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**Sermon by Rabbi Shalom Paltiel
Delivered at Chabad of Port Washington**

Yom Kippur 5766

Lion King Sermon

A very religious Jew calls a taxi to take him and his wife to hospital on the eve of Yom Kippur as she is preparing to give birth. Since its Yom Kippur he makes a request that they not send a Jewish driver. As he and his wife get into the cab, they hear the crackling voice of the dispatcher over the radio: Did you pick up those Anti Semites yet???

Anti Semitism is often blamed on our claim to be the chosen people

What does Fiddler say: G-d I know we're the chosen nation. But can you do us a favor? Every once in a while can you please choose someone else...

Jew who survived the holocaust finally makes it to America, is sitting on a subway train in NYC, reading a paper and minding his own business, anti-Semite begins to start up: Hey Jew, what's this about chosen people? You guys think you're so special, that G-d chose you, huh?! The guy looks up from his Forverts, looks across the subway car from the top of his bifocals and says, only half in jest: (say with strong European accent) What's your problem? You're jealous? I wouldn't be jealous... He chose us? He picked on us!

Too often we Jews are uncomfortable with the title – Chosen people.

Rabbi Manis Friedman was asked to deliver an end-of-semester talk on religion to a class of Christian Seminary students. During the question and answer session one of the students asked: What do you think about being the Chosen People? Rabbi Friedman answered: Feels great... The student is satisfied with the response and sits down. Later, the priest in charge tells Manis that last year they had a different – less proud – rabbi give the talk. This student asked the very same question of that rabbi. The rabbi tried to wiggle his way out of the issue by saying things like – well, we're not really more chosen than anyone else... that's an old fashioned idea... we can all be chosen if we like, etc. On the bus on the way home, all of the students agreed, the rabbi was lying to them!

Friends, we can't get away from the truth that we are the chosen people... A truth stated unequivocally in the Book of Books, the Bible, the best seller of history, a book recognized by all the major religions of the world.

When we say Chosen, it's not that we Jews are brighter, more energetic or talented than others. That is a racist doctrine to be rejected. Rather, it is that to be a Jew is to be asked to give, to contribute, to make a difference. We were chosen to help in the monumental task that has engaged Jews since the dawn of our history, to make the world a home for the Divine presence, a place of justice, compassion, human dignity and the sanctity of life. More than a privilege, our chosen ness is a responsibility – a G-d given responsibility - Letakein Olam – to fix the world, to make the world better, kinder, gentler, a world befitting it's great Creator... A place G-d can call His home.

Here's what some famous non-Jews had to say about the Jews:

Winston Churchill said:

"Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are, beyond any question, the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has appeared in the world."

Leo Tolstoy wrote:

"The Jew is that sacred being who has brought down from heaven the everlasting fire, and has illumined with it the entire world. He is the religious source, spring, and fountain out of which all the rest of the peoples have drawn their beliefs and their religions."

Paul Johnson in History of the Jews wrote: The Jews stand at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose."

Matthew Arnold in his book "Literature & Dogma" wrote: "As long as the world lasts, all who want to make progress in righteousness will come to Israel for inspiration."

My dear friends: that very same best seller of history refers to our nation as: Mamleches Kohanim, Royal princes... Every one of us is a prince... a princess... The Torah calls us royalty... Again, this is not about some kind of self grandiose of being a supreme race... To quote the Talmud: Lo shroro ani nosen lochem... It is not rulership which I give to you... It is servitude... Al-mighty G-d chose us as His royal

family... to be Ohr Lagoyim, a light unto the nations... to lead the world in the direction of G-dliness and goodness... More than a privilege, it is a responsibility...

And it is very important to make the distinction... You see, if it's merely a privilege, I can pass on it... Thank you – but no thank you... Choose some body else... If it's a responsibility, now that's a different story. I'm being counted on. I have to live up to my responsibility...

We often play down the "Jewish" thing because we think we'll be more accepted into society. But it doesn't work that way. First of all, we can't hide it...

