

Proposal for Shavuot Holiday Service (*Tikkun*)

Exodus	Chapter	19	Verses	1-6
1.	On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt,			
	on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.			
2.	They set out from Refidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped			
	in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain,			
3.	While Moses went up to God, The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying,			
	“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel:			
4.	You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles'			
	wings and brought you to myself			
5.	Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be			
	my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;			
6.	And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words			
	that you shall speak to the people of Israel.			

On the backdrop of the giving of the Torah, there arises the issue of the Jews as the people chosen to receive the Torah, enter the covenant and become G-d's treasured possession among all peoples.

What does it mean to be the chosen people? What are the psychological and social needs that the concept of the chosen people responds to? Would any of us see a certain moral difficulty with regard to this concept, i.e., with regard to its ethnocentricity (an ethnic group's conception of itself and its values as being more exalted and virtuous than others), isolationism, arrogance, and even racism inherent in it?

In the following, we shall bring several *midrashim* from *hazal* literature that deal with this topic, as well as modern philosophical writings that attempt to answer some of the disturbing questions that arise in connection with the “chosen people” concept.

You may read the *midrash* and study it yourselves or, with the help of the guiding questions given in the following. For words that may require interpretation, use the following aids that accompany the text:

Like a rose among thorns

from: Vayikrah Rabbah (Great Leviticus) Chapter 23, Verse 3
 Rabbi Azaria in the name of Rabbi Yehudah son of Rabbi Shimon says: The matter may be compared to the case of a king who had an orchard planted with one row of fig trees, one of vines, one of pomegranates, and one of apples. He entrusted it to a tenant and

went away. After a time, the king came and looked in at the orchard to ascertain what it had yielded. He found it full of thorns and briars, so he brought woodcutters to raze it. He looked closely at the thorns and noticed among them a single rose-colored flower. He smelled it, and his spirits calmed down. The king said: The whole orchard shall be saved because of this flower! In a similar manner, the whole world was created only for the sake of the Torah. Twenty six generations later, G-d looked in at his world to ascertain what it had yielded and found it full of water in water. Generation of Enosh - water in water Generation of the flood - water in water Generation of the dispersion - water in water So he brought woodcutters to raze it. As it is written (Psalms 29): The Lord sits enthroned over the flood. He saw one rose-colored flower, to wit, Israel. G-d took it and smelled it when G-d gave them (the Israelites) the Ten Commandments, and G-d's spirits were calmed when they said, we will do, and we will hear. G-d said: The whole orchard shall be saved because of this flower! For the sake of the Torah and of Israel, the world shall be saved!

The proverb and the moral of the story: Who is who? Who is the king? Who are the woodcutters? The orchard? The thorns and briars? The rose?

Are there gaps and differences between the proverb and the lesson? Do they have meaning?

How does the proverb illustrate the midrash's perspective on the meaning of the chosen people?

The imagery of the rose among thorns is taken from the Song of Songs: "Like a lily among the thorns is my darling among the young women" (Song of Songs 2:2). How does the romantic imagery contribute to the outlook of the *midrash*? What is the midrash's position on the place of the Jewish people and the Torah in the world?

What underlies the human need to see the group I belong to as a chosen group?

What could have been the role of such positions in Jewish history, and what purpose did they serve? Did they serve as a defense mechanism?

In the following is another midrash, describing how Israel was chosen to receive the Torah.

"We will do, and we will hear", from: Pesikta Rabbati 21

At first G-d went to the sons of Esau. And He said: Do you accept the Torah?





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And they said before G-d: Lord in Heaven, what is written in it? And He said: Thou shalt not kill. They told him: The very heritage which our father left us was violence, as it is said: "You shall live by the sword." We cannot accept the Torah. He then went to the Amonites (and Moab) and asked them: Do you accept the Torah? And they said before G-d: Lord in Heaven, what is written in it? And He said: Thou shalt not commit adultery. They told him: They, however, said to Him that they were, all of them, the children of adulterers, as it is written: "So both of Lot's daughters became pregnant by their father." We cannot accept the Torah. He then went to the sons of Ishmael. And He said: Do you accept the Torah? And they said before G-d: Lord in Heaven, what is written in it? And He said: Thou shalt not steal. They told him: The very blessing that had been pronounced upon our father was to live from stealing and robbery. As it is written: "He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him." We cannot accept the Torah. He then turned to the people of Israel. They told him: We will do, and we will hear. As it is written: "The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes."

In your opinion, what questions does the *midrash* intend to answer?

What is the internal role of the verses brought in the *midrash*, with regard to each of the nations mentioned?

According to the *midrash*, what is the uniqueness of the response given by Israel?

What could the implications of the concept of Israel as the chosen people be, as arise from the two *midrashim* brought here?

What kind of self-awareness do these concepts form? What are the possible advantages, and what are the dangers that could result from such concepts?

We shall study two more *midrashim*. Although the two *midrashim* are similar, it seems that each leads the verse explained in them in a different direction.

"And all the people saw the voices",

from: Exodus Rabbah, Chapter 5:

"And all the people saw the voices..." R. Yochanan said: It is not voice that is written here, but rather voices. The voice would go out and divide into seventy voices for the seventy languages, so that all the nations would hear. And each and every nation would hear in the language of the nation and their souls would depart. But Israel would hear and they were not injured.





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And “like a hammer that shatters a rock”

from: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat Tractate 29b':

R. Yochanan said: where is it written (Psalms 68) “Kings and armies flee in haste; the women at home divide the plunder”? Each and every utterance that emerged from the mouth of the Almighty divided into seventy languages. The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught with regard to the verse: “Behold, is my word not like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that shatters a rock?” (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as this hammer breaks a stone into several fragments, so too, each and every utterance that emerged from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, divided into seventy languages.

What is the difference between the two *midrashim*? What position with regard to the Torah and the Jewish people is alluded to in each of them?

The imagery of sparks flying and division into 70 languages could hint at an understanding of the divine message as one that appears in different forms, other than the form and language given to Israel. You are invited to study the writings of Avraham Yitzhak Green, and American Jewish thinker, who attempts to deal with the difficulty he sees with regard to the chosen people concept.

Meanings of words and expressions

“Like a rose among thorns”

Thistles and briars - thorns

Woodcutters - tree cutters, tree choppers to chop down the orchard

Water in water - all water, no wine. Allegory for a lesser generation, of meager achievements

Generation of Enosh - the generation after Cain and Abel

Generation of the flood - Noah’s generation

Generation of the dispersion - the generation of the Tower of Babel

“We will do, and we will hear”

That which is written

“And all the people saw the voices”

“And all the people saw the voices” - Exodus 20:18

“Like a hammer that shatters a rock”

What is written

The Almighty - one of the names of G-d

Tani d’bei - learned in the study hall of...





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References to verses

Like a rose among thorns

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood (Psalms 29:10)

“We will do, and we will hear” - Exodus 24:7

“We will do, and we will hear”

“You shall live by the sword” - Genesis 27:40

“So both of Lot’s daughters became pregnant by their father” - Genesis 19:36

“He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him” - Genesis 16:12

“The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran” - Deuteronomy 33:2

“And all the people saw the voices”

And their souls would depart - died

“Like a hammer that shatters a rock”

“Kings and armies flee in haste; the women at home divide the plunder.” Psalms 68:12

“Like a hammer that shatters a rock” Jeremiah 23:29

