Three Follow-Up Questions

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Yehudah Gellman's new book offers a new theory of Jewish choseness made palatable for modern committed Jews. One might say that he pours out the supremacist bathwater while sparing the particularist baby. Since I have registered my appreciation for the book elsewhere, here it will suffice to point out three directions for further inquiry needed to help flesh-out Gellman's project:

1) Gellman pushes the envelope of intellectual honesty in Orthodox Jewish thought; he does this by explicitly breaking the tradition of never admitting that you are breaking with tradition. Thus, he writes of his own theory that "this is *not* [emphasis in original] the way Jewish choseness has been interpreted historically" (pg. 73). Gellman has very interesting things to say in chapter one about his relationship with tradition, and he cautiously suggests that his ideas on choseness may eventually find their place in the historical process of "progressive revelation." However, I think it would be fair to say that during the last millennium – especially given the rise of Kabbalah - supremacist elements have only strengthened within Judaism. Is there a plausible story to be told explaining how Gellman's ideas are in accord with some underlying principle guiding the "progressive revelation" of Jewish doctrine? Otherwise, this would seem, at best, to be a case of Judaism playing "catch up" with the progress achieved by Western morality, or worse, Judaism simply adapting to current intellectual fashions

Reply:

Beryl places my book within Orthodox Jewish thought. I want to clarify that in my book I make no claim to be putting forward an Orthodox position. Usually I wrote of "traditional Judaism," rather than of Orthodoxy. The reason is that it was not an aim of mine to write what "Orthodox Jews" will find acceptable. Most Orthodox Jews believe differently than I do on a number of important issues. Most will reject my book out of hand. I am part of the Orthodox community and share its general religious orientation, but am not prepared to test my convictions by what a majority of such Jews, or even the most learned of them, might think is true. "Traditional Judaism" is a nebulous term, which can include more views.

Now to my reply. Jewish superiority is rampant in Talmudic and midrashic literature. I studied the Midrash Rabbah on the Torah and have compiled a long list of passages that are severely negative about non-Jews because they are not Jews. In my book I cite a few of these for illustration. The kabbalah is a natural extension of this outlook. So, I see the severely negative attitude to the Gentile as arching from the Talmud through the kabbalah and beyond. To an extent, this came about because of serial Gentile repression and persecution of the Jews.

My conviction is that we are living in a time of rapid change, which by Divine Guidance is revealing a new understanding. This change is taking place within kabbalah itself, prominently in the teachings of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, author of the *Sulam* commentary to the Zohar and the multi-volume monumental *Torat Eser Sephirot*. In the tradition of Hasidism, and in a systematic detailed way, Rabbi Ashlag has interpreted kabbalah as being entirely about what takes place within our souls. It is no longer about Jews and Gentiles as they are in the world, but about the "Israel" and the "Gentile" within each of us. This is a step ahead but is not there yet, since the old terminology is left over from the past. Furthermore, in the Ashlag system, as opposed to how kabbalah has been ordinarily understood, all are destined to be redeemed, Greek and Jew, man and woman, slave and the free.

Now, when I wrote about "progressive revelation" I did not mean a gradual unfolding, bit by bit. My intention was only to point to stages in human development where higher awareness emerges from an earlier stage. My reference was meant to be using, at the start, something like Rambam's idea about sacrifices: They are a concession by God because of the cultural placement of the people at the time. As I believe, at some point of spiritual development, sacrifices will no longer continue to have their function. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook wrote in this way about sacrifices but apparently saw the break with the past far off in some future. In our time, we are beginning to see a glimmer of changes in human consciousness, at least in some parts of the world. My topic, not touching on biblical law, is more benign than sacrifices, and I believe the time has come to put into effect a new understanding of the Chosen People.