A Jew walks into an exclusive country club looking to join ... They look him up and down, check out his nose... Hmmmm... Ok. They give him an interview where he is asked a few questions: What's your name? He offers some really Waspy name like: Hutchinson River Parkway the Third or something like that... Where is your family from? Ireland of course (they're really from somewhere in Poland). What's your Religion? My religion? Goy!

A Jew was having a hard time making a living so he got himself a job at the church. After a couple of weeks the priest meets with him and tells him how satisfied he is with his performance. "Just please, I ask of you three favors: When you come out of the bathroom don't wash your hands with that water – it's the holy water. Stop hanging your coat on the cross. And please... stop calling mother Teresa - mother Shapiro.

When we deny our chosen-ness, they just simply don't believe us... And they resent that we're not telling them the truth. And that we're not doing our job... When we're proud of who we are, people respect us for it.

Those who have been coming to this shul for a while know the relationship I have with my non-Jewish neighbors. How one of them insisted that I put a mezuzah on their front door to bless their home...

...and another one thanked me and felt blessed when a strong wind blew our entire sukkah into their backyard... I came home ... walked onto the back porch, and the sukkah was gone... It had picked itself up and landed in the neighbors' backyard. I ran over to their house, I apologized, I was thankful no one got hurt... But they were fine with it... They had heard about the sukkah from the Bible, and they felt blessed to have had a sukkah, albeit upside down, in their backyard for a few hours...

Mattisyahu, the now famous Chassidic Reggae superstar... grew up totally non-religious. Is now a Chabad Chassid and a religious Jew. He speaks about the first time he wore his yarmulka in public. He says it was one of the greatest feelings. And I quote Matisyahu: "I felt for the first time I was wearing my own clothes... That felt so good. I noticed a feeling of respect that I got from people. I think it's because they see that you're doing your thing. You're really doing you... Being religious and coming across as a Jew-I'm not lost and assimilated into the culture. A lot of times people really respect that."

I'm sure some of you have seen the Disney Movie - Lion King.

(I must make a disclaimer here. I'm not a big fan of the movies. I rarely watch a movie. I think most of them are a terrible waste of time – at best. However, once in a while there's a really good one that comes out.)

Remember the part when Simba is roaming around with his new found friends doing the Hakuna Matata... (Sing ...) No worries, problem free philosophy... And instead of acting like a king, this lion is dancing around like he's some kind of wart-hog or something... When someone suggests that he's a king he goes: No, I'm no king. I'm the same guy... I'm just like you. Sound familiar? A neighbor says – you're the chosen people. Nah, it's really nothing... Don't pay attention to that... I'm the same guy... I'm just like you...

But you're a King! Nah, that was a long time ago...

But we have a responsibility... Remember when Nala comes along and says – we need you. You're the king... We need you... You're our only hope... Everything's destroyed in Pride Rock, there's no food, no water, everyone will starve...

Like Simba, when we fail to take our place in the Circle of Life, everyone loses... We're not being humble... We're shirking our responsibility... We're not doing our job... Our non-Jewish neighbors are disappointed in us...

When the Torah tells us we are Royalty... a kingdom of princes – it's not just for us, to make us feel good, to boost our egos... It's for the whole world... We're all connected in the great circle of life... But we got to stand up and take our rightful place...

Yom Kippur is the when a Jew looks himself in the mirror and asks himself: What am I about? What is my life about? Have I gotten lost, was I farblonjet somewhere along the way? Who am I?

And the resounding answer that Yom Kippur gives each of us: You know who you are?

You're Mufasa's boy!!!

You're royalty... Stand up and do your job!

And you do your job by acting like royalty...

Remember when Simba's two new friends first bring him into their trio and they introduce him to their food menu.... He's not thrilled... He's used to eating like a lion... But they say to him: If you live with us – eat like us...

No, you don't eat like them. You eat like a king... a special royal menu for princes and princesses... It's called kosher...

You take your prince aside and teach'em a lesson on how to continue the chain of royalty... it's called Yeshiva,

a good Jewish education...

You marry like royalty – to a fellow prince or princess, together with whom you will bring to the world the next generation of kings...

