

YK 5772 Kol Nidre  
Universalism and Particularism

Shabbat Shalom.

*Gmar Hatimah Tovah.*

What a strange world we live in! Could our grandparents have imagined a country like the United States where circumcision would one day be on the ballot? Imagine the scene.

“Nu, Morris, how are you gonna vote in number four: the bris question?”

“Oy, oy, oy. Tough one. I think no. I never really liked the food at a bris; why can’t people serve deli? It’s always bagels and lox!”

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But this is no joke; this year, circumcision opponents in San Francisco placed an initiative on the ballot to outlaw our most ancient rite.

While some of the opposition took issue with the circumcision itself, many of the conversations that ensued were about religion.

Jews, Muslims and others who believe in the first amendment - in religious freedom spoke out against this proposed ballot initiative.

There was a time in the 1960s when 85% of Americans circumcised their sons. Today that number is closer to 57%, and with that drop in the general population, the percentage of Jews who circumcise their sons has dropped as well.

There are many causes for this. First, there is a debate about how medically beneficial this procedure is. Some evidence seems to indicate that it reduces susceptibility to certain sexually transmitted diseases.

But lost in this controversy is the fact that this is a particularistic act that Jews are commanded to perform. However you understand its origin – it comes to us from God, the Torah, the tradition and from hundreds of generations over thousands of years – it is a particularistic act, and particularization is on the decline in our modern, intellectual circles.

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Today, if you ask Jewish college students if they date only Jews, they are likely to tell you that it is “racist” to date only Jews.

Technically, it cannot be racist, since Jews come from all different races, but we might consider it “religion-ist” or maybe “people-ist” or “civilization-ist.”

This is quite a change: today, many young non-Orthodox Jews object on principle to dating only Jews.

Now please don't misunderstand me. There are many in our own community who are married to non-Jews, and they and many of their non-Jewish spouses are among the most committed members of our congregation. In fact, we honored two wonderful volunteers who are not Jewish on Rosh Hashanah with English readings during our services both to thank them for their service to our shul and to make a clear statement about our inclusive and welcoming community.

For many of today's college students dating only Jews is not an ethically defensible choice. Seeing dating only within the fold as unacceptable speaks to the degree to which universalism has taken hold – certainly among younger Jews.

So the question I ask tonight is: how can we be particularistic without losing our place in the universalistic world that we inhabit?

How can we, as modern, thinking Jews of the twenty-first century remain committed to the values of universalism, but at the same time maintain our particular identity?

Perhaps the first question should be: is it really worthwhile? And if so, how do we do it in a sensitive and balanced manner?

Let me try to narrow down the question. This is not a sermon about Jewish survivalism, although I am a Jewish survivalist. (Which means that it would pain me beyond words to see the demise of the Jewish people.) This is a sermon about how we can be particularistic in a universalistic world – why maintaining our Jewish identity allows us to hold dear the values of universalism.

There are many ways to approach this question. Let me begin with a Jewish text. One of the *piyyutim* or religious poems that were written for the high holy days is “*Adonai Melekh*” - God reigns. It uses three phrases in its refrain: *Adonai Melekh* - God is King; *Adonai Malakh* - God was King; and *Adonai Yimlokh* - God will be King, or: Adonai reigns, Adonai has reigned, and Adonai will reign.

That is the three-part refrain of this poem. In each of the stanzas, the first line describes how the angels and celestial beings proclaim God's praise, the second line refers to the praise of God that originates from mortals on earth, and the third line emphasizes that Heaven and earth together extol God.

Written by Simon ben Isaac ben Abun of Mayence in the eleventh century, this poem was modeled after a similar poem by the great religious poet Elazar Kallir, who

lived some five-hundred years earlier. These three phrases were taken from Psalm 86, the book of First Chronicles, and Exodus, Chapter 15.

These three ways of describing God are the different ways we look at time: present, past, and future.

The present – God reigns – comes first. How do we engage in the present? Our tradition offers us the way we should walk in our lives, the literal meaning of *halakhah* – Jewish law. *Halakhah* is an attempt to take *mitzvot* and incorporate them into our lives, into the very fabric of our existence.

How do we take each moment and elevate it, sanctify it, and experience it on another level? How do we take each decision, each conversation, each opportunity, each choice that we make, and imbue it with moral and ethical values and sacred meaning?

That is about living in the present.

The second phrase, *Adonai Malakh* - God reigned in the past, is about the power of Jewish history. When you have 4000 years of the past, you inhabit a unique position in the history of humanity. Our history takes us on journeys: the journey that Abraham took from *Haran* to the land of Canaan; the journey of the descent into Egypt, and the Exodus; the revelation at Sinai and the wandering through the wilderness; the entering and transforming the Land of Israel; the ups and downs that have taken us all around the world and back again.

There have been moments of unbelievable glory and success: returning from Babylonia after the first exile, rebuilding the Temple, the heroism of the Maccabees, the development of a rich legal system, the incredible flourishing of Jewish culture in Medieval Spain, the establishment of social supports for those in need, widows, orphans and the sick, the return to Israel in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the rebuilding of our state.

There have also been moments of great loss and devastation, persecution, murder, pogroms, and genocide.

It is a history unlike any other and it is ours. All human beings want to know where they come from, their story, how they got here.

Finally, *Adonai Yimlokh* - God will reign. This is about the future, a future to which we all aspire, the future that we are constantly striving for in our performance of *mitzvot* and in our engagement in the world.

