

Parashat Re'eh, 5773, 2013:

On Being G-d's Chosen Nation

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, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

You are a nation consecrated to G-d your L-rd. G-d has chosen you from all nations on the face of the earth to be His own special nation. (*Sefer Devarim* 14:2, Parashat Re'eh, this, and all Torah translations, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*)

The election of the Jewish people (*bechirat Yisrael*) is a fundamental concept in understanding our relationship with G-d. This idea is repeated in a number of places in the *Siddur*. As a result, it has become one of the best-known principles of Jewish thought:

- *Habocheh 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)

What, however, does it mean to be Hashem's chosen nation and precious treasure (*Am Hanivchar, Am Segulah*)? Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Rabbi Sir Jonathan Henry Sacks, formulated his response to our question in the following manner: "Do not think

that G-d choosing one people means He rejects every other people. Absolutely not! That was never our way. And that is why, again and again and again, G-d, the prophets say, is not our G-d only.” (Public lecture: “Jewish Identity - The Concept of a Chosen People,” May 8, 2001) Rather than an arrogant and elitist rejection of the other nations of the world, Rav Sacks presents an entirely different approach to understanding our unique role in Hashem’s grand plan for mankind. He maintains that our chosenness enables us to bring Hashem’s message to the world: “... the Jewish story, in its unique particularity, is the human story in its universality. If we would have been everyone in general, we would never have been somebody in particular. And if we hadn't been somebody in particular, we would never have a message for humanity in general.” (Ibid.) In other words, our chosenness allows us to spread G-d’s message of hope and everlasting peace to the nations of the world. It does not, however, make us “better than” anyone else.

Rav Shimson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) foreshadowed Rav Sacks in his dismissal of the “better than” approach in his understanding of the terms “*bechirat Yisrael*” and “*Am Segulah*.” Rather than a rejection of non-Jews, he translates this concept into a statement of the Jewish people’s **extraordinary responsibility to Hashem**. The Jewish people 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 the rest of mankind. Instead, *Kabbalat HaTorah* placed the *ol malchut Shamayim*, the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven (G-d’s will), uniquely upon us. Our responsibilities and obligations toward Hashem are, therefore, different in kind and degree than those of the rest of mankind. In a word, we Jews are blessed with 613 commandments, whereas the nations of the world have but seven.

Now that I have briefly presented an approach as to how to understand the content of the term “Chosen People,” allow me to ask a seemingly straightforward question: “Why did Hashem choose us? After all, “It was not because you had greater numbers than all the other nations that G-d embraced you and chose you; you are among the smallest of all the nations.” (*Sefer Devarim* 7:7) Rabbinic literature provides us with different responses to our question. I will focus on three of them. The first answer is that we, to the exclusion of all other nations, accepted the Torah - even though every other people had the opportunity to do so:

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?” (*Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah* 2b, translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my emendations to enhance readability)

The connection between the acceptance of the Torah and our election is made even more explicit in the following passage from *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:10: “And why did the Holy One blessed be He choose them [i.e. the Jews]? All of the other nations denigrated the Torah and did not want to accept it. But [they, i.e. the Jews] wanted it and chose [to follow] the Holy One blessed be He and His Torah...”

The second approach as to why Hashem chose us is found in *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber), Parashat Naso 13. Herein, the emphasis is placed upon our being the heirs of the

Avot and *Emahot* (Patriarchs and Matriarchs, i.e. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah), who personified truth and holiness:

And I chose you because you are the heirs of truth (Hebrew: “*sheatem m’zera emet*”). As the text states: “And I planted you from the best vine, entirely of truthful seed.” (*Sefer Yermiahu* 2:21) Moreover, it is also written: “...in you did Hashem your G-d choose,” (*Sefer Devarim* 7:6) – Even in the future I will never choose anyone other than you [i.e. the Jews] because you come from holy origins. As the text states: “They will not struggle needlessly or create in vain, for they are the offspring of the blessed ones of Hashem.” (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 65:23, all translations my own)

The final answer to the question “Why did Hashem chose us?” is in some ways the most direct and compelling. Quite simply, G-d loved and continues to love us: “Why did the Holy One blessed be He choose you [i.e. the Jews]? – He did this because He loved you. As the Torah states: ‘It was because of G-d's love for you...’” (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Buber, Parashat Bamidbar 20) In other words, according to this Midrash, our election is a result of pure and direct Divine grace – of *chane*, *v’chesed*, *v’rachamim* – rather than the result of any actions or merits on our part. With the exception of the Torah, *bechirat Yisrael*, therefore, emerges as the greatest and most beneficent gift in all of recorded history.

With Hashem’s help, may we live lives filled with demonstrable kindness and mercy to our fellow Jews and to all mankind. Moreover, may our actions ever prove that we are the *Am Hanivchar* and the *Am Segulah*. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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