

Jewish Supremacy

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For some twenty years, the email would periodically arrive in my inbox. The sender was well-intentioned, but I was troubled. Presented with a long list of Jewish Nobel Prize winners, compared to much shorter list of Arabs or Muslims, I was at a loss to respond. Yes, I am pleased when a Jew—or an American, for that matter—wins a Nobel Prize. Delighting in the achievement of one’s own people is normal. The contrast to the paltry number of Arab or Muslim prize winners, though, was troubling. The sender seemed to be proclaiming that Jews are smarter, perhaps even better, than Arabs or Muslims. Even if I were convinced that a tally of Nobel Prizes would warrant such a conclusion, I wondered why my correspondent felt the need to tout that supposed superiority.

Every human being is created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s image. None of us is inherently better than anybody else, whether individually or in the ways we are grouped.

A passage from this week’s Torah portion, though, follows an oft-repeated theme that does suggest Jewish superiority:

And the Eternal has affirmed this day that you are, as promised, God’s treasured people who shall observe all the divine commandments, and that [God] will set you in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that [God] has made, and that you shall be, as promised, a holy people to the Eternal your God.ⁱ

Throughout our history, Jews have debated these words. Rabbi Noa Sattath writes: “Rashi viewed [the word “treasure”] as demonstrating that the Israelites are prized in the eyes of God, in comparison to all other peoples.”ⁱⁱ The fifteenth century commentator Sforno had a different, more egalitarian, take: ‘Even though God values all people... you will be special above others because you will act as a sovereign people of priests, instructing all of humankind to worship God together.’”^{iii iv}

I was raised in a Reform Judaism that adopted Sforno’s view: Jews are chosen with a special responsibility, but not to be superior or more beloved by God than any other people. Reconstructionist Judaism, by contrast, rejects the notion of a chosen people altogether. As Rabbi Deborah Waxman explains: “Even if the concept is reinterpreted...it still implies a hierarchy and thus lends itself far too quickly to chauvinism and other anti-democratic behavior.”^v

Jews do need to be particularly concerned about any supremacist ideology. Throughout much of the last 2000 years of Jewish history, our people has been oppressed by Christian or Muslim supremacists.

As Rabbi Sattath writes: “Even though white supremacist ideologies around the world target Jews as enemies of the superior race, an analogous ideology has existed in Israel since the 1970s: the Kahanist movement, which advocates Jewish supremacy. Rabbi Meir Kahane immigrated to Israel from New York in 1971, following several convictions for acts related to domestic terrorism in the United States. Once in Israel, Kahane developed his racist theories, essentially targeting Arabs both within Israel and in the occupied territories. Underlying his theories was the dissemination of the idea that Jews are the chosen, superior people who must therefore separate themselves from others[. Kahane wrote]: ‘The people of Israel were chosen to continue the first human, and they are called *adam*, human, since they have the souls of humans, the wonderful special creation in the world. Gentiles, while they are physically equal to Israel, aren’t ‘human’ in the spiritual sense.’^{vi}^{vii}

Kahane’s words are despicable, if not surprising. The Nazis defined Jews and others marked for extermination as sub-human. Kahane did the same. Despite being assassinated in New York in 1990, Kahane lives on through his hateful ideology. Most horrifying was the terrorist attack carried out by an American-born Kahane follower, Baruch Goldstein. Journalist Matt Plen explains: “On Purim morning, February 25, 1994, Baruch Goldstein walked into the Muslim prayer hall at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Goldstein...opened fire into the crowd, killing 29 people and injuring 125, until he was overwhelmed and beaten to death by survivors.”^{viii} While the bulk of Israelis, including the Orthodox establishment and most West Bank settlers, abhorred Goldstein’s mass murder, he and his infamous act continue to be celebrated by racist Jewish supremacists. As Plen writes, “Goldstein was buried in the Meir Kahane Memorial Park in Kiryat Arba. A plaque near the grave reads: ‘To the holy Baruch Goldstein, who gave his life for the Jewish people, the Torah, and the Land of Israel.’ The grave became a site of pilgrimage for the extreme right.”^{ix}

Disciples of Kahane and Goldstein continue to spread their racist, hate-filled rhetoric, often accompanied by terror. Our Reform Movement’s Israel Religious Action Center bravely and consistently confronts them, bringing these violent Jewish Supremacists to court and working to keep them out of Israel’s Knesset. As Rabbi Sattath writes: “One of Kahane’s most prominent students, Bentzi Gopstein, continues to manipulate the [Torah] for purposes of hatred, adopting Kahane’s methods and ideology. Under the guise of working against “assimilation,” he

established a hate group focused on ... Arab men, inciting against them, and advocating against their employment. The goal is to deter Arabs from visiting or working in mixed areas in central Jerusalem, ... Gopstein regularly incites hatred against Arabs and Christian on his Twitter account... After years of monitoring, ninety complaints placed by [the Israel Religious Action Center], and three appeals to the Supreme Court, Gopstein was charged in 2019 and is set to face trial.” The Israel Religious Action Center has continued to work, often successfully, to keep Kahanists like Gopstein off ballots for election to the Knesset,^x although the current Knesset does include the notorious Jewish Supremacist, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who “was convicted of inciting racism and supporting a terror group after holding up signs reading, ‘Expel the Arab enemy’...”^{xi}

Often, when conversion candidates first speak with me about Judaism and the Jewish community, they will tell me that they appreciate our openness and tolerance. I am grateful for that assessment, particularly because I understand it to reflect people’s experience with Reform Judaism and Congregation B’nai Israel. Still, we must not be smug. We do have, and always have had, racist Jewish Supremacists among us, and they find support in words of Torah, however manipulated.

Even as we are grateful to be called “God’s treasured people,” let us take those words as a call to action and responsibility, not as an indication of superiority. Let us approach other peoples with humility and curiosity, not disdain. We, so often the victims of others’ supremacist ideologies, must not foster our own. Instead, we rejoice in our duties to God, to other Jews, and to repairing the world, the tasks for which we have been chosen. And let us never imagine that what makes us distinct as Jews also makes us superior.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 26:18-19.

ⁱⁱRashi to Deuteronomy 26:17.

ⁱⁱⁱSforno to Deuteronomy 26:18.

^{iv} Rabbi Noa Sattath, “Jewish Supremacy: The Danger of Chosenness,” manuscript for *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, forthcoming from CCAR Press in 2021.

^v Rabbi Deborah Waxman, Ph.D., “Rejecting Chosenness in Favor of Distinctiveness,” *Reconstructing Judaism*, May 13, 2016, [Rejecting Chosenness in Favor of Distinctiveness | Reconstructing Judaism](#).

^{vi} Meir Kahane, *Or Hara’ayon: The Jewish Idea*, Jerusalem: Institute for Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 1996.

^{vii} Sattath.

^{viii} Matt Plen, “Baruch Goldstein: The perpetrator of the Hebron massacre is both vilified and celebrated,” *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/baruch-goldstein/>.

^{ix} Plen.

^x Sattath.

^{xi} “Otzma Yehudit candidate: Critics have to go back 30 years in order to attack us,” *The Times of Israel*, February 24, 2019, [Otzma Yehudit candidate: Critics have to go back 30 years in order to attack us | The Times of Israel](#).