

THE PROPHETS OF ISRAEL: BOTH UNIVERSALIST AND PARTICULARIST

JACOB CHINTZ

It is often said that the Hebrew prophets stood for universalism, yet they made striking remarks about the particularist role of Israel as *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex. 19:6). It is also said that their emphasis is on ethical fervor in contrast to ritual, but it is evident from their writings that certain sectarian institutions were in the category of *a priori* principles of ceremony.

ISAIAH

Like other prophets, Isaiah castigated theatrical piety that was merely external: *Their worship of Me is a commandment of men, learned by rote* (29:13).

Today, animal sacrifice is often derided as primitive. Isaiah, like his fellow prophets, frequently expressed horror of this ritual only when it is offered with mouth but not with the heart (29:13). Also in the Book of Isaiah is the passage:

Thou hast not brought Me [with proper humility and spiritual cleansing] the small cattle of thy burnt-offerings; neither hast thou honored Me [thereby] with thy sacrifices . . . Thou hast bought for Me no sweet cane with money, neither hast thou satisfied Me with the fat of thy sacrifices; [rather] thou hast burdened Me with thy sins, thou hast wearied Me with thine iniquities (43:23,24).

The crime of moral hypocrisy could not be ameliorated even in the Temple. In his moral fervor, Isaiah criticized the behavior in the Temple, and even predicted its destruction, but he understood that the Temple itself, together with the detailed laws of its rituals, was intended to inspire and educate the Israelites particularly and all humanity universally. Thus, he also predicted that the Temple will be restored: *I am the Lord . . . even saying of Jerusalem:*

Jacob Chintz was ordained at Yeshiva University and is a member of The Rabbinical Assembly. He has taught at several colleges, and has written a few hundred articles in twenty journals in the United States, Canada and Israel. He has served as rabbi in Philadelphia and Halifax, and recently at Congregation Shaare Zedek, Montreal. His three books are: In My Opinion, Divrei Torah for Shabbat and Chagim, and Ten Illusions about Judaism.

'She shall be rebuilt;' and the Temple: 'Thy foundation shall be laid again' (44: 24, 28).

Particularist regulations and rituals pertain only to the Israelite people, but the morality and ethics that this nation was chosen to practice and teach apply to all nations. The Temple was not closed to anyone with pure heart and mind: *For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples* (56:1,2,7).

For his fellow Israelites, Isaiah intermixes the institution of the Temple, the stress on justice and righteousness, and the acceptance of converts from other nations. There is also emphasis on ritual, such as the observance of the Sabbath and of kashrut, subjects of much minute legalism: *Happy is the man . . . that keeps the Sabbath from profanation and keeps his hand from doing any evil . . . Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall [then] be acceptable upon Mine altar* (56:1,2,7).

And again: *If thou turn away thy foot [from everyday activities] because of the Sabbath, from pursuing thy business on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight . . . and shall honor it, not doing thy wonted ways, nor pursuing thy business nor speaking thereof; then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord* (58:13,14).

The laws of kashrut are manifold and in modern times are often ignored if not outright derided. Those who break those laws may not be in the category of hypocrites who publicly offer sacrifices while violating moral and ethical laws, but these transgressors, too, will feel the displeasure of the Lord: *A people that provoke Me . . . that eat swine's flesh, and broth of abominable things is in their vessels . . . I will not stand idly by, but will repay* (65:4,6). Immediately in the next verse Isaiah chastises those who say with straight-faced hypocrisy: *Stand by thyself, come not near to me, for I am holier than thou* (65:5), and *They that sanctify themselves and purify themselves, [only] to go out unto the gardens, behind one in the midst, eating of swine's flesh, and the detestable thing, and the mouse, shall be consumed together, saith the Lord* (66:17).

For the Israelites, ritual is the springboard to righteousness, thunders Isaiah. It is timeless, immune to fashion, idiosyncrasy, and compromise. Its purpose is eternalized in the words of the Lord.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah is not known for universalism as much as is Isaiah. Yet, if we consider the number of references in his prophecies, he does not reveal himself to be more of a ritualist. Religious ordinances, for him, have a symbiotic relationship with nationalist politics and universalist visions.

Like Isaiah, he stresses loyalty to the Sabbath as a personal set of halakhot, but, he too, connects the Sabbath to national destiny:

Take heed for the sake of your souls, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. Neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, neither do ye any work. But hallow ye the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers (17:21, 22).

He also makes a direct connection between this ritual observance and the national status of Jerusalem:

If ye bring in no burden through the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but hallow the Sabbath day, to do no work therein; then shall there be an entrance by the gates of this city of kings and princes, sitting upon the throne of David . . . and this city shall be inhabited forever (24:25).

In the very next verse, Jeremiah, like Isaiah, promises the revival of the sacrificial rituals, seeing in them the moral potentialities he saw in the Sabbath: *And they shall bring burnt offerings, and sacrifices, and meal-offerings, and frankincense, and sacrifice of thanksgiving, unto the house of the Lord (24:26).* This follows immediately the exhortations to Sabbath observers, and precedes the concluding threat: *But if ye will not hearken unto Me, to hallow the Sabbath day, and not to bear a burden and enter in at the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched (24:27).*

Modern or liberal ideas dare not ignore or violate the laws, rituals, and traditions of the forefathers. For the prophet, these two streams of experience interrelate.

