Editor's Note

It Takes a Cosmic Village: Universalism's Potential and Its Discontents

In one of his most significant essays penned and published in English, appearing in these pages in 1978, Rabbi Soloveitchik observed:

> Man was created of cosmic dust. God gathered the dust, of which man was fashioned, from all parts of the earth, indeed, from all the uncharted lanes of creation. Man belongs everywhere. He is no stranger to any part of the universe. . . . In short, man is a cosmic being.

At the same time, dialectically, he offered an opposing interpretation of man's relationship with the world:

> [M]an was created from the dust of a single spot. Man is committed to one locus. The Creator assigned him a single spot he calls home. Man is not cosmic; he is here-minded. He is a rooted being, not cosmopolitan but provincial, a villager who belongs to the soil that fed him as a child and to the little world into which he was born. [Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 27, 29.]

Both modes of existence are simultaneously present and sanctioned in mankind; both the cosmic, cosmopolitan universalist and the parochial particularist reside within the soul of each of us—and both have spiritual significance. "Both cosmos-conscious man and origin-conscious man quest for God, although they are not always aware of this quest" (31). Rabbi Norman Lamm, showing the Rav's influence on his thinking, suggested that "the philosophy of modern Orthodoxy [is] a total commitment to the Halakhah while living in this world and participating in it fully." And yet he once admonished his congregants that a troubling aspect of our community is the problem of forgetting the centrality of Torah study: "the vital center of our own lives is Torah, we cannot and dare not get along without some element of the over-all community that is totally and exclusively committed to the study of Torah and Torah alone."

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Elsewhere, in a slightly different context, he suggested "There is no unresolvable conflict between them. Those who would remove one from the other . . . offend the deepest tenets of our faith."*

It seems to me that along with a portfolio of other *sugyot* (*Torah u-Madda*, "orthodoxies" and freedom of inquiry, faith and science, tradition and modernity), the universalism-particularism dyad is one of those topics Modern Orthodoxy wrestles with in every generation. The conversation, debate, argument for the sake of Heaven is itself a worthy goal, even as the pendulum swings or the ground shifts microscopically beneath our feet. Young people are initiated into these conversations by their older guides who steer them along. The process enables us to reach surprising new understandings about ourselves, keeping us mentally awake and morally straight as a religious community. (Our sister publication *TheLehrhaus.com* recently ran an extensive symposium on the state of *Torah u-Madda*, testimony to its pride of place among the evergreen topics, which advanced an oblique criticism of those that might do more to preserve and advance it as a living value. *Plus ça change*.)

While the dialectical dance goes on, we remember that even the parochials engage with the big wide world, for otherwise how would they know what to close themselves off from? Similarly, religious cosmopolitans with integrity remain rooted in the intellectual and spiritual *Alte Heim*; without that in what way could they be discerning consumers of "the best that has been thought and said" in the outside world to which they remain so open? As in so much of the Rav's philosophical writing, we are dealing with a thought experiment—no centrifuge has yet been invented to spin a person out into disparate Adam I and Adam II, to separate our majestic from our humble atoms; they both reside within us. We strive to obtain operative harmony and balance, even if (as the Rav suggests) the dialectic is "irreconcilable and hence interminable."

And yet, for both sides of the equation, if Jews, as the old witticism goes, "are just like everyone else, only more so"—must we be *more so* in some of the worst ways?

I began to struggle with this on a recent visit to the United States. Although I have made my home in Israel for nearly three decades, and have spent almost my entire professional life here, I always consider myself a keen observer of American Jewry in particular and American society, culture, and politics in general. Since the omnipresence of the Internet and arrival of modern modes of communication this has been

made a good deal easier (when I first arrived in Israel, aerogrammes and *asimonim* were still around, but they were having their last hurrah). No doubt, the privilege of teaching many American students in and around Jerusalem these many years has helped my finger remain on the pulse of American Orthodoxy.

So, after the lengthiest absence from the United States, brought about by COVID travel restrictions, I was surprised by certain changes I observed during my visit. Why has our commitment to being citizens of the world become a full-on engagement in the contemporary culture wars? Are we mindful of the damage to the fabric of our religious communities—to say nothing of American society—when we look upon those who vote differently as enemies of the state? Political opponents are rivals, never enemies. Consider Lincoln's warning: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." If true for fellow countrymen, how much more so for fellow congregants—those "better angels" to whom we are bound by "love thy neighbor" and the covenants of both faith and destiny. These are our brother and sister Jews, whom we seek to not only talk to, but daven with.

Yet, in every community I visited I met at least one person, and in some cases a good deal more, who said of a fellow congregant, "I can't talk to that guy anymore—he's too much of an *X*, he believes in *Y*, he voted for *Z*." (Make no mistake, these variables can be assigned with as much ease by the left or the right, a type of political Mad Libs—fill in an adjective, ideology, and candidate.)

