

The Chosen People

Shavuot 5781

R. Yonatan Cohen

A. The Blessing over the Torah

The blessing over the Torah describes the election of Israel “from among the nations.”

1. What does this blessing mean to you?

1. Blessing over the Torah scroll	1. ברכת התורה
Praised are you Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who chose us from among the nations and gave us God's Torah. Praised are you, Adonai, who gives the Torah.	ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם. אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים. ונתן לנו את תורתו. ברוך אתה ה', נותן התורה:

B. Biblical Sources

Biblical sources 2-7 describe the election of Israel in different ways, each highlighting unique characteristics of Israel's special status.

1. Read each source carefully and compare and contrast the message of each one.

2. Which of these sources resonate with you the most and why?

3. Do you find any of these sources challenging or problematic in any way? Explain.

2. Exodus 19:5-6	2. שמות י"ט:ה-ו'
(5) Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, (6) but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."	(ה) ועתה אם־שמעו תשמעו בקלי ושמרתם את־בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל־העמים כִּי־לִי כֻלָּהָאָרֶץ: (ו) ואתם תהיו־לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל־בני יִשְׂרָאֵל:
3. Deuteronomy 7:6-8	3. דברים ז':ו'-ח'
(6) For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God: of all the peoples on earth the LORD your God chose you to be His treasured people. (7) It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the LORD set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; (8) but it was because the LORD favored you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the LORD freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.	(ו) כִּי עַם קָדוֹשׁ אַתָּה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְהָיִית לְךָ לְעַם סִגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה: (ז) לֹא מִרְבֹּכֶם מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים חֶשֶׁק יְהוָה בָּכֶם וּבַחֲרָ בָכֶם כִּי־אַתֶּם הַמְעֻט מִכָּל הָעַמִּים: (ח) כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת יְהוָה אֶתְכֶם וּמִשְׁמֵרוֹ אֶת־הַשְּׂבִיעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶתְכֶם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְיָד מְבִית עֲבָדִים מִיַּד פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם:
4. Deuteronomy 26:17-18	4. דברים כ"ו:יז-יח
(17) You have affirmed this day that Adonai is your God, that you will walk in God's ways, that you will observe God's laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey God. (18) And Adonai has affirmed this day that you are, as God promised you, God's treasured people who shall observe all of God's commandments.	(יז) אַתָּה הָאֵמַרְתָּ הַיּוֹם לַיהוָה לֵאמֹר לֹא־אֶלְקִים וּלְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָּיו וּלְשַׁמֵּר חֻקֵּיו וּמִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וּלְשַׁמֵּעַ בְּקוֹל: (יח) וְהָאֵמַרְתָּ הַיּוֹם לַיהוָה לֵאמֹר לֹא־עַם סִגְלָה כָּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּךְ וּלְשַׁמֵּר כָּל־מִצְוֹתָיו:
5. Joshua 24:22	5. יהושע כ"ד:כב
(22) Thereupon Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have by your own act chosen to serve Adonai.” “Yes, we are!” they responded.	(כב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל־הָעָם עֲדִים אַתֶּם בָּכֶם כִּי־אַתֶּם בַּחֲרַתֶּם לָכֶם אֶת־ה' לַעֲבֹד אוֹתוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲדִים:
6. Isaiah 42:6	6. ישעיהו מ"ב:ו'
(6) I the LORD, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations.	(ו) אֲנִי יְהוָה קְרָאתִיךָ בְּצֶדֶק וְאַחֲזַק בְּיָדךָ וְאַצְרִיד וְאַתֶּנֶּךָ לְבְרִית עִם לְאוֹר גּוֹיִם:

C. Commentaries – Rabbinic, Medieval, and Contemporary

Sources 7-15 amplify a particular Biblical voice and thread. As you study these sources consider these questions:

1. Which biblical source is the commentator amplifying or responding to the most?
2. Which of these voices resonate the most to you personally and why?
3. Which of these sources seem most relevant to Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora? If your response was different for each place, explain the difference.

