

In the Body of the Beholder The Politics of Religion

Dorit Cypis
2003

To understand perceptions of a religion we must also understand the politics of perception. Believers of a monotheistic religion claim an authentic source to their faith, i.e. that the sacred scriptures of Torah, New Testament and Qur'an were divinely transmitted to Abraham, Jesus and Mohammad respectively. Throughout history this claim has also been accompanied by a twin claim to absolute "truth" leading to absolute "order". Yet when we look to decipher how the meanings of these original texts are perceived by the splintered populations within and between each of the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we find a plethora of truths, a plethora of orders. Herein lies the source of many disputes, between friends, between strangers and between nations.

What does authentic mean when each "believer" has their authentic perception of the original? We each experience anew, no matter who experienced it first. Authenticity is in the body of the beholder. Augsburg, writing in his Conflict Mediation Across Cultures, 1992, introduces the term "interpathically":

"to perceive and experience another's cultural content and context from within while coming from without."

If the original is always made new through experience, how can we then assume that we understand how a person "believes" by simply knowing which faith they belong to? Faith, which exists even in its absence in the case of a secular person, is relative and conditional on endless cultural, political and personal issues and interests. Where one was born, conditions of birth, era of birth, gender, sexual orientation, family class, education, political orientation, personality disposition i.e. happy, sad, resentful, forgiving, introvert, extrovert, dreamer, pragmatist, active, passive, all points on a continuum, are only some of the nameable variables. And what of the more liminal aspects of fantasy, dream, desire?

Any mix of these variables begins to shape an individual identity, which yet is always in flux, accommodating to and resisting events in the present and variously remembering events of the past. We each exist simultaneously in multiple frames of reference, in multiple realities, forever negotiating collisions and connections between us. Even as we may belong to the same larger cultural group, yet we each simultaneously belong to multiple smaller cultural groups. We might then say that we each are multi-cultural. Each one culturally unique.

"Every individual is, in some respects, like all others, like some others, like no other.

Gluckhohn, Murray, 1948

Michel Foucault, in The Order of Things, 1970, quoted and commented on a passage by Borges, brilliantly exposing an implicit contradiction in the simultaneity of order and disorder:

"In a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing that is demonstrated in the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*."

While we expect that the implied order of *a-b-c-d-e...* will yield us more order, we are perplexed to find a chaos within the order. Same and different. Not what we expected! Interpathically, same and different, we may complete each other, redefine each other, inspire each other, transform each other. You, whom I fear, may be the bearer of my healing.

You, Myself and I

I am an Israeli born Jew, daughter of Holocaust survivors, a Canadian and a American who has had the cultural and psychic space to ponder my Jewish identity in relation to others. My childhood in Israel of the 1950's was embedded in a social context of numbness, neglect and hysteria. The unprocessed emotions of multi national survivors from Europe was a heavy presence all around me. Their emphasis was on saving the "tribe" through construction of the physical, social and political State of Israel. This politic was their "belief". This "belief" was my Jewish identity, frightening, deafening and deeply isolating.

My family emigrated to Montreal, Canada in 1958. I was 7. Cultural differences between us and Canadian Jews were huge, as were the separations which existed between multi lingual Jews, French Catholics and English Protestants. I grew up with a deep sense of otherness, struggling to make sense of that which was different than the me that I knew. Worlds were other than my own, physical, metaphysical, personal and transpersonal, social and political. I learned multiple "orders" and experienced them as disorders. For me, states of contradiction between same and difference was/is my status quo.

It bewilders and astonishes me today that Jews live throughout every continent of the world and converge within the State of Israel. They claim sameness and yet are radical in their differences. In the Israeli elections of 2003 there were no less than 30 political parties represented. James Bennet writes in the New York Times, January 19, 2003:

"Israelis speak Arabic and want to end the occupation. Israelis speak Hebrew and want to legalize marijuana. Israelis speak Russian and yearn to build power plants. Israelis drive taxis and want to pay less child support. ... In the (political) advertisements, music varies from rock and roll to Klesmer tunes, and the production values from slick - Labor commercials are meant to recall "The West Wing" - to something out of "Wayne's World." The fears invoked by the commercials also vary : Will you be able to afford a mortgage? Will your granddaughter marry a Gentile?"

