



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Re'eh

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August 15, 2015

Re'eh/Elul

**The Chosen People:
Politically Correct?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

One of the most controversial issues is the description of Jews as the Chosen People, based on a verse in this week’s Torah portion. This has been the cause of so much hatred and resentment of the gentile world throughout history. How can we understand the meaning of the Chosen People in any way other than an elitist, condescending statement?

This sermon is all about choices – God’s choices, our choices.

What does it mean to be chosen? What does it mean to choose?

Do we choose what is best for us, or what is the most valuable?

If that were the case, Canada would definitely seem a better choice than Canaan (as far as choosing the Promised Land is concerned).

Canada is humongous, while Canaan is tiny. Canada is pregnant with natural resources, while Canaan is part desert, part rocky mountain. Canada has pleasant neighbors to the south and west (the USA) and even more pleasant neighbors to the north and east (the Arctic, the Atlantic), while Canaan has very unpleasant neighbors to the east, west, north and south (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Gaza), and if you stretch a little further, there is also the Islamic State, Iraq and Iran, etc.

No one is threatening to push Canada into the Mediterranean or drop a nuclear bomb on its head, while Canaan – better known today as Israel – is the subject of such threats daily.

Perhaps we may understand the choosing of Israel (the land) by understanding an even more perplexing choice: the choosing of Israel (the people).

Is it racist to be Jewish and chosen? Is it egalitarian for the Torah to say: *You are children of the Lord, your God ... you are a holy people to the Lord, your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a treasured people for Him, out of all the nations that are upon the earth.*

Well, is it?

Most importantly: Should we teach our children that they are chosen?

WE ARE THE CHOSEN PEOPLE: BUT IS THAT POLITICALLY CORRECT?

1. Canaan, or... (Joke)

On the sixth day God turned to the angel Gabriel and said, "Today I am going to create a land called Israel. It will be my chosen land – a land of outstanding natural beauty. It will have rolling hills and mountains full of goats and eagles, a beautiful, sparkling, clear ocean full of sea life and high cliffs overlooking white sandy beaches."

God continued, "I shall also choose from among all nations one nation who will be my Chosen People, and I shall give them this special and chosen land. I shall make the land rich in natural resources to allow its inhabitants, my chosen people, to prosper. These inhabitants shall be called "Israelites" (or the Children of Israel), and their land will be called "Israel."

"But," asked Gabriel, "Don't you think you're being too generous to these Jews?" "Not really," replied God, "just wait and see the neighbors I am going to give them."

Yes, indeed it would seem to have been a lot easier for the Jewish people to be given the land of... Canada, instead of the land of Canaan...

[Optional.

As the joke goes that when God asked Moses which country he would prefer for the Jewish People, Moses began to respond: "Ca...," while an "impatient" God tethered and said "Canaan? Wonderful. Consider it done. But Moses had wanted to say: Canada].

2. The Best Choice?

Usually, when one chooses something, that something is of higher value and of greater importance than the alternatives around it.

Select seats for a concert imply the best. Select vintage connotes the finest wine. And when a brand advertises that its product or produce is "hand-picked" or "specially chosen," it is suggesting that these are the best possible selections from the entire field.

If that were the case, Canada would definitely seem a better choice than Canaan.

Canada is humongous, while Canaan is tiny. Canada is pregnant with natural resources, while Canaan is part desert, part rocky mountain. Canada has pleasant neighbors to the south and west (the USA) and even more pleasant neighbors to the north and east (the Arctic, the Atlantic), while Canaan has very unpleasant neighbors to the east, west, north and south (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Gaza), and if you stretch a little further, there is also the Islamic State, Iraq and Iran, etc.

Canada has great ski slopes while Canaan seems to be on a perpetual slippery slope. Canada has no one threatening to push into the Mediterranean or drop a nuclear bomb on its head, while Canaan (better known today as Israel) is the subject of such threats daily.

3. Parshat Re'eh

Perhaps we may understand the choosing of Israel (the land) by understanding an even more perplexing choice: the choosing of Israel (the people).

This week's Torah reading relates how this came about with two seemingly non-egalitarian, politically-incorrect verses:

*You are children of the Lord, your God ... For you are a holy people to the Lord, your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a treasured people for Him, out of all the nations that are upon the earth.*¹

For thousands of years, while the Jews were persecuted hither and yon, this statement seemed to be almost tragically laughable. As the Yiddish wit, Shalom Aleichem, put it through his legendary character Tevye, "God, I know we are your chosen people, but couldn't you choose somebody else for a change?"

Big deal if the Torah claims that the Jews are chosen. Yeah, they're chosen – chosen to suffer.

But, today, when Jews are free, when Jews even have their own country, a Jewish State, what does it mean to be chosen, to be Jewish?

Is it racist to say we are the chosen people? Is it egalitarian for the Torah to say *You are children of the Lord, your God...you are a holy people to the Lord, your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a treasured people for Him, out of all the nations that are upon the earth?*

These verses seem to be the opposite of political correctness. They seem to suggest that Jews are better than non-Jews. Indeed, this has been the (unjustified) excuse of so much hatred and resentment of the gentile world throughout history. But does the Torah actually teach that Jews are better?

And, more practically and to the point: Is this what we should be teaching our children – that they are chosen, that they are better, that they are more holy and refined and special than the *goyim*, the other nations of the world?

¹ Deuteronomy 14:1-2.

4. Is this Fundamentalism?

Everything we know of Western democracy and modern thought shouts that this is fundamentalism, extremism, which can become the root of all evil, as we are witness to today.

So how can the Torah, *whose ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace,*² state in no uncertain terms that *You are children of the Lord, your God...you are a holy people to the Lord, your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a treasured people for Him, out of all the nations that are upon the earth?*

The question becomes even more perplexing when we compare it to another Torah passage, which states all human beings are created in the Divine Image. If all human beings, Jews and non-Jews, are created in God's Image, why does the Torah state that the Jews are chosen, that they are holy? Can anyone else created in God's Image, Jew or non-Jew, not be holy, not be chosen?

Since every molecule of creation was created by God, and, as the Baal Shem Tov teaches, is perpetually sustained by the Divine, then how is it possible that anything in creation is not chosen? If it weren't chosen, even for a split second, it would cease to be.

Therefore, what is this verse teaching us? Great, we are chosen – but so is everything else in existence!

Yet we know there is more to it. And we strive to understand the nuances: What does it mean to be chosen?

And, furthermore, what should we tell our kids – are we, Jews, like everyone else, or are we different?

Let us turn to a fascinating passage in the Midrash which cites various examples of things chosen by God.

² Proverbs 3:17.

5. The Midrash

In two places, the Midrash³ discusses various examples of creations that God has selected and chosen:

You find a variety of creations that the Holy Blessed One created in the world and selected one of them. He created seven days and chose the Shabbat, as it says, *And God blessed the seventh day and He hallowed it.*⁴ He created years and selected one of them, as it says, *The land shall be given a rest – a Shabbat to the Lord.*⁵ He created Sabbaticals and selected one of them, as it says, *And you shall sanctify the fiftieth [Jubilee] year.*⁶ He created lands and selected one of them, the Land of Israel, as it says, *Perpetually the eyes of Lord, your God, are upon it.*⁷ Also the Holy One calls it “His land,” as it says, *And My land they divided.*⁸ He created firmaments, and selected one, the clouds, as it says, *Praise Him who rides in the clouds.*⁹ He created nations and selected one of them, Israel, as it says, *The Lord has chosen you to be for a treasured people for Him.*¹⁰ He created tribes and selected one of them, Levi, as it says, *And did I choose him from all the tribes of Israel.*¹¹

Earlier, the Midrash,¹² offered a different list of items that were chosen:

Six are those that are chosen: 1) the priesthood; 2) the Levites; 3) Israel; 4) the Kingdom of Judah; 4) Jerusalem; 6) the Holy Temple.

³ Bamidbar Rabbah 3:8.

⁴ Genesis 2:3.

⁵ Leviticus 25:2.

⁶ Ibid. 10.

⁷ Deuteronomy 11:12.

⁸ Joel 4:2.

⁹ Psalms 68:5.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 14:2.

¹¹ II Samuel 2:28.

¹² Bamidbar Rabbah 3:2.

What's the common denominator between all of these? Why were they chosen? Were they chosen for the reasons human beings usually choose things or were they chosen for another reason? What does this word, *bochar*, "chosen," mean in the above context?

And, finally, what does this mean for us today?

6. Why We Choose

Usually, when a human being chooses something it is because that item is better than the comparable items.

You choose a bulkhead seat on an airplane because it has more legroom than the other seats. You choose a Lexus over an Oldsmobile because the Lexus is smoother and more luxurious. You choose a Rolex over a Timex because a Rolex is more durable and sophisticated.

With holy things, it works the exact opposite way: you don't choose something because of its value, rather, the choice itself makes it valuable.

As this is an abstract idea, let us use a concrete example: a parent loves a child not because of the child's virtues or value but because the child is the parent's child.

Choice reveals an innate connection with someone or something, more than it is about choosing someone or something that's better.¹³ True choice isn't a calculation. True choice is a realization.

A parent chooses a child whether the child behaves or misbehaves. God chooses Israel whether Israel "behaves" or "misbehaves."¹⁴ The choice is not rational. The choice reflects the innate relationship.

¹³ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 19, p. 279.

¹⁴ Either way they are my children and cannot be replaced with another nation – see Talmud, Kidushin 36a. Ruth Rabba Psichta 3. Bamidbar Rabba 2:15.

We Jews demonstrate to the world through our actions that our relationship with God is not how everyone else conventionally thinks of a relationship with God. Their relationship is dependent on doing righteous deeds and through them creating the relationship. So while every person on earth was chosen by God and is created in the divine image, yet our relationship with God is intrinsic, innate – God already chose us – and we actualize that intrinsic connection when we do righteous deeds.

This is like a parent/child relationship, where the love and connection is intrinsic and not dependent on the child acting in a desirable manner.

So though every element of existence, including every person, is chosen by God for a particular mission, the forces of material life can conceal this choice. While the Jew's inherent connection with God is always intact, and thus has the power to actually reveal the "choseness" and uniqueness of every human being.

This is why a Jew is a Jew. That is true whether the Jew prays all day long or never prays at all ... whether the Jew has or does not have matzo balls for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The relationship is not based on what you do; rather what you do is based on the relationship.

Now, of course, that relationship can be more revealed and conscious or less revealed and conscious depending on the Jew's behavior, but the relationship always exists.

Because there is a relationship with God, we must keep the Torah, and through keeping the Torah our relationship with God is enhanced.

It may have made more sense for God to choose Canada over Canaan, or most any other land before choosing the Land of Israel. It may have made more sense for God to choose almost any other nation over the Nation of Israel – there are many others that are bigger, stronger, more prosperous.

But He didn't. Because we are inherently connected with Him. As such His choice made us holy.

This is true for all of God's choices listed in the Midrash: All of them are holy and transcendent because God chose them, but God did not choose them because they were transcendent and holy.

And this is the profound idea that is conveyed in the choosing of the Jewish people – our relationship with God is not contingent on anything, only on the essential reality that God chose us.

Which leads us to educating our children.

7. Personal Lesson: Your Children Are Special, Chosen

Which child is healthier? The child that is taught from day one that he or she has been chosen, is special, is hand picked and selected, or the child that has been educated from day one that he or she is not unique, is like everyone else, is interchangeable?

It seems as if we live in a society where being special is frowned upon. Parents don't tell their children, "You're special," either because they themselves don't think it, or because they believe *all* children are special.

It's true, *all* children are special. But it is the ones who believe they are special that respect and see others as special as well. And those who have been taught that they are not special believe other children aren't special either.

Says the Torah in this week's portion: The greatest gift we can give our kids is to teach them that they have been hand-picked by God, that they are unique, selected and special. Then surely they will believe that every one of God's creatures is likewise special.

But if we teach our kids that they are not chosen and they are not special, how are they ever supposed to teach the people of the world that they have been created in the Divine Image?

8. Rosh Chodesh Elul – King's in the Field (Conclusion)

Today is (the first day of) Rosh Chodesh Elul, the beginning of the month of Elul, the twelfth and final month of the Jewish year. Elul is the month of accounting for the previous year and the month that segues into and prepares us for Rosh Hashanah and the New Year ahead.

Traditionally, the month of Elul is used by Jews to self-evaluate – to review the past year and commit to a fabulous year ahead.

In Chassidic teachings, one's relationship with God in Elul is described by a wonderful metaphor: The king is in the field!

Normally, the king is in the palace, surrounded by ministers, guards, fortresses and moats – all standing between you and the King.

The same can be said of our relationship with God throughout the year – there is so much between us and heaven. And it requires much preparation to access the King in His palace.

But, in the month of Elul, the king – that is God, the King of Kings is in the field. He is outside the palace, travelling in the countryside and anyone, anywhere, anytime may walk up to Him and say hello, say thank you, ask a question, or ask for a blessing.

It matters not what rank you hold, or how “religious,” or how “chosen,” you deem yourself to be. The King is in the field and you are connected and holy and divine – you can access the King whether you are prepared for it or not.

All you have to do is take a walk in the field. All you have to do is embrace your connection and your purpose.

And this is what the verses in our portion tell us, straight up:

You are children of the Lord, your God...you are a holy people to the Lord, your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a treasured people for Him, out of all the nations that are upon the earth.

So be sure your children know this. Teach them that they are united with God, that they are chosen by God even as they find themselves in the mundane field, and that they should live in a way that reflects their Divine Image.

When they do, they will inspire the rest of the world to live that way as well.

Shabbat Shalom!