

Rabbi Yehuda Turetsky

# Haftarat Vayikra: When Dreams Meet Reality: Do Sins Impact Status?

*“Adam was called Adam even after he sinned, as Woman was called Woman after being expelled.” (R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha)<sup>1</sup>*

*“In the American Jewish community Orthodoxy is in the minority. Most people do not study Torah and most people do not observe all or even most of the mitzvot. A recent poll proves, to our chagrin, that the highest percentage of those who do not believe in God come from the Jewish community. How then, under such conditions, can we say that it is we who are to teach Godliness to others? Does not the idea of the chosen people, in our times, become totally irrelevant? Permit me to propose an answer...” (R. Norman Lamm)<sup>2</sup>*

## I. Introduction: Sin and the Jewish People

The Jewish people are told numerous times in *Tanakh* that they are a chosen people, a “Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation” (*Shemot* 19:6), “singled out of all the families on the earth” (*Amos* 3:2). The significance of this special status has been debated for centuries, and there remains no universally accepted perspective on its precise meaning and influence. Nevertheless, its primary role in Jewish thought is clear, with some more recent scholars arguing for an increased emphasis on its importance in modern times.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it appears self-evident that regardless of how one understands why the Jews are chosen, God’s choice of the Jews indicates there is something unique and special about them.

Yet, while the Jews have offered considerable contributions to mankind, they have not always lived up to this ambitious ideal. The prophets continually rebuke the Jewish people for their sins, and the continued state of exile is viewed by *Chazal* (*Yerushalmi Yoma* 1:1) as an indication that the Jews remain unworthy of meriting a temple. Clearly, while this nation may be unique, its actions have not always met expectations. How is one to understand that? What impact does sin have on the Jewish people? Is it a cataclysmic occurrence, impacting their position and standing, or do the Jews remain essentially the same as before, unaffected by their less than ideal behavior?

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<sup>1</sup>. *Ramatayim Tzofim* 1:1. Translated in Michael Rosen, *The Quest for Authenticity: The Thought of Reb Simha Bunim* (Jerusalem, Urim Publications, 2008), 179.

<sup>2</sup>. R. Norman Lamm, “Sinai – Burden or Blessing?” delivered as a sermon at The Jewish Center on May 26, 1966.

<sup>3</sup>. R. Yaakov Feitman cites the following:

Rabbi Chaim Segal, *zt”l*, the veteran *menahel* of Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin, is said to have once asked the *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Yitzchak Hutner, *zt”l*, “What is the single most important teaching to transmit to the new generation of American students?” His reply was terse and immediate: “That we are the *Am Hanivchar*” (Symposium on “You Have Chosen Us from Amongst the Nations,” *Jewish Action* (65:1, Fall 2004)).

A most extreme formulation is found in R. Yechiel Yehoshua of Biala’s *Siddur Chelkat Yeshoshua*, where he adds belief in the Jewish people’s unique status onto Rambam’s list of thirteen principles of faith.

This tension emerges most clearly in the words of Yeshayahu that make up *Parashat Vayikra's haftarah*. The *haftarah* begins on a positive note, in which the Jewish people are informed that they were created as a separate nation to fulfill a specific purpose (*Yeshayahu* 43:21): "I created this nation for Me so that they may praise Me."<sup>4</sup> Yeshayahu then shifts tones, rebuking the nation for their sins and failure to offer sacrifices according to *Halakhah*. Yeshayahu (43:27) even states that not only have the people sinned, but they come from sinners, as well: "Your first father sinned, and your intercessors have transgressed against Me."<sup>5</sup> Eventually, though, Yeshayahu reassures the nation that *Hashem* will help them return and facilitate an ultimate redemption; God continues to love his people despite their sins, and they remain chosen even with their failures.

To relate to this tension, it is critical to ascertain the extent to which behavior impacts status. In other words, to what degree can the Jew's position be altered? As will be shown, the implications of these issues are numerous, and relate to both the Jew as an individual and the Jewish people as a whole. From the perspective of the individual, there are implications with regards to determining *halakhic* status, as well as implications with regards to the meaning and goal of repentance. For the community, answering these questions will help determine the extent to which the Jews can remain chosen despite a history filled with sins, and may help clarify the precise goal of the Jews' historical mission.

