

# FORGET NOT YOUR FOREBEARS!

DAN VOGEL

With God's choice of the Patriarch Abraham as the forebear of the future Jewish nation, the encounter of universality and particularity engages that nation unto this very day, devolving upon it rights, privileges, responsibilities, and sufferings. At the very end of Chapter 11 of Genesis, the birth and genealogy of Abraham are merely mentioned. At the very beginning of Chapter 12, however, God suddenly descends to select Abraham of all the people on earth and to command him to go forth on a strange journey to an unnamed terminus but for a clearly delineated reason: Abraham is to father a family through which the families of all the earth will be blessed.

Why was a particularistic choice necessary? In the generations preceding Abraham, God had dealt with humanity in its universal condition, without the anchor of a particular individual. The results were all disappointing. Adam, after Eden, could not adequately lead and influence the emerging generations. Noah initially was given only one task: to save himself and the animal phyla. After the Deluge, he was given the task of reconstituting mankind, but here he was unsuccessful. The experiment in universal brotherhood at the Tower of Babel (11:1) failed because of overweening pride, and the people had to be dispersed. Ultimately, God chose Abraham to be the forebear of a family-nation that would direct the spiritual history of the peoples of the earth.

Generations later, at the time when the people of Israel were about to be given the Torah, they were commanded to evolve into a *ממלכת כהנים* [kingdom of priests or, better, kingdom of ministers, i.e., teachers] *וגוי קדוש* [and a holy nation] (Ex. 19:6). As a nation dedicated to the moral development of the rest of the world, the Jews were to take on a universalistic perspective; as a nation committed to retain its holiness, they were to remain particularist.

In his article, Pinchas Kahn emphasized the universal mission of the family-rendered-into-nation. Here, I propose to emphasize the other side of the

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coin: the supreme danger of eclipsing the particularism of the Fathers in the grandiose cosmic design. The danger is omnipresent. It transcends time and characterizes tendencies in the Dispersion and even in the State of Israel. Yoram Hazony<sup>2</sup> defines the philosophical/political attack on the idea of a Jewish State from the days of Martin Buber's opposition to Theodor Herzl, to contemporary intellectuals at The Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University. Their contention is: true, the Jews have a universal spiritual job to do, but it cannot be done if the weight of Jewish history is on their backs. Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), as Hazony summarizes his philosophy, ". . . preached the universality of pure reason and its identity as the one true religion; the existence of a single true morality based on the eradication of self-interest . . .

." <sup>3</sup> For Martin Buber (1878-1965), the universal ideal is unity, and the Jew who affirms his link with the substance of his people does not, in doing so, actually arrive at Jewish particularism but, on the contrary, identifies himself with a people that itself embodies the desire for an interpenetration and unity with all mankind. <sup>4</sup>

For those who came to believe these doctrines, the State of Israel as the Jewish state is therefore an anomaly, since Jews should have nothing to do with statecraft, only with promoting their spiritual lesson. To them, this requires eliding the Jewish differences of historical perspective and traditions from those of the rest of the world. In this way, the Jewish people and their mission will be universalized. Thus, Hazony quotes the historian Yehuda Elkana's statement: "Israeli leaders must make every effort to uproot the rule of historical remembrance from our lives."<sup>5</sup> This trend of thought is epitomized in Gavriel Moked's remark about the particularity of Jewish history: "And really, what do people living in Tel Aviv . . . have to do with the covenant of Abraham?"<sup>6</sup>

The Bible foresaw the confrontation of universality and particularity. Several biblical texts recognize the tendency and, in an indirect way, they warn against it. In its wisdom, the Bible does not present its warning in legalistic or hortatory terms, but in historical passages that reflect human actions and thoughts. This article will examine a few of these texts.

