

An Unfortunate Quote

Commentary for December 16, 2010 — A Senior Rabbi Speaks His Mind

Recently in Jerusalem an elderly but important Sephardic rabbi spoke publicly about Jewish racial superiority and the inferiority of non-Jews. His statement shocked the Jewish community in Israel and has given ammunition to opponents of Israel and radical Islamists. Here is the *Jerusalem Post* article titled, "[Yosef: Gentiles exist only to serve Jews](#)":

"The sole purpose of non-Jews is to serve Jews, according to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the head of Shas's Council of Torah Sages and a senior Sephardi adjudicator.

'Goyim [Gentiles] were born only to serve us. Without that, they have no place in the world — only to serve the People of Israel,' he said in his weekly Saturday night sermon on the laws regarding the actions non-Jews are permitted to perform on Shabbat [as employees of Jews, see Exodus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 5:14].

According to Yosef, the lives of non-Jews in Israel are safeguarded by divinity, to prevent losses to Jews.

'In Israel, death has no dominion over them ... With Gentiles, it will be like any person — they need to die, but [God] will give them longevity. Why? Imagine that one's donkey would die, they'd lose their money.

This is his servant ... That's why he gets a long life, to work well for this Jew,' Yosef said. 'Why are Gentiles needed? They will work, they will plow, they will reap. We will sit like an effendi and eat. That is why Gentiles were created,' he added.

Yosef's Saturday night sermons have seen many controversial statements from the 90-year-old rabbi. In August, Yosef caused a diplomatic uproar when he wished a plague upon the Palestinian people and their leaders, a curse he retracted a few weeks later, when he blessed them along with all of Israel's other peace-seeking neighbors."

Jonah Mandel, October 18, 2010, underlining mine

Such statements by Rabbi Yosef are not helpful.

The Anti Defamation League in Israel condemned the Rabbi's October statements: "[ADL slams Shas spiritual leader for saying non-Jews 'were born to serve Jews'](#)":

"On Tuesday, the ADL said that Yosef's comments contributed 'to an atmosphere of hatred and a global trend of intolerance.' 'It is disturbing to see any religious leader, and particularly Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, use their podium to preach such hateful and divisive ideas,' ADL chief Abraham H. Foxman said. 'In a world where bigotry and prejudice are prevalent, it is especially important for religious leaders to use their influence to teach respect and acceptance,' he continued."

In August 2010 Rabbi Yosef publicly cursed the Palestinian people and leaders, as if he had authority to do so. Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu strongly condemned that statement and the United States later gave an even stronger rebuke: August 30, 2010 *Haaretz* article: "[U.S. issues sterner condemnation of Ovadia Yosef comments than Netanyahu.](#)"

Yosef's October 2010 comments were broadcast live in Israel. It was reported in several Israeli media outlets, including in a *JTA.org* article titled: "[Sephardi leader Yosef: Non-Jews exist to serve Jews.](#)" Besides the text of the *Jerusalem Post* article above, this article added:

"The American Jewish Committee condemned the rabbi's remarks in a statement issued Monday. Rabbi Yosef's remarks — suggesting outrageously that Jewish scripture asserts non-Jews exist to serve Jews — are abhorrent and an offense to human dignity and human equality," said AJC Executive Director David Harris. 'Judaism first taught the world that all individuals are created in the divine image, which helped form the basis of our moral code. A rabbi should be the first, not the last, to reflect that bedrock teaching of our tradition.'"

Of course, Yosef's statement was picked up and quoted in Al-Jazeera, the worldwide Arab and Muslim broadcast and internet news service: "[Israeli Rabbis Yosef, Shapira Say Non-Jews Exist Only to Serve Jews, to Be Used as Human Shields.](#)" Al-Jazeera coupled R. Yosef's statement with another Rabbi's statement that it was morally acceptable to use non-Jews as human shields when attacked. So, why is Rabbi Yosef saying such things?

What Is the Source of Rabbi Yosef's Ideas?

I think Rabbi Yosef was referring to a biblical passage that talks about Israelites being viewed as superior to other peoples. However, the passage actually says something quite different than what Rabbi Yosef may be thinking. It does not justify his prejudicial statements.

In the section of Scripture where Jacob deceives his father Isaac and poses as his brother Esau so he (Jacob) can obtain the birthright firstborn blessing, Esau was understood to be the firstborn. Reading Genesis 27:1–29 you feel that the nearly blind Isaac was cautious. He may have suspected a deception and did not fully trust the son in front of him. It was Jacob and finally the blessing was given to him. One part of Isaac's blessing says:

"Let people serve you, and nations bow down to you: be lord [*geber*, a mighty one] over your brethren, and let your mother's sons bow down to you: cursed be every one that curses you, and blessed be he that blesses you."

• *Genesis 27:29*¹

Most all translations and commentaries accept that non-Israelites are being referred to in the words **"Let people serve you ..."** Then Isaac goes on about **"your brethren"** and **"your mother's sons."** These are seen as referring to the descendants of Ishmael and Esau. Professor George Wesley Buchanan quotes from the *Genesis Rabba* 66:4 (131b-c):

"People will serve you (Gen 27:29). The seventy nations. And nations (*lamim*) will prostrate themselves before you (Gen 27:29). These are the Ishmaelites, the sons of Keturah, of whom it is written, [*The sons of Dedan were*] *Assurim, Letushim, and Leumim* (Gen 25:3). *Be lord over your brothers* (Gen 27:29). This is Esau and his chiefs."

