

Universalism and Particularism

Yom Kippur

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Are all things that are particularly Jewish also inherently universal? Here is what we might call a Jewish Joke.

A man started to tell a joke at a party: "Two old Jews were on their way..."

Suddenly he was interrupted by a sensitive guest.

"Why do so many jokes begin with Jews?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," apologized the story teller, "I'll start again.

Two old Chinese men were on their way to the Synagogue to see the Rabbi..."

One might think that we are all gathered on this holy day to celebrate our own particular version of religion. This is how we, the Jewish people relate to our tradition, our view of God, and our unique path to repentance and atonement. Yet, even if that is true, we do this while being aware and concerned with the world around us, not only focused on Jewish people. We are taught that we are supposed to have a window in the sanctuaries in which we pray. (I guess we'll have to let Temple Sinai make up for this closed auditorium.) Why do we need these windows? Since prayer is often an inwardly focused activity, we need

the windows to remind us to be aware of and concerned with what is out in the world.

I recall that years ago I had a conversation with a younger colleague asking why they did not participate in any interfaith or secular community groups. The answer I received was That their vision of the role of the rabbi was to teach Judaism to Jews and to others who might want to learn about Judaism. To me that was a heavily focused inward orientation.

My vision has always been quite different. I needed to know about other cultures and religions to understand and appreciate those who were not in my immediate circle and also gain deeper insight into my own. I have felt I had to balance activities between serving my congregants, the Jewish people, and serving the larger circle of people of which I am a part, all the way to the human family.

There are two biblical quotes cited by Rabbi Shoshana Boyd Gelfand in an essay which confront these visions of how we as Jews relate to the world around us. In the prophet Isaiah (44:6) we are told to be "A Light to the Nations." She offsets this with a quote from Numbers (23:9) when the foreign seer or prophet, Balaam, talks about the Israelites and says, "There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations."

I believe that both of these visions of us are true. We need look no further than our prayers. It is demonstrated in our liturgy as well as our holidays. For some, one takes precedence over the other. There are even those who hold one view and almost entirely negate the other perspective. For some of the Haredim, the ultra-Orthodox, who may live in parts of Jerusalem, Benei Brak, or even in Brooklyn or communities of New Square, Monsey, or Kiryas Yoel, the "people that dwell apart" is an apt description. Contact with the non-Jewish world as well as with Jews who live their lives differently from them is limited or if possible avoided. I want to emphasize that not all Hasidim are like this. Chabad certainly fall into the categorization of those who have contact with others. Most of the modern Orthodox community also dwell in both worlds.

If we think of the perspective that, "A light to the nations" can be a perspective for Jews who are out to fix the world, all humanity, and take tikkun olam to the extreme of doing everything possible to help others. If they do this while showing little commitment to their own people, other Jews, or Jewish causes, they too are living a life on the end of the spectrum of these two perspectives. One might refer to these separate perspectives as "particularistic" Jews and "universalist" Jews.

In his book, All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days, my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, in his essay "Why be Jewish? The Universalist Message of the High Holy Days" describes these two visions of Jewish life. He teaches that particularism is not simple individualism but rather "exclusive attachment" to one's own group. We can express our individuality and still be particularistic in our Jewish identity. He claims that the extreme case of particularism would be when we act without regard for the other. Still, particularity doesn't rob us of our individuality.

He contrasts this with universalism which is loyalty to a larger whole, beyond one's group, unless of course one considers their group to be all of humanity and all the world. As odd as it might seem, being a universalist does not insure one of keeping their individuality. One can still be a follower in causes without exhibiting a unique point of view.

We might wonder where is the most fitting balance? There will be a different answer for each of us. One might examine to see how much of their own view on life is particularistic and how much is universalist. A further question might be: What does Judaism demand of us on both counts? This question is contained in a tension found in our liturgy and holidays.

There exists an interesting balance in our morning and evening services where at the beginning and then at the end we express the ideals of universalism and particularity in the same prayers. After the ברכו, the first theme that follows is about creation; in the morning we say יוצר אור, God fashioning the light and in the evening מעריב ערבים, God bringing on the dark of evening. Both are focused on the cycle of nature and creation. The theme of creation is universal for all humanity, not for any particular people. Some say that the theme of Rosh HaShanah having to do with the creation of the world is therefore a very universalist holy day, from a Jewish perspective.

