

Dear Chavraya,

I had two experiences this week that made me think about how we as Jews view others and are viewed by others. I spoke one evening with a church adult education class. One of the participants asked me about the "election of Israel," the meaning of the term and concept of the "chosen people." In the course of asking the question she suggested that this is the source of anti-Semitism. I winced a bit. It was late at night and I had anticipated a more easy-going conversation, nothing too heavy. I suggested in essence that "chosen-ness" refers to the chosen vocation of a people. In regard to Israel it is the choosing to accept and give life to Torah in the world. Each people has its own chosen vocation that expresses its uniqueness. Like all racism, anti-Semitism reflects the inability through fear and hatred to give the "other" their rightful place and equal due by dint of being human.

Whether or not chosen-ness is understood in more universal or chauvinist terms has often varied in relation to the degree of anti-Semitism and persecution in a given time and place. Expressing a universal ideal that all people are chosen, the prophet Isaiah says, *I will gather all nations and tongues..., and I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, says God.* At the moment of receiving the Torah and entering into the Covenant with God at Mount Sinai, the most uniquely intimate and singular event in Jewish history, God reminds the people that there is a special divine relationship with all peoples, saying, *ki li kol ha'aretz/for all the earth is Mine*, i.e., not just the land and people of Israel. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in mid-nineteenth century Germany, explains these words to mean, *The relationship into which you are to enter with Me is in fact nothing exceptional; it is merely to begin the restoration of that normal relationship which all the earth should really have with me....*

The other experience of the past week concerning view of self and others was more frustrating than the church conversation, which turned out to be quite positive. I had asked a colleague if he would be part of the planning committee for a project called "Building Bridges through Learning" that brings imams and rabbis together to learn each other's texts. Someone whom I respect and who certainly supports interfaith dialogue, I was startled by his response. In an email he reflected on the "problem of religious/textual dialogue in the absence of a post-Enlightenment brand of Islam." Referring to one of the study gatherings, he said, "The Jews came with their modern, critical views of their own texts. The Muslims came with "The Prophet, peace be upon him, said...." We offered our opinions and they stated the incontrovertible Truth. That does not, in my opinion, open the way to fruitful dialogue. I don't think I have the patience for this."

Saddened by an apparent stepping back from dialogue on the part of a progressive rabbi, I was troubled by what struck me as an ironic dogmatism. I understood the divide of which my colleague spoke, but did not experience it in the same way. We meet the other in the other's chosen way and place of being who they are. As Muslims and Jews sat together with each other's sacred texts before them, I heard many questions asked that clearly indicated a willingness to

listen and discuss. For an array of historical, sociological, and theological reasons, American Muslims are in a very different place than American Jews. While hardly a monolithic community, in the Muslim community there is not the same pluralism that we celebrate in the American Jewish community. Responding to my colleague, I wrote that “contact and engagement with Muslims is crucial toward fostering a greater “enlightenment” in the world and in our own city and community. Engaging the other where they are, we create the possibility for new awareness, while in the absence of engagement nothing will change.” In the end, whether it be in regard to how we understand “chosenness” or the divinity of texts, it is the action inspired by religious teaching and the willingness to be in each other’s presence that counts most.

In this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Bamidbar*, first portion in the fourth book of the Torah, there is a helpful framework through which to consider the experiences that I have shared of the past week. The portion begins with a census through which each one is counted, a reminder that each one counts. Instruction is given for how the tribes are to be organized around the sanctuary, each with its own place and standard: *Everyone shall camp next to their standard, each designated with the insignia of their ancestral home.* Extrapolating from the particular to the universal, every people and nation is chosen to bring their own unique gifts into the world, each one with their own place and calling, their own task and purpose. The Izbirtza Rebbe tells a parable: *If one plants an orchard in beautiful arrangement, and then removes or exchanges one familiar planting, the orchard will no longer be in a state of wholeness.*

*Sh’laymoot/wholeness, completeness, is the source of shalom.* We are the trees in God’s orchard, every person and every people. When we can admire each other’s fruit, and appreciate the sustenance that each one draws from their own roots, and the varied ways of dancing on the breeze that is God’s breath, then peace shall be the common fruit for all to share.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor