

Miketz

Universal Values, Particular Values, and Us

Whe Jews have always lived under a dialectical tension. Abraham explained this tension very well when he approached the Hittites in order to buy a burial plot for his wife. He said, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you." In other words, I am both an alien and a citizen. This seems to be a contradiction in terms. How can we be both an alien and a citizen? Either we are an alien or a citizen. How can we be both?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explained that the role of the Jew is to be both, an alien and a citizen. He is to be part of the greater world, contributing mightily to it by being a good citizen, by interacting positively with everyone but, at the same time, he is to be an alien. He must always remember that religiously he is different, that ultimately he has different visions and, when it comes to these values and to religious matters, he must remain unique and separate. Every human being is under a covenantal relationship with G-d ever since the time of Noah, and every human being must be treated with respect and dignity. Every human being has the ability to develop himself and to reach up to G-d and, therefore, we must react positively with every human being. We must care for the sick of all nations. We must feed their poor, clothe their naked, rejoice with them on their happy occasions and mourn with them on their sad occasions. However, we have a second covenant from Abraham. We Jews have been called upon never to desert our values, to realize that we have a special mission to help G-d redeem this world. Judaism has always been a religion which postulates universal and particular values. We must honor them both always. We cannot just stress the universal and forget about the particular, and we cannot concentrate only on the particular and forget about the universal.

This is indicated clearly by the holiday of *Yom Kippur*, the quintessential Jewish holiday. On *Yom Kippur* we read the *Book of Jonah* in which we read how G-d is concerned about all humanity, how He wants Nineveh, that evil city, to repent, and how He sends Jonah, a Jew, to accomplish this mission. Even in our prayers on *Yom Kippur* we pray for the whole world. In Judaism it is never us against them. We Jews are part of the world, even

though we are also different. We are part of the them as well as being, of course, part of the us.

One of the terrible legacies of the Holocaust is that for many Jews this dialectical tension between the universal and particular values of Judaism ceased. It became only us and them. This was in sharp contrast to many Jews who, before the Holocaust, had given up entirely upon particular Jewish values and who had tried to claim that Judaism was only concerned with universal values. These people tried to remove from Judaism all its particular elements. They changed Jewish rituals and beliefs to make Judaism entirely a universal religion. This, of course, has led to great assimilation. To many of these Jews, the Holocaust reminded them that the world still needs the Jewish particular values, and many of them have come back to certain Jewish practices. However, there were many Jews who, because of the Holocaust, completely rejected Judaism's universal message and said that Jews must now concentrate solely on Jews and Jewish causes. The world outside the Jewish world was essentially an evil world and was out to get every Jew.

These Jews, too, swallowed the canard that the Jews of Europe went to their deaths like sheep to the slaughter. Many of them accepted the late Rabbi Meir Kahane's analysis that it was the Jewish leaders of the Holocaust who led their people like Judas goats to the slaughter. When Meir Kahane used the phrase "never again," he meant, among other things, that Jews should never again suffer such leaders who would collaborate with the enemies of the Jewish people in order to bring about our destruction. He even advocated assassinating such leaders.

We, in our own day, see the tragic consequences of such thinking. Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a man who belonged to a group, Ayal, which was an offshoot of a Kahane group in Israel. They broke off from the main Kahane group because they thought that that group was too moderate. This group thought that Yitzhak Rabin was doing what the leaders of the Judenrat in Europe did during the Nazi era. He was selecting Jews to be sent to their destruction. He had already selected the first 150,000 Jews, the settlers in Judea, Samaria, Gaza, and the Golan, and next they claimed he would select the Israelis who live north of Tel Aviv in that stretch of Israel which in only nine miles wide. This group was convinced that the

only way to stop this impending catastrophe was to get rid of Yitzhak Rabin, among others.

This analysis, of course, is faulty and completely antithetical to Judaism and Jewish values. Israel is not a Judenrat. Israel has an army, allies, and resources to combat whatever plans Arafat has in mind. It is true that there may be casualties, and it is true that this peace plan is risky, but to say that a patriot like Rabin would deliberately sell out his people is absurd. The same applies to the opposition. They, too, are patriots who just feel that the peace plan is too risky. They are not to be confused with the extremists.

