

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Yitro)

Friday night. The sun has long since set, dark clouds hide the stars, and the wind is howling off the Shouf mountain range in central Lebanon.

I had managed to quietly sing the Kabbalat Shabbat service, while en-route to the ambush site, and even pray the evening service while in the staging ground, before giving my men a final inspection, but I had no idea what to do about Kiddush. In such situations we usually ate from our packs, one or two at a time, and we had a system to ensure that we didn't make much noise, but I had never happened to find myself in this particular situation on a Friday night. I had not thought it through in advance, so I had no wine with which to make Kiddush, and a wave of depression fell over me as I realized how far I was from where I really wished to be on a Friday night. Having come straight from a patrol to lay down this ambush, (intelligence had indicated that terrorists might be coming through this valley on this particular night...) there were no candles lit, no beautiful Shabbat table laden with freshly baked Challot and wine, and certainly, in the cold Lebanon night, no-one was singing Shabbat songs.

My first sergeant, a Yemenite Jew, crawled over to me and I noticed a strange smile on his face; not the normal expression of a soldier lying in the bitter cold in the middle of the night in Lebanon...

*"Achi!" 'My brother', he whispered,
"Mah kara?" ('What's up?'),
"Atah Nir'eh Kol Kach Atzuv, mah zeh tzarich le'hiyot?"
'You look so down, what's the matter with you?'*

"You know", he continued, we're not ready to lay down this ambush; we haven't finished all the preparations (known in the army as "Hachanot"...). I was somewhat surprised, thinking I had been pretty thorough, but you learn pretty quickly to listen to your men, especially your first sergeant, who had been around...

"B'li Kiddush, lo Zazim!", 'How can we move without making Kiddush?' he said with a smile. (It had become the custom in the battalion that every Friday night, before we ate, I would make Kiddush for the whole battalion, and all the guys would always kid me about it...).

It was only then I noticed he had crawled over with a canteen in his hand... and unscrewing the cap on the canteen, he told me he had no Kiddush cup, but promised me the Kiddush wine this week would be worth it. And together with seven other men in Israeli Army uniform, on a wind-swept hill in the middle of the night in Lebanon, we made Kiddush.

I had never seen him with a Kippah on his head, nor had I ever caught him with a pair of Tefillin on his arm, but at that moment, for me, Moshe Biton was the holiest man in the world. And that Friday night Kiddush was absolutely one of the highest experiences of my life.

Kiddush is all about sanctifying the moment. It's about elevating the mundane to a different place, and about how we can transform the ordinary every day to something incredible; something really special. But that also raises one of the most challenging questions we face as Jews.

The climax, perhaps even the apex, of the Friday night Kiddush has us say:

“Ki Vanu Vacharta Mikol Ha’Amim”

“Because You (Hashem) have chosen us from amongst all the nations”.

We are called the chosen people; indeed, we say this every day. Every morning when we wake up, we say the blessing:

“Asher Bachar Banu Mikol Ha’Amim, Ve’natan Lanu Et Torato”

“Hashem has Chosen us from amongst all the Nations, and given us His Torah...”

What does this mean? Do we think we are better than everyone else? Are we an elitist society? Is this what Judaism is all about?

Given that there are Jews from every racial background on the face of the earth, and that a walk through any street in Israel will see Jews from every nationality in the world speaking the same language, one would be hard-pressed to imagine that this idea is racist. Anyone who wants to be a Jew can join the club. (Though what that entails is far from simple, and involves at the very least defining what it means to be a Jew in the first place)

But something doesn’t seem to sit right about the idea that we consider ourselves to be chosen above all the other peoples of the world. In fact, if we think we are so great, one wonders what it is we are chosen for. I remember thinking, on that hill in Lebanon, and in many similar situations in the army and out, do I/we really want to be chosen? If this is what I am chosen for, to be in green pajamas, playing war games in the night, then thanks, but no thanks!!

In fact, the sources make very clear that any person, who lives an ethical life regardless of whether they are or are not Jewish, has a portion in the world to come (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13), and that anyone can cause the Divine Presence of G-d to reside in them.

So what does it mean to be chosen? And what does this chosen-ness have to do with Shabbat? Why is that one of the major themes of Shabbat, is found, not only in the Kiddush, but also in the special prayers for Shabbat, culminating with the statement in the Shabbat afternoon service:

“Atah Echad, Ve’Shimcha Echad, U’Mi Ke’amcha Yisrael, Goy Echad Ba’Aretz.”

