



Universalism and Particularism in the Liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

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Of all of the Jewish holidays, the major ones that are coming up next week—Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement)—are the most universal in their message. At the same time, they do not ignore Jewish particularism. Yet, the universalist/humanist side of these days is all too often downplayed and subdued in favor of the nationalist themes which can also be found in our prayers on these days.

There is one page in our High Holiday *Mahzor* (special prayer book just for these days), which summarizes this very nicely. It constitutes three paragraphs, which according to scholars were added to the liturgy for these days in the third century as poetic additions for these special days. The first paragraph reads:

Lord, , our God, instill your awe in all You have made, and fear of You in all You have created, so that all You have fashioned revere You, all You have created bow in recognition, and all be bound together, carrying out Your will wholeheartedly...

The emphasis on **all human beings** could not be more striking or more emphasized. We are one human family, bound together, and we ought to carry out God's will together. It is not us against them, our tribe versus their tribe, our nation versus other nations. This is a sublime expression of our common humanity.

If this was true in the third century, how much more so, ought this to be the case in our globalized world of the twenty-first century, in which we are all challenged by climate change, mass migration and many other universal issues.

But we don't stop there. We begin with the universal expression of our common bonds of humanity and then move to a recognition that in addition to our belonging to all humanity, we are also part of a people, which has a special mission in the world, and a special connection to a particular land. Accordingly, the second paragraph of this trilogy reads:

Bestow honor to your people, O God, praise to those who revere You, hope to those who seek You, and recognition to those who await You, joy to your land and gladness to your city.

If anyone wants a clear reference to the fact that Jews are a people, and not just a religious group, one can certainly find it here. We Jews are a people with a very unique attachment to a particular land, the land of Israel, and a particular city, the city of Jerusalem. And, we seek to find in this land not conflict and dissension but hope, and integrity, joy and gladness. What a beautiful expression of our most fervent dreams as a people, and as individuals.

Yet, we are not finished. The third paragraph of this special section of our prayers, rounds out our aspirations for us as a people for the New Year:

Then, the righteous, beholding this, will rejoice, the upright will be glad, the pious will celebrate with song, evil will be silenced, and all wickedness will disappear like smoke, when you remove the

tyranny of arrogance from the earth.

When will this happen? When we realize that we are at the same time part of humanity and part of a people. And what will this people do? It will put an end to evil and wickedness, and it will avoid arrogance, both in our land and in this world!!

In other words, together with the rest of humanity, we need to strive make this a better world, at the same time that we seek to make our own country a better country. The social and political implications of these prayers could not be more relevant in our world today, where we are witness to so many arrogant leaders and so many downright evil regimes. (I am refraining from mentioning any particular names, to avoid “politics”).

This third paragraph has one more section to it which ties it all together:

You alone, God, will rule all Your creation, from Mount Zion, the dwelling-place of Your glory, and from Jerusalem, your holy city. As it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘The Lord will reign forever; your God, O Zion, from generation to generation. Halleluyah!

This ascribes a special role for Jerusalem and for Israel. It means that this city and this country must return to being “a light unto the nations”, a society that will give hope to the world, (as it was, for those who can remember, in the early years of the state.). We have a role and a responsibility to care for the world, from our special place, not to ignore it and not to withdraw from it.

And finally this section of our prayers concludes with a quote from the prophet Isaiah:

You are holy, and Your name is revered, for there is no God but You. As Your prophet Isaiah wrote: ‘God will be exalted through justice, the holy God, sanctified through righteousness.’

How are we going to be partners with God in the year ahead in making this a better world? By acting justly and righteously, as individuals, as a people, and as part of humanity.

Let’s do it together this year, and not separately.

(all translations of the prayers are based

on the translations from the new prayer book

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Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish, Founding Director and now Senior Advisor, the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, (the Israel chapter of Religions for Peace), now a department of Rabbis for Human Rights

and Library Fellow, the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute.

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