The Universalism/Particularism of Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh

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Nineteenth century Livorno was home to a unique thinker whose life work centered on unity. Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh (1822-1900), whose parents were natives of Fez, Morocco, was orphaned at an early age. His guardians saw to it that this precocious child received a well-rounded education in Jewish and general subjects. Although as a young man he entered a business career, his real love was for religious and scientific thought. He went on to devote himself to a life of learning and communal leadership, including his tenure as professor of theology in Livorno's rabbinical school. He published works in Hebrew, Italian and French.

R. Benamozegh was deeply steeped in Jewish sacred texts; he was also a scholar who sought wisdom in the general world of scholarship—history, archeology, theology, science. His commentary on the Torah, *Em leMikra*, drew on sources well beyond the classic rabbinic cannon. He incurred the ire of prominent traditionalist rabbis who declared his work to be heretical. R. Benamozegh wrote a humble reply to his critics, defending his piety and loyalty to Jewish religious tradition. Truth (with a capital T) is not confined to only one tradition. If we are to serve God and seek God's unity, we must open our minds to wisdom and insights from many sources.

Although he was a modern, scientifically-inclined scholar, he was an ardent devotee of Kabbala, Jewish mysticism. While traditionalists blasted his modernity, modern scholars sharply criticized his devotion to Kabbala. How could an enlightened, rational thinker give credence to the esoteric, non-rational corpus of religious mysticism?

R. Benamozegh was—and still remains—an enigma to many. He was a traditional rabbi…with a mind open to the untraditional. He was a rational, modern thinker…who fully embraced the truths of Kabbala. He was devoted to Jewish particularism…while fostering a remarkably universalistic worldview. To some, his views are eclectic, eccentric, and even self-contradictory. But, in fact, he thirsted for the ultimate unity, the primordial Aleph of reality. He would not be constrained or confined by artificial intellectual categories. The ultimate unity could only be sought through all the available avenues of human thought.

In the introduction to his book, *Israel and Humanity*, Rabbi Benamozegh states his concern bluntly: "Everyone agrees that we are in the midst of a great religious crisis. This reveals itself in three ways. The conflict between religion and science is in an acute state, and therefore occupies us the most; but to this must be added the antagonism among religions themselves; and the evolutionary changes which are occurring simultaneously at the heart of each religion" (*Israel and Humanity*, p. 39).

As to the perceived conflict between religion and science, R. Benamozegh makes it clear that these two areas are actually in harmony. Both express truths that lead to a fuller understanding of God and His creations. "Everyone who is deeply concerned with the future of mankind dreams of a religious life which fully respects both the needs of faith and the essential principles of modern reason" (Idid., p. 49). Sophisticated moderns will not succumb to a religious worldview that is riddled with superstition and obscurantism. On the contrary, religionists must view scientific advances as positive steps in the human quest for God.

The various religions all found themselves in confrontation with science and the scientific method. Yet, instead of forming a unified front against excessive rationalism and secularization, religions were busy fighting against one another. The major Western/Middle Eastern religions—Christianity and Islam—presented themselves as the sole purveyors of Truth. They disdained their older ancestor—Judaism. But for R. Benamozegh, Judaism was the most universal of religions, the only religion with a realistic message for all humanity.

In his book, *Jewish and Christian Ethics,* he noted that Judaism encompassed two factors: the national *(mediniyut)* and the ethical *(mussar).* Jewish ethics is grounded in practical reality. It is not ethereal or over-idealized but is based on the considerations of a real nation. In contrast, Christian ethics is not applicable to national life in the same way. Christians speak of humility, suffering,

compassion, and other such concepts in unrealistic ways. Which nation on earth would allow itself to be attacked and not defend itself or strike back? Which nation would forgive debts or ignore insults and cruelties committed against its people? Christianity cannot adequately satisfy the natural human need and attachment for a homeland. On the other hand, Judaism is realistic in linking ethical teachings to national and practical concerns. Religion and nationality cannot be separated.

In his elaboration of the Jewish ethical tradition, Rabbi Benamozegh stressed the universalism of Judaism. The Torah described humanity as deriving from common ancestors, Adam and Eve. Humanity has a common destiny—the messianic time. Jewish ethics shows respect for non-Jews and does not preclude them from God's love and salvation. Judaism's goal is not to punish the wicked but to bring them back to righteousness. Since Jewish faith is necessarily contingent on the performance of practical works, it provides the most realistic framework for the creation of an ethical society.

In his view, only Judaism relates to all humanity, not merely to its own group of believers. Rabbinic tradition teaches that Noah and his descendants were given seven basic categories of law, and that "Noahides" fulfill their religious obligations through these Noahide laws. The Talmud (Yevamot 47a) states: "Our sages have said that seven commandments have been prescribed for the Sons of Noah: the first requires them to have judges; the other six forbid sacrilege, idolatry, incest, homicide, theft, and the consumption of a limb taken from a living animal." While Jews are obligated to observe all the commandments of the Torah due to their covenant with God, non-Jews are bound by a divine covenant through the specific commandments given to them as Noahides.

