The Universalistic Vision of Judaism

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At the Revelation at Mount Sinai, God chose the people of Israel to receive the Torah. This unique and unprecedented covenant between God and a group of human beings was to have an immense influence on human civilization. The Torah prescribed a specific way of life for the Jewish people. Yet, the Revelation—though experienced directly by Israel--was also concerned with humanity as a whole.

A fascinating Midrash points out that at the Revelation the voice of God divided into seventy languages, representing the seventy nations of the world i.e. all of humanity. The Torah, while containing a particular message for the people of Israel, also includes a universal message for all human beings.

Paul Johnson, in his History of the Jews, has noted that “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.”

The Jewish enterprise, then, has been both particularistic and universalistic. The Torah and rabbinic tradition have been the guiding forces animating Jewish life over the millenia. The halakha (Jewish law) has been understood by the Jewish people as a Divinely-bestowed way of life. Through living a life of righteousness based on Torah and halakha, Jews thereby serve as “a light unto the nations”. The

achievement of this ideal is dependent upon faithfulness to the particular teachings of the Torah as well as a universalistic vision for the well-being of all humanity.

Maintaining this equilibrium is a basic desideratum of Judaism. Yet, this vital balance is threatened by various trends in modern Jewish life.

On the one hand are those who stress universalism, while playing down particularism as much as possible. They advocate Jewish ethics, but denigrate the need to fulfill the specific ritual commandments of the Torah. On the other hand are those who are devoted to the ceremonial rituals, but who are very little involved with the world at large. They retreat into their own spiritual and physical ghettos, often trying to drive as many wedges as possible between themselves and the rest of society. Both of these approaches represent a deviation from the harmonious balance implicit in classic Judaism. Our ethical teachings are rooted in the mitzvot. An ethical universalism outside the context of observance of the mitzvot is not true to the Jewish religious genius. Likewise, a parochial commitment to rituals, without a concomitant concern for universalistic ethics, is also an aberration. Judaism emptied of its particularistic mitzvot is hollow; Judaism robbed of its unversalistic vision is cult-like, rather than a world religion.

The current tendency within the traditionally-observant community has been toward particularism. This tendency manifests itself in the phenomenal growth of the hareidi (right-wing) community, as well as its pervasive influence throughout contemporary Orthodox Jewish life. Religious self-sufficiency and spiritual isolationism are dominant themes in the right-wing Orthodox way of thinking.

The turn inward within contemporary traditional Judaism actually has deep roots in Jewish history. It reflects centuries of anti-Jewish persecution. In the face of vast hostility and cruelty committed against Jews since antiquity, it was natural for Jews to turn inward, and to develop negative attitudes toward their non-Jewish oppressors. Could Jews fully trust non-Jews whose societies denigrated Jews and Judaism, forced Jews into ghettoes, compelled Jews to forsake Judaism by converting to the dominant religion of the land, and deprived Jews of elementary civil rights? Centuries of persecution taught Jews to be suspicious of the non-Jewish world, to focus on their own internal Jewish needs, and leave the non-Jews to take care of themselves.

The negative attitude toward the non-Jewish world found expression in rabbinic literature. For example, the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5) teaches that God began humanity by creating an individual human being, Adam, “to teach that if anyone

destroy a single soul from humankind, Scripture charges him as though he had destroyed a whole world, and whoever saves a single soul from humankind, Scripture credits him as though he had saved a whole world." This is certainly a universalistic teaching on the value of human life. Yet, at some point, the text of this Mishna was revised, so that many editions read that Adam was created alone "to teach that if anyone destroy a single soul from Israel, Scripture charges him as though he had destroyed a whole world, and whoever saves a single soul from Israel, Scripture credits him as though he had saved a whole world." The text has thus been transformed to a quite particularist teaching about the value of a Jewish life, rather than the value of all human life.

The negative attitudes toward the non-Jewish world have led to a serious distortion of the original teachings of Judaism. A narrow, xenophobic approach has developed, especially among those Jews who have felt most alienated and threatened by non-Jews.

Rabbi Aharon Soloveichik offered a more nuanced approach in an address to a conference of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America in 1966, in which he dealt with the extent of Jewish responsibility toward non-Jews. He argued that Jews are obliged to love fellow Jews unconditionally, and are absolutely responsible for the welfare of all Jews. When it comes to non-Jews, though, the obligation is not identical. Since all human beings are created in the image of God, Jews obviously have to respect this fact when dealing with non-Jews. Yet, the extent of responsibility toward non-Jews is conditional: if they act properly toward us, we are obliged to act properly toward them. But if non-Jews hate us or persecute us, we have no obligation to be kind to them or work for their well-being. These sentiments reflect Jewish caution when dealing with a non-Jewish world that has a long history of persecuting Jews.

