

Conversations with Our Children

Parshat Bo

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I. Introduction: When Midrash Occludes Pshat

As sometimes occurs in the field of Jewish learning, a particular Rashi, or Midrash, becomes so famous, so thoroughly captures the hearts and minds of the Jewish people, that it is difficult to remember that, indeed, it is a Midrash, and that somewhere, an important message is waiting for us in the simple *pshat*, the plain meaning of the text.

Surely, one such example is the k'negged arba'ah banim dibrah Torah, which we recite as part of the Haggadah on Seder night. Taken from a *Mekhiltah*¹, the Midrash interprets four conversations between parents and child as an example of differentiated education. The Torah addressed its singular message to four different types of children, with, perhaps, four different personalities, aptitudes, or levels of Judaic interest. The basic message of inclusivity, even with the rather harsh response given to the *rasha*, in this Midrash has resonated throughout the generations, consistent with the general Jewish ethic of educating a child in a manner appropriate to his development, *chanoch la'na'ar al pi darko*, educate each child according to his path.

In truth, however, if one examines the *pshat* of these four sections of the Torah, one does not find that the same question is being posed in four different ways, but that there are four distinct conversations, or perhaps more precisely, messages, which are being transmitted between the generations.

The clear and natural meaning of the *pshat* is that *all four messages* must be communicated to *each* Jewish child, in direct opposition to the beautiful, yet thoroughly homiletical, interpretation

¹ Mekhilta (R' Yishmael) Parshat Bo, Masikhta D'Pischa, 18. See, for comparison, the parallel text in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Vilna) Pesakhim 10:4, which has a number of deviations from the familiar Mekhilta text included in our haggadah. The changes include, but are not limited to, the replacement of the "tam" with "tipesh", an inversion of the answers provided to the chakham and the tipesh, respectively, as well as a difference in the question posed by the rasha. See Rambam Hilchot Chametz U'Matzah 7:2-3 who seems to have preferred the text of the Yerushalmi, based on numerous formulations he seems to have borrowed from that particular passage.

found in the celebrated Midrash Halakha, that the Torah is conveying the same message in a differentiated manner so as to accommodate four different types of children.

Three of these conversations relate directly to elements of the Exodus, while one is a question about the specific character of Jewish religious life in a more general vein. The first three, unsurprisingly, appear in Sefer Shemot, while the final conversation appears in Sefer Devarim, in which Moshe presents his own synthesis and distillation of these crucial educational messages. Each one is vitally important for all of Jewish history². Let us examine them all in the order in which they appear in the Torah.

II. The First Conversation: **The Symbolism of Korban Pesach and Chosenness**

In the crucial twelfth chapter of the Book of Shemot, in which the Jewish people are given instructions for the sanctification of the new month, the preparation of the first Korban Pesach, the future establishment of a holiday commemorating this date, the Torah turns its attention to future offerings of the Korban Pesach. It is in this context that the first conversation between parent and child occurs, when the child will inquire about the specific character of the Korban Pesach, using the same word, *avodah*, which is consistently used to describe Korban Pesach throughout this section of the Torah.

וְהָיָה כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן יְקֹוֹק לָכֶם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמְרֶתֶם אֶת הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת: וְהָיָה כִּי יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם
מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם:³

And when you enter the land that the LORD will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this *avodah*. And when your children ask you, ‘What is this *avodah* to you?’

² I should note at the outset that there is a fifth conversation which appears in the Torah, albeit an implied one, which highlights a core Jewish value beyond the scope of this essay. In a remarkable passage (Bereishit 18:19) detailing God’s unwillingness to shield Avraham from the destruction of Sodom, he notes that Avraham will surely instruct his children and household to follow the “דֶּרֶךְ הַלְעָשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט” (Bereishit 18:19). I have left this implied conversation out of this essay as it does not have the same textual structure as the other four conversations, where the Torah mandates us to convey specific messages to our children. Here, there is an awareness projected that Avraham simply will see to it that the message of righteousness and justice, service of the Almighty through implementation of the ethical norm, is transmitted. The importance of these values is obviously beyond any doubt. See Yevamot 79a and Ketubot 8b for citations of this verse which establish the defining aspect of loving kindness amongst the descendants of Avraham.

³ Shemot 12:25-26.

There can be little doubt regarding the plain meaning of this question. In a future generation, the Torah records, a child will ask about the unique character of the korban pesach. The response contains the first critical message for Jewish history.

וְאַמְרָתֶם זֶכֶח פֶּסַח הוּא לִיקְנוֹק אֲשֶׁר פֶּסַח עַל בְּתֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנֹגְפוֹ אֶת מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת בְּתֵינוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקַּד
הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ⁴:

And you should say, it is a Pesach sacrifice unto the Lord, who passed over the Jewish homes in Egypt, when he smote Egypt, and spared our homes.

The answer which the parent gives the child is equally clear. At the end of the day, for all of its complexity and many halakhot, the Korban Pesach stands for one idea: the chosenness of the Jewish people⁵. We were ensconced within the pagan civilization in Egypt⁶, and, out of love and compassion for us⁷, the Almighty chose us, and spared our homes and our families, *b'nagpo et mitzvah, v'et batenu hitzil*.

This conversation contains the first message for Jewish history, that of chosenness. Chosenness itself means that a selection has been made, one is chosen, the other is not, and that is precisely the imagery of this verse. The Jews are spared, the Egyptians are utterly destroyed.

The first and most basic message which we must convey to our children is that the Almighty has a special relationship with the Jewish people. To be sure, we value all of humanity, and our morality is firmly shaped by the notion that each person has been created in the image of the Divine⁸.

⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁵ It is surely not incidental that the verse cited in the Haggadah regarding the Korban Pesach, in the context of Rabban Gamaliel's essential triad, is specifically this verse. There are many verses in the Torah related to the Korban Pesach, but it seems clear that our verse, Shemot 12:27, is the defining one, as far as the underlying meaning of the Korban.

⁶ See Devarim 4:34, and Chizkuni, ad loc. concerning the extent to which the Jewish people were immersed in the pagan civilization in Egypt. This view was shared by Rambam as well. See Hilchot Avodat Kohavim Chapter 1 regarding Rambam's description of the spiritual state of the Jewish people in the Land of Egypt prior to redemption.

⁷ The dual meaning of the word *pesach*, both to skip over, as well as to have compassion, perfectly convey the notion of chosenness. (See Rashi 12:23, who cites both interpretations, preferring the latter, which is the sole interpretation cited by both Targum Onkelos as well as Targum Yonatan. See Ibn Ezra, ad loc., who, like Rashi, cites both interpretations, but seems to prefer the latter as well. Rashbam exclusively cites the former interpretation.) It is both a selection of one party, but not in an arbitrary one, but rather, one based in a relationship of love and affection. See the poetic verses in Yechezkel Chapter 16:4-13 which capture this moment, and explicitly note that the Almighty's choosing of Israel was based in love and compassion. Of course, part of this section is treated explicitly in the Haggadah in the section devoted to Arami Oved Avi.

⁸ Avot 3:14.

Each person is, in this sense, a world unto himself. All human suffering is of consequence to us, and as God is has compassion upon all of His creatures, we are mandated by the ethos of *imitatio dei*⁹ to work tirelessly in all spheres of human endeavor to help improve the world, and the quality of human life in it¹⁰.

And yet, even as the Almighty has a deep investment in all of humanity, and, may certainly have specific missions and callings for all peoples, the relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish people is qualitatively distinct. As Moshe was instructed to tell Pharaoh at the outset of the Exodus narrative, ¹¹”bini bechori Yisrael”, Israel is my first born.

III. The Second Conversation: For This We were Chosen

Chosenness, intrinsically, and especially in our pluralistic age, is a fraught concept. It might be construed to imply superiority of one form or another. It raises questions at two distinct planes: first, for what purpose has this particular group been chosen, and second, what is the relationship between this group and all others. It is striking that the second conversation, or, in this case, as it is not precipitated by a question posed by the child¹², communication, directly addresses the former question.

