

Dear Chavraya,

One of the great challenges in Jewish thought and theology is the question of chosenness. Depending on how it is understood, we find either the basis for triumphalism and narrow vision or an imperative for moral striving as a Jew in the world. The idea of being a “chosen people” can and should cause discomfort. In a midrash, it is clear that the rabbis too felt discomfort. God is imagined as having gone to all of the other nations seeking a people who would accept the Torah. Only when all of the others had refused does God come to Israel. In exasperation now, God holds Mount Sinai above them and says, “If you do not accept My Torah, this shall be your grave.” As noble or preferential calling, the force of chosenness is diminished in being the last one approached and given no choice in the choosing.

It is in this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Yitro*, that we come to Mount Sinai. In the giving of the Torah we become a people joined in common purpose with each other and with God. Our common purpose is uniquely ours to fulfill, as every nation and people has its own purpose and destiny among the children of Adam, the first human. As the Slonimer rebbe teaches that each person has her or his own unique task and purpose, or else we wouldn’t be here, so too does each nation and people have its own unique offering within the human family.

As we gather at Mount Sinai, and the Torah says *b’tachtit ha’har*, literally “beneath the mountain,” thus the midrash, God speaks to us of the nature of the Covenant we are about to enter into. Only “if you will really listen to My voice,” shall we enter into the relationship. Only then, *v’h’yitem li s’gulah mikol ha’amim*/ then you must belong to Me exclusively from all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine. It does not say from “among” the peoples, but “from,” so each people when expressing its own unique attributes, another meaning of the word *s’gulah*, is highlighted from all the peoples. As though drawn out and held up in God’s hand, each people and nation becomes a representative from the community of nations. This is how I understand these words, *mi kol ha’amim*/from all the peoples, when saying them in the context of the blessing said when called to the Torah. If I am unique and of special task and purpose in this world, so too is every other person and people.

Immediately following this verse we are told, *And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation/mamlechet kohanim v’goy kadosh*. The Slonimer Rebbe points out that the sentence would make sense without the word *li/to Me*. He then explains that the word *li* denotes personal choice, our own choosing, *If it is your desire to be Mine, it is upon you to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...*, it is a personal choice/*mivchar ha’enoshiyut*. Chosen becomes choosing. Rashi says, “And don’t say: you alone are Mine and I have no others with you.”

In a remarkable expression of God's hope for humanity, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes, "for this relationship you are to bear towards Me is really nothing exceptional.... The whole of humanity, every nation in the world really is destined to belong to Me and will be ultimately educated by Me up to Me. Of what it means to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," Hirsch writes of our own calling, "a nation which is not to seek its greatness in power and might but in the absolute rule of the Divine Law - the Torah." May that be the way of our choosing, as individuals who stood together at Sinai, until as a people it shall become the common purpose, of greatness not found in power and might, that unites us and joins us together with all peoples.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor