

Parashat Ki Tavo 5775, 2015

On Being the Am Segulah

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, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And the L-rd has selected you this day to be His treasured people (*l'am segulah*), as He spoke to you, and so that you shall observe all His commandments, and to make you supreme, above all the nations that He made, [so that you will have] praise, a [distinguished] name and glory; and so that you will be a holy people to the L-rd, your G-d, as He spoke. (*Sefer Devarim, Parashat Ki Tavo, 26:18-19, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The concept of the Jewish people being Hashem's *am segulah* is first introduced in *Sefer Shemot 19:5*: “And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples (*segulah mikol ha'amim*), for Mine is the entire earth,” and is echoed, as well, by *David Hamelech* (King David) in *Sefer Tehillim*: “For G-d chose Jacob for Himself, Israel for His treasure (*l'segulato*). Little wonder, then, that Rashi (1040-1105) explains “*segulah*” in the following manner: “...a beloved treasure, like ‘and the treasures of the kings’ (*Sefer Kohelet 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*].” In contrast, Onkelos (First Century CE) explains “*segulah mikol ha'amim*” as “and you shall be more beloved before Me than all the other nations (“*u'tehon kadamai chabivin mikol am'maiyah*”). In sum, two classic approaches emerge concerning the meaning of the term “*segulah*.” For *David Hamelech* and Rashi, it

connotes “treasure,” and for Onkelos it denotes the uniquely beloved status we have in the eyes of our Creator.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and disciples, in at least one instance, defines “*segulah*” differently than either Onkelos or Rashi, namely, as “singularity”:

The word “singular” means “being only one,” “exceptional,” “extraordinary” and “separate.” The word *segulah* in Hebrew similarly connotes singularity. In Exodus (19:5), the Torah enunciates the doctrine of the election of Israel as a cardinal tenet of our faith. (Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought* adapted from Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, this, and the following citations, are from page 119, all underling my own)

The Rav continues this line of reasoning, and emphasizes that “*segulah*” is not solely a theological construct. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in human interaction:

Segulah may also describe relationships between people. For example, Jacob loved Rachel but he did not hate Leah, despite the verse, “And the Eternal saw that Leah was unloved” (*senuah*, *Sefer Bereishit* 29:31). His bond to her merely suffered by comparison with Rachel... his relationship with Rachel was singular.” There was a *segulah* dimension in this special love. It involved an intertwining of souls, a union beyond verbal description. It was more than emotional love; it was a oneness achieved, which is the highest rung of identification. (Minor emendation my own)

Significantly, Rav Soloveitchik notes that Hashem’s unique relationship with the Jewish people is parallel to Yaakov’s marital bonds with Rachel and Leah:

Similarly, the people of Israel are a *segulah* people, singularly valued by G-d; this involves no denigration of other nations. It is a specialness – a nation, one of its kind, which G-d has designated to preserve and disseminate His Divine teachings. This is singularity.

Clearly, for the Rav, the *segulah* nature of the Jewish people does not translate into a declaration of superiority over the other nations of the world. Instead, each nation has its own intrinsic value and inherent worth. As such, we must constantly emphasize and teach

that all mankind are created *b'tzelem Elokim* (in G-d's Divine image), and, therefore, all people are important before Hashem.

This *Motzai Shabbat*, Ashkenazi Jews will join our Sephardic brethren in the recitation of *Selichot* (Penitential Prayers) in spiritual preparation for the period of the *Yamim Noraim* (the Days of Awe). Throughout this unique time, let us ponder our singular relationship with Hashem as His *am segulah*. May this, in turn, lead to our desire for “an intertwining of souls, a union beyond verbal description” with our Creator, so that we may fulfill our role to “preserve and disseminate His Divine teachings” to all mankind. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, *kativah v'chatimah tovah* and *tizku l'shanim rabot*.

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>.

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