

sacred ones. When the *shochet* pronounces a blessing before the act of slaughtering, or as the blood is covered with dust, he is reminded that his work—even the grizzly duty of putting an animal to death for the consumption of meat—must fulfill God’s commandments. His skill must be placed in the service of compassion for the pain of animals and reverence for all life. In treating the slaughter of animals as ritual, Jewish tradition seeks to prevent it from becoming a cruel and callous function of human behavior.

Today, the technologies of animal slaughter and the health risks associated with meat consumption are major topics of controversy. Many argue that slaughter houses employing stun guns in an assembly-line killing of animals is extremely cruel; in comparison, the regulations and procedures of *shechitah* are far superior. They introduce important ethical and ritual considerations into the grim butchery of animals—of living beings.

PEREK BET: *Am Segulah: Can Israel Be God’s “Treasured People”?*

Several times in the Hebrew Bible the people of Israel are referred to as God’s *am segulah*, “treasured people.”

In the third month after their liberation from Egypt, Moses climbs Mount Sinai. There, according to the Torah (Exodus 19:4–6), God tells Moses: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My *am segulah*, ‘treasured possession,’ among all the peoples . . . you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

In our Torah portion, *Re’eh*, Moses declares to the Israelites: “You are a people consecrated to *Adonai* your God: *Adonai* your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be God’s treasured people.” (Deuteronomy 14:2) In another speech to the people, Moses expands the idea, clearly indicating the mutuality of the commitment between God and the people of Israel. He says, “You have affirmed this day that *Adonai* is your God, that you will walk in God’s ways, that you will observe God’s laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey

God. And *Adonai* has affirmed this day that you are, as God promised you, God’s *am segulah*, ‘treasured people,’ who shall observe all God’s commandments, and that God will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that God has made; and that you shall be, as God promised, a holy people to *Adonai* your God.” (Deuteronomy 26:17–19)

This idea that God selects or designates the people of Israel as an *am segulah* remains a central belief in Jewish tradition. The prophet Malachi (3:17) uses the term. So does the Psalmist who, singing in the Jerusalem Temple, praises God for having “chosen Jacob—Israel—as a treasured possession.” (135:3–4)

In daily, Shabbat, and festival worship, just before Jews recite the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One,” they say: “Be praised, O God, who in love has chosen Israel as God’s people.” The identical notion is a part of the *aliyah* blessing chanted before the reading of the Torah: “Be praised, O God . . . who has chosen us from all peoples by giving us the Torah.”

Clearly the idea of the people of Israel as a “chosen people,” as an *am segulah*, a “treasured people,” is central to Jewish faith. Yet, what does this assertion mean? How does the Torah understand it? How has it been interpreted throughout the ages?

Early rabbinic commentators speak of the mystery of love between God and the people of Israel. God, they say, discovers the oppressed and beaten people in Egypt, liberates them, leads them through the desert, and gives them the Torah at Mount Sinai. God’s love for Israel is “eternal.” It is a love of rescue and protection, a love of deep mutual affection and commitment. Quoting the Song of Songs as love poetry between God and Israel, the rabbis claim that God says of Israel, “My beloved is mine and I am my beloved’s,” and the people of Israel respond, “God is our God, and we are God’s people.”

This sense that God’s mysterious and eternal love for Israel leads to its being chosen as an *am segulah* is expressed by Moses, who tells the people that they are “consecrated” to God, who has selected them not because they are powerful or because they are numerous but because God

“loves” them. It is for that reason, Moses tells them, that God freed them from Egypt and made a covenant with them. (See *Exodus Rabbah* 99:1; *Tanna Debe Eliyahu*, p. 31; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 2:16, and Deuteronomy 7:6–11.)

The nature of love, whether between God and Israel or between human beings, cannot be explained. No one knows the secret of what attracts one person to another or what sustains a relationship through years of sad and happy times, through celebrations, achievements, disagreements, and disappointments. If the capacity and power of human love remain a riddle, so does the mystery of the relationship between God and human beings. The origins of life, the sources of human curiosity, and the urge to create, care, seek justice, and love are all beyond explanation. We are more sure of our astonishment than of our tentative theories. For many early rabbinic interpreters, God's choice of Israel as an *am segulah*, God's liberation of Israel from Egypt, and Israel's exile and return to its land could only be explained as an expression of such powerful and mysterious love.

