

This summer I have begun sessions at a gym with a personal trainer with the aim of improving my mobility, range of motion and control over my joints. I am surely the most uncoordinated student my trainer has ever put through a workout. As I exercise, he tries very hard to have me maintain proper form. Keep your chin up. Hold your core tight. Don't let your arm drop, keep it level. Don't lean forward. One of the most difficult exercises for me is walking sideways with stretch bands attached to my lower legs at the ankle. There is a tendency on my part, after taking the initial step, to bring my legs close together and let the bands go slack. Keep the legs apart, my trainer urges, maintain the tension.

Maintaining the tension, I believe is a fitting metaphor for the system of values that underlies the beliefs and practices of Judaism. We ascribe importance at one and the same time to a value, a concept or an ideal and to its opposite. Several examples come to mind. We believe that in the process of repentance, God's grace is important, but so too is the initiative of the person who turns to God in a spirit of penitence. We value the spirit of the law, the moral lessons that the law seeks to impart and the desire to serve and to be drawn closer to the Creator through observance of the mitzvot, but we also insist on carrying out the letter of the law and performing the actions and deeds that the Torah commands. Or, to use the terms popularized by Dr. Abraham Heschel, we uphold both the *keva*, the fixed structure of obligations enjoined upon us by the Torah and the *kavvana*, the inward focus, concentration and intention that should accompany our observance.

One such tension that is especially relevant to us and deserving of our attention is the one between particularism and universalism. The former term denotes a focus on the well-being, interests and survival of our particular community, *am Yisrael*, the people of Israel. The latter term implies a devotion to the well-being of all humankind and a recognition that God's concern extends to all of the people on earth and that the message and vision of Judaism are directed toward the redemption not just of Jews but of the entire world. Our Scriptures and our liturgy feature both the universal and the particular, and our faith maintains the two in a fruitful and beneficial tension. Both have their place, and both are legitimate domains within our spiritual life and our religious activism. We need to stress both rather than one to the exclusion of the other.

It is legitimate to pray in behalf of one's community, to say, for example, "may we and all of Your people, the whole house of Israel, be inscribed and sealed in the book of life, blessing and peace." Or as one wag once put it, when you take leave of a friend you ask him or her to extend your good wishes to their spouse and children, you don't say "give my regards to all humankind." Jewish traditionalists are to be admired for their commitment to ritual observance and to pursuing and disseminating a high level of knowledge of Jewish practice, texts and lore. People of all faiths (and none) and of all racial and ethnic groups espouse a belief in justice, equality and compassion, but it is the rituals and the culture that we have passed down over the generations that are distinctive and unique to us as Jews, and our commitment to them will be instrumental to our survival. When we devote ourselves to the particular, we assure our continuity as a community dedicated to the realization of universal ideals. The Israeli blogger, Gershom Gorenberg in a magazine article that appeared last April, posed an interesting rejoinder to this formulation. Do we need to be part of the Jewish community to serve the cause of universal peace and justice? Perhaps, the Jewish mission has been completed, and we can simply join forces with people of good will from all backgrounds who live according to the values and ideals of Micah, Amos and Isaiah, which are Judaism's gift to world civilization. Gorenberg answers his own question by noting that when members of a cultural minority assimilate, they lose what is unique to their heritage, but the majority culture to which they are assimilating (be it American or French or some other) is no less particularistic than their former identity and no more representative of universal humanity. I will not be around to observe the strength and the character of the Jewish community in Israel and in the Diaspora in the latter half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but I feel that the weakening or disappearance of Jewish religion and culture (with its rich textual tradition, its promotion of a disciplined spiritual practice, and its rituals for marking the passage of time and the stages of the life cycle along with its devotion to social justice) would be a loss not only for Jews but for all humankind.

Particularism has value in enabling our survival as well as worth in its own right. Humanity is enriched by religious and cultural diversity. Because Judaism engages the mind, the body and the emotions and touches all aspects of our existence and because it has fostered divergent intellectual traditions- the mystical, the philosophical and the legal

– it has been able to create over the centuries, from antiquity to the present, a unique religious civilization that I earnestly hope will be preserved.

And yet we need to remember that universalism is equally prominent in Scriptural and Rabbinic tradition. We have something of value to contribute to humankind – insights into the ethics of everyday life and an understanding of the meaning of witnessing to God’s Presence and to what Dr. Heschel referred to as God’s stake in human affairs. We must be engaged with the world at large as well as with ourselves and our community. The book of Jonah, to be read ten days from now on Yom Kippur, teaches us about God’s concern for a distant non-Israelite city. Jonah was commissioned to go to Nineveh and preach to its residents, because God feared that otherwise they might perish as a consequence of their wickedness. Isaiah spoke in lofty, sublime and universal tones which Martin Luther King, Jr. fittingly wove into his “I have a dream” oration. And it was Isaiah who, speaking in God’s name, challenged the Jews to be an *or goyim*, a light to the nations of the world. Historians note that notions of the Divine evolved from tribal gods, concerned only with protecting their particular nation to a universal God of all humanity. We can proudly claim to have been in the forefront of that development. Our God is *melech ha-olam*, the Sovereign of the entire universe, and we pray for the day when God’s sovereignty will be recognized by every creature and by all who draw breath. Nor is universalism limited to the Scriptures. Gorenberg references a recently published volume, *Justice in the City*, by Aryeh Cohen that shows through textual analysis how the teachings of the Talmud obligate us to concern ourselves with the basic needs of our fellow persons and to provide food, clothing and shelter to the stranger who dwells among us along with the native born, the non-Jew along with the Jew.