As for Western morality, I confess to seeing some elements of it as convincing and as signifying a higher type of morality than what has preceded it. Given the category of divine accommodation, values reflected in the Torah need not always reflect the highest values. Again, Rabbi Kook uses this theme to explain a number of commandments. True enough not all that is Western morality is to my taste. Western morality makes far too much of the primacy of individual needs and rights, as opposed to the welfare of the community, a view I see rooted in an individually self-centered orientation. However, Western morality is achieving an advanced understanding of inter-nation/religion/ethnic relations. This is not a fad. It is the hard-won result of sober reflection on the evils that have happened in the past, of an increased familiarity between cultures, of an intermingling of populations to an extent never before, and instant communication between neighbors in the global apartment building. The "Other" is rapidly decreasing in its otherness. Once, when I got off a public bus in New Jersey on a Friday afternoon, the black driver as well the Chinese passenger behind him both called out to me, "Have a good Shabbos!" This new mutual recognition as well as an active inter-religious industry in parts of the world requires a new theology of the Gentiles and of their religions, if at all possible.

2) Gellman does claim Judaism to be *doctrinally* superior to other religions (albeit in a very gentle fashion – see pages 31-), but I would like to hear more about the role of Jewish *practice* in his theory. He seems to grant gentiles the new spiritual advantage of loving God in "freedom and joy"; one might say that *gadol she'eino metzuveh ve'oseh misheh metzuveh ve'oseh*. However, it is commonly held by Jews that the Torah offers the most efficacious path to spiritual development. Jews are not superior to gentiles by *nature*, but can Gellman explain why practicing Jews are not spiritually superior to gentiles thanks to Torah-*nurture*?

Reply: Torah practice in itself is no guarantee of spiritual superiority. We are witnesses that too often those who seem to be the most stringent and outspoken about their Jewish observance fall seriously short of holiness. Religious observance passes all too easily into habit, and into a self-satisfying regimen. That is why we must pray to God that God "make us holy *through* your commandments." The commandments are not a guarantee of holiness. We need pray for divine assistance for this. They signify God's wanting us to be close to God, by fulfilling God's will and becoming God-like. God signals the desire for all to come close to God by giving us the commandments. Traditionally, God giving commandments is an act of love. More commandments (up to a point I would suppose) signal intense love. That is the meaning of observance when looked at from God's point of view, which is the crux of my view of chosenness. From my point of view whether we succeed in coming close to God depends on how we take up the task. We become God-like by becoming merciful and loving as is God. Whether this issues from our observance is a matter of our training with a conscious aim of coming close to God.

Can a Gentile come to a spiritual height comparable to that of a Jew? In principle I do not see why not. The Gentile is facilitated in this endeavor by his or her religion not being a command from God but the result of a freely chosen religious form. There is more to think about in this question. I have not done that more thinking to be able to add more here. So I will stop here rather than succumb to the temptation to give an answer for the sake of giving an answer.

3) What exactly is the role of the Jewish example for gentiles? Does God's relationship with Israel simply reflect the sheer intensity of His love for humanity, or is the coercive evidence of God's love for Israel meant to *help* gentiles recognize the non-coercive evidence of God's presence and love in their own lives? At the risk of being accused of dragging out the old God/dog conundrum, consider these two pictures:

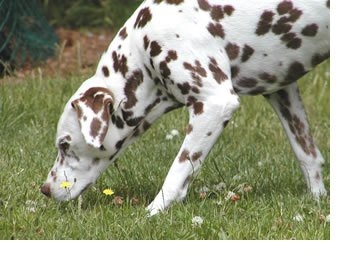
 

Image A Image B

Image A does not "coerce" us to interpret it in some particular way, while Image B is unmistakably a picture of a Dalmatian. Seeing the "coercive" image B "primes" us to discover the hidden dog of image A. Can acquaintance with God's coercive presence in Judaism help gentiles discover His non-coercive presence in their own lives? This would seem to require the discovery of relevant structural similarities between the coercive and non-coercive cases, the search for such similarities constitutes yet another line of theological discussion suggested by Gellman's book. Allow me to suggest a biblical precedent: The miraculous stories of the barren matriarchs giving birth primes us to see God's hidden hand behind the action in the Book of Ruth, where human kindness grants Naomi a "son" in her old age. (See: [http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=23358](http://www.jpost.com/landedpages/printarticle.aspx?id=23358) )

Reply:

This is an excellent point. In the book I make Jewish Chosenness only a matter of demonstrating God's love for all of humanity, but I think Beryl is on to something in his alternative proposal. This is well worth developing. The two-picture representation of the idea is spectacular! This question makes me think beyond what I wrote in my book. Thank you.

