

"SINAI -- BURDEN OR BLESSING?"

Shavuot, the zeman mattan toratenu, the time of the giving of our Torah, is appropriate for a discussion of the theme of am segulah, the Jewish concept of the Chosen People.

This idea is affirmed every time we read the Torah, when the individual who is honored to rise to the Torah recites the blessing: asher bahar banu, thanking God that He has chosen us. It is a concept that is repeated especially on holidays, when, in the Kiddush, we proclaim asher bahar banu, that God has chosen us from amongst all the peoples. It is a doctrine that plays a paramount role in Jewish thought. It was promised to Abraham, proclaimed to Moses, and promulgated at Sinai. And for Rabbi Yehuda Halevi it is the very core of Jewish religion and philosophy.

What, briefly, is the contents of this idea? According to the Torah, it implies two functions: that of Israel as a goy kadosh, a holy nation, and as a mamleket kohanim, a kingdom of priests. The first function, that of a holy nation, relates to our separate-ness from the rest of the world insofar as our loyalty to Torah is concerned. It means that we are a people devoted to attaining sanctity by observance of all the commandments, by following the life of Halakhah. That is why the concept of chosenness is so frequently related to the study of Torah.

The second function, that of Israel as a kingdom of priests, relates to our chosen obligation to the rest of the world. Kehunah, or priesthood, is defined in the Jewish tradition as a teaching vocation. Thus, the Prophet Ezekiel says of the Priests that v'et

ami yoru bein kodesh va-hol, they shall instruct My people to distinguish between the sacred and the profane. Israel was elected to teach the rest of the world the knowledge of God and the service of God. Chosenness, therefore, is a service of teaching and a teaching of service.

However, this doctrine of election has not fared well in the modern world. The western democratic mentality finds it hard to accept a unique role for any nation and the idea is therefore problematical for western man. In this 20th century, millions of people have become the victims of a racism which declared one race superior to others. It is therefore quite important for us to know what chosenness is not.

Let it then be said above all else that this doctrine is not one of racial arrogance. We do not bless God who has chosen us al kol ha-amim, above all other peoples, but mikol ha-amim, from amongst all other people. There is nothing in this theory which relates to an innate superiority of the Jewish people. On the contrary, there is in the Talmud a reference to just the reverse!

That chosenness does not imply an ignoring of or a feeling of superiority over the rest of the world, is already implicit in the fact that, as we have already explained, one aspect of chosenness is our priesthood. Indeed, the very act of divine choosing of Israel is related to His love for the rest of the world. Thus, when we were told that we were to be the am segulah, the peculiar possession of the Lord, the Torah quotes God as saying that He has chosen us ki li kol ha-aretz, "for all the world is mine." The Italian-Jewish commentator, Seforno, explains that this means: you shall be the

kingdom of priests to interpret and explain to all of mankind how to call upon the name of the Lord and to serve Him with one shoulder.

How does this teaching take place? It is rarely direct, by instruction in words. More often, it is, or should be, by example. Most always the best and most effective way of teaching the presence of God is through the very mystery of Jewish history. Our survival as an intact people is the greatest testament to the existence of God.

Chosenness, then, implies a responsibility to all others. One contemporary scholar has discovered, in a study of the Rabbis of the Mishnah, that the greater the stress by the Rabbi on the idea of the chosen people, the greater the breadth of his universality. Thus, for instance, the same R. Akiva who proclaims that "beloved is Israel for they were called children to God," is the one who proclaimed with equal sincerity, "beloved is man -- all of mankind-- in that he was created in the image of God."

To reject, therefore, the idea of Jewish chosenness because it can -- and with some non-Jews has -- degenerated to a vicious kind of racism, to a Herrenvolk idea, is to throw out the baby with the bath water. Any idea contains the risk of distortion; and the nobler the idea, the greater the danger and the uglier the perversion. For instance, the very idea of government can lead, in the extreme, to a suffocating tyranny; shall we, therefore, all become anarchists to avoid this danger? Religion may degenerate into superstition; is that a reason for atheism? Liberty often develops into libertinism; must we, in order to remain moral, become authoritarian autocrats?

Respect can become a submissive subservience; must every stanch individual therefore become a flippant rebel? Love often becomes lechery; does that speak well for the monastic ideal? The fact that the idea of chosenness can and has become deadly is all the more reason for us to affirm its true meaning for us and our children after us.

