

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Balak)

Years ago, about to exit the doors of LaGuardia airport after a long flight, I suddenly realized I had forgotten my tefillin on the plane.

I rushed back to the gates only to discover I could not get through without a valid boarding pass, which I no longer had. Personnel at lost and found (in baggage control) patiently explained they only dealt with items lost in the airport or in baggage, and sent me to the check in counters, where they explained I had no boarding pass and could not get back on the plane, which was now being cleaned, and did I have identification?

Finally, a supervisor with a security guard came out to see what was going on and asked me to describe the lost object. And so, a few months after September 11th, with all of the heightened security, I explained it was a small velvet pouch, with two leather boxes and straps inside. Although my name was on the bag, it was only my Hebrew name, written in ancient Hebrew letters....

“Well, what exactly are these boxes, sir?” the woman asked, and what is it that you do with them? And if you don’t even have your name on them why are you so concerned about them?”

How could I explain the concept of Tefillin before the plane took off with my Tefillin to its next destination, especially as the security guard was by now eyeing me very curiously?

“Well, we wear these as a sign that we are the chosen people....”

What does it mean to be the chosen people? Are we somehow better than everyone else?

Three thousand years ago, a non-Jewish prophet named **Balaam** forced us to confront this very question.

Balak, the king of Moab, finally realized that the Jewish people in the desert were not going to be defeated on the battlefield.

Having somehow miraculously escaped Egypt leaving the mighty Egyptian army floundering in the Red Sea, and after vanquishing the Amalekites in open battle, clearly the Jews and their G-d would not be conquered in the conventional manner.

So **Balak** hires **Balaam** to curse the Jewish people, hoping to somehow undermine them on the spiritual battlefield.

Yet a non-Jewish prophet as intent on wickedness as **Balaam** could only offer the words G-d put in his mouth and what comes forth from Balaam’s mouth is some of the most beautiful poetry in the bible.

“Mah Tovu O’halecha’ Ya’akov, Mishke’notecha’ Yisrael! ...Yizal mayim Mi’Dalyav, Ve’Zar’o’ be’mayim Rabim... Ve’Tinaseh’ malchuto”

“How goodly are your tents oh Jacob, Your dwellings, Oh Israel!... Water shall flow from his branches, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his kingdom shall be exalted.” (Bamidbar 24:5-7)

Are we really exalted above all other peoples? Are we chosen and therefore somehow better than everyone else?

And yet, every Friday night we make Kiddush over a cup of wine and bless G-d: “*Ki Vanu’ Vacharta, Ve’Otanu Kidashta*” “*Because you chose us and sanctified us...*”.

Are we really the chosen people? Are we better than everyone else?

I recall once, when our son Yair was three years old, he came over to hug me and said, taking my face in his hands: “Aba, you’re the best!” then he asked me: “Aba, am I the best?” With his five year old sister standing a few feet away, I realized this was a political minefield, so I simply said, in the tradition of centuries of clever parents: “You’re the best three year old in the family!”

Because it is uncomfortable to assume anyone is really the best, isn’t it?

So, what does it mean to be chosen?

It is interesting to note that Jews come in all shapes and sizes, with no reference anywhere in Jewish law and tradition to any difference whatsoever regarding a Jew’s status be he black or white, or of African, Mexican, Chinese, European or any other racial origin. So obviously this idea of being chosen cannot be a racist concept.

Indeed, Jewish tradition even has a place in the world to come for the righteous amongst the nations, (see *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13) and it is actually a lot easier for a non-Jew to get into ‘heaven’ and certainly to keep his or her place there, than it is for a Jew!

Indeed, the entire portion in which we receive the Torah is named after a non-Jew, *Yitro*, and it is from him that we receive the basics of our system of courts and judges, something the Torah makes quite clear. And there are many sources in which it is quite clear that a person can reach the highest spiritual levels, even having the Divine Presence (the *Shechinah*) descend upon oneself be they Jew or non-Jew (*Tana De’Bei Elihau Rabbah* 9).

And of course, *anyone*, regardless of race or nationality, wishing to become Jewish can do so, through a process known as *Giyur* (conversion). Obviously, then, we are not ‘better’ in the normal sense of that word. So, what is this idea of being chosen, or even exalted, which Balaam alluded to, so long ago?

It is interesting to note that on Shabbat, that same Shabbat which begins by suggesting that we are chosen, mentioned as well in the Friday night services, reaches its crescendo on Shabbat afternoon when we describe the Jewish people as “*Goy Echad Ba’Aretz*” “*One nation*”. It seems, then that we are indeed ‘The one, the only one’, which again seems to leave a very bad taste.

The truth is, we are all, in a sense, chosen; Born, each of us as individuals, with our own special gifts. The real question is not whether I am chosen. The real question is what am I chosen for? What do I choose to do with the gifts I have been given?

There is a statement in the Talmud that relates to the story of Balaam.

When the emissaries of Balak, the king of Moab, come to entice him to come and curse the Jewish people, he seems to do the right thing.

“Stay this night and I will respond to your request based on however G-d instructs me....” (22:8)

And ultimately, G-d tells Balaam (verse 12) not to go with the emissaries of Balak, so Balaam tells the messengers to go home.

But Balak refuses to take no for an answer, and the messengers return, and again Balaam tells them G-d decides these things. Only this time, (v.20) G-d says:

“If these men have come to call on you, then by all means, go with them...”

And incredibly, when Balaam goes, G-d gets very angry with him! (v.21-22)

Why is G-d angry with Balaam, when Balaam clearly said he could not go without G-d’s permission, and G-d basically gave him the go-ahead?

So the Talmud (*Makkot* 10b) gives us a fascinating insight into the psychology of our relationship with G-d, and ultimately with ourselves.

“Rabbah Bar Rav Huna said: This teaches that a person is led in the path that he wishes to travel.”

Ultimately, G-d allows us to do what it is that we want to do. G-d’s problem with Balaam, was that despite the fact that G-d had already expressed to Balaam that this was not the right path, Balaam still *wanted* to go.

Who I am, ultimately, is a result of the choices I make.

The concept of being ‘chosen’ as a people does not mean we are better than anyone else. What it means is that we, (like any other nation) have our own special gifts and therefore our own special purpose. And this different (and not better) relationship with G-d is a result of the choices we have made. All of which now present us with the challenge of living up to the responsibilities those gifts and that different relationship entail.

Three thousand years ago in the desert, as a people, we made a choice to be different. To stand up to a higher moral standard; to refuse to become what those who wish us destroyed long for us to be.

And even in these challenging times, we can still hear the echo of those words ringing out in the barren mountains of Arvot Moav, on the banks of the Jordan river: *“Mah Tovu O’halecha’ Ya’akov”, “How goodly are your tents oh Jacob”*.

We live in a time of blessing, when we can walk again the alleyways of the old city of Jerusalem, stand on the top of Masada and experience the breathtaking vista of the Sea of Galilee from atop the Golan Heights....

May Hashem bless us all to discover the beauty of the gifts we have been given, and to live up to the challenge of what we can do with them.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman