

Universalism: Beyond the Particular
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Last summer my family and I spent two weeks in Israel. We were on the synagogue tour, which was extraordinary. Then we stayed for another couple days, when we celebrated our son Laurence's becoming bar mitzvah at a small sunrise service with our family at the top of Masada. After that very early and very memorable morning, we enjoyed a festive breakfast with our family at our hotel by the Dead Sea, spent some time relaxing at the pool, and then packed up our rental car to head to the airport. We planned a dinner stop at a convenient McDonalds, as the boys were very excited about having their first Big Macs—the meat in Israel is kosher. After filling up on good American cuisine, (sorry, I know it's a fast day!) and having been up since three in the morning, we quite lethargically headed out to the parking lot to the car. I was ahead of Alla and the boys. I walked up to the car and opened the driver's door to get in, noticed Alla trying to tell me something but I can't quite hear what she's saying, and then I feel a fierce tap on my shoulder. I turn around to find an Arab man, about my age, staring into my face rather aggressively. As I try to quickly shift my brain into gear to understand what is happening, suddenly Alla starts laughing out loud, an exaggerated laugh, saying, "Ha Ha Ha. Wrong Car! Wrong Car!" I suddenly look inside the car and see an Arab woman sitting in the passenger seat and two teenage girls in the back. Looking at their faces within the head coverings I could see confusion, anxiety and some fear. Ah, the wrong car! I then find my car parked two spots away. I look at the man staring in my face and show him my keys with the big Hertz keychain, and say, "Rental car! Same color!" Then Alla laughs again. The man laughs. His wife laughs. I smile and ask, "Want to switch families?" The girls in his back seat giggle. I stand aside. He takes his seat and drives away. Then my sons start cracking up. Alla gives me that look. And I say, "Good thing you started laughing right then!"

Yes, they had one on me, and Alla's quick thinking helped prevent another international incident. Thinking about that funny episode, though, I am reflecting now that I am indeed embarrassed. Not that I

didn't recognize my car. It was a rental car that I only just picked up from Jerusalem the day before. I'm embarrassed that the first thing I noticed about that family, that is, after I noticed them, was that they were Arab. And I'm sure that the man who thought I was about to drive away with his family saw that I was a Jew. It's not that he was wearing a kufiyah and neither was I wearing a kippah at the time. The women were wearing head coverings but I only noticed them later. So how did I know that he was an Arab and how did he know that I was a Jew? In Israel you just know. If you live there long enough you just know. I did live in Jerusalem for two separate years so I don't feel like a tourist when I am in Israel. IF you live there you identify with your ethnicity, which is either Jewish, Arab, or other. While the state is majority Jewish, the state does not define identity. Social critics in Israel have often pointed to this problem in the social fabric: why can't people just identify as Israeli? Why does it have to be Jewish or Arab?

These are not problems specific to Israel. Just yesterday the New York Times carried a piece on its front page by one of its editors, Michael Luo, about how his family was yelled at on the streets of New York to "go back to China." Luo was born in the United States and been an American all his life. We seem to see more and more the scary face of racism and prejudice. We understand the anger and sadness over the prejudicial assessments of African American men in society and on the street, even as our first African American president concludes his second and final term in office. The growing prejudice against Muslims in America was raised as a question in the last presidential debate on Sunday. And we are witnessing throughout the world a turning away from the ethics of basic humanitarianism as refugees fleeing horrid war zones are turned away, sent back home.

When I was a boy and first learned about the Holocaust, the part that was the hardest for me to understand was how the rest of the world, the good countries, countries like the United States of America among others, turned Jewish refugees away, refused to let them disembark, and sent their ships back to Germany, back to Hitler. I consoled myself in believing that the world was better today than it was when

my grandparents were in their prime. That today the world has learned its lesson. That it would never permit prejudice and self-interest to allow innocent people to suffer and die, that it would never send people needing a safe place to live back to the nightmare they were trying to escape.

But while I don't drive my grandfather's Oldsmobile (I don't think he had one), this is still my grandfather's world. This is still my grandfather's America. There is still so much to do. While there of course differences between refugees from the Holocaust and today's refugees, nevertheless, specifically because of our experience of the past, I expected better of the world today. Doing our part here I am excited to learn from three of our members a week from Friday night as they will tell us their personal stories of fleeing places of persecution and finding a new home in America. That is a special Friday night service, discussion and dinner. Please let the office know tomorrow if you are coming.

