



SUKKOT, UNIVERSALISM AND THE END OF DAYS

A profound question has often been raised about the covenant between God and the Jewish people: After Sinai, what does Judaism believe is the nature of the relationship between God and the rest of the world who rejected His law? Put succinctly, does God still care about people who refused His Commandments, or have they forevermore forfeited their right to providential concern?

Universalism Versus Particularism

There are two ways we might view all of history in the aftermath of the Jewish people's acceptance of Torah.

The first is to assume that God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, sought a people who believe in Him and follow His ways. All the nations of the world, according to the Midrash (*Mechilta*, Yitro no. 5), were offered the Torah but they declined. They were not willing to live by its restrictions. They felt it too confining for their lifestyles and values. Only the Jews said, "We will do and we will listen." From that moment on, it was the Jews who became the beloved children of the Almighty. All others exist merely to be tolerated, or perhaps to serve God's grander scheme to simply bring benefits to His chosen people.

In this view, non-Jews were written off forever from divine favor. The world only exists for the sake of Torah; Gentiles who do not accept Torah are merely vestigial remnants of ancient times, consigned to eternal divine rejection.

In sharp contrast to this particularistic view, another interpretation is that even after the covenant at Sinai between God and the Jewish people, the creator of the entire world did not renounce hope and confidence in the rest of mankind. Judaism may well have a universalistic vision. After all, it was Adam, progenitor of *all* human beings on earth, who was created in God's image. That makes all humanity

one, at least in some measure, with the Almighty. It lends all people divine dignity. It sets humans apart from the beasts that preceded them in the act of creation. Human existence is imbued with a level of holiness. This spiritual link to the creator suggests that sin is but a temporary aberration; the refusal of non-Jews long ago to accept a covenant with God represents a failing in the past that will at some point be rectified. All descendants of Adam must someday agree to live their lives as God had intended. The goal of history must be for Jews to serve as a catalyst for the rest of the world, to ensure that what the Jews grasped at Sinai eventually becomes acknowledged by all of God's children.

Which is the correct interpretation of Judaism and its attitude toward those outside the covenant? The words of Isaiah (49:6) come immediately to mind: We are to be “a light unto the nations.” Our historically early acceptance of Torah places upon us an obligation to share its beauty with those who were not ready for its truths when first offered to them.

Why did God give the Torah in the desert of Sinai rather than in the holy land? Our sages (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:6) explain that God wanted to demonstrate that the Torah didn't belong to one nation alone or even to one country. A desert is halachically designated as “a place free for all, without owner, no man's land,” or better put, “every man's land” (*makom hefker*). The Torah was not given in Israel for that would have meant it was to be uniquely the Jewish Constitution. It was given in a space owned by human kind equally, for it was intended for all. Its purpose is to turn a world without law — which, by definition, is a barren desert — into

a blooming, fertile, and productive place for human existence.

Yitro (Exodus 18–20), Moses' father-in-law Jethro, is the name of the biblical portion where we read the account of the most important event in Jewish history, the revelation of the Decalogue. It is strange that Moses does not receive this honor. It is stranger still that the portion has as its title the name of someone who was not even born a Jew, but who only later in life abandoned his false idols and recognized monotheism. Why choose him? Because he is the greatest illustration of what the Torah is meant to accomplish — to transform idolaters into believers, pagans into worshipers of God.

When the Jewish people stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and were prepared to accept the Torah, God defined their mission by telling Moses to instruct the people the following:

וַעֲתָה אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְהִיִּיתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָל הָאָרֶץ. וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מִמְלַכֶּת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבַּר אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Now therefore if you will listen unto My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be mine own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation ...

Exodus 19:5 – 6

The commentators are intrigued by the phrase “a kingdom of priests” — *mamlechet kohanim*. Surely the Jewish people will not all be priests. The 12 tribes were divided into Priests, Levites, and Israelites; most Jews are simply Israelites. Why does God say that the Jewish people in its entirety will become a kingdom of Priests? Yehudah HaLevi (*Kuzari*, 2:35-44) explained that even as the Priests were

to be the teachers and holy leaders for the rest of the Jewish people, so too, the Jews have to become the holy leaders of the rest of the world. That is the meaning of “You shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples.” Not to be selected “from among” so that all others be discarded. Rather to be the *Kohanim* who will ensure that all others eventually follow, for “*all the earth is mine.*”

This universalistic concept is even used by one of the Talmudic sages to explain why Jews throughout history have been exiled around the globe. In a daring suggestion, Rabbi Eliezer offers the possible rationale that this seeming punishment may have a totally different purpose:

אמר ר' א לא הגלה הקדוש ברוך הוא את ישראל לבין האומות אלא כדי שיתוספו עליהם גרים שנאמר (הושע ב, כה) וזרעתיה לי בארץ כלום אדם זורע סאה אלא להכניס כמה כורין.

The Holy One, blessed be He, did not exile Israel among the nations save in order that proselytes might join them, for it is said: “and I will sow her unto Me in the land” [Hosea 2:25]. Surely a man sows a se'ah [biblical measure] in order to harvest many kor.

Pesachim 87b

Jews must spread the knowledge of one God. The existence of the Jews allows for an awareness of Torah in the greater world community.

The Three Pilgrimage Festivals

In this light we may understand a deeper reason behind the sequence of the three pilgrimage festivals, Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

Three major moments are commemorated in these holidays. Passover, the time when the Jews left Egypt, is identified always as the

“Festival of our freedom” — *zman cherutenu*. Shavuot, referred to as *zman matan Torateinu*, recalls “The time of the giving of the Torah” 50 days later. The 40 years of wandering through the desert, leading up to the entry into Israel, is marked by Sukkot, the “Festival of our rejoicing,” *zman simchatenu*.

These descriptives attached to the festivals all recall their historic component. Yet another aspect is also incorporated into every one of them. The history of our people coincides with specific seasons. And the agricultural phenomenon of these seasons are crucial to the proper observance of the festivals, so much so that whenever we refer to these holidays we allude to their links with nature as well.

Passover is also called *Chag ho'Aviv* — “the Festival of the spring.” So important is this connection that although Jews observe a lunar calendar, we are commanded to insert an extra month in the year if the sages determined that Passover, because the lunar calendar is shorter than the solar, would occur too early and thereby lose its required link with spring.

The emphasis on the season in nature in addition to the historic basis for Passover is true for the other two festivals in the series as well. In the Bible, Shavuot is referred to as *Chag Ha'Bikurim* — the “Festival of the First Fruits.” Farmers saw the first of the harvest ripen at this time of year. They would take their first fruits that bloomed and bring them to Jerusalem. Sukkot, the last in the series, must always occur in the fall so that its agricultural title applies: *Chag Ha'Assif* — “Festival of the Harvest.”

Spring, first fruit, and harvest are

not simply addenda to the historic moments that these holidays commemorate. By way of metaphor, they offer the most profound insight into the meaning of the historic moments they ask us to recall.

To what may Passover best be compared? God finds a people He feels worthy of deliverance. To them He will subsequently give the Torah. They would be bearers of His mission. After the long darkness of historic winter, God's people begin to “blossom.” It is spring. God and Israel meet as lovers. Shir Ha'shirim, the love song of Solomon, is a required biblical reading for Passover. But the relationship has not yet borne any fruit. Without Torah we can speak of no real fulfillment. Spring is but the season of promise, projected in terms of budding and blossoming. It is *Chag Ho'Aviv*. It remains for Shavuot, the time of the giving of the Torah to metaphorically coincide with *Chag HaBikurim*. The messages of historic revelation and of nature's sending forth its fruits are in fact identical. Just as the farmer longs for his fruit to come forth from the seed, so too did God gratefully recognize the spiritual birth of the Jewish people. The world bore its first fruit when the Jews said, “We will do and we will hear.”

Yet that moment of revelation in nature is not the final harvest. It is merely synonymous with the “Festival of First Fruits.” The agricultural comparison assumes powerful meaning when we note the word used by God to describe His people. At the burning bush, God informed Moses that he would one day warn Pharaoh about the plague of the firstborn. The reason for this 10th plague was given:

וַתִּמְאַן לְשַׁלְחוֹ הַגָּה אֶנְכִי הָרַג אֶת בְּנֵךְ בְּכֹרְךָ.
And you shall say unto Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn, and I have said unto you, let My son go that he may serve Me. And you have refused to let him go. Behold I will slay your son, your firstborn.”

וַתִּמְאַן לְשַׁלְחוֹ הַגָּה אֶנְכִי הָרַג אֶת בְּנֵךְ בְּכֹרְךָ.
And you shall say unto Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn, and I have said unto you, let My son go that he may serve Me. And you have refused to let him go. Behold I will slay your son, your firstborn.”
Exodus 4:22 – 23

The firstborn of Egypt were slain, measure for measure, because Pharaoh had harmed God's firstborn; *b'ni b'chori Yisrael* — “My son, My firstborn, is Israel.” In what sense is Israel the firstborn of God? The commentator Ibn Ezra explains: “They were the first of My children to serve Me.”

Even as the uniqueness of the Jewish people is expressed in these words, God makes clear that He has many children. He is Father to everyone on earth. What makes Israel special is not that we are His “only” children, but rather that we are His first, the first to acknowledge Him. We are, as it were, the first fruits of the Almighty. How appropriate that the moment when the first nation appeared on the scene of world history to submit to God as master and accepted His will as law is when nature offers up its annual message of fulfillment by way of *Bikkurim*.

But first fruits are not the final harvest. Shavuot cannot be the end of the cycle of festivals. How could God, who created the entire world, be content if only a small portion of humanity is dedicated to Him? History must bring about recognition on the part of all; from first fruits we must eventually proceed to an ingathering of all the crops in the fields, a complete harvest.

If Passover commemorates the Exodus and Shavuot the Revelation, then Sukkot speaks of the time that

has not yet come to pass, the end of days which the prophets spoke of with the certainty of their eventual arrival. Sukkot, agriculturally the time of the final harvest, affirms that history too will emulate the workings of nature. The “first fruits” of the covenant at Sinai will eventually be followed by a time of universal acceptance of God, a time for rejoicing in the fullest sense of the word, a *zman simchotenu* for all of mankind.

Sukkot is the holiday of universalism par excellence. On this holiday we are commanded in the Torah to offer 70 sacrifices — sacrifices on behalf of all of the nations of the world. The wavings of the four plant species are to be directed to the four corners of the earth. We are to leave the confines of our homes that separate us from others and sit in booths under the heavens that look down upon all of God’s children.

And it is precisely on this holiday that the prophet Zechariah tells us, in the text that has become designated as the Haftarah reading for the first day of Sukkot, that “It shall come to pass that everyone that is left of all the nations that came against Jerusalem shall

go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to *keep the feast of Tabernacles*” [14:16]. Sukkot will eventually be observed by the whole world because this is the holiday meant to fulfill the joy of the final harvest for God — a joy long delayed and overdue from the Shavuot moment when only the Jewish “first fruits” appeared on the scene at Sinai.

The Universalistic Vision of the Shema Yisrael

So important is this idea that according to Rashi, the prime commentator on the Torah, it finds expression in the verse we are commanded to recite twice daily to verbally summarize our commitment to God and our faith.

The six words of the Shema have been translated in many ways. On the simplest level, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” affirms no more than a belief in monotheism. But Rashi sees much more in this statement:

ה' אלהינו ה' אחד - ה' שהוא אלקינו עתה ולא אלקי האומות, הוא עתיד להיות ה' אחד, שנאמר (צפניה ג, ט) כי אז אהפוך אל עמים

שפה ברורה לקרוא כולם בשם ה' ונאמר (זכריה יד, ט) ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד:

The Lord is our God the Lord is one — the Lord who at present is our God and not the God of the nations, He is destined to become the One God, as it says, “For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one consent” (Zephaniah 3:9), and it says, “And in that day the Lord will be One and his name will be One” (Zechariah 14:9).

Rashi, Devarim 6:4

The phrase that summarizes our faith, the Torah verse we are to teach our children as soon as they learn how to speak and that, if we have the opportunity to do so, to recite before we go to our deaths, doesn’t simply express belief in God. More than monotheism, it asserts total conviction that at some future time all of mankind will share this knowledge and join us in acknowledging the creator of the heavens and the Earth. And that may well be the most relevant and meaningful message of Sukkot.

Sukkot is the holiday of universalism par excellence ... We are to leave the confines of our homes that separate us from others and sit in booths under the heavens that look down upon all of God’s children.