Needless to say, beliefs and mythological understandings of traditional tenets of identity amongst Jews is as diverse and different as night and day. And yet Yoram Peri, chairman of the Chaim Herzog Center for Media, Politics and Society at Tel Aviv University says :

"We have a very divided society (yet) with a very strong emphasis on your identification with your tribe."

Plural worlds, plural realities, all Jews. Same and other. Why then am I left so queasy, so anxious with this seemingly fluid order and disorder? I am haunted by an irresolvable shadow of my past, remembered, yet not my memory. It is as if I am framing memories I never had. What of this political notion of "the land", held to be Israel,

God said to Abraham; "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred and from thy father's house, onto the land that I will show thee." Torah (Old Testament)

Is this then Israel, the contentious land so many Jews profess was promised to them only? Can a "land" be so politicized into possession as to eliminate its necessary shadow, a place which cannot be owned because it is a place, a land, within? And what of this politicized notion of "the Chosen People", a notion I smell yet cannot see, feel yet cannot touch? Politicized to imply the chosen people of this land?

"You only have I chosen among all peoples of the earth, therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquity." Torah (Old Testament)

Yet another frightening implication is discussed by Richard Rubenstein in The Dean and the Chosen People, 1989 :

"As long as Jews are thought of as set apart from humanity by God, they are going to be the object of abnormal demands and hatreds....As long as we continue to hold to the doctrine of the election of Israel, we will leave ourselves open to the theology...that because the Jews are God's Chosen People, God wanted Hitler to punish them."

Is there another interpretation outside of this implied perpetual state of victimhood? What about being "chosen" to choose another way, one where we must negotiate with our own otherness, that which we do not know of ourselves. Interpathically, same and different, we may complete each other, redefine each other, inspire each other, transform each other. You, whom I fear, may be the bearer of my healing.

Me, Myself, and You

Recently, I entered into a dialogue with my friend Don Singer, a Rabbi and Zen Sensei in Los Angeles. He offered me another interpretation on the notion of "the land that I will show you":

God says to man, "First, get thee out of your country, that means the dimness you have inflicted on yourself. Then, out of your birthplace, that means, out of the dimness your mother inflicted on you. After that, out of the house of your father, that means out of the dimness your father inflicted on you. Only then will you be able to go to the land that I will show you."

Rabbi Zuzya, 19th C.

I distributed this quote via email, along with the Torah texts on "the land" and "the Chosen People" to **30** individuals whom I know, friends and family, in the United States and in Israel. **All** Jews. **1** requested from them their personal reflections on these notions. **11** individuals responded. **8** are my peers in age. **6** are born in the United States. **4** are foreign born. **4** are Professors. **4** are visual artist. **3** are writers. **3** are one generation senior. **2** emigrated to Palestine from Poland in 1936. **1** has had

6 passports of different nationalities in her life. 1 is an Art Historian. 1 did not respond but I included a previous comment by her. 1 is a dancer presently studying to become a Rabbi. 1 is a retired Librarian. 1 is a Healer. 1 is a retired Fundraiser for Jewish organizations. 0 responded from Israel. All are current US citizens.

- (a) Two brief anecdotes from my childhood in Greece: My parents always told me they felt conflicted about the "land" and "our land" thing because the Diaspora was our identity. They didn't understand the notion very well.

As for "The chosen", they explained to me that we Jews were God's chosen, but immediately added that this is most embarrassing, and that I must never repeat it in front of Christians, since they already think we are insane!!

- (b) Being a long time student of the Old Testament, I do not accept the interpretation of the text which you have sent. This interpretation insinuates that everything past, country, home, family - is negative and that in order to progress one has to abandon the past. We are the sum of our history and without the past there is no future. Of course there were many bad things in the past, but let us not forget the good ones and not everything that is new makes it good. The Bible stresses all along the importance of heritage. It is up to us as individuals to sift all our experiences and retain whatever is good. Therefore, the addition of the word "Dimness" in this interpretation is purely a slanted point of view and misses the message of the Bible.

As for the term "Chosen People" - if the Jewish people were chosen for anything - it was for suffering through two thousand years. I never accepted this notion. You are what you are by your own personal achievement and not by being "chosen".

- (c) The time of Abraham was a transition time. The culture and the people were locked into rituals, beliefs, morals, ethics that were being broken down. It seems to me that it might have been a time much like our own where the task of the people was to look deeply into themselves. It was also a time of evolvement. We see that in the different names for God in the time of Abraham, from Yahweh and Adonai to Eloheim. Yahweh being the punishing all powerful god that told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and Eloheim the god that said no, do not sacrifice your son and sent a ram to take his place. So, I think that this is about breaking the bonds of the old and looking at the patterns that had been taught by the family and the culture and moving to a new level of consciousness. It has to do with one's personal journey and the opening to one's own spirit and to the supreme or universal consciousness that we have called God.

As for the concept of the chosen people. Many are called, but few are chosen. It is a self selecting process. When one is called it is always an experience that brings up much fear because we are being called to find our way back home. It means a time of introspection, of coming face to face with our dark side as well as our light side and owning what we have created. It is saying yes to our power and being willing to use it. And so few say yes to being chosen. The chosen people does not mean special or better. To me it simply means that one is willing to answer the call to opening themselves spiritually and doing the work to evolve and transform and break free of the bindings and bonds that keep us from both making free choice and taking responsibility for the choices that we do make. It is a step out of the time one is living in to bring in a new wave.

For example, Moses was called by God and even though he was afraid he accepted the challenge. He was the figure that led the people out of bondage and towards becoming free once more. Wandering in the desert for 40 years gave a time for a generation to die out so that a new generation could create a different way of living. The people had a slave mentality and that needed to be broken. Being chosen, or choosing the spiritual path that one takes to once more connect with the essence of our beings is no small task. To create a life that is congruent with our own inner nature rather than what one has been taught is what we are all chosen for. Along the way there are many lessons and pitfalls to overcome. The choice is always ours and what is created then becomes the base line for a new paradigm to live with, until that too becomes crystallized and structured and must be broken down so we can evolve and choose once more.

- (d) The land? It has absolutely nothing to do with religion. God wanted the young people to become independent and to leave the house of the parents and do things for themselves and for the people around them. God wanted the people to have the curiosity to see and to create anew. The reward for widening our horizons and going to new places is that we see new things and become independent. No mother inflicts "dimness" on her child. Children are born with the will to learn and must exercise it.

The chosen people? I don't believe it. I don't think there are chosen people in the world. The term "chosen" came from the rabbis to make the people of those days believe that they could do great things, because the world had to change. This was an incentive to create progress. All prophets were social reformers who used religion to move people towards social reform.

- (e) I like Rabbi Zuzya's interpretations. They are so Freudian! I would hardly credit the original writers of these scriptures with this particular degree of subtlety and it is refreshing to contemplate this material thusly.

I have always thought of God's Chosen People as a fluid designation appropriately given to whoever is experiencing the most horrible suffering at the present moment...perhaps now the people of Iraq. Perhaps this has as much to do with my dark sense of humor as it does with my general distrust of religion. I absolutely hate it when anyone announces themselves as having God more on their side! Nothing could be more ludicrous or dangerous!

- (f) I've always felt that there is a relationship between Jewish nomadism and education. Learning is portable and therefore compensates for the lack of land. Perhaps this also has something to do with American Jews' attraction for cities: it's a way of perching on the land without cultivating it or following a feudal relationship (although of course the entire situation is so different in Israel).

I grew up in an intense atmosphere of Jewish exceptionalism (i.e. we're smarter, richer, and more ethical than everyone else). It is a cliché to say that this kind of feeling is the inversion of persecution (a connection which American Jews make explicitly), but I suppose there's a good deal of truth to that. It is a badge of courage to have been persecuted: a potent but, in my view hateful and nearly pornographic, fixation of victimhood.

- (g) You were born in Israel, so I'm assuming you have much stronger feelings and memories regarding the terms "the chosen people" and "the land." I was raised of "light" and "darkness" in me: the lightness of Southern California and the darkness of my "Jewish roots."