<p>7. R. Judah Halevi (1075-1141), <i>Sefer Kuzari</i> 1:98-101</p> <p>92. Al Khazari: Take care, O Rabbi, lest too great indulgence in the description of the superiority of thy people make thee not unbearable, causing thee to overlook what is known of their disobedience in spite of the revelation. I have heard that in the midst of it they made a calf and worshipped it.</p> <p>93. The Rabbi: A sin which was reckoned all the heavier on account of their greatness. Great is he whose sins are counted</p> <p>94. Al Khazari: This is what makes thee tedious and makes thee appear partial to thy people. What sin could be greater than this, and what deed could have exceeded this?</p> <p>95. The Rabbi: Bear with me a little while that I show the lofty station of the people. For me it is sufficient that God chose them as His people from all nations of the world, and allowed His influence to rest on all of them, and that they nearly approached being addressed by Him.... If disobedient men existed among them, they were hated, but remained, without doubt, of the essence inasmuch as they were part of it on account of their descent and nature, and begat children who were of the same stamp. An ungodly man received consideration in proportion to the minuteness of the essence with which he was endowed, for it reappeared in his children and grandchildren according to the purity of their lineage...</p>	<p>7. ספר הכוזרי א' צ"ח-ק"א</p> <p>(צח) (צב) אמר הכוזרי: השמר לך החבר לבל תפליג בספור שבחיה של אמתך ולבל תסיח דעתך מן הדבר הנודע ברבים דבר המרותם את אלהיהם על אף המעמדות האלה שמעתי כי בעצם הימים ההם עשו להם עגל ויעבדו לו ולא לאלוק:</p> <p>(צט) (צג) אמר החבר: חטא אשר גוהו הם עצמם מתוך גדולתם ואין גדול כי אם מי שחטאיו ספורים:</p> <p>(ק) (צד) אמר הכוזרי: אינך אומר כך כי אם דרך הפרזה ומתוך משוא פנים לעמך וכי יש לך חטא גדול מזה ומה מעשה טוב ישאר להם אחר זה:</p> <p>(קא) (צה) אמר החבר: כתר לי זעיר ואוכיח לך גדלת העם הזה ודי לי בעדות שהעידה התורה כי אותם בחר האלוק לו לעם ולאמר מבין כל אמות העולם וכי הענין האלוקי חל בכל המונם עד שנעשו כלם ראויים לשמע את הדבור האלוקי... היו ביניהם גם חוטאים שנואי אלוך אבל אין ספק שגם הם היו סגלה מבחינה ידועה שהרי מצד שרשם וטבעם היה בהם מן הסגלה ועתידיהם היו להוליד בנים שיהיו סגלה כך יש להזהר באב החוטא שכן הוא הנושא את זרע הסגלה אשר בהזדככו תתגלה בבנו או בבן בנו...</p>
<p>8. Lou Silberman (1934-2005), <i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i>, "Chosen People"</p> <p>The more extreme, and exclusive interpretations of the doctrine of election among Jewish thinkers, were partly the result of reaction to oppression by the non-Jewish world. The more the Jew was forced to close in on himself, to withdraw into the imposed confines of the ghetto, the more he tended to emphasize Israel's difference from the cruel gentile without. This type of interpretation reaches its height in the Kabbalistic idea that while the souls of Israel stem from God, the souls of gentiles are merely of base material.</p>	
<p>9. Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovits (1921-1999)</p> <p>Yes, I do believe that the chosen people concept as affirmed by Judaism in its holy writ, its prayers, and its millennial tradition. In fact, I believe that every people—and indeed, in a more limited way, every individual—is "chosen" or destined for some distinct purpose in advancing the designs of Providence.</p>	
<p>10. Sforno (1470-1550) on Exodus 19:6</p> <p>"And you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" – and with this shall you be a treasure from amongst all of them, for you shall be a kingdom of priests to understand [to make understood] and to instruct all of mankind to call out in unison in the Name of God.</p>	<p>10. ספורנו על שמות י"ט:ו'</p> <p>"ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים" ובזה תהיו סגולה מכלם כי תהיו ממלכת כהנים להבין ולהורות לכל המין האנושי לקרוא כלם בשם ה'.</p>
<p>11. Siddur Ashkenaz, Festivals, Shalosh Regalim, Amida for Maariv, Shacharit, Mincha, Sanctity of the Day 1</p> <p>You have chosen us from all the Nations. You loved us and Desired us. You raised us</p>	<p>11. סידור אשכנז, חגים, תפילות לשלוש רגלים, עמידה לערבית, שחרית, מנחה, קדושת היום א'</p> <p>אתה בחרתנו מכל העמים אהבת אותנו ורצית בנו ורוממתנו מכל העליונות</p>