And then take your little royal cubs... and lift them up proudly for the whole world to see them... with their yarmulkahs and their tzitzis hanging... pick up your little kinderlach bring them over to the mezuzah to give it a kiss... carry them over to put some coins in the tzedakah pushka...

And when you lift your eyes heavenward in prayer, you don't accept that what you're seeing is just some fireflies stuck on the inky black backdrop up there. Even if you don't understand it fully, you know that there's something greater... that there's a plan... and a purpose... and an afterlife... You know that Hashem is out there... together with your loved one's... the great kings of the past...

And whenever you feel alone – just remember... look up at the stars... those kings will always be there for you... Ladies and gentlemen, that's what Yiskor is all about... Why are we so moved by Yiskor... It's our connection to our past... Our illustrious past... We're all so proud of where we come from...

I once visited the home of a Jew here in Sands Point. As soon as I walked in he made a clear statement up front: "I'm not religious. I don't care much for any of this old fashioned stuff. It doesn't mean anything to me. I don't believe in it." I'm standing there in the entrance area taking off my coat trying to figure out how I'm going to connect with this guy. There was a whole wall of family pictures. I notice a few photographs of people with beards and peyes... and sheitels... so I say – wow – who are these very religious looking people? Suddenly the guy's eyes well up with tears... He was so choked up it took him a few minutes before he was able to talk... Yeah – he said. That was my zeideh... my grandfather... He was a real tzaddik... He used to daven... he used to daven everyday with his tallis and tfillin... And this is my bubbie... They were real Jews! Very religious... Very religious... And the guy's choking up again – my bubbie used to make a Shabbos table, and we would all stand around the table... It was so special to us because after she lit her candles she would walk go the room and give each of us a Shabbos kiss and a piece of chocolate...

But Yiskor is much more than just remembering the past... it is reliving that past in the present ...

You're a special chosen people... You're a king... Me a king? Nah, maybe a long time ago – maybe my father was the king... I'm not my father...

Sound familiar? What Simba said is what all of us say. We are all very proud of our illustrious Jewish past, our zeidies and bubbies from back in the old country who lived like Jews, looked like Jews... Everyone has pictures of their ancestors who were rabbis, gabbais, sofers (scribes) and observant Jews. We proudly tell people about these special Jews who came before us... But then when it comes to ourselves, we suddenly look at ourselves totally differently... We're not like them... We're part of modernity...

This is the most powerful moment of the film, the part where I choked up: when the baboon says to Simba: You're father's alive... And he stares into the water and sees his royal reflection... and he says that's not my father, just my reflection... No – he says: Look hard... You see, he lives in you...

Mufasa appears in a fiery image from heaven... (how I wish there was a kosher way of projecting that scene right here in shul – with Mufasa in the fiery image – and his booming voice in surround

sound)...just like Yiskor when our loved ones join us in shul... “Simba – you have forgotten who you are and so you forgotten me... Remember who you are... Remember – that’s Yiskor - You are my son... Remember... You are more than what you have become... You must return and take your place in the circle of life... Remember... Remember...

Today – at this very moment, Yom Kippur 2005...our parents look down at us from the stars... along with their parents and their parents... Today – at this very moment - the great kings of the past – Abraham Isaac Jacob... Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah... Moses & Miriam... Queen Esther... Deborah the Prophetess... Hillel & Rabbi Akiva... Rashi & Maimonides... The Baal Shem Tov... The millions who have come before us who lived and died for their Jewishness... Today... and every day... all these great kings of the past look down at us... Yes, us... You’re thinking – who? Me?? These great historic figures are looking at me? But I’m so small and insignificant... Why would they look at me... Friends, because you are them... You are the kings of today... Look into your eyes... Look into your Jewish heart and soul... your neshomo... your sparkling G-dly soul within... Look hard... You’ll see your ancestors... You carry their souls within your’s... You carry their destiny within you...

They live within you... Now it’s all up to you... You’re our only hope...

Like I said to you on Rosh Hashana, now it’s up to you and me... The destiny and purpose of all the great kings of the past is now in our hands. And we have only two choices – yes and no - Remember that conversation? We can’t plant a tree without a tree... we can’t plant Judaism without Judaism – without Mitzvahs and Torah and Traditions... This is no time for false humility... This is a time to stand up and be counted... To take responsibility for the continuity of our people... By stepping up the level of Judaism in our homes starting today...