To address this overall topic, we will explore three separate issues, followed by a concluding thought. We will first outline two very different perspectives as to how to relate to sin, as well as the precise nature of repentance. We will then examine the question of status – is status flexible and wavering, or impervious to change? The article's final section will use Yeshayahu's words in this *haftarah* to elucidate two approaches to relating to the impact of sin on the individual and Jewish people as a whole. We will conclude the article by offering a more nuanced perspective towards understanding the precise influence of sin, and the purpose of repentance.

## II. Sin and Repentance

Sin and repentance are deeply personal matters, which have been analyzed and discussed from various perspectives. However, while there are numerous elements and possible facets involved,<sup>6</sup> there appear to be two very different orientations with regards to their relationship. One view is to understand sin as a cataclysmic occurrence. Sin does not just impact one's reward and punishment; it influences who the sinner is, and changes the sinner's essence and identity. If so, repentance may demand not just regret over an inappropriate act, but necessitate a change into a "different person."

This view finds support in certain Kabbalistic works,<sup>7</sup> and may emerge from Rambam's view of repentance.<sup>8</sup> He writes (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:4):

It is of the ways of repentance, that the penitent shouts out regularly before God with cries and supplications, performing tzedakah in line with his capabilities, distancing himself far from the matter of his sin, and changing his name, thereby saying, "I am another man, and not the man who did those acts, and he changes all his actions to good and to an upright path..."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>. This interpretation follows Rashi. See *Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel* (ibid.) for an alternate explanation.

<sup>5</sup>. It is not clear who exactly Yeshayahu is referring to, and the sheer range of opinions found in the commentaries highlights a national history filled with numerous sins. See Rashi, Radak, Ibn Ezra, and Malbim (ad loc.).

<sup>6</sup>. For example, R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook discusses three categories of repentance in *Orot Ha-Teshuvah* (ch. 1), and R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (*Al Ha-Teshuvah* p. 15) articulates two aspects of the impact of sin and two corresponding goals of repentance.

<sup>7</sup>. See, for example, *The Quest for Authenticity* (ibid.).

<sup>8</sup>. See Rabbeinu Yonah's *Yesod Ha-Teshuvah*, where a similar approach may emerge.

<sup>9</sup>. This translation is taken from <http://www.mesora.org/RewardPunishmentii.htm>.

Rambam apparently understands that repentance requires one to essentially become “another man,” a different person from the one who committed the sin.<sup>10</sup>

An alternative perspective emerges from the quote of R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha cited above. By noting that Adam and Chava keep their names after sinning, he expresses the view that sin is not transformative.<sup>11</sup> True, sin should not be committed, and goes against a Divine command, but sin does not radically impact a person’s identity. Given that perspective, one could argue that repentance comes to undo a wrong action, but does not change personal status, since one remains essentially the same person.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, and possibly more likely, it may lead to a view whereby the goal of repentance is not to change one’s identity, but to “return” to one’s true character. Sin is an aberration that obscures a person’s inner self from emerging.

A most articulate presentation of this view is offered by R. Jonathan Sacks in the name of R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe:<sup>13</sup>

“Repentance” in Hebrew is not *teshuvah*, but *charatah*. Not only are these two terms not synonymous. They are opposites. *Charatah* implies remorse or a feeling of guilt about the past and an intention to behave in a completely new way in the future. The person decides to become “a new man.” But *teshuvah* means “returning” to the old, to one’s original nature. Underlying the concept of *teshuvah* is the fact that the Jew is, in essence, good. Desires or temptations may deflect him temporarily from being himself, being true to his essence. But the bad that he does is not part of, nor does it affect, his real nature. *Teshuvah* is a return to the self. While repentance involves dismissing the past and starting anew, *teshuvah* means going back to one’s roots in G-d and exposing them as one’s true character.

What have emerged are two very different perspectives as to the impact of sin and the function of repentance. One views sin as transformative to a person’s identity, and therefore understands repentance as a requirement to become “another person,” while the other minimizes the impact of sin and may argue for a repentance that requires the opposite; it demands not that one change into a new person but instead that one return to one’s true identity.

### III. Flexible Status: Are We Always God’s Children?

Support for these two perspectives on the effects of sin may be found in a discussion in the Talmud regarding Jewish status. The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 36a) cites a debate about the scope of the Torah’s statement that the Jews are God’s children (*Devarim* 14:1).<sup>14</sup> R. Yehudah maintains that a Jew is only

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<sup>10</sup>. The source for changing one’s name is the Talmud in *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (16b). In truth, many commentators discuss the purpose of changing one’s name and becoming “another person,” and there may be different ways to understand why it would be necessary. See Ran (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* ad loc.), Meiri (*Chibur Ha-Teshuvah* 1:9) and Semag (*Positive Mitzvot* 17).