In a context regarding the future celebrations in the Land of Israel of a seven day holiday of commemoration for the events of the Exodus, including a mandate to consume matzah, a restriction against any ownership of leavening agent or a leavened product, the Torah relates the following communication:

וְהַגִּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה יְקֹנֶךָ לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם: וְהָיָה לָךְ לְאוֹת
עַל יָדָךְ וּלְזִכָּרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת יְקֹנֶךָ בְּפִיךָ כִּי בְּיָד חֲזָקָה הוֹצֵאתָ יְקֹנֶךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם¹³:

⁹ See Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilchot Melachim 10:12. The citation of the verse from Tehillim 145:9, טוב ה' לכל ורחמי על כל מעשיו, firmly establishes the *imitatio dei* aspect of this orientation to the universal community.

¹⁰ These motifs were consistently stressed by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik throughout his works, but, in particular, resonate through *Confrontation* and the *Lonely Man of Faith*.

¹¹ Shemot 4:22.

¹² I would argue that the reason that in this case alone we do not find a question triggering the conversation is that in essence, this communication is a continuation of the previous one. The first conversation established the doctrine of chosenness. This conversation establishes its goals. They are inextricably linked. No new question divides the two.

¹³ Shemot 13:8-9.

And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.' And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt.

The question of chosenness is being directly addressed. We have been chosen by the Almighty, in the context of the Exodus, for the singular purpose of devoting our lives towards the study of his Torah, *l'ma'an tihyeh Torat Hashem b'ficha*, and the fulfillment of his commandments, *ba'avod zeh*¹⁴. The fact that the mitzvot of Tefillin are introduced for the first time in the Torah in this context is far from incidental; the very image of literally tying our own bodies to the Divine norm¹⁵, of bonding ourselves, is the most evocative image of emerging from bondage of the Egyptian variety to accept the bondage of Torah and mitzvot¹⁶.

Inescapably, chosenness does remain, for many, a fraught concept¹⁷, and, as noted above, especially in the contemporary cultural and intellectual milieu. Yet, if we are to ask ourselves what the *telos* of chosenness is, the answer is absolutely clear: it is to a life of enormous demand and responsibility, one which requires of us full commitment of mind (Torah study) and body (performance of mitzvot) to the One to whom we owe our freedom.

This is the second message, a continuation of the first, which we must convey to our children. Our chosenness should never be misconstrued as some kind of crass chauvinism.

¹⁴ See Rashi 13:8, who puts the matter in concise but unmistakable terms- בעבור זה- בעבור שאקיים מצותיו- Pesach, Pesach, Matzah, and Marror are merely examples. See Ibn Ezra, ad loc. who makes precisely the same point, noting that the entire point of the Exodus was our the service to God which would follow, והטעם לא הוציאנו ממצרים רק לעבדו. Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot 2, is in full agreement, though with a particular emphasis, in the context of that mitzvah, on unifying God's name.

¹⁵ Tefillin represent the holistic nature of the commitment to the Divine norm, and the full acceptance of the Divine yoke. The Talmudic passage (Shabbat 28b) which derives from this verse that all articles utilized in performance of mitzvot must come from a kosher animal highlights precisely this point, that the Torah itself, and our commitment to it, cannot be approached piecemeal, but as part of an inseparable whole. The laws of kashrut relate, fundamentally, to the laws of Tefillin, and other mitzvot as well. See the view of the Ran cited by Rema in the context of Shofar, Shulkhan Arukh Orach Chaim 586:1.

¹⁶ It is particularly poignant that Rambam affiliates performance of the mitzvot of Tefillin with cultivation of humility and fear of heaven (Mishneh Torah Hilchot Tefillin 4:25), both of which precisely reflect this theme, that of humbly dedicating oneself to submitting to the Almighty and his mitzvot.