Other rabbinic commentators, however, define the relationship, with a sense of humor, as one of mutual desperation. God and Israel treasure each other and love each other because they cannot do otherwise. These interpreters argue that at precisely the time Israel is wandering on the Sinai desert, God is searching for a people to accept the Torah. Each of the great nations of the world is asked if it will take the Torah, and each refuses, saying that the Torah's teachings are not suitable or compatible with its beliefs and culture. Finally, say these rabbis, God sees the tattered and desperate Israelites making their way across the desert. Lifting Mount Sinai over their heads, God asks threateningly, “Will you accept my Torah or be buried by this mountain?” Seeing that they have no choice if they wish to live, the Israelites respond: “It is a tree of life to all who grasp it. . . .”

For these rabbis, the Israelites choose life by choosing the Torah. It is a desperate choice of a desperate people singled out by a desperate God. God requires an *am segulah*, a “treasured people,” not for special favors but for a special burden. They are to be responsible for carrying the Torah

and its commandments into the world. The survival of the world and all within it depends upon the truths of Torah and the loyalty of those who carry out its ethical and ritual commandments. Israel is beloved by God when it chooses to be God's partner and when it lives by Torah. To the extent that they “choose” to live by the commandments they guarantee their survival. (*Numbers Rabbah* 14:10; *Avodah Zarah* 2b–3a)



Rashi

Rashi offers his own interpretation of what it means for Israel to be called an *am segulah*. He suggests that the people of Israel are like a precious golden cup or gem among a larger collection of cups and gems belonging to a ruler. They are precious, special, but not exclusive. All peoples and nations belong to God, writes Rashi. No people, including Israel, can claim that it alone is God's people.

Israel's special relationship with God, Rashi holds, derives from its historical and mutual covenant and from its commitment within that covenant to abandon idolatry and pagan practices and to become a holy people through its practice of all the mitzvot of Torah. God chooses them for that purpose. They are a “treasured people” to God if they uphold their part of the covenant. (Comments on Exodus 15:5; Deuteronomy 14:2)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides connects Rashi's view with those of the Jewish mystics who speak of God's love for Israel and of Israel's love for God. They teach that *if* the people of Israel are loyal in carrying out the mitzvot, they are God's treasure, *am segulah*, or they are “a treasure in God's hand.” Nachmanides agrees, emphasizing the conditional nature of the relationship. God loves Israel for its love, its attention, and its loyalty. Every mitzvah performed proves that loyalty. Love pro-

motes love; loyal deeds engender loyal rewards. That is the test of love. It is demonstrated through the doing of mitzvot. Anything else is disloyalty. (Comments on Exodus 19:5)

Dangers and challenges

Israel was elected for the purpose of entering into a covenant relationship with the God of the whole world in order to be God's "kingdom of priests." Without the Torah, and without the commandments, the "chosen people" ceases to be a meaningful concept and is liable to degenerate into pagan notions of chauvinism and racism. (Jakob J. Petuchowski, Ever Since Sinai, B. Arbit Books, Milwaukee, 1979, p. 64)

Israel did not discover God. Israel was discovered by God. Judaism is God's quest for man. The Bible is a record of God's approach to Israel. . . . There is no concept of a chosen God, but there is the idea of a chosen people. The idea of a chosen people does not suggest the preference for one people over another. We do not say that we are a superior people. The "chosen people" means a people approached and chosen by God. The significance of this term is genuine in relation to God rather than in relation to other peoples. It signifies not a quality inherent in the people but a relationship between the people and God. (Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, New York, 1955, pp. 425-426)

In seeking to understand the contemporary meaning of being a "chosen people," Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut suggests: "Perhaps it is the destiny of the Jew today to maintain the possibility of minority and diversity . . . to be acculturated yet not assimilated; to be totally in this world yet also beyond it; to be loyal to nations of many countries yet the earth's true internationalists; to be the bearers of many cultures yet never to be known by them; to be acceptable yet never quite accepted for kodesh is invisibly engraved on the forehead of every Jew. (The Case for the Chosen People, Doubleday, New York, 1965, pp. 120-121)