Sadly, there are so many examples today of people choosing prejudice and fear over the call of the ethical, of mitzvah. But let's look at two strikingly different examples in Europe. On the one hand is Germany. Germany is, I suppose, ahead of the learning curve in understanding the dangerous path along which prejudice and fear can take a country. Because of that experience, and because of the strong leadership of Chancellor Merkel, the Federal Republic of Germany continues to lead the world in finding room for refugees. Not without difficulties. And not without growing political pressure. But it is when we see the anti-immigrant anti-foreigner hatreds express themselves in Germany we see, clearer than anywhere else, the true face that stares behind it. Let us never forget that we were those immigrants once. We were those foreigners once. Even though, like the Asian American editor writing in the New York Times yesterday, we were born in that country, spoke the language perfectly and always lived there. And yet we were treated as foreigners and strangers, as a danger to the public good, as a threat. And no one else took us in.

Germany still struggles with its demons. Demons which will never entirely disappear. But let's talk about another European country now. I tell you, I felt like someone punched me in the stomach when

the British people voted to leave the European Union. As is clearer now in the aftermath than even at the time, the majority voted to leave the EU because of one reason and one reason only: the Schengen Agreement. That is the name of the 1985 treaty that eliminated the border controls between EU member states. You remember the old days, right? When we had to pass through customs at each border, and also change money? Even more than the common currency, the open borders have served to bring together a continent that twice in the last century brought the world down to the horrible hell of world war. Those open borders, simple signs with the name of the country that we pass on the highway, symbolized for me the hope for a better world.

Once, my Israeli uncle visited us when Alla and I were still living in Westchester. We took a drive with him to New Jersey and as we crossed the George Washington Bridge I pointed out the small green sign on the midway point of the span that marks the state line. “One day,” he said, “we will be able to travel and cross borders in the Middle East between Israel and the Arab countries, just like this.” That is a prayer. But what a blessing that our states here are united so that we can travel freely from one to another. There is enough traffic already on the GW; could you imagine border controls too? Our union is a blessing. As has the EU been for peace in Europe and the world.

And yet, the British people voted for Brexit, to leave the EU, because of the Schengen Agreement. Because they don’t want open borders. Because they don’t want foreigners entering Britain.

Alla, the boys and I did enter the UK this summer. We had to stop in Greece before Israel for my cousin’s wedding—yes, a very nice destination wedding!—and we spent a few days in London on our way there. When we landed at Heathrow and were passing through border control I answered the questions of the officer as clearly as possible, as the general rule is to not make jokes and just get through. He asked me how long we would be in the UK. Four days I said. But then, aware of the Schengen Agreement, that still held even though the Brexit vote had just happened, I wasn’t sure if I should include the time we were to spend in Greece in my answer, so I said, “Well, four days here and then more time in the EU.” “EU?”

the border control officer asked me? “We don’t say that word anymore. You see this button here? I press that for people like you and we send you to the dungeon!” I travel a lot, but that was the first time I met a border control officer with a sense of humor! That being said, clearly he was sharing the tension over the Brexit campaign and vote, as well as the disappointment through London with the result.

I don’t usually get so political here, but I want to take the liberty to discuss Brexit. Those are not our politics, and yet it is our world. Why did I feel punched in the gut when the British people voted to walk away from the EU? Yes, I was, and am, so bothered by the anti-foreigner prejudice. By the fear of open borders. But there is more than that. For me, the EU has always held the promise of what the world can be, of how we can transcend our particularisms and build a common human community. For me, it offered a glimpse of salvation.

I did speak last night about the treasure of community. We find strength and warmth in our particular families and cultures. We need to be nurtured and feel safe before we take part in the wider world. But there is that wider world. I don’t imagine a world where everyone is the same with no individual cultures, languages, music, religion, etc. Rather, I envision a world where all those particular communities, all those cultures and languages and religions can share their gifts with each other, can learn from each other, and can live together, strengthening each other rather than retreating into fortresses of fear and isolation. We need to find the middle path of celebrating our particular treasures while avoiding the chauvinism of too much particularism that we find and struggle with in the Aleinu, as I addressed on Rosh Hashanah. A perfect symbol of that is the euro coin itself. I would hold one up, but it is Yom Kippur so we are not supposed to handle money. The euro, the common EU currency—yes that currency that our British friends could not agree to join even before Brexit—has two sides. On the one side is a map of Europe with the number 1. On the other side is a mint particular to each country. In Germany it has the German eagle. In France there is a seal of a tree with the words Liberte Egalite Fraternite and with the letters RF for Republique Francaise. In Greece it has the owl of Athena. In Italy, the famous da Vinci

drawing of the Vitruvian man. In Spain it has the face of the monarch. Every nation's particularity is minted on that one side of the euro. And what is special is that the coins circulate. So that in any one country most of the euros are minted there in that country, but you will have euros from other EU countries in circulation as well. One learns to live with the differences and commonalities, just as Europeans have learned to live with multiple languages and cultures. The symbolism of the common yet particular coin sides was such a great idea that we copied it here with the different states depicted on the quarter.

