

Dear Rabbi Fried,

Our literature is filled with the notion that we are the “Chosen People”. Although I’m not sure what exactly that connotes, one thing I do know, is that it smacks of racism, that we’re better than everyone else. How can we continue, in this day and age, to promulgate a concept that flies in the face of the Western ideal that all people are equal?
Clyde W.

Dear Clyde,

In order for the concept of the Chosen People to be racist, claiming we are racially superior, we would need to be a race. We certainly could not claim to be racially superior, since every possible race is counted among our ranks. There are Asians, Europeans, Scandinavians, Ethiopians, Caucasians, Blacks and Orientals who are all part of the Jewish nation. Jews cannot be defined as a monolithic race, as our people are as diverse as all of mankind!

While the term Chosen People does not connote racial superiority, it does imply a uniqueness belonging to the Jewish People. This uniqueness is defined by the Torah by our unique relationship with the Almighty. “...for you are a holy nation unto the Lord your G-d, the Lord your G-d has chosen you to be a treasured nation from all the other nations upon the face of the earth. Not because you are greater than all the nations G-d desired you and chose you, for you are the smallest of the nations. Rather because of G-d’s love for you..., and you should keep the mitzvah, the statutes and the laws that I have commanded to you today to fulfill them.” (Devarim/ Deut. 7: 6-11).

The unique love relationship G-d has with the Jewish people was earned by their voluntary acceptance of fulfilling G-d’s will in the world, and spreading the knowledge of G-d to the nations. This mission dubs us a “light among the nations”.

Was this privilege unfairly bestowed upon us? Not if the opportunity to accept the special mission and merit the ensuing privileges was offered to the other nations as well. The Torah tells us that the Almighty offered the Torah to the other nations of the world before he offered it to us, and they turned it down as they felt it entailed too much. (See Rashi to Devarim 33:2 and Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 14:10).

Privileges do not necessarily imply favoritism or discrimination. If a privilege is offered to anyone who is willing to pay the necessary price, no one can claim it was granted unfairly. A child who refuses to brush his teeth and keep to his bedtime can hardly claim that his siblings who did so are racist or arrogant to accept the prize offered by their parents for the children who follow the rules. Nor are the parents considered unjust or preferential in their treatment, since each child was given equal opportunity.

When all the nations rejected the offer to receive the Torah, and the Jews accepted, they assumed the role of ambassadors of G-d to the world. Also, to receive the Torah and all that massive spiritual energy compressed within it, they Jews were endowed with and expansion of their souls to become receptacles for all that holiness and G-dly energy. Anyone born Jewish, or properly converts and becomes Jewish, receives a “Jewish soul” which is that expanded soul – custom made to receive and understand Torah, and to radiate the light within it to the nations as a member of the “light among the nations”. This privilege comes with 613 categories of obligations, and only when those obligations are fulfilled does the Jewish soul radiate that light to the nations of the world. When they are not fulfilled, we suffer the consequences and that light is greatly dimmed.

This is far from a racist concept, rather a system of acceptance, obligations and their attendant privileges. May we all merit to be worthy ambassadors and to radiate our mission brightly throughout the world!