



Chosenness

By Steve Greenberg

I have always felt quite marked as a Jew during the Christmas season. This is the time when the difference between the two side-by-side faiths is most present to me. It is hard not to be pulled into the festive spirit and it is harder yet not to resent it. As a child, I learned by osmosis that Christmas carols were verboten. When I sang in my high school choir, I first avoided the "C" word and then the "J" word and then, finally, I refused altogether to sing Christmas carols. Chanukah songs were no consolation because the exclusion from Christmas was the overwhelming point for me. Christmas in America, with all its red and green and glitter and its grand wishes for peace on earth and good will toward men, has from the beginning been a time of Jewish nervousness.

Historically, Christmas is the time of year when the mutual rejection of each faith by the other burns brightest. Easter has an even more sinister history of European anti-Semitism, but in America it is Christmas that really marks the Jew as an outsider. Perhaps I am overly theological, but I have always sensed that beneath the songs and decorations a quiet battle still rages over who indeed is God's chosen people, the elder or the younger. That's why it felt, and still feels, like treason for me to sing those songs. Even when it is genteel, a deep sibling rivalry simmers.

Apropos of all this, the lunch conversation on a recent Shabbat drifted to the story of Joseph and his brothers. Together we considered what the brothers' hatred of Joseph was all about. Was it simply a matter of their jealousy in the face of their father's special dotting on Joseph? Was it the coat that pushed them over the edge? Was it Joseph's narcissistic behavior, his egotistic dreams? Or was it something deeper, a motif that recurs over and over again in the stories of *Genesis*, a motif that goes to the very roots of the Abrahamic covenant? Abraham had two sons -- one was rejected and the other chosen. Isaac also had two sons -- one was rejected, the other was chosen. The pattern whereby the election of one son is made to depend upon the rejection of the others recurs again and again. Knowing the contours of this oft repeated family plot, it would hardly be surprising if Joseph's brothers believed they were engaged in a competitive contest from which would emerge a single winner. If so, it would be fair for them to assume that "the chosen one" would ultimately cut them out of the story just as Ishmael and Esau had been cut out.

Despite the fact that God's choosing of one son over another is what moves the plot, the Joseph narratives give evidence of the spiritual and moral dangers inherent in the idea. The winnowing of Abraham's seed, by choosing one son

and rejecting the other, may serve to build the covenantal family, but it potentially undermines it as well.

Paradoxically, the dramatic vehicle that solidifies group identity by negating "others" turns back upon itself and threatens to splinter the very group that it is supposed to maintain. Social theorists have suggested that the legacies of oppression are often maintained by the practice of "othering." Othering is a way of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of an "other." Whatever the markers of social differentiation that shape the meaning of "us" and "them," whether they are racial, geographic, ethnic, economic or ideological, there is always the danger that they will become the basis for a self-affirmation that depends upon the denigration of the other group. When a group claims to be "chosen by God," the danger multiplies, not only for the "unchosen" other who may be subjected to violence, but for the chosen group itself that is at risk of being undermined. The chosen ones of God may be torn apart when the zealous persecution of the faithless outsider turns inward to become the zealous persecution of the faithless insider. Jews, Christians and Moslems all have a history of intolerance that extends from without to within.

Given this picture, the dynamic of covenantal inclusion/exclusion that plays out in the Book of *Genesis* looks like the heart of the problem. And yet, at the same time, the Joseph story can be read as critiquing the very tradition of inclusion/exclusion that, on the surface, it seems to repeat. The text makes quite explicit the dynamic whereby one son is chosen over the others. But it also brings us face to face with the negative consequences of this dynamic as the family is torn apart by a combination of Jacob's favoritism, Joseph's narcissism and his brothers' murderous resentment and jealousy. Can more dramatic testimony to the dangers of chosenness be imagined?

And yet in the course of the Joseph story a counter-lesson emerges, a lesson that does not repudiate the idea of chosenness, but emphasizes instead that the chosen are elected by God for a purpose, that they are chosen not for their own sake but for the sake of serving others. Had Joseph grasped this lesson from the beginning, he would not have interpreted the signs of his election in as narcissistic and grandiose a fashion as he does and would not have lorded it over his brothers. Proving that pride goes before the fall, Joseph's narcissism brings him to grief and he finds himself sold into Egypt as a slave by his brothers.

As a slave in Egypt, however, Joseph comes to understand chosenness in a new way and learns the real meaning of God's promise to his great-grandfather Abraham, that "through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." In short, he comes to learn that chosenness is about service to others and his grasp of this lesson carries him to leadership in the dungeons of Pharaoh, and then to the office of vizier of Egypt. Knowing himself to be chosen and finally understanding what being chosen means, Joseph is emboldened and empowered to act decisively to save the Egyptians from famine. This he understood to be God's will, this he understood to be God's reason for choosing

and elevating him. God did not want him to convert the Egyptians to the God of Israel. Nor was he elected to demonstrate Israelite cultural superiority to the pagans or to urge Israel's moral values upon the Egyptians. He was chosen to feed people and this he did. Chosenness, once properly understood, motivates and assures, and empowers us to act decisively for the greater good. The awareness of being chosen provides the confidence that can make all the difference in one's ability to make a difference. It is not an end in itself, but a resource for good.

Late in the Joseph story, at the moment when his father Jacob is about to die, Joseph brings his sons to Jacob to receive his blessing. When Joseph stands with his two young sons before his father Jacob, and sees Jacob placing his right hand on the head of the younger and his left upon the head of the older, he protests that his father seems, yet again, to be subtly favoring the younger over the older. Jacob calms him, explaining that his blessing goes equally to both children. Joseph uncomfortably relents.

On Friday nights we bless our children with the blessings of our ancestors. Daughters are blessed with the names of the mothers, "May you be like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah," but sons are blessed with "May you be like Ephraim and Menashe." Why don't we bless our sons with the names of the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Perhaps because the joint blessing of the two sons Ephraim and Menashe recalls Jacob's equal blessing to both and represents our hope that the chosen family will never again be torn apart by arrogance on the one side and envy on the other. As Ephraim and Menashe were liberated from the competitive struggle for their parents' love, or for God's exclusive blessing, may we be so liberated that we can instead work together, sharing our respective gifts for the common good. Joseph calls upon us all to learn that each of us in our uniqueness is individually chosen by God, and to be strengthened by this knowledge to act and to serve.