And it is more than that. So much more. From the time I was a little boy I seemed to always know, always believe, that in the future the world would unite under a single enlightened government. I suppose the problem was that I grew up a Star Trek fan. What made Star Trek so special, so redemptive, was that here was a television show from the 1960s, from the midst of the Cold War, that imagined a future where earth was united under a single government, working to form an even larger union, a United Federation of Planet. Differences were not washed over, they were celebrated. The Russian ensign and the Scottish engineer would exchange friendly insults. There was the Japanese helmsman, the African American woman lieutenant, and even the half human half Vulcan Mr. Spock. Certainly that had to be our real future, the young impressionable and hopeful David Fine thought.

It was in high school that I fell in love with Woodrow Wilson. I have shelves of books on Woodrow Wilson at home. I must have read every biography about him, have poured over his own words, and seen every photograph. I ended up going to Wesleyan University for college, but the reason why I went to visit the campus in the first place was because of the little known fact that Woodrow Wilson taught there for two years. Yes, I have dragged Alla to the house where he was born in Staunton, Virginia. I've made the pilgrimage to his home in Washington, DC, and to his tomb in the National Cathedral. And I even got myself into some hot water last November when I published an op ed defending his legacy against protests at Princeton that he was a racist.

What enthralled me about Woodrow Wilson? It was the dream of the League of Nations. The idea that from war the turn to peace needed to entail consolidation and union was for me exactly what Star Trek was about. The Star Trek idea was that after the catastrophe of another world war, the people of Earth realized that their only good option was to work with each rather than against each other, and to unite. Growing up in the 1970s and 80s, under the specter of nuclear war, I wanted us to get to that future without destroying ourselves in the process. Could we skip World War III and go directly to world peace? Why not? Woodrow Wilson already figured out the answer at the end of World War I back in 1918! What made him a messiah-like politician was that he found a way to transcend the particular concerns and politics and rise to a higher stage of statesmanship. He did that literally, travelling to the Europe to preside with his Allied partners over the peace negotiations. He was the very first American president to ever leave the sovereign territory of the United States while in office. And they didn't have Air Force One then. He really had to leave, and was away for months. That might be one reason, among others, that he lost control over the domestic political scene. He is my tragic hero, fighting for a vision that he was unable to accomplish yet believing to the end that it was in the best interest of his country and the world. His sermons against isolationism, his charge that we must be engaged in the world, started to win traction when we were drawn back into European conflict in World War II. Our country took a heavy lead in the United Nations, making up for its absence from the League, but the UN, while doing much important work in the world, has not achieved the Wilsonian vision of a world governing council.

I was so enamored with Wilson's vision and dreams when I was in high school that I doodled down a draft constitution for what a real federal world government could look like. Calculus and Physics were not grabbing me. The main issue was how to retain the identities of the individual countries while creating a real federal union above them. I remember being so convinced that this was the only future for the world until my father said to me one day, "David, your ideas are all very interesting, but how to do you reconcile this with your Jewishness? What about Zionism? Do you really want the Jews to give up

sovereignty over Israel to some world government, when it was so difficult to get that from the United Nations in the first place (and would probably not pass if voted on today!)?” Hmm. That was a tough one. Understand, he wasn’t arguing with me as much as pushing me to articulate things better. I felt deeply that the ultimate purpose of Judaism must be something higher than sovereignty. Isn’t Judaism supposed to teach us that we are a part of the world? Just as a Jew is not supposed to be alone but in community, as I discussed last night, so also the Jewish people are not meant to be alone. As the vision of the Aleinu imagines, aren’t we supposed to be a light unto the nations, a beacon to the world for all the nations of the world to come together under the one God? And, while it took me some time to work it out until I could speak to the issue as I did on Rosh Hashanah, the real meaning of the Aleinu is not that we prevail over others in the end, but rather that we all come together, accepting each other, and building thereby a better and redeemed world.

Theodor Herzl’s founding vision of Zionism, by the way, was not necessarily independent sovereignty. He would have been fine with the Jewish state existing under the protection of the Ottoman Sultan, or the German Kaiser or the British monarch. In the end, he fought a losing battle in the Zionist congress to accept a British proposal of a Jewish state in Africa under the British crown. Herzl’s was concerned with autonomy, not sovereignty. For him, a proud Jewish state was destined not to for sovereign isolation but for integration as an equal and respected partner in the European cultural orbit. So as I continued to think about this through the years, I kept imagining ways to refine my hopes for a consolidated peaceful world community where there would still be a place for an Israel, where we would not lose our individuality. Where we could have our small community within the broader federation, if you will.

