

Parashat Beshalach

Taking It to the Next Level

Shirat ha-yam, the song sung by Moshe and the Jewish people at the Red Sea, is more than an exaltation of God in verse. On close examination, it shows itself to be a credo containing foundational principles of Jewish faith and belief. Among others, it references God's omnipotence, His eternality, and the establishment of a Temple.

The second half of the second verse of the song reads, "this is my God, and I will glorify Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him" (זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנִי, אֵלֹהֵי אָבִי וְאֲרַמְּנֶהוּ) (Exodus 15:2). Rashi glosses the words "my father's God" as follows: "I am not the beginning of the holiness; the holiness has been longstanding, and His divinity has been upon me from the days of my fathers."¹ In other words, we inherit our holiness as Jews from our ancestors.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explained that this is one kind of holiness that a Jew possesses. Being born Jewish grants a person innate holiness—"my father's God." But there is another level of holiness encapsulated by "this is my God, and I will glorify Him." When a Jew accepts upon himself or herself the mitzvot and builds a life dedicated to God's service, they possess another kind of holiness. The non-Jew who converts, fully embracing Jewish life, possesses this second level of holiness, too.²

The Rav showed that this distinction is implied by the two blessings about Jewish chosenness recited every morning. We bless God "who has not made me a Gentile" (שָׁלֵא (עֲשֵׂנִי גוֹי), and we bless God "who has chosen us from all peoples" (אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים). Logically speaking, isn't this redundant? If God has not made us Gentiles, then mustn't He have chosen us to be otherwise, to be His people? The Rav answered that one aspect of our chosenness is genealogical, that is, we are the progeny of Avraham, and so we bless God for not having made us Gentiles. A second aspect is reflected in the verses, "you shall be for Me a treasure from all the peoples... And you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). This chosenness goes beyond simple lineage and is generated and sustained by active commitment and dedication to study and practice.³

These two levels of holiness and chosenness have direct halachic consequences for the thorny case of the apostate Jew. The Jew who renounces their religion cannot erase their ancestry; consequently, their act of betrothal would be considered valid. In other areas, though, like ritual slaughter or the writing of a Torah scroll, the apostate is halachically no different from a non-Jew, rendering the meat non-kosher and the Torah scroll invalid. This can be explained using the above distinction. Jewish betrothal depends on the inborn sanctity; ritual slaughter and holy writ demand the additional holiness of commitment and observance.⁴

¹ Rashi on Exodus 15:2, s.v. אֵלֹהֵי אָבִי.

² Schachter, *Nefesh ha-Rav*, 282.

³ *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, 12–13.

⁴ Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 208.

Seizing the Crown

Israel was crowned with these three crowns: the crown of priesthood, the crown of kingship, and the crown of Torah.⁵

בְּשִׁלְשָׁה כְּתָרִים נִכְתְּרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל:
בְּכֹתֶר כְּהֻנָּה, בְּכֹתֶר מְלָכוּת
וּבְכֹתֶר תּוֹרָה.

Thus says *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*. The first two crowns belong to those who are anointed, the priest and the king. Their anointing indicates an inner sanctity and nobility that accompanies their position of stature. It is a product of lineage, an innate holiness in one's genes. The Rav argued that the same can be said regarding the crown of Torah, which is available to any Jew for the taking, and not to a select few of a particular bloodline.⁶ When we work hard to attain it, to become "a kingdom of priests" with acquired holiness, we become elevated and our personality is refined. Those engaged in Torah study and mitzvot are transformed and acquire a new sensitivity to and a different view on the world.⁷

Thanks for Everything

Rabbi Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik, the Rav's namesake and great-grandfather, identified another, similar duality in *shirat ha-yam*. The Midrash says that Moshe chose *az* (אֶז) as the first word of the song to right an earlier wrong involving the same word. Moshe had complained to God, "Since that time (מֵאֵז) when I came to speak to Pharaoh in Your name, he has done evil to this people..." (Exodus 5:23).⁸ How does the verbal repetition of a word undo wrongdoing?

Rabbi Soloveitchik answered this with a conceptual distinction between two types of gratitude. When someone is delivered from suffering, they are grateful to God for being relieved of it. The suffering itself is not considered any cause for thanksgiving. To borrow the conceptual structure above, this is the natural, baseline kind of gratitude. When Moshe and the Jewish people rejoiced at the Red Sea, they displayed a higher-order gratitude. They were thanking God for their bondage, for through it they were the instrument of God's glorification in the world. They had searched and found meaning in their suffering, so they thanked God for it in addition to their rescue. This, of course, must have taken spiritual effort, of the same type required for acquiring the second holiness and the crown of Torah.

Moshe initially bemoaned the Israelites' bondage using the word *az*. His choice to begin the song with *az* did not mysteriously negate his earlier act of misspeaking, but exemplified his and the people's newfound recognition.

Rabbi Soloveitchik located these two levels of gratitude in a verse recited during Hallel: "I praise You, for you have afflicted me, and You have been a salvation for me" (Psalms 118:21). That is, we thank God for the affliction because it prompts the salvation, by which the (ex-) sufferer becomes a vehicle for the sanctification of God's name. We show gratitude for the experience in its entirety.⁹

⁵ *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 41:1.

⁶ See the formulation in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah*, 3:1.

⁷ Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 205–206.

⁸ *Exodus Rabbah*, 23:5.

⁹ *Beit ha-Levi, Beshalach*, s.v. אֶז יִשִּׁיר מֹשֶׁה.

The Rav applied this to a puzzling inclusion in the prayer of *Al ha-Nisim*, which we say on Chanukah and Purim. Why do we thank God “for the wars” (עַל הַמִּלְחָמוֹת) during the Maccabean era and when the Jews fought back against the anti-Semites of Shushan and the rest of Persia? Perhaps the intent is to declare that our faith in God is so strong that we perceive even the darkest and most challenging moments our nation has faced to be the product of God’s providence, and we declare our submission to His inscrutable will.¹⁰

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

We have learned that concerning the verse, “this is my God, and I will glorify Him; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him” (Exodus 15:2), the Rav understood the first half to be about acquired holiness and the second half about innate holiness. Shouldn’t the order of the verse be reversed if the second is the basis and the first is the addition? Perhaps the Torah wishes to instruct that every individual’s aspirations and attainments are more significant than their *yichus*, their pedigree.

In the first blessing of the *Amidah*, God is addressed as the God of each of the three Patriarchs. Rabbi Meir Eisenstadt wondered why the word “God” (אֱלֹהִי) is repeated three times; why not say “the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov”? He suggested that in each generation, the son achieved an even deeper appreciation of and faith in God. The legacy inherited from each father served as the foundation on which spiritual monuments could be built.

Rabbi Shimon Shkop is said to have later asked why the blessing ends with “the shield of Avraham” (מָגֵן אַבְרָהָם). He proposed that Avraham was unique in that his father bequeathed him nothing but idols. Avraham had to lay a new foundation, the ground level for his son, his grandson, and for all of us.¹¹

We can emulate Avraham and take our holiness and chosenness to the next level by being dissatisfied with what we have imbibed unconsciously from our upbringing. The greatest aspect of our faith is the way in which we develop our own personalities by internalizing and embodying the principles of the Torah in our own lives.

¹⁰ Shurkin, *Harerei Kedem*, 303.

¹¹ Rabbi Daniel Stein, “Emunah and Bitachon,” <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/985449/rabbi-daniel-stein/emunah-and-bitachon/> (accessed March 4, 2021).