

Caring for the Universal by Living the Particular

Those who know my family are not surprised to learn that our children's first trip to Fenway Park was on a night when the Red Sox were not even in town. No...Mia and Adam's first exposure to the historic ballpark was on the night that Paul McCartney returned to Boston last year. Mia had already committed a sizable chunk of the Beatles catalogue to memory and was committed to staying awake for the entire show, which she managed to do. Adam, on the other hand, was holding out hope for one song in particular.

See, every night, since long before he can remember, just before he heads off to bed, Adam climbs onto one of our laps, snuggles up, and listens to the Beatles' Let it Be¹. Each time I experience this bedtime ritual, it is a moment that is profoundly personal...a son nestled on a father's lap finding comfort, security, and love...while I hold him tight, uttering silent prayers for the wellbeing of this precious soul as he drifts off to sleep.

While that moment is so deeply personal and focused on our home, McCartney's lyrics often transport my mind to the rest of existence outside of Adam's bedroom – moving me to situate our family within the larger whole of the world in which we live:

*“And when the broken hearted people
Living in the world agree
There will be an answer, let it be.
For though they may be parted
There is still a chance that they will see
There will be an answer, let it be.”*²

This mental and spiritual dance – this walking of the intellectual tightrope between the particular needs of my own family and my hopes for the entirety of the world in which we live...this is what *Rosh Hashanah* is all about.

It may be surprising to hear me assert that these High Holy Days may be less about the particular concerns of the Jewish people than they are about the Jewish people's concern for the rest of the world. After all...could there be days more Jewishly focused than these? This is when our communities come together in such great numbers. These are the days when we utter prayers all our own, in a language all our own, which affirm a covenant with God that is our own.

Professor Shaye Cohen opens his book on The Beginnings of Jewishness by paraphrasing an old joke. “There are two kinds of people in the world, those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who do not. Jews,” he notes, “are in the former category.” Like all parties, sects, nations, and faith traditions, we have a tendency towards particularism...an attachment to our own group, its customs,

¹ Connection between Let it Be and these days inspired by Rabbi Jack Riemer in All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days, Jewish Lights Press, 2014, p. 98

² The Beatles. "Let it Be." Let it Be. Apple Records, 1970.

outlooks, rituals, and norms. In an extreme case, this tendency may cause one to act entirely for the betterment of one's own group without any care whatsoever for those who fall beyond its boundaries.

Particularism's opposite – universalism – draws our attention beyond ourselves to care for the whole of humanity. In its most extreme form the universalist tendency prompts some to wonder, "Why bother being Jewish at all? If the ultimate goal is betterment of all humanity, then why be part of any group, especially this one?" And, in fact, this isn't such an extreme stance nowadays. As the 2013 Pew Study found, some 22% of those Jews surveyed expressed that they had no religion.³ They may feel culturally connected – or not – but the religious components of the Judaism have been cast aside in favor of simply being part of the larger whole of the human race, perhaps with a little brisket, bagels, and *kugel* mixed in for good measure.

Those who choose to place themselves on the margins of our people today are likely not the only ones to sometimes wonder...what is the larger purpose of living a Jewish life? This day of *Rosh Hashanah* serves as a reminder that all the particulars of our faith tradition: our rituals, our prayers, our beliefs and obligations, they are not in place merely for the sake of perpetuating Judaism. To the contrary, the particulars of Judaism are constructed to help us fulfill our larger mission...to fulfill the prophet Isaiah's vision that we serve as a light – a beacon of justice, freedom, love, and hope – to all the people of the world.⁴ The rituals of these days abound in evidence that this is, indeed, our ultimate goal.

First, *Rosh Hashanah* was known by our Sages as *Hayom Harat Olam*...the birthday of the entire world. Tonight we ring in the year 5775 in the Hebrew calendar, a number which reflects our ancient ancestors' attempts to begin counting years at the dawn of creation. "[By contrast,] the calendar[s] of the [other monotheistic] religions [mark] time from the decisive event of their own particular histories ([for Christians,] the birth of Jesus; [for Muslims,] Muhammad's escape from Mecca)?"⁵

We see further evidence of our Universalist mandate in the structure of the Torah itself which begins not with the covenant established with our People at Sinai nor even with the covenant established with Abraham, but rather with the dawn of all creation - for our tradition invites belief in a God that cares for the whole of the universe, not only one group.

