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*Who is Chosen: Who Chooses?*

Did you ever want to be chosen? I mean really, really want to be chosen? I think everyone has had that yearning at some time in their life. When I was a kid we used to have pick-up baseball games, and the two best players (or maybe they were just the oldest, or the strongest), anyway, they would choose among we others, the lesser deities of the baseball field. Everyone knew who was a good player, and of course these were picked first; then there was a middle echelon, passable and playable. And then there were the dregs. I was down in that bottom category.

It was an unwritten but time-honored practice that everyone had to be picked for one or the other team, and you could feel the chooser's eyes scanning, over and around you, weighing how much of a burden he could tolerate and figuring what position you could play while doing the least damage. I suppose it would have been even more humiliating to never be chosen. Maybe, or maybe not. One could feign indifference if he wasn't included, or choose to play tennis, or checkers.

What *are* your choices if you are not among the chosen?

Now, I was raised Jewish, which in its pro-social practices has many similarities to Unitarian Universalism . I was proud of being Jewish, and of what Jews had accomplished, and had contributed to Western civilization. And growing up in the 1950's, I was stirred by the reality that as a people we had survived many terrible persecutions and one near annihilation, a fact that bound me even closer to my Jewish identity. But there was one self-identifying label of Jews that always made me uncomfortable – and that was being “the chosen people.” That a divine presence had selected Israel over every other people in the world, had selected us for some special privilege, just made me cringe. What right did we have to claim such a status, bestowed by omnipotent God? I thought that such a privilege should be earned, not just given, or assumed. And who, I wondered, was doing the choosing anyway?

So this morning I'd like to explore this questions with you, and to examine its relevance for our experience as Unitarian Universalists.

I'm still uncertain about this Jewish designation of “chosen people”, but I can articulate my uncertainty more clearly now. Seeking the truth, I did some Biblical searching on this topic.

The first mention of *being chosen* occurs in Genesis 12:1-4, when God instructs Abram:

“Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup>“I will make you into a great nation,  
 and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,  
 and you will be a blessing.

<sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and *all peoples on earth*  
will be blessed through you.”

This is the first of several passages in the Hebrew Bible where the Jewish patriarchs agree to a covenant with their God, the original essence of which is *accept me, as your only God, and therefore follow my commandments, and I will bless you*. To be a great nation is to have many children and, on its face, God’s side of the deal is promising, since having many children was critical for nomadic, tribal survival, to fight against enemies and to be assisted in one’s older age. And survival was foremost in the ancients’ life. (The “pursuit of happiness” would never have occurred to them.) And on Abram’s side of the covenant was obedience – following God’s commandments.

Anyway, Abram figures he has little to lose, agrees to the Covenant, and packs up his tent as all his extended family heads towards Canaan, the “chosen people” moving to the “promised land”.

In a very simplified telling, the rest of the Hebrew Bible is about the struggle to fulfill this Covenant, the struggle of the Israelites to follow all the commandments, or even the most basic Ten of them, and the struggle of God to return with forgiveness, again and again, to His promise of blessing. It’s told as a very dramatic narrative, filled with courage and virtue, doubt and disruption, wars, murders, incest and infidelities, all by people you probably wouldn’t want for your near neighbor, but I have them for relatives.

But, my friends, there are some important twists as the story progresses. Along the path of this theology the nature of God changes, and so does Israel’s *relationship* with God. For smack dab in the middle of the Deuteronomy, the last of the five Books of Jewish Torah, appears a new Commandment: “*Harken, Israel, The Lord God is One*”, and “*you shall love your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*”. At first read, and taken out of context, this seems like an outrageous statement; imagine if I walked into our kitchen and commanded my wife, Linnea, to love me. If I was lucky all I’d receive in return would be an incredulous stare. How can anyone be *commanded* to love another? Love comes out of relationship, doesn’t it? So where’s the relationship here, for love, between God and Israel?

Well, it’s actually been building throughout the Hebrew Bible. It’s written that God chooses Israel the people as His “bride” (yes, I know that it uses language that’s offensively patriarchal to our modern ears, but let’s cut them 2000 years of slack, and try to hear what was being taught through their ears). Numerous times it is written that God loves Israel – and God wants (commands?) Israel to love God in return. But how does one love a ferocious sky God, pillar of fire, column of smoke, or some abstract concept that forbids being imaged? No Golden Calves for the Hebrews to adore, dance around, pray to. How, actually, does the Bible describe this God who commands love?

One answer to this question occurs when Moses, speaking to the burning bush in the wilderness, asks God “Who shall I tell the Hebrews sent me to lead them out of Egypt? *What is your name?*” God’s voice answers, *Ayeh asher Ayeh*, which means “I am what I will be.” Now God’s actual name in the Bible is *never* supposed to be said or read (the Hebrew word Lord,

“Adonai”, is substituted for it) but is a 4 letter contraction of the Hebrew for “I was, I am, and I will be.” In other words, God is All of Creation, past, present and future.