The second theme after the Barechu contains a particular theme found in the morning with ahavah rabbah, great love, and in the evening with ahavat olam, an all-encompassing love. These paragraphs remind us of God's love given to us, the Jewish people, through the Torah. This is totally particular for Jews. After these two themes, universal creation and particular Torah, are offered, only then do we continue with the recitation of our core theological statement, the שמע. When I recite the שמע I often wonder whether "Adonai Ehad" means God is One for us as Jews or there is only One God for all humanity, no matter what we call or how we view the Divine.

Towards the end of the both services we recite the Aleinu. Here, the second paragraph and the conclusion are universal; citing repair of

the world and God's name being One for all people. The initial paragraph says, *Aleinu*, it is incumbent upon us, the Jewish people, a particular group, to praise God. This is definitely the perspective of the traditional wording.

We should be well aware that there are also various passages found in traditional Jewish prayers that speak in unflattering or even harsh terms about non-Jews. A clear example of that is in the traditional *Aleinu*, **שֶׁלֹא שָׂם חֲלָקֵנוּ כְּהֵם וְגוֹרְלֵנוּ כְּכָל הַמּוֹנִם**, "who did not make us like the nations of the world and did not include us with the (other) families of the earth." The reason may very well have been a defense mechanism against the ways Jews were treated in hostile environments. If Christians were persecuting Jews or denigrating our religion, we may have answered that through our attitudes towards them. Another interpretation that is less negative is a reminder of our unique role in the world.

There is another line from this prayer that was censored out of many prayer books many years ago. It was retained in recent time in some Orthodox editions. It reads, **שֶׁהֵם מְשַׁתְּחִיִּים לְהַבֵּל וְרִיק וּמִתְפַּלְלִים** **אֶל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ**, "they worship vanity and emptiness and pray to a god that will not save. This line was taken out of many siddurim and is not found in any Reform or Conservative editions as well as some Orthodox. Its particularism is a negation of other religions.

Yet, at the same time we have been directed to pray for others. As early as the prophet Jeremiah we are told to pray for the welfare of the government of the place in which we reside. Here the more outward looking perspective was inserted even if it was to appease the ruling governments.

וְדַרְשׁוּ אֶת־שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגְלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בְּעַדָּהּ אֶל־יְהוָה
כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָהּ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם | And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Eternal in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.(Jeremish 29:7) Although the motives might be parochial the prayer itself does refer to the good of others.

Our holidays are also a balance between Jewish particularism and universal values and concerns. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are our way of being very Jewish while reflecting on universal themes: creation, repentance, and atonement. Passover is our particular story of liberation and becoming a people. Yet this is confirmed on Shavuot at Sinai when we receive Torah reminding us that we must protect and care about others.

In a description of Rosh Hashanah in the Mishnah tractate of that name: we read about כל באי עולם, "all who come into the world." All are summoned before God. Jewish tradition calls us to the synagogue, but we stand in judgement either worthy or unworthy to engage in

teshuvah, repentance. Our prayers are Jewish, but contrition is not particular. Teshuvah is not a Jewish but a human enterprise.

Another way the liturgy for Yom Kippur demonstrates the non-particularistic approach to the holy days is through the confessional prayers. Both the Ashamnu and the Al Cheyt confessional prayers deal entirely with sins that are not specifically for Jewish people. There are no ritual transgressions or actions that apply to Jewish life. They are sins that any human can commit and in turn also make atonement. Therefore, any individual could recite these passages and find meaning.

If we continue through the liturgy for the Days of Awe we are constantly reminded of the universalist outlook that was part of the prayers that are recited. We see this with expressions like, God is "good to everyone, טוב לכל, "ruler of the universe, מלך (ה)עולם, "the sole judge of the world's inhabitants, הדרך יחידי לבאי עולם. These are not solely directed towards Jews, but all people.

