

If I am Only for Myself, What Am I? - A Particular Universalism
Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan, Ph.D. Yom Kippur Day, 5778/2017
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One of my rabbi friends posted online before Rosh Hashanah that he heard an ice-cream truck playing “It’s a small world after all,” and thought, “there’s got to be a sermon in there somewhere.” At the time I thought it was funny—rabbinic overload!—but really what could be more true? In earlier times, we knew and cared about people in our own village. As Jews, we were focused on the plight of our own people. Today we get instant updates about people around the globe who need help, from American citizens recovering from a hurricane in Puerto Rico, to the desperate Syrian and Rohingya refugees across the oceans. With today’s global outlook, we see how the world is connected, even beyond the human race, so we care for the fate of rainforests and coral reefs, for their own sake and because their survival is tied up with our own.

My teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi taught that the sacramental picture of the 20th century is Planet Earth viewed from space. For the first time, we could see our planet as a whole:

vital and blue, a living jewel suspended in the vast black reaches of the cosmos. This is our Eden, our precious home. We are all in this together.

In my years of interfaith work, I've come to see that we have much to learn from every religion and culture. What then, distinguishes our Jewish path? What we are doing here as Jews is simple: striving to make *this world* a better place for all its creatures and all humanity, because we see every life as precious, holy, and stamped with the divine image. Our historical experience and our Torah has taught us to know the heart of the stranger and the outcast. For all of our Jewish mysticism and spirituality, we are also the most grounded of world religions. Our beautiful rituals are here to give us a taste of that messianic vision of peace and dignity that we want to spread to everyone.

In the past, Jews were often segregated into isolated, insular communities, and it was there that the interpersonal mitzvot were generously practiced. Even today, the most traditional Jewish communities give, loan, lend to and help their own such as few other groups. But what of a broader commitment to humanity and the planet?

Is that only for the assimilated, “universalist” Jew who has little interest in the traditional sources? I believe that the opposite should be the case.

One way to be ourselves while being for others is to adopt what I call “a particular universalism.” That means acting for the greater good of society, but out of our particular Jewish ethos. Not only do veteran charities like UJA-Federation invest in the broader community, but in recent decades many organizations have blossomed that approach general social concerns from a distinctly Jewish consciousness, such as Mazon, a Jewish Response to Hunger, and the American Jewish World Service, an international development and human rights organization. Or the renewal of HIAS, founded to help desperate Jewish refugees, that has come to prominence working for all refugees and immigrants.

Just as we give to help our own families first, we should of course give to our extended family, the Jewish people, and to help our Jewish communities thrive. There are still needy Jews around the world. For example, I contribute frequently to a small Jewish community in Uganda (recently featured in a New York Times wedding article) and have

brought some handouts about them. To paraphrase Hillel, if we are not for ourselves, who will be for us? But we can't stop there.

So what's particular in our universalism? I believe that we do a great service for all of humanity every time that we draw on our particular Jewish heritage to help others. Simply said, we've been developing Jewish wisdom for 4000 years and now it's time to share it with a world that hungers for greater meaning and connection. There are three main ways that we can do so: through our values and ethics, through our rituals, and through our communal organizations.

Judaism has much to teach the planet about ethical development. Just like the Native Inuit Alaskans have 53 words for different kinds of snow, so does Judaism have a very refined vocabulary for ethics, values, and charity. The very Hebrew word for charity, *tzedakah*, has a different connotation than in English. It literally means, "justice" or "righteousness." *Tzedakah* is not just something that we do out of kindness (as the word "charity" implies), but out of a moral duty to do the right thing. Plus, as Jews we have thought through how it should be done.

Maimonides, the greatest rabbi of the past millennia, came up with eight levels of tzedakah, each more protective of the recipient's dignity, with the highest level being to help a person become self-sufficient.

The second way to share our wisdom with the world is through Jewish rituals. Through ritual, we tell our stories and pass along our values over the generations. For example, the Passover Seder is one of the most powerful home-based rituals that teaches about freedom and redemption. In the 1960's, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, founder of the Shalom Center, created the Freedom Seder as a vehicle to promote Civil Rights. Today, people use the Passover Seder to teach about many causes, both particularly Jewish and universalistic. Reb Zalman suggested to the Dalai Lama that the exiled Tibetan Buddhists create a home Seder to tell the story of their people and keep their heritage alive. It's time to share more of our rituals with others.

Finally, we serve the greater good through a strong Jewish community. We are a communally minded people, and our synagogues and organizations can multiply our power to do good in the world.

That leads right into the next part of our morning's talk. It's my custom on Yom Kippur morning to take time to hear from members of our community who are engaged in mitzvot so that each of us can come away with new ways to serve. This morning, we will hear from three members of Pleasantville Community Synagogue.

Leslie Mack is our Tikkun Olam/Social Action chair. Susan Friedman is chair of our Caring/Hessed committee, to support our own members in times of illness, bereavement or other difficulties. Evan Kingsley, along with his wife Dara Meyers-Kingsley and a group of their neighbors, has founded PART-One, the Pleasantville-Armonk Resettlement Team, to resettle a refugee family in our area with the support of PCS, B'nai Yisrael in Armonk and other local faith communities. Each of them will speak for a few minutes about ways that you can become involved in doing mitzvot in the year ahead.

Leslie Mack

Susan Friedman

Evan Kingsley

Conclusion:

Thank you.

Over these days of awe, we have reflected on Hillel's timeless questions:

אם אין אני לי מי לי? If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

וכשאני לעצמי מה אני? And if I am just for myself, what am I?

ואם לא עכשו אימתי? And if not now, when?

May each of us, and all of us together as a community, be blessed to stand up for ourselves, to give generously and serve others, and to get started, well... “if not now, when?” Blessing everyone with *tzom kal*, an easy fast, and *gemar hatimah tovah*, to be sealed in the scroll of life for a Good New Year!