

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Balak)

On one of my frequent trips, 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? Chosen for what? Are we somehow better than everyone else?

Three thousand years ago, a non-Jewish prophet named Bilaam 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 Bilaam to curse the Jewish people, hoping to somehow undermine them on the spiritual battlefield.

Yet a non-Jewish prophet as intent on wickedness as Bilaam could only offer the words G-d put in his mouth and what comes forth from Bilaam’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?

When Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls won their first basketball championship, Michael was asked by a reporter how it felt, to which he was quoted as responding:

“It feels good to be the best”.

And I remember being really bothered by that. Were the Bulls really the best, just because two points won a game? How many lucky calls, bad breaks, injuries on other teams and lucky mismatches contribute to a championship to allow a team to call itself the best? How arrogant is it to ever assume you are the best? (To his credit, Michael Jordan was apparently misquoted; what he had actually said was “it feels good to be the best you can be”.)

So how arrogant are we to assume we are the best? And yet, every morning, we bless G-d for having “...Chosen us from amongst all the nations, and given us His Torah” (“*Asher Bachar Banu Mikol Ha’Amim Ve’natan Lanu Et Torato*”), and 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?

When our youngest child Yair was three, he came over to hug me (and show me his muscles!) and said, taking my face in his hands: “Abba, you’re the best!” then he asked me: “Abba, am I the best?” With five-year-old Adi 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? Could this seemingly elite attitude be at the root or at least partially responsible for some of the terrible anti-Semitism we have experienced and continue to experience as a people?

Doesn’t this concept of chosen-ness smack of the very Nazi Aryanism that caused so much pain in this century for our own people?

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 the Torah is given 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).

Anyone, regardless of race or nationality, wishing to become Jewish and wants to accept the Jewish way of life 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 Bilaam 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 first question, however, regarding our status as a chosen people is: did G-d choose us, or did we choose G-d?

Imagine one morning I realize I have a very important meeting and I have to get out of the house on time. So I tell the kids the night before: 'whoever gets up quickly, gets dressed, brushes their teeth and comes down to breakfast without any fuss in the morning, will get a treat on the way to school.' And imagine that Yonatan (our then nine-year-old), motivated of course by the opportunity to honor his dad (!) jumps out of bed in the morning, gets dressed, brushes his teeth and is waiting at the breakfast table with a big smile, anticipating the 'reward of the world to come'! But Adi is still snoring away, so I have to coax her out of bed, and it takes a while to find the right outfit, until eventually she, too, is downstairs eating breakfast.... So of course, later, Yonatan gets a treat, right? And of course, Adi yells out: "No fair! Favorites!" But she could have had a treat as well, if she just would have been willing to do the work.

You see, four thousand years ago, for some reason that remains a mystery to historians of all disciplines, monotheism burst onto the world scene, amidst a world wallowing in the morass of pagan idolatry. And, by definition, if a people, for whatever the reason, accept upon themselves not one, nor seven, but actually six hundred and thirteen different vehicles for relating to G-d (known as mitzvot), then the result will be a very different relationship with that same G-d.

Obviously, even in the midst of giving Yonatan a treat and withholding one from Adi, it would never have occurred to me that any one of my children was better than the other. But at the same time, at least for that moment the relationship I was experiencing with each of them was fundamentally *different*.

Hashem, G-d, created all the nations of the world, so it would be challenging at best to imagine that any one nation is somehow better than any other. But at the same time, given that all peoples have taken different paths and have different approaches in their relationships with G-d and the world around them, it stands to reason that each nation has a different relationship.

But it goes much deeper than that.

The Talmud relates the story of the great and holy Zusha, one of the greatest leaders of his generation. Lying on his deathbed, his students note that he is trembling, and upon asking why their great teacher and master seems so afraid, he responds by explaining:

“How can one not tremble in awe at the thought of entering the heavenly court, and standing in judgment before the King of Kings?”

Some of the students, clearly troubled by this, then ask:

“But if you, our holy teacher and clearly one of the great masters of the generation, are afraid, then what hope is there for us?”

