

## The Chosen People? A survey of chosenness in Jewish sources

*How odd  
Of God  
To choose  
The Jews.*

British journalist W. N. Ewer

*Not odd  
Of God;  
Goyim  
Annoy'im.*

American humorist and Yiddishist Leo Rosten

### A - Liturgy

#### 1. Brachot 11b

אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים וְנָתַן לָנוּ אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ Who chose us from all of the peoples and gave us His Torah.

#### 2. Psukei d'Zimra

אַתָּה הוּא יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר בָּחַרְתָּ בְּאַבְרָם וְהוֹצֵאתָ מֵאוּר כַּסְדִּים וְשִׁמְתָה שְׁמוֹ אַבְרָהָם You are Hashem, the God Who chose Avram, and brought him out of Ur Kasdim and established his name (as) Avraham.

#### 3. Aleinu

שְׁלֵא עָשָׂנוּ כְּגוֹיֵי הָאֲרָצוֹת. וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ כְּמִשְׁפָּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה. שְׁלֵא שָׁם חִלְקֵנוּ כְּהֵם וְגוֹרְלָנוּ כְּכֹל הַמוֹנִם: שְׁהֵם מִשְׁתַּחֲוִיִּים לְהַבֵּל וְרִיק וּמִתְפַּלְלִים אֶל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ: God made our lot unlike that of other people, assigning to us a unique destiny. (For they worship vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who cannot save.)

**4. Ahava rabba - 2nd bracha  
before the Shema**

ברוך אתה ה', הבורח בעמו ישראל באהבה: Blessed are You, Lord, who chooses His people, Israel, with love.

**5. Shabbat kiddush**

כי בָּנוּ בְּחֵרָתְךָ וְאוֹתָנוּ קִדְּשָׁתָּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים, וְשַׁבַּת קִדְּשָׁךְ  
בְּאַהֲבָה וּבְרַצוֹן הִנְחַלְתָּנוּ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, מְקַדֵּשׁ  
הַשַּׁבָּת. For you have chosen us and sanctified us out of all the nations, and have given us the Sabbath as an inheritance in love and favour. Praised are you, Lord, who hallows the Sabbath

**6. Shabbat / Festival Amida**

וְלֹא נָתַתָּהּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְגוֹיֵי הָאָרְצוֹת. וְלֹא הִנְחַלְתָּנוּ  
מִלְּכָנוּ לְעוֹבְדֵי פְסִילִים. וְגַם בְּמִנוּחֵתָנוּ לֹא יִשְׁכְּנוּ עַרְלִים.  
כִּי לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עָמְדָה נְתַתָּהּ בְּאַהֲבָה. לְזָרַע יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר בָּם  
בְּחֵרָתְךָ

You did not give the Sabbath to other nations of the earth nor did You bestow it on the idolaters; the pagans may not rest on the Sabbath. But to Israel, Your people, You have given it in love, to the seed of Jacob whom You did choose  
.....

אַתָּה בְּחַרְתָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֶהְבַּתָּ אוֹתָנוּ וְרָצִיתָ בָּנוּ  
וְרִמַּמְתָּנוּ מִכָּל הַלְשׁוֹנוֹת וְקִדְּשָׁתָנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ וְקִרְבַּתָּנוּ  
מִלְּכָנוּ לְעַבֹדְתֶךָ

You have chosen us from all the nations, loving us and taking pleasure in us; You exalted our language above all others and sanctified us with Your commandments and brought us near, our King, to Your service ...

**7. Havdallah**

אשר בחר בנו ליחד את שמו וקרבתנו לעבודתו Who chose us in order to single out God's name, and brought us close to God's service.

**8. 2020 Reform Siddur of Israel**

אשר בחר בנו ליחד את שמו וקרבתנו לעבודתו Who chose us in order to single out God's name, and brought us close to God's service.

B - Torah

9. Shemot 4:22

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּנִי בְכֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says יהוה: Israel is My first-born son.

10. Shemot 19:5

וְעַתָּה אִם שְׂמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת  
בְּרִיתִי וְהֵייתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָל  
הָאָרֶץ. וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלַכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ  
Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be my **treasure** among all the peoples; for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be unto Me a **kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.**

11. Devarim 14:2

כִּי עִם קְדוֹשׁ אַתָּה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּבְךָ בָחַר יְהוָה  
לִהְיוֹת לוֹ לְעַם סִגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי  
הָאֲדָמָה  
For you are a people consecrated to your God יהוה: your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be a treasured people..

