

THE CHOSEN

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Yisro

The Chosen

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 look down on other groups. Not so, writes R' Shimon Schwab z"l (1908-1994; rabbi of the "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 though 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. What, then, is added when the Torah commands us to honor our parents? Honoring parents as required by the Torah *begins* where honoring parents because of common sense *ends*. The Torah is calling on us to practice something higher than basic human decency, which even others practice. That is what it means to be an "Am Segulah." (Selected Writings p.290)

"Yitro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moshe, heard everything that Elokim did for Moshe and for Yisrael, His people--that Hashem had taken Yisrael out of Egypt." (18:1)

Rashi z"l comments: "What was the particular report which he heard so that he came? The splitting of the Yam Suf and the war with Amalek."

R' Eliezer Dovid Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Oyber- Visheve, Hungary) explains: Yitro merited to recognize the Creator and to abandon idolatry, but why did he abandon his home and join Bnei Yisrael? After all, Hashem's Honor fills the entire universe!

Yitro joined Bnei Yisrael because he recognized that they are Hashem's Chosen People. How did he know this? It cannot be because of the plagues in Egypt; maybe those were only because the Egyptians deserved to be punished. Rather, "Yitro . . . heard everything that Elokim did for Moshe and for Yisrael, His people [after] Hashem had taken Yisrael out of Egypt." When Yitro heard about the splitting of the Yam Suf--a spectacular miracle which served no purpose other than to demonstrate Hashem's love for the Jewish People--he understood that Bnei Yisrael are the Chosen People.

But, maybe the splitting of the Yam Suf did serve a purpose--to save Bnei Yisrael from the pursuing Egyptian army. To dispel this notion, Rashi adds that Yitro also heard about the war with Amalek. Just as Bnei Yisrael defeated Amalek in conventional warfare, they could have defeated the Egyptians too. The splitting of the Yam Suf was unnecessary except to demonstrate Hashem's love for Bnei Yisrael. (Keren L'Dovid)

"Moshe told his father-in-law everything that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and Egypt for Yisrael's sake . . ." (18:8)

R' Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer z"l (1815-1871; rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Pressburg, Hungary) asks: What did Moshe tell Yitro? Didn't we read already, "Yitro . . . heard everything that Elokim did for Moshe and for Yisrael, His people"?

He explains: Yitro heard all about the Ten Plagues and the Exodus. However, Yitro was bewildered. Why did Hashem seemingly allow Pharaoh to toy with Him? Since Hashem knows the future, He must have known that only the Plague of the Firstborn would move Pharaoh. Why didn't He bring that plague immediately and be done with it?

R' Sofer continues: We know the answer to that question, because Hashem told Moshe (10:1), "I have made his heart and the heart of his servants stubborn so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst and so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I placed among them--that you may know that I am Hashem." The Ten Plagues were meant to teach the world, in general, and Bnei Yisrael, in particular, about Hashem's power. But Yitro had no way of knowing that until Moshe told him, in our verse, "everything that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and Egypt *for Yisrael's sake*." (Ketav Sofer)

"Moshe sent off his father-in-law, and he went to his land." (18:27)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) asks: Why was Yitro's send-off placed in the Torah just before the Giving of the Torah, when it actually occurred a year later? He offers three answers:

(1) To indicate that the Torah inherently belongs to the Jewish People, and to no other. This is why the first commandment begins (20:2), "I am Hashem, your Elokim, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery," not: I am Hashem who created heaven and earth.

(2) Although Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah willingly, our Sages say that Hashem also held the mountain over their heads to compel them to accept the Torah. Why? So that our relationship to Hashem would be one of servants to a Master, not a relationship of people who accepted a leader voluntarily. We are indebted to Hashem because He took us out of Egypt, and we repay Him by serving Him. The Torah emphasizes this by implying that Yitro, who was never enslaved in Egypt, was not part of the Giving of the Torah.

(3) Bnei Yisrael's enslavement in Egypt was itself preparation for receiving the Torah. Man's gashmiut / physicality and his seichel / intellect and spirituality have an inverse relationship to each other. When man focuses on his gashmiut, his seichel declines. When man downplays his gashmiut, his seichel flourishes. The Torah is seichel. Therefore, slavery, which subdues gashmiut, prepared Bnei Yisrael to receive the Torah. Yitro, as mentioned, was never a slave in Egypt. [This answers a question one might have asked regarding the second answer above: why should we be grateful to Hashem for taking us out of Egypt when He put us there in the first place? It turns out, however, that the enslavement in Egypt was for our own benefit.]

Maharal continues: Our Sages say that three gifts are acquired through pain- -the Torah, Eretz Yisrael and Olam Ha'ba. Each of these three is a *spiritual* gift. Therefore, pain, which subdues man's gashmiut, helps him to acquire these three gifts. (Drush Al Ha'Torah, Introduction)

"Elokim spoke all these statements, to say." (20:1)

Rashi z"l writes: The expression, "To say," teaches us that Bnei Yisrael responded "Yea" to each affirmative commandment and "Nay" to each negative commandment.

R' Shalom Rokeach z"l (1779-1855; first Belzer Rebbe) asks: Our Sages say that the first two commandments, "I am Hashem," and "You shall not have other gods," were uttered simultaneously. Since one is an affirmative commandment and the other negative, what did Bnei Yisrael respond?

He answers: They responded, "Hashem echad" / "G-d is One." This is the equivalent of saying "Yea" to "I am Hashem" and "Nay" to "You shall not have other gods." This is what we allude to when we sing in the Shabbat zemer, Yom Shabbaton: "They entered the covenant together, 'We shall do and we shall listen' they said as one; they opened up together, "Hashem is one." (Lekket Imrei Kodesh)

Shemittah

This week we continue discussing the concept of "Kedushat Shevi'it" / the sanctity of the fruits of the seventh year. The halachot below are taken from chapter seven of Sefer Ha'shemittah by R' Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky z"l.

Anything that has kedushat shevi'it / sanctity of the seventh year, may not be destroyed (except through normal consumption). This applies to human and animal food, dyes made from produce, etc. Therefore, if the pit of a fruit still has some fruit attached to it, or if the pit itself is edible, it may not be thrown away. "Edible pits" include also those hard pits which have a soft kernel inside.

Fruit skins may not be thrown away if they are edible. If they are fit for making preserves, one should do so. If they are fit for animals, they should be given to animals. If dyes can be made from them, they should be used for dyes. If they are not useful for any purpose, they may be thrown away.

If produce is fit for eating, but one does not want to eat it, it should be set aside until it rots. In practice, observant households in Israel separate their garbage during the shemittah year so that refuse that has sanctity (fruits and vegetables) is not mixed with refuse that does not have sanctity (everything else that was on the table, from the chicken bones to the paper napkins). Note that, at any given point in the shemittah year and the year after the shemittah year, some fruits and vegetables will have shemittah sanctity and others will not, a topic to be discussed in a future issue.) Alternatively, produce that one does not wish to eat may be put in a place where an animal will eat it (notwithstanding the prohibition on giving human food to an animal *directly*).

One may give a child fruits of shemittah to eat even though the child might throw away the edible parts of the peels or pits.

One may not pick unripe fruits during the shemittah because that wastes them. However, one may pick a small quantity to eat on the spot.

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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