

All The World Shall Come To Serve Thee

If you are of a certain age, and grew up at Beth Am, or a Reform Synagogue someplace in this country, I'll bet you used to end Rosh HaShanah services with the hymn: "All The World Shall Come to Serve Thee."

All the world shall come to serve Thee
And bless Thy glorious name,
And Thy righteousness triumphant
The islands shall acclaim.
Yea, the peoples shall go seeking
Who knew Thee not before,
And the ends of earth shall praise Thee
And tell Thy greatness o'er.

Appearing in the Union Prayer Book II, the High Holiday Machzor, used by Reform Synagogues across the country - All The World was the rousing anthem, in the King's English that became a staple of classical reform High Holiday liturgy. Even as Reform Synagogues moved away from Classical Reform Hymns and got rid of the organ, in many places "All The World" remained an iconic uplifting coda to Rosh HaShana morning services.

I'm told it was my grandfather, Jim Bloch's favorite - and not just because it marked the end of the service. He, like so many classical reform Jews, likely liked the tune and the message. Filled with pomp and triumph - perfect for an organ - in major key, there is almost a sense of joy and patriotism to the song. It dreams of a large glorious future that we pray will come soon. As Dr. Wendy Zierler says: "It imagines a coming together of all nations, from every end and island of the earth, to recognize and worship God as king - a kind of theological melting pot."

With the coming of Your victory
The hills shall shout with song,
And the islands laugh exultant
That they to God belong.
And through all Your congregations
So loud Your praise shall ring, that the utmost peoples, hearing,
Shall then Your greatness sing.

The song, a modern reflection of a Hebrew poem that dates back, possibly, as far as the 7th century, was perfect for the Classical Reform Jews of the 19th and 20th Century. The classical Reform Rabbis insisted on a form of radical universalism and “All The World,” grand and inclusive, spoke to this lofty vision of the world as it should be.

The traditional placement of All The World - in Hebrew *V'ye-etay Chol L'ovedcha*, falls in the Rosh HaShana musaf service and immediately precedes another prayer, *Atah V'Chartanu*. *Atah V'chartanu - A-tah vi-char-tah-nu mi-kol hah-a-mim*, It's got quite a different message than the sweeping human vision of “All The World.” *Atah V'chartanu - You chose us from all the nations, you loved us and wanted us. You elevated us over all tongues and sanctified us with your commandments, and your great and holy name you proclaimed on us.* On its most basic level It's a particular vision of a God who chose the Jews.

We, at Beth Am, do not say that prayer on these sacred days. But we do say others - many of which you are likely familiar with - that appear to contradict the ecumenical vision of All The World. Prayers that highlight our distinctiveness as a people over universality. Take our Shabbat Kiddush - “*ki vanu vacharta, v'otanu kidashta mikol ha-amim*”, “God chose us and sanctified us from all the other nations. Or the aleinu *shelo asanu k'goyei ha-aratzot* “who did not make us like other nations in other lands.”

In these opening lines of the Aleinu, as the Jewish people we are called upon to praise God as the sovereign and creator of all, because God assigned Jews a different kind of responsibility and destiny in the world. Right in the liturgy - a tension that has challenged us as a people for millennia - particular vs universal.

For many of us, myself included, it's often easier to tack toward the universal. To highlight the bonds we share with the rest of humanity. We are uncomfortable with the passages within our tradition that set us apart from others, that define us as Chosen and seem to emphasize our tribalism and distinctiveness. Their messages seem myopic at best and chauvinistic at worst. The earliest Reform Jews certainly didn't feel good about separation between Judaism and other religions; removing prayers and phrases from our liturgy that didn't fit this universal sentiment. We share the same common principles, values and behaviors as our non-Jewish neighbors.

But, we are particular as well. Our Passover Haggadah retells our narrative - “In each generation we must see ourselves as being freed from Egypt.” Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of Jewish might; Purim, the Jewish survival in the face of long odds; Shavuot, the receiving of our people's most sacred book on Sinai. We celebrate the

Independence of Israel each spring and mourn the horrors that were committed against us during the Holocaust.

Many of us are familiar with the phrase *Kol Yisrael Aravin Zeh B'Zeh* - all Israel is responsible for one another. If we don't look at ourselves uniquely, nobody else will. Our history tells us if we don't look out for ourselves, nobody else will. In the words of the writer, Cynthia Ozick: "If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all."

And it's harder for us than our more traditional Jewish family and friends. We've lost some of the barriers that have helped emphasize our particularism. We generally do not follow strict dietary rules, we don't keep a traditional shabbat, few of us speak Hebrew, our prayer times are more often meditation apps and yoga classes than engagement with the prayerbook. We don't have the fences around our Jewish lives preventing it from escaping. If we are too universal and don't highlight our distinctiveness - we've lost what has helped maintain us as a people.

I hope we haven't lost that sense of responsibility to other Jews. Especially, with the rise of antisemitism in this country, we know we need to support one another. As a community we've always found it important to support other Jews. This is core to our Jewish American story. As new immigrants fled pogroms and persecution, we built Jewish Settlement Houses and Free Loan Associations to aid Jews from Eastern Europe. We helped Jews who were persecuted in Ethiopia and Yemen find homes in Israel. We marched for Soviet Jewry. To paraphrase the great Israeli Author Amos Oz: "A Jew, is someone who chooses to share the fate of other Jews, or who is condemned to do so."

