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The Chosen People: Discrimination or Divine Mission?

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Ki Tavo

The Chosen People: Discrimination or Divine Mission?

Years ago, in America's most prestigious colleges and Ivy League universities, there was an unwritten rule of discrimination against Jews. These colleges would accept only a certain number of Jewish students each year. There would be a certain "cap," and the moment those slots were filled, the university would not accept a single Jew more.

The colleges knew that the Jewish students were sharp and qualified, and they didn't want them to "influence" or "dominate" the universities, to the extent that there were many Jews who changed their last names to typical American names just so they could be accepted into these colleges.

Even in Israel, the same thing has been happening lately, just in a different form—there is a whole uproar regarding the treatment of children of Sephardi origin whom Ashkenazi schools do not want to accept.

Interestingly enough, it seems that this form of discrimination existed even in the times of the Talmud.

Tractate Brachos of the Talmud tells us about Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh, the leader of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of the Second Temple. He had a yeshivah, but not everyone could be accepted into this yeshivah. The Talmud tells us that "Rabbi Gamliel would announce and say, 'Any students whose inside is not like his outside should not enter the study hall' " (Brachos 28a).

What Rabban Gamliel was really saying is that if the student isn't serious and doesn't truly wish to study, we don't need him here. Rabban Gamliel only wanted the serious crowd around him, to the extent that he placed a guard at the door who would decide who to admit and who to leave outside.

But this story sounds very strange.

First of all, there's a technical problem here: how did the guard know which of the students were "inside like outside" and which not? This is an inner issue that is hard to discover—did the guard have some sort of truth detector with which he could check who was on the inside like he was on the outside?

But there's an even more serious question here: Judaism believes that one needs to teach Torah to every Jew regardless of who he is. As the Mishnah (Ethics of the Fathers) says: "Establish many students"—meaning, there should be as many students as possible.

Essentially, the Rebbe explains, this is the entire innovation of the Giving of the Torah: when G-d gave the Torah on Mt. Sinai, everyone was there—including those whose insides were not like their outsides.

In ancient Egyptian society, for example, there was a certain elite part of society that was educated. But the common Egyptian, however, didn't learn a thing, remaining ignorant of any knowledge so that the ruling elite could control them.

But along came G-d with an innovation: knowledge for all. Everyone needs to learn Torah, without any separations. That's why the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai to all the Jews, not just the scholars among us. Indeed, Jewish law (Code of Jewish Law, Laws of Torah Study 1:8) rules: "It is a positive commandment in the Torah for every single Jewish scholar to teach all the students."

Therefore, how is it possible to say that Rabban Gamliel, the leader of the Jews of his day, did not allow everyone into his yeshivah?! (Only when Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah was appointed as leader of the Jewish Nation were the guards removed from the yeshivah door, and in those days, many more yeshivah students were added.)

Now, if we look back a little bit, we find that the difference in philosophy between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah was the same old dispute between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel, the Schools of Shammai and Hillel.

Beis Shammai, taught that "a person should only teach a person who is a scholar, humble, from a family of leaders, and rich."

Here we are not talking about someone who is serious or not, someone "inside like outside." Here we are explicitly stating that if you are from a good family and your parents can pay tuition, then we let you in—or at least if you come from a family with pedigree. If you don't have that, then you need to at least be a "chochom," a highly qualified scholar—then we'll accept you, even for free. We have a scholarship for you. But if you don't have that, don't bother looking into our yeshivah—go to Beis Hillel's yeshivah. They'll accept you there.

Beis Hillel, for their part, held that "every person should study"—that everyone needs to study the Torah, regardless of whom. And they explained why: "Because there were many sinners among Israel, and they were drawn close to the study of Torah, and righteous, pious and fitting people emerged from among them."

So now we come back to the original question: How could Beis Shammai act like that? It's against halachah and against the entire philosophy of the Jewish Nation since it became a nation! And what's more, how could Rabban Gamliel deny Torah to all Jews?

There is a story about a Jew named Rabbi Aaron Chazan who lived in Russia during the Communist years. He ran a secret minyan in his house where a couple of Jews would gather and pray together quietly.

But one time, he decided to celebrate Simchas Torah, not in his own home but rather, at the secret Chabad minyan that also existed in the same city.

Now, let me firstly briefly describe what goes on at Simchas Torah Hakafos.

