

CHOOSE YOURSELF

We were chosen at one time but each Jew, present and future, must also choose himself or herself.

To be Jewish is to choose, over and over again during our lives, the renewal of the Covenant we have with G-d, in which we agreed to show by example that the laws and wisdom of the Five Books of Moses is the way for humanity to reach its potential.

A long time ago, at Mount Sinai and in the following years, the Jews, as a group, chose to enter a Covenant, a grand agreement, with G-d, but they were chosen long before then for an important mission. Starting with G-d's choice of Abraham, and then the choice of certain descendants, and finally His choice of the greatly enlarged group, the Jews were being prepared for a very special historical role. This people were freed from slavery and isolated in the desert. It was there that the purpose of their selection was revealed and the details were taught. The Jews, mostly as a token of gratitude and trust, accepted the task that had been waiting for them. They literally said, yes, we choose to fulfill Your plan for us, even though the specifics were only gradually revealed over the course of the wanderings.

What was the purpose of the chosenness and what did the Jews choose to accept? They were going to be part of an all-important demonstration or experiment. They were not chosen for other special favors. G-d wanted to give humanity certain ethical and social organization suggestions. He wanted these ideas conveyed not through force but rather by example. The Jews volunteered to live the laws and to show the world what wonderful benefits can be derived from them.

The laws, of course, apply to the individual, family, city, and state levels. They also cover our relationship to animals and all of nature. To truly demonstrate the wisdom of the laws, the Jews would need cities and a state. Even before the society could be set up according to these laws in Israel, the Jews would need a transformation from a slave mentality and lives of desperation to free men's and women's pride, functioning families, and civic participation. That took forty years and a new generation.

We entered Israel but our troubles did not end. There were times when the society was functioning somewhat according to plan but most centuries saw one disaster after another and chaos. Later we lost the state and had no control over cities either. This meant a large part of the experiment could not even continue, and left to us were merely the laws governing individual, family, and congregation behavior.

The need for active (conscious and frequent) affirmation of the Covenant had never been well understood. Many who considered themselves Jewish or were considered Jewish by the surrounding religion, did not look at the Covenant as a personal choice. They did not realize that each person must choose to enter the Covenant in order for Jews to have a reason for existing as a distinct people. So here we are today, with many people being Jewish only by parentage or by tradition or whatever. It is time to think about choosing the Covenant for ourselves and then not losing sight of it during our entire lifetimes.

It has to be a conscious choice. People must be educated so that they understand the choice. They must have opportunities to discuss the choice with other Jews. They can make the choice in private or in public. All of Jewish life should revolve around the Covenant.

Individuals should choose themselves, for the mission of setting an example in every life situation: in personal and public interaction, in private and work-related matters, in dealings with Jews and non-Jews, in synagogue,

social, and civic activities. Everywhere and all day, we must choose to show that there is a mode of behavior, pointed out a long time ago, that is still the one to bring us and all of humanity a happy life.

It is clear to me that not choosing is the way out of Judaism and results in the decrease of our numbers currently occurring. It is clear to me that the absence, to a large extent, of the teaching and discussion of the Covenant is responsible for the present decline of Judaism in the Diaspora and in Israel itself.

The choosing I have been discussing should be the heart of our religion, the center of every religious service, the most sacred promise we can make. I do believe that our conscious determination to individually fulfill our share of the Covenant is what G-d really wants of us, as opposed to praises or gifts. This affirmation is what the central prayer, "Hear Israel...", and the following paragraphs, are all about, but additional statements about the Covenant would help clarify things for Jews. Yes, we should speak of (i.e. learn, discuss, come to understand) the laws when we rise and when we retire, when at home or when away, but knowing the laws is not enough. We should also make commitments to follow them and to set a good example, in general. To all Jews, I say choose the Covenant over and over again, as often as your daily affairs allow you to remember it as your purpose for being.

These days at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is not fashionable to believe and to teach that Jews have a unique purpose. Many recommend that we forget the chosenness and blend in as much as possible. That is not Judaism; in fact it is the end of Judaism and the end of the lesson we are meant to live. It is humanity's loss. It is a wonderful gift from G-d that we would be choosing to set aside.

Teach your children and hope that they, on their own, will decide to be volunteers because that's what we are, that they will take upon themselves their very noble mission of bringing to the world the potential benefits of the laws and wisdom of the Five Books of Moses. This is what a Bar Mitzvah and later affirmation ceremonies are supposed to be (please see my article, "Let's Have Second, Third, and Later Bar Mitzvahs"), but we all know what happens to most Jewish youths after their Bar Mitzvah celebrations; they are lost to Judaism for a number of years if not permanently. They reason correctly that if there is nothing special about Judaism then what's the point?

With regard to converts, if someone wants to enter the same Covenant with G-d that the Jewish people treasure, then they should be welcome. We should not make their way difficult. After all, they are not exactly choosing a pleasurable lifestyle. It is not easy to do the right thing and to set a good example. They need to know what the Covenant involves, what is it that they are becoming a part of. If knowing that, they are still moved to use their lives in that way, I am thrilled

Give your life the serious meaning that it was supposed to have. Choose yourself!

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