

Parashat Yitro 5775, 2015:

To Be Precious Before Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure (*segulah*) out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. (*Sefer Shemot* 19:5, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Our *pasuk* (verse) is one of the better-known verses that precede the Revelation of Hashem and our *Kabbalat HaTorah* (the Receiving of the Torah) at Mount Sinai. The expression, “a treasure (*segulah*) out of all peoples,” however, is difficult to understand. What exactly does it connote? What was Hashem communicating to us by employing this terminology? To answer these questions, let us turn to some of the giants of our tradition.

Onkelos (110 CE approx.) translated the term “*segulah*” as “*chavivin mekol am'maya*” (“more beloved than all the other peoples of the world”). This approach was followed, and elaborated upon, by the Italian exegete Rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob Seforno (1475-1550) in his commentary on our verse:

Even though the entire species of man is valued by Me more than all other terrestrial beings – for it is in he [man] alone wherein G-d places his special focus – as is born out in the phrase, “Beloved is man for he was created in G-d’s image,” [*Pirkei Avot* 3:14] nonetheless, you [i.e. the Jewish people] shall be more beloved to Me than the rest of mankind.

In contrast, Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael*, explained our expression as, “a beloved treasure, like ‘and the treasures (תְּלִמְוֹת) of the kings’ (*Sefer Kohelet* 2:8), [i.e., like] costly vessels and precious stones, which kings store away...” The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) closely followed Rashi’s lead in his interpretation of our phrase, up to and including the citation of the verse from *Sefer Kohelet*:

You will be a precious treasure unto Me [literally, ‘in My hands’]. This is the case, since something that is truly beloved is never handed over by a king to someone else. As the verse states: “[i.e., like] costly vessels and precious stones, which kings store away.”

The 19th century German commentator, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), in his explication of our *pasuk*, focused upon our obligations to Hashem and explains *segulah* in the following fashion:

Consequently, “*segulah*” is a singular possession to which no one else may lay claim. It, therefore, has no connection whatsoever to anyone other than it’s owner. A fundamental condition thus emerges in reference to “*segulah*,” namely, this concept demands of us [i.e. the Jewish people] in reference to our relationship with Hashem, that we will be His sole possession in a total and complete sense – in the very fiber of our spiritual being, in every aspect of our persona and with our entire volition and lives. Moreover, we must see ourselves as depending upon G-d alone, and never upon some other power or being – this principle must shape the trajectory of our lives and influence the essence and approach of all our actions. (Translation from the Hebrew edition my own)

In Rav Hirsch’s view, therefore, the concept of *segulah* emerges as the personification of our extraordinary dedication toward the Almighty that, in turn, obligates us to recognize that everything in our lives is “*m’ate Hashem hayitah zot*” (“that everything comes directly from G-d,” *Sefer Tehillim* 118:23).

Rav Yaakov ben Yaakov Moshe Lorberbaum of Lissa (1760-1832), in his work, *Netivot Yaakov*, provided an uplifting and inspiring interpretation of the *segulah* concept that

bespeaks the permanence of the relationship that obtains between Hashem and *Kenneset Yisrael* (the trans-historical community of the Jewish people):

You [the Jewish people] are more precious to Me than all the peoples of the world, i.e. you are the Chosen Nation. This is the case not only during the time when the other nations of the world will be enveloped in the darkness and dross of idol worship – but even in the time when we will witness the fulfillment of “for Mine is the entire earth.” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:5) In other words, even when the entire world, even when all the nations of the world turn to Me and believe in Me, as will be the case in Messianic times, [as it is stated in the prophet *Tzafaniah* 3:9:] “For then I will convert the peoples to a pure language that all of them call in the name of the L-rd, to worship Him of one accord” – even then you will be my precious people – for “you are children of Hashem your G-d.” (*Sefer Devarim* 14:1)

Regardless of which interpretation of *segulah* speaks to you, may we, Hashem’s *am segulah* (precious and beloved nation), be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah’s stirring words: “And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one.” (14:9) May that time soon arrive and herald true peace for all mankind, for then we will stand shoulder to shoulder in the recognition of Hashem’s presence amongst us and glorify His holy Name. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

** Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: [@theRavZatzal](https://twitter.com/theRavZatzal) and [@Torahtech613](https://twitter.com/Torahtech613).