But let us be honest with ourselves. We have said that chosenness implies the holiness of our people and the teachings of Godliness and Torah to the rest of mankind. But can we Jews continue to claim chosenness in the 20th century? In the American Jewish community Orthodoxy is in the minority. Most people do not study Torah and most people do not observe all or even most of the mitzvot. A recent poll proves, to our chagrine, that the highest percentage of those who do not believe in God come from the Jewish community. How then, under such conditions, can we say that it is we who are to teach Godliness to others? Does not the idea of the chosen people, in our times, become totally irrelevant?

Permit me to propose an answer by presenting an apparent contradiction between two famous talmudic traditions. In one place the Rabbis tell us that the Torah was given to us under coercion. Kafah alehem har ke'gigit, God lifted Mt. Sinai above our ancestors as if it were a gigantic tank, v'amar, im tekablu et ha-torah mutav, and He said, if you accept the Torah, good and well -- I will return the mountain to its roots. However, v'im lav, sham tehei kevuratkhem, if you do not accept the Torah, I will hurl it down upon you, and this shall become no the mountain of revelation but a collective tomb where all of you will be buried alive!

The second tradition tells an entirely different story. Hehezir ha-Kadosh barukh hu et ha-torah me'umah le'umah, the Almighty carried

the Torah to every single nation, none excepted, and offered it to each of them. But every time He received a refusal. Some felt they could not abide by the commandment prohibiting stealing; others rejected the prohibition of murder; still others could not reconcile themselves with the commandment against adultery. Finally, He came to this small and insignificant people called Israel and offered them the Torah. Here He found acceptance. Israel answered, with one voice: naaseh <sup>ve</sup> ve'nishmah -- we shall do and we shall accept.

Thus the two traditions are remarkably different. In the first, God chose us; quite literally, we had no choice. It was either Torah or death. In the second tradition, we chose Him. In the first we were the chosen people; in the second, He was the chosen God. Are these traditions not opposed to each other? Do we not have, then, a real contradiction?

The answer is that there is no conflict between them, and that both are necessary. Indeed, these two traditions together serve to underscore the central meaning of the theology of chosenness. What they mean to tell us is that both are necessary. Both chronologically and logically, God first chooses us, and then we must choose Him. He chose us only once, at Sinai. This choice thereafter devolved upon every Jew, in any place and at any time, no matter what his wish, his commitment, his conduct. For all eternity, any one born into this people is chosen. But we must choose Him anew in every generation. Indeed, every individual must choose God all over again. Sometimes the choice must be made repeatedly, as each of us is constantly confronted with new ethical crises. At Sinai it was true that asher bahar banu, He chose us. But when we study Torah and recite the blessing and we preface our remarks with barukh ata ha-Shem, blessed art Thou O Lord, then we

have chosen His as well. When, every morning, we recite the blessing, ha-boher b'amo yisrael be'ahavah, that God chooses His people Israel in love, we speak of God choosing us, in accordance with the first tradition. But immediately thereafter we proclaim the Shema Yisrael, and this profession of unity is our choice of God. When we say ki banu vaharta, we speak of God seeking us out and placing Torah upon us; but then when Moses tells us u-vaharta ba-hayyim, and thou shalt choose life, he is telling us to choose the Source of all life -- God Himself.

Now, chosennes has both obligations and privileges, difficulties and joys. The negative features -- the responsibilities and the agonies -- derive from God's choice of us; the positive aspects -- the sense of privilege and the delight -- come from our choice of Him. Every Jew is chosen; at birth he inherits all the agonies of bearing God's word to an unrepentant and unredeemed world. When he is but eight days old, the Jewish child suffers the anguish of cold steel cutting into his flesh, his blood is spilled, and he cries out a shriek of pain. He has been chosen as a Jew. But when thereafter, if he has the privilege of the proper kind of parents who know how to train him, he learns to organize his life according to the pattern of sanctity, and he is able to recite a blessing and to put on his tefillin at his Bar Mitzvah, then he experiences joy and delight: he has chosen God. For the Jew who is only chosen, Jewishness is a fate; for the Jew who also chooses, it is a fortune.

