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**Choosing to be Chosen**

Jews have often been criticized for referring to themselves as “the Chosen People.” After all, the referring to oneself as “chosen” does sound pompous and elitist.

The idea of choice is central to the holiday of Shavuot. God chose to reveal Himself at Mount Sinai to the Israelites and the Israelites chose to accept the Torah. The Israelites, when offered the Torah, accepted with enthusiasm, responding *na'aseh v'nishmah*, literally “we will do and we will listen.” In other words, the Israelites were so eager to accept the Torah, they pledged to fulfill its precepts before they had the opportunity to hear them. (It's like signing a contract first, and then reading it.) The Israelites accepted upon themselves God's *mitzvot*, commandments, as spelled out in the Torah.

Through the performance of the *mitzvot*, the Israelites were to become a *Goy Kadosh*, a holy nation. In other words, simply being an Israelite does not make one a holy person. Rather, the Israelite becomes holy by acting in a holy manner, by performing the *mitzvot*. The idea that the Israelite is holy simply because he is a member of the chosen people is firmly rejected by the prophet Amos.

Bible Scholar Bernard Anderson points out that the prophet Amos repudiated the idea that the God of Israel was a national God that Israel could mobilize in the service of the nation's own interest. According to Amos, being chosen by God did not entitle Israel to special privilege and protection; rather, it meant that Israel had accepted upon herself the responsibility to serve God. According to Amos, God is a universal God who is active in the histories of all nations: “Are you not like the Kushites to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel out of the land of Egypt? And the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). The other nations have not realized this because they have not shared the intimate relationship with God that Israel has been allowed to.

Rabbi Hertz, in his commentary on the Bible, explains that two teachings are enunciated through Amos 9:7. The first is that God has guided all other nations as well as Israel. All peoples are equally dear to Him, and the hand of providence is evident not only in the migration of Israel

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The Union for Traditional Judaism is a trans-denominational organization dedicated to bringing the message of open-minded Halakhic Judaism to the widest possible audience.

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but in every historical movement. The second teaching is that God's special relationship with Israel rests on moral foundations. A degenerate Israel is of no more worth to God than other immoral nations.

Amos is believed to have prophesied between the years 765-750 B.C.E. during the reign of Jeroboam the Second, a time of great affluence for the northern Kingdom of Israel. The prophet condemns the people for engaging in hollow religious ritual while failing to care for the poor.

So we see that choosing to be "the chosen" means accepting additional responsibility. Potential converts are discouraged from converting to Judaism, in part because of this added responsibility. Yet one can choose to become a member of "the chosen people" if he or she desires.

The Rabbis teach that the Torah was given in the desert, in a barren area, because it is *hefker*, unclaimed property. In other words, anyone can accept the yoke of the Torah upon him- or herself. The Book of Ruth, which is read on Shavuot, tells the story of Ruth the Moabite who is considered the quintessential convert to Judaism. Many female converts choose Ruth as their Hebrew name. Ruth did not have *yichus* – an impressive lineage. The Moabites were enemies of Israel and descended from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter, as detailed in Genesis 19.

Yet Ruth chooses to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel and becomes an Israelite. Ruth is not shunned for becoming an Israelite; rather, Jewish history views her as an exalted figure. Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David from whom the Messiah will emerge. So we see that the Messiah will be a descendant of a woman who was born a non-Jew.

Anyone who believes that he/she is superior to others because of his/her Jewish birth misses the message of the Book of Ruth. Being chosen does not confer any sort of genetic superiority; rather, being chosen means that we choose to develop our relationship with God.

As we celebrate the giving of the Torah, let us choose to strengthen our relationship with God by climbing the ladder of *mitzvot*. No matter how we identify, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or other, we can climb the ladder of *mitzvot* by increasing our ritual observance. Just as importantly, we can climb the ladder of *mitzvot* by increasing our observance of the laws that govern our relationships with fellow human beings, such as giving charity and conducting business honestly.

By climbing the ladder of *mitzvot*, we are ascending the heights of Mount Sinai and in the process become better individuals. May we all reach new heights this Shavuot.

*Chag Same'ach!*

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