

Shabbat Shalom!

Firstly, I want to thank Terri Swartz Russell and Rabbis Lerner and Fel for giving me the opportunity to speak this morning. As a third-generation member of this community, it gives me great joy to stand before you today and share some of the things I've been thinking about over the past few years.

As many of you know, my grandfather and father—who often speak here—are charming and funny individuals. I won't claim I'm either of those things. Talk to me at Kiddush and make up your mind for yourself...Instead I will claim to be curious about our past and about our texts, a similarity I *do* believe I share with both of them. You see, continuity is important. I, the child and grandchild, try to take from the father and grandfather those traits that have made them such great people...and I'm not talking about pitching called third strikes in the Brotherhood softball league. So, in the Ezekiel family tradition—and I'm including my two sisters in this, even though neither could show up today—I now share with you my curiosity and conclusions. Here goes...

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I see connections to the greatest themes of Judaism in almost every weekly parsha. This week's, *Korach*, is no exception. My aim today is to focus on the Jewish concept of Chosenness, and to explain to you all what it means to me historically and today. I'll take an in depth look at the parsha and weave in and out of the Torah, and arrive at a connection between the Chosenness of Moshe and Aharon, and the Chosenness of *kol edat b'nai Yisrael*, all the Children of Israel, the Jewish People.

What we must first understand about the rebellion of Korach, Datan, and Aviram, is that it is at once a political and religious uprising—an attempt to overthrow both Moshe *and*, crucially, Aharon as the leaders of b'nai Yisrael. Today I want to focus on the religious elements of the rebellion.

Quickly, though, the political bit. Datan and Aviram are descendants of Reuven, first born of Jacob. Reuven, however, lost his birthright, and his descendants in the time of Moshe are not the leaders of Israel. Datan and Aviram are attempting to regain their

“birthright”. In essence, they are rebelling against Moshe. But they fail.

Korach fails as well but seemingly there is no shared cause between his (and his supporters’) rebellion and Datan and Aviram’s. Korach’s is much more a religious revolt against Aharon and the office of Kohen, priest.

What is his central claim against Aharon, and by extension the priesthood? Kohanim are, in fact, members of beit Levi just like Korach and his supporters. What makes Aharon’s line more worthy, elevated, over Korach’s? Here is Korach’s opening accusation against Moshe and Aharon: “*rav lachem ki kol ha’edah kulam kedoshim!*” You, Moshe and Aharon, have too much power! Why? Because all the people of Israel are holy people, and you both are raising yourselves above us all. If I were in charge, Korach says, we would be much more egalitarian, on equal footing, because I recognize the holiness in our whole people.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the noted religious professor and philosopher, says something remarkable about Korach’s claim. He

says Korach's chief mistake was claiming *kulam kedoshim*, we are all holy. On the surface, he is simply claiming that not just kohanim are kadosh, as is suggested in earlier books of the torah. But not only is Korach disingenuous, but he is also totally mistaken about the nature of holiness.

His claim is in direct contrast to what is, in my mind, the chief mitzvah of sefer vayikra, the one that says *kedoshim ti'hiyu*, you **will be** holy. It would not be a mitzvah to be holy if holiness was an inherent attribute of the Jewish people. Instead, says Leibowitz, it is a challenge, and something we must strive for. Moshe and Aharon understand this, and Korach does not. It is as if Korach says, I am worthy to be the leader because I am holy. It is as if Aharon and Moshe say, we aim to be holy, and we are not worthy. For God, that is the legitimizing factor of Moshe and Aharon; their self-perception as *unworthy* is exactly what makes them worthy leaders to God.

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Let's take a look at a passage in *sefer shemot* that alludes to Aharon's primacy over Korach for the priesthood. I must thank one of my campus rabbis at NYU, Joe Wolfson, for teaching me the following: In Exodus Chapter 6 we find an unusual genealogy interrupting the narrative of God commanding Moshe and Aharon to free Israel from the land of *mitzrayim*.

The genealogy focuses on the descendants of Levi. We discover that Korach and Aharon are first cousins. God may well have chosen Korach to be the holy Kohen Gadol. But, of course, we must put the family tree into context and understand why it interrupts the narrative of Exodus. The answer is that it shows Moshe, who questions his own ability to lead, that his brother Aharon is worthy to be Kohen Gadol, and in turn that he is worthy to be a political leader (by highlighting *beit Levi*, and not *beit Reuven*).