And Zusha answers quite simply:

“You don’t understand. When I stand before the heavenly court, I am not concerned that I will be asked, why couldn’t you be like Moses, or King David. My challenge is how to respond when I am asked: ‘Zusha, why couldn’t you be Zusha?’ Did I live up to the Zusha I was meant to be?”

We are all, in a sense, chosen, each of us born, 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 well-known Midrash (rabbinic legend) that always bothered me. The Midrash tells that G-d went around the world offering the Torah to the nations of the world.

The Edomites asked G-d, ‘what is in this Torah you want us to accept?’ and G-d responded: ‘thou shalt not kill’. And the Edomites said ‘sorry not interested!’ after all, they were hunters and warriors by profession, how could they not kill?

And G-d goes down the line asking different nations to accept the Torah, and each nation, curious as to what is in this ‘Torah’ receives a different answer.

‘Don’t steal’ G-d says to one nation, ‘Sorry not interested!’ after all, they were thieves by profession, how could they not pilfer? Maybe G-d comes to the Italians and explains that the Torah says ‘Don’t adulter’. ‘Sorry, we are definitely not interested!’ after all....

Until finally G-d supposedly comes to the Jews and asks them to accept the Torah and they simply respond: “Na’aseh Ve’Nishma” We will do whatever it takes, and if it comes from you, G-d, then we already love whatever is in it.

But this seems very unfair. Obviously, G-d was stacking the deck! (Ever wonder what would have happened if he added to the Jews: but you should know, it says ‘thou shalt not gossip’...?)

Perhaps this Midrash is sharing a fundamental truth. There is a statement in the Talmud that relates to the story of Bilaam.

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

“Linu Poh Halailah Va’hashivoti Etchem Davar Ka’asher Yedaber Hashem Elai...”
Stay this night and I will respond to your request based on however G-d instructs me...” (22:8)

G-d tells Bilaam (verse 12) not to go with the emissaries of Balak, and not to curse the Jewish people, so Bilaam tells the messengers to go home, *“Ki Me’en Hashem Le’titiLa’haloch Imachem* (v.13) ‘...because G-d does not allow me to go with you.”

However, (22: 15-19) Balak refuses to take no for an answer, and the messengers return, and again Bilaam tells them G-d decides these things. Only this time, (v.20) G-d says *“Im Likro’ lechah ba’u, Ha’Anashim, Kum Lech Itam...”* “If these men have come to call on you, then by all means, go with them...”

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

Why is G-d angry with Bilaam, when Bilaam 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 Hunah** said: This (these verses) 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 Bilaam, was that despite the fact that G-d had already expressed to Bilaam that this was not the right path, Bilaam 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.

This is also the reason this concept is so closely connected with Shabbat.

Shabbat is all about teaching me to appreciate my and our special role in the world.

I recall a story I heard in the name of **Rav Efraim Oshry**, one of the last rabbis of the Kovno ghetto.

A Jewish village was gathered in the central square, awaiting their obvious executions. As they watched the machine guns being set up on the tripods, the SS with their snarling dogs all around them, one old man approached the SS officer in charge and asked him if he could lead the Jews in one last prayer.

The Officer, amused, acquiesced, and the old Jew, in a loud voice, recited the blessing, “Baruch Atah Hashem ... Shelo Asani Goy.” The officer, curious, asked him the meaning of the prayer, to which the Jew explained its meaning: “Blessed are you oh G-d ... who has not made me a non-Jew.”

At this, the SS officer burst out laughing. ‘Fool!’ he said to the Jew, ‘If you were not a Jew you would not be in this predicament!’

To which the Jew responded: “If I had to choose between being the murdered or the murderer, I am thankful the choices I made did not lead me to be a murderer.”

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

And even in today’s 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*”.

As we 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, we remember that with it all, we live in a time of blessing, part of an incredible dream spoken even by a non-Jewish prophet, and unfolding even now, before our eyes.

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

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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