



# How one word can make a difference in a blessing

**FOR MANY** years, I have been reciting a newish blessing before the reading from the Torah when I am called up for an aliyah (a moment when a Jew is invited to say a blessing before the reading of a portion of the Torah in the synagogue). The original version states: “Praised are You, our God, King of the universe, for having chosen us from all the other peoples of the world.” The blessing that I say substitutes the word “with” for the word “from”. Accordingly, the blessing that I say is “Praised are You, our God, King of the universe, for having chosen us along with all the other peoples of the world.” (I don’t know the origin of this blessing, but I am told it is probably from the Reconstructionist Movement.)



RECONSTRUCTIONIST RABBI DEBORAH WAXMAN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Rabbi Deborah Waxman: Rejecting the idea of the Chosen People is one of the most important developments of this movement.

Why have I adopted this change? What do I mean when I say this blessing, as opposed to the traditional one recited by most Jews?

Firstly, let me explain why I reject the traditional blessing.

I don’t believe that we Jews are the Chosen People. I reject the idea of Jewish supremacy. I don’t think that we are better than all the other peoples on this

earth in any way – not morally, not religiously, not intellectually.

On the contrary, I believe that all peoples on this earth are – or should be – blessed with the same rights and responsibilities towards their fellow human beings and to the earth. All human beings are created in the image of God, as we have learned from Genesis. No one’s human blood is holier than any other human being’s blood.

I am not the first rabbi to reject the idea of Jewish chosenness. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement in America, negated it a long time ago. In October 1945, he said at a conference of the Reconstructionist Movement:

*The Jewish state, which was once thought to be a ‘light unto the nations’ and which was established to free Jews from antisemitism, has now become one of the main sources of antisemitism in the world*

in the divine scheme of salvation. As such it neither is nor can be any longer accepted by modern-minded Jews.”

According to Rabbi Deborah Waxman, president and CEO of Reconstructing Judaism (the new name for the Reconstructionist movement in Judaism), rejecting the idea of the Chosen People is one of the most important developments of this movement in the contemporary era:

“Setting aside the concept of the Jews as God’s chosen people is one of the most significant theological choices we should embrace in this post-Sept. 11, postmodern era. The specific reasons for setting aside Jewish chosenness are long and detailed, but can be summarized by these points:

1) The concept of ‘chosenness,’ only hinted at in the Hebrew Bible, was developed during periods of Jewish history when Jews were deeply persecuted and searching for some supernatural explanation for their suffering. Like other practices and beliefs, it need not be retained simply because it once

“The idea of the Chosen People was justifiable religious doctrine in ancient Judaism, but today it is not merely untenable, but also detrimental to a normal adjustment of the Jew to his environment. That idea is warranted, to be sure, in the realm of opinion as an assertion of Judaism’s contribution to the religion of mankind in the past. But it is not as such an opinion that it is included in the traditional Prayer Book. There it is in the realm of dogma and is meant to affirm that the Jewish people have been chosen to occupy forever the central place



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Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement.



The blessing for the aliyah to the Torah in the Reconstructing Judaism prayerbook has set aside the idea of Jewish chosenness for many years: 'Blessed are you... our God... who has drawn us to your service, and has given us your Torah...'

existed in the Jewish canon of beliefs. We no longer believe that God contravenes nature or acts in history. If God is not a person, then who is choosing the Jews?

2) Even if the concept is reinterpreted (e.g., to emphasize that the Jews are choosing to be God's chosen, to assert that being chosen entails a set of responsibilities, or to suggest that other peoples are chosen for their own distinct missions), it still implies a hierarchy and thus lends itself far too quickly to chauvinism and other anti-democratic behavior.

3) In an era that values diversity and multiplicity, in a worldview that asserts universalistic ends even by particularistic means, Reconstructionists conclude that "chosenness" cannot be reconstructed." (January 31, 2025, "The Chosen People, Two Perspectives", Zeek, a Journal of Jewish Thought and Culture)

Accordingly, a new blessing for the aliyah to the Torah has been incorporated in the Reconstructionist prayerbook for a long time:

"Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has drawn us to your service, and has given us your Torah. Blessed are you, Eternal One, who gives the Torah." In addition, other Reconstructionist, Reform and even some Conservative Jews use this new blessing:

*"Praised are You, our God, King of the World, who has bless-*

*ed us along with all the other peoples of the world..."*

Why do I feel that this change is important now, especially as a Jew living in Israel in these turbulent times?

In my view, we have far too much Jewish supremacy in Israeli society (and in Jewish society abroad in recent years), not just theologically, but also politically and socially. The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in the south of Israel and in the Gaza, Strip is a good example of this. So many extreme right-wing supremacist members of the current government in Israel have made it clear in the media in recent months when they have repeatedly said that "our lives are more important than theirs" and that "all Palestinians in Gaza are Hamas and should be killed".

Moreover, the supremacist view of Judaism is also the one that rules the West Bank, where Palestinians have lived under military control known as "occupation" since 1967, whereby they have very few human or civil rights, and are certainly considered lesser human beings by the settlers, especially by the most extremist ones who commit pogroms against them on a regular basis, while the government, of which their representatives are a part, just wink and let it happen.

In addition to all this, I want to add a note, from my perspective as a liberal Jewish humanist Zionist, about why I reject this notion of the Chosen People, the idea that we are better than every other people on this earth, an idea which I believe leads to separation and isolation from the world. I want to be part of the world, not totally separated from it and at odds with most of humanity. I am glad that we are once again part of the family of nations, which implies a moral commitment to care about the world, and not just about ourselves. I don't want us to be "a people who dwells alone"; rath-



er, I want us to be part of the human family, with every other people, ethnic group, and religious group in this world.

The separatists and supremacists are working hard every day to turn Israel into a pariah state, to separate us from most of the nations of the world, by their statements and their actions in Israeli society, and especially in the West Bank and Gaza. If they continue along this path, Israel and the Jews will once again become a hated people in this world. To a large extent, because of their actions, this has already begun to happen in a big way in recent years. What an irony! The Jewish state, which was once thought to be a “light unto the nations” and which was established to free Jews from anti-Semitism, has now become one of the main sources of anti-Semitism in the world, due to the statements of so many of the extreme supremacists in the government of Israel, including the Prime Minister.

Rather than asserting that we are the Chosen People, which is a statement that has gotten the Jews in trouble over many centuries, including this one, I think that we need to find a balance

between our Jewish distinctiveness and our universal commitments. When I praise God for having chosen us “along with” all other peoples in this world, I affirm my dedication to work with all other peoples in making this a better world, a more liveable, ethical and just one.

Yes, one word can make a major difference in our prayers and in our lives sometimes. Indeed, it can become a central part of one’s identity. ■



‘And Elohim Created Adam,’ by William Blake, c. 1795-1805.

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Palestinians walk near the Qalandia checkpoint on their way to the Aqsa Mosque compound.

MOHAMAD TOROKMAN/REUTERS



DENIS BALIBOUSE/REUTERS

The flag alley at the UN European headquarters in Geneva. ‘I want to be part of the world, not totally separated from it.’