¹⁷ Of course, the institution and possibility of *gi'ur* is an important conceptual marker in this context. The possibility of opting into the fraternity, of course, contingent upon the acceptance of the requisite norms (Bekhorot 30a), militates against any kind of doctrine of racial superiority, contra certain strands of Jewish medieval thought.

While, to be sure, it reflects unique intimacy, and is surely a profound opportunity, it remains, at its core, a clear demand. It requires bending of our will to His, and sometimes, outright self-negation¹⁸.

This message, in particular in a pluralistic society, must be underscored. There can be no authentic self-understanding of our chosenness, of our peoplehood, without a total commitment to the study of and implementation of the Divine norm.

IV. The Third Conversation: Almighty, Master of History

The third conversation, recorded just a few verses after the second conversation, appears in the context of the mitzvot associated with the sanctity of the first-born¹⁹. Reacting to the sanctity which devolves upon the first born child, the first born kosher animal, and perhaps, especially, the first-born donkey, the Torah presents the child's question:

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה זֹאת וְאַמַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ יְיָ
מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים: וַיְהִי כִּי הִקְשָׁה פֶרַעַה לְשַׁלְּחָנוּ וַיַּהַרְג יְיָ כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם מִבְּכֹר אָדָם וְעַד בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה עַל כֵּן אֲנִי זֹכֵחַ לֵיקְנוֹת כָּל פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם הַזְּכָרִים
וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי אֶפְרָה: וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל יָדְכָה וּלְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ כִּי בְחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ
יְיָ מִמִּצְרַיִם:²⁰

And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall reply, ‘It was with a mighty hand that the LORD brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every male first-born among my children. And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the LORD freed us from Egypt

¹⁸ Avot 2:4.

¹⁹ See Targum Yonatan and Chizkuni, ad loc. See, however, Seforno, ad loc. who understands the query to be specific to the sanctity which devolves upon the non-kosher donkey. See his fascinating and elaborate theory as to how the mitzvah of redeeming or executing the donkey is rooted in a symbolic representation of the Egyptians as donkeys and the Jewish people as sheep.

²⁰ Shemot 13:15-17

The answer which the parent must provide concerning the proprietary role which the Almighty assumes relative to the first-born is rooted in God's mastery over historical events. This theme is captured in the five word recurring phrase denoting God's omnipotence: *b'chozek yad hotzianu Hashem mi'mitzrayim*.

The firstborn, the parent explains, belongs to God, because everything in this world belongs to God. His control, His sovereign mastery, extends to each space and every domain. The recalcitrance of even the most powerful of human regents is immaterial in the face of the Divine, *ki hikshah Pharaoh l'shalchenu*, can only lead to the destruction of that arrogant mortal, *va'ya'harog Hashem kol bechor b'ereetz mitzrayim*.

In this context, the mitzvah of Tefillin is presented to the child, in contradistinction to the second conversation, not as a proxy for a life of commitment and submission to the norm, but as a testimonial mitzvah regarding Divine power and control over world events²¹.

It is specifically in this second presentation of the mitzvah of Tefillin, the one meant to highlight the insuperable chasm between Divine power and human feebleness, from which the halakha mandating placement of the Tefillin on one's weaker hand²², underscoring this asymmetrical power dynamic, is derived.

In one sense, this conversation is a continuation of the previous two. If indeed God has chosen us, and chosen us for a particular mission, it is certainly important to note that God is all powerful, and could have chosen any other nation, should He have willed it, or no nation at all. Our sense of being chosen is surely enhanced by the realization that He who chose us is all powerful.

And yet, this third conversation contains an independent message, one which is absolutely vital to convey to our children in its own right. Jewish history, in all of its vicissitudes, has exposed us to countless empires and innumerable emperors.

Each one, in its own way, fancied itself the ruler of the known world, the apotheosis of human achievement. Each one disappeared, and yet we persist. Our understanding that this supernatural perseverance is not somehow a reflection of a collective *kochi v'otzem yadi*, but on the contrary, a reflection of His *chozek yad*, to borrow the operative phrase from this third conversation, is essential. It

²¹ See Chizkuni ad loc. who argues that the Tefillin shel Rosh correspond to the miracles which we witnessed with our eyes, בין עיניך, and the Tefillin shel Yad represent Divine power, ביד חזקה.

