

Choice is a big theme in Deuteronomy. The verb **to choose** - **ב.ח.ר.** - occurs 31 times, and over half of those occurrences are found in our parasha!¹ When we examine them we discover that **ב.ח.ר.** occurs in **seven** (the divine number) (!) different contexts. Is this a coincidence? **I think not!** However, even if it is, it certainly piques our curiosity and invites us into a deeper interpretive conversation. Is there a message here?

1. וַיִּבְחַר בְּנָדָו. 1
God chooses the descendants of the Patriarchs.²

The Torah never tells us explicitly why God **chooses** Abraham, nor does it explicitly use the verb **ב.ח.ר.** with him.³ However, here in Deuteronomy, Moses does provide a reason: **because God loved him and the other Patriarchs. Because of God's love of the Patriarchs God chose their descendants.** Here we side with those commentators who interpret **נָדָו**-his descendant(s) as the **first descendants, namely the tribal leaders not the entire people of Israel.** In this reading, God's **choice** of Israel is **not** an expression of Israel's intrinsic worthiness, but rather, it is an explicit and emphatic expression of God's love for and loyalty to their ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

¹ **ב.ח.ר.** occurs 8 times in the rest of the Torah, Gen.: 2, Exod.: 3, Lev.: 0, Num.: 3. Choice, is not a big theme in the rest of the Torah. Choice is an important theme in Jewish liturgy. A person called for an aliyah to the Torah recites, **בְּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים, (Blessed is God) who chose us from all the nations.** This festival kiddush has that formula as well. The blessing for reciting the Haftarah acknowledges that God **chose** good prophets **אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בְּנְבִיאִים טוֹבִים**, as well as Torah, Moses and the people of Israel. At the end of the Yishtabah, God is referred to as, **הַבּוֹחֵר בְּשִׁירֵי זִמְרָה, the one who chooses song-hymns.**

² **Now since he loved your fathers, he chose their seed after them** (Deut. 4:37). **Only to your fathers was God attached, to love them, so he chose their seed after them.** (Deut. 10:15).

³ But Nehemiah **does** explicitly say that God **chose** Abraham. The passage is familiar to us from the sidur: **אֵתָהּ הוּא ה' הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר בָּחַרְתָּ בְּאַבְרָם וְהוֹצֵאתוֹ מֵאֹר כְּשָׂדִים וְשָׂמְתָּ שְׁמוֹ אַבְרָהָם. וּמִצַּאת אֵת לְבָבוֹ נֶאֱמָן לְפָנָי וְכָרוֹת עִמּוֹ הִבְרִית... You are the LORD God, who chose Abram, who brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and changed his name to Abraham. Finding his heart true to You, You made a covenant with him...** This is a later biblical writer commenting on an earlier biblical text. Nehemiah understands the story of Abraham as a story of God's **choice**. He uses the term **בָּחַרְתָּ** which Genesis does not use.

⁴ The relationship between holiness and smallness is intriguing. It is part of a paradox that we express regularly in the words of the Kaddish: **יִתְגַּדַּל - Yitgadal means: may God's name be made great.** May it be made **bigger**, may God's name **expand** in size and greatness so that it will be known by the entire world. **יִתְקַדַּשׁ - Yitkadash means: may God's name be made holy**, which means, may God's name **be contracted into an infinitesimal intimacy**

2. וַיִּבְחַר בָּכֶם, בְּךָ בָּחַר. 2
God chooses you (the people).

Moses explicitly states that God **chooses** the people of Israel for two distinct reasons: a) They are holy to God. **For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; [it is] you [whom] the Lord your God chose for him as a treasured people,** (Deut. 7:6, see also 14:2) and b) Israel is the smallest nation: **Not because of your being many-more than all the peoples has God attached himself to you and chosen you, for you are the least numerous of all peoples!** (Deut. 7:7). Is there a connection between holiness and smallness? Perhaps.⁴

3. הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר. 3
God chooses the place.⁵

This phrase occurs 21 times in Deuteronomy - 17 times in this week's parasha alone! - and refers to what will eventually become the Temple in Jerusalem.⁶ **This is a not-so-subtle anti-pagan polemic!** In pagan religions, sacred places are often a function of nature and the aesthetics of human choice. For example, the Canaanites, whose sites Israel is going to inherit, worshiped their gods **on the high hills and on the mountains and beneath every luxuriant tree** (Deut. 12:11). Pagan temples and pilgrimage sites were also connected to

that is reminiscent of the infinitesimally small space above the Ark in the Holy of Holies, where God "resides". Greatness is God's vastness and power. **Holiness** is God's smallness and closeness. **When God is only perceived to be great and powerful, human beings feel small and insignificant.** To get God's attention, as it were, they will use their ultimate godly power, the power to kill another human being, and claim they are doing it to make God great. The Islamist who shouts "God is great" while murdering an innocent person in God's name is reflecting his insignificance. **When God is only perceived to be holy and intimate, human beings who claim that they are in an intimate relationship with God will perceive themselves endowed with such godly dignity, that they are holier than everyone else.** Unmediated by humility, they will espouse supremacy in the guise of holy piety. **Yitgadal ve-yitkadash - may God's name be made great, and yet may it also be made holy,** can be understood not as a way or praising God, but as a way of cultivating the human character: a human being is to perceive themselves in this paradox: **we are insignificant, dust and ashes, and we are at the same time, endowed with godliness and a spark of infinite worthiness.** The people of Israel is holy because we are small in size; but great because we are in a very intimate relationship with God.

⁵ Deut. 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26 and more.

⁶ The building of the Temple takes place, **In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt.** (1 Kings 6:1). In Deuteronomy, Moses is addressing the people 40 years after the Exodus. According to biblical chronology, it will be another 440 years before **the place that God chooses** is built.

pagan mythologies in which the gods often selected the sites. In Egyptian culture, sacred spots were often located near tombs and pyramids, **places that were defined by death**. In Deuteronomy on the other hand, **the place that God will choose**, will become a place that will be understood as the **source of life**. It will become, in the imagination of those who worship there, the place from which the waters that sustain life will flow and sustain the entire world.

4. שׁוֹם תִּשָּׂם עָלַיָּה מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ מִקְרֵב אֲחֵיךָ.
God chooses the king.⁷

The establishment of a monarchy in ancient Israel is a concession to the desire of the people to be like other peoples. However, the monarch is chosen not by the people as a result of his prowess, popularity, or political skills, but rather, **explicitly by God as a result of God's will**. The animating question of biblical history is to what extent the kings that are chosen - first Saul, then David, then all of David's descendants - live up to that will.

5. כִּי בּוֹ יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִכָּל שְׂבָטֶיךָ.
God chooses the Kohen.⁸

The Kohen is also **chosen** by God, and is entitled to certain emoluments as a consequence of not being allotted any property and being forced to subsist off of the offerings, tithes, and gifts of the people.

6. עֲמִידָה יָשֵׁב בְּקִרְבְּךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר.
The fugitive slave dwells with you in a place that he chooses.⁹

A slave runs away from a master and seeks refuge with you. According to the law of the Torah, you are forbidden to return that slave to his master. Moreover, that slave has the right to **choose where to live within one of your gates [that] seems good for him**; he is effectively entitled to your protection: **you are not to maltreat him!** **It is fascinating that the Torah deliberately uses the same locution for the fugitive slave's choice of a dwelling as it does for God's choice of a pilgrimage spot.** This is yet another way that the Torah undermines slavery. While on the one hand, the Torah unfortunately acquiesces to a pernicious human institution that was ubiquitous in antiquity, on the other hand, it incentivizes the slave to seek refuge by granting the slave automatic asylum if he/she runs away. **Just as God chooses freely where his name will reside, the fugitive slave chooses freely where he/she will reside. The conclusion: the dignity of the fugitive slave is no less than God's.**

7. וּבִחְרַת בָּחַיִּים.
Choose life.¹⁰

This is Deuteronomy's climactic statement: **I call-as-witness against you today the heavens and the earth: life and death I place before you, blessing and curse; so choose life, in order that you may stay alive, you and your seed, by loving the Lord your God, by hearkening to his voice and by cleaving to him, for he is your life and the**

length of your days, to be settled on the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, to give them!

What are we to make of this?

God is a choosing God. Human beings are choosing creatures. Essential to God's godliness is that God chooses. God is a choosing God. God does not choose out of compulsion or because God is subject to any force of nature.¹¹ God chooses freely. And God chooses because God loves. Each of God's choices are made freely and out of love. While this idea may challenge modern sensibilities, we have to underscore that the various individuals that God chooses - the descendants of the Patriarchs, the King, the Kohen - as well as the people of Israel as a whole, **have to live up to tremendous responsibilities as a result of being chosen.** The descendants of the Patriarchs have the responsibility to transmit the covenant; the King must be an exemplar of the Torah; the Kohen must serve. The people of Israel has the awesome responsibility of bringing God's name into the world. The place that God chooses for his name to reside is a place that, because of the awesome responsibility of those who serve in it, must radiate God's



grandeur and holiness to the world. The lowliest person in biblical society - the slave - can, upon seeking freedom, attain the highest rung of human dignity. By exercising choice of where

to live, the slave expresses their human dignity and behaves just like God. **Just as God is a choosing God, human beings attain their dignity by being moral creatures who exercise their freedom of moral choice.**

If God chooses Israel, one would expect the Torah to say to Israel: **Choose God.** But the Torah never says that. Rather the Torah says, **Choose life.** **Choosing life** magnifies the **Source of Life** and expands God's presence in the world. **Choosing goodness** sanctifies God's name. **Choosing death** diminishes God's presence in the world. **Choosing evil** erases God's name. **Thus, choosing life is in effect choosing God.** All seven instances of choice in Deuteronomy, share something in common. The objects of God's choice, possess grandeur and responsibility. The choosers of place and life reflect the most important of God's attributes: love and freedom.

Shabbat Shalom!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Marla and Rich Zirin to commemorate the yahrzeits of their mothers, Shirley Kabat and Connie Zirin, z'l.

This Shabbat we mark 687 days of the war and the captivity of the hostages. We pray for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. May God shield Israel, protect the IDF, heal the wounded, comfort the bereaved, and spare innocents from suffering.

⁷ Deut. 17:15. Located in next week's parasha, Shoftim.

⁸ Deut. 18:5. Also located in next week's parasha.

⁹ Deut. 23:17. Located in parashat Ki Tetzei. Two weeks from this parasha.

¹⁰ Deut. 30:19. Located in parashat Nitzavim. Four weeks from this parasha.

¹¹ In monotheism, the One God is above nature. In paganism, the gods are subject to nature.