How I pity the poor Jew who has rejected Torah and abandoned his Judaism! What does he have from his Jewish heritage? -- only troubles! Judaism is for him only an intolerable burden. How troubled he is by anti-Semitism. He has grown up in supposedly free

America and his Jewish "defense agencies" every odd week, in order to prove their successes, tell him that anti-Semitism is no longer a problem. Yet on even weeks, when they feel they must justify their continuing demands for funds, they point to an anti-Semite here and an anti-Semite there. How he suffers when he learns of some raving semi-lunatic in a hamlet in the mid-West who has made an unflattering reference to Jews! It gives him mental cramps for weeks thereafter. Inwardly he seems to cry out to the unknown adversary: what do you want from me? I am not Jewish in any real way; is it my fault that I was born into the Jewish people? He suffers from spiritual loneliness, finding himself at home neither amongst Jews nor amongst non-Jews. Every December he has to undergo the same annual syndrome of trying to explain to his children why they cannot participate fully in the holiday of the majority, and yet he has almost nothing to give them to make them feel that they too have something to celebrate in life. They lack identity, they do not know the meaning of their selfhood. If he is at all spiritually sensitive, he thinks back to his parents and grandparents, from whence he came, and how miserable is his embarrassment! His face turns red with guilt. But then he gazes over the border that separates him from the WASP -- and how he wishes that he were born a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant! Now he turns green with envy. And for it all, his life is colorless, pale, with nothing to rescue him from spiritual ennui but all his many anxieties. The unJewish Jew who is only chosen but has not himself chosen God, proceeds through life in self-doubt, wallowing in the putrid puddles of perplexity and purposelessness, alienated both from Jews and non-Jews, both from man and God. But when the Jew, chosen by God forcibly throughout history, turns to God and now, out of his own free will and with the total commitment of a free per-



sonality, chooses Him -- his life is transformed, filled with the beauty of meaning and purpose. If a Jew is only chosen and not choosing, then Mt. Sinai crushes him. But if he turns about and decides to choose God, then Mt. Sinai becomes a lofty summons, not a landslide; a blessing and not a burden; a challenge and not an avalanche; a rebirth and not a burial place.

An English Jew, Sir Isaiah Berlin, in a whimsical moment maintained that Jewishness for Jews is like a hunchback. Some Jews are ashamed to be disfigured by it, and try to have as few contacts with the rest of the world as possible; they try to hide their deformity. Others act as if they were not disfigured and hope thereby that no one else will recognize it. Still others become nationalists, and convince themselves that their deformity is a beauty mark.

In a way, what he says is a partial truth. But these three categories are only subdivisions of one of two major classes. They only describe Jews for whom the Jewishness is an inescapable faith, something forced upon them against their will, something into which they were born without being asked. For them, indeed, Jewishness is a deformity and a burden. But there is a class of people who have gone far beyond this. They are not only born as Jews, but they bear their Jewishness with pride. They are not only the chosen, they are also the choosing. Mt. Sinai has not crushed them; it has elevated them aloft. Torah and Jewishness is not a deformity they want to ignore or hide or talk themselves out of, but it is the keter shel Torah, a crown, a diadem, a mark of eternal dignity and distinction.

This, then, is the answer to our question. All Jews are chosen, but it is only the choosing Jews who have freely committed themselves to Torah who carry out the full mission of Israel. They bear the



brunt of the difficulties of Jewishness, but they are also heirs to its glory. The many who are merely chosen are the passive and the pitiful. The few who choose are the ones who will redeem their chosen brethren, and with them all of mankind.

At a time of Yizkor, when you remember parents and grandparents, and through them the link of every generation with the one that preceded it, all the way up the chain of time, is a time that we must consider what we have said today. If our link to the past is merely biological, simply a matter of heredity, then we are merely chosen Jews. But that is far from sufficient. If we want to make our lives marvelous instead of miserable, glorious instead of agonizing, we must now rise and affirm Torah, choose God, decide for the life of sacredness and beauty.

For all Jews, no matter what their conduct or commitment, today is the zeman mattan toratenu, the season in which God has given the Torah -- whether we like it or not. Now we must rise to the greater glory of kabbalat ha-Torah, of accepting the Torah. Now we are called upon to be not only chosen Jews but choosing Jews.