We see further evidence of the universalist thrust of these High Holy Days in their liturgy. First and foremost is the almost overwhelming repetition of our desire for the Sovereignty of God. From *Avinu Malkeinu* – our Father, Our "King," to the *shofar*

³ The Jewish Week, "Fast-Growing Jewish 'Nones' Seen Reshaping Community," by Robert Goldblum, October 2, 2013

⁴ Isaiah 49:6

⁵ Rabbi Reuven Kimelman, PhD, in All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days, Jewish Lights Press, 2014, p. 98

service itself with one of its sections bearing the name, “*Malchuyot* – God’s sovereignty,” this God as King metaphor is difficult to avoid during these holy days.

And, truth be told, it’s just plain difficult. There is the gendered nature of the “King” imagery which has served to make women feel distanced from Divinity for centuries and which continues to frustrate so many of us who prefer not to attach gender to God at all. Plus, we live in the nation which resoundingly rejected monarchy as a form of governance and in the city known for pushing tea into the harbor when we don’t find our royalty to be just. On that account, we can find solace in the fact that our Rabbis who composed these prayers didn’t like kings much either. There must, then, have been something compelling in the metaphor for our Sages that allowed them to transcend their distaste for monarchy.

The *Aleinu* prayer, now familiar to so many of us as part of our daily liturgy had its origins solely in worship on *Rosh Hashanah*. It paints a clear picture of our grandest hopes, first thanking God for giving the Jewish people a unique role in the world and then defining that role: *Bayom hahu y’hiyeh Adonai Echad U’shemo Echad*...We strive actively for the day when God will be One and God’s name will be One. This is poetic imagery for what God’s “kingship” meant to our Sages, as difficult as the imagery may be for us today...that just as subjects turn their behavior towards the will of their ruler, all humanity would come to embrace the core tenets of righteousness, justice, and goodness that are the agenda of the ultimate Sovereign.

When Rabbi Leo Baeck emerged from the horrors of the Theresienstadt camp, having been given every reason to see humanity as prone to pure evil, he was nonetheless renewed in his conviction that “Monotheism – [one God with purview over the entire earth] - means, in its very essence, the oneness of all morality.”⁶ In considering Baeck’s life and legacy, Rabbi Joseph Meszler writes, “The Jewish people long ago gave the world the belief in one God. It is time to also give the world belief in one humanity.”⁷ If Baeck could maintain hope for such a world, can’t we as well?

Our High Holy Day liturgy is replete with echoes of this theme. Remember, “All the will come to serve thee,” whose themes of a world united under God echo throughout the Days of Awe? And the *Uv’ken* blessing we recited earlier this evening is described by Rabbi Andrew Goldstein as summing up, “...the greatness of Judaism, reminding us that] we [Jews] can still have our own identity and heritage, our own ways of worship, our own land and holy city. But we exist not just for ourselves. We believe in one God who is the God of all humanity, the God of all creation, and the God who calls us to unite with all humanity to fight evil, persecution, and discrimination.”⁸

⁶ Leo Baeck, *This People Israel: The Meaning of Jewish Existence*, trans. Albert H. Friedlander (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965), p. 69.

⁷ *Witness to the One: The Spiritual History of the Sh’ma* by Rabbi Joseph B. Meszler, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006, p. 100.

