

What is G-d's relationship with non-Jewish nations?

Some years ago, at a General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, a prominent rabbi made the following argument. He claimed that a full appreciation of the Divine Form present in each human being led inevitably to the conclusion that each human being has infinite value; that accordingly each human being was equally valuable; that accordingly the Jews could not have a relationship with G-d necessarily deeper than those of other nations; and concluded that other nations must have at least the opportunity of entering into a covenantal relationship with the G-d in Whom we Jews believe. In other words, his answer to the question we discuss today is that we cannot know, but must be open to the possibility that G-d's relationship with non-Jewish nations is covenantal in the same way that it is with Jews.

This answer removes the taint of chauvinism from our claim of "chosenness" by conceding that any and all other nations may be equally "chosen". It restrains our judgementalism by admitting that other moral codes may be based on Divine revelations to which we have not had access. Its focus on the Divine Form in all human beings is an excellent prescription for improving interpersonal behavior. In short, this argument has so much to recommend it that I think it worthwhile to organize this essay around my difficulties with it.

My immediate public response to this emotionally powerful theological manifesto was hyperintellectual. I pointed out that the argument rested on the premise that all infinities are equal, a premise certainly not universally accepted by mathematicians. Perhaps, I said, all human beings are of infinite value, but Jews are of more infinite value, infinite value plus.

This technical argument, however, was only the outward expression of a deep uncertainty as to whether it was possible to construct an authentic and convincing Jewish theology which did not privilege our "chosenness". This uncertainty centered on the Mishnah (Avot 3:14) stating that "Humanity is dear (to G-d) because it was created in the Divine Form . . . Israel is dear in that they are called "children of G-d"". Perhaps G-d has many children, but that doesn't seem to be the point of the Mishnah, and this Mishnah seems to me among the more universalist statements in the rabbinic canon.

But I'm not aware of any convincing evidence of Jewish spiritual superiority, and I understand and fear the very real possibility that defining "chosenness" as implying such will lead to the "chosen" treating the Gentile as having considerably less than infinite value. Indeed, I believe that there is, unfortunately, much convincing contemporary evidence of that progression specifically within the observant Jewish community.

Perhaps a passageway through this philosophic thicket can be found by questioning a different assumption of the argument. Perhaps a belief in the infinite, and accordingly equal, value of each human individual does not lead inexorably to the conclusion that each national group has, at least potentially, the same relationship with G-d as the Jews.

Let me offer here a skeletal suggestion, in the hope that it will be fleshed out in conversation with you and among you. The Jewish nation was forged, uniquely, in responsibility. We did not achieve our covenant with G-d; we were created by it. As such, the possessor of Jewish identity bears a greater responsibility than a non-Jewish individual, all other things being equal. Non-Jewish individuals can, of course, shoulder the same responsibility via conversion. Greater responsibility does not change intrinsic worth, but it legitimately entitles one to a closer relationship with the Giver of Responsibility.

I think it worthwhile to translate here a section of the commentary of R. Yaakov Kaminetsky zt"l, late Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Torah Vodaath and member of the Council of Torah Sages of Agudath Yisroel, to Mishnah Avot 1:11.

"Incidentally, we see from this mishnah an important principle of Jewish thought. Even though Shemayah and Avtalyon were converts, they were able to reach offices as high as Head of the Sanhedrin and President, the pinnacles of national leadership. This was because our perspective is that all human beings are created in the Divine Form, and all of them are dear to G-d, but that Children of Israel – who accepted upon themselves the Torah of G-d and His Commandments – have a unique closeness with G-d. Therefore, if an individual non-Jew comes and accepts upon himself or herself the observance of the Torah, he or she is a full Jew and becomes part of the chosen nation.

Here is contained the response to those who claim that the Jewish religion is a racist religion, Heaven forbid. They claim that when we say "You have chosen us from among all the nations" it seems that we are exalting ourselves above the other nations of the world, as if we were uniquely good. But the truth is certainly the opposite, because they believe that a person cannot join their nation if he was born into another nation – as the Germans claimed to be the best race – but we believe that our chosenness stems solely from our being subject to additional commandments, and anyone who accepts

upon himself or herself the Yoke of Heaven is absolutely able to join our nation and is called by the name of Israel.”

Two concluding points:

- 1) I am ambivalent as to the metaphysical reality of other nations, such that G-d can be said to relate to them covenantally as nations. Do we really believe that American citizenship does, or should, change one's relationship with and responsibilities to G-d, and that these responsibilities are imposed uniformly on all Americans? By what standards would someone be defined as an American? Certainly I would not claim that Americans, or any other non-Jewish group, are bound by the laws of a specific religion, and I think a “covenantal” relationship without specific and concretized ramifications would not be equivalent to ours.
Nonetheless, I concede that the Torah devotes much time to the ethnic taxonomy of nations and has specific laws with regard to how Jews should treat specific nations and their constituent members, and that many of the literary prophets delivered speeches about and to non-Jewish nations qua nations. And while the Talmud records and endorses R. Yehoshua's contention that those laws have no contemporary applicability because Sennecharib's resettlement policy “confused the world” and made us unable to identify any individual or group as the legal descendants of the nations discussed by the Torah, it also admits that Jeremiah's as-yet-unfulfilled prediction that G-d would restore the nation of Amon implies that Amon, at least, has an ongoing national relationship with G-d.
- 2) I noted at the outset that conceding the possibility that G-d has equivalent covenantal relationships with non-Jewish nations has the advantage of restraining judgementalism. This is a far from unalloyed good – restrained judgementalism tends to degenerate fairly rapidly into relativism. Traditional Judaism would at least set conformity with the Seven Noachide Commandments as the test of legitimacy for non-Jewish religions, and having our Revelation and Tradition establish the standard by which others are judged is in and of itself privileging.
Shabbat Shalom!