Philosopher Yehudah Halevi proposes a different view in his book, *The Kuzari*. He presents an imaginary discussion between a rabbi and the king of the Kuzars. Writing in eleventh-century Spain, Halevi advances the idea that the people of Israel are "the heart of the nations." When they are sick or suffer, all peoples are sick and suffer. They are an *am segulah*, a people "distinguished from other people by godly qualities, which makes them, so to speak, an angelic caste. Each of them is permeated by the divine essence . . ." with the result that "the human soul becomes divine. It is detached from material senses and joins the highest world, where it enjoys a vision of the divine light and hears the divine speech."

For Halevi, being a part of this "treasured people" is to sense God's influence and to be shaped by it. Living within "the divine light" brings wisdom and sensitivity, justice, and love to the human heart. Hearing "the divine speech" within one's mind opens the way to doing God's will by fulfilling the commandments of Torah.

Halevi's view of being a part of the "treasured people" does not promise a life after death in pleasant and beautiful gardens but rather a life "among angels on earth." The Jewish people are "the heart of the nations," Halevi argues. What they do, how they carry out the commandments of Torah has consequences not only for them but for the entire human family. (See *The Kuzari*, Schocken Books, New York, 1964, pp. 70-76, 109-115.)

Modern philosopher Martin Buber reflects Yehudah Halevi's view but adds his own emphasis. Calling the Jewish people a *res sui generis*, a unique people molded by their history and by "a great inner transformation" through which they became "an anointed kingdom" representing God, Buber seeks to define "the idea of election." He warns against the slogans of nationalism built on empty pride and dangerous assumptions about superiority. Buber maintains that the notion of Israel as a chosen people "does not indicate a feeling of superiority but a sense of destiny. It does not spring from a comparison with others but from the concentrated devotion to a task, to the task that molded the people into a nation." "The prophets," Buber continues, "formulated that task and never ceased uttering their warning:

If you boast of being chosen instead of living up to it, if you turn election into a static object instead of obeying it as a command, you will forfeit it!" In specific terms, Buber challenges Zionists with the message that "Israel be a nation that establishes justice and truth in its institutions and activities" and that summons all peoples "to walk in the light of *Adonai*."

For Buber, the people of Israel is no ordinary nation. The people have a mission, a prophetic purpose. They are to bring about the time when justice and compassion will rule all personal, national, and international endeavors and when humanity will be redeemed from cruelty, deceit, and war. The people of Israel is God's instrument to bring about such an era of understanding, truth, and peace. So is Zionism. "True Zionism," Buber concludes in an essay to Zionists in the Land of Israel and throughout the world, is "the desire to establish something like 'the city of the great king. . . .' We need 'Zionists of Zion' here and abroad." (*Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis*, Schocken Books, New York, 1963, pp. 223–224 and 258 ff.)

Differing with Buber and most of the interpreters on the meaning of Israel as an *am segulah* is the creator of the modern Reconstructionist movement, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan. For Kaplan the concept of "being chosen" grows out of four "entirely unwarranted" assumptions: first, that Jews possess hereditary traits that make them religiously and ethically superior to others; second, that Jews were the first to receive these religious and ethical conceptions and ideals; third, that Jews possess the truest form of religious and ethical ideals; and fourth, that Jews have the historic task of teaching these ideals to the world.

Such assumptions, says Kaplan, are "unproved." He argues that "national traits" are more a product of "historical circumstances . . . geographic environment, and social institutions" than of "heredity." "For Jews to claim sole credit for having given mankind those religious and ethical concepts that hold out the promise of a better world smacks of arrogance." Few modern Jews, Kaplan continues, believe that they have "the truest form of truth" when it comes to religion or ethics. The idea that God selected Israel to "fulfill the mission of making God known to the nations" is not central to Jewish tradition

but is found only in "less than a dozen passages in the second part of Isaiah."