Thankfully, here in California, being a Jew is a choice - part of that choice must mean looking out for other Jews. I hope that we recognize the obligation that comes with being part of this sacred people. It's quite a blessing to live our lives obligated to the sacred call that brings us here on these High Holidays - to care for and to continue to build the Jewish future

But we are Universal Jews. We care for all, Jews and non-Jews alike. Our God cares for each of us. We are not better than other religions. We believe that we are caught up in a larger web of humanity and feel responsibility for all. Our hearts ache wherever we see suffering. We are sensitive to the pain and the plight of all human beings. The yoke of responsibility is upon us simply because we are human.

You likely know the story from Midrash Rabbah. Your rabbis have preached on it before: “A man in a boat begins to drill a hole under his seat. His fellow passengers are alarmed and protest - what are you doing? The man replies, “stay out of my business, what concern are my actions to you?” I, after all am drilling the hole under my seat, not yours. The other passengers reply” That is so, but when the water enters this boat, and the boat sinks, we too shall drown.” We’ve felt this as a community more than ever in the last 18 months as we grapple with individual liberties versus communal responsibility.

I had a dream that we’d all be together today - filled and loud, laughter and tears. People coming in and slowly filling up our sanctuary. We’d hug and sway. I dreamt we’d be together - packed here at Beth Am. I’d see confirmands and wedding couples and those here to say kaddish for the first time. New babies and old friends. And let’s be honest, that should have been the reality - we should be celebrating this wonderful holiday all of us together in person - not on our screens. My dream lived the words of our psalmists - the cries and the darkness of the evening would yield the joy of the morning.”

And, we did everything right. We wore masks and we washed our hands and we got our shots, we didn’t travel or go to parties. Grandparents didn’t see their grandchildren - we postponed weddings and bar mitzvahs. We chose to live in this world responsibly.

But yet, this virus persists and we cannot gather like we should for the High Holidays. And it’s a big deal not to be together. It’s a big deal to continue to live our lives on screens and be distanced and apart from family. It’s a big deal to still have to make difficult choices about travel and school and family. It’s a big deal to still be apart on these holidays. It’s a big deal because our sense of connectedness to this world is at stake. We are anxious and disappointed and on edge. I’ve heard from so many people who continue to worry - how much of this can we take?

And let’s be clear - unlike last year there is blame to go around. This is a pandemic of choice. This is a pandemic of lack of responsibility. This is a pandemic of dishonesty. We could have avoided this. The reason our kids, my kids, are in the position that we are in today is because of the actions of adults. Adults who decided to drill a hole on their side of the boat - not caring about who would sink.

Adults who refused to get vaccinated. Adults who called masking tyrannical. Adults, many of whom are vaccinated, who continue to spout lies and mistruths about vaccines and disease. Adults who see growth in the market as a panacea to our pandemic woes. Adults who sow division and chaos for personal gain and glory. Adults who for a

host of reasons shirk their own communal responsibility - who are neither particular nor universal but who thrive on narcissism and division.

As this strange virus continues to spread and bring chaos and uncertainty to our country and world I pray for all people - not just Jews - who have been directly impacted by COVID. My heart breaks for all family members who have lost a loved one, all people who have had to say goodbye on a screen. I especially pray for those on the margins - who are often forgotten in our prayers and who too quickly are left behind to fend for themselves.

If we are going to be universal - we need to be radically universal. That's what Rosh HaShana is about. It's our most universal of holidays - the day where we do not observe a specific event in the Jewish calendar - but rather celebrate the Birthday of The World. A time, as Rabbi Larry Hoffman says, "to celebrate God's rule over a marvelously diverse yet interconnected human family." "Why does the Torah provide the story of Adam and Eve?" the Rabbis asked. Answer: to teach us that all humanity is descended from a single set of parents.

"After all, the message all along of these Holy Days seems to be that our life's purpose is about bringing Equality, Justice, and the Pursuit of Self-Knowledge into the world. These are such universal themes. Why not just embrace them?" Writes Rabbi Greg Wolf. Rabbi Danny Zemel cautions us, however, that while the Jewish instinct is universal; the Jewish method is particular. He writes: "Our human sense of 'caring' dissipates the farther removed we are from the genuine experience of belonging to a 'something' rather than an 'everything.'" A classic Peanuts cartoon underscores this point when Linus shouts: I love humanity...it's people I can't stand!" Zemel continues, "God created the whole universe and obliges us to care for it all. But we care for it all as Jews."

It turns out, there is not much of a tension between being universal and particular. Our particularism propels our universalism. The two ideas live in tandem and they grow together - we are better humans when we are in touch with our Judaism and better Jews when we see the broader world. That's the message of these holy days. That's the call of the shofar. We hear the blast of our sacred symbol and use it to go out and build the world we aspire to live in.

Back to the aleinu - we chant at the end of each and every service. If the start of the prayer highlights our distinctiveness the end casts a broad and beautiful vision of the world perfected. The prayer actually contains the root of a phrase that many of us know

and aspire to, the melding of the particular and universal - Tikkun Olam - *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*. This is who we are as Jews. This is our calling.

All the world shall come to serve Thee
And bless Thy glorious name,
And Thy righteousness triumphant
The islands shall acclaim.
Yea, the peoples shall go seeking
Who knew Thee not before,
And the ends of earth shall praise Thee
And tell Thy greatness o'er.

<https://www.bethaverim.org/rosh-hashana-5775-rabbi-greg-wolfe/>

<https://www.amazon.com/All-World-Universalism-Particularism-Prayers/dp/1580237835>