

Sukkot: Chosen People

- Nisson Shulman.

What being a "Chosen People" really means, and how the only way Hashem would be revealed throughout the world would be by choosing a particular people. How this is expressed in the Sukkot holiday, as well as in the Rosh Hashanah and Shalosh Regalim prayers.

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In the Amida of every Yom Tov, we read, ATA BECHARTANU MIKOL HAAMIM, AHAVTA OTANU VERATZITA BANU VEROMAMTANU MIKOL HALESHONOT VEKERA VTANU MALKENU LA AVDATECHA VESHIMCHA HAGADOL VEHAKADOSH ALEINU KARATA.

"You have chosen us from all nations; you have loved us, and desired us above all other people; you have brought us to your service and called us by your great and holy name: In short, you have made us the CHOSEN PEOPLE.

This theme reappears, again and again in the Torah and in the prophets.

ET HASHEM HEEMARTA HAYOM LIHIYOT LECHA LE ELOKIM VELALECHET BIDRACHAV, VAHASHEM HEEMIRCHA HAYOM LIHIYOT LO LEAM SEGULA

"You have this day declared the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and He has this day declared you HIS CHOSEN PEOPLE...

Or again, LO MERUBCHEM MIKOL HAAMIM HASHAK HASHEM BACHEM KI ATEM HAMEAT MIKOL HAAMIM.

Not because you are more numerous than other nations did God desire you and choose you, but despite the fact that you are smallest of the nations.

KI AM KADOSH HASHEM ELOKECHA You are a nation holy to God and God has chosen you.

- and so too in the words of Amos:

"I have chosen you from amongst all the world's nations. Therefore shall I punish you for all your sins.

But, for this idea, which appears so often, we have received a great deal of criticism from our enemies, from our detractors, and even from our friends.

For the idea that a Universal God of all people chose to reveal Himself uniquely to one nation, is a most awkward doctrine to explain.

Awkward, not only because it seems partial and unfair, but also because so many other people have made similar and therefore incompatible claims: In fact, almost all religions of ancient times repeated this claim: Shall we consider our claim to be a similar kind of religious chauvinism?

No, indeed, because of many reasons.

But first of all, that when we study the Jewish principal of the Chosen People, we are immediately greeted with a sharp surprise.

For unlike all other people, we Jews did not say we are chosen for any special privilege. We were chosen to serve, and to suffer the ordeals such service entails!

When we said NAASE VENISHMA, "We will do and obey all that the Lord has commanded, we undertook a far more exacting morality and code of law and discipline than any of our contemporaries both present and in the past.

The Midrash portrays this nicely, in the picture of how God first offered the Torah to every other nation on earth, but found only the Jews willing to accept the rigor of its demands.

But acceptance of the very high demands of the Torah, also opened us to penalties for its violation.

How different from the common conception of chosenness does this turn out to be, How much more demanding; how unenviable. No wonder other nations didn't accept it:

Of course, non-Jews are often still not satisfied even after they understand this.

For granted that God required of us heroic ordeal instead of giving us privilege. Nevertheless, the fact that we were singled out for any role of special partnership with the Almighty in the redemption of the world is still an indication that we were held in special regard and even love.

The Torah states this openly:

This flies in the face of democracy. It has given rise to a special theological term, used as an accusation against our people, called "The scandal of particularity." It questions how God, who envelops all of history, would focus at special times, in specific places and upon a particular people.

Yet, if we examine our history, we see no other possibility. Of course, our survival, our existence till this day, Mysteriously, in spite of all logic, in spite of the rules of history, attests to this unique role. A nation defeated, exiled, refusing to assimilate, loyal to its land and capitol even if thousands of miles way, retaining its culture and its language, in a spiritual sense even its original borders wherever they were forced to wander, doing this for two thousand years of time, with loyalty unabated, yearning undimmed, resolution and faith unquenched, surely this attests to our unique role. No other explanation accounts for it. It has come to pass, just as it has been foretold in scripture and prophecy. We are here, alive, living witnesses to the chosenness of Israel.