Holding onto these particularistic ideas and practices helps define our place in the world. But our particularistic and unique Jewish destiny resounds with universal notes as well.

We hope that all peoples, in the words of Isaiah, will gather around Mt. Zion and embrace each other as human beings with shared human values. They do not have to become Jewish to join in.

So we transmit a universal message that we want to share with the world through our unique, distinct identity.

In the words of the Israeli writer, Yossi Klein Halevi (*Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, page 947), “To effect this universalist vision, the Jewish people was, paradoxically, set apart, as a testing ground for the possibility of redemptive interaction between humanity and God. For, as a people, the Jews are a random cross-section of humanity. If this people could be transformed into an instrument for divine intimacy, then the hope of a realized transcendence could be extended, eventually, to all peoples.”

As a people, we have been given this task at many different moments. Abraham was to become the first believer in an ethical God. He journeyed forth and journeyed into himself to experience sacred truths.

This task was given to the Jewish people at the Exodus and at Sinai – “History’s first experiment in egalitarian redemption,” where revelation and access to sacred text were not reserved for the elite alone.

It is interesting to note how we celebrate our events as a people, not as accomplishments of a single person or prophet. As a community, we, in the words of Isaiah, have been called to be witnesses to God – witnesses to God’s beauty and the sanctity of our world. As witnesses, we can testify to the grandeur of creation, to the truths of revelation, to the promise of redemption. We strive to move the world closer to those aims.

Back to the text. There is another noteworthy aspect to this *piyyut*, to this poem. It is the order of the three phrases. Why is God’s sovereignty in the present preceding the past? Shouldn’t the past come first followed by the present and then the future?

Woven into this statement is a profound truth about the way we make meaning in our lives. The past is not enough without the present. Only by being in the moment, by appreciating the significance of this particular instant that we are in, can we mine the past for meaning, and only with that meaning, with those insights into the significance of our lives, can we take the steps needed to ensure the future.

Our ability to maintain ourselves as a community and to maintain our ideas and ideals – our ability to be both a religion and a people, a unique civilization whose values have enriched all humanity; this particularism has brought with it many blessings.

So, how do we balance the two? How can we be particularistic in our universalistic milieu?

Well, as it turns out, that is precisely the way our tradition was set up. It constantly weaves back and forth between universalism to particularism, never allowing us to be consumed fully by either side.

Think of the *Amidah* that we just recited. The last paragraph of the *Amidah* always discusses peace. In that paragraph we have added the words “*V'al kol yoshvei teiveil* - upon all the inhabitants of the world, we want peace to descend.” And in the morning version of this prayer, we have added the word “*Ba'olam* – in the world.” Peace is not simply for the Jewish people, but for all peoples.

Incorporated in the 1945 Conservative Movement *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book*, the addition of “*Ba-olam*” was actually based on the prayer book of a much more ancient, tenth century sage, Rav Saadiah Gaon, and has been a precedent for articulating a concern for peace throughout the world at the conclusion of the *Amidah*.

Even these days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur dance us between universalism and particularism. We change the end of the *Amidah* during these days to ask that the entire House of Israel be remembered and recorded in the Book of Life. On some level, this makes the prayer more particularistic. We and the entire House of Israel are to be remembered for blessing. But then the close of the blessing, the *hatimah*, the most important part of the *brakhah*, also changes. During 51 weeks of the year it is: “Praised are you, Adonai, who blesses the people Israel with peace.” But during the ten days of repentance, including Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it is “Praised are you, Adonai, who makes peace.” That opens up a much more universalistic notion.

In fact, the days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur sway back and forth between the universal and the particular. Rosh Hashanah is a day that commemorates the birthday of the world, of all humanity – certainly a universal day if ever there was one.

Our rabbis understood metaphorically that every creature passes before God to be judged; this is inclusive of all.

However, the Torah reading on Rosh Hashanah is the particularistic narrative about the birth of Isaac and the mantle of the tradition being passed down from Abraham to Isaac.

Yom Kippur, on the other hand, offers us two countervailing notions: a *haftarah* where there is a universal concern for those in need and a day which represents the commitment between God and the Jewish people. It commemorates the day when Moses completed his second 40 days of the top of Mount Sinai, firmly sealing the covenant, like a marriage between ourselves and our Creator.

So there is great power in our particular identity as Jews, even in this multi-cultural, universalistic world of ours.

When we stood at Sinai, the Torah says, “And there Israel camped – *va-yeehan sham Yisrael* (Exodus 19:2). Rashi immediately notes that it is strange that the verb is in the singular. Shouldn’t “all of Israel camped” be in the plural? Rashi sees the community as being merged into one. Until this verse when the Israelites encamped at Sinai, all the verbs were in the plural. All of the tribes became “as one person, as one heart” and only then, were they fit to receive the Torah.

Our community receives much blessing from being able to have the extended family of the Jewish people. The notion of being connected to a people is something that everyone needs. Just as individuals need family, we all need communities and our distinct identity, even as we push the world towards a universalistic vision.

That is why these high holy days culminate on Sukkot. Sukkot is, of course, the rejoicing. Some see it as the seven days of feasting after a wedding, but who is invited to these wedding celebrations? All the nations of the world, all peoples, are invited to a universal *Sukkah*. The Jewish people’s particularistic, unique identity and message ultimately bring the entire world closer together, closer to peace.

In the words of Isaiah, “For My house shall be called the house of prayer for all peoples. Thus declares Adonai, God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel.” (Isaiah 56:7-8).

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