


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 6 February 2015 – 17 Shevat 5775
Sedra Yitro


KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

SCIENTISTS HAVE CLAIMED THAT THE JEWISH PRIESTS, the Cohanim, are distinguished from other Jews by a particular gene transmitted through the male line. This distinction applies both to Ashkenazim (western Jews) and Sefardim (eastern Jews).

According to the Torah all Cohanim are descended from one man: Aaron, the brother of Moses. Further, while any human being can convert to Judaism, no one can convert to become a Cohen. These points help to substantiate the claim that Cohanim are actually genetically distinguished from other Jews.

The special role of the Cohen is to serve in the Temple, as representative of the entire Jewish people. The effect of the Cohanim is to bond the Jewish people and the world as a whole to G-d through their special service. The Cohanim, both in Temple times and today, also have a special power of blessing. In order to be able to carry out their spiritual task, the Cohen is bound by special laws which do not apply to anyone else.

This helps us understand an interesting passage in the Sedra¹, which is a kind of introduction to the centre-point of the Torah, the giving of the Ten Command-ments at Mount Sinai². G-d instructs

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|  | In Loving Memory of Mrs Jeanne Gewolb-Sostrin (Yenta bas Devora) ע"ה - 15 Tevet 5772 Dedicated by her Son Dr Roger Gewolb שי' |
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Moses to make the following declaration to the Jewish people:

*You saw what I did in Egypt, carrying you on eagles' wings and bringing you to Me. Now if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you will be My special treasure among all nations, because all the world is Mine. You will be for Me a Kingdom of Priests and a holy people*³.

These words are often quoted to explain the 'chosen' quality of the Jewish people. We have a special relationship with G-d, with a special covenant which includes laws which relate specifically to the Jewish people and to no-one else. G-d tells us that the effect of this relationship is that we will become a Kingdom of Priests.

What does this phrase mean?

One way of understanding it is as describing the innate closeness to G-d of each individual Jew. A further aspect, however, is that it emphasises the *responsibility* of the Jewish people and of each Jewish man or woman.

Closeness to G-d, being like a Priest or even like a High Priest, imparts also the power and responsibility to make the world into a dwelling for the Divine, a realm where holiness can be expressed. This means teaching, guiding, having an effect not only on Jews but also non-Jews. Just as the Cohanim bond the Jewish people to G-d, so the Jews, as a Kingdom of Priests, bond the whole world to G-d.

This sense of *responsibility* is also the true meaning of the chosenness of the Jew. Each one of us was chosen at the Giving of the Torah described in the Sedra. The Sages tell us all Jewish souls which would ever be born were present, including all future proselytes to Judaism.

Each man and woman is chosen to keep and to transmit G-d's teachings, the 613 Mitzvot for the Jewish people and the Seven Noachide Laws for the nations of the world. The responsibility of each Jew is the goal to change the world for good, in one's own life and surroundings, yet ultimately with a chain effect which will affect all existence, bringing the Redemption for the Jewish people and all humanity⁴.

1. Exodus chs.18-20. 2. Exodus 20:1-14. 3. Exodus 19:5-6. 4. See the commentary of *Baal HaTurim* and Seforno to Ex. 19:6, the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.1.25 p.330, and Rambam *Mishneh Torah* 'Laws of Repentance' 3:4.

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53

SEDRA YITRO

BEING CHOSEN

Debbi was full of her big news. She charged into the house, her schoolbag flying behind her, and rushed to find her mother. Her twin sister, Leah, followed slowly behind.

“Ma, guess what?” she said excitedly, as she took off her jacket. “Today, my teacher chose me to be the class monitor! It’s the most important job in the class, and she chose me!”

“That’s wonderful!” exclaimed her mother, looking almost as pleased as her daughter, but noticing that Leah wasn’t looking happy.

“It’s not fair,” said Leah, sulking a bit. “I never get chosen to do anything good. It’s always Debbi, not me. Why should she be chosen?”

“Who’s chosen?” asked their older brother David, coming downstairs, and catching the last part of Leah’s outburst.

His mother explained the situation. David said: “You know, this sounds like a discussion we were having in school today, about the Jews being the Chosen People. Some of us couldn’t understand why the Jews should consider themselves better than everyone else, but our teacher showed us where it says in Sedra Yitro that G-d

tells the Jewish people ‘...you shall be My special treasure among the nations....’ He explained that this means the Jewish people have a big responsibility, just like Debbi.”

“Responsibility?” Debbi said, “I suppose you're right, I do have a responsibility - Miss Levi said there are all these special jobs I have to do, and she said she was choosing me because she knew I could be a model of good behaviour – and I'm a bit worried about that, that means I have to be good! But what responsibility do the Jews have?”

“Well, the Jews received the Torah at Mount Sinai. It is our job to keep it properly and follow its laws. Each Jew is also responsible for all other Jews, so we have to try to help all Jews learn about the Torah. Then we also have to teach the rest of the world how to serve G-d, which means teaching them the seven Noachide laws.

“By keeping our responsibility properly, we will bring the Messiah, when everybody will serve G-d. But if a person doesn't try to fulfil their task as a Jew, my teacher said, he's letting everyone down. We are given a responsibility by being Jewish, and its important we live up to that”.

“That's quite a hard job,” said Leah thoughtfully. “I suppose it's just as well I didn't get chosen to be monitor - I don't think I could ever be that good, and anyway, now it seems I have enough responsibility, just by being Jewish”.

“Well,” her mother said, “it's always possible you will be made a monitor next term. I'm sure you would live up to the responsibility.”

Leah shrugged. But she looked much happier now.

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