

Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

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The Chosen People

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Adam and Eve failed by eating of the Tree of Knowledge and were thus exiled from Eden. Cain murdered his brother, and he, too, was exiled. The following generations became corrupt to the point where the entire human race was overwhelmed by immorality.

At this point, God rejected most of humanity and restarted human history with Noah, the “second Adam.” After the flood, God explicitly commanded several moral laws (Genesis 9), which the Talmud understands as the “Seven Noahide Laws” (also referred to as ethical monotheism). Noah should have taught these principles to all his descendants. Instead, the only recorded story of Noah’s final 350 years relates that he got drunk and cursed his grandson Canaan. Although Noah was a righteous man, he did not transmit his values to succeeding generations.

The Tower of Babel represents a societal break from God. It marked the beginnings of paganism and unbridled human arrogance. At this point, God appears to have given up on having the entire world perfected and instead chose Abraham—the “third Adam”—and his descendants to model ethical monotheism and teach it to all humanity. This synopsis of the first 12 chapters of Genesis is encapsulated by Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno in his introduction to Genesis. The remainder of the Book of Genesis revolves around a selection process within Abraham’s family. Not all branches would become Abraham’s spiritual heirs. By the end of Genesis, it is evident that the Chosen People is comprised specifically of all Jacob’s sons and their future generations.

Can other nations be chosen again by reaccepting ethical monotheism? The answer is a resounding “yes.” Prophets look to an ideal future when all nations can again become chosen. For example, Zephaniah envisions a time when all nations will speak “a clear language,” thereby undoing the damage of the Tower of Babel (Zephaniah 3:9). One is chosen if one chooses God. For a Jew, that means commitment to the Torah and its commandments. For a non-Jew, that means commitment to ethical monotheism. God longs for the return of all humanity,

and the messianic visions of the prophets constantly reiterate that aspiration.

Rather than serving primarily as an ethnic description, the Chosen People concept is deeply rooted in religious ethics. It is a constant prod to faithfulness to God and the Torah, and it contains a universalistic message that addresses the community of nations. All are descendants from Adam and Eve, created in God’s Image. God waits with open arms to choose all those who choose to pursue that sacred relationship with the divine.

Adapted from Rabbi Hayyim Angel, A Synagogue Companion

The Conversion of Abraham

Rabbi Alec Goldstein

Abraham is the founding father of Judaism, yet as Nehama Leibowitz writes, “The Torah does not relate to us even one detail of Abraham’s previous life which would give us reason for understanding the Divine choice.” Indeed the reader has no idea why Abraham was chosen, and two possibilities exist: either God chose Abraham or Abraham chose God.

In the Midrash, R. Yitzchak uses the teleological argument for God’s existence, i.e., one can come to believe in God by observing that the universe has order, structure, and purpose. By contrast, Maimonides uses the Aristotelian argument for God’s existence, i.e., that there must be a First Cause that is responsible for all motion. Yet despite their differences, R. Yitzchak and Maimonides have one crucial point in common – they agree that Abraham converted because of philosophical enquiry.

While these are perhaps the most famous accounts of Abraham’s conversion, there are other ways it has been explained. For example, Rashi likely does not believe Abraham converted based on philosophical proofs. The prophet Isaiah refers to Abraham as *ohavi*, “the one who loved Me” (41:8), but what is the source of that love? Rashi writes that Abraham “did not recognize Me [*hikkirani*] because of rebuke [*tochachah*] or the teachings of his fathers [*limmud avotav*], but from love [*ahavah*.]” Implied in Rashi is that while most people accept God because of either argument or as a tradition from their parents, Abraham did neither – rather, Abraham’s conversion came from an emotional awareness.

The third Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (Sefat Emet), also does not see Abraham's conversion as a product of mere philosophy: "... in the holy Zohar it is stated that the very reason for [Abraham's] praise is that he heard this statement [of lech lecha, the central verse of Abraham's election], which is uttered from God, may He be praised, constantly to every individual ... and our forefather Abraham heard [the call] and accepted [it]."

According to Sefat Emet, then, Abraham's election is not because of philosophical inquiry. Instead, God emitted, as it were, a faint siren, barely audible to the human ear, but loud enough that a sensitive person could not only hear the call but also accept the call. That is precisely what Abraham did, and that is why he was selected.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes: "To us, this problem is almost irrelevant. We need no evidence of the historical existence of our patriarch, just as there is no necessity for clear-cut logical evidence concerning the reality of God. The immediacy and aboriginal impact of our God-experience, cutting through all levels of existence, does not require any other form of evidence and is not subject to logico-deductive or inductive verification."

Thus we have two basic models of understanding Abraham's conversion. According to R. Yitzchak (Midrash Rabbah) and the simple reading of Maimonides, Abraham was converted by one philosophical proof or another. However, according to Rashi, Kuzari, Sefat Emet, and Rabbi Soloveitchik, Abraham's conversion was engendered by something other than philosophical speculation. Perhaps the "philosophical" narratives are more famous, but it is not clear that the majority of Jewish sources interpret the story that way.

Adapted from Strauss, Spinoza & Sinai: Orthodox Judaism and Modern Questions of Faith

That It May Go Well with Me Because of You

Rabbi Amnon Bazak

Commentators are divided about two incidents during Avram's descent to Egypt. First, should he have left Israel at all? According to Ramban, this was a sin that brought a heavy punishment in its wake: "Even leaving the land during famine was a sin. God would have saved him from starvation. For this action, his descendants were punished with exile in Egypt under Pharaoh's rule." Radak, however, sees this as a test that Avram faced and passed: "This is one of the tests with which God tested our father Avraham. Avraham withstood them all and

did not doubt God's ways by saying, 'Yesterday You promised that the nations of the world would be blessed through me, and today, the land is beset by famine such that I have to leave.'

The commentators also disagreed about whether Avram should have presented Sarai as his sister. Ramban characterizes this, too, as a grave mistake: "Know that our father Avraham unwittingly sinned a great sin in placing his righteous wife into a situation where she might sin, because he feared for his life. He ought to have trusted that God would save him, his wife, and all that he had." Radak (12:12), once again, gives Avraham the benefit of the doubt: "He did not rely on God's promise, because he worried about sin. The correct behavior for every righteous person is not to rely on a miracle in a dangerous situation, but to take whatever action is necessary to protect himself." It is hard to determine which of these positions is most closely aligned with the simple meaning of the text. Even with Radak's positive view, one line in the text is somewhat jarring: "Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you" (12:12). If there is no choice, and his life is at stake, it is enough to say "that I may remain alive." What is the meaning of the additional phrase "that it may go well with me because of you"? Rashi explains: "That they will give me gifts." This seems correct, because in the continuation of the story, "because of her, it went well with Avram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels" (12:16). Would it be acceptable for Avram to explain from the outset that he was asking Sarai to do something difficult so that he could get gifts?

Later on, he will refuse wealth from wicked people. He tells the king of Sodom, "I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Avram rich'" (14:23). It looks as though Avram reconsidered his behavior in Egypt and decided not to take money in negative circumstances. Indeed, when Avram finds himself in nearly identical circumstances, he does not express an expectation of financial gain (20:1–2): "Avraham journeyed from there.... While he was sojourning in Gerar, Avraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister.'" Perhaps this explains why, in this situation, God intervened directly with the king: "I did not let you touch her" (20:6). This is something that apparently did not happen in Egypt. The difference between the two incidents suggests that Avraham underwent a change between the first one and the second.

Adapted from Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Starting Point