

The Meaning of Chosenness

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I.

From Albert Einstein to Jonas Salk to Sergei Brin, Jewish people have made seminal contributions over the last century to the advancement of humanity at large. Of course, these more recent examples are merely the latest chapters in the millennia-long legacy of Jewish contribution to general civilization.

The legacy is a proud one which traces its roots back to our patriarch Abraham himself, whose twin contributions of monotheism and social justice continue to form the cornerstone of modern civilization.

In point of fact, a careful reading of the opening verses of this week's *sedrah* reveals that this legacy of advancement and contribution was an essential aspect of Hashem's initial selection of Abraham. As Hashem promises to Abraham, at the very inception of his mission, *v'nivrichu vicha kol mishpichot ha'adamah*, 'through you, all the families of the Earth will be blessed¹.'

In other words, Abraham and those of his descendents that carry his spiritual legacy, namely the Jewish people², were selected by Hashem as a vehicle through which profound blessings would be brought to all of humanity.

It is through this lens of Divine Providence, as opposed to an exaggerated and chauvinistic sense of intrinsic superiority, that we must perceive the truly astounding advances that the Jewish people have brought to the world.

Within the internal Jewish sphere, the Kohanim from the tribe of Levi have been mandated to bless the Jewish people, so too, the Jewish people in its entirety, who have been described in the Torah as a *mamlechet kohanim*, an entire nation of Kohanim, have been mandated to bless the entire world.

Moreover, as noted by Seforno, the kohen is portrayed in the Torah as an educator. Much as the kohanim are the educators of the Jewish people, *yoru mishpacha l'ya'akov v'toratcha l'yisrael*, the Jewish people have a deep responsibility to educate the world as it concerns morality and values. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, *atem edai ne'um Hashem*, we are Divine witnesses, and we must bear faithful testimony to his value, to the betterment of all people.

¹ Onkelos' rendering is slightly different, בדילך, on your account.

² This narrowing first occurred in the selection of Yitzchak, כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע.

Indeed, we might even suggest that the greatest blessing of all that we can bring to the world is precisely through education, through promoting cardinal values- the majesty of Heaven, the axiom that humanity has been created in the Divine image, filial piety, the centrality of truth and justice, and the imperative of *caritas*- all of which were fundamental aspects of Avraham's legacy, to the entire world.

II.

It is a given that successfully conveying these messages requires not only preaching, but, far more importantly, modeling these messages consistently. As the Sages stated, "*yesh na'eh doresh, v'eino na'eh mekayem*," there are many who speak nobly, but whose actions do not reflect those commitments. Avraham's life, which we begin to explore in Lech Licha, is a master class of synergy between professed values and concrete action.

Avraham's journey to the Land of Canaan, on Divine command, sacrificing all that he knew and all that was familiar to him, is itself an illustration of *kabbalat malkhut shamayim*. Avraham's own father had intended to complete the journey, but, as noted by Ramban, found himself comfortable in the ancient family homestead of Charan, and abandoned his original path. Avraham's submission to the Divine will stands as clear evidence of the depth of his commitment to *malkhut shamayim*.

Avraham's arrival in the Land of Canaan, along with his nephew Lot, serves as profound evidence of Avraham's commitment to *chesed*. The orphaned Lot, whom Avraham always considered a brother, "*anashim achim anachnu*", is the earlier beneficiary of Avraham's unparalleled sense of both loyalty to his deceased brother and compassion for a *yatom*.

Further, Avraham, in a land of pagans and polytheists, is *koreh b'shem Hashem*, alternatively understood as praying to one true God, or literally publicly educating towards these values. His commitment to promoting *malkhut shamayim*, alone, but undeterred, would eventually result in his being recognized as a *nesi elokim*, a faithful ambassador of Divine values by the indiginous pagan peoples, but that would take decades.

Even after Lot chooses to pursue a life of materialism and hedonism in Sodom, Avraham remains the very model of filial piety, and endangers his own life to rescue the nephew who repaid his own extraordinary kindness by abandoning him.

In the immediate aftermath of this remarkable rescue, Avraham refuses to benefit at all from the loot of Sodom, but insists, in a demonstration of total integrity, that his allies, Aner, Eshkol and Mamre be allotted their portion of the spoils, as they had provided protection for Avraham's holdings while he was away at war.

When the Almighty next appears to Avraham, he reassures him that he should not be afraid, “al tira Avram anochi magen lach.” As noted by Ramban, Avraham was deeply concerned that he might be found undeserving in the eyes of the Almighty, for he had, in rescuing Lot, killed many of Lot’s captors. While Avraham’s actions were surely justifiable against a group of marauding aggressors, Avraham’s deep concern over the loss of human life is equal parts characteristic and instructive. It remains a profound reflection of Avraham’s commitment to *tzelem elokim*.

Subsequent events, such as Avraham’s commitment to the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* despite great personal pain, his championing of the people of Sodom despite their grievous shortcomings, only serve to deepen our sense of Avraham’s investment in *tzelem elokim* per se.

III.

As emphasized throughout our Sedra by Ramban, *ma’aseh Avot siman l’banim*. Avraham’s life becomes a template for posterity. While Ramban largely understood this in a descriptive sense, with the major events of Avraham’s life recapitulating themselves at the national scale in subsequent generations, it is no less true in a moral and ethical sense.

The values for which Avraham stood become the touchstone of our moral existence. Indeed, as the Almighty states before destroying Sodom and its suburbs, Avraham must be informed, for he is raising his family, and all those who come after him, to a life of *tzedek u’mishpat*.

Our status as the *am ha-nivchar*, the chosen people, is, in that sense inextricably linked with our own fidelity to the cardinal values of Avraham’s life. He was the *av hamon goyim*, the spiritual father of humanity. We, his children, are charged to carry on his legacy, as a reflection of both our inalienable commitment to his values, and our sense of commitment to all of humanity.