Luvell Anderson

Jerome Gellman

*God’s Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us: A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People*

In the fourth chapter Gellman lays out the argument for his claim that God chose the Jews upon which to lavish his overwhelming love as a kind of display to the rest of humanity that God desires to love everyone. Rather than compel or woo them, God forces his love on the Jews, commanding them to love back. In contrast, God issues a *call* to non-Jews, “a call that can be accepted or rebuffed (71).”

One question we might raise has to do with the nature of the call. Gellman points out the contrast between his understanding of Jewish chosenness and the historical interpretation of God’s choosing of Jewish people as being indicative of exclusive love towards them, or perhaps God’s greater love for them over others. One worry the latter interpretation raises concerns divisions in racial identity and the notion of hierarchy. If God loves Jews more than others or in an exclusive way that signals a special status, this suggests a subordinated status for non-Jews. It also suggests that God is engaging in divine racism, as William R. Jones points out in his seminal book *Is God a White Racist?* (although, Jones’ target is Christian theology and not Judaism). Does Gellman’s rearticulation of Jewish chosenness escape this worry? What mechanisms in Gellman’s account ensure that God’s choice of the Jews is not mistaken as “due to God’s special love for the Jews (73)?” As Gellman anticipates, an objection to his view is that if God’s purpose in choosing the Jews is meant as a way of displaying his love for humanity as a whole, why is it still largely unknown (74)?

Reply:

These questions are dealt with in other places in my book. My criteria for an acceptable concept of chosenness include these, among others:

It advances a respectful and appreciative attitude, *in principle*, toward other world religions.

It does not imply Jewish superiority or imply a degradation of non-Jews.

If my proposal were to infringe on my criteria then I would disown my proposal rather than revise my criteria. But I do not think my proposal can be interpreted so as to defy my requirements. In particular, my proposal rejects that God loves Jews more than others or in an exclusive way that signals a special status, and I do not allow a subordinated status for non-Jews. God loves all nations the same and selects one nation to picture God’s love for all humanity. This one nation experiences God’s overwhelming love so that God can signal his equal love to all while allowing them to come to God in freedom and joy. My theology tries to explain why God should choose *any* nation, whether the Jews or the Hittites. There is no reason in sight why it was the Jews in particular. No Jewish superiority explains why the Jews were chosen in the first place.

Luvell Anderson

What mechanisms in Gellman’s account ensure that God’s choice of the Jews is not mistaken as “due to God’s special love for the Jews?” As Gellman anticipates, an objection to his view is that if God’s purpose in choosing the Jews is meant as a way of displaying his love for humanity as a whole, why is it still largely unknown?

Reply:

What I am proposing is not to look back at history to claim that what I am proposing was the understanding then. It is not. Rather, I believe that a new story has to be told now, acknowledging that the old story was fit to the times and to human capacities at the time. Divine accommodation made that possible. People did not know that God was choosing one nation to show God’s love for all to preserve everybody else’s freedom. The conception was a different one. People were not ready for a new understanding.

I am not proposing merely to read the Bible and to offer my theology when one happens to ask whether the idea of chosenness is not racist. Now a new story is to be told from the start, a story telling of God’s purpose in choosing one nation. This is a story to disseminate loudly and clearly. It is to be told alongside the Bible. It is to inform adjustments in Jewish liturgy, as I argue in a later chapter of my book.

My proposal is not a dogma. Perhaps someone will come up with a better idea than mine to fulfill my criteria. If that were to happen I would embrace it.