# Universally Particularistic: Thoughts for Matot-Masei

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Angel for Shabbat, Matot-Masei

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John Lennon's "Imagine," while powerful and moving for many, is challenging for those who are religiously committed. The verse that concludes with the call to "imagine all the people living life in peace" depicts a world free of any nations or religions. To Lennon, peace is only possible in the total absence of tribe-forming forces that lead to conflict. Lennon's universalism negates the role of Judaism, or any other particularistic force or philosophy. But does that mean that Judaism opposes universalism? That Judaism is no different than any other form of tribalism?

This tension between tribal allegiance and a broader national allegiance also exists within the Jewish people itself. At the end of this week's parasha, we once again encounter the daughters of Zelophehad, who were to inherit the land of their deceased father because he had no sons. However, whatever land these women would inherit would go to their husbands upon marriage. Therefore, the leaders of their tribe, Menashe, approach Moshe, worried that should the daughters of Zelophehad marry outside of the tribe, the land, originally allotted to Menashe, will become the possession of another tribe. God validates this concern, and thus limits the daughters of Zelophehad to only marry within their tribe. This passage seems to reinforce a tribe-centric view of Judaism. When there is a conflict between a tribal and a national impulse, the tribal wins out.

However, the Gemara in Taanit (30b) explains that this is a one time only ruling, far from ideal. Commenting on the verse "This is the matter that the Lord has commanded concerning the daughters of Zelophehad," the Gemara states:

They derived from the verse that this matter shall be practiced only in this generation, when the land of Israel was divided among the tribes, but afterward members of different tribes were permitted to marry. On the day this barrier separating the tribes was removed, the Sages established a permanent day of rejoicing.

To the Sages, the removal of barriers between tribes was a cause for great celebration! The ideal, as put forth by this Gemara, is an integrated society between all of the tribes. But what is the difference between the rabbis' rejoicing in newfound unity and Lennon’s vision lacking distinctive groups of people at all?

Throughout the Bible and rabbinnic tradition, we are constantly confronted with these competing themes of universalism and particularism. We have many ritualistic laws relevant only to Jews; we affirm every day that God chose the people of Israel; we commemorate our national redemption and our national tragedies. At the same time,we believe all people, Jews and non-Jews alike, are created in the divine image; we learn of Abraham’s insistence on divine justice for the pagan city of Sodom; we are commanded by the rabbis to provide  for the poor of the gentiles. We are both the chosen people, and the people through whom all the people of the world shall be blessed.

A model of the balance between these two values was championed by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who advocated for an integrative unity. According to Rav Kook, it is only through elevation of ourselves that we can elevate the Jewish people, and it is only through elevation of the Jewish people that we can elevate the world. In Middot Haraya, The Moral Principles, he writes:

The love of all creation comes first, then comes the love for all humankind, and then follows the love for the Jewish people, in which all other loves are included, since it is the destiny of the Jews to serve toward the perfection of all things.

To Lennon, unity is sameness. It is the erasing of any and all distinguishing factors that make one person different from another. To Rav Kook, unity is in the integration of diverse parts. In fact, there is a blessing made upon seeing a multitude of people, blessing God as the “knower of secrets.” The rabbis explain: “for their minds are not similar to each other and their faces are not similar to each other,” that is, God appreciates the distinctiveness of each individual. In direct contrast to Lennon, Rav Kook argues that it is specifically when we are rooted in our nations, our religions, our tribes, that we are best suited to look outward and create the greatest impact on the world at large.

To focus exclusively on the universal aspects of Judaism, tikkun olam and social justice, though central to Judaism’s mission, is to do a disservice not only to the Jewish tradition, but all of humanity. Without a real foundation in its particular mission in the world, Judaism will struggle to contribute universally. Similarly, to focus exclusively on the particularistic aspects of Judaism corrupts its very purpose within humanity.

As in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad, it is sometimes imperative to focus on the tribal community’s needs in specific cases and at specific times. But as the Gemara expounds, we must strive for and rejoice in efforts of integrative unity. We must not long for a unity of sameness, but the unity found in diversity.

Angel for Shabbat