



Parshat Yitro

Why Do Jews Claim to be the Chosen People?

Dear Rebbetzin,

The notion that the Jews are G-d's chosen people has always bothered me. It seems to me spiritual snobbism – holding oneself to be greater than others. Considering ourselves to be better than others also arouses needless anti-Semitism. G-d created many nations in the world. Doesn't He love each of them equally, just as good parents are expected to love all their children the same? Why would our Creator show favoritism?

Sigalit Richman (name changed)

Dear Sigalit,

I can very much identify with your difficulty with the notion of being 'G-d's chosen people.' When I was a teenager searching for truth, this chosen-people-business appalled me very much about Judaism, and almost prevented me from becoming Torah observant. Often, my students as well, have a hard time with the concept that the Jewish people are supposed to be 'The Chosen People.' It is remarkable that the people whom Hashem chose do not desire to be chosen. However, an arrogant nation, who considers themselves to be better than others, would never have been chosen by G-d. The fact that so many Jews are uncomfortable with being 'the Chosen People,' ironically, makes them the most suitable candidate for this special role.

A Blessing for the World

Why does G-d need a chosen people? Why does He need any people at all? Hashem created the world in order to share of His goodness. Yet, we are only able to fully enjoy this goodness when we earn it through our own efforts (*Derech Hashem*, Chapter 1). By following G-d's instructions, humanity gains the opportunity to earn their well-deserved reward. Yet, Adam and Chava, the very first human beings, disobeyed G-d and thus failed to earn their own goodness. Their descendants did not rise to the occasion of rectifying this original disobedience until Avraham came. He went against his nature to obey G-d's commands and thereby became a source of blessing for all of humanity, as it states, "In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have listened to My voice" (*Bereishit* 22:18). As soon as Avraham followed G-d to an unknown destination, Hashem bequeathed him with the power to bless the world, "Blessings are entrusted to you; until now they were in my power, I blessed Adam and Noach, but from now on you shall bless whomever you wish" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 12:2). Of Avraham's two sons, Yishmael and Yitzchak, only Yitzchak walked in Avraham's footsteps. However, Yishmael became a bandit – committing murder, adultery, and idol worship (Rashi, *Bereishit* 21:9). Subsequently, from Yitzchak's children, only Ya'acov followed the path of his fathers, whereas, Esav became a murderer (Rashi, *Bereishit* 25:29). Ya'acov completed the rectification of Adam, (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra* 58a), and was therefore, the first father whose children were all unblemished and holy (Rashi, *Bereishit* 35:22). This explains why only Israel is called Adam (*Yechezkiel* 34:31), as the Talmud comments, "You are Adam, but the other nations are not called Adam" (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 61a). The Children of Israel fulfill the purpose of Creation, and therefore, G-d imbued them with the power to elevate and bless the world. This is the meaning of being 'The Chosen People.'

Teachers of Humanity

The purpose of being 'Chosen' is to help and facilitate all of humanity to reach the ultimate purpose of recognizing G-d and following His instructions. Being 'Chosen' is therefore more of a responsibility than a privilege. By giving the Torah to the Jewish People, Hashem charged us with the responsibility to become the teachers of humanity. The best teachers facilitate students to attain knowledge on their own. Likewise, the responsibility of Israel is to cause the "world to become filled with the knowledge of Hashem as the waters cover the sea" (*Yesh'a'yahu* 11:9). Knowledge of G-d must spur us to listen to Hashem and obey His commands. Due to the merit of Avraham's obedience, the Jewish people inherit the capacity for listening to G-d. This is the main reason why Hashem chose Israel to receive His Torah and become His treasured people.

ספר שמות פרק יט (ה) ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקולי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ:

"Now therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be Mine own treasure above all the peoples: for all the earth is Mine" (*Shemot* 19:5).

Chosen to Serve

This world is a world of hierarchy. Within the Jewish people there is a threefold hierarchy: Yisrael, Levi, Kohen. A Kohen is called up first to the Torah in the Synagogue. Yet, I never heard anyone being uncomfortable with the chosenness of the Kohen. The Kohen is chosen to serve in the Temple. By offering sacrifices on behalf of the world, he brings not only the Jewish people but also the entire world, closer to G-d. "Sacrifice" in Hebrew is called קרבן/*korban* from the language of קרוב/*karov*, which means close. The word כהן/*Kohen* actually means to serve and is so used even in Modern Hebrew, as for example, "I served as a Rabbi..." The role of the Kohen within the Jewish community directly parallels the role of the Jewish people in the world. In fact, in the Torah verse, which follows directly after the one, quoted above, Hashem calls the Jewish people a "Kingdom of Kohanim:"

ספר שמות פרק יט (ו) ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל בני ישראל:

"You shall be to Me a kingdom of kohanim (priests), and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel" (*Shemot* 19:6)

Thus, being 'Chosen' doesn't necessarily mean being better than others. Rather, the Jewish people are chosen to serve humanity, in the same way that the Kohen is chosen to serve in the Temple. Just as a teacher serves his or her students by helping them to reach their potential, so are we Jews called upon to serve humanity and help them reach their potential. We are not chosen to disparage non-Jewish people, but rather, to do our job to the best of our ability, even if it sometimes entails cleaning up everyone's mess. Didn't the Kohen have to clean up the ashes in the Temple?