

MYTH #4:

JEWS THINK THEY ARE BETTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE

Where does it come from?

According to Judaism, the Jews are the “chosen people.” This concept has been misunderstood by both Jews and non-Jews alike. Many people have come to believe that by calling themselves the chosen people, Jews are declaring that they think they are better than other religious and ethnic groups.

What are the facts?

Being the chosen people does not mean that Jews have greater privileges than non-Jews. Rather, according to Jewish law, being the chosen people means that they have a special responsibility to uphold Jewish ethical teachings.

The idea comes from a portion of the Torah (the Jewish bible) in which the Jewish people were “chosen” to accept the responsibilities of the Torah and to be a “light unto the nations,” that is, an example of good behavior for all. But the “chosen people” concept has been twisted over time by some who say that the title proves that Jews think they are better than non-Jews.

Jews, like most groups, are proud of their heritage and identity. However, this does not make them better than anyone else. Orthodox Jews interpret the “chosen people” idea to mean that they have a responsibility to keep the 613 commandments of the Torah. All sects of Judaism have acted on this ethical responsibility through their work on social issues.

Moreover, Judaism espouses the concept of the righteous gentile, whereby a non-Jew who follows the Seven Laws of Noah will receive the same rewards after death as a righteous Jew. Jews do not view being Jewish as an exclusive status reserved only for those who happen to be born into the faith. According to Jewish law, anyone can convert to Judaism by accepting the same responsibilities as the other members of the faith.

How can we respond?

It is important to clarify the “chosen people” distinction in order to break down the barriers of misunderstanding. Every religion has something unique about it — it is just this particular

phrasing that has led some to misconstrue the facts. As far as special privileges such as taking time off for holidays, these exceptions are granted to members of many groups, not just Jews. Most American schools, businesses, and government agencies strive to respect the diversity of people in the U.S. and the special circumstances that warrant absence from school or work.

In response to comments like, “Jews think they are so special,” you can say that Jews sometimes feel different as a minority, and sometimes Jews are misunderstood because of their cultural and religious differences. Jews do feel a special connection with their heritage (as most groups do), but they do not as a group feel superior to others. The phrase “chosen people” refers to biblical obligations and is not meant to suggest that a hierarchy exists among religious groups.

If you hear someone complaining that the “chosen people” are asking for special privileges (e.g., the High Holidays off from school) because they think their chosen status puts them above the rules, you now know that they are misinterpreting or misunderstanding the facts. You can respond by pointing out that Jews desire the same rights to practice their religion as everyone else. Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, are regularly observed through school closures and special programs. These observances are taken for granted in U.S. society, while observances of Jewish or Muslim holidays may be seen as “weird” or constituting special privileges. Pointing out this double standard might challenge others to think about the lack of equity.