C - Nach

12. Nechemia 9:7

אַתָּה־הוּא יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר בָּחַרְתָּ בְּאַבְרָם  
וְהוֹצֵאתוֹ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים וְשִׁמְתָּ שְׁמוֹ אַבְרָהָם.  
You are the LORD God, who chose Abram, who brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and changed his name to Abraham

13. Malachi 3:17

וְהָיוּ לִי אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת לַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה  
סִגְלָה וְחִמְלָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם כְּאִשֶׁר יַחְמַל אִישׁ עַל בְּנוֹ  
הָעֹבֵד אֹתוֹ  
And on the day that I am preparing, said YHWH of Hosts, they shall be my **treasure**; I will be tender toward them as a man is tender toward a son who ministers to him.

14. Psalm 135:4

כִּי יַעֲקֹב בָּחַר לוֹ יְהוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְסֻגְלֹתָיו

For Hashem has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel as his treasure.

15. Isaiah 42:5-8

(ה) כֹּה־אָמַר הָאֱלֹהִים ה' בִּנְרָא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנוֹטִיָּהֶם  
רָקַע הָאָרֶץ וַיַּצְאֶצְאֶיהָ נָתַן נְשִׁמָּה לָעַם עָלֶיהָ וְרוּחַ  
לְהִלְכִים בָּהּ: (ו) אֲנִי ה' קָרָאתִיךָ בְצַדִּיק וְאֶחְזַק  
בְּיָדְךָ וְאֶצְרָךְ וְאֶתְנַן לְבְרִית עִם לְאוּר גּוֹיִם: (ז)  
לְפָקֹחַ עֵינַיִם עֲוֹרוֹת לְהוֹצִיא מִמִּסְגָּר אֲסִיר מִבַּיִת  
כִּלְא יִשְׁבִּי חֹשֶׁה: (ח) אֲנִי ה' הוּא שְׁמִי וְכַבֹּדִי  
לֹא־אֶחָר לְאֲחֵר וְיִתְהַלְתִּי לְפָסִילִים:

Thus said God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and what it brings forth, Who gave breath to the people upon it And life to those who walk thereon: **I the LORD, in My grace, have summoned you, And I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you A covenant people, a light of nations—** Opening eyes deprived of light, Rescuing prisoners from confinement, From the dungeon those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not yield My glory to another...

16. Jeremiah 3:1

(א) לֹא־אֶמַר הֵן יִשְׁלַח אִישׁ אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהִלְכָה מֵאִתּוֹ  
וְהִיְתָה לְאִישׁ־אֲחֵר הֲיָשׁוּב אֵלָיָה עוֹד הֲלוֹא חֲנוּף תִּחַנַּף  
הָאָרֶץ הַהִיא וְאֵת זְנִית רַעִים רַבִּים וְשׁוֹב אֵלַי  
נֹאֵם־יְהוָה:

(1) [The word of the LORD came to me] as follows: If a man divorces his wife, and she leaves him and marries another man, can he ever go back to her? Would not such a land be defiled? Now you have whored with many lovers: can you return to Me?—says the LORD.

17. Joshua 24:22

(כב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל־הָעָם עֵדִים אַתֶּם בְּכֶם כִּי־אַתֶּם  
בְּחַרְתֶּם לָכֶם אֶת־יְהוָה לְעַבְדְּ אוֹתוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֵדִים:

And Yehoshua said to the people, You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.

18. Micah

וְהָיָה אִי בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים יְהִי־הָרַב־בֵּית־יְהוָה נֶכֶן בְּרֹאשׁ  
הַהָרִים וְנִשָּׂא הוּא מִגְּבֻעוֹת וְנִהְרֹו עָלָיו עַמִּים: וְהָלְכוּ  
גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לְכוּ אִי וְנִעְלָה אֶל־הַר־יְהוָה וְאֶל־בֵּית  
אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיִּרְגְּבוּ מִדְרָכָיו וְנִלְכְּהוּ בְּאַרְחֻתָיו כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן  
תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וְדִבְרֵי־יְהוָה מִירוּשָׁלַם: וְשָׁפֹט בֵּין עַמִּים  
רַבִּים וְהוֹכִיחַ לְגוֹיִם עֲצָמִים עַד־רָחוֹק וְכַתְּבוּ חֲרֻבְתֵיהֶם  
לְאַתָּים וְחִנִּיתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמֹרוֹת לֹא־יִשְׂאֹו גּוֹי אֶל־גּוֹי  
חֶרֶב וְלֹא־יִלְמְדוּן עוֹד מִלְחָמָה: וַיִּשְׁבּוּ אִישׁ תַּחַת גִּפְנוֹ  
וְתַחַת תְּאֵנָתוֹ וְאִין מִחְרִיד כִּי־פִי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת דִּבֶּר: כִּי  
כָל־הָעַמִּים יִלְכוּ אִישׁ בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהָיו וְאַנְחֲנוּ נִלְהֶ  
בְּשֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

