

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk** 

Hidden Treasure

Yitro

This week's Torah reading is very dramatic. It's not just that our ancestors received the first installment of God's Torah, the Ten Commandments. The extravagant transmission of this material was actually staged and performed by God. Forget about the pyrotechnics, what can be compared to the very presence of our Creator. But this amazing Divine Manifestation is preceded by some remarkable assurances granted by God to our ancestors and their descendants. That's us!

So, let's take a look at one of these promises made by God to those fortunate souls gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai, which included us: Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession (S'GULA) among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel (Sh'mot 19:5-6).

There's so much going on in those

two verses, that I'm going to focus on just one part of this offer, 'you shall be My treasured possession', The critical word in that phrase is S'GULA. Rashi explains that this term means 'a cherished (beloved) possession'. The S'forno adds, 'even though all humans are important to Me, you will be treasured above the rest'.

Many of us are familiar with this term, S'GULA, in a more mystical context. This word has been borrowed to refer to certain phenomena which protect from harm. Most famously, the red string (ROYTE BENDEL) from Kever Rachel that many people wear or place on a baby's crib or stroller. Perhaps, the comment of the Ohr HaChayim helps to understand that practice. He explains that a S'GULA is beyond 'the natural'. I'm often dismayed by these talismans. I want to try to understand what God had in mind for us, as God's S'GULA.

Rabbeinu Bechaye suggests that this term is mostly used in a relative sense. Here it compares us to the rest of mankind. God loves all descendants of Adam, created in the Divine Image (B'TZELEM ELOKIM), but there is a special bond with us the progeny of Avraham Avinu. He goes on to explain that this unique relationship is expressed in God's

direct concern for our nation. All other ethnicities relate to heaven through intermediaries (MELACHIM), but the Jewish people deal directly with God. That's the treasure.

The Netziv adds that Jews themselves can, as a result of this special designation, transcend the nature of this realm. He says that this idea is seen in the lament of Yeshayahu about what the Jews are missing because of our straying from God's path: Where is He who put in their midst the Holy Spirit? Who made His Glorious arm march at the right hand of Moshe? (Yeshayahu 63:11-12). The S'GULA is this proximity to the Divine Presence (SH'CHINA). Sadly, it's most notable when lacking.

But the Mei Shilo'ach takes us in another direction, which truly resonates with me. The Rebbe of Izhbitz says that the S'GULA isn't a precious item to be placed in a safe. It's the vault itself. The S'GULA is the unique ability to contain Divine Presence in our very being. It's a gift to sense that Presence resonating inside of us.

I think that Reb Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro of Piacseczno was following the Izhbitzer in his comment on this phenomenon in his famous work, CHOVAH HaTALMIDIM (The Students' Obligation). That skilled and caring

educator informs us of how wonderful it is to be a simple, normal Jew following the Torah. This was a gift and it is a condition being made with every Jew from the simplest water bearer and on upwards. Before the experience at Sinai, God was letting us know how amazing is the portion being presented. It makes us the S'GULA as well as a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation.

However, it wasn't really a gift. It was a prerequisite. We are this special vessel only when there are Torah and mitzvot inside of us. We can move through this life as an amazing object of beauty and admiration on that condition. That visible brilliance and splendor is a reflection of what is transpiring inside.

The Rebbe admonishes that, God forbid, if this potentially precious vessel is empty of the holy and the spiritual, then it is not brilliant; it is not splendid; it is not a S'GULA.

The Ohr HaChayim which I quoted from earlier, remarks that a S'GULA has no intrinsic value. A S'GULA reflects or projects a K'DUSHA and a power which emanates from elsewhere. There is no power in those red strings. If, however, that mundane object reminds us of the prayers of Rachel Imeinu, and her tears for her offspring, then great power has been

accessed. The power of every S'GULA is in the connection to the source of the sanctity it represents. Never in the object itself.

What an honor and privilege to be God's representatives in this realm! Our parsha informs us of that boon. But we must never forget that it's all predicated upon: IF you will faithfully obey Me, and keep My Covenant! 