



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Two Tiers of Chosenness

The exhilarating *Shirat HaYam*, Song Of The Sea, sung by Moshe and Israel contain not only lofty prose and praise extolling the Almighty but foundational principles of Jewish faith and belief. To cite three examples: one finds the declaration of the omnipotence of God, God's eternity, and the principle that a Temple be established to worship Him.

In this same vein, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l was intrigued by a particular verse in the *Shira* that appears to define a person's 'Jewishness'. The *Shira's* second verse states **זֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵלֵינוּ יִגְדָּל**: **אֲנִי וְאַרְמְתֶּנּוּ**. "...this is my God, and I will glorify Him; My father's God, and I will exalt Him" (*Shemot* 15:2).

The Rav took note of Rashi's comment which addresses the phrase, "My father's God, and I will glorify Him". This phrase in the verse, says Rashi, highlights the fact that we receive our holiness as Jews as an inheritance from the Forefathers. "Holiness has been possessed and has remained by me, and His divinity has been upon me from the days of my fathers" (*Rashi* 3:2).

The Rav expounded on this teaching and explained that a Jew actually contains two tiers of 'holiness.' One is rooted in the fact that an individual is born a Jew. A Jew is the beneficiary of holiness as a direct result of being a descendant of the Avot, as Rashi's emphasized above.

A second level of holiness is found in a Jew. This aspect of sanctity is implied by the first half of the same verse from the *Shira*: "This is my God, and I will glorify him." This relates to the fact that a Jew accepts upon themselves the mitzvot, studies Torah, and builds a life of service and dedication. This is not dissimilar to the way in which a convert embraces a Jewish life (*Nefesh Harav*, *Shechter*, *Parshat Beshalach*).

The Rav demonstrated that this distinction between the two components of holiness is also implied by the two blessings a Jew recites each morning. Both blessings refer to the chosenness of Israel. We bless God, **שְׁלֵמָה עֲשֵׂנוּ נָוִי**, "*Who has not made me a heathen*" and we bless God, **אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר**, **בְּנוֹ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים**, "*Who has chosen us from all the peoples.*" One of blessings seems superfluous. If we bless God for having made us Jews and not heathens, why repeat the assertion in another blessing by saying that He chose us from among the peoples?

The answer is that we are “chosen” in two distinct ways. One aspect of our chosenness relates to being the progeny of Avraham, and it is this aspect for which we bless God for not having made us heathens. There is, however, an additional aspect to our chosenness, one that is reflected in the verses, “And you shall be My own treasure from among the peoples...and you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Shemot 19:5-6). This chosenness involves a higher sanctification than is afforded through simple lineage. It comes through Torah study. It comes through commitment and dedication (*Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, Lustiger, pp.12-13).

This double layer of sanctity within a Jew is not only true in the homiletic or philosophic sense but has direct repercussions in the area of Jewish law. This dual nature of ‘chosenness’ touches on a complex area of Jewish law: the halachic status of a Jew who renounces his religion. On the one hand, if he betroths a woman, his betrothal would be valid. On the other hand, with regard to other specific halachot, an apostate Jew is considered no different from a non-Jew. For example, regarding slaughter of animals or writing of Torah scrolls, an apostate is considered to be a non-Jew; the meat would be considered non-kosher, and the Torah scroll is invalid.

What is the difference between the two cases? The answer is that the apostate Jew retains the sanctity afforded though his lineage. This heritage cannot be renounced no matter what he does. Therefore the case of the marriage is still binding. However, the second, or more

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elevated *kedusha* is dependent on the sanctity of the individual. Apparently, serving as a *shochet* or *sofer* who engages in a holy act, requires the higher tier of “chosenness” (*Derashot HaRav*, Lustiger, p. 208).

Receiving the Crown

One who strives and thrives as a Jew by ennobling their character merits a higher tier of Jewishness. Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested that this is the meaning of the notion that a Jew can achieve the lauded stature of *Keter Torah* (Crown of Torah).

The term *keter* (crown) as applied to Torah was first introduced in *Avot DeRav Natan* 41:1:

בשלשה כתרין נכתרו ישראל: בכתר כהונה, בכתר מלכות ובכתר תורה

“Israel was crowned with these three crowns; The Crown of priesthood (*Keter Kehunah*), the Crown of Kingship (*Keter Malkhut*), and the Crown of Torah (*Keter Torah*).”

The Rav asked what these three ‘crowns’

have in common? He answered that the first two share a commonality in that both the *kohen* and king are anointed. An individual being anointed symbolizes an inner sanctity and nobility which they attain in their position and stature. The Rav said that the same can be said regarding the one who acquires the *Keter Torah*. Such a person becomes elevated. There is a personal purifications. The knowledge of Torah and a dedicated life engenders a refinement of the character. The individual undergoes a transformation. The person engaged in Torah study and mitzvot observance gains a new sensitivity and a different view of the world (*Derashot HaRav*, Lustiger, pp.205-206).

In sum, the Rav demonstrates that we are ‘chosen’ in two distinct ways. One aspect of our chosenness relates to being the progeny of Avraham. There is, however, an additional level which is based on what the Rav called *bechira*, chosenness; how each one of us choose to incorporate the Torah’s teachings in one’s life.

והייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ

ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש

“And you shall be for Me a **treasure** from among the nations...and you shall be for Me a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation** (*Shemot* 19:5-6). There is a ‘treasured’ or *segulah* status that we inherit from our forefathers. However, attaining the nobility of priests and holiness requires personal intention and investment. ■

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