to having spoken unkindly, to having held a grudge, to having indulged our impulses. The holiest days on the Jewish calendar are a platform for improving not our Jewish selves, but our human selves. This is what makes Judaism great, this what gives us the claim to chosenness: that the great idea embodied by our tradition is the property of all humankind.

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<sup>7</sup> For a similar argument, see Peter Beinart in *The Atlantic*: "what made America exceptional were its people's habits and ideas" (February 2, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> As noted in Hoffman, Lawrence. *Prayers of Awe: All the World -- Universalism, Particularism, and the High Holy Days*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014, p. 24.

If so, then we who sit here tonight are doubly chosen: chosen by Judaism, and chosen by America. This does not make us doubly special, but rather, doubly responsible -- responsible to live our lives embodying the ideas that make Judaism and America great. We are not the chosen people. We are the people who choose<sup>9</sup> -- who choose to apply our great idea in service of all humankind. If we choose to do so, then we might truly be able to say that we live in the Town That Made America Famous.

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<sup>9</sup> For a lively debate on the use of this phrase, see Rachel Kohl Finegold and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer: <http://shma.com/2015/02/the-choosing-people/> and <http://shma.com/2015/02/the-call-of-the-not-so-wild/>.