In the days to come, The Mount of the LORD's House shall stand Firm above the mountains; And it shall tower above the hills. The peoples shall gaze on it with joy, And the many nations shall go and shall say: "Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the LORD, To the House of the God of Jacob; That He may instruct us in His ways, And that we may walk in His paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, The word of the LORD from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the many peoples, And arbitrate for the multitude of nations, However distant; And they shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up Sword against nation; They shall never again know war; But every man shall sit Under his grapevine or fig tree With no one to disturb him. For it was the LORD of Hosts who spoke. Though all the peoples walk Each in the names of its gods, We will walk In the name of the LORD our God Forever and ever.

19. Amos 9:7

הֲלוֹא כַבְּנֵי כִשְׁיִים אַתֶּם לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם־יְהוָה  
הֲלוֹא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל הֶעֱלִיתִי מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם  
וּפְלִשְׁתִּיִים מִכַּפְתּוֹר וְאַרְם מִקִּיר

To Me, O Israelites, you are  
Just like the Cushites  
—declares the LORD.  
True, I brought Israel up  
From the land of Egypt,  
But also the Philistines from Caphtor  
And the Arameans from Kir.

## D - Rabbinic Judaism

**20. Sforno** on "A Kingdom of Priests" - to the entire human race, so that they may call in the name of God, to serve him together.

**21. Radak's commentary on Isaiah 42**

<p><b>לברית עם לקיום כל עם ועם כי בעבורך מתקיים כל העולם וכל ברית הוא ענין קיום וכן תהיה גם כן לאור גוים כמו שאמר והלכו גוים לאורך והאור הוא התורה שתצא להם מצוין, וישראל יהיו קיום האומות... כי בסבת ישראל יהיו הגוים שומרים שבע מצות וילכו בדרך טובה ...</b></p>	<p><b>A covenant People</b> to maintain all the nations. For the whole world is maintained on your behalf. And every covenant is related to maintenance. And thus you shall also be "a light to the nations" as it says, "And nations shall walk in your light"(Isaiah 60:3). And the light is the Torah that will come out of Zion for them. ... because of Israel, the nations will keep the seven mitzvot and they will do good...</p>
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**22. Tanhuma Vayera**

Why is Israel called God's people? Because of the Torah. Rabbi Jose ben Simon said: "Before you stood at Sinai and accepted My Torah you were called 'Israel' as all the other nations are called by specific names ... But after you accepted My Torah at Sinai you were called 'My People.'"

## E - Kabbalistic Judaism

**23. Zohar**

Creatures that have a "soul"-- that pertains to the Jews, for they are the Children of God, and from God came their holy souls....And the souls of other nations, from where do they come? Rabbi Elazar says that they have souls from the impure left side, and therefore, they are all impure, defiling anyone who comes near them.

**24. Tanya Ch. 1**

The souls of the nations of the world, however, emanate from the other, unclean kelipot which contain no good whatsoever.

**25. Lou Silberman, Encyclopaedia Judaica**

"The more extreme, and exclusive, interpretations of the doctrine of election among Jewish thinkers, were partly the result of reaction to oppression by the non-Jewish world. The more the Jew was forced to close in on himself, to withdraw into the imposed confines of the ghetto, the more he tended to emphasise Israel's difference from the cruel gentile without. Only thus did his suffering become intelligible and bearable. This type of interpretation reaches its height in the Kabbalistic idea that while the souls of Israel stem from God, the souls of gentiles are merely of base material."

F - Modern takes

**26. Rabbi John Rayner, 1981**

Many people respond negatively to the concept of the 'Chosen People:' "Antisemites see in it a typical example of our insufferable arrogance. Gentiles who are friendly to us feel excluded by it. And Jews often find it positively embarrassing.

**27. The Transvaluation of Values (1898), Ahad Ha'am**

It is almost universally admitted that the Jews have a genius for morality, and in this respect are superior to all other nations. It matters not how this happened, or in what way this trait developed: we certainly find that in the very earliest times the Jewish people became conscious of its superiority in this respect over the surrounding nations.

