

Choseness: Privilege or Responsibility?**Parshat Kedoshim**

Leviticus 19:1 – 20:27/ Amos 9:7 – 15



Some time in the middle of the eighth century BCE Amos, a pruner of sycamore trees in southern kingdom of Judah, made his way north to Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and began to speak in the name of God. Though he claimed not to be a professional prophet he had a message that God had given him for all the people and the leaders in particular. Amos chastised them for their lack of faith in God's covenant and their social immorality. He also told the nation that the consequence of their wickedness was irrefutable: their land would be destroyed and the people exiled from their homes. No doubt, many people dismissed Amos as a crackpot. Prophets either attended prophetic schools or were associated with the royal court. They must have thought it strange that this odd fellow thought he could speak in the name of God. What's more, his message was pessimistic and dark; he offered no hope or comfort to the people.

Only nine brief chapters remain of Amos' prophecies. Of them, only the last few verses offer Israel any hope of redemption and hope. But the prophet's message continues to ring out to us even today; he was the first of the classical or literary prophets whose work we preserve in the Bible. Why do we read the words of Amos on the week we chant Parshat Kedoshim? The answer to that question can be found in the contrast between the books of Leviticus and Amos. Rather than reverberating the message in today's Torah portion, it challenges us to consider the issue of the chosen people from two perspectives.

Amos Chapter 9:7-8

To me O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians (*Kushim*), declares the Lord, Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt? But, (did I not bring) also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir? Behold the Lord God has his eye upon the sinful kingdom: I will wipe it off the face of the earth! But I will not wholly wipe out the House of Jacob, declares the Lord.

Leviticus Chapter 20 verse 26

You shall be holy to Me for I, the Lord, am holy and I have set you apart from other nations to be mine.

Deuteronomy Chapter 4, verses 5 – 8, 19 -20

See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the Lord my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land which you are about to invade and occupy. Observe them faithfully for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, "Surely that great nation is wise and discerning people." These, the Lord your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven. But you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron furnace, to be his own people as is now the case.

The Siddur (The Alaynu)

It is our duty to give praise to the Lord of all, to proclaim the greatness of the creator, who has not made us as the nations of the earth nor has He made our destiny to be as theirs. We bend the knee and bow acknowledging the King of Kings, the Holy One. Blessed be He.

Our ancestors believed themselves chosen to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” with obligations and duties which flowed from their willingness to accept this status. Far from being a license for special privilege, it entailed additional responsibilities not only toward God but to their fellow human beings...

Even those who do not accept the belief in the chosen People literally can appreciate its assertion that the Jews, unlike other nations emerged on the stage of history to be a people dedicated to God. The “Election of Israel,” then, is the consciousness of that calling, while loyalty to the covenant suggests that its fulfillment is vital not only for Israel’s continued existence, but for the good of all humankind.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the statement by Amos contrast with Parshat Kedoshim and its vision of holiness? Is it possible to think of oneself as holy and belonging to God and still believe that one is no different than the other nations? Is it possible to be “chosen” without being “superior?”
2. What does the prophet mean when he suggests that the Israelites are no different from the Ethiopians and that God redeemed Aram and Philistines. Why do you think Amos singled out these three nations?
3. Compare the statements from Deuteronomy, the Siddur and the book of Amos above? How does each of them view this idea of chosenness? What do they have to say about our relationship to other nations and religions?
4. Do you believe in the idea of chosenness? Why or why not? Some modern Jewish thinkers have suggested that we should abandon this idea because it has been misunderstood so often. What do you think about this suggestion?
5. Parshat Kedoshim contains the statement, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Some Bible scholars have suggested that despite the fact that we think of this statement as the golden rule, originally it applied specifically to the way Israelites treated one another and not their attitude toward non-Jews. (That is, “your neighbor” = your fellow Israelite.) What do you think of this interpretation? What would the prophet Amos say about this?
6. Why do we say that God, “chose us from all the nations” and that “God gave us the Torah,” when we are called up on the pulpit on Shabbat morning for an Aliyah during the Torah service. What is the connection between these two statements? Should a person make this statement if he disagrees with one or both parts of the statement?

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