GELLMAN SYMPOSIUM

Michael J. Harris

I commented on Yehuda Gellman's views on the chosenness of the Jewish people in a 2013 APJ symposium on Chapter 4 of Gellman's *God's Kindness has Overwhelmed Us: A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People* (Academic Studies Press, 2013), and again in my book *Faith Without Fear: Unresolved Issues in Modern Orthodoxy* (Vallentine Mitchell, 2016), Chapter 6. Gellman has now included his freshest thinking on this topic in the first three chapters of his important book *The People, The Torah, The God: A Neo-Traditional Jewish Theology* (Academic Studies Press, 2023).

As early as the first paragraph of Chapter 1, Gellman registers his concern that the concept of Jewish chosenness may leave the Jewish people vulnerable to a charge of racism. Very early on in Chapter 1, too, he acknowledges that in the course of Jewish history "the chosenness conviction has been taken to racist conclusions at times" (p. 4; also in Ch. 2 at p. 19), adding that widespread, severe and often murderous non-Jewish persecution of Jews over millennia unsurprisingly vindicated such attitudes as far as many Jews were concerned (pp. 4-5).

In Chapter 2, Gellman returns to this issue, focusing on the term 'racism' and the dangers of the doctrine of chosenness descending into it. (I actually didn't use the term 'racist' at all in discussing Gellman's earlier formulations of his view but I accept that he sees an implicit objection based on racism or ethniticism from my references to superiority). The term 'racism' is not my preferred one in this context, since I don't believe that the Jewish people is accurately described as a race, but the term we select – racism, ethniticism, essentialism, supremacism, superiority – obviously matters less than the clear moral danger in this

general vicinity that each of these terms attempts to identify. The key thing is to be aware of the danger, which Gellman clearly is, but too much of the contemporary Orthodox world apparently is not.

So I entirely agree with Gellman's insistence on the need to interpret the idea of Jewish election in a way that forestalls racist readings as far as possible, while recognising that a core sense of Jewish chosenness is too integral to Jewish tradition to be read out of it (p. 5). However, Gellman actually talks of the need to "*re*interpret" (my emphasis) the idea of chosenness, which makes me somewhat uncomfortable from a traditionalist perspective. Gellman writes that he wants to change our interpretation of Jewish chosenness but not too much, not to "water it down beyond recognition" (p.5). I believe that rather than changing or reinterpreting, the most authentic move is to identify and privilege strands *already within the tradition* which articulate chosenness in a substantive but non-racist, non-supremacist way. In Chapter 2, Gellman presents his concept of Jewish election as "a viable contemporary doctrine of the Chosen People to replace previous formulations. This is a "replacement theology"" (p. 25). Again, I would argue that a better strategy for a contemporary traditional Jewish theology is to identify and privilege motifs already securely grounded within our tradition which articulate chosenness in a meaningful way while avoiding racism or supremacism. "Replacement" seems to me both unnecessary and too radical.

The essence of Gellman's conception of Jewish chosenness is this: God loves all human beings equally. However, ordinarily, God does not display His love to a degree which will rob people of their extraordinarily valuable ability to choose to come to Him *freely* rather than in a way that is coerced. But in order to make all human beings aware of His full love for them

and to encourage them to turn to Him, God *designates* (a term Gellman's prefers to "chooses") one particular people for whom His love will be fully manifest. God's relationship to this people provides a *figuration* of God's love for all people and *prefigures* the open manifestation of God's love for all people at some future time. (Gellman therefore refers to his conception of Jewish chosenness as *figurational*). The nation designated by God is the Jews, whom God almost compels, at the early stages of His encounter with them, to enter into an intimate covenantal relationship with Him. This God does most centrally in the Revelation at Sinai - an epiphany experienced by the entire Jewish people.

Gellman (p. 14) anticipates the obvious objection to the idea that God manifests His love for the Jews from the bloody and painful history of the Jewish people. His response is that the Jewish people does not model receipt of a Divine love that is expressed through peace, security, tranquillity and prosperity. Rather, Jewish history serves as the paradigm for a divine love rooted in the difficult real world of struggle, conflict, and human evil, as an archetype of how God redeems a people's bitter suffering and enables them to survive (p.16; see also p. 23).

In the 2013 APJ symposium and in *Faith Without Fear* (p. 161), I expressed the worry that a conception of chosenness that understands the Jewish people alone among global peoples as current recipients of God's overwhelming love (and the same would apply to a conception that understands the Jewish people alone among global peoples as current recipients of God's manifest love) inevitably suggests Jewish superiority and is likely to be internalized by many Jews as a sense of superiority. I appreciate Gellman clarifying in his new book that the distinction he proposes in his concept of chosenness is not between Jews who are current recipients of God's overwhelming or manifest love and Gentiles who are not yet such

recipients, but rather, within a pan-human community each of whose members is loved by God equally, between those for whom God's love is currently more manifestly revealed and those for whom, in order to enable them to come to God in freedom, it is currently less manifest. As Gellman recognizes (p. 25), his figurational interpretation of chosenness is still vulnerable to racist or xenophobic attitudes, but I agree with him that that may well be true of all plausible accounts of chosenness: "[T]here likely is no view of Jewish Election that is not vulnerable to racist misuse" (26). Gellman makes a useful distinction between vulnerability to racist attitudes, on the one hand, and on the other, conceptions of chosenness which are either themselves explicitly racist or will inevitably descend into racism, and are therefore unacceptable (p. 19, p. 25). I entirely agree with Gellman that the proper response to vulnerability to racist attitudes is not to jettison the concept of chosenness but to increase diligence about its dangers, to educate appropriately, and to foster meaningful and respectful encounters across religious and ethnic boundaries (p. 27).

Overall, I think that Gellman, in this latest presentation of his concept of chosenness, has allayed the main concerns that I had about it previously. My residual worry is that the idea of 'replacement' seems too radical. Relatedly, although it seems to me that the component parts of Gellman's doctrine of chosenness are pretty much *consistent* with traditional Jewish theology, it is not clear that his conception of chosenness is adequately *grounded* in Jewish tradition in the sense of the conception as a whole having much precedent in the tradition. The reading of chosenness that I favour, namely the Jewish people as teachers of monotheism to humanity, does better on that score.

I conclude with two minor comments. First, regarding the blessing in the Morning Service *shelo asani nochri*, "Who has not made me a Gentile" (mentioned by Gellman on p. 4): this

blessing does not necessarily have to do with chosenness. Tamar Ross in her *Expanding the Palace of Torah* (p. 263, n. 52) cites the suggestion that along with *shelo asani isha* and *shelo asani eved,* the juxtaposed blessings that thank God for not having made one a woman or a slave, *shelo asani nochri* is entirely an anti-Christian polemic targeting Galatians 3:28 rather than an implicit (in fact, almost explicit) ranking of Jews and non-Jews. But this is a mere quibble – Gellman's (obviously correct) point is that the doctrine of chosenness is prevalent in the Torah, Rabbinic literature, Jewish liturgy and many other places in Jewish religious literature.

Second, I find Gellman's criticisms of Michael Wyschogrod's conception of chosenness (Chapter 3) persuasive. Regarding Wyschogrod's view that to require an account of chosenness to be morally acceptable would be an infringement of God's sovereignty, I would just add to Gellman's theological arguments (pp. 33-35) that Wyschogrod's kind of divine command theory is not well-rooted in Jewish tradition and in fact enters the tradition in a substantive way only late in the history of Jewish thought, as I argue in detail in my *Divine Command Ethics: Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Routledge, 2003).