

# UNIVERSALISM AND/OR PARTICULARISM

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One of the characteristics of Judaism is the innate balance between particularism and universalism. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people, but the God of Israel is not only a national God and Israel's own national interests do not constitute the boundaries of its ethical concerns.

The authentic teachers of Judaism never saw their God as less than the Creator of mankind, the Lord of history as well as the source and sanction of righteousness in human affairs. The Torah describes Abraham as bargaining for the lives of the depraved Sodomites out of his profound conviction that God's universality finds expression in the punishment of sinners precisely because He is the Author of a moral law, universal in scope.

The thrust of Abraham's argument before the Divine bar of justice, constituting the bedrock of ethical monotheism, is that His infinite powers are not indiscriminately applied, inasmuch as the Lord is not capricious like the pagan gods. As it is written: *'Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?'* (Gen. 18:25).

Amos saw the God of Israel, whose seat is in Zion, exacting retribution from all the nations guilty of barbarism and treachery against one another (Amos 1:2). Isaiah conceived of God as universal, but at the same time as choosing Israel as the instrument for His transcendent truth and thereby consigning His chosen people to contumely and persecution until all the nations recognize Israel's role in history as the teacher of mankind (Isa. 42:1-4, 19, 22, 52:13, 53:12).

For both the prophets and the sages of Israel there was no contradiction between a passionate concern for humanity on the one hand and on the other a steadfast preoccupation with Israel's return from Exile and the reconstitution of its national life in the Land of Israel (Isa. 40:1ff.). Moreover, in the same utterance, the prophet could welcome proselytes who had embraced monotheism and were Sabbath observers. They would be welcome to dwell in Jerusalem and free to offer their sacrifices in His sanctuary: *Their burnt offer-*

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*ings and sacrifices will be acceptable upon My altar, for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people (Isa. 51:6-7).*

In the post-biblical centuries, when Jews experienced exile and persecution, particularism and universalism nevertheless remained in evidence. The best example being the *Aleinu* prayer composed by Rav, a Babylonian *amora*, in the Third Century C.E. Its first paragraph stresses particularism in uncompromising terms:

It is our duty to praise the Lord of all and to ascribe greatness to the Author of Creation who has not made us like the nations of the world, nor has placed us like other families of the earth, who has not made our portion like theirs nor our destiny like that of all their multitude . . . .

In the second paragraph of the *Aleinu*, the universalistic hope of Judaism is underscored:

Therefore, it is our hope, O Lord our God that . . . all mankind will call upon Your name . . . They shall accept the yoke of Your kingdom and You will reign over them speedily and forever. For the kingdom is Yours and to all eternity. You will reign in glory, as it is written in Your Torah . . . The Lord shall be King over all the earth. On that day the Lord shall be One and His name One.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the millennia of its history, Judaism kept in focus its particularistic origin and function as well as its universal vision and thrust. No interpretation of Judaism that possesses any degree of authenticity can fail to recognize and share this recognition and appreciation of a Jew's specific group loyalty linked to an attachment to universal values. This balance, which is at the very core of Judaism, has nevertheless appeared as a stumbling block, if not an outright scandal, to some and a contradiction to others. The ineluctable fact is, however, that both elements in this balance have survived in Jewish consciousness and thought for millennia.

The message of the Torah was intended for all the children of men. According to tradition, before Israel received the Torah at Sinai, God offered it to the other nations but they refused to accept it. The Torah, we are told, was revealed in the wilderness (no-man's land) and not in Eretz Yisrael so as to teach us that in the extra-territorial desert all nations have a right to embrace it. Likewise, the Torah was revealed simultaneously in 70 languages so that it

would be comprehensible to one and all.<sup>2</sup> Also, a pagan who studies Torah as the revealed word of God is like a *kohen gadol* [high priest].<sup>3</sup>

Belief in God as the Father and Sovereign of all men and at the same time belief in His special concern with Israel, chosen to be His special treasure (Ex. 19:5) are the twin pillars of Judaism, inseparably joined together like two sides of the same coin. This union since time immemorial has nevertheless raised questions in every generation. Some of the reasons will be discussed below.

The seven *mitzvot b'nai Noach* [commandments for the children of Noah] are biblical in origin and give Judaism a universal role in human history. A non-Jew who keeps the seven Noahide laws has a share in *olam ha-ba* [the world to come] without ever converting to Judaism. As such, he is entitled to support from the Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> These seven Noahide laws are derived from Adam and Noah,<sup>5</sup> both of whom are considered the progenitors of humankind, which give these laws a universal character.

