

CHOSEN PEOPLE

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Yisro

Chosen People

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Today's Learning:
Avodah Zarah 1:6-7
O.C. 76:4-7
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nedarim 36
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Chagigah 16

In this week's parashah, Hashem calls us His "Am Segulah," often translated "Chosen People." Many Jews are uncomfortable with this title, as if it implies that Jews are a superior race to other nations. Not so, writes R' Shimon Schwab z"l (1908-1994; rabbi of the German "Breuer's" community in New York). We do not look down on other groups. It is no praise to assert that one is chosen from among inferior beings. The very fact that the Torah calls those who observe the Torah and mitzvot the "Chosen People" is a testament to the lofty stature of all of mankind. Likewise, R' Schwab writes, if

one believes that all studies other than Torah are worthless, then the thanks that one gives for having received the Torah is meaningless. What glory is ascribed to Torah knowledge if its distinction is that it is superior to nonsense?

What then does it mean to be an "Am Segulah"? R' Schwab explains: We find (in Rashi to Bereishit 24:50) that Lavan is called a rasha / wicked one because he did not respect his father. Why? Lavan was not Jewish, and he had no mitzvah to respect his father! On the other hand, the Gemara relates that a gentile by the name of Dama ben Netina honored his father by not awakening him even when he (Dama) lost a valuable business opportunity as a result. Why do the Sages extol this person who had no mitzvah to honor his father? Seemingly he was a fool for losing a fortune at the expense of that "good" deed!

What our Sages are teaching is that honoring one's parents is an element of basic human decency. Yet, the Torah commands us to honor our parents. Why? Honoring parents as required by the Torah begins where honoring parents because of common sense ends. The Torah is calling us to practice something higher than basic human decency, which even others practice. That is what is behind the duty to be an "Am Segulah." (Selected Writings p.290)

"In the third month from the Exodus of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai." (19:1)

The Midrash Tanchuma asks: Did Bnei Yisrael come to Sinai on this day? The verse should have said, "on that day." The midrash answers: The verse wants to teach us that one should accept the Torah anew every day as if it was given on that very day.

R' Mordechai Gifter z"l (1916-2001; rosh yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland) adds: Based on the Torah's usual style, we would have expected our verse to begin with the letter "vav" - "And in the third month" Why did it not?

He explains: The purpose of that Exodus was so that Bnei Yisrael would stand at Har Sinai and receive the Torah. Bnei Yisrael knew this and, at first, they eagerly anticipated the day when the Torah would be given. However, last week's parashah (verse 17:1, as interpreted by our Sages) teaches that they "loosened their grip" on the Torah. Their anticipation for the great day when the Torah would be given waned, and the consequence was that they were attacked by Amalek.

Thereafter, R' Gifter writes, Bnei Yisrael repented, and they began anew to anticipate the giving of the Torah. That is why our verse does not begin with "And." (Haggadah Shel Pesach Pirkei Mo'ed p.124)

R' Meir Simcha Hakohen z"l (rabbi of Dvinsk, Latvia; died 1926) explains the absence of the "vav" from the beginning of our verse as follows:

We read (Shmot 24:4), "Moshe wrote all the words of Hashem." From the context, it is clear that this event occurred before the Torah was given. Consistent with this, Rashi z"l comments on that verse that Moshe wrote "from Bereishit until the giving of the Torah."

Where is the break between what Moshe wrote before the Torah was given and what he wrote after? Our verse was the first one written after the giving of the Torah, and the absence of the connecting "vav" ("and") is meant to indicate that distinction. (Meshech Chochmah)

"The sound of the shofar grew continually much stronger; Moshe will speak and G-d will respond to him with a voice." (19:19)

R' Naftali Hertz Wiesel z"l (18th century; Germany) asks: Why is the second part of this verse in future tense? Moreover, it seems out of place, since only later does Moshe climb Har Sinai and descend, and then Hashem speaks the words of the Torah.

He explains: The verse is telling us that the sound of the shofar that was heard in the camp was heralding an announcement. What was the announcement? It was: "Moshe will speak and G-d will respond to him with a voice." This was Hashem's promise that Moshe would be able to resolve almost any question that Bnei Yisrael might ask him about the Torah and, on those rare occasions when Moshe could not respond, Hashem would immediately inform him of the law.