Before the enumeration of the genealogy, Moshe tells God, “*v'eich yishmaeini Paroh v'ani aral s'fataim.*” How will Pharaoh listen to me, for I have “uncircumcised lips”, which we can take to

mean impure or *unholy* lips, and by extension entire being. The right, by family history and continuity, to lead the people out of Egypt is highlighted by the genealogy. Yet the subsequent verses are almost an exact repetition of Moshe's objection. He says, once again, "*hen ani aral s'fataim*, see, I am of uncircumcised lips!"

Rashi comments that the verse is merely repeated due to the interruption of the narrative, but I think we can take Moshe's second objection to be slightly different than the first, for his words are slightly different. The first objection is like a direct quote from Moshe. The second objection is the paraphrased quote from the narrator of the Torah—as if to say, this is the same Moshe with the family lineage to lead, the one with the right parentage and whose brother will be High Priest, and yet he *still* says, I have impure lips!

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Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the UK and, in my opinion, one of the main rabbinic authorities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, calls Moshe's leadership style *servant leadership*—a

phrase he borrowed from Robert Greenleaf. A servant leader is one who does not, as Korach accuses, set himself over “God’s Congregation.” Instead, as the phrase suggests, Moshe *serves* the community he leads, rather than ruling over or figuratively *on top of* the people. Indeed, Rabbi Sacks points out, Moshe is called *eved Hashem*, the servant of the lord, eighteen times in Tanakh; We can think of it as his official title. Not leader, but servant. He serves God, and therefore our tradition says he serves the community. Famously, Moshe was described earlier in *bemidbar* as “very humble, more so than anyone else on earth” (Num. 12:3). Is it any wonder then, why God chose Moshe and his brother Aharon instead of Korach, or Datan, or Aviram, who view leadership as reaching the top of a mountain, as looking out *over* and above subjects? Moshe, the man with unworthy lips, was chosen to be the leader of the Chosen People.

So what, then, does it mean to be chosen by God? Are there similarities between the Chosenness of Moshe and the Chosenness of B’nai Yisrael? The answer, I submit, is YES.

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This past March, I had the opportunity to meet with Rabbi Sacks, one on one, and chat with him for about twenty minutes. He serves as a scholar in residence once a semester at NYU, and when he visits New York he sits with Jewish students one afternoon to talk. I was lucky enough to be one of those students this past time.

At the time of our conversation, I had just finished reading his book *Future Tense*, which outlines what he believes are the core tenants of Judaism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I LOVED his book, especially because one of the first chapters dealt directly with the concept of Jewish Chosenness.

So, when I finally got to sit down with him, I asked him, “is the concept of Chosenness arrogant or condescending?” Now, I knew he would say NO it is not (after all, I’d read his book), but I needed to hear him directly refute the idea that many people in the Jewish community have—that to be Chosen is setting ourselves *above* other peoples, and therefore Jews, by calling themselves chosen, view themselves as morally superior.

In response to my question, he summarized his "dignity of difference" argument to me, which you can find in *Future Tense*. He spoke about *Bereshit* chapter 11 and the story of the Tower of Babel as a biblical critique of empire, especially an empire where everyone is forced to be the same. In this reading of the story, the Tower is a watchtower, and everyone is forced to speak the same language and use the same words, the repetition of "language" and "words" means forced to not only to speak the same tongue, but also to have *the same ideas and values*. Judaism is a rejection of this story, and immediately following we have Lech Lecha—God choosing Abraham to leave that same Mesopotamian empire where the Tower was found. Leave to go to Eretz Canaan.

Rabbi Sacks related this story back to his overarching concept of Judaism as a religion of universality and particularity. The concept of Chosenness says that each faith or nationality, through their particularity, could bring something universal to the human experience. Having only a universal way of life is tyranny. There are two conceptions of God, he says: Elokim, the universal

God of justice, and Hashem, the particular (Jewish) God of love and mercy. We need both.

Now here is where I will attempt, not too poorly I hope, to take over from Rabbi Sacks in my drasha, and share how his opinions shaped my own.