<sup>11</sup>. See *The Quest for Authenticity* (ibid.).

<sup>12</sup>. One can find support for both of these views through an analysis of various sacrifices. The *olah*, *asham*, and *chatat* offerings may all provide atonement to the person that offered the sacrifice, but it is possible to distinguish between them in terms of how they accomplish that goal. The *chatat* may relate to the action of the sinner, whereas the *olah*, for example, may relate to the sinner’s overall status. For support for such an approach, see the Talmud’s statement in *Zevachim* 6b.

<sup>13</sup>. R. Jonathan Sacks, *Torah Studies* (Brooklyn NY, Kehot, 2000), 335.

This general perspective is found in numerous other sources and especially developed in the writings of R. Kook. For a collection of relevant citations from his writings, see R. David Samson and Tzvi Fishman, *The Art of Teshuva* (Jerusalem, Beit Orot, 5759), 7–10.

<sup>14</sup>. A related debate is found in the Talmud in *Bava Batra* (10a). See Maharsha (ibid.).

God's child when he behaves appropriately and in a manner befitting an obedient child. For him, status is based on conduct; it is earned and not inherited. Such an approach is easily justified if one maintains that sin changes one's identity.

R. Meir disagrees and argues that Jews always remain God's children. Personal piety has no impact on individual status; rather, biology is the key determinant. For him, sin cannot influence the intrinsic holiness inside the Jew. Taken at face value, the Talmud offers two radically different approaches to a Jew's status, one impervious and resistant to change and another flexible and wavering, each possibly reflecting one of the perspectives outlined above about the nature of sin's impact on the Jews.

There are, however, those that limit the scope of this debate, arguing that R. Yehudah and R. Meir should be interpreted in more limited fashions. If so, it may be necessary to develop a more nuanced approach towards understanding the impact of sin on personal identity. Rashba (*Shut Rashba* 1:194) maintains that even R. Meir agrees that one's status can be lost with regards to certain *halakhot*. For example, a sinner always retains his ability to create a halakhic marriage and divorce, but in some circumstances one may lend money to a sinner with interest, something normally prohibited.<sup>15</sup> Some offer a more sweeping characterization of a sinner's status, whereby one's independent status as a Jew persists, while one's national identity disappears.<sup>16</sup> For proponents of this approach, the categories of being a Jew and being part of the Jewish people are not the same. A Jew is imbued with a special sanctity that can never be removed, but being part of the national identity is less certain and depends on one's lifestyle and ideals.

*Sefat Emet* (*Parashat Re'ei*, 5645) offers a more mystical perspective to this debate. He argues that Jews have a unique and special soul that can never be lost, but the Jewish body only receives a certain status when the Jew observes God's commands.<sup>17</sup> According to this view, then, one may suggest that R. Yehudah and R. Meir debate the impact of the special soul on the Jewish body. R. Meir maintains that the soul and body are always intertwined and linked, whereas R. Yehudah argues that soul only impacts body when the Jew acts like God's obedient child. For R. Yehudah, then, what appears to emerge is a difference between a Jew's intrinsic sanctity, which cannot be diminished, and additional levels of sanctity that are conditional.

If one accepts these nuanced approaches, it becomes apparent that numerous perspectives exist. There are not just two distinct views, one arguing that sin cannot impact status because the Jew always remains holy, and another believing that sin can completely undermine personal standing. Instead, there may be a range of views, each requiring separate analysis. To highlight two specific perspectives towards understanding why sin may not be able to undermine the Jew's special status, we will now turn to Yeshayahu's words in this *haftarah*.

#### **iv. Keeping Identity: Two Perspectives in Yeshayahu**

Yeshayahu not only informs the Jewish people that they are chosen, but also why they are chosen. He tells the Jews that God created them so that they would praise Him.<sup>18</sup> As noted above, these words of Yeshayahu can be used to highlight two different views as to why sin cannot undermine status:

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<sup>15</sup>. For a discussion of Rashba's rationale for ruling as he did, see R. Tzvi Pesach Frank's *Shut Har Tzvi* (E.H. 97).

<sup>16</sup>. See, for example, R. Herschel Schachter's *Eretz Ha-Tzvi* (pp. 122). See, as well, Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Ishut* 4:15) and *Orchot Chaim* (*Hilkhot Kiddushin* p. 55).