<p>from among all Languages and sanctified us with your mitzvot. You brought us closer to you our King. To serve your great and holy Name you called us.</p>	<p>וְקִדְשָׁתָנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ וְקִרְבָּתָנוּ מִלְּכֵנוּ לְעִבּוּדְתֶּךָ וְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ עָלֵינוּ קִרְאָתְךָ:</p>
<p>12. Norman Lamm (1927-2020), <i>Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith, Volume 1</i></p> <p>The chosenness of Israel relates exclusively to its spiritual vocation embodied in the Torah... This spiritual vocation consists of two complementary functions, described as "<i>Goy Kadosh</i>", that of a holy nation, and "<i>Mamlekhet Kohanim</i>", that of a kingdom of priests. The first term denotes the development of communal separateness or differences in order to achieve a collective self-transcendence [...] The second term implies the obligation of this brotherhood of the spiritual elite toward the rest of mankind; priesthood is defined by the prophets as fundamentally a teaching vocation.</p>	
<p>13. Berachot 20b</p> <p>Rav Avira taught, sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Ami, and sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Asi: The ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, in Your Torah it is written: "The great, mighty and awesome God who favors no one and takes no bribe" (Deuteronomy 10:17), yet You, nevertheless, show favor to Israel, as it is written: "The Lord shall show favor to you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:26). He replied to them: And how can I not show favor to Israel, as I wrote for them in the Torah: "And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 8:10), meaning that there is no obligation to bless the Lord until one is satiated; yet they are exacting with themselves to recite Grace after Meals even if they have eaten as much as an olive-bulk or an egg-bulk.</p>	<p>13. ברכות כ:</p> <p>דרש רב עורא זמנין אמר לה משמיה דרבי אמי זמנין אמר לה משמיה דרבי אסי אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא רבונו של עולם כתוב בתורתך אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד והלא אתה נושא פנים לישראל דכתיב ישא ה' פניו אליך אמר להם וכי לא ישא פנים לישראל שכתבתי להם בתורה ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ה' אלהיך והם מדקדקים [על] עצמם עד כזית ועד כביצה:</p>
<p>14. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), <i>The Prophets</i>, p. 33</p> <p>From the beginnings of Israelite religion, the belief that God had chosen this particular people to carry out [God's] mission has been both a cornerstone of Hebrew faith and a refuge in moments of distress. And yet, the prophets felt that to many of their contemporaries this cornerstone was a stumbling block; this refuge, an escape. They had to remind the people that chosenness must not be mistaken as divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement, but, on the contrary, that it meant being more seriously exposed to divine judgment and chastisement.</p>	
<p>15. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020), <i>The Concept of a Chosen People</i></p> <p>And, finally – my final question: why on earth did He choose us? Do you want the real answer? I'll tell you. When God chose the Jewish people, He was not opting for a quiet life. God chooses those whom the world rejects. That is why He chose us.</p> <p>In the ancient world, power and position went to the firstborn. That is why God always chooses the younger rather than the elder. Cain instead of Abel. Isaac instead of Ishmael. Jacob instead of Esau. Moses instead of Aaron. David instead of all his brothers. ...</p> <p>In the ancient world, power went to the strong and the many. The Jewish people always was a tiny people. <i>Ki atem hame'at mi kol ho'amim</i>. You were the smallest of all peoples. ...</p> <p>God chooses whom the world rejects. He chooses the marginal, the nomads, the few, the young. People who, whether in their own land, from then to today, to live in Israel is to live in a tiny country surrounded by big empires at the juncture of three continents. Israel always was a tiny people surrounded by big neighbors. ...</p> <p>That is why the Jewish story, in its unique particularity, is the human story in its universality. If we would have been everyone in general, we would never have been somebody in particular. And if we hadn't somebody in particular, we would never have a message for humanity in general.</p>	