

Shabbat Chol HaMoed Succot, 5779, 2018:

“You Will Be Distinguished from All Other Nations”

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, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Shabbat Chol HaMoed Succot and Shabbat Chol HaMoed Pesach share the same main *kriah* (Torah reading): *Sefer Shemot*, Parashat Ki Tisa, 33:12-23 and 34:1-26. The source for these passages is a statement in *Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 31a: “Rav Huna said in the name of Rav: ‘On the Sabbath which falls on the intermediate days of the festival, whether Passover or Succot, the passage we read from the Torah is ‘Look – you say to me...’” (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations) The rationale for this particular reading initially seems clear, since we find a mention of both Shabbat and the Festivals contained therein:

Six days you may work, and on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing and in harvest you shall rest...The Festival of Unleavened Cakes you shall keep; seven days you shall eat unleavened cakes which I have commanded you...And you shall make for yourself a Festival of Weeks, the first of the wheat harvest, and the festival of the ingathering, at the turn of the year. (*Sefer Shemot* 34:21, 18, 22, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rav Ephraim Piekarski notes that these *pasukim* (verses) contain nearly the exact same wording as earlier verses found in *Sefer Shemot*, Parashat Mishpatim 15:16 and 23:16.

<http://www.haoros.com/Archive/index.asp?kovetz=886&cat=11&haoro=0>

He asks, “Why did *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) choose the verses in Parashat Ki Tisa as the *kriah* for Shabbat Chol HaMoed, rather than those of Parashat Mishpatim?”

While Rav Piekarski provides a cogent halachically-based answer, I would like to offer my own response to his question.

Our Torah reading for Shabbat Chol HaMoed is comprised of 36 *pasukim*, of which the first 29 contain no mention of either Shabbat or the Festivals. Instead, they focus upon Moshe's dialogical encounter with the Almighty following the egregious sin of the *Chet HaEgel* (Golden Calf), and the receiving of the second set of *luchot* (Tablets of the Law).

Initially, we may be stymied as to why *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) chose these 29 *pasukim* to be read at this time. Yet, I believe the concept of *machshava* (thought) links these verses to Shabbat Chol HaMoed. This idea is given powerful voice in Rav Shlomo Alkabetz's *Lecha Dodi* when he describes Shabbat as "*sof ma'aseh, b'machshava techilah*" ("last to be created, yet first in thought"). As many sources intimate, the nexus between Shabbat and Hashem's *machshava* in this Friday evening hymn is hardly accidental. Shabbat, and by extension the Festivals, underscore the unique import of *machshava* for these holy days, which provide the Jewish people with an unsurpassed opportunity for serious reflection. Moreover, in a very real sense, we emulate Hashem when we apply the thought component on Shabbat and the Festivals.

Based upon the singular connection that obtains between Shabbat, the Festivals and *machshava*, we can better understand why *Chazal* included the extended dialogue between Hashem and Moshe at the beginning of our Torah reading. Herein, we find a number of crucial spiritual concepts and theological principles that enhance our Shabbat and Yom Tov experience. Allow me to focus upon one of them: "For how then will it be known that

I [Moshe] 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 (*niflinu*) from every [other] nation on the face of the earth.” (*Sefer Shemot* 33:16) In what way will we be *niflinu* if Hashem’s *Schechinah* (Divine Presence) is amongst us? Not surprisingly, this is a question that has captured the hearts and minds of many of our greatest thinkers.

Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser (known as the “Malbim,” 1809-1879) grapples with our question and provides us with an original answer:

The only way that the Jewish people will be distinguished (*niflinu*) from the rest of mankind will be if You [Hashem] “will go with us.” This is the case, since all of the other nations of the world are guided by the hand of heavenly beings and angels, whereas we are separate from them in the sense that we are not under the control of any heavenly being or angel. Instead, “the L-rd’s portion is His people Jacob, the lot of His inheritance.” (*Sefer Devarim* 32:9) – as such, we are guided solely by His providence (*hashgachato*). (Translation, my own)

The Malbim’s interpretation of *niflinu* is unique. In relatively few words, he reminds us of the exceptional relationship we share with the Almighty that is personified in a verse from a Yom Kippur *tefilah* we recently sang together: “*ki anu amecha v’Atah Elokeinu*” (“For we are Your people, and You are our G-d”). In other words, we are the Creator’s *am hanivchar* (chosen people) and, as such, we and we alone are directly *tachat kanfei HaSchechinah* (under His divine Providence).

What does the expression, “*am hanivchar*,” mean in a practical sense? In my estimation, the former Chief Rabbi of England, Sir Jonathan Sacks, offers 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) Rabbi Sacks emphasizes a very 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.”

We now see that *Chazal* chose Shabbat Chol HaMoed’s Torah reading, with its seemingly extraneous 29 initial *pasukim*, precisely because these include multiple *yesodei haTorah v’ikarei emunah* (fundamental principles of Jewish belief) that this Shabbat uniquely allows us to contemplate. Prominent among these theological principles is the notion of *niflinu – am hanivchar*. Armed with Rabbi Sacks’ explanation of this concept, may we ever strive to live distinguished lives so that we will serve as role models for all mankind. Then, as Isaiah the prophet taught us so long ago, may we truly be a “light unto nations,” (49:6) and Hashem’s “witnesses” to the entire world. (43:10). With the Almighty’s guidance and our fervent desire, may this be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach!*

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

They may also be found on <http://www.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:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** 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.