‘You are One, Your name is One, and who is like unto Your Nation Israel: One nation in the World.’

Are we really ‘the one, the only one’?

And why, in introducing this idea that we are chosen, every day, do we link this to the fact that Hashem gave us the Torah?

It would seem, that the ideal place to look, in order to make sense of this idea would be that point in Jewish history where Hashem actually chose us as his people. And that, according to Jewish tradition, is this week’s portion, *Yitro*.

3,200 years ago, G-d chose to give us this special set of books that we call the Torah. Beginning with the Ten Commandments the entire Jewish people received and with them the revelation that encapsulates the one-to-one relationship that we had with G-d, beneath that little mountain, somewhere in the Sinai desert. Arguably, this is the single most significant experience in Jewish history. It forms the basis for who we are, and all that we have to share with the world. All of which raises a rather interesting question.

If this experience, which is clearly the central piece of this week's portion, is so significant, why is the portion named after Yitro, who is described in the opening remarks of the portion to be a "*Kohen Midyan*", a Priest of Midyan?

Why isn't the portion named after Moshe, who received the Torah to begin with? (In fact, there is no portion anywhere in the Torah named after Moshe, nor for that matter after Avraham, Yitzchak or Yaakov, either!)

Even more challenging is how this portion begins: One would have expected the story this week to begin with chapter 19 (of Exodus), which describes the arrival of the Jewish people at Sinai, in preparation for the giving of the Torah. Instead, we are treated to the arrival of Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law. The exchange that takes place between Yitro and Moshe and the results of that conversation are even stranger.

Yitro notices that Moshe is sitting all day long holding court for the Jewish community. So he advises Moshe to set up a system of courts and judges, with lower courts and appellate courts, and even Supreme courts, all finally reporting to Moshe in the event that a problem cannot be solved. Amazingly, Moshe thinks this to be a great idea, and this forms the basis for the Jewish judiciary, which of course is the foundation of any, and in this case the Jewish, ethical system. This is nothing short of incredible!

Imagine you meet a friend who is about to go into a private meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Z"TL), to try and resolve a difficult Halachic question. And although you know he is five minutes away from an answer from the Rebbe, you decide to give him some advice and tell him what you think is the best solution, and he actually listens to you, and decides to do what you are suggesting! And he calls his wife to tell her the answer, and how to deal with it, and then off he goes to his meeting with the Rebbe! That would be beyond chutzpah, it would be ridiculous! How could you imagine giving advice to someone who is going to see a world authority, and why on earth would he be so presumptuous as to listen to you, and all this before even seeing what the Rebbe has to say! How could Yitro have the audacity to suggest a system, when Moshe, and for that matter the entire Jewish people, is about to have a tete a tete with G-d?

And why are we listening to this priest of idolatry in the first place, much less naming one of the most important portions of the Torah in his honor?

(Granted that Yitro may have left the idolatry of Midyan, to embrace Judaism, but if that were the point, one would expect to see that a bit more clearly expressed in the text, which it clearly is not. In fact, a contextual reading of this story has Yitro returning to Midyan and not even waiting for the experience of Sinai! (See 18:27)

One wonders if this may be precisely the point.

There are really two pieces to the idea of chosen-ness.

The first is, did G-d choose us, or did we choose G-d?

The second, which is far more crucial, is: What exactly are we chosen *for*?

Often, when considering this question, people point out that before G-d chose us, we chose G-d. Abraham, alone in a world of pagan idolatry and immorality, was the first to consider the possibility that G-d wasn't a part of the world; the world was a part of G-d. Historians are generally intrigued, and have no explanation for how one people came to the idea that G-d is an unseen, all-giving, loving entity, that is the source and the totality of all reality. Especially given that this was a complete departure from everything anyone had ever considered to this point.

There is even the oft-quoted *Midrash* (Oral traditional teaching) that has G-d offering the Torah to all the nations of the world, with each of them finding some problem in its content that make it untenable to their way of life. Each nation asks, what is in this Torah, and to one G-d says 'Thou shalt not kill', to another 'Thou shalt not steal...' and each nation cannot imagine life without theft, or without cheeseburgers, or without hunting as a sport... Yet, says the Midrash, the Jews simply say we will live it, whatever it says... (*next week's discussion...*).

But is this really a fair expression of the idea that we chose G-d? What if G-d had told us a little more of what was in this book? I sometimes wonder what would have happened if G-d had told us that the Torah says 'thou shalt not gossip' (even in the back of the Synagogue!), we might well have looked for another book!

