

Parashat Vayechi 5774, 2013

The Concept of the Chosen People

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Our *parasha* depicts the final days, actions, and passing of *Yaakov Avinu* (Our Patriarch Yaakov). How do you summarize the life of such a man? What can one say about one of the greatest people who ever lived? Where does one begin, and where does one end?

King David focused squarely upon *Yaakov Avinu*'s selection as the progenitor of the nation that would ultimately bear his name. Therefore, he declared: "For G-d selected Jacob as His own, Israel as His treasure." (*Sefer Tehillim* 135:4, translation Artscroll *Siddur*). The original Hebrew reads: "*Ki Yaakov bachar lo Kah, Yisrael l'segulato.*" The verb is *bachar* (to choose). The One who chose Yaakov and his heirs for all time was Hashem (*Kah*), and we were chosen as His treasure (*l'segulato*). Based upon this verse, the 12th century Midrashic compilation on *Sefer Tehillim*, *Sechel Tov*, declared Yaakov to be the "*bechir ha'Avot*," the chosen one of the *Avot* (Patriarchs).

King David's formulation of the concept of the election of Yaakov and his future heirs in *Sefer Tehillim* (Psalms) is analogous to a famous *pasuk* in the Torah: "And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth." (*Sefer Shemot* 19:5, this and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Significantly, both verses share the word "*segulah*"

("treasure"). Rashi (1040-1105) defines this word in the following fashion: "...a beloved treasure, like 'and the treasures of the kings' (Eccl. 2:8), [i.e., like] costly vessels and precious stones, which kings store away. So will you be [more of] a treasure to Me than the other nations [*Mechilta*]." Thus, Yaakov is the chosen one among the *Avot*, and we, the Jewish people, are the chosen ones among the nations.

Chazal (our Sages of Blessed Memory) based the Election of Israel, i.e. the concept of the Chosen People, upon our acceptance of the Torah. The seminal Talmudic passage that encapsulates this idea is found in *Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 2b*:

The nations will then contend: "L-rd of the Universe, have You given us the Torah, and have we declined to accept it?" But how can they argue in this way, seeing that it is written, "The L-rd came from Sinai and rose from Seir unto them, He shined forth from Mount Paran?" [*Sefer Devarim* 33:2] And it is also written, "G-d came from Teman." [*Habakkuk* 3:3]. What did He seek in Seir, and what did He seek in Mount Paran? — R. Johanan says: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it, until He came to Israel who received it. [How, then, can they say that the Torah was not offered to them?] Their contention will be this: "Did we accept it and fail to observe it?" But surely the obvious rejoinder to this plea would be: "Then why did you not accept it?" (Translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my emendations to enhance readability)

The importance of this and similar passages found throughout Midrashic literature cannot be overestimated. Rashi derives three ideas from these sources that have shaped both Jewish theology and the Jewish psyche:

1. Israel became the nation closest to G-d. (*Sefer Shemot* 19:5)
2. Israel differs from the other nations in its submission to the 613 Commandments of the Torah (*Sefer Rut* 1:16)
3. Israel alone devotes itself to the study of Torah (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:33)

The theme of the Jewish people as the Chosen People (*Am Hanivchar, Am Segulah*) is repeated in a number of places in the *Siddur*. As a result, it has become one of the most widely accepted principles of Jewish thought:

- *Habocher b'amo Yisrael b'ahavah* (He who chose His people Israel in love; blessing before the recitation of the *Shema*)
- *Ki banu bacharta v'otonu kidashta mikol ha'amim* (...for He has chosen us and sanctified us above all other nations; Friday night *Kiddush*)
- *Asher bachar banu mikol am v'romemanu mikol lashon* (...Who has chosen us from all peoples and raised us above all nations; Festival Evening *Kiddush*)
- *Asher bachar banu mikol ha'amim v'natan lanu et Torato* (...Who has chosen us from all the nations and given us His Torah; Blessing before the Reading of the Torah)

Thus far, we have focused upon those sources that emphasize how *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (G-d) chose us. Yet, in truth, we chose Him as well, when we declared *naaseh v'nishmah* (We will do and we will hear and understand, *Sefer Shemot* 24:7) prior to receiving the Torah:

R. Simla lectured: When the Israelites gave precedence to “we will do” over “we will hear,” six hundred thousand ministering angels came and set two crowns upon each man of Israel, one as a reward for “we will do,” and the other as a reward for “we will hearken”...R. Eleazar said: When the Israelites gave precedence to “we will do” over “we will hearken,” a Heavenly Voice went forth and exclaimed to them, Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the Ministering Angels, as it is written, Bless the L-rd, you angels of His. You mighty in strength, that fulfill His word, That hearken unto the voice of His word: First they fulfill and then they hear [understand].

R. Hama son of R. Hanina said: What is meant by, “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, [So is my beloved among the sons:]” Why were the Jews compared to an apple tree? To teach you: just as the fruit of the apple tree precedes its leaves, so did the Jews give precedence to “we will do” over “we will hear.” (*Talmud Bavli* 88a, *Soncino Talmud* translation with my emendations to enhance readability)

What emerges from the above Talmudic passage is profoundly fascinating. Our status as the *Am Hanivchar* has two components: The first is G-d's search for a nation, wherein we were passive players on the great spiritual stage of history. The second is our active desire to encounter our Creator and become His designated people and ambassadors to all mankind.

What, however, does it mean to be the Chosen People? What is the import of this expression? Please allow me to begin with what it is not. The Election of Israel does not translate into a chauvinistic declaration of preeminence over the other nations of the world. Every nation has its role to play in Hashem's drama that we call "life." Therefore, each nation has its own intrinsic value and inherent worth. In addition, the doctrine of the Chosen People certainly, and most emphatically, does not include any notion whatsoever of Jewish superiority. It must be constantly emphasized and taught that everyone is created *b'tzelem Elokim* (in G-d's divine image), and, therefore, all people have the potential to achieve authentic holiness.

What, then, does it mean to be the Chosen People? Based upon my reading of Rav Shimson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), among others, I believe this concept translates into a statement of **extraordinary responsibility**. We are more responsible to Hashem than any other nation. The Sinaitic Covenant (*Kabbalat HaTorah*) did not somehow mysteriously alter our biology so that we became genetically different than other nations. Instead, *Kabbalat HaTorah* placed the *ol malchut Shamayim* (the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven), = G-d's will, uniquely upon us. Thus, our responsibilities and obligations toward Hashem are different in kind and degree than those of the rest of mankind. This, I

believe, is the essence of being the Chosen People, for it is our unique role to bring the truth of the Torah before the entire world. Truly, *ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu u'mah naaim yerushateinu*. We are ecstatic and overcome with joy, how wonderful is our portion and how pleasant is our inheritance (i.e. the Torah).

May we ever strive to pursue lives that reflect our election as G-d's chosen people. In so doing, may we be *mekadash shame shamayim* (sanctify G-d's name,) and thereby bring honor and glory to Him before all mankind. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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