



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת במדבר תש"ע ❧ ❧ ❧ *Parshas Bamidbar 5770*

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

There is a certain procedure that we witness on a regular basis, but a bit of reflection may reveal that its basic meaning eludes us. The practice stems from the basic law recorded in the Mishnah in Megillah (4:1):

הפּוֹתֵחַ וְהַחוֹתֵם בְּתוֹרָה, מְבַרֵךְ לְפָנֶיהָ וְלְאַחֲרֶיהָ.

“The opening reader from the Torah makes a *berachah* (blessing) prior to the reading, while the final reader makes a blessing following the reading.”

During the times of the Mishnah, the preceding blessing was recited only by the opening reader, while the concluding blessing was recited only by the closing reader. Current practice follows the ruling of the Gemara (*Megillah 21b*), which requires every individual who is called to the Torah to recite both the preceding blessing (at the beginning of his *aliyah*) and the concluding blessing (at the end of his *aliyah*).

The blessing recited prior to the reading refers to Hashem’s selecting of the Jewish nation and bequeathing them with the ultimate gift – the Torah. For a few moments, let us contemplate this all-familiar Torah blessing, as it encapsulates the fundamental event that is the focus of the approaching Yom Tov of Shavuos. The *berachah* states:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים, וְנָתַן לָנוּ אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ; בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה.

“Blessed are You, Hashem our L-rd, King of the Universe, Who has selected us from amongst all of the nations, and granted us with His Torah; Blessed are You, Hashem, Who grants us the Torah.”

WHO CHOSE WHOM?

The message of this *berachah* should stir our emotions each time we hear it, as it reminds us of our special status as the “Chosen People”; Hashem selected us from all of the people of the world to present us with His most prized “possession.” What bears asking, though, is the following: Is this really the case? Were *we* chosen by Hashem, or, in reality, was it the other way around?

R’ Refael Hamburger (*Marpei Lashon, Amud Hatorah*) punctuates this problem: The Medrash states (*cf. Sifri, parshas V’zos Haberachah*) that Hashem went to all of the various nations and offered them the Torah. Upon offering it to the children of Esav, they asked, “What is written therein?” When they learned that the Torah forbids the practice of murder, they declined. The children of Lot backed out because of the prohibition against immorality, and when the Yishmaelites heard that stealing was forbidden, they likewise refused the Torah. Out of all the nations, only B’nei Yisrael answered in the affirmative. It would seem, then, that it was the Jewish people who chose Hashem! Instead of bypassing the other nations and selecting Yisrael, it seems that the nations merely removed themselves from the bidding!

There is a beautiful exposition by the Beis Halevy (*parshas Yisro*), wherein he clarifies the whole concept and mechanics of the giving of the Torah. His explanation may shed light on our issue as well.

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WHO'S IN CHARGE?

And so, the Beis Halevy explains, the angels never meant to keep the Jews from the Torah entirely; after all, you need people to *fulfill* the Torah. It was a different aspect of the Torah that the angels wished to retain for themselves: namely, the *interpretive* facet of Torah. It is through the Torah She'b'al Peh – the Oral Tradition – that the laws and meanings of the Torah are clarified. The angels felt that the power to interpret the Written Torah – through the rules and methods contained in the Oral Torah – should not be given to man.

In other words, the angels were fine with the Jewish people being charged with the task of fulfilling the commandments. They felt, though, that they themselves should comprise the ultimate “*beis din*,” which would interpret and clarify the Torah’s laws.

Yet, even on this point Moshe emerged victorious, and this is the full import of the giving of the Torah. In the Shavuot service, the Yom Tov is not referred to as “*Z’man Matan Torah*” – the time of giving the Torah – but, rather “*Z’man Matan Toraseinu*” – the giving of *our* Torah. For now, it is exactly that – our Torah, as the scholars and sages possess the power to elucidate and interpret the Torah’s laws.

This, perhaps, is the full meaning of “*Asher bochar banu*” – that Hashem chose us. It appeared – R’ Refael asked – that the opposite was true, that *we* are the ones who chose Hashem. Based on the words of the Beis Halevy, though, the blessing takes on new meaning. True, Hashem offered the Torah to the nations – but that was only the practical, fulfillment aspect. Even had they accepted the Torah, they would only be able to perform the commandments. The decision-making and interpreting would have been up to the angels.

There was only one nation who was offered the Torah in all of its completeness, to be the masters not only of its fulfillment, but of its study and elucidation. This was B’nei Yisrael, the true “Chosen People.”

Moshe Rabbeinu ascended Har Sinai to receive the Torah; but actually, getting it was no simple matter. The Gemara in Shabbos (88b) relates that there were those who protested the transference of Torah to the people: the angels contended that mere mortals were unworthy of the holy Torah. Hashem urged Moshe to respond to the angels, and he proceeded to provide a very convincing argument. “The Torah says, ‘I am Hashem... Who took you out of Egypt? Did you spend time in Egypt? It says further: ‘Honor your father and mother.’ Do you have parents? Obviously, the Torah was intended for people, not angels.” Moshe’s argument won the day, and the angels withdrew their complaint.

What seems puzzling is the angels’ initial claim; what, exactly, were they thinking? While Moshe’s reasoning is solid, it also seems pretty obvious. The whole Torah is talking to *people* – you need an arm to put on *tefillin*, a mouth to eat matzah, etc. How could the angels contend that the Torah was *not* for people?

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