²² Menachot 37a.

is precisely this ethic that the Haggadah seeks to impart in the celebrated passage distilling the challenges of Jewish history, and our survival, *b'khol dor va'dor omdim aleinu l'khaloteinu vi'ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu mi'yadam*.

Today, as always, the threats we face are very real. Our return to Zion itself, and our seventy five years of perseverance there, with the constant threat of those who openly seek our destruction, is a testament to this third message, His *chozek yad* continues to manifest itself in the survival of the Jewish people. There simply is no other explanation. When confronted with our history of exile and redemption, of survival throughout the ages, atheistic rationality is itself an absurdist dogma.

Conversation IV: Moshe's Distillation, and the Land of Israel

The fourth conversation, while presented in the Mekhilta as a question related directly to the Exodus²³, is, in its natural context, a far more general question, one concerning the specific character of the Jewish religious experience.

כִּי יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְנֶךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה הָעֲדוֹת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם²⁴:

When, in time to come, your children ask you, “What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that the LORD our God has enjoined upon you?

Seforno²⁵ notes that the question which is being posed by this child concerns why it is that the Jewish people have an obligation in the full corpus of mitzvot²⁶. Why was it insufficient to simply adhere to the universal standards of ethical monotheism which are established by the seven Noahide laws?

The parent's answer is as follows:

²³ Hence, in the Mekhilta version, one responds with a halakha governing the Korban Pesach, אין מפטירין, אחר הפסח אפיקומן. In the Yerushalmi version, one responds with a more general reflection concerning the events of the Exodus, בחזק יד הוציאנו ה' ממצרים.

²⁴ Devarim 6:20

²⁵ Ibid. See also Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) who appears to offer a similar interpretation. His understanding of the parent's answer, namely, that God's benevolence towards us obligates us in his service over and above other nations, confirms this reading of the child's question.

²⁶ For the specific mitzvot including in these three categories, *edot, chukim, and mishpatim*, see Ramban's essay (ad loc.) differentiating the three categories, and especially, his novel understanding of *mishpatim* as it relates to this context.

ואמר לַבְּנֵי עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לַפְּרָעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה: וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה אוֹתוֹת וּמִפְתִּים גְּדֹלִים וְרַעִים בְּמִצְרַיִם בַּפְּרָעָה וּבְכָל בֵּיתוֹ לְעֵינֵינוּ: וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם לְמַעַן הָבִיא אֹתָנוּ לְתֵת לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם וַיֹּצִיֵנוּ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לִּירְאָה אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל הַיָּמִים לְחִיתָנוּ כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה: וַיִּצְדָּקָה תְּהִיָּה לָנוּ כִּי נִשְׁמַר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צֻוֵּנוּ:²⁷

The LORD wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the LORD our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case. It will therefore be to our merit before the LORD our God to observe faithfully this whole Instruction, as He has commanded us.”

Remarkably, the three messages from the first three conversations, all in the immediate context of the Exodus, are synthesized and distilled here in Moshe’s final message to the Jewish people.

First, Moshe focuses on the message from the third conversation, with an emphasis on the Almighty as the master of world events and human history, on the Divine *yad chazakah*.

Next, Moshe highlights the message of chosenness, *v’otanu hotzi mi’sham*, noting that while the Egyptians were singled out for terrifying justice, *va’yiten Hashem otot u’moftim gedolim v’ra’im*, we were extracted from the scene of devastation and destruction.

Finally, Moshe underscores the purpose for which we were chosen, the acceptance of the Divine norm, *va’yetzavenu Hashem la’asot et kol ha’chukim ha’eleh*. As one might expect, the Sefer Devarim-Mishneh Torah version reviews, distills, and synthesizes the three messages which were systematically presented in three successive conversations in Sefer Shemot.