<sup>17</sup>. For a related discussion that impacts verses in this *haftarah*, see Rabbeinu Bechaye (*Bereishit* 47:29) and *Rinat Yitzchak* (*Yeshayahu* pp. 161–162).

<sup>18</sup>. This follows the interpretation of Rashi (ad loc.). See footnote above.

## 1. An Inherent Sanctity

Yeshayahu tells the Jews that they were not merely separated at a later point in history after numerous years of existence – the Jews were created for the purpose of praising God, thereby making it increasingly more likely that the impact of their being chosen is fundamental to their very existence. *Sefat Emet* invokes this verse in numerous places, arguing that it highlights how the primary purpose of Creation was for the Jews.<sup>19</sup> Most critical for the question at hand, *Sefat Emet* cites this verse as an indication that all Jews are connected, in a certain sense, to *Hashem* and His Torah. Even though Jews may sin, they remain at their core connected with the Divine; built into them and their creation is this strong connection to *Hashem*.<sup>20</sup> What may, therefore, emerge, is a perspective that argues that Jews remain chosen despite their sins because at their core they are holy. There is an intrinsic sanctity within them that never wavers, and a fundamental connection built into them that cannot be swayed.

Working with an essentialist perspective on chosenness, R. Kook appears to develop a similar approach (*Orot Yisrael* 5:7).<sup>21</sup>

One might think that the entire difference between Israel and the nations is that difference [in the realm of action] which is given prominence by the active observance of *mitzvot*...This view is mistaken...It is the element of *neshamah* that sets Israel's character apart as a distinct unit, unique in the world. From that difference spring all the differences in behavior [i.e., *mitzvot*], and even when these last are impaired [by lack of observance], that impairment cannot touch the...psychic element from which they derive. Therefore the difference between Israel and the nations will remain forever.

Because what separates Jews and non-Jews for R. Kook is not action or behavior, but soul and essential character; he argues that the Jew remains distinct even when not observant or externally pious. The soul remains the same, separate from the rest of humanity. In another context, R. Kook, similar to *Sefat Emet*, also argues that all Jews, including heretics, are filled with faith and are connected to *Hashem*.<sup>22</sup>

This view accepts the above perspective that sin cannot impact the holiness found within each Jew, and it would likely align with the approach outlined above that true repentance involves returning to one's true self and allowing one's inner sanctity to flourish. From this perspective, the Jews as a whole remain chosen for the same reason that sin cannot undermine the sanctity of an individual Jew.

Not all accept the above approaches, be it the fundamental approach that argues for an essentialist perspective to chosenness, or the more extreme formulations that argue for a strong Divine connection for even the most heretical of Jews. However, there is an additional element of Yeshayahu's words to the Jewish people, one that offers another reason why the Jews can remain chosen and a different perspective on sin and repentance.

## 2. A Historical Mission

As mentioned above, Yeshayahu informs the Jewish people that they were selected for a purpose, to praise *Hashem*. Interestingly, while emphasizing the role of mission and purpose could lead to a more

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<sup>19</sup>. See, for example, *Sefat Emet* (*Sukkot* 5644).

<sup>20</sup>. *Sefat Emet* (*Sukkot* 5658).

<sup>21</sup>. For a lengthier discussion of R. Kook's perspective on chosenness, see R. Jonathan Blass' article in the aforementioned Jewish Action symposium. This translation is taken from that article.

<sup>22</sup>. See R. Kook's *Middot Ha-Ra'ayah* (*emunah* 10). This general idea can be found in numerous other places. See, for example, R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (*Meshekh Chokhmah* to *Parashat Vayera* 22:14) and R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (*Likkutei Amarim*, ch. 18).

flexible Jewish status,<sup>23</sup> Yeshayahu appears to endorse a different view in this *haftarah*. He begins by informing the Jews that they are singled out for a mission, and continues, just a few verses later, to emphasize that they remain chosen despite their sins. Apparently, the special status remains intact *even if the mission for which they were selected remains unaccomplished*. It is God's charge to praise Him that makes the Jews chosen, not whether they fulfill that command.

