

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

*Center for Modern Torah Leadership*



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

### CHOSENNESS AND THE INFINITE VALUE OF EACH HUMAN BEING

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

At a public conference many years ago, a prominent Jewish intellectual explained to great acclaim why he no longer accepted the idea that Jews are "chosen." Since all human beings are created *b'tzelem Elokim*, he argued, they are each infinitely valuable, and therefore, they must all be equally valuable. I raised my hand: Mathematicians, I asked, disagree about whether all infinities are equal. Would you have a moral problem with someone claiming that chosenness creates a "larger infinity?"

No one else present was interested in my question, and I don't know enough math to pursue the analogy in depth. I myself am deeply committed to the absolute ontological equality of all human beings. I recognize that distinguishing among infinities is dangerously similar to an Orwellian declaration that "Some people are more equal than others." I follow Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky z"l's argument in his commentary to Avot that Judaism would be irredeemably racist if not for the possibility of conversion, which proves that "chosenness" relates to a responsibility that can be voluntarily assumed by nonJews. (Rabbi Kaminetsky plainly excluded any understanding of conversion as effecting a miraculous ontological shift.)

Nonetheless, the distinction inherent in my question matters. There is a moral gulf between those who assume the infinite value of each human being, and then build particularist pride on top of that, and those who seek to build pride by diminishing others.

I have seen both in Jewish contexts. During my year in yeshiva, a rabbi at an affiliated institution – a man with many admirable traits – regularly gave allegedly inspirational lectures filled with comments that diminished the humanity of nonJews. These lectures seemed to me to have an almost visibly corrosive impact on the souls of his students. But I also acknowledge that some Chabad shlichim strike me as superb examples of treating each human being as infinitely valuable without compromising on their belief in Jewish superiority. The world would be a much better place if

everyone cared for each other on quotidian matters the way those shlichim care for nonJews.

This issue arose for me this week in the context of Netziv's explanation of *naaseh v'nishma*.

In Shemot 24:3, we read:

וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וַיְסַפֵּר לְעַם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל־דִּבְרֵי יְקֹוֹק וְאֵת כָּל־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים  
וַיַּעַן כָּל־הָעָם קוֹל אֶחָד וַיֹּאמְרוּ  
כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְקֹוֹק נַעֲשֶׂה:

*Mosheh came and recounted to the nation all of Hashem's words  
and all the regulations.*

*The entire nation responded in one voice, saying:  
All the words that Hashem spoke – we will do (= naaseh).*

Four verses later, we read

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם  
וַיֹּאמְרוּ

כָּל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְקֹוֹק נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע:

*(Mosheh) took the scroll of the covenant and read/proclaimed (it)  
in the ears of the nation.*

*They said:*

*All that Hashem spoke – we will do and we will heed (=naaseh  
venishma)*

Netziv raises three questions. First, if the Jews already committed to doing "All the words that Hashem spoke," what more was Mosheh seeking to accomplish by reading the "scroll of the covenant" to them? Second, why is only the first response attributed to "the entire nation?" Third, what does "we will heed" add to "we will do?"

Grouping the questions makes clear that the overall structure of the answer will be: Mosheh read the scroll of the covenant so that some (but not all) of the nation would add "we will heed" to "we will do."

Netziv formulates the distinction between "doing" and "heeding" as follows: "Doing" means performing the actions that G-d commands, but "heeding" means performing them **with the intention** that G-d commands. Netziv believes

that the intention that G-d commands is that one perform them entirely for His sake, rather than because they accord with nature or human reason.

Netziv constructs the following timeline. In the Ten Commandments and immediate aftermath, G-d makes clear to the Jews that he insists on their studying Torah and engaging in worship (*torah va'avodah*), but he does not mention *gemilut chasadim*, the third pillar holding up the world. Why?

שהרי בטבעם המה בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב גומלי חסדים  
*Because by their nature they are children of Avraham, Yitzchak,  
and Yaakov, practitioners of chasadim*

Because *chessed* was natural to them, when the Jews respond "All the words that Hashem spoke – we will do," they cannot be referring to *chessed*, because they would have done *chessed* even without the Divine command. Mosheh then reads to them the "Scroll of the Covenant," which Netziv identifies with Genesis, to explain that the Three Forefathers performed *chessed* for G-d's sake, and not just by nature. The elite of the nation understood the point and responded "We will do **and we will heed**" to emphasize their acceptance of the requirement for motivation.

I am not comfortable with reading elite/mass distinctions into the narrative here (although I must acknowledge that Netziv is far from alone in doing so). I find it frankly disturbing that he understands "*naaseh venishma*" as reflecting the attitude of only the elite. But my interest this week is his apparent claim that Jews are genetically more predisposed to *chessed* than are nonJews.

This is the kind of claim that can easily be turned to evil. *Chessed* is natural to Jews, but not to nonJews; therefore nonJews do not share at least one of G-d's thirteen attributes; therefore they are not truly created *b'tzelem Elokim*; and so on.

Which is why it is so absolutely vital that Netziv notices the danger, and moves to preclude it. Even though his textual interpretation here in no way depends on any claim regarding nonJews, he adds a sentence in:

שהרי בטבעם המה בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב גומלי חסדים  
וגם כל האוה"ע -  
על חסד בבנית העולם,  
*Because by their nature they are children of Avraham, Yitzchak,  
and Yaakov, practitioners of chasadim  
and so too all the nations of the world (are natural practitioners  
of chasadim)*

### *because the world was built (by G-d) through chessed*

He adds this in to prevent anyone from reading his argument in the ways above. All human beings must share every aspect of G-d Who created the world.

The problem is that that all distinctions can become invidious; and that malicious or insensitive students may try to dismiss such clarifications as disingenuous apologetics for the censor. So if we are to legitimate such rhetoric or theology in our midst (even without agreeing with it), we need to set clear **halakhic and hashkafic** boundaries that, if breached, will demonstrate that human life is not being given infinite value.

Here are my suggestions.

First, the status of *tzelem Elokim* must not be subject to any notion of "greater" or "lesser." All human beings are created *b'tzelem Elokim*, period.

Second, it must be a given that Jewish and non-Jewish physical lives are in practice absolutely equal infinities. For example, in a pandemic, one cannot suggest that Jews be given priority for care, or for immunization, or that even that Jewish self-care responsibilities are greater because of some non-equivalence.

One of the tiny, fleeting comforts of this terrible time has been the broad acceptance within Orthodoxy that the disease is a human problem and that how to respond is a problem of human ethics. Even those whose practical decisions seem to show a willful disregard for human life at least do so without obvious prejudice. May that merit help bring us to a time of much greater comfort.