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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tavo

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“You have avouched the Lord this day to be your God and that you would walk in His ways and keep His statutes and commandments and ordinances and hearken to His voice. And the Lord has avouched you this day to be His own treasure…and to make you high above all nations that He has made…” (Devarim 26:17-19).

The Torah repeatedly emphasizes the special relationship between God and the children of Israel. This covenant marks Israel as “the chosen people” of God, a very high honor and great responsibility.

Years ago, a member of my congregation did not want to recite the blessing when called to the Torah, praising God Who has chosen us from among all nations. He was a “universalist” and was uncomfortable with the notion of God singling out one people for His special attention. I replied that one could take the blessing as a historical fact rather than a theological principle. The people of Israel alone received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Our blessing acknowledges the historical fact that God did indeed single out one people to receive the Torah. This does not mean that God doesn’t also care about all other humans, only that Israel received a particular revelation.

While this answer satisfied my congregant, it didn’t fully address the issue at hand. Yes, God gave the Torah uniquely to Israel. But how does the rest of humanity fit into the Divine plan?

Modern Jewish thinkers have tried to balance the particular religious reality of Israel/Judaism, and the universal impulse to relate to all human beings and their faiths. Alon Goshen-Gottstein recently published a book dealing with Rabbis Irving Greenberg and Jonathan Sacks: *Covenant and World Religions*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2023. He points to three approaches.

Pluralism: this posits that all religions are equally connected to God and each has its own particular contribution to make to human progress. Jews have their own covenant, but so do other religions. While thinkers like Rabbi Irving Greenberg have identified with this approach, many others—certainly those within Orthodox Judaism—have not been comfortable with pluralism. For many, Judaism has a unique relationship with God above and beyond other nations/religions.

Exclusivism: this posits that only one religion has ultimate truth. This view was widely held by Christian and Muslim theology for centuries i.e. only their religion is true and everyone needs to

convert to it in order to be in proper relationship with God. Within Judaism, many thinkers promoted the exclusivist view, although recognizing that all righteous people have a place in the world to come. For Jewish exclusivists, only Judaism has the ultimate Truth.

Inclusivism: this posits that while our religion/people is chosen, God loves all of humanity. Rabbi Sacks essentially adopts this approach. We have the Torah and our unique covenant with God. But we make room for all good people, whatever their religion. We can work fruitfully with people of other religions as long as we all see ourselves as working for the betterment of humanity. Instead of debating theological points, we should be joining hands to foster justice, respect, kindness, peace etc.

The Torah makes it clear that the people of Israel have a unique relationship with the Almighty and a unique mission to fulfill. This does not preclude God's relationship with all humanity and love for all who seek to live righteous lives.

A grand religious vision must necessarily entail a grand perception of God: God is great enough to create and love all human beings. God sees the whole canvas of humanity in its fulness.