The rabbinic tradition considers these laws to be the minimal moral imperatives enjoined by the Bible on all men and essential to the maintenance of an ordered and wholesome society. They include: prohibition of (1) idolatry, (2) blasphemy, (3) bloodshed, (4) incest and adultery, and (5) robbery, (6) the injunction to establish courts of law; and (7) the prohibition against eating flesh cut from a living animal. In rabbinic theology, the Noahide commandments are understood as revealed law. They are of Divine origin and carry Divine authority. Nor can they be defined or classified as belonging to that category known as "natural law"; i.e., inherent in human nature and rooted or founded in reason.<sup>6</sup>

Maimonides postulated that the seven Noahide laws must be accepted by non-Jews as Divinely revealed, since all ethical systems require a theological framework and Divine authority. Should a non-Jew perform them solely for philosophical reasons, he would not take his place among the pious gentiles who merit a share of the hereafter. This distinction in motivation is fundamental to rabbinic teaching, because Divine authority is considered an essential prerequisite for the preservation of the moral fabric of human society. The ultimate sanction for the values inherent in these laws is that they constitute the will of God. Rational processes are not regarded as sufficient incentive for righteous action.<sup>7</sup> There are, however, differences of opinion as to

whether the ultimate stage of humanity will comprise both Judaism and Noahism or that Noahism is only the penultimate level before the universalization of Torah Judaism.<sup>8</sup>

In the ancient Near East, only Judaism conceived of a panoramic world outlook in which all of history was seen to be governed by the will of one God. Only the Hebrew prophets were able to interpret their national history as a universal sequence governed by one all-encompassing Divine plan (Isa. 13-23; Jer. 27:2ff; Ezek. 25-32; Amos 1:3-12, et al.). Nevertheless, the election of Israel and the Covenant at Sinai made Israel unique. Even a cursory perusal of biblical and rabbinic literature leaves no doubt that Israel's election by God always maintained in Jewish consciousness the character of at least an unformulated dogma. (Maimonides does not list it among his 13 principles of the Jewish faith.<sup>9</sup>)

The clearest formulation of this doctrine is to be found in a prayer which reads:

You have chosen us from among all people; You have loved us and taken pleasure in us; You have exalted us above all tongues; You have sanctified us by your commandments and brought us near, O our King, to Your service; and called us by Your great and holy name.<sup>10</sup>

God, we are told, chose Israel from among all the nations because unlike the other nations, Israel accepted His Torah without any prior conditions or reservations. But it should be noted that Israel's election was not as exclusive as is commonly imagined. In fact, the same prophet who declared God's election of Israel refers to God as *the King of the nations* (Jer. 10:7). Similarly, in Jeremiah 32, God is both *the God of all flesh* (V. 27) and *the God of Israel* (V. 36). The Midrash understood the juxtaposition of the verses as indicating the relation of God to the world in general and to Israel in particular. He is the Lord of all the nations, while His name is especially attached to Israel.<sup>11</sup>

More striking by far is the interpretation given in the Midrash to Deuteronomy 6:4 (the *Shema*): *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*. This quintessential affirmation of faith in the one and only God of Israel, to be recited *when you lie down and when you rise up* not only expresses a metaphysical dogma, namely the absolute unity of God, but also contains a hope and a belief in the ultimate acceptance by all men of His universal kingdom here on earth. In the words of the Midrash:

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He is our God making His name particularly attached to us; but He is also the one God of all mankind . . . as it is said, And the Lord shall be King over all the earth; in that day there shall be one Lord, and His name one.<sup>12</sup>

Both the biblical record and the millennia-long history of the Jews attest to the fact that Israel's election was no *bona fide* guarantee for special protection or privilege. The consequences of being chosen were not immunity, but heightened obligation and responsibility (*noblesse oblige*), as well as the unrelenting enmity of the Gentiles. The brief verse "How odd of God, to choose the Jews," could easily resonate in both Jewish and Christian quarters. Down through the ages there were some Jews who queried in resentment and bitterness why this unique destiny was visited upon them. There were always those who were willing to forgo the dignity and the misery, the crown and the thorns that came in the wake of their "chosenness," from Josephus Flavius who defected to Rome in the 1st Century C.E. to the Cardinal of Paris in the 20th Century.

