

A Chosen People

In the face of repeated rebellions by the Israelites, Moses is found pleading with the Lord to show mercy to the people. Such was the case after the Golden Calf, and such is the case after the calamity stirred up by the Spies in chapters 13-14 of the Book of Numbers. The Lord, bitterly disappointed in his people, threatens to “disinherit them” while Moses urges a divine rethink of this drastic plan.

With the help of Jewish Torah teacher Nehama Leibowitz,¹ here we focus on the wording of Moses’ plea to the Lord in Numbers 14:1-25. *But Moses said to the Lord... “If you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, ‘It was because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.’”* (Num. 14:13,15-16)

Note the argument Moses advances as he intercedes for the Israelites in the face of divine wrath. Compare this to the strategy Moses employed after the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:11-13). What is similar? What is different?

After the Golden Calf, Moses put to the Lord three good reasons to relent and preserve the Israelites: 1) Lord, they are, after all, your chosen people; 2) remember the patriarchs with whom you made a covenant; 3) don’t bring your divine Name into disrepute among the nations!

After the Spies, however, Moses raises just one point: his fear that the divine Name will be brought into disrepute among the nations (the Hebrew term for this is *hillul hashem*).

Why does Moses reduce his strategy to this one element? Has he lost confidence in the Israelites as God’s chosen people? Does he think their lack of faith so disturbing that even an appeal to the patriarchs will fail to evoke God’s compassion? And is *hillul hashem* really the critical issue here?

When we delve further into Jewish tradition we find Abravanel² presenting the difficulty by asking why should God care about what the nations think? After all, God rules over every living creature.

Surely the Holy One blessed be He has no fear of the nations. What does it profit Him whether he is honoured by the Egyptians or otherwise?

In answer, Leibowitz reminds us of a Talmudic text: “*Wherever you find His greatness, there you find His meekness.*” Says Leibowitz, the Almighty indeed transcends the world, but God is deeply concerned with the welfare of every creature. And how does God reach out and make God’s oneness and majesty known to all? Through a chosen people. In the words of the prophet Ezekiel:

“Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes.” (Ezekiel 36:22-23)

This leads Nahmanides³ to observe:

Were [God] to destroy Israel, the peoples of the world would forget God’s deeds and the whole intention of human creation would be completely defeated. It was only logical therefore that the Divine will that had willed the creation of the world should desire the continued existence of the people of Israel since they knew him more than all the nations.

This was the argument Moses chose as he interceded, and which the Lord accepted saying, “*I do forgive, just as you have asked*” (14:20).

Continue to ponder the text, Moses’ strategy, and the observations of these commentators regarding God’s relationship with Israel and the nations.

1. Nehama Leibowitz, 1905-1997. Highly influential educator, Israel.
2. Isaac Arama, 1420-1494 Spanish Talmudic scholar.
3. Nahmanides (Ramban), 1194-1270. Spanish scholar.

Sources: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York: Lambda, n.p.d.). Scripture: NRSV.

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