If we agree with the “dignity of difference” argument, we might conclude that God must ALSO choose ALL peoples and faiths and nations. After all, there is universality and particularity in all human cultures. There are values and traits we all share, and there are values and customs we reserve for ourselves and our own community. And I would say there is some truth in that argument. All peoples *do* have particularities that make them able to bring something valuable to the human experience. But I do not think that makes them Chosen. Why do I believe in Jewish Chosenness, then? Why do I agree with our ancient texts that we are indeed the Chosen people? What is that extra something, what is it about our own particularity, that makes us chosen?

We have two archetypes in our Torah, both of which have already been mentioned today, to answer those questions. Both of which went on journeys to the same land. One of which didn't quite make it. I am speaking of course, of Avraham Avinu and Moshe Rabbenu. When Avraham left Ur Kasdim in Mesopotamia, as we have just mentioned, he left behind the paradigm of Migdal Bavel. He rejected the watchtower, the ziggurat civilization. When Moshe led B'nai Yisrael from Egypt, he rejected the pyramid civilization. Where did they both go? To a land with no great empire, one without towers with points on the top, where a HUMAN leader could not claim omniscience and omnipotence. We can easily add Avraham to the list of great Jewish servant leaders, for he was the first.

And we have Moshe, who rejected Pharaoh and the power of ancient Egypt, and took our people instead, so the story goes, to Mount Sinai. Not a human-constructed pyramid, but a natural one, and smaller than the other mountains, the Midrash says. Centuries later the prophet Ezekiel (not me, I promise), said about Pharaoh:

“Thus said the Lord God: I am going to deal with you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, mighty monster, sprawling in your channels, who said, ‘My Nile is my own; I made it for myself’” (Ezek. 29:3, in *Etz Hayim Chumash*). Pharaoh says, *I made it for myself*. I serve over all you other Egyptians for I *am a god*, I made your great river. Moshe, though, served *with* B’nai Yisrael and *for* them. Korach was dead wrong when he claimed otherwise.

And if our two greatest archetypes were servant-leaders, shouldn’t we all be? Shouldn’t our nation be? We, the Jewish People, must be the servant leaders for all other nations on earth. That is what Jewish Chosenness means, plain and simple. It is not a morally superior position, but a humble one. For the Jewish people make mistakes too, we at times also have impure lips.

Yet we cannot be leaders without embracing our particularity. By particularity I do not mean eating as many bagels, schmear, and lox as we can, or doing any other classically American “Jewish” thing. Rather, I mean seriously engaging with texts and with tradition, celebrating holidays, living together, marrying each other,

traveling to Eretz Yisrael. In short, remaining a particular people, and not becoming solely universal. This is what servant leadership is to me. *Kedoshim ti'hiyu* is the challenge, and in my eyes to be holy must include being an individual, as a single person and as a collective corpus. Holiness is separation, is differentiation.

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One last passage from *Shemot* and then I promise I'm done. Incidentally, I once chanted this passage at my Bar Mitzvah just over nine years ago, and it's stuck with me ever since... Upon B'nai Yisrael's arrival at Har Sinai and Moshe's ascension of the mountain, God tells him Israel's destiny. God tells Moshe, "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 obey me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but 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" (Ex. 19:4-6 in *Etz Hayim Chumash*). I'll paraphrase this passage: If you reject

the Egyptians and what they stand for, as you have seen Me do, and you maintain your particularity *in the manner I will show you*, you will be my Chosen people. Even though I created the world, says God, even though every person, Jew and non-Jew alike, was created in My image, you still will become a **Mamlechet Kohanim v'Goi Kadosh**, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...

Mamlechet Kohanim v'Goi Kadosh—that is our motto. That is our goal. In that phrase we have Aharon, the Kohen Gadol, holiness personified and a model for the rest of us. But we also find the leader of our *goi*, of our nation, Moshe, who has *aral s'fataim*, is imperfect, but can still be Kadosh. For he is the ultimate, humble, *eved Hashem*. Korach's rejection of Aharon as Kohen Gadol and Moshe as leader was a rejection and thorough misunderstanding of what would become Judaism, of what they were trying to build in the desert after the revelation at Sinai...a sovereign kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Micah Ezekiel

Parashat Korach 5777 June 24, 2017

Shabbat Shalom.