Why, then, the feeling of uneasiness among some Jews when the term "universalism" is brought up? Perhaps it has to do with the fact that following the Emancipation, universalism became synonymous with assimilation. In Eastern Europe, socialist and communist doctrines of political universalism made Judaism anathema, claiming as they did that Judaism along with Zionism diverted the workers of the world from pursuing the "proper goals" of a classless society. It is, therefore, no wonder that the vaunted goals of atheistic humanistic universalism are perceived as antithetical to the concerns for Jewish continuity and inimical to the preciousness of Jewish particularity.

These hopelessly utopian dreams of an imminent messianic age evaporated when the "great examples" of universal humanism in the West did its methodical and malevolent best to gas and incinerate European Jewry. At the same time the so-called "liberal democracies" found every which way not to do what should have and could have been done to prevent Hitler's genocidal war against our people.

Post-Holocaust Jews who returned to a life of Torah and *mitzvot* were now proud to affirm and reaffirm their Jewishness and rejected the notion that Jewish particularity lacks intrinsic dignity and must justify itself in terms of its service of a higher good. They, however, run the risk of losing the baby

together with the bath water. If Jews believe that the Jewish people play a critical role in human history – namely, ushering in the messianic era – then remaining faithfully Jewish and doing one's best to transmit the Jewish heritage to future generations becomes a critical Jewish responsibility of cosmic dimensions.

Once we accept this premise, then Jewish particularity mandates our universal concerns whereby we can be identified with all mankind. Atheistic philosophers can at best only commend universal human dignity; Hebrew Scripture commands it since man was created in the image of God. This incomparable status of humankind's irrevocable personal worth derives from an absolute, immutable and transcendent source of value in the universe and not from any philosophical postulate or rational syllogism. A universalism grounded in Hebrew scripture and biblical faith transcends all contingencies of time, place and person. Biblical universalism cannot be compromised or qualified by any human authority. Any infringement of a person's inalienable rights as a member of the human family constitutes, as it were, the denial of his Creator.

The dismal failure of contemporary rationalisms and secular ideologies, whether communism, naturalism or utopianism, to confer upon human beings transcendent value and infinite worth is probably a major intellectual cause of the ethical decay of Western civilization. Man's incomparable status in the universe is a function of his unique connection and identification in Hebrew Scripture with God and with God's Divine purpose and plan. Even one convicted of homicide and executed for his crime is not stripped of his essential dignity. Jewish law requires that his corpse be handled respectfully.<sup>13</sup>

When Christianity and Islam brought belief in one God to the Western world, discrimination and persecution of Jews made Jewish self-concern a major desideratum. Nevertheless, even in these straightened circumstances Jews never surrendered the prophetic vision of one God and one humanity, which without a doubt was a spiritual feat of numinous dimensions.

I am an incurable universalist precisely because of my Jewish particularity, which emphasizes the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. I continue to cling to my Jewish particularity and to the religious obligations of my covenantal relationship with God and to my particular faith community because this is for me the highest and most enduring realization of my mis-

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sion both as a Jew and as a human being. Self respect and respect for all who were created in His image demands more than a fragile and tentative secular social contract.

### NOTES

1. The prayer can be found in the Festival Amidah and is based upon the following verses: Deuteronomy. 10: 15, 14: 2; Psalm 149: 2 and Jeremiah. 14: 27.
2. T.B. Shabbat 88b; Ex. Rabbah 5:9, 27:9; Mekhilta, Yitro 5; Sifre, Deut. 343.
3. T. B. A.Z. 3a.
4. *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, VI, col. 289.
5. Gen. R. 34; San. 59b.
6. T.B. Yoma 67b.
7. Maimonides, M.T.: Melakhim, 10: 9-10.
8. T.Y. A.Z. 2:1. (Aime Palliere, 1875-1949, a French writer and theologian, author of *The Unknown Sanctuary*, though born a Catholic was drawn to Judaism and wished to convert. His spiritual mentor, Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh, persuaded him to settle for the status of a Noahide, without formally converting to Judaism.)
9. Maimonides, M.T. San. 4:816a.
10. The prayer is from the Festival Amidah based on verses from Deut. 10:15, 14:12; Ps. 149:2 and Jer. 14:27.
11. Mekhilta 102a and Sifre 73a.
12. Ibid.
13. Maimonides, M.T. Sanhedrin 4:8

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## QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book TORAH DIALOGUES

- 1. In Exodus Chapter 12, what was strange about the first Pesah?**
- 2. Find the phrase in Leviticus Chapter 7 that is cited by the Sages to show that fish does not require "kashering" in order to be eaten, while meat and poultry do require salting and soaking to remove excess blood?**

**3. What phrase in Leviticus 19 is appropriate to post in busses and trains?**

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