To a large extent, the very mystery of all this, the impossibility of explaining it in any other way, has fed the flames of the hatred of our enemies. The fear of this mystery; the lie that it gives to their theology; the wonder that it engenders is more likely to make us enemies than friends. Many theological excuses have been devised to explain the fantastic, miraculous, unbelievable survival of the Jews, despite loss of land, and exile.

But not only our history attests to this; our very birth as a nation does so too. For it is not only our survival beyond all expectations, but also that we became a nation at the very outset against all the rules of society and history. And perhaps that is the reason the Exodus from Egypt is repeated in the Torah as the basis for many commandments. In fact the Succah itself is commanded "so that generations shall know that you dwelt in booths when I took you out of the land of Egypt."

According to all the rules, we should not have been able to escape from Pharaoh in the first place: No single slave, let alone an entire nation had ever done that: We were a weak, demoralized people, tyrannized by the most oppressive, powerful empire in the world at that time!

We had no allies, but the help of God. And yet, we were brought out to freedom, to the amazement of the world, and to the confounding and the desolation of Egypt.

Now there are two possible explanations why God did this: either the credit belongs to the Jews, or it belongs to God. Given those two alternatives we Jews accepted the only possible truth, and turned to God with thanks.

In fact, one of the striking features of our exceptional people has been our refusal to see anything intrinsically exceptional in ourselves:

And so, in beautiful poetic ways, we constantly taught that all men are equal.

We taught the Midrash, that when God made man he gathered the material from all parts of the earth to insure the universality of the human race. We taught the Mishna that man was portrayed as having been created alone so that no man could say to his neighbor "My father is better than yours," for we are all children of one man:

Whatever special had come to Jews could not have been by our own doing. The only answer was that it came from God.

Thus, an idea, which looks at first to have been prompted by national arrogance, turns out to be the humblest interpretation of the facts of history.

The same interpretation must be given to the revelation at Sinai, which did not happen to one man only but to our entire nation. It too was a national, historical experience, which we have transmitted through authentic tradition so that it is as if each of us was there.

A philosopher once tried to explain why God choose the Jews. Was it because Abraham sought God first? Was it because we were possessed, as Yehuda Halevi wrote, with a special faculty of spiritual sensitivity? "It is hard to know" he said "But this is sure. If God had blessed and chosen all nations equally, He would not be known in this world. The blessing would be so universal, that we would take it for granted. There would be no one to recognize God as the author of the blessing."

"Just as we take the presence of the oxygen we breathe for granted and do not infer God's goodness from it, though the miracle of the air is ever so great; just so would we take the blessings of God's providence for granted if they were given equally to all people on earth. It is only when God selects one nation for a special role and a special revelation of His spirit that God's blessing and spirit stand a chance to be recognized by the rest of the world. So, until the day when God will be accepted by all nations He continues to need a people apart, God's special task force in history" (Huston Smith, "The Religions of Man", Harper and Rowe, p. 294).

But this is not new. It is a message of Isaiah the Prophet: "Listen to me O Islands, hearken you people from far: The Lord called me from the womb, made my mouth a sharp sword ...and said: "You are My servant; Israel in whom I will be glorified" (49:1-3).

Perhaps the best expression of this thought is in the Succos service in the Holy Temple on behalf of all the nations of the world. Then too, as now, many were our enemies, Yet we prayed for them, offered sacrifices for them and dedicated a large part of the Succos service in their behalf. Underlying all of the service is the prayer that we should one day not be the only ones praying for all the world: that foes will turn to friends, and all nations shall come to recognize, accept and worship one God, offering sacrifices on each other's behalf, even as we now do on theirs.

The ideal is expressed in the Rosh Hashana Mussaf "Our God and God of our fathers reign in Thy glory over the universe. Shine forth in thy majestic glory upon all Thy worlds inhabitants. Let every creature recognize Thee as its Creator - let every living, breathing thing proclaim - the Lord God of Israel is King and His dominion is over all."