Since I am not observant, I do not have a "communal" Jewish identity. So concepts of "the land" and "the chosen people" are abstractions to me. But for others, through studying scripture, these ideas could have been formed over generations and definitions of themselves as Jews are imbedded in their "blood" and "soul."

I observed this when visiting Jerusalem, but the oppression of it all was overwhelming. Your two notions weigh heavily upon the people in that part of the world, Jew and Arab. Palestinians also claim they are the "chosen." Chosen by Allah. They also claim the land. Claim it as theirs.

It is ironic that the most militant of those who claim "the land," are American Jews who have returned (to Israel). The Chassids refuse to claim the land, only the culture, but they are "the chosen."

This is all crazy, of course.

- (h) Just briefly, the context of the statement from Torah (a note: "Old Testament" is the Christian name for the Hebrew Bible. In scholarly and theological circles it has a pejorative ring to it, since the "New Testament" was supposed to have come to extend and fulfill the incomplete "Old Testament") is that the archetypal figure of Abraham came from a family of idolaters, firmly entrenched on the old ways of the polytheistic, nature-centered religion of the ancient Middle East. His father left Ur of the Chaldeans (Iraq!) and got as far as Haran, a sort of border town between the known, civilized world and the wilderness peopled by nomadic clans (liminal space). But Terah, the father of Abraham, couldn't or didn't want to go further. G-d tells Abraham he must leave behind ALL that he knows in order to progress on the spiritual path. The rabbis *drash* a lot on the significance of the ordering of the things he must leave (Reb Zuzya's take being one such), since one would think that the logical rhetorical order for what he must leave behind would be increasing in range: leave your father's house, your community and your country. But Torah gives the reverse order, opening an interpretive space in which we might see this as an inward journey. This notion is reinforced by the Hebrew, *lech l'cha*, rendered in your translation as "Get thee out," but which would be more accurately translated "Go for/to yourself."

One of my *drashes* (from *midrash*, meaning "searching or seeking out") on this passage is that one can run from land to land, town to town, but ultimately the choices leading to transformation and a broader spiritual connection are choices made and acted upon within. One must undo all bonds of attachment, from the most obvious to the most subtle, to progress on the spiritual journey, to wake up to Oneness.

Obviously, this passage has not always (often?) been interpreted thus, and the concept of "chosenness" congealed, under the pressure of history, into some unhelpful and at times disastrous stereotypes. For me it is not a question of being chosen, but of choosing.

"The choosing people," a rubric which might be applied across all national and religious boundaries, are those who choose to be in relationship with Oneness. Abraham, after all, was not a Jew, just as Jesus was not a Christian.

- (i) The vision of "chosen people" I was raised with in the Brooklyn, NY Diaspora was, and is, double-edged. On one hand there is the pride/arrogance/respect associated with identifying with the successes of Jews now and in the past. Speculative games like "Jewish geography" were standard fare, as were notions of Jewish intellectual achievement, social responsibility, generosity, etc. that were to be understood as models and lessons for an ethical life. More recent games, like lists of the most embarrassing Jews - Elie Wiesel, Ari Fleischer, Joe Lieberman, Richard Simmons et al - provide a way to laugh at notions of exceptionalism and intra-group conflict, but more significantly to acknowledge that being "chosen" also means being singled out. That is, anti-Semitism and Jewish exceptionalism are entwined. This becomes increasingly complicated when neo-con Jews like Wolfowitz, Perle, Feith, Kristol, etc. become identified with something like U.S.-Iraq policy. And so "Operation keep-the-tax-breaks-alive-and-the-gas-flowing" becomes for some a way to shelter Israeli policies, thereby providing for others an opportunity to justify anti-Semitism from left and right.

Without getting into that hornet's nest, I think it is fair to say that historically, had various Jews not found a way to infiltrate, support and manipulate the power of the King, there would probably be no Jews. One could say that "membership" has its privileges, but it often comes with a label - yellow star, presidential seal.