It is easier to understand why this would be when chosenness is interpreted as a purpose instead of a privilege, and a responsibility rather than a right. The Jewish people are chosen not because of their biology or genealogy, but because they are supposed to fulfill a mission. If they fail to do so, that charge still remains, and if anything, the mission becomes all the more critical. The world needs what the Jewish people are supposed to offer, a life predicated on higher calling and reflecting a desire to praise *Hashem*. In other words, a chosenness dependent on responsibility can remain, despite a history of sin, because the mission creates our status, and the mission is a continual one.<sup>24</sup>

When applied to the individual Jew, this perspective offers an interesting approach to the impact of sin. There's no guarantee that one can withstand the impact of iniquities; they may alter one's identity and therefore demand a repentance that comes with becoming "another person." There's no assumption of an essentialist viewpoint to Jewish sanctity. However, that need not impact a person's status as chosen. The sense of mission and purpose remains despite personal failures, and one can always remain chosen even if there's a need to reinvent and reorient oneself towards a more ambitious religious lifestyle.

## V. Conclusion: Two Aspects to Chosenness

While Yeshayahu appears to endorse the position that the Jewish people always remain chosen, a failure to observe God's commands may create distance between God and the Jews.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Yeshayahu is correct when he tells the Jewish people that no bill of divorce has been given (*Yeshayahu* 50:1), but that does not mean that there is no separation. Indeed, it was noted above that nuanced perspectives exist regarding an individual Jew's status, whereby one can be a full Jew but not part of the Jewish people, or filled with a Jewish soul, but without a Jewish body.

How is one to understand that?

R. Norman Lamm (ibid.) distinguishes between two facets of chosenness, that of God choosing the Jews, and that of the Jews choosing God. He argues, "chosenness has both obligations and privileges, difficulties and joys. The negative features – the responsibilities and the agonies – derive from God's choice of us; the positive aspects – the sense of privilege and the delight – come from our choice of Him."<sup>26</sup>

It seems possible to suggest that much of the nuance in assessing the impact of sin derives from this distinction. Yeshayahu reminds the Jews that they are always chosen by God. But if one only has that element of chosenness, it can feel like a burden. In line with the Rashba's approach mentioned

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<sup>23</sup>. This is because if the Jewish people are unique because they are supposed to behave differently, then they should lose their status if they fail to act as required. On this, see, for example, Prof. Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>24</sup>. The words of R. Hirsch (*Commentary to Parashat Vayikra* 20:26) appear to reflect this general orientation towards understanding what it means to be chosen:

...so that in no way does Jewish thought look on the choice of Israel as a rejection of the rest of humanity. It regards the choice of Israel only a beginning, only the restarting of the spiritual and moral rebuilding of Mankind, only the first step to that future...where many nations will attach themselves to God, and become His People, and Israel's Sanctuary will not only be the central heart of Israel but the centre of Mankind, who will have found their way to God.

<sup>25</sup>. See R. Hayyim J. Angel, "The Chosen People": An Ethical Challenge, in *Creating Space Between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav 2011), 28–30.

<sup>26</sup>. Elements of this perspective may be found in the writings of R. Kook. See R. Kook's *Orot*, 55.

above, it can lead to an individual's distance from the rest of the Jewish people and the sense of isolation and frustration that comes from viewing one's state as a challenge and not a gift. From the *Sefat Emet's* perspective, it may mean that the special soul will stay inside, and not permeate one's body. Not embracing one's status allows it to remain hidden, since it lacks the room necessary to flourish and develop.

True, one remains chosen despite sin, and selected from the rest of humanity even with failures, but being completely chosen demands a commitment and acceptance of that special state. It requires recognition that a life of chosenness is a life filled with joy, opportunity, and meaning. It is a life where one is close to the Divine, and lives an inspired life filled with a constant sense of purpose.

Working with R. Lamm's approach, one may argue for an additional perspective on the impact of sin and the meaning of repentance. Sins are not only individual acts of rebellion against God. They serve as a statement that the sinner has not chosen God. If so, authentic repentance may require not only regret over the act on the part of the sinner, but changing one's orientation to effectively choose God. It requires shifting perspectives, and living a more ambitious religious life.

Yeshayahu informs the Jews that they will always remain chosen. But that is not enough. To maximize their potential and fulfill their national destiny, they must also choose God. When that is done, the Jewish people will not only have achieved the goals set forth for them, but they will have encouraged and inspired the rest of the world, as well. As Yeshayahu describes, there will be a time when all will merit a closer connection to the Divine. Our inner sanctity will finally flourish and our sacred mission will be fully accomplished. "For the Earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (*Yeshayahu* 11:9).