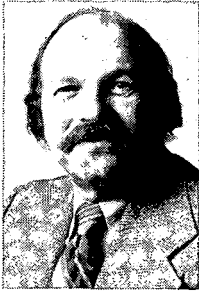


# The Chosen People

Passover marks the yearly celebration of an almost unbelievable historical event of universal, rather than specifically Jewish, significance. Here was an entire people, perhaps 400,000 men, women and children, rejecting the relative security of slavery, assuming responsibility for their own lives and marching into the unknown. They had no guarantees either about the possibility of existence under the new circumstances or about the quality of such a hoped for life. A dry desert loomed ahead. Frightening, giant-like tribes blocked the way, and an apparently impassable sea lay ahead.



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When Moses succeeded in organizing the Jewish slaves and induced them to follow him, they were surely not fully conscious of the significance of their action. They could not have known that their saga would inspire the oppressed of all future generations. The "flesh pots" of Egypt were surely meager and lean, the land "flowing with milk and honey" very promising by comparison. But, this probably was not enough of a motivation. The magic of believing that an all-loving God watched over them and would guide them into the promised land must have helped these primitive people overcome a natural reluctance to undertake the dangerous and adventurous journey.

The exodus from Egypt is *the* central event of Jewish history and has helped shape the Jewish character: Standing up for what is right and against oppression, regardless of the odds; A skepticism about power, even as one is forced to use it, and a special sensitivity and concern for justice; Responsibility for one's own life, and a genuine commitment to the welfare of those who share a common fate, fellow Jews; Deep respect for any individual, created in the image of God, and by extension, deep respect for life itself. "A Jew and blood," said a well-known writer at the turn of the century, "are there two opposites more distant from each other?" Concerned with their own survival, Jews have always recognized that it is closely tied with the well being of others. "Jews are members of the human race—worse than that I cannot say of them," said Mark Twain, probably with a twinkle in his eye. And, the Rabbis asserted that, "He who saves one life is as if he saves the whole world, and he who destroys one life is as if he destroys the whole universe."

Even the lowliest of Jews had a direct, immediate and almost personal relationship with an omnipresent force in nature, greater and nobler than Man. Such a relationship demanded that every Jew enoble himself and not fall short as he communicated with this "partner." "Listen, O God," says Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof," as he looks upwards complainingly, "would it really have been so much trouble had you made me a rich man?" This personal involvement with God forced the Jew to become introspective, self-examining and thoughtful, qualities which fathered both intellectuals and neurotics.

The unique relationship with God and history thrust upon the unwilling shoulders of the Jews a special burden and a responsibility to maintain in their daily lives that which is godly, and, therefore, most human. Talmudic legend has it that the Jews, too, like other people, were reluctant to accept this heavy yoke. As God was looking around for a worthy recipient, Ten Commandments in hand, He was refused by those who lived by the sword or by stealing. The hesitating Jews were commanded to accept, "or here will be your burial place." Contrary to the teachings or beliefs of many, this burden is the real essence of the idea of the chosen people. As their history amply demonstrates, the Jews were hardly the chosen people of privilege.

The pragmatic approach to life's problems in present-day society has diminished the role of Christ in the lives of many Christians as it has made many Jews strangers to their own Jewishness. As a result, integrity of character, independence of judgment and a discriminating concern for the dignity of every person often seem "square," archaic and strange these days. All value systems have become less important, and behavior is often shaped to minimize criticism and disapproval, disregarding all other considerations. Many Jews, physicians and others, instinctively rally to the side of the oppressed, even after these have organized and have begun to extract from the rest of the public as much as they can. Blacks, labor, women and others have continued to use the banner of oppression long after power has replaced weakness. Many well-meaning Jews continue, nevertheless, to respond to the call as before. Gentiles with vestiges of resentment from the irrationality of childhood, in which "Christ-killer" Jews were regarded as an abomination, use such ill-guided attitudes of some Jews as an excuse to maintain old attitudes of dislike, distrust and distance from all Jews, some of whom may be feared as threatening and successful competitors.

Society in general and Medicine in particular can ill afford to allow such irrational attitudes to continue existing, for we are all in trouble together. Medicine as a profession, occupying a special and protected role in society, is increasingly taking over the historical position of the Jews. *It* is becoming the Chosen People of our society. Congress, bureaucrats, the press and large segments of the public all converge on physicians these days as if all they stand for is narrow selfishness.

Like the Jews before it, Medicine bears a special responsibility for emphasizing, amidst a sea of conformity, alienation and standardization, the uniqueness and value of the individual and of life itself. The one-to-one relationship between a concerned and caring physician and his patient can never really be replaced by quality-assurance manuals. Like the Jews of every generation, Medicine must also be constantly on guard to minimize real sins of omission or commission, lest its waiting detractors use them as horns against the profession. It is inexcusable to use the protected role that society granted physicians as a means for actually getting rich. Medicine is not a business, even if it can be run most effectively as such.

The more physicians actually live up to being Chosen People, the more effective can they hope to be in demanding that society protect them better than it has, even though the odds for preserving even that which proved most humane in the old and revered tradition of Medicine are small in a society that has cast rationality aside in a blind pursuit of "more." Physicians everywhere are the "Jews" of today. The very existence of the private practice of Medicine, like the very existence of the Jews throughout history, is experienced by some as an affront to them and to their plans to homogenize the world.

The exhortation that "in every generation Man ought to consider himself as if he, himself, had come out of Egypt," is meant for Everyman, not for Jews alone. Physicians and others, both Jewish and Gentile, would do well to study this tale thoroughly and repeatedly for "the more one tells the story of the exodus from slavery, the better."

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