If the Torah makes the point of sharing this story of Yitro with us right before receiving the Torah, and if Jewish tradition even calls the portion Yitro, in his honor, then there must be an idea, which is crucial to our relationship with G-d, and our being chosen by G-d to receive the Torah.

You see, just because I am chosen does not mean that anyone else is *not* chosen. In fact, we are all, every one of us, chosen, in some special way.

Imagine that I come home and tell our children that after a long day, whoever gets into pajamas, brushes their teeth, and gets into bed all on their own, will get an extra story before bedtime. And imagine our son Yair does exactly that, and gets ready for bed all on his own, and with no cajoling whatsoever is all ready for a story. But Adi, our daughter still resists and wants more help with pajamas and teeth, and being 'eased' into bed. So of course, Yair gets an extra story, and Adi doesn't. But then Adi yells: "favorites!" "It's not fair...!" (You know the rest of the script...) So that's ridiculous. I'm not favoring Yair; no one child is my favorite, because they are all my favorites, always. My relationship with Yair has changed in that moment because of how he behaved, and the efforts he made, but that will never cause me to favor him more.

Hashem created each and every one of us. And just as all individuals were created by G-d, so were all the Nations of the world. And to the best of my knowledge, you will not find, in any Jewish source, that

just because I am chosen, that someone else isn't, or that the fact that I am chosen implies that I am somehow better than anybody else.

In fact, one of the most challenging aspects of parenting is to be able to show your children that each one of them is chosen, and special, while showing them that none of them is *more* special...

And maybe this is what this strange story of Yitro is doing here. Before we begin our very special chosen relationship with Hashem, remember, that just because the Torah is truth, does not mean that truth is not to be found anywhere else.

To be chosen is a gift; the gift that Hashem gives me. Some of us are chosen to be musical, some artistic, some to be methodical, and some brilliant. My challenge as an individual is to decide how I think Hashem chose me. What is *my* gift? What do I really have to give the world? And of course, a gift is meaningful when I can give it purpose. To be chosen also means I have a purpose. And if I take the gifts Hashem has given me (which is how G-d chooses me) and transform into a gift I give back to the world (How I choose G-d), then I am no longer a created object, I am a partner in creation.

And if this is true for individuals, it is equally true for us as nations of the world. We are all given our special gifts, and each of us, Buddhists and Muslims, Catholics and Jews, French and English; have to figure out as a people, *how* we are chosen (what special gifts we have been given) and *what* we are chosen *for*.

What are we, as people, chosen for? What, indeed, is our mission? It is interesting that Judaism has been caught between the extremes of religious fanaticism on the one hand, and secular humanism on the other. The religious fanatic believes, essentially, that G-d supersedes man, and that human beings are insignificant before G-d, therefore, in the name of G-d, there is no limit to what we can do to man. As long as G-d lives, it does not matter if man dies.

The secular humanist, on the other hand, believes that G-d is dead. And if we are not created in the image of G-d, then we are in the end, created in the image of matter. And if we are matter, and random, then how long does it take before a man can become a bar of soap, or a lampshade.

Judaism offers the world the idea that man cannot be insignificant before G-d, because man comes from G-d, and is even an extension of G-d. Ultimately, Judaism suggests that the first place to look for G-d is in the person sitting next to me. Only when I realize that every person is created in the image of G-d, and that every human being is chosen, in his or her own special way, am I ready to realize that we each, all of us, have a purpose. And then I am ready to tackle the meaning of being chosen. I am ready to discover the gifts I have been given (how G-d chose me), and the way I can use them to give back to G-d (the choices I make.)

This is why chosen-ness is such a central part of Shabbat; because on Shabbat I take the time in my week to consider what all the running around is all about. Shabbat is the island in time that allows me to consider who I really am, and why I am really here. It is also the reason Shabbat is so connected to the idea of Jewish community, because together, our challenge is to re-discover what we as a people are doing here, and how we can use the special gifts we are given, to make the world a better place.

And the key to discovering just what we, as a people, have been given is to explore the book that gives us the formula for what those gifts, and that purpose really is.

Three thousand years ago Yitro, a Midianite Priest, taught us that truth is truth, and that we all have our gifts, and each one of us is 'the one, the only one', in our own special way. And that allowed us to begin the journey of discovery to what our one-ness is all about.

Maybe if we all, as Jews, learn to respect the one-ness and chosen-ness of others, we will be ready to appreciate the one-ness and chosen-ness we already have.

Shabbat Shalom,

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