

Israel and Humanity: Thoughts for Parashat Pinehas

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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pinehas

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This week's Torah portion includes a listing of the sacrifices brought on the seven days of Succoth. Our sages noticed that seventy calves were offered during the course of this holiday. Seventy, of course, is the number traditionally believed to represent all the nations in the world. The conclusion was reached: "...Israel atones for all peoples; for seventy calves which were burned on the altar at the festival of Succoth were offered on behalf of the nations, in order that their existence might be maintained in this world..." (Midrash Shir haShirim).

Israel prayed for the well-being of all the nations of the world! Although the nations probably did not know and did not care about Israel's concern for them, Israel prayed for them. Although few if any of the nations prayed for Israel, Israel nevertheless prayed for all the nations.

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 is part and parcel of traditional Judaism. Tikkun olam is a concept relevant to all Jews.

With an inspired and activist Judaism, the world can become a better place for all.

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