



GEULAS YISRAEL

BY RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN

Ram, Yeshivat Har Etzion

Recovering A Lost Voice

On the eve of his death, Moshe desperately pleads with his nation to avoid the cultural contamination of the land they are about to enter. He reminds them that they are children of Hashem, בנים אתם לה, אלוקים who must not sink into the local barbaric culture. Among the repugnant and banned Kna'anite abominations is physical disfiguration of the human body. In pagan cultures, human beings aren't endowed with divine image and aren't viewed as the masterpiece of creation. Showing little respect for human life or for their own bodies, paganists mutilated themselves to display grief over death.

By contrast, Jews, as the children of Hashem, must uphold the dignity of human life and respect the human body which, too, was crafted by Hashem. By avoiding physical defacement, the children of G-d uphold the dignity of Man.

THE BROADER VIEW

Thousands of years later, Moshe's disciple, Rabbi Akiva, reaffirmed our status as children of Hashem, but framed it in a broader context. Rabbi Akiva, cited by a mishnah in Pirkei Avot, first acknowledges the divine image in every human being חביב אדם שנברא בצלם. Unlike any

other creature in the natural order, homo sapiens are endowed with intelligence, creativity, cognitive speech, moral conscience, emotions, consciousness, and free will. Despite living through one of the harshest periods of Jewish history and personally facing Roman brutality, Rabbi Akiva never lost faith in humanity and affirmed the divine potential within every human being.

Having accredited the divine image in every human being, Rabbi Akiva declared that Jews enjoy an even loftier status as children of Hashem and he quoted the pasuk in Re'eh בנים אתם לה' אלוקים.

In citing both the divine image in everyman and our exalted status as children, Rabbi Akiva showcased the delicate balance between Jewish particularism and universalism. We are placed on this earth to educate all of humanity about monotheism and morality. Selected by Hashem for this mission, we are beloved to Him as children. We alone embraced His Torah and His mission.

We are beloved because we are His. We are His because He chose us. He chose us to inspire His world. If we abandon our universalist mission of inspiring the world, we betray this "chosenness" and we abdicate the status as "His children".

For a Jew, Nationalist identity and Universalist identity go hand in hand. If we shrink from universalist identity, our

mission fades and our selection withers. Alternatively, if our internal religious experience becomes diluted, we compromise the content of our message and our historical mission goes blank. A Jew must be both universalistic and particularistic. We can't be one without the other.

INITIAL SUCCESS


During the initial stages of Jewish history, we successfully balanced particularism and universalism. We settled our homeland, promised us by Hashem, and built a Mikdash to house His presence. Yet we also spread His message across the globe. The ancient world was drawn to the city of Hashem and mesmerized by the spectacle of His people living in his city and abiding by His will. Our inner religious world was vibrant, and our broader universalist message was resonant.

Tragically we betrayed this mission. Twice, we failed to live by these lofty and grand expectations. Twice, we were evicted from our homeland and from our historical perch.

CONTRACTION

After the second eviction and the destruction of the second Mikdash, our universalism receded. Walking out of Yerushalayim, we contracted into the inner world of the beit midrash, Torah and mitzvah observance. Having lost our universalist agenda, we withdrew into an inner world of beauty and of grandeur.

In addition to our own retraction from universalism the world itself fell into cultural hibernation. Having destroyed the Mikdash and evicted the chosen people from Yerushalayim, humanity sunk into a 1500-year period of darkness. Riddled


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by war and violence, and stifled by ignorance and illiteracy, the Western world found itself trapped in a dismal and dreary tunnel called the Dark Ages. With our departure from the historical stage the world descended into darkness. The prospect of inspiring humanity to higher religious and moral ground seemed implausible.

In addition to our own lost voice, and humanity's plunge into darkness, antisemitism also hampered our universalist agenda. As we suffered centuries of persecution it was preposterous to imagine that we could inspire the world. We were viewed as outcasts, not educators.

During the past two thousand years, our internal contraction, the calamity of the Dark Ages, and scourge of antisemitism all thwarted our universalist mission.

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RECOVERING A LOST VOICE

History has turned. In the leadup to the end of time humanity has slowly recovered its tzelem elokim, and is gradually readying itself to be, once again, inspired by our people. Over the past 500 years humanity has yanked itself out of the shadows and has launched major revolutions advancing the human condition. The world is inching closer to a state of “readiness” to be inspired to Hashem by His children.

Are we ready? Are we capable of reclaiming our universalist voice? Have we forgotten that every person possesses this divine image and divine potential, and that it is our duty to inspire them. After two thousand years of turning inward, can we now, also turn outward, without diluting our inner world? This shift of consciousness and of national identity may take time. However, it is a crucial shift for history to continue its moral and religious evolution.

As Rabbi Sacks wrote, “religious thought has not fully caught up with this development. Modernity confronted Jews as a series of traumatic onslaughts. First the assimilatory demands of European emancipation, then the rising tide of racial anti-Semitism, then the nightmare of the Holocaust, and finally the challenge of forging a new nation in Israel under pressures internal and external that might easily have defeated a less hardy people. Distress inhibits prophecy because it makes

people turn in on themselves rather than outward to the world and to God.

Our people he wrote, “has not yet recovered its poise scope intellectual breath or prophetic depth in the past half century it has produced two few prophets so men and women sufficiently gifted in the arts of listening to time and eternity the particularity of Jewish existence and the universality of human concern to hear in God’s word for all time the specific cadences of the word for this time yet this too will come.”

We are Hashem’s children. We must inspire all of His creatures. ■

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