Kaplan advances the idea that each nation and people has a special "vocation." He writes: "No nation is chosen or elected or superior to any other, but every nation should discover its vocation or calling as a source of religious experience and as a medium of salvation to those who share its life. . . ." For the Jewish people this means using all of its traditions, historical experience, ethical wisdom, and culture to advance its survival and enrich all peoples with its unique way of life. (*The Future of the American Jew*, Macmillan, New York, 1948, pp. 211–130)

Kaplan's rejection of the idea of the Jewish people as "chosen," or as an *am segulah*, has received wide criticism. Scholars have pointed out that the concept is not confined to the prophetic pronouncements of Second Isaiah but is found sprinkled generously throughout the Torah, in other biblical writings, and in the Talmud and Midrash. Others claim that, except for Yehudah Halevi's interpretation of Israel as "the heart of the nations," the concept of *am segulah* has never been interpreted to mean that the people of Israel considered itself superior to other peoples. Instead, its meaning is precisely what Kaplan has in mind when he uses the term "vocation." In other words, the people of Israel has a special task, a responsibility, a unique role to play in the history of nations.

The business of Israel

The business of Israel is not to vaunt itself as the historical possessor of a priceless heritage but to live and serve and teach in the sight of all the world as becomes the bearers of a great name and of a glorious tradition . . . to live as seekers after God, doers of justice, ever fanatical for social righteousness, possessed of childlike purity of heart. Whether the heritage is to be carried on depends upon the life of the Jew today, here and everywhere upon the capacity of the individual Jew to give himself to those noble and consecrated ends of life. (Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, quoted in A Modern Treasury of Jewish Thoughts, Sidney Greenberg, editor, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1964, p. 285)

It is this “task” that modern interpreter Rabbi Leo Baeck attaches to the idea of being “chosen.” Israel, he writes, “is elect if it elects itself.” Baeck, like other commentators, sees the concept of being an *am segulah* as conditional. If the people obey God’s commandments and are loyal to their covenant with God, they will survive and prosper as a “chosen” people. “Israel, though chosen by God, can remain so only if it practices righteousness; sin separates it from God,” says Baeck. “Election,” he continues, “is a prophetic calling of an entire people. This mission goes beyond Israel itself; it is an election for the sake of others . . . (as the prophet puts it) . . . ‘I Adonai have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and give you for a covenant of the people, for a light to the nations; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness in the prison house.’” (Isaiah 42:6ff.) Baeck concludes that “this classical idea, of which the essential core has been retained, could only have arisen from the consciousness of election.” (*The Essence of Judaism*, pp. 65–68)

The majority of Jewish commentators seem to agree that the Jewish people in its covenant with God sensed that their relationship was more than self-serving. They bore the unusual task of being God’s instrument for extending truth, justice, righteousness, compassion, and peace on earth among all peoples. The awareness of this responsibility grew in them and, as Baeck explains, became a “consciousness of election.” Nothing in this view claims superiority. On the contrary, being an *am segulah* means the people of Israel must measure its existence by the values and demands of Judaism. To be chosen by God means to be responsible, not only for your own survival, but for the survival of all peoples.

Struggling to determine the meaning of being an *am segulah*, a “treasured people” of God, interpreters to this day must deal with the sig-

nificant question: “What is the purpose of Jewish existence?” It is out of such exploration that ancient ideas are confronted and new understandings and responsibilities are born.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Why does Jewish tradition put such emphasis upon the manner in which an animal is slaughtered? Are there considerations beyond concern for the pain of animals?
2. The laws of *shechitah* are part of Jewish ritual. Ritual is meant to uplift life with special meanings, to enhance it with ethical values and sensitivities, and to celebrate it with joy. How do the rituals and regulations of *shechitah* perform such a function?
3. Some interpreters argue that the claim that the people of Israel is an *am segulah* leads to arrogance and feelings of superiority. How does the historic notion that being “a treasured people” means being selected for carrying out the commandments of Torah and for being “a light to the nations” answer this objection?
4. There are many contemporary thinkers who argue that surviving as a nation is sufficient and that no nation or people needs to justify its existence, traditions, or culture. Given Jewish history and experience, is mere survival enough? Do the people of Israel and all peoples need to think about life beyond the borders of their own self-interests? Can Yehudah Halevi’s view of being an *am segulah* still motivate Jews to stretch their concerns beyond the survival of their people?