## GENESIS 18

One of the most dramatic and famous colloquies in the entire Bible occurs when Abraham and the Lord stand together looking down at the valley where Sodom awaits destruction. The judgment to be visited upon Sodom is a local matter with complex ethical implications, but Abraham begins his negotiation about the number of righteous that may be found there with a thunderous statement, unique at that juncture of history: *'Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?'* (Gen. 18:25)

Abraham was not the first universalist. Other peoples saw their gods as ruling all the earth. However, Abraham is the first who attributed justice to the One God of the universe. He seems here to intuit the universality of his responsibility as the first monotheist. For the first time in the recorded history of civilization, a deity – the Deity, indeed – is perceived not merely with power over other gods, but endowed with universal justice. That one Lord of justice rules over all the earth is precisely the lesson that Abraham's progeny is destined and will be commanded to teach to the rest of the world. For the corollary is clear: mankind, to the best of its ability, must strive to imitate God by pervading itself with justice. Sodom, like the generation of Noah, had no human figure to teach them. It is an awesome task for one particular forebear to be chosen to undertake.

The chapters in the rest of the Book of Genesis trace the adventures of the Abrahamite family, climaxed by the descent from Canaan into Egypt that the Lord had prophesied to Abraham. Great-grandson Joseph, at the end of his days, prophesies in turn that the Lord will once again take notice of the family and will redeem them. But it is not the universalist God of Creation or of omnipotence, or the Lord above time and space, that Joseph identifies as doing so. Rather, the God that made an eternal promise to a particular set of ancestors, *to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob* (50:25). It is a reminder that his family as a universalist instrument has a long journey to travel. It is a litany that will be reprised throughout biblical history.

## EXODUS 3

The second passage I intend to present comes close to the beginning of the Book of Exodus; in fact, at the very beginning of the career of Moses as the new leader of the Abrahamite clan. The story is familiar: God accosts Moses

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through the burning bush and devolves upon him the job of leading the Israelite tribes to freedom from slavery. Moses tries to beg off, but God will have none of it. Finally, Moses weakens and asks: *'When I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you" and they ask me, "What is His name?" what shall I say to them?'* (Ex. 3:13.) God replies: *'Eheyeh asher eheyeh.'* The NJPS translation offers in a footnote three of many possible translations, all emphasizing universality of space and time, as Saadia Gaon understood the verse. This is good psychology: first, tell them a universal name, a name that is redolent of eternity and almightiness to overwhelm the regional gods that they have been in contact with for centuries now. Yet, this appellation is evidently insufficient. God is not yet through with His instructions on how to approach the Israelites: He continues: *'Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This shall be My name forever, This [shall be] My appellation for all eternity'* (3:13-15) [emphasis mine, DV]. No matter what other designation you may ever give Me, this is My preference.

It would seem that God is making a distinction between two roles that He has adopted for Himself: the Omnipotent above time on the universal side, and the God of Israel on the particular side. At the same time, He is making an inexorable connection between the two. The awe and aura of universality notwithstanding, the impetus behind the actions of God rises from the remembrance of the forebears of a particular family. This combination is implied in a further instruction about how Moses is to speak to Pharaoh: *'You shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son . . . .'* (4:23), which leaves the implication that the rest of mankind are also children of the Lord. Israel is particularized, but the rest of the world is not forgotten. The inter-relationship will always be unbreakable.

## EXODUS 32

Not too long after receiving the Torah at Sinai, as all Bible-readers know, the Israelites, through impatience or misunderstanding, fashion the Golden Calf as their leader to the land of Canaan. The sin is most grievous, for it violates the Second Commandment outright. The anger of the Lord is nearly limitless. He tells Moses that He is ready to destroy this people and make him

the head of new people. Moses will have none of that! He makes his plea on behalf of the stiff-necked, recalcitrant Israelites. His plea has three points:

1. You brought these people out of Egypt with great power. You displayed an immeasurable sovereignty over nature itself. All the world was astonished. How can You now destroy them?

2. Let not the Egyptians say that You took them out with evil intent (as if the Lord of the universe should worry about what the Egyptians would say!).

