

Parashat Vaetchanan 5776, 2016:

On Being 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 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, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The theme of the Chosen People (*am hanivchar*) is repeated in a number of places in the *Siddur*. Based upon the widespread dissemination of the prayer book, this idea has become one of the most universally 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)

The concept of the *am hanivchar* is presented in our *parasha* as well: “For you are a holy people (*am kadosh*) to the L-rd, your G-d: the L-rd your G-d has chosen you to be His treasured people (*am segulah*) out of all the peoples upon the face of the earth.” (*Sefer Devarim* 19:5, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) A careful reading of this *pasuk* (verse) teaches us that *am kadosh* and *am segulah* are two

distinct aspects of our people's designation as Hashem's chosen nation. *Am kadosh* signifies that we are differentiated from all other nations of the world in our singular dedication to the Master of the Universe and the precepts of His holy Torah. As such, we are the living embodiment of Moshe's prayer to the Almighty following the Sin of the Golden Calf: "For how then will it be known that I have found favor in Your eyes, I and Your people? Is it not in that You will go with us? Then I and Your people will be distinguished from every [other] nation on the face of the earth." (*Sefer Shemot* 3:16)

In contrast to *am kadosh*, *am segulah* focuses upon our special relationship with Hashem. This thought was clearly expressed by the 19th century German commentator, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), in his explication of our term:

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. (*Commentary to Sefer Shemot* 19:5, translation from the Hebrew edition my own)

In Rav Hirsch's view, therefore, the concept of *am segulah* emerges as the representation of our extraordinary devotion to Hashem, which encourages us to recognize that everything in our lives is "*m'ate Hashem hayitah zot*" ("comes directly from G-d," *Sefer Tehillim* 118:23).

Now that we have analyzed two of the constitutive elements of *am hanivchar*, we are ready to define it in broad terms. I believe that the former Chief Rabbi of England, Sir Jonathan Sacks, offered one of the best modern presentations of this concept. He notes

that many people are misled into believing that the idea of “chosenness” is tantamount to G-d rejecting all the other nations and, consequently, connotes arrogance and elitism. Rabbi Sacks suggests, however, that nothing could be further from the truth: “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) Rav Sacks presents an entirely different approach to understanding our one-of-a kind role in Hashem’s grand plan for mankind. He maintains that our election 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.”

In sum, our chosen stature allows us to spread G-d’s message of hope and everlasting peace to the nations of the world. Moreover, every nation has its unique role to play in the drama we call “life.” As such, each nation has its own intrinsic value and inherent worth. As such, it must be constantly emphasized and taught that everyone is created *b’tzelem Elokim*, in G-d’s Divine image. This idea was given powerful voice in a famous statement of Rabbi Akiva: “Beloved is man, for he was created in the image [of G-d]; it is a sign of even greater love that it has been made known to him that he was created in the image, as it is says, ‘For in the image of G-d, He made man’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 9:6; *Pirkei Avot* 3:14, translation, Rabbi Yosef Marcus) Thus, while we are the *am kadosh*, all nations have the potential to pursue holiness and thereby serve the Almighty in their own unique manner,

for they, too, are beloved before Him.

May we 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 when we will stand shoulder to shoulder in the recognition of Hashem's presence amongst us. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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 <mailto:rdb718@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. Please click on the highlighted link.