Israel and the Nations: Thoughts for Parashat Devarim

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This week’s Torah portion reports that Moses gave a thorough explanation of the Torah to the Israelites. A rabbinic Midrash states that Moses explained the Torah in 70 languages. Obviously, the Israelites did not know 70 languages, so what was the point of this Midrash.

One suggestion is that the Almighty knew that the people of Israel would eventually be scattered throughout the world and would be speaking many languages. The Midrash teaches that the Torah will be relevant in all the lands of dispersion and will be accessible in all languages.

Another suggestion is that the Torah's teachings are relevant to all humanity, not just to the Israelites. The MIdrash may be pointing to the universal relevance of the Torah.

The great 19th century thinker, Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh, noted that Judaism is in fact the most universal religion in the world. In his book, “Israel and Humanity,” he notes that other religions tend to restrict salvation only to adherents of their faiths. By contrast, Judaism teaches that the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come. Judaism’s universalism manifests itself in its concern for humanity at large, not merely for its own religionists.

The Talmud states (Gittin 61A): “Our Rabbis teach: We sustain the poor of the non-Jews along with the poor of the Jews; visit the sick of the non-Jews along with the sick of the Jews; bury the dead of the non-Jews as well as the dead of the Jews—because of the ways of peace (mipenei darkhei shalom).” Judaism fosters responsibility for the peace and harmony of society. Rabbi Haim David Halevy (Asei Lekha Rav 9:30 and 9:33) points out that our responsibility for non-Jews is not a strategy simply designed to promote our own self-interest i.e. if we are good to them, they’ll be good to us. Rather, our responsibility toward non-idolaters, e.g. Christians and Muslims, is a firmly established ethical imperative in its own right.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel wrote of our responsibility for working for yishuvo shel olam (Hegyonei Uziel, vol. 2, p. 98), the building and settlement of society and human civilization. This involves practical action in social justice efforts, as well as research and programs that expand human knowledge and culture.

There is a tendency within the traditionally-observant Jewish community to stress the particularism of Judaism, and to downplay the universalistic elements of our tradition. While the tendency toward inwardness and isolationism may be understandable from a historical and sociological perspective, nevertheless it is a tendency which needs to be corrected. Vibrant religious Jewish life needs to look outward as well as inward.

Paul Johnson, in his History of the Jews, has noted the incredible contributions to the world made by Judaism and the Jewish people. “The world without the Jews would have been a radically different place.…To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as a foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews, it might have been a much emptier place.”

Social justice does not belong to the non-Orthodox movements of Judaism—it is part and parcel of traditional Orthodoxy. Tikkun olam is not the provenance of secularist Jews, but is an essential ingredient in traditional Orthodox Judaism. It is important for Orthodox Judaism to reclaim its visionary universalistic worldview. Along with adherence to our ritual mitzvoth, we need to enlarge our commitment to the mitzvoth of social responsibility and social activism. With an inspired and vocal Orthodox Judaism, the world can become a better place for all.

Angel for Shabbat