**28. Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), founder of the Reconstructionist Movement**

The idea of Israel as the Chosen People must... be understood as belonging to a thought world which we no longer inhabit... Nowadays for any people to call itself "chosen" is to be guilty of self-infatuation.

**29. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan on Chosenness, Oct. 14, 1945**

"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."

"The idea of race or national superiority exercises divisive influences generating suspicion and hatred...we cannot assume that Israel must at all times possess that spirit to a higher degree than other people." "Thank God I had had the courage to go through with the excision of such a cancerous growth from the Jewish consciousness ..."

### **30. Hannah Arendt**

Those Jews who no longer believe in their God in a traditional way but continue to consider themselves “chosen” in some fashion or other, can mean by it nothing other than that by nature they are better or wiser or more rebellious or salt of the earth. And that would be, twist and turn it as you like, nothing other than a version of racist superstition.

### **31. Comfort and discomfort continue alongside one another**

Some philosophers, such as Mordecai Kaplan and Judith Plaskow, reject a hierarchical and supernatural notion they cannot support, and search for alternative models. Others, such as Jon Levenson, Will Herberg and Michael Wyschogrod, remain comfortable with a God who loves and demands a particular people (as well as all peoples), and insist that any future of dignity and honesty between peoples demands embracing our particular embodied identities.

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/israel-gods-chosen-people>

### **32. Abraham Joshua Heschel**

"We have not chosen God; He has chosen us. There is no concept of a chosen God but there is the idea of a chosen people. The idea of a chosen people does not suggest the preference for a people based upon a discrimination among a number of peoples. We do not say that we are superior people. The "chosen people" means a people approached and chosen by God. The significance of this term is genuine in relation to God rather than in relation to other peoples. It signifies not a quality inherent in the people but a relationship between the people and God."

### **33. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - Faith Lectures: Jewish Identity: The Concept of a Chosen People**

And, finally – my final question: why on earth did He choose us? Do you want the real answer? I'll tell you. When God chose the Jewish people, He was not opting for a quiet life. However, you want another, more philosophical explanation. Here it is. You will find it in my book Radical Then, Radical Now. Here it is. I am absolutely serious. I'll tell you. God chooses those whom the world rejects. That is why He chose us.

In the ancient world, power and position went to the firstborn. That is why God always chooses the younger rather than the elder. Cain instead of Abel. Isaac instead of Ishmael. Jacob instead of Esau. Moses instead of Aaron. David instead of all his brothers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qkrPPC9Ojw>

### **34. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Dignity of Difference (Chapter 3, 2002)**

God the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different, teaching humanity to make space for difference. God may at times

be found in human other, the one not like us. Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one gateway to God's presence. On the contrary, it is the idea that the unity of God is to be found in the diversity of creation."

**35. Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal**

To be sure, election tempts a people to arrogance. If God has singled out one person or nation as special, as beloved, as chosen, there is a natural tendency to feel superior, to laud it over others, to assume one can do no wrong, and to conclude that if Israel is chosen others are rejected. Evidently, some Israelites and Judeans were afflicted with this hubris....

As long as violence, bloodshed, racism, bigotry, exploitation, wars and all the other man-made ills of society continue to afflict us, we are unfulfilled and unredeemed. There is yet much to be done. There is a teleology to our election: we must become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," a people created in the image of the Divine.

**36. R. Samson Refael Hirsch, The Nineteen Letters, pg 65**

If, however, in the midst of a world which worships wealth and lust, Israel were to live a tranquil life of righteousness and love; if, while everywhere else the generation of man is sinking into the depth of sensuality and immorality, Israel's sons and daughters should bloom forth in the splendor of youth, purity and innocence, ah, what a powerful instrument for good Israel could be! If...every Jew would be a mutely eloquent example and teacher of universal righteousness and universal love; if thus the dispersed of Israel were to show themselves everywhere on earth as the glorious priests of God and pure humanity; if only we were, or would become that which we should be, if only our lives were a perfect reflection of our Law - what a mighty force we would constitute for steering mankind to the final goal of all human education! This would affect man-kind more quietly, but much more forcefully and profoundly than ever our tragic record of suffering...

**Further reading:**

A Letter Exchange between Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi: "It is essential that all Jews understand their role as a chosen people, chosen to create and sustain Israel in all its struggles and in all its strivings" and Aryeh Bernstein: "The association of chosenness with superiority reflects the faulty assumption that what I know is all there is to be known, that I can testify to our chosenness because I remember Sinai..."

<http://shma.com/rachel-sabath-beit-halachmi/>