At this point, Moses implores, *'Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people'* (32:12) – a plea so affecting that tradition calls for the entire congregation listening to this passage on public fast days to repeat it aloud with the reader. Nevertheless, as eloquent as Moses may have been, heaven is silent. No reaction. No response. The sentence of condemnation still hangs over the Israelites.

3. Then, Moses apparently remembers his dialogue with God at the burning bush, from which he now, in desperation, takes his cue how to clinch his plea. There is a job to be done by this people and their descendants, a job God Himself devolved upon the patriarchs. A covenant, which obligates both sides, was established and neither side, not even the Lord of the universe, can break a covenant. *'Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,'* cries Moses, and Your promise of their destined future in the world. Only then, when Moses invokes the title by which God had said He desires to be known for eternity above all other appellations, are we told:

וַיִּנַחֵם ה' עַל הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר לַעֲשׂוֹת לַעֲמֹד.

*And the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people* (32:14).

Just punishment is meted out, but the people remain alive (and continually kicking!) to fulfill their mission. The bond to their ancestors is clear and inexorable. Rabbi Elazar connects the two co-existent phases of the Judge of all the earth in his comment on this verse: "If the Name of the Lord is forever, His promise to the progeny of Abraham is forever" (T. Berachot 32a).

#### I KINGS 13

The scene is Mount Carmel. The *dramatis personae*: the prophets of Baal and their opponent, Elijah. The plot: Elijah had challenged the Israelites: *'If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!'* (I Kg. 18:21). Now,

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each side will place a sacrifice on its altar and beg its deity to descend to consume it. The audience: the wayward Israelite worshippers of Baal, once again forgetful of their link to Abraham. And, in the wings: the rest of the world.

After a morning of invoking their god by prayer, shouts, and self-laceration, the prophets of Baal give up. Now it is Elijah's turn. His people are in dire trouble, once again because they desire to be precisely like the neighboring peoples. Thus, Elijah signifies that he is invoking the God of the Israelites by first taking 12 stones *corresponding to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob*, their particular ancestors, to build an altar (18:31). Only then does he cry out a prayer that echoes Moses: *'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am your servant, and I have done all these things at Your bidding'* (18:36).

On Mount Carmel, there were no shattering events of nature, no splitting of seas or thunderings above a mountain. God sends a single fire to consume His prophet's offering, in answer to His prophet's remembrance of the forebears of a particular people.

## CONCLUSION

That gentiles and Jews have dreams of a rational world of universal brotherhood, justice, and humanism is proof that the mission of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has, to that extent at least, succeeded. Sometimes it is inconvenient or politically unfashionable to conform to the Jewish particularist religious heritage as Divinely endowed, but the Bible insists that the same God Who created a universe out of chaos and oversaw the development of a world of peoples also assigned upon the Jews the mission from which universalist visionaries have derived their visions. The very invocation of the names of their founding fathers saved the Jewish people at times of near-destruction. To accept the teachings of the people descendent from these patriarchs, but to reject them and/or the God that sent them into a hostile world – to believe that salvation actually lies elsewhere – is irrational, illogical, and simply un-historical.

Moreover, in an age when many subjected groups seek their roots not only for purposes of identity but also for the pride and strength to contribute to the betterment of their fellow beings, it is truly anomalous and self-defeating to ignore one's ancestral roots. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob inaugurated, at God's

command, the grand design. Their vision and biographies, with all their human faults, are the national memory. The Bible controverts those visionary intellectuals who suggest that we must forget our forebears to achieve the universal spiritual goals they had been chosen to reach for, if not to grasp, in this world. For the Jews, it has been decreed that universalist mission and particularist heritage co-exist and must go consistently and persistently forward together.

*I wish here to acknowledge the aid of Rabbi Dr. Pinchas Kahn in preparing this essay.*

#### NOTES

1. This is how Sforno interprets the phrase.
2. Yoram Hazony, *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. Quoted by Hazony, p. 303.

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