Yet, this passage is far more than mere review of the previous three conversations. Moshe adds a crucial fourth dimension in this conversation, that of the significance of the Land of Israel, *l’ma’an havi otanu la’tet lanu et ha’aretz*²⁸. The Land of Israel bears directly on all three aforementioned messages for Jewish history. First and foremost, with respect to the first message, concerning the chosenness of the

²⁷ Devarim 6:21-25.

²⁸ See the incisive comment of R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (Meshekh Chokhmah, *ibid*) who notes that in the previous three conversations, the Torah explicitly states that the setting for the discussion would be in the Land of Israel (Shemot 12:24, 13:5, 13:11, respectively). Apparently, R. Meir Simcha notes, this conversation will be engaged in by Jewish families in the Diaspora.

Jewish people, an intrinsic element of the Almighty's selection of the Jewish people was His decision to grant them their inheritance in the Land that He Himself seeks, *eretz asher Hashem elokekha doresh otah*."

Moreover, as is well established in rabbinic literature, the Land of Israel itself contributes to the internal cohesion, *hani hu d'ikrai kahal*,²⁹ and sense of mutual responsibility, *areivut*, of the Jewish people³⁰. As such, the Land of Israel plays an essential role in completing the process triggered by the Almighty's extraction of the Jewish people from the Egyptian majority in which they dwelled and consolidating the Jewish people into their own nation.

Second, with respect to the second message, the purpose of our chosenness, namely, assuming the full mantle of Torah and mitzvot, the Land of Israel not only potentiates entire categories of mitzvot which cannot be achieved in exile, the mitzvot ha-teluyot ba'aretz, but adds a critical dimension to the mitzvot which do maintain, in the technical sense, outside the Land of Israel as well³¹.

Finally, the Almighty's capacity to deliver the Land of Israel into our hands, from the control of seven nations far more powerful, in the military sense, than the Jewish people, is itself a testament to the third message, His control over history, *koach ma'asav higid l'amo la'tet lahem nachalat goyim*.³²

As such, the centrality to the Land of Israel to the Jewish national mission cannot possibly be overstated. It both reflects, on the one hand, and consolidates, on the other, our status as the Chosen People; it quantitatively and qualitatively enhances the *raison d'être for our chosenness*, guarding the norm; and finally, it, perhaps more than anything else in the annals of humanity³³, reflects the Almighty's hand in history.

V. Four Messages for Our Children

²⁹ Horayot 3a.

³⁰ Sanhedrin 43b-44a, especially according to the radical view of R. Yehuda, contra R. Nechemiah, concerning hidden sins.

³¹ See Rashi's famous citation of the Sifrei (Re'eh 80) in his commentary to Devarim 11:11. None of the Rishonim emphasized this point more vigorously and more frequently than Ramban. For just two examples, see his commentary to Devarim 4:5 and VaYikra 18:25, 'כי עיקר כל המצות ליושבים בארץ ה'.

³² Tehillim 111:6

³³ See the dispute between Ben Zoma and the Chakhamim (Brachot 12b-13a) as to whether, in light of the future ingathering of the exiles, the miracles of the Exodus will even continue to be discussed. Even the Chakhamim, who maintain that Yetziat Mitzraim will continue to be remembered in the redemptive age, still concede to Ben Zoma that it will have a secondary place.

In every generation, the challenge of transmitting the *mesorah* is a challenging one. Especially in the contemporary context, the pervasive distractions of modern technology, and for the more philosophically inclined child, the challenges posed by the ideologies of pluralism and, to a certain degree, relativism, and the prospect can begin to seem insurmountable.

Under these conditions, as we scramble to find the right vehicles for conveying that which was preserved at such cost throughout the generations, it is sometimes easy to lose the forest for the trees. We would do well to return to the four conversations outlined in the Torah, so unforgettably portrayed in the Mekhilta as corresponding to four different religious personalities, but to see them in their natural contexts, as presenting four core messages which must be the foundation of our message to the next generation.

