

CHOSEN AND TOUGH

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Parshas Re'eh begins the main legal text of Sefer Divarim. Containing 55 Mitzvos, Re'eh's focus is on those Mitzvos which set Israel apart from all other nations and lifestyles. Although all Mitzvos make us "different", these are the commandments such as Kashrus and the Yomim Tovim which publicly declare our status as "Am Livadad Yishkon - A nation that dwells alone".

The public persona of a nation, or for that matter, any organization, is a product of public perception, rather than substance. Billions of dollars are spent on creating an image, selling a dream, advertising, and other forms of P.R.; and success is measured by how visible you are along the information highway. More often than we are willing to admit, we are fooled into buying unnecessary, frivolous, and non-substantive products, because of effective selling strategies.

The Torah in Parshas Vaeschanan promised us that our public image would be that of a "wise and understanding nation". It promised us that so long as we keep G-d's mitzvos we will be successful in all our endeavors, and respected by all the other nations. It promised that our public persona would be founded upon substance and quality, not slick advertising and suggestion.

In preparation for the Bnai Yisroel entering Eretz Yisroel, Moshe forewarned them against being influenced by the idolatrous practices and life styles of the Seven Nations. He commanded them to, "...tear down their altars, break up their sacred pillars, burn their Asherah trees, and chop down the statues of their gods, obliterating their names from that place". (12:3)

Moshe did not propose compromises or political niceties. Moshe didn't discuss living in peace with other ideologies or religions. Moshe detailed in clear and unequivocal terms their obligation to clean up the spiritual environment. The nation that was destined to "dwell alone" required a homeland that was "alone".

Moshe did not believe that we could withstand the influences of a foreign society determined to assimilate us into its values. As history has tragically proven, and as the present continues to support, Moshe was unerringly accurate in his assessment, and fears. Had the Bnai Yisroel listened to Moshe and removed all foreign practices, their subsequent place in history would have been of messianic proportions. We would have been acknowledged as a "wise and understanding nation", and respected for "dwelling alone". The spiritual product we are intended to sell as the Chosen People would have become a marketing success.

In 14:2 of Re'eh, Hashem proclaimed us as the "Chosen People", a designation which we need to

understand. Many have mistakenly cloaked themselves with an air of intellectual superiority and religious elitism that unfortunately leads to selfishness and the negation of responsibility. Individuals or nations that see themselves as superior by virtue of genetics or ancestry, rather than personal merit and behavior, will view all others as inferior to them because of the absence of the same. Regardless of the others personal merits and accomplishments, if he doesn't have the same background as myself he is less than I am.

Taken to its extreme, history has shown the extent that superiority will dehumanize the "man who was created in G-d's image". If superiority is solely the result of ancestry then Darwin's Survival of the Fittest is the inevitable destruction of all those deemed as potentially dangerous to the existence of the superior species.

Making difficult decisions that hurt today, but are of benefit tomorrow, is the meaning of wisdom and maturity. In all areas of life such decisions and sacrifices are demanded. None of us, in the hopes of prolonging our lives or that of our loved ones, would stay the surgeon's scalpel bust because the incision hurts today. Misplaced mercy and humility has been the cause of great damage in individual, family, communal, and national destinies.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos 2:9 defines the straight path that a person should follow. Rabbi Shimon says, "one who makes decisions today with concern for tomorrow". The same is true for organizations and nations. The concerns for the here and now often misguide us in relation to the realities of tomorrow. I have little doubt that most of Sefer Divarim, if said today, would be deemed "politically incorrect". Yet, had the Bnai Yisroel heeded Moshe's fundamentalist demands and removed all foreign practices and ideologies, the world would have gained immeasurably.

Being the Chosen People carries with it a responsibility. We are to be the nation who is most responsible to Hashem and His purpose in creating all of mankind, not just the Jew. To do so we must be perceived by the rest of the world as different by virtue of our behavior, actions, and humility. Even among our own we attempt to equalize all, including the Ger - convert, by acknowledging our shared ancestry as the "children of Avraham and Sarah". As Yishayuhu declared, (Haftoras Ekev)"Look to Avraham your father and to Sarah who gave birth to you".

Individual Yichus is only as good as the individual's merits, actions, and values. It was Avraham and Sarah who, as the only Jews alive, devoted the majority of their time teaching the non-Jew about G-d and His purpose for creating the universe. Of course, we are obligated to protect our uniqueness from the assimilative values of society. In so doing, we must be fearless and at times ruthless. Idolatry and paganism, in whatever sophisticated form they appear, demean mankind to the level of animal by declaring the animal in man as divine. On the other hand, adherence to Torah and mitzvos directs and elevates the animal in man, endowing it with dignity, humility, and G-dliness.

Good Shabbos.

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