Because non-Jews have access to God through the Noahide covenant, they are under no obligation to convert to Judaism in order to be "saved". "The authentic spirit of Judaism appears unambiguously when we find it affirming that there exist just men among the Gentiles, men loved by God, whose merits are responsible for the prosperity of the nations" (*Israel and Humanity,* p. 349). Those non-Jews who wish to convert to Judaism are welcome--but Jews have generally avoided active proselytization, since non-Jews do not have to become Jewish in order to serve God properly. They need only adhere to the seven Noahide laws (and their derivatives), thereby living morally upright lives. Judaism presents a religious message for humanity. It does not demand or expect that everyone convert to Judaism. It respects non-Jews' spiritual integrity, and offers a religious worldview which is remarkably universal and humane. It only asks that all human beings--Jewish and non-Jewish--

conduct their lives on a high moral level, based on recognition of One God who loves all humanity.

Maimonides (*Hilkhot Shemitah veYovel* 13:13) underscored the universal vision of Judaism: Not only the tribe of Levi but every single individual from among the world's inhabitants could rise to the highest spiritual levels and could become "totally consecrated, and God will be his portion and inheritance forever and ever."

Rabbi Benamozegh noted the irony: Christianity and Islam are considered to be universal religions; and yet they have historically been quite intolerant of those not adhering to their particular religion. They engaged in forced conversion of "infidels," crusades, and religious wars in order to force others to accept their creeds. They have taught that only their religious adherents fulfill God's will and can share in the blessings of the world-to-come. Judaism, which is often (unfairly) portrayed as being parochial and particularistic, actually is the most universal religion--it teaches that God blesses all righteous people, that the world-to-come is available to all good people whether Jewish or non-Jewish.

God's covenant with humanity--the Noahide laws--create the foundation for a world governed by justice and morality. Humanity still has a very long way to go to fulfill this covenant properly.

Rabbi Benamozegh's religious vision attracted the interest of a profound Catholic thinker, Aime Palliere, who expressed an interest in converting to Judaism. But R. Benamozegh guided him in the direction of being a righteous Noahide. "This is the path which lies open before your efforts, before mine as well, to spread the knowledge [of Noahism], as it is my duty to do. And it lies open to the efforts of any one, whosoever believes in Revelation, without necessarily adhering to Mosaism…" (*The Unknown Sanctuary*, p. 135).

Rabbi Benamozegh called on Aime Palliere to become a spokesman of the universal Noahide religion. "If you come to convince yourself of it, you will be much more precious to Israel than if you submit to the Law of Israel. You will be the instrument of the Providence of God to humanity (Ibid., p. 137). For R. Benamozegh, Israel serves as the priesthood for humanity; Jews are commanded to bring God's word to all humanity just as priests are to be religious guides to their flocks. If a non-Jew truly wishes to join the "priesthood" of Israel, conversion is available. But Jews do not have a monopoly on truth or on God's love.

Recognizing that Palliere was raised as a believing Catholic, R. Benamozegh informed him that he need not renounce Jesus in order to be a proper Noahide. "Let us understand one another well: on

condition that you see in Jesus only a just man, a prophet, only a man, however lofty you may wish to imagine him. And it will be the easier for you to reconcile this with conceptions of Judaism which you well know were in the teachings of Jesus most sympathetic to the conservation of Mosaism. And who can tell if you are not destined to become the bond of union between Christianity and Judaism?" (Ibid., p. 161).

Palliere concludes his book with a fundamental teaching of Rabbi Benamozegh: "Mankind cannot rise to the essential principles on which society must rest unless it meet with Israel. And Israel cannot fathom the deeps of its own national and religious tradition, unless it meet with mankind" (Ibid., p. 243).

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I began serving Congregation Shearith Israel in New York in 1969, while I was still a rabbinical student at Yeshiva University's rabbinic seminary. I was ordained a year later. Along with my rabbinic studies, I was working toward a PhD degree in Jewish history and a Master's degree in English literature.

While I contemplated a lifetime of service as an Orthodox rabbi, I was seeking an Orthodoxy that was faithful to tradition, that was intellectually challenging, inclusive…universalistic. I found some role models among my teachers; but I also felt that Orthodoxy was growing increasingly narrow, stilted…functioning almost like a sect rather than as a world religion. I experienced a certain spiritual restlessness.

The clergy of Shearith Israel used to don their clerical robes in a room that had been the office of Rabbi David de Sola Pool. The office was lined with bookcases filled with an assortment of volumes. One that caught my eye was a Hebrew book entitled *Bishvilei Musar* (*In Ethical Paths*). I opened it and found that it was a translation by Simon Marcus of a book by Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh, *Jewish and Christian Ethics.* I had never heard of Rabbi Benamozegh; I borrowed the volume and studied it carefully during the course of the coming months. I quickly realized that Rabbi Benamozegh was a profound thinker with a grand religious worldview. He was just the intellectual figure I needed at that point in my life…a staunchly traditional Orthodox Jew who viewed Judaism as a world religion with a message for all of humanity. As I later studied more of his writings, I came to see him as an Aleph…a thinker who sought—and perceived—an ultimate unity, and who opened one's

mind to a quest for Truth.

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