Also, the idea that the Jews went to their deaths like sheep to the slaughter in the Holocaust is false. For the most part they were tricked. They did not even know they were going to death camps and, when they found out, they fought as best they could, even burning down several concentration camps. It is also a lie to say that the leaders of the Judenrat collaborated with the Nazis to bring about the destruction of the Jewish people. They tried their best to stop, ameliorate, and stall the Nazi onslaught. Several of them even committed suicide when their efforts failed, but they constantly tried to get the Nazis to rescind their decrees. They, too, were for the most part, heroes in the finest sense of the word.

It is also true that Israel is no super power. Israel many times has to bend to the will of the nations of the world. Israel is dependent for many things on the nations of the world. Without the United States, Israel could not obtain jet fuel, to cite just one example. If the nations of the world could break South Africa and break the Soviet Union, they could certainly break Israel. The 86 heads of government who came to Rabin's funeral did so not just to honor Rabin but to tell Israel that she should continue on her present policies and that they would support her only if she did. That is also why the entire senior leadership of the United States government, Republican and Democrat, attended Rabin's funeral. Rabin must have been under terrible pressure to do what he did, and the presence of all these heads of state was to tell Israel that the nations of the world want Israel to continue on its present course.

Even Abraham had to ask his wife, Sarah, when he went to Egypt to tell everyone that she was his sister and not his wife. Even that proud Jew

Abraham had to bend a little bit. He believed that G-d would make sure that nothing bad would happen to Sarah because she said that she was his sister and not his wife.

In the *Torah* portion *Miketz*, we learn how Joseph was taken out of prison to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh. Joseph was a proud Jew who even evoked G-d's name when Pharaoh asked him to interpret his dreams. Joseph truly exemplified Judaism's concern with both universal and particular values. Joseph never forgot his roots. Joseph was the one who saved the Jewish people by saving his brothers and their families from the terrible famine which swept the Middle East, but Joseph was also a faithful viceroy of Egypt who was concerned about Egypt and all its problems and who also saved Egypt. Joseph was the example par excellence of how to balance particular values with universal values. He also understood something that his brothers did not understand, and that is that we have to constantly balance universal and particular values because universal values are also part of Jewish values and vice versa.

In Israel today there is a terrible cleavage between those who only want to pursue universal values and those who only want to pursue particular values. Some on the left want to go so far as to change the Israeli flag because it has a Star of David on it. They want to change the national anthem. They want to change the emphasis on Hebrew because they say that they have to make the Arab citizens of Israel feel more at home. These same people, on the other hand, do not seem to have any qualms at all about the Arab countries not letting Jews even live in them. They do not seem to have any qualms at all about the Palestinians eradicating any traces of a Jewish presence ever in Israel in their textbooks or in the lands they hold. On the other hand, there are Jews who want to deprive the Arabs of their citizenship rights, etc. Both these groups are wrong. We need both universal and particular values because Judaism encompasses both. The tension between them will always endure throughout all generations and must be maintained if Judaism is to remain true to itself.

One of the reasons why the rabbis say the brothers of Joseph sold him into slavery was because he predicted that they would have to lead a different kind of life. They would have to give up being shepherds and prepare for a world which was changing. That's why he dreamed about

sheaves and not sheep. They hated him for it. He told them times were changing and that they would have to be concerned with universal as well as particular values. Our rabbis explain that this is one of the reasons why Joseph tested his brothers before he revealed his identity to them in Egypt. He tested them by having them bring Benjamin to him and then he framed Benjamin to see what his brothers would do. This time they did not allow their brother to become a slave, even though they knew that their lives would be completely changed. They, in the person of Judah, stepped forward to help him. They knew that they had to be united. They knew that the worst thing in Jewish history is when one brother fights another. Jews can disagree over what the exact balance should be between the universal and the particular, but we cannot use violence against each other because of our disagreements. If we do, then we will destroy ourselves.

This is the lesson which we still must learn today. Judaism has never been a religion of us and them. It has always been a religion of we and us. Let us hope that the lesson Joseph taught his brothers will be a lesson which we will learn today. Just as Joseph was reconciled with his brothers, so should all Jews today be reconciled with each other so that we can continue to propagate our unique message, the necessity of balancing universal and particular values.