With this, writes R' Wiesel, we can understand the opening phrase of Pirkei Avot: "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai." Why not: "Moshe received the Torah from Hashem"? Because, R' Wiesel explains, the mishnah means to tell us that (the events at) Har Sinai itself testified that Moshe received the Torah. (Yain Ha'levanon)

"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Descend, warn the people, lest they break through to Hashem to see, and a multitude of them will fall. . .'

"Moshe said to Hashem, 'The people cannot ascend Har Sinai, for You have warned us, saying: Bound the mountain and sanctify it.'

"Hashem said to him, 'Go, descend. Then you shall ascend, and Aharon with you, but the kohanim, and the people -- they shall not break through to ascend to Hashem, lest He burst forth against them'." (19:21, 23-24)

Why, in fact, did Hashem repeat the command that Bnei Yisrael not ascend Har Sinai? Why did He reject Moshe's argument that it was enough to tell Bnei Yisrael once?

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903-1993) explains: There is a difference between the boundary that holds back a human, a rational being, and the boundary that holds back an animal. For an animal, one must build a fence, and that is what Moshe had done earlier. However, a person does not need

a partition; it is enough to warn him that the territory does not belong to him. The boundary that restrains a rational being may be an abstraction. Apparently, R' Soloveitchik explains, G-d did not want the people to refrain from ascending the mountain because a physical barrier blocked them. Therefore, He commanded Moshe to descend and warn them to restrain themselves because of Moshe's command and not because there was a physical barrier. (Festival of Freedom p.71)

"You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven. You shall not make images of what is with Me; gods of silver and gods of gold shall you not make for yourselves." (20:19-20)

How does the second verse quoted here follow from the first? R' Shmuel Tayib z"l (early 20th century; Djerba) explains:

Idolatry developed originally because men believed that G-d is too lofty to interact with mankind. Instead, they believed that man could relate only to G-d's intermediaries, such as angels, stars, and planets.

Hashem teaches in our verse that those who held that belief were wrong. "You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven." Therefore, you know that you can interact directly with Me, and you have no need to make "images of what is with Me." (Afapei Shachar)

Shemittah

This week we discuss the prohibition on exporting produce from Eretz Yisrael during the shemittah year. The prohibition itself, which is of Rabbinic origin (not from the Torah), is mentioned in the mishnah, Masechet Shevi'it 6:5. Several different reasons for the prohibition are presented in the mishnah commentary Yad Avraham.

Some explain that the prohibition is connected with the requirement of biur / destruction. [This requirement will be discussed at greater length in future issues but essentially requires that produce of shemittah be destroyed once it is no longer available in the wild.] There is a dispute among the sages of the mishnah whether, if produce was removed from Eretz Yisrael, any leftovers must be returned to Eretz Yisrael for biur or whether biur can be done outside of Eretz Yisrael. The mishnah which prohibits exporting produce of shemittah reflects the view of the sage who requires leftover produce to be returned to Eretz Yisrael for biur, and is meant as a precaution. (R' Ovadiah Mi'Bartenura z"l)

Others explain that the prohibition on export is not connected to the requirement of biur. Rather, the Sages were afraid that produce that was exported would not be treated with the sanctity of shevi'it. [As discussed in the last several issues of Hamaayan, there are limitations on the use of shemittah produce because of a certain sanctity that the produce has.] According to this view, all sages of the mishnah agree that export is prohibited. (Rash Mi'Shantz; Ra'avad)

Still others explain that because of the sanctity of the fruits, it is only fitting that they be eaten in Eretz Yisrael. (Pe'at Ha'shulchan)

The following are some of the laws applicable to exporting fruits of shemittah:

Some say that a traveler may take a limited amount of shemittah produce with him if necessary for his own provisions.

Etrogim of shevi'it may be exported if there is no other adequate source of etrogim for the Jews of the diaspora. In that case, however, one must eat the etrog immediately after Sukkot.

If fruits of shemittah were exported, the exporter has sinned, but the buyers of the fruit are permitted to eat it.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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