

## Siman Tov u Mazel Tov!!

Rabbi Claudio J. Kogan  
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple  
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A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of officiating at a wedding with Rabbi Miller in three languages: Hebrew, English, and Spanish. It did not matter that the sanctuary was not finished, it was a joyous occasion. I also had the privilege to officiate at the wedding of my sister, which was something completely different from other rabbinical duties that I have ever done.

Under the *chupa* we witness the love of a Jewish couple and their commitment to start a Jewish home. This concept is revitalized each week in *Kabbalat Shabbat* when we sing the last verses of the *Lecha dodi*, when we sing "*Toch Emunei am segula Bohi Kala Bohi Kala*," "Crowning your people, faithful and true; come Sabbath bride, Sabbath bride of rest," the writer of the *Lecha Dodi* viewed the Shabbat as a wedding between Israel and God.

It is said in our tradition that when a person is born, God chooses somebody else to be his or her *bashert*. Moreover, that person will look his or her *bashert* until they find each other. God chooses who will marry whom and we have to travel through the roads of our lives to find that *bashert*.

Today, I want to speak about an important concept that in some ways is related to the *bashert* and Jewish weddings. This concept appears for the second time in our Torah; this week in *Parasha Ki Tavo*. That concept is "*Am Segula*," the chosen people.

I am aware of the ambivalence many Jews feel about the concept of chosenness throughout history, this doctrine was understood by some to mean that the Jews were given special status by God. In difficult periods of Jewish history, chosenness provided a source of hope and reassurance. However, to outsiders, the doctrine of chosenness was proof that Jews were distant and arrogant, a description that made Jews angry.

In this Torah portion we learn "And the Lord has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured, chosen people which shall observe all His commandments, and that He will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations, that He has made; and that you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the Lord your God" (Deut. 26:1 18-19; also see 7:6, 14:2).

In spite of the elevated status of being called *am kadosh* (a holy People) and *am segulah* (a treasured people), the concept of chosenness produced anxiety among Jews because it was often interpreted by non-Jews as indicative of Jewish conceit and superiority. Such self-exaltation often resulted in the charge: "You Jews think that you are better than anyone else." I will never forget when I was asked that question; it was in an oral final of Pediatrics. With pride I said yes we are different, but different means that because we were chosen, we have a responsibility. This responsibility is to be a light to the world, "*Or La Goim*."

Chosenness implies a uniqueness, a particular purpose. The statement "I was chosen today" is incomplete unless I specify what it is I was chosen for. Similarly. Jewish chosenness is

a sentence fragment. It is grammatically and theologically incomplete.

What completes the chosenness of the Jews is the assertion that Jews were (and are) chosen to embody the life and values of the Torah and rabbinic tradition. By living a life centered on *mitzvot* and by constantly growing as Jews, we *choose* to be chosen. We allow the *brit* to live by the way we conduct our lives. As with any love relationship, both partners have the power to affirm or to rupture that relationship of their own free will.

The idea of *brit* places that enormous responsibility in our hands, no less than in those of God. In the words of the *Mekhilta*, the ancient rabbinic commentary to Exodus, the phrase "and you shall be Mine" means "you shall be turned to Me and be occupied with the words of the Torah." God doesn't love Jews better; God loves us differently.

By immersing ourselves in the study and practice of Torah, we Jews renew our unique relationship with God. By living lives centered on God and *mitzvot*, we justify the claim, not of being God's *only* love, but on being God's first. By doing *mitzvot* we reaffirm that we are chosen. Right now members of our congregation are traveling south to help people in need. *B'nei mitzvah* children are required to do a Mitzvah Project in their preparation; in our Hebrew school we have a Mitzvah hour class.

In building communities of holiness and love, we assist our non-Jewish neighbors in cultivating their love relationship with God. Together, with this shared understanding we can join hands to build a world that is just, compassionate, and worthy of God.

The view of 20th-century philosopher Mordecai Kaplan is representative of how uncomfortable modern Jews have become with the concept of chosenness. He suggested that the doctrine has no place in an age that decries inequality of every kind, and he argued that while chosenness may have had its place in Jewish life, it, nevertheless, has always been viewed with suspicion.

**The bitter lesson of history is that Jews would prefer not to be singled out for any special treatment**—or for any special punishment, for that matter—because Judaism's critics and enemies have utilized this doctrine as a model for their own racist ideologies.

This "just leave us alone" philosophy was articulated in *Fiddler on the Roof* by the fictional Tevye, who said, "Master of the Universe, You promised to make the seed of Abraham as the sands of the seashore and as numerous as the stars of the heavens. Lord of all worlds, thank you very much. But don't you think it's time to choose someone else?"

One way that modern Jews have attempted to resolve the tension between universalism and particularism has been to recognize that the special status of chosenness is an earned title as much as it is a given one. God made special demands for the right to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus. 19:6).

We are, in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, messengers who have forgotten the message. We are a people with a purpose. Unexceptional as an entity in so many other areas, the Jews are a rich and fertile source of spirituality and religion for all humanity and ourselves.

Throughout the millennia, our insights about the One God, creator of heaven and earth, source of morality and seeker of justice, have enlightened the lives and quiet moments of untold

millions. The sacred writings of our teacher Moses, the stirring words of our prophets, reverberate wherever a commitment to human betterment, equality, and liberty remain.

The name of this Torah portion is *Ki Tavo*, which means “when you will come.” We are celebrating the Shabbat that precedes *Selichot*, the prayer service before Rosh Hashanah during which we ask for forgiveness. Tomorrow during the service of *selichot* we will change the covers of the Torah to white ones like a bridal gown. Starting tomorrow we will ask for forgiveness from others for the mistakes that we have made and even though we have not made any, we will ask for forgiveness. Why? Because we are the Chosen people.

What better time than now to see into ourselves and to be proud of being the Chosen people!! What a wonderful time to help those in need. What better time to see more of what we are doing, of what we are learning, the programs that we are a part of at the temple; the committees that we serve! What better time to see what we have rather than to see what we do not have....

This time of the year invites us to come together as individuals, as parents as a congregation to be proud that we are the Chosen people, “*Am segula*,” to be proud that our people made a covenant at Sinai that still lives inside each of us.

May God give us the capacity to remember that sacred moment under the *Chupa* and at Sinai.

May God bless us with strength to forgive and to be forgiven.

May God illuminate us to continue to be the Chosen People.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon*, May this be God’s will.

Shabbat shalom.