A few years ago I was having lunch at a kosher steak restaurant in Manhattan with a high ranking diplomat from the German consulate. After discussing more mundane matters, I shared with him my vision of Israel one day becoming an EU member. My friend almost choked on his food. I knew what he

was thinking. That Israel is the most particularistic of nations. Politics aside, why would it ever even want to give up its sovereignty to join the European Union? And besides the fact that it is not actually in Europe. I responded that Europe is about more than geography. It's about trade and culture. Israel is already a part of Europe in that sense. Partly because it is isolated in its own region and partly because of the cultural affinities, Israel trades with Europe. Israel competes in the European song festivals. Israel, while it has strong Middle Eastern aspects to it, is in many respects already a European country. Wouldn't acceptance in the EU be the culmination of the Zionist dream, of total Jewish acceptance?

Interesting, he said, but not on the current agenda. Of course not. But I do hope that my silly high school doodlings reflect a prayer and vision that is not too utopian to never see fruition. As I watched the Cold War end and the borders of the EU expand, as I saw the United States stand by its commitment to engagement in the world even in the absence of its Cold War competitor (although Russia is coming back on the stage), I had great hopes for where the world was going.

As Americans we should be predisposed to the idea of unification. I enjoyed much of this past summer reading Ron Chernow's 900-page biography of George Washington. Yes, I caught the Hamilton-mania and then kept going. Washington led the struggle to unify our country. Not only against the British but also against all the Americans who saw themselves first as of their particular states before they saw themselves as Americans. Washington was not first a Virginian. He held firm against the other Virginian patricians like Jefferson and Madison and Monroe who were concerned about the growth of federal power. Washington devoted all his political energies and leadership to the formation of a nation that would exceed the sum of its component states. In a great unfinished symphony, another great movement of which was composed through the tragic struggle years later by Abraham Lincoln, our nation grew as the model of what smaller states can become when they come together to be something greater.

I mention Washington as well because the Rabbi Selig Salkowitz Distinguished Speaker that we are hosting in partnership with Temple Avodat Shalom next month is the distinguished American Jewish

historian and archivist Dr. Gary P. Zola who will be speaking here on Shabbat morning November 12 on “George Washington, American Jewry and the Story of Religious Freedom in America.” He will no doubt teach us about Washington’s famous 1790 letter to the Newport synagogue. It is a text that American Jews, and all Americans for that matter, should memorize. In the words of the first president: “For happily, the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens.”

The America that Washington fought for is still a work in progress, as he surely knew when he died. At the core of his vision was a polity where no one group would reign over another. His emancipation of his slaves in his will is a testament to the space that remains between the world we envision and the world we live in.

Washington understood that only in unity, in the coming together of different states, could security and peace be established. What he envisioned for America can be applied to Europe, and ultimately to the world. I believe that his policies of isolationism were pragmatic, not programmatic. That need for states to come together even as they retain their separateness applies to religions as well. As Abraham Joshua Heschel articulated to a non-Jewish audience in 1965: “The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations. Energies, experiences, and ideas that come to life outside the boundaries of a particular religion or all religions continue to challenge and to effect every religion. Horizons are wider, dangers are great. No religion is an island.” Heschel was perhaps thinking of the words of the English poet John Donne: “No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

But the British electorate voted to stay on their island. To turn away from the continent. To turn away from the common cause, and to close its gates to strangers. Is it possible that history will yet again stall in its slow move towards a better world? Will we move backwards again, revert to old ways of

inwardness, prejudice, fear of others and lack of vision? Or will we find a way to shore ourselves up in our own communities as we continue to join and embrace others and build something better, a better community, a better country and a better world? I think back to that moment in the parking lot outside the McDonald's in Israel back in July. I am embarrassed that the first thing I saw was that that family was Arab. But in the end, we saw that we were just two families, two families with similar looking cars. We were two men about the same age. Both married. Both with two children. He had two teenage girls. I, two middle school boys. We had both just eaten at McDonald's. Surely, we were more the same than different. While we came from different peoples and cultures, we found ourselves in the same place, almost sharing a parking spot, in a tiny country at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea. If we could accept each other, as we did at that moment, the world can take a step closer together. Then will we achieve the vision of the Aleinu, when all the world will worship the one God together, *bayom hahu yihyeh Adonai ehad ushemo ehad.*