• *Buchanan, Revelation and Redemption, pp. 329-330*²

¹ The words **"people"** (*amim*, plural, "people" focuses on ethnicity) and **"nations"** (*lamim*, plural, "people," focuses on organization, i.e., nations) are not translated from the usual word *"goyim"* which is the most common term for "nations" (>500 times), the vast majority meaning non-Israelites.

So the Jewish sages of the 6th century AD (approximately when the *Genesis Rabba* was written down) believed that the first phrase meant the nations of the world in general, while the nations that would prostrate or bow down before Israel were other sons of Abraham and Esau.

The Targums expand upon Genesis 27:29 in the same manner. Targums are translations (from Hebrew to Aramaic, a cognate language of Hebrew) and paraphrases of sections of the Old Testament.

“Let peoples serve before thee, all the sons of Esau: all kings be subject to thee, all the sons of Ishmael: be thou a chief and a ruler over the sons of Keturah: ...”

Targum Jerusalem on the Pentateuch, Genesis 27:29

“Let peoples be subject to thee, all the sons of Esau, and kingdoms bend before thee, all the sons of Keturah; a chief and a ruler be thou over thy brethren, and let the sons of thy mother salute thee. ...”

Targum Pseudo Jonathan on the Pentateuch, Genesis 27:29

“Let the peoples serve thee, and kingdoms be subservient to thee: be thou chief of thy brethren, and let the sons of thy mother worship thee: ...”

Targum Onkelos on the Pentateuch, Genesis 27:29

Statements in the Talmud

Although Genesis 27:29 is not quoted or cited directly in the Mishnah or in the Talmuds (that I have found so far), there are statements similar to Rabbi Yosef’s statements in the Talmuds.³ Several Talmudic sources declare rather openly that Gentiles have a status below that of Israelites and Jews in God’s sight, to the extent that only those who are not of Israel are somewhat less than fully human. I will not quote these Talmudic statements, but they are clearly taught.

Rabbi Yosef’s statements follow the line of thought in the Talmud, but in this day and age such prejudicial statements have no place in religious discourse. They are against Scripture. All human beings derive from Adam. We are **“in Adam”** just as we are **“in Christ”** (Romans chapter 8) and 1 Corinthians 15:22 **“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”**

In ancient times the Greeks labeled all other peoples as “barbarians” which simply meant non-Greeks and inferior. Yes, they were not quite up to the Greek ideal of what a human

² *Revelation and Redemption: Jewish Documents of Deliverance from the Fall of Jerusalem to the Death of Nahmanides* (Dillsboro, NC: Western North Carolina Press, 1978).

³ The Mishnah is a written compilation of Jewish oral tradition. It is teaching apart from the written tradition which is the Old Testament. The Talmud is a commentary on the Mishnah and it is considered by many Jewish scholars to have greater authority than the Bible. The Mishnah was compiled by 200 AD while the Talmud was compiled over several centuries ending around 500 AD. The two major Talmuds are the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. See Dr. Ernest Martin’s enlightening article [“The Intertestamental Period”](#) where Jewish sources admit that the authority of the Talmud is considered superior to the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

being should be. The Romans, the Germans, the Gauls, the Persians, and pre-Islamic Arabs all felt the same way. It was “us against them” in the world.

The Bible nowhere calls Gentiles, whether nations or individuals, as less than human. There are statements comparing people and nations to animals, but those biblical statements criticize their behavior and actions, not their intrinsic character or worth before God as human beings created in His image. These are cultural statements made under stress and danger and threat of extermination, in a period in history when everyone wrote and made such statements against those they reviled and considered their enemies.

In the United States there is much recent talk about “American exceptionalism.” Such a concept is fine so long as it is kept in mind that there is no moral superiority of one people over another. Only God can make such judgments, and he does so. Each ethnic and racial group has special characteristics and natural abilities that differ and perhaps are superior to others. This is how God made His children.

God, however, has the right to discriminate. He designated Canaan to be cursed by Noah (Genesis 9:25). God chose Jacob over Esau and as Paul says God loved Jacob, and hated Esau (Romans 9:13, quoting Malachi 1:2–3). One notable characteristic of Israel is that they are a rebellious and stiff-necked people (Deuteronomy 31:27). God established Israel from Abraham to be a people set apart, a people special to God, having benefit of His special affection and attention. **“For YHWH’s portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance”** (Deuteronomy 32:9). God’s special people rebelled in spite of His care.

Scripture Is Different

The Scriptures do not discriminate between peoples on a spiritual level, all are from Adam (Acts 17:24–27). As I have written before, Israel is special only because they have been chosen by lot; Israel was not chosen because they were special. While all come from Adam, all people and nations have particular characteristics, some good, some bad. National or racial characteristics do not indicate moral superiority of one people over another.

Israel was chosen by God to perform two major tasks in history: **(1)** to preserve the Word of God (Romans 3:1–2), and **(2)** to teach the Gentiles about God (Zechariah 8:13–23). Israel is not performing the second task — yet. In the future we shall see if they are performing the first task. Teaching that Gentiles are inferior before God and are to be likened to beasts of burden, as Rabbi Yosef states, makes it very difficult for Gentiles to listen and respond to anything Israel and the Jews may have to say about God. How can you dialogue with someone who thinks you are beneath them and like an animal?

Isaac’s blessing in Genesis 27:29 was a prophecy, just like God’s blessing of Abraham and Abraham’s blessing of Isaac were prophecies. The world will serve Israel when Israel fulfills God’s mission for them— not because Israel is special, but so that Israel will bless and teach the nations about God. Then it will be seen that they are indeed the chosen people of God.