First of all, the atmosphere is very upbeat and exciting, like a party. Secondly, before the dancing with the Torah scrolls begin, a group of ten or 15 verses are recited responsively—one person says a verse and everyone repeats it. Only once this “introduction” is completed does the dancing begin. And thirdly, to both fundraise for the synagogue and to have a little fun, the tradition, at least in many Jewish communities, is to auction off the honor of reciting the verses. You have to be there to really understand what it's like—it's really a lot of good clean spiritual fun.

Anyway, Rabbi Chazan arrived at the underground minyan just as they were starting to sell the verses. The gabbai had just announced that the opening bid was three rubles for the first verse.

One of the congregants yelled out, “Four rubles!” Another one called back, “Five rubles!” And so the auction got under way.

Rabbi Chazan wanted to get into the action. He thought he could allow himself to buy one verse for a few rubles. So when the next verse was up for bidding, he called out, “Five rubles!”

But the gabbai turned to him and yelled, “Hey, buddy! We don't sell to outsiders! (“Poilishers”)

Now, Rabbi Chazan was hurt to depths of his soul. He hadn't expected *that* kind of behavior from a Chabad chosid—not wanting to “sell” him a verse at Simchas Torah!

A few days later, one of his close friends bumped into him and said, “I noticed how hurt you were when they didn't want to sell you a verse on Simchas Torah. You should know that we have nothing against you. It's just that on that night, we were raising funds for the secret cheders [the underground Hebrew schools that the Russian Lubavitchers ran], and when we said ‘three rubles,’ we really meant three thousand rubles. We knew that you didn't have that kind of money, but we had no way of telling you the truth because we were afraid of informers. So we said, ‘We don't sell to outsiders.’ ”

Perhaps this is what was going on with the stories of Rabban Gamliel and Beis Shammai.

The period of Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh was one of most frightful periods in Jewish history. The Roman military police in the Holy Land crushed every vestige of Jewish life, just like in Soviet Russia: it was forbidden to perform circumcisions, keep the Shabbos and so on—and anyone caught was sentenced to death.

At that time, there were two approaches to dealing with the Romans. Rabban Gamliel held that we need to actively fight the Romans, to organize a rebellion and do whatever possible to cause them as many losses as possible until they abandon the land. Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah, however, was of the other stream. He thought that we don't need to fight them—we just need to stand strong and outlast them.

Therefore, they didn't just study the Torah in Rabban Gamliel's yeshivah—they were actively involved in war against the Romans. There was an underground militia of sorts based out of the yeshivah—which is why they couldn't accept just any student. The yeshivah could only admit those who could be relied upon not to inform—only “one of ours.”

But this arrangement was not something that could be said out loud—they couldn't even say, “We're organizing a rebellion here and so we're only admitting trustworthy people.” The fear was frightful, and, as the saying goes, the walls had ears.

If you read and heard the stories of how Judaism was secretly kept alive in Soviet Russia, under the noses of the KGB and the NKVD, you could understand a little of this. Perhaps that's why Rabban Gamliel's yeshivah had a guard at the door to the study hall who would decide who could enter. It wasn't a question of who was a good student or who wasn't—it was a question of who could be trusted. And the guard knew who the members of the rebellion were and who were not—and only let in those who could be trusted.

But you couldn't say this explicitly. So they created an official designation—someone who was “inside like outside.” It really meant the same thing: someone who was genuine; that what you saw on the outside was what was there on the inside—not someone acting like a good guy on the outside but a turncoat and informer on the inside.

The same thing went for Beis Shammai. They couldn't say the truth about why they didn't accept certain students—so they would basically say, “You're an outsider”: you're not from a pedigreed family, or some other excuse. But really, there were other reasons for this altogether.

In this week's Parshah we read about how G-d chose the Jewish Nation to be the Chosen People—and not only that, but, as verse 19 of Chapter 26 states, “to make you supreme above all the nations.”

A lot of people who read this get irritated: “What's this business of being a Chosen People? And ‘supreme’ too?! This is outright racism! We don't like not being accepted at universities—and here we're going to do the same thing?!”

But when we discover that being the Chosen People means being a “light unto the nations,” being a positive example of how to live life to everyone around us, in whichever country or society we live, then we don't get so worked up about this title.

The lesson is that when you hear of a behavior in Jewish life that looks contradictory to typical Jewish philosophies – don't jump to conclusions and get all worked up; do a little bit of open minded research, and you may discover a whole different story.

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