



PROBING THE PROPHETS

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“Asher Bahchar Bahnu Mikol Ha’ammim”

Whenever one is honored with an Aliyah to the Torah, that person stands before the scroll and, after opening the Sefer Torah, recites the bracha, thanking Hashem for having chosen the nation of Israel above other nations: “asher bachar banu mikol ha’ammim.” This blessing is offered each morning, allowing us to articulate words of Torah that day.

This “choice” of Israel was established by G-d Himself at Har Sinai when He promised that Israel would be a “goy kadosh,” a holy nation for Him. Furthermore, this guarantee is found in many places throughout the Tanach, including in the Torah [see D’varim 7:6; 14:2], the Sifrei Nevi’im [see Sefer Yishayahu 44:1-2 and elsewhere], as well as in the Ketuvim [see Psalms 33:12; 135:4].

It is for this very reason that we are taken aback upon hearing the very first words of

this week’s haftarah: “Hahlo chiv’nei chushi-yim atem li...” – “Behold you are no different to me than the nation of Cush...” – in other words, in Hashem’s eyes, we are the same as other nations. And so, we wonder: What happened to the “chosenness” we were promised from G-d? What about the guarantee “asher banu mikol ha’ammim”? And what, therefore, is the import of the bracha at all??

The harsh condemnation of Israel by the prophet Amos seems to erase the special and unique relationship Hashem promised to establish with His people and is, therefore, particularly difficult for us to understand. Which is why we must look back to the book’s opening chapters that help us better understand the prophet’s message. It is in those opening chapters that we find Amos berating the evil and the vice of Israel’s neighboring states, decrying their immoral behavior and deeds that has G-d refusing to ignore.

But the navi goes on to include the corruption of Samaria as well, comparing them to their sinful neighbors. And, in doing so, Amos declares G-d’s determination to punish Israel as well, stating: “I have singled out you alone of all the families of the earth—**That is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities!**” Yes! Hashem’s choice of His

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nation does not **free** us from any reprimand for disobedience but **condemns** us to punishment and chastisement for any corrupt ways – even more than he might castigate the “non-chosen” nations.

How powerfully does Rav Yissachar Ya'akovson contend how the opening of our haftarah was meant to be a “wake up call”, urging each Israelite to understand that the special choice granted to our nation places additional responsibility on each member to harken to G-d's opening words of the (second) parasha : “Kedoshim Ti'hiyu”. HKB”H expects every individual to attain, and retain, the state of kedusha -sanctity – a state that depends upon more than following ritual practice or retaining a state of purity.

Those mitzvot that follow G-d's call of “Kedoshim Ti'hiyu” are replete in commands of how to treat the poor, how to care for the unfortunate and, essentially, how to build an ethical and moral society.

Painfully, perhaps, Hashem might reluctantly be “forced” to regard us no differently than he does other peoples. But that is precisely why He reminds us “Kedoshim Ti'hiyu”! And that is also why “bachar banu mikol ha'ammim”, we alone were charged with the responsibility to act and model Kedusha. ■

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