First, we must, as the foundation, insist on the doctrine of chosenness. We must impress upon our children the special relationship between the Almighty and the Jewish people, a relationship which expressed itself in the Exodus thirty three hundred years ago, and continues for all of Jewish history. The sense that they are part of the covenantal community, whose self-perception has been shaped and guided by an awareness of the bond between itself and the Creator, is the most essential aspect of the self-identity of our children. More important than any discreet piece of knowledge, any Mishnah, Rambam, or R. Chaim, is the awareness of belonging to the *mamleket kohanim v'goy kadosh*.

Surely, this emphasis on chosenness must be accompanied, organically, with a deep sense of care and concern for all of humanity, as well as appreciation for all of the contributions to civilization, from which we all collectively benefit, *chochma ba'goyim ta'amen*. And yet, especially in our pluralistic age, in which assimilation has never been easier, or, tragically, more prevalent, we must draw sharp lines for our children.

Second, it must be clear to our children that our chosenness was not a goal in itself, but the vehicle through which we accepted Torah and mitzvot. We must continue to resist any movement that proclaims to our children a Jewish chosenness, be it rooted in nationalism per se, cultural achievements, or anything other than a doctrine of commitment to the study and implementation of Torah.

Third, we must, whatever skepticism prevails in our technologically advanced society, continue to celebrate the overwhelming hand of the Almighty in human affairs. In particular, it is vital that our children understand the winding path of Jewish history, beginning in Egypt, through the centuries and millennia of return and exile, as an expression of Divine will.

Unquestionably, appreciating the hand of the Almighty throughout history requires an appreciation of history, in the general sense, and Jewish history, in a more particular vein. Redoubling our educational efforts to cultivate this kind of historical sensitivity and sensibility, the kind of which Moshe spoke so urgently of in the coda of Sefer Devarim, *zekhor yemot olam, binu shenot dor v'dor*,³⁴ can only serve to enable our children to more fully appreciate the yad chazakah that the Almighty has continued to wield on our behalf

Fourth, and finally, we must continue to project the centrality of the Land of Israel to all three of these core messages. Especially for those of us who do not reside in that terra sancta, *duchta di'Moshe vi'Aharon lo zachu lab*³⁵, we must never present life in Israel as merely an option amongst others, a viable spiritual choice for those who are so inclined, but as the optimal location for Jewish life.

Such messages must of course be presented with enormous sensitivity towards the complexity of life, family situations, and financial realities, but the message must be conveyed nevertheless.

At one level, it is a matter of the sheer significance of mitzvot yishuv eretz Yisrael, shekulah k'negged kol ha'mitzvot she'bi'Torah,³⁶ and a visceral desire to be counted amongst those regarding whom the Talmud stated *ki'mi she'yesh lo eloha*³⁷, and not, tragically, the inverse.

Concomitantly, as detailed above, it relates to the extent which the Land of Israel both reflects and consolidates, our status as the Chosen People, enhances our opportunities for Torah study and implementation of mitzvot, and finally, reflects the awesome hand of our Creator in history, bringing the remnants of His people to their ancestral homeland, in keeping his promise, *vi'ha'aretz ezkor*³⁸.

In this respect, the blessing of living in a time in which the things we witness regarding *shivat tziyon* were the stuff of our ancestors' dreams, puts us, educationally speaking, at a distinct advantage vis a vis previous generations. As we celebrate seventy five years since *chazrah malkhut l'yisrael*³⁹, in Rambam's phraseology, we must redouble our efforts in this respect, so that our dreams become our children's realities.

³⁴ Devarim 32:7.

³⁵ Ketubot 111a.

³⁶ Tosefta, Avodah Zarah 5:2.

³⁷ Ketubot 110b.

³⁸ VaYikra 26:42.

³⁹ Hilchot Megillah V'Chanukah 3:1. Rav Amital, zt'l, would often point to this passage in Rambam as evidence of the significance of sovereignty, per se. Obviously, with respect to whether this particular government of Kohanim was something to be celebrated, Ramban vociferously disagreed. See his comments to Bereishit 49:10.