The Jewish people lost an unbelievably special, dedicated Jew this year. Simon Wiesenthal alav hashalom – G-d bless his soul, was asked by fellow survivors why he dedicated so much of his life to remembering the holocaust. He said: After 120 years, when we meet with our loved ones who were murdered, they’ll ask us what we did with the rest of our lives. What will you say – he asked. That you sold shoes? You traded stocks? I will say – I worked hard every day so that you would not be forgotten...

I get a call one day from a man who lives in this community, a friend, he might very well be here in this room today. He’s upset. He tells me his son is in love. The girl is really nice and sweet.. but not Jewish... He’s really upset. They are a fairly traditional family. How could this happen to him. He asks if I would try to help. I asked him if his son would come and talk to me. He said that the matter was already closed in

their home, but he would ask his son to come and talk to me. The young man came to my office, tall, handsome, very bright young man. The first thing he tells me is that I should know I am wasting my time talking to him. "I know the whole story you're going to tell me how terrible it is to marry a shikse... I've heard it all from family and rabbis... You're wasting your time... I only came here out of respect to my parents... I don't believe in this whole thing... I think it's racist... Besides, my parents don't keep Shabbat, or kosher, or the holidays... They never bothered sending me to a Yeshiva... Why is this the only sin that matters? If they wanted me to live a religious life they should've woken up 20 years ago and brought yiddishkeit into our home..." "Good point" I said. Anyway, I sat there and talked and talked... I gave him my best shots, but I could tell I was getting no where... Every once in a while he would glance at his watch impatiently. Once or twice during my "monologue" he excused himself as he quickly replied to an email coming in on his Blackberry... I was, in fact, wasting my time.

Finally, I pulled out the best trick I had in my bag... I looked him the eye and asked for his full attention... I told him the story of a world-renowned musician who happen to visit a small, isolated village. The simple villagers were overwhelmed by the honor, they begged him to do a concert for them... They all gathered in Town Hall wearing their best tuxedos, bowties, walking sticks and all... It was a celebration such as this little town had never seen before... The maestro walks up onto the stage, places his flute to his lips, and makes a little "toot" ... then another sound, and a third... And this kept happening... The people were puzzled... This world-renowned artist is standing there blowing a series of unrelated notes... Once they were amply confused, the artist said to them: I know what you're thinking. I know when I stand here alone and play it doesn't sound like anything. However, the truth is that I am not alone. I am part of a large orchestra of musicians who play together in perfect harmony, producing the most amazing musical symphony. When we all play together in harmony, my little "toots" add a beauty and perfection to the entire orchestra...

So I said to the young man sitting across the desk from me: This is story of the Jewish people. You might think of yourself and what you do as small and insignificant. But the truth is you're not alone. Your deeds matter. Your Mitzvahs matter. You are part of a large orchestra of Jews throughout the whole world who are doing mitzvahs... and the hundreds of generations of Jews who came before you... all the way back to Abraham and Sarah... the patriarchs of our people... We are all one... And your little "toot" matters... It adds a perfection and beauty to the entire picture...

Imagine this, I continued: The most beautiful orchestra in the world has been playing without interruption for 3800 years. Hundreds... thousands of musicians have playing... each generation some of the players go back stage and others come on stage... the orchestra keeps expanding... never once did the music stops... it continues to play in good times and in bad times... In good times... during Holy Temple days... the orchestra played proudly as if in the most gorgeous concert hall... In bad times... pogroms.. inquisitions... gas chambers... it played much as it played on the sinking Titanic.. but the music

never stopped... Imagine this... For the past 3800 years of your family the music continued... The Suddenly – it stops!

As the young man got up to leave, he shook my hand and said: Rabbi, you've given me something to think about...

Friends, that's our story... Let us remember who we are and what we are part of . Don't forget - You're Mufasa's boy. If you don't forget who you are you won't forget where you came from... The future of our people is in our hands... The destiny of all our ancestors in our hands... Let's not let them down... Let's make them proud...