So later, when the passage in Deuteronomy that commands love of God *harkens* Israel to the reality that God is One, it means the One, the total reality of BEING. To me, personally, my friends, the most profoundly spiritual experience is one in which I am aware of my being, not as a singular, sentient person but existing in a loving relationship that engages and embraces the mystery of being.

(repeat) *The most profoundly spiritual experience is one in which I am aware of my being, not as a singular, sentient person but existing in a loving relationship that engages and embraces the mystery of being.*

Maybe you’ve had experiences like this, too.

Seen this way, the Covenant is a reciprocal loving relationship, where the commandments are the guides for relating and the blessings that result are the fruits of a life lived in love. But not without struggle; it’s not all milk and honey. Israel – the name that God gave to the patriarch Jacob’s - means “one who wrestles with God.” See, it’s a real, personal relationship. God becomes personified as a step towards helping us love Creation, and humans realize their divine nature as a step closer to God.

This religious evolution continues into the next Biblical texts. The New Testament confirms and extends the ancient Covenant, except now God’s promise isn’t real estate, but instead is God’s spiritual kingdom. Jesus taught that “the kingdom of God is within you.” And life is increased not by the growth of the current population but by the blessing of eternal life, after physical death. Israel still must keep the commandments, but now the blessing takes a different form, and the return is spiritual and emotional, not material or geographical.

*And here, my friends, is where another historical-theological twist happens.* Until that time, Jews were Jews by birth, with few exceptions, and Judaism was intended for Jews (even if other nations were blessed by their acceptance of that fact, as noted in the original Abrahamic contract). Very few people sought a conversion to Judaism. It was a pretty closed club, with strict purity laws and a requirement for male circumcision, which would have made many men think twice before signing

Even Jesus was slow to realize that his message might reach beyond his people. Yet after Jesus’ death, the evangelical program carried out by his followers, teaching that he was the true Messiah, the savior of Israel, reached beyond the self-identifying Jews and sought to convert Gentiles. (The circumcision requirement had been dropped.) And these Gentiles could accept the invitation to be Christ-believing Jews.

*In other words, they had a choice.* Instead of being the *Chosen People*, selected by God, they were the *Choosing People*, choosing the Covenant while accepting Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of personal rather than national deliverance. Believers were not Pagan or Jewish because of their parents or where they lived, or what an emperor commanded, but instead by accepting a religious/spiritual covenant as a matter of choice. A choice about not just what to believe but, critically, of *how to behave*, which is what Judaism was largely about anyway. And still is.

*And aren't we Unitarian Universalists also followers of a set of Principles of Behavior?*

So this choice of the early converts involved making a *spiritual pilgrimage* rather than a *geographical one*, being sent on a path of the heart rather than a journey for the feet. Not a commitment taken lightly, as Christian-Jews were small in number and vulnerable to persecution wherever they lived, but, still, a commitment that was compelling in its message of intimate community, justice, love and eternal life.

Ironically, however, as this revolutionary religious movement grew in numbers, it became institutionalized as *The Church*, and then, God forbid, was nationalized as the Holy Roman Church. For the sake of uniformity the church officials imposed an orthodoxy of liturgy and doctrine, and the concept of God – despite His Trinitarian nature of Father-Son-Holy Spirit – became locked up again in an authoritarian, omnipotent and static mold. Creation became historically trapped and humans, sinful and without intrinsic morality – not to mention love- now required the Church to deliver them to Paradise. To choose otherwise was to be, literally, a “heretic.”

No church, no belief, too bad, no Heaven for you.

Fast forward a few thousand years, and here we are. We Unitarian Universalists have evolved through rigid church hierarchies and severe dogmas, escaped “original sin”, stepped out from among the “elect” of our Calvinist, Puritanical forbearers, and chosen those pieces of the covenant that are consistent with the angels of our better selves- choosing to elevate our quest to a *search for truth in love*, a commitment to compassionate actions to effect justice, and a practice that strives to include everyone in caring community.

We are the happy heretics, who replace dogma and doctrine with Principles. Who recognize the central importance of seeing our human species as part of the interactive web of existence, and of accepting every individual as worthy of respect.

And yet, my friends, doesn't our choice allow the same relationship as the original Biblical Covenant? Not that we blindly follow commandments in order to secure a piece of land or the material benefits that abound in stores or pour in from on-line buying. But, rather, that we thoughtfully follow the Principles we have crafted in order to bring about a world that honors relationships and that respects the process of creation and our role in it. And in so doing we celebrate our sacred relationship with and our loving commitment to Being.

In closing, let us pledge to carry forward these choices, our thoughtfully crafted Principles, to teach them to our children, and to share them with a wounded world that is in sad need of rational religion and the peace that comes with justice. May carrying them out become a blessing, not just to us, but to all people.

And maybe, with liberated spirits, we will continue to imagine the God that waits for each of us, passionately, with promise and with hope.

Please join me in saying, “May it be so” and *Amen*.