

## The Chosen People

Midrash says, when, “God gave the Torah no bird sang, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, the sea ceased to roar, and all creatures were silent. The entire world was hushed into stillness and the Voice spoke forth: ‘I, the Lord...’” (Plaut 518). This applies to this week’s parashah, Yitro. Found in the book of Exodus, Yitro describes the awesome event that occurred over 3,000 years ago at Mount Sinai. In his commentary, Gunther Plaut suggests that Am Yisrael’s birth was twofold. Although its “physical birth” occurs with the Exodus from Egypt, of pivotal importance is Israel’s “spiritual birth” which occurs at Mount Sinai (Plaut 516). This “spiritual birth,” composed of “Revelation, Covenant, and Law,” makes Israel a nation among the nations. Plaut describes these “three pillars,” without which Israel would have been just like all other nations and its people, just like all other people.

The first part of Am Yisrael’s spiritual birth is the Revelation; God revealed the Awesome Presence to the Jewish people. It is this theophany that causes the Hebrews to accept the Covenant. “All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. ‘You speak to us,’ they said to Moses, ‘and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die’ ” (JPS Hebrew English Tanakh Ex. 20:15-17). When the Revelation occurred, all of Israel felt fear for they had seen God’s true might. This fear drove the Hebrews to accept God’s Covenant and God’s Laws. This Revelation was thus a necessary step in creating the Chosen People.

Covenant, the second part of Am Yisrael’s spiritual birth, describes the relationship between God and the Jewish people. In the vernacular, a covenant is a written contract, a promise, agreed upon and signed by two or more people or groups of people. However, in the bible, the Covenant means much more than the vernacular. It possesses a sense of holiness, divine awe, and beauty. The Covenant is not just a covenant. It is the Covenant because two groups of people do not agree upon it, but rather The Holy One agrees upon it with the Chosen People. When the Jewish people agreed to the Covenant, they agreed to believe in Adonai, the one God. And by believing in God, the Jewish people have chosen to follow God’s laws. Thus, Adonai rewards Am Yisrael making them the Chosen People.

The third and final part of Am Yisrael’s spiritual birth is the Law, which is contained within the Torah. Judaism teaches us that nothing is more sacred than life. But what is life other than breath and the sacred drumbeat, the beat of one’s heart? It has been said that when God gave the Torah, God did so in a single breath. When God gave the Torah, the Law, God did not simply give an object, but rather breathed life into it, just as when God created Adam. The Torah therefore contains the secret to life; life’s very essence appears unclothed, naked before our very human eyes. One simply has to take a close look to see that all the Torah says is to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This simplest of ethics, to do right, comes from the Almighty One. Jewish ethics define a being’s heart, its potential to do good and evil. The practicing of these ethics are the

actions of the heart, the beating of a heart. The Torah, the Law, contains God's breath and God's heartbeat. For Am Yisrael to have received such a treasure, truly we must be the Chosen People.

Nevertheless, being God's Chosen People is both a blessing and a burden. It would have been enough of a blessing just to be God's Chosen People. But God grants us another blessing for the Divine Presence is always with us and is always protecting us. It is a shield of light that drives away darkness. However, Judaism also carries a burden. If we do not fulfill the Covenant, then God will make us suffer. The manner in which we deal with this burden defines us as a people. Though times may be difficult, like Job, we too must stay true to God just as we said at Sinai, Na'aseh V'nishma, "we will faithfully do!" (JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh Ex. 24:7). The North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) is the epitome of staying true to the Covenant in hard times.

In 1939 in the United States, college age individuals created NFTY. Kristallnacht, which happened in 1938, is proof that although the Holocaust had not begun yet, feelings of anti-Semitism were still quite high in Europe. Unfortunately, people in the United States viewed Jews in a similar light. "In a Roper poll in the United States, only thirty-nine percent of the respondents agreed that Jews should be treated like everyone else. Fifty-three percent believed that 'Jews are different and should be restricted.' And ten percent believed that Jews should be deported" (Smitha 2001). To have created a Jewish organization at such a time, required more than just bravery; it required love. NFTY's creators loved their Jewish faith just as God loves the Chosen People. When NFTY's creators gave birth to NFTY, it was as if they said, na'aseh v'nishma, "we will faithfully do!" all over again." (JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh Ex. 24:7) They reaffirmed their faith and their belief in the Covenant once more proving that they, that we, NFTY, truly believe in a Holy Partnership, the Covenant.

One often asks the question as to why God chose the Jewish people to be the Chosen People. However, this is the wrong question. God did not ask us, but rather we chose Adonai to be our God. When we made that choice, we became the Chosen People. When NFTY's creators created NFTY, they made the choice to choose God all over again. We are the Chosen People, and NFTY is proof of it.

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