During the modern period, when Jews gained full civil rights in the Western countries, efforts have been made to shake off the mistrust of the centuries, and to strengthen the universalistic impulse within Judaism. Yet, these efforts have met resistance in the more traditionally-oriented Jewish communities. Those modern Jews who have been most identified with universalistic attitudes have also tended to be those who have moved away from traditional religious beliefs and observances. Thus, universalism has been identified with assimilation and loss of Jewish religious integrity.

Although the tendency toward 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, and to regain its spiritual vision that focuses on all humanity.

The Torah (Devarim 4:6-7) tells the Israelites to observe and fulfill the commandments: “For this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, that, when they hear all these statutes shall say: ‘surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’; for what great nation is there that has God so near unto them, as the Lord our God is whenever we call upon Him?” Interestingly, the Torah is concerned that the Israelites be perceived in a positive light by the nations of the world. The medieval Italian commentator, Rabbi Obadia Seforno, comments on verse seven: “The reason it is appropriate to be concerned that you should be considered wise and understanding in the eyes of the nations is that God, may He be blessed, is close to us when we call upon Him. This shows that He chose us from all the nations. And if the nations should think that you are fools, it will be a desecration of God’s Name, for they will say: ‘This is God’s people.’ Since the people of the world look upon the Jews as the bearers of God’s Torah, the Israelites’ behavior reflects back upon the Almighty. If the Israelites are righteous and wise, then they sanctify God’s name; conversely, if they are foolish and unrighteous, they profane God’s name. The Israelites, thus, are not given the option of living in isolation without caring about the opinions of others. On the contrary, they need to see themselves as emissaries of the Almighty.

These passages in Devarim are cited by a great 19th century sage, Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan (Taalumot Lev 1:4). Rabbi Hazan had opened a school in Tripoli in which Jewish children were given instruction in religious topics, as well as in other subjects - including several languages. He pointed out that “it is the praise of our holy nation that the peoples of the world will say that this is surely a wise and understanding great nation with righteous laws and statutes, who should live among them. And if the scattered Jewish people would not know or understand the language of the people (among whom they live), they would be--Heaven forbid--a laughing stock, a derision and a shame among the nations.” In this responsum, Rabbi Hazan has indicated that Torah law requires that Jews be perceived as a wise people. They are obligated to be understood by their non-Jewish neighbors. Although Jews have their own distinctive religious way of life, they nevertheless must interrelate constructively with the non-Jewish community.

But the Jewish responsibility to the non-Jewish world is not merely that of setting a good example of wisdom and righteousness. The Jewish tradition teaches a principled and active responsibility for all people. All human beings are created in the image of God.

The Midrash, commenting on the Song of Songs (4:1) observes that the people of Israel offered 70 sacrifices in the holy Temple during the festival of Succoth. These sacrifices were offered by the Jewish people to seek atonement for all the nations of the world (symbolized by the number 70). Praying for the well-being of the nations is a powerful statement of concern and responsibility.

The Talmud (Gittin 61a) records the law that Jews are obligated to support the poor of the non-Jews along with the poor of the Jewish community. Moreover, Jews are obligated to visit the non-Jewish sick and to bury their dead. The Talmud specifies that these deeds of compassion and loving-kindness are to be done "because of the ways of peace." In order to maintain a harmonious society, people need to care for each other and to offer help to those in need. Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, has pointed out that our responsibility toward Muslims and Christians (as well as other non-idolaters) does not stem from expedience, but rather from a firmly established ethical imperative (Aseh Lekha Rav, 9:30 and 9:33).

Jews are commanded to be constructive members of society. The Torah demands that we be righteous and compassionate. This responsibility is not confined merely to the broad category of social justice, but extends to the general upbuilding of human civilization as a whole. Rabbi Benzion Uziel (Hegyonei Uziel, Vol. 2, p. 98) discussed the classic concept of "yishuvo shel olam," responsibility to help in the upbuilding of human civilization. This involves practical society building, but also includes expanding human knowledge. Scientific research, for example, helps us gain a deeper appreciation of God's wisdom. It also leads to technological discoveries which improve the quality of life. Working to improve the human condition is a Jewish religious imperative.

As noted earlier, the Jewish impact on human civilization has been vast. We have given the world many ideas and ideals. On the other hand, we have also learned from the non-Jewish world. And we have been strengthened by non-Jews who have converted to Judaism. In the words of Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh (Israel and Humanity, trans. Maxwell Luria), "each proselyte in becoming converted has contributed his own impulses and personal sentiments to the Israelite heritage." Rabbi Benamozegh argued that "in order to achieve the concept of a universal Providence extending to all peoples and sanctioning the legitimate rights of each, men must cease to believe that the national or ethnic group is all that counts, that mankind has no significant existence apart from the nation or tribe….We should not be surprised that such has not been the case with Hebraism, which teaches that all mankind has the same origin and thus that a single Providence

looks over all.”

Victor Hugo observed that “narrow horizons beget stunted ideas.” Classic Judaism has included an idealistic universalistic world-view. Judaism’s horizons have been great; and it has begotten great ideas. The challenge to modern Jews is to remain faithful to their distinctive mitzvot while maintaining a universalistic ethical idealism.