Because many Israelis are secular in their outlook and have little knowledge of many aspects of Jewish tradition and because there is also a concern for the attenuation of Jewish identity in the Diaspora, government ministries in Israel as well as Israeli political figures associated with the religious parties have promoted efforts to expand outreach and education efforts within Israel and to Jewish communities abroad. Critics have expressed a concern; before launching such an effort, the question that should be asked is what kind of Judaism will be taught in these sessions. The question is relevant, because there are

individuals and groups within the Israeli religious establishment (who would likely have an influence on these outreach initiatives) whose devotion to Jewish particularism borders on chauvinism or insularity. The Israeli blogger Tomer Persico, a fellow of the Hartman Institute and a thoughtful commentator on contemporary religious issues, notes the irony in the fact that the ultra-Orthodox, who are regarded by the Jewish public as the “most religious” among us, are also the most isolationist, the farthest removed from contact not only with the non-Jewish world but also with fellow Jews who are non-observant or not as observant. The universalist dimension of Judaism is neglected by them, and their focus is primarily on detailed study and meticulous observance of the ritual law. A Judaism that, along with ritual and knowledge of tradition, stresses the humane traditions of pursuing justice, loving the stranger, and imitating the Divine quality of compassion to all would likely have a broader appeal to those whom the outreach effort is intended to reach. A Judaism that does not articulate and embody these concerns would be, as Persico characterizes it, severely “impoverished.”

One of the intellectual giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century America was the eminent Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. His roots were in the Midwest – in Missouri and Illinois – but he wound up teaching at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, down the street from my alma mater. He was a close personal friend of Rabbi Abraham Heschel and a strong supporter in the 1940’s of the right of the Jewish people to have a state of their own. Niebuhr expounded on the contrast between “moral man” and “immoral society” and incorporated it as the title of one of his books. His thesis, I believe, helps us understand how the exclusive focus on and concern with our particular group identity can be transformed into something morally dubious (and on occasion objectionable) and underlines for me the need to maintain within our Jewish lives the tension between particularism and universalism. Niebuhr believed that people as individuals aspire to be moral persons and that they have the capability individually to transcend their selfishness and their ethical limitations. We experience this struggle every year at this High Holiday season; we know how difficult it is, but we also know that some measure of success is possible in our striving for self-betterment. However, when individuals form collectives and identify with them, according to Niebuhr, the capacity for self-transcendence is diminished as is the ability to be governed by the dictates of reason. I’m not sure this is

the type of collective Niebuhr had in mind or an example he would have offered, but we all recognize that a mob is capable of perpetrating outrages that an individual on his own would never dare to commit.

There is no question but that some collectives are more morally problematic or odious than others – those nations, for example, that practice repression or coercion on their citizens and deny them basic human rights, sponsor terrorism, incite hatred of others, or wage aggressive and unprovoked war against their neighbors. But Niebuhr’s point is that any collective – nation, religious or ethnic group, or political party or faction –no matter how benign in comparison to its counterparts, is susceptible to hypocrisy, smugness, selfishness, contempt or condescension toward the outsider, narrowness of perspective, and a blindness to its own faults. Interestingly, although Niebuhr as an activist was identified with liberal political causes, the book, when it appeared, was understood as a critique of pacifism and of liberal naivete. He was skeptical about the possibility of social justice being achieved on the basis of pure idealism and rationality. The best path in pursuit of justice, he thought, is to allow for “competing centers of power” within society, something akin to the system of checks and balances established in the political realm by the framers of the U.S. Constitution. This line of thinking is what underlay Niebuhr’s support for Jewish statehood, his conviction that history’s most persecuted and powerless people deserved to have, as a matter of historic justice, a homeland and a state where they could exercise power.

Niebuhr’s pessimism and his emphasis on human sinfulness may have struck some Jews at the time as too rooted in a fundamentally Christian worldview. But I believe his insight into the dynamics of group (as contrasted to individual) morality is borne out by what we observe on a daily basis in our nation and world. His concept of immoral society serves as an admonition to us to hold our devotion to Jewish particularism in balance or tension with the ideals of *tzedek*, universal justice, *ahavat habr’iyot* (love for God’s creatures), and respect for the *tzelem Elohim*, the Divine image that is shared by all humankind.

Let us maintain the tension, slacking neither in regard to the particular nor the universal. Let us cherish our religious and cultural heritage and what is distinctive about it, deriving meaning from our active participation in it and devoting our efforts to its

survival. Let us take pride in Israel, a miracle in our time, that has brought dignity, independence and hope to our people; and let us remain committed to its security and well-being. But let us remember at the same time that our holiday today commemorates not the birth and emergence of the people Israel but *harat olam*, the birthday of the world, that Divine judgment embraces *kol ba'ei olam*, all those who have come into this world, and that the Divine summons to justice and compassion and the prophetic hope for redemption are universal.

Maintain the tension. And may you be blessed with a happy, healthy and sweet New Year.