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel is most quoted on the principle of individual moral responsibility, to modify the "cruel" doctrine of the Pentateuch which *visits the sins of the fathers upon the children*. In true liberal, universalist pronouncements, he sets

forth his doctrine of individual responsibility by listing the virtues of the good man:

If a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right, and hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, neither hath defiled his neighbor's wife, neither hath come near to a woman in her impurity; and hath not wronged any, but hath restored his pledge for a debt, hath taken nought by robbery, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment . . . (18:5, 6, 7).

What more is needed than this statement of individual and societal morality?

Nevertheless, for Ezekiel, it is the particularist ritualistic fundamentals that remind the individual that he is held accountable. Indeed, Ezekiel is the most ritualistic of the prophets. The last nine chapters of his book deal with the technical details of the Temple to be, and the sacrifices, the laws pertaining to the priests, and their dietary regulations.

Idolatry, adultery, ethics, and the ancient concept of ritual purity are in Ezekiel's code of conduct. The echoes of Isaiah and Jeremiah combining statutes, ordinances, and the Sabbath are heard again: *I am the Lord your God; walk in My statutes, and keep My ordinances, and do them; and hallow My Sabbaths, and they shall be a sign between Me and you* (20:19, 20). It is a conservative faith that can, in the belief of the prophet, help restore the age of Eden.

MINOR PROPHETS

The quantity of references is smaller and less in proportion in the prophecies of the Twelve. Hosea talks about a punishment involving dietary considerations: *Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and they shall eat unclean food in Assyria* (9:3). Joel even recommends a ritualistic fasting in contrition: *Turn unto Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with lamentation* (2:12). In a verse reminiscent of Deuteronomy, he seems to expect a ritual grace after meals: *And ye shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and shall praise the name of the Lord your God* (2:26). Several verses in Haggai sound like later detailed talmudic discussions:

Ask now the priests for instruction, saying: 'If one bear hallowed flesh in the skirt of his garment, and with his skirt do touch bread,

or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any food, shall it become holy?' And the priests answered and said: 'No.' Then said Haggai: 'If one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean?'

And the priest answered and said: 'It shall be unclean' (2:10-13).

It is fitting to conclude our discussion with Malachi, whose book is the last of the prophetic books in the Bible. It is very popular, in the age of interfaith conversations and ecumenicism, to quote the universalist sentiments of Malachi: *Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, profaning the covenant of our fathers?* (2:10). Certainly, Malachi, and all the prophets, believed in a mankind created by God and destined to live one day in peace under God. But this universalism does not happen to be the meaning of this particular passage. Malachi, far from decrying the Temple and the sacrifices, complains in the name of God concerning the quality of the sacrifices offered: *Ye offer polluted bread upon Mine altar. And ye say: 'Wherein have we polluted thee?' In that ye say: 'The table of the Lord is contemptible' (1:7).*

It so happens that a very particularistic, nationalistic, one could say a chauvinistic, issue is here discussed by the prophet. Consider the historical, as well as the textual, context. The Jews had just returned from Babylon. They were heavily intermarried. Malachi is not appealing to them to practice brotherhood with their neighbors. On the contrary, he is appealing to their national pride, to the Covenant with their own fathers, and asking them to get rid of their foreign wives, and castigating them for deserting their own Jewish wives. What follows the oft-quoted, and misinterpreted verses cited above is this:

Judah has broken faith; a detestable thing has been done in Israel He has married the daughter of alien gods God stands as witness between you and the wife of your youth, the wife with whom you have broken faith, even though she was your partner and your wife by covenant (2:11-14).

Thus it is not only personal ritual, but the intense nationalism of the prophets that does not dispense with the basic spirit of Pentateuchal religion. And it is not only Malachi, in his appeal against intermarriage, but even Isaiah, whose visions of the future are accepted by all as embracing the widest latitude of universalism. He never deserts the concept of Israelite nationhood,

and even retains semblances of chosenness of the primitive variety in the rawest sections of the Books of Moses. And we quote not from Isaiah I the arch-conservative, but from Isaiah II the politically liberal:

Thus says the Lord: the peasants of Egypt and the traders of Cush, and the tall men of Seba, will submit to you and be yours. They will follow you in chains, they will bow down before you, they will pray to you: With you alone is God, and He has no rival, there is no other God. Truly, God is hidden with you, the God of Israel, the savior. Those who opposed you will be disgraced and humiliated (45:14-17).

This is in direct contradiction to the "tolerance" of Micah, who says: *Let each man walk in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever (4:5).*

All of this only goes to cast doubt on problematic generalizations for good but amorphous social ideals. Neither conservative nor liberal, neither primitive nor sophisticated, at once particularistic and universalist, the prophets understood the value of traditional Divinely-enunciated bases for fashionable ideals. In other words, they were realists.



RESPONSES FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. Rashi states that the *Sotah* problem, symptom of moral decline, develops from society's neglect of obligations due to the Kohen (discussed in Numbers 5:5-10).
2. Some commentators hold that the juxtaposition implies the need to abstain from drinking alcohol when *Sotah* problems occur. The Ramban sees the Nazirite as the moral antithesis to the *Sotah*.
3. The song at the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 15) and the farewell song of Moses (Deut. 31:30).