⁸ Rabbi Andrew Goldstein PhD, p. 130

This summer I had the privilege of teaching a mini-course for entering 10th graders at camp. Our topic: The current conflict in Israel and its portrayal in the media. On our first day we watched a single news clip about the most recent Hamas missile attacks and the most recent Israeli counter strike, and I asked for their responses. I called on the first teen with a hand in the air who wondered aloud, “Why do we even need a State of Israel anymore? We are safe here in America...Jews should just come here.” More hands shot up in the air, and I called on the second volunteer who offered, “Why doesn’t Israel just bomb its neighbors and wipe everyone out?” My heart sank at their evident oversimplifications, at their unawareness of the substantive issues involved, at how far both views strayed from the heart of our tradition.

Rabbi Asher Lopatin, the head of the orthodox *Chovevei Torah* seminary in New York, brings a more nuanced voice to the discussion: “Israel at its best is a celebration of particularistic Judaism, while understanding that Zion, Jerusalem, and the Holy Land lack meaning if our very particularism is unconnected with the world beyond – if, that is, we do not make a [positive] difference in the world.”⁹

“If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us,”¹⁰ echo Hillel’s words through our hearts. We rightfully defend our lives and our security here, in Israel, and throughout the globe. We safeguard the wellbeing of every Jew, remembering the sage teaching that all the people Israel is responsible for one another.¹¹ We invest in our Jewish institutions to insure a thriving future for our children, grandchildren, and for generations to come.

“But,” counsels Hillel, “if we are only for ourselves, what are we?” If we allow our legitimate fears to blind us to the humanity of others beyond our borders, if we are pushed off of our moral center, then we have lost sight of our people’s larger mission.

In times when Israel suffers, when anti-Semitism rears its ugly head, when our very existence feels threatened once again, our natural inclination is to turn inward, and in so doing we risk becoming insular. But this is not our people’s ultimate goal.

“Indeed,” instructs my teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, “it may be that the purpose of our particularist commitment to Jewish continuity is that the Jewish People whose continuity we guarantee can then turn to its universalistic task of effecting God’s will for justice and goodness throughout all of God’s world.”¹²

“Why be Jewish,” asks at least 22% of American Jewry. To that I say, at our best we are not Jewish for the sake of being Jewish. We immerse ourselves in the particularities of this tradition as a means by which we can serve all of humanity.

⁹ Rabbi Asher Lopatin in *All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days*, Jewish Lights Press, 2014, pp. 202-203

¹⁰ Paraphrased from *Mishnah Pirkei Avot 1:14*

¹¹ *Talmud Bavli, Shavuot 39a*

¹² Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman in *All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days*, Jewish Lights Press, 2014, p. 18

We engage in Jewish life not only because it adds meaning to our own lives but because it adds purpose to our days, compelling us to eschew intolerance, violence, bigotry and hate, driving us to pursue freedom, hope, peace and justice for all.

And that is why on this very particularistic Jewish holy day of *Rosh Hashanah* we depart Temple Beth Shalom with paper bags in hand to fill them with food for all of God's people who hunger. That is why, on *Yom Kippur* at the Rashi School, we will take a moment to swab our own cheeks so we can be recorded in the Gift of Life Bone Marrow registry with the hope that those who suffer may be inscribed once again in the Book of Life through our deeds.

In the words of Rabbi Bradley Artson, "If Judaism is not a tool to become profoundly human, if it is not our entryway, our porthole into humanity, into all of creation, then it is unworthy of its legacy. We must be willing to stand for a Judaism that addresses broad, universal, human concerns, one which mobilizes [all of its great resources] to be able to allow us to be fully human."¹³ Particularism and Universalism are not an either-or proposition, at least not in our tradition.

A Rabbinic *midrash*¹⁴ envisions the angels asking God, 'When is *Rosh Hashanah*? When does the new year begin?' [As it turns out,] the answer is not found on the calendar but in our deeds: [*Rosh Hashanah* begins] when we recognize the humanity and the divinity within every human being and act accordingly.¹⁵

Let the new year begin. Let it be.

¹³ Bradley Shavit Artson, "Building a Future Worthy of Our Past," blog on the *Times of Israel*, December 1, 2013.

¹⁴ *Devarim Rabbah* 2:14

¹⁵ Rabbi Edwin Goldberg in *All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days*, Jewish Lights Press, 2014, p. 18