This is enormously complicated and requires a much more nuance discussion, but to close it out I would say that for me the issue of the "land" - apart from arguments about the boundaries - has always meant having a "neighborhood" that you control. Everyone else has one so why not Jews? "The land" intertwines with "the chosen" via having a place to call your own that might allow for letting go of the need for exceptionalism. A place to be normal, banal, petty or brilliant like everyone else. The ticking bomb in the middle of this aspiration is religion, both a font of ignorance and arrogance, and a place of sanctuary and contemplation. As long as God (or God's lobbyists) have a place at the table, this will never be sorted out.

Wednesday night, we'll sit around a "local" table for our Seder, and all this complexity will be hashed out once again. My ambivalence never abates, but the Seder is so woven into family life and lore that it will continue. There is some comfort in the ritual, food, and repetitions, and an appropriate sense of scale, but ultimately no escape from the problems of the chosen and the land.

- (j) My instinct tells me that the simplification of each concept, the sound bite of each - in the first case, the horrific "this land is mine, God gave this land to me" (and sung to a background of heartrending inspirational strings!) and in the second case "we are the chosen people" - cause endless pain and suffering for anyone who goes near them. It may be that there's redemption, some blessing contained in the second idea, if only because it says that law tells us we must act morally, but in the first there is none - it can only mean this is mine, get off my property or I'll shoot you.

I'm interested that God says leave your country and leave your parents' house and leave your relatives. To me this means that the passage is talking about something other than putting a nation in a moving van and taking it from Egypt to Canaan. Because if it were simply talking about relocating the Jews in the promised land, why separate individuals from their families?

The passage talks about separating children from parents because it's about personal liberation as much as national liberation. You don't make a nation by breaking apart families, quite the opposite, but for someone to follow a spiritual path, the path to God, he or she has to leave the comfort and familiarity and safety of conventional notions of how to live, how to see the world, how to behave. It reminds me of the Buddhist notion that followers are called refugees. That they leave home and take refuge in the three Jewels. This is about God leading the Jews to a spiritual place, not to real estate.

I simply don't believe in God the Realtor, assigning lots to his clients. I don't put a lot of literal credence in the creation myths of the Inuit, the Navajos or the Sioux and it's tragic that hundreds of years after the enlightenment we literally believe this passage of our own creation myth.

A few years ago during the World Music Festival in LA, I went to a program of sacred music at the Hollywood Bowl. It was a wildly eclectic program. A mass choir from South Central. The LA Philharmonic played Beethoven's 9th. There was American Indian singing. Sufis. The Dalai Lama was there and Tibetan monks. A cantor with a great voice - I think he was from Montreal - sang.

One thing that struck me was the prevalence of the word Yisroel in the two songs he performed. Yisroel! Yisroel! Yisroel! The Jewish People! The Jewish People! The Jewish People!

We are so full of ourselves.

The printed program had translations of texts of the numbers everyone sang. Everyone else sang to God. The Hopis didn't sing The Hopi People, The Hopi People, The Hopi People! The Tibetans didn't sing Tibet, Tibet, Tibet! Only the cantor sang Us, Us, Us. We, We, We. Ours, Ours, Ours.

Is this what happens when your myth tells you God picked you and only you for divine revelation? It could be. What a limited understanding of God, like a Roman emperor, gesturing to indicate who will live and who will die.

I think these stories we tell ourselves become more pernicious the more literally they are understood. We think they make us special, but they keep us in chains.

(k) I am not Jewish. I am Jew-ish.

While we expect that the implied order of *a-b-c-d-e-* will yield us more order, we are perplexed to find a chaos within the order. Same and different. Not what we expected! Interpathically, same and different, we may complete each other, redefine each other, inspire each other, transform each other. You, whom I fear, may be the bearer of my healing.

Bibliography

David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures, Pathways and Patterns*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London : Tavistock, 1970

James Bennet, *New York Times International*, January 19, 2003

John Roth and Michael Birenbaum, *Holocaust, Religions and Philosophical Implication*, Paragon House, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1989

Don Singer, *in conversation*, Malibu, California, 2003

Diane Elliot, *in conversation*, Los Angeles, California, 2003

11 of my family and friends, *email conversation*, 2003