

Parashat Yitro: The Mission Statement of the Jewish People

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What does it mean to be an *Am Segula*, a “treasured possession,” or more commonly, a “chosen people?” This designation has been a source of both pride and embarrassment among Jews and of adulation and derision from Gentiles over the millennia. In this era of rising antisemitism, I believe that fully embracing this aspect of Jewish identity and peoplehood, with a Mussar perspective, can give us a bold and purposeful way forward.

While Israel is referred to as God’s first born during the ten plagues, the first time the Jewish people are singled out as a treasure to HaShem is in *parashat* Yitro in the lead up to the revelation at Mt. Sinai:

וְעַתָּה אִם־שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמַעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים
כִּי־לִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

“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,

וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קֳדוֹשׁ אֲלֵה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבַּר אֵלַי־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

and 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.” (Exodus 19:5-6)

There is a lot to say about these two verses, not the least of which is the conditional nature of being a treasured people. “If you will obey ... you shall be” There is nothing intrinsic in Israel that makes them a treasured people, rather this designation is based on behavior. God is proposing a covenantal relationship in which both parties have responsibilities to the other. Israel is invited into being a treasured people. When they accept this invitation by saying, “We will obey” what exactly are they stepping into? The next verse clarifies:

“You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

This is the concise job description of the Jewish people. All the subsequent *mitzvot* described in the Ten Commandments and beyond are training materials to fulfill this role. Let’s take a deeper look at what it means to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Both Ibn Ezra (d.1164, Spain) and Nachmanides (d.1270, Israel) clarify that a priest is a service role. You shall be a kingdom of people in service to HaShem bringing a universal message of the reality that there is one Creator who is the source and ruler of all the earth. A priest’s role is to reconcile people with the Divine. This newly initiated group of priests’ role *vis a vis* humanity was to help all humanity recognize, relate to, and reconcile with one universal God that demanded the creation of societies of justice

and compassion free from efforts to control the Divine through idol worship. It is important to note that this call to spread awareness of the one God gave much latitude to cultures and peoples to maintain their traditions and religious beliefs as long as they aligned with the major principles noted above. There has never been a mass effort to convert people to Judaism.

The other half of the mission is to be a holy nation. We turn to Rabbi Shimon Shkop's definition of holiness to understand this expansive aspect of what it means to be the Jewish people:

Blessed shall be the Creator, and exalted shall be the Maker, Who created us in [the Divine] "Image" and in the likeness of [the Divine] "Structure," and planted eternal life within us, so that our greatest desire should be to benefit others, to individuals and to the masses, now and in the future in imitation of the Creator (so to speak) That is, that we, ... should constantly hold as our purpose to sanctify our physical and spiritual abilities, for the good of the many, according to our abilities. In my opinion, this whole concept is included in HaShem's mitzvah [of] "Be holy, [for I am Holy] (Introduction, *Sha'arei Yosher*, Rabbi Micha Berger translation)

To "be holy" is to mobilize all your physical and spiritual abilities for the benefit of an increasingly expansive circle of others, starting with the self and moving outwards to family, the Jewish people, all of humanity, and the entire planet. To be a "holy nation" is to be a people dedicated to benefiting all of humanity.

Taken together, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation have a powerful mission of service to tend to the physical and spiritual well-being of all humanity and to bring about a universal awareness of the interconnection of all things through the one, universal Source of all Being. That is some mission!

If this is our mission as a Jewish people, how do we benefit all humanity and raise awareness of the Source of Being that connects all in an era when so many people are bigoted against Jews and some want to hurt us? This is where I believe a Mussar perspective can be helpful. The classic "Mussar move" when encountering a challenge is to look inside, where you have the most leverage, for how you might initiate change. No doubt Jews need to defend ourselves from those who want to do us harm. And, there is so much more we can do than defense.

We need to know who we are, as a Jewish people, and hold ourselves accountable to our own God-given mission. We are not responsible for other peoples' prejudice and bigotry. That is their problem. Indeed, antisemitism robs Gentiles of the ability to do their own healing by blaming Jews for their problems. This is not a way to grow.

However, our task as Jews is to make our own *Cheshbon HaNefesh* / Soul Accounting and to honestly ask ourselves to what extent we are being a kingdom of priests – serving HaShem in raising universal awareness of the Holy One, and to what extent are

we being a holy nation – using our physical and spiritual abilities to benefit increasingly expansive circles of humanity and the planet? Where are we not doing these exalted activities? What might be in the way and what can we do, as individuals and as Jewish communities, to take the next step in this mission?

These are practical, Mussar-focused questions we need to constantly ask ourselves. We do not need to be afraid of antisemitism. The only thing that merits fear (in the sense of concern) is whether or not we are serving HaShem in our covenantal role. And that is something we always have agency over by asking the question, answering honestly, and taking the next step in the covenantal relationship with God that we commemorate in this week's *parasha*.