

Parashat Terumah, 5770, 2010:

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The Eternal Election of the Jewish People

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Speak to the children of Israel, and have them take for Me an offering; from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity, you shall take My offering. (*Sefer Shemot 25:2*, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

The above-quoted *pasuk* (verse) is the second one of our *parasha*. The phrase “and have them take for Me an offering,” is a translation of the Hebrew “*v’yikchu Li terumah.*” Since the word “*Li*” (“for Me,” i.e. G-d) is grammatically superfluous, the Torah simply could have written: “Speak to the children of Israel, and have them take an offering...” In classic Jewish fashion, this leads us to ask what does “*Li*” add to the essential meaning of the *pasuk* that we would not have otherwise have known? Rashi (1040-1105) helps us understand the significance of the word “*Li*” by explaining that it means “*Lishmi*” (“for Me”) In my view, this means that the free-will offering (*terumah*) should be given solely with the intent of serving Hashem in a pure sense, without any notion of receiving a reward in-kind. In other words, giving *terumah* must be devoid of any thoughts of a *quid pro quo* if it is to be a meaningful faith-gesture. This is in consonance with the well-known Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) that states:

Antignos of Socho received the tradition from Shimon the Righteous. He would say: “Do not be like slaves, who serve their master for the sake of reward. Instead, be like slaves who serve their master not for the sake of reward. And the fear of Heaven should be upon you.” (1:3, translation and underlining my own)

Rashi’s explanation of “*Li*” as “*Lishmi*,” has its roots deep within the Midrashic tradition.

Indeed, the earliest source for this exegesis is found in the sixth chapter of *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* that was compiled sometime in the years 500-640 CE: “But the Torah states: ‘And you shall be holy to Me (“*Li*”), for I, the L-rd, am holy, and I have distinguished you from the peoples, to be Mine (“*Li*”).’ [Sefer Vayikra 20:26] ‘*Li*’ means ‘*Lishmi*’ forever...” (Translation my own)

Midrash Tanchuma (Warsaw), *Parashat Terumah*, Chapter III, contains a unique Midrash that advances the understanding of our verse and the underlying significance of the term “*Li*”:

“Speak to the children of Israel, and have them take for Me (“*Li*”) an offering...” In all instances wherein the Holy One Blessed be He states the word “*Li*,” in the Torah it refers to an [unbreakable] link (*yaishno*) between Him and to that which is referred in both *Olam Hazeah* (this World) and in *Olam Habah* (the World to Come). What are some examples? “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to Me (“*Li*”) ...[Sefer Vayikra 25:23] - this refers both to *Olam Hazeah* and to *Olam Habah*. [Another example:] “For all the firstborns are Mine (“*Li*”) [Sefer Bamidbar 3:13] - this refers both to *Olam Hazeah* and to *Olam Habah*. [Another example:] “... and the Levites shall become Mine (“*Li*”) - this refers both to *Olam Hazeah* and to *Olam Habah*. The Jewish people [are G-d’s holy possession] in both this World and the World to Come. As it is written: “And you shall be to Me (“*Li*”) a kingdom of princes and a holy nation... [Sefer Shemot 19:6] Therefore the Torah states: “and have them take for Me (“*Li*”) an offering...” - this refers both to *Olam Hazeah* and to *Olam Habah*. (Translation my own)

In summary, there are five entities that are designated in this Midrash as belonging to Hashem in perpetuity (i.e. in *Olam Hazeah* and *Olam Habah*): Terumah, the Land of Israel, the first born among the Jewish nation, the *Leviim*, and the Jewish people. Fascinatingly, the notion of the Jewish people belonging to Hashem for all eternity is precisely parallel to what we have seen in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* when it states: ““*Li*’ means ‘*Lishmi*’ forever...” In a word, we are and always will be G-d’s chosen people, His *Am Hanivchar*.

Exactly when did the election of the Jewish people begin? At first glance, one might think it began when G-d took us out of Egypt: "...We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the L-rd took us out of Egypt with a strong hand." (*Sefer Devarim* 6:21) In other words, G-d conquered Pharaoh and his murderous minions and thereby "earned the right" to demand our loyalty so that we would become His people. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the Rav by his students and followers, however, suggested an entirely different rationale as to when and why we became the *Am Hanivchar*:

The election of Israel in Egypt did not come about through conquest, through the mighty hand and the outstretched arm, through signs and wonders, but rather through the divine revelation of a still, small voice in the soul of the nation, through the fulfillment of "You shall take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood" (Ex. 12:22) through the sudden elevation of soul and spirit, through "And all the people bowed low" (Ex. 12:27), through the acceptance of the sanctity of Israel and of the commandments, ... through being transformed into G-d's Temple – and just as the sanctity of the Temple is never annulled, so too the election of Israel exists forever... (*Festival of Freedom: Essays on Pesah and the Haggadah*, p. 87, underlining my own)

We most often think of ourselves as having been chosen by G-d to be His people. It seems at first blush that this was a passive acceptance on our part, wherein we were non-acting objects rather than free-willed volitional subjects. This, according to the Rav, is simply not true. Instead, "The eternity of the Jewish people was not created through the signs and wonders of the mighty hand and the outstretched arm, but rather through the dipping of the bunch of hyssop in blood, through the heroic behavior of the Jews in Egypt when they brought the paschal sacrifice." (Ibid.) The Jews in Egypt were heroic figures! How so? They kept G-d's commandment to sacrifice the paschal lamb, the god of the Egyptians, even though this act put their very lives in danger. The Rav is teaching us a truly novel idea - without our heroic actions, without our willingness to keep His

commandments, we would never have become G-d's chosen nation! This means that we needed to assert our spiritual and psychological independence from Pharaoh and his people "...Not by military force and not by physical strength..." (*Sefer Zechariah* 4:6) but rather, by beginning to live lives dedicated to the Torah and its Mitzvot. As Rabbi Soloveitchik so beautifully stated:

... the great sanctity of the night-of-watching [Passover] is grounded not in the miracles and wonders which G-d displayed that night, not in the acquisition through conquest accomplished with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, but rather through the divine revelation of a still, small voice. The Jews themselves created the greatest miracle: they raised themselves to the level of a holy nation. Only after that miracle took place did the redemption through conquest and miracles of a mighty hand and an outstretched arm first begin. Had the Jews not first redeemed themselves by self-sanctification on that night-of-watching in Egypt, the redemption through conquest would not have been complete. (Ibid., p.88, underlining my own)

A new and deeper understanding of the Exodus and *bechirat Yisrael* (the Election of Israel) emerges based upon a careful analysis of the Rav's ideas as presented in these passages. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, our progenitors' self-sanctification led to their self-redemption and, subsequently, to their self-election. This transformative process created the foundation for our ancestor's spiritual self-sacrifice and ability to ignore all manner and variety of potential physical danger in their pursuit of fulfilling Hashem's will. This, in turn, led to the actualization and realization of the Exodus. We must always remember, however, that as great as Hashem's role in the Exodus indisputably was, we had to act first in order to gain our physical freedom. We had to incontrovertibly prove to the Master of the Universe that we were one with Him in His glorious goal of creating the world anew through the vehicle of His holy Torah. Moreover, we had to demonstrate through our actions that we believed that G-d, and G-d alone, ran the world. With Hashem's help, we rose to this challenge and heroically offered the *korban Pesach*

(paschal lamb) and thereby ensured our role as G-d's chosen people for all time.

May it be His will and our heartfelt desire that we, too, will live lives as heroes of the spirit. In addition, may each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to be a link in the great chain of Jewish being - now and for all eternity. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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