



*Reprinted from Moment Magazine, April 2007, "Ask the Rabbis" column*

## ***Why are Jews called the "Chosen People?"***

***Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer***

One of my favorite rabbinic stories describes how God had unsuccessfully shopped around the Ten Commandments to various peoples and was spurned by all. When God finally came to the Hebrews he wasn't in the mood for rejection and made them an offer they couldn't refuse. He lifted Mt. Sinai over their heads and said, Either you take the law or I drop the mountain on top of you.

So much for being the "Chosen People." According to this tale, we were really the "People of Last Resort", and, like a hapless recruit, we were "volunteered" for an unwanted, not to mention, dangerous assignment without any say in the matter.

Over time, this "privilege" of being chosen has led to smug superiority and arrogant chauvinism. However, as Maimonides taught, there is nothing inherently special about the Jewish people. This distinction is earned, not innate. Ever since the Enlightenment, most Jews have recognized that we are part of one world people. No one subgroup is chosen over another. We embrace universalism over particularism. We have become, if anything, a people that makes choices: We choose how much time to invest in our Jewish identity including, for example, whether to pray three times a day or three days a year or not at all. We choose, moreover, to ordain women along with men, to conduct secular bar/bat mitzvahs, to officiate at intercultural weddings, and those of lesbians and gays.

For myself, I chose, against all predictions, to enter the rabbinate. Later, I made an intellectual shift and chose to embrace Humanistic Judaism. Both of these decisions were about living a life of integrity, purpose and choice, not blind obedience to inherited tradition or dictate. They were voluntary decisions. This is how I continue to choose to be a Jew.