Some of you might remember the last of the classic Reform hymns that was sung here at Sinai until a few years ago. "All the World Shall Come to Serve You." ויאתיו, was the quintessential statement of Jewish universalism from medieval poem with translation Israel Zangwill,(19-20 cent). The sentiment of that hymn is beautiful. However because of its archaic language style and its 19th century, heavy organ style of music, we no longer sing it.

A more recent translation: (Mahzor Lev Shalem - The Rabbinical Assembly) reads:

"And all shall come to serve You,
praising Your honored name,
proclaiming Your just rule in every island.
Nations that knew You not will seek You,
even those that live at the ends of the earth will laud you,
constantly proclaiming, "God is great." ...

This passage demonstrates a type of universalism where all people will accept God.

In her essay, "Monotheism, Mission, and Multiculturalism: Universalism Then and Now," Dr Annette Beckley cites three High Holy Day insertions, prayers that are special for these holy days and not recited at other times. We only use pieces of these prayers, usually in a more creative and interpretive manner.

1 וְכָל מַאֲמִינִים, presents the biblical attributes of God that all believe.

2 וּבְכֹן, expresses the religiosity of all creatures.

3 וְיָאֲתִיב, "All the World Shall Come to Serve You," mentioned before, portrays a prophetic vision that someday all people will worship in Zion

These present an early Jewish approach to universalism 1) all people will come to Zion and 2) all will accept Israel's God. By the 19th century an approach to universalism was that Jews wanted to be accepted by all peoples and given civic equality. Often, especially in Western and Central Europe, Jews wanted to be viewed and accepted as equal citizens, just like their Christian neighbors.

Claude Montefiore, who lived in the second half of the 19th and first part of the 20th century was the intellectual founder of Anglo-Liberal Judaism and the founding president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. He asserted that Judaism was a particular religion charged with a universal task of spreading God's word. His approach was similar to other early Reformers who viewed Judaism and Jews not as a national group but as a religion. Here the message of universalism was found in the message we offered the world. This fits the category of "a light to the nations."

Rabbi Marc Saperstein described 2 types of liturgical universalism. The first is found in *Aleinu* and *All the World...* "They'll all see that we were right universalism' because it affirms that the whole world will finally recognize the truth..."

The second is a different type of liturgical universalism, he calls "We're all in it together" universalism. representing the human condition, we all share because we are all human. I think this type of universalism is more fitting for many of us who view their Judaism in a somewhat progressive manner.

Rabbi David Teutsch writes in his essay, "Universalism, Transnationalism, and the Challenge of Triumphalism" that people tend to cling to their small or large group identities, often preserving the particularity of their own culture. They are not cutting themselves off from others and in fact are seeking some elements of unity. It is therefore more realistic to strive towards a sense of "transnationalism," maybe described as "transgroupalism," than total universalism.

Some of RH liturgy (Uv'chen 1st paragraph) that tends towards a universalism does so only when others find this path through a Jewish vision of God's will. Teutsch describes the universalism (2nd paragraph) connected with Jews and Jerusalem at its center as a "triumphalism." Our aim, he posits, is to replace triumphalism with a concern for others and an appreciation of differences.

He compares the sentiments in Uv'chen with ויאתי which is a purer form of universalism, where all will come to God from wherever they

stand. He then compares that to the messianic sentiments in the second part of Aleinu, as we read on page 119 (Mishkan HaNefesh) "...So may all created in Your image, become one in spirit and one in friendship, forever united in Your service..."

While much of what I shared was reminding us to look beyond our particularism as Jews and be concerned with others, I believe so many Jews today, in their good works and causes forget that they do this as Jews based on ancient heritage.

Let's not be so universalistic that we forget our own people and heritage.

Rabbi Walter Homolka from Berlin wrote, "The universal state of peace would require a compromise between the individual ego and the common welfare for all." He cites Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson. "If Judaism is not a tool to become profoundly human, if it is not our entryway, our porthole into humanity, into all of creation, then it is unworthy of its legacy. We must be willing to stand for a Judaism that addresses broad, universal concerns...to be able to allow us to be fully human."