To be certain, the dialectical tension between universalism and particularism is not a product of the culture wars. Both Republican and Democratic Orthodox Jews can claim that they are engaged in addressing universalistic concerns. But tempering that certainty with a dose of particularism may remind both camps of the dangers inherent in identifying Judaism with any one political or social agenda. It would be tragically ironic if the Rav's brand of openness, in which we cosmic beings are "no stranger to any part of the universe," serves as license to import the most divisive current elements of general society into our communities. What's more, the current political climate is not only exhausting, but spiritually distracting. Torah should always trump Trump as Shabbat table talk.

Of course, what I diagnose as a disease on the body politic, infecting the Jewish sphere via general society, in which we are partisans in the street *and* in the shul, may be pointed to by some as a parochialist

triumph of the Jewish "villager who belongs to the soil that fed him as a child and to the little world into which he was born" (i.e., Torah and *mitzvot*). By arguing for Jewish values in the public square we aim to influence the big wide world and make it more like our own little village. Being a "light unto the nations" is, after all, a paradoxically particularistic form of universalism. Whether this is in line with how the Jewish community traditionally protected its own interests as a religious minority, whether it is effective in the long run, or whether we can ever be certain what the Torah's precise view on any particular front in an ideological or policy battle is (including in cases which may have little bearing on American Jewry or Jewish life) – can be debated by people of integrity and good faith, even when those characteristics are hard to come by. But we might ask ourselves, in the name of advancing Torah values, is there no irony in the fact that particularists are completely open to the culture wars but grow increasingly closed to culture? (And is there not something wrong when Modern Orthodoxy's engagement with "culture" is more often than not really a thin disguise for sanctioning every form of "leisure" and conspicuous consumption instead?)

These issues play themselves out in Israel in different but disturbing ways as well. The Jewish State, within the memories of most readers, witnessed the worst form of social division: political assassination (and, in a perverted manner, carried out in the name of the Torah itself). Nevertheless, the current political moment in Israel—with our unrelenting visits to the ballot box—seems to be, on the whole, strangely lacking in the vicious vigor of the public debate on the American scene.

It is therefore not surprising that *Tradition*, as a journal of ideas, finds itself publishing a number of essays on "Particularism and Universalism." Full disclosure: This editor's strong guiding hand did not bring this about. It seems, rather, that there is something in the ether. The authors in this issue are not necessarily motivated by the concerns I have enumerated here. In fact, had we not situated them together under a unifying headline, readers might not have noticed a common theme running among these articles. Nevertheless, the preponderance of attention to one issue, even broadly defined, by a number of our community's brightest thinkers, requires us to consider what's gotten into the drinking water. This, perhaps, is the noblest role *Tradition* can play: To be a scholarly journal, but one which aims to impact the life of a community, rather than remaining in the ivory tower; to serve as a mirror back onto our readership, helping it understand the challenges

which abound, and pointing in new directions to confront them. Clearly, we do not publish policy papers but philosophical articles, yet we aim to demonstrate that, properly presented, there's nothing quite so potentially practical as philosophy.

And so, in considering this constellation of related topics, we offer writing in this issue by Malka Z. Simkovich, who dismantles the Christian claim that Judaism is insular, ritualistic, misanthropic, and particularistic at its core. She questions whether the terms "universalism" and "particularism" remain useful categories, since both are essential to maintaining a healthy covenantal community that seeks to nourish its relationships with God and with other people. Readers will also be provoked by Yakov Nagen, who delineates some of the challenges and opportunities of shining the light of Torah to the nations of the world. Nagen argues that only in embracing this universalistic assignment are we ever fully loyal to our unique role. Less focused on the "inside/outside" mechanics of universalism, per se, Francis Nataf examines the intellectual pluralism of Rav Kook, rooted as it was in Jewish mystical practice and texts, and compares it to the philosophy of Nietzsche. Given that the ideas of both thinkers would play a role in subsequent Jewish thought, Nataf demonstrates the value in considering their teachings on pluralism, its limits and possibilities. We should also add other recent and related treatments of these topics, including that penned by Menachem Kellner (in our Fall 2021 issue), who returned to the pages of *Tradition* with a presentation of universalism as he reads it in Maimonidean texts. In our Spring 2022 issue, Samuel Lebens asked if it is possible to be a religious pluralist without collapsing into some sort of post-modern rejection of absolute truth and presented R. Jonathan Sacks' often criticized and misunderstood set of answers to this question. In that same issue, Shmuel Lesher introduced our readers to the thought of R. Eleazer Fleckeles (1754–1826), calling him "an early rabbinic humanist."

Whether these learned offerings might help ameliorate the ills I cataloged above is impossible to say. Perhaps they will allow us to consider ways in which we share common cause with our fellow citizens and humanity at-large. Perhaps these readings will help reorient our moral compass to "ask not" only about our rights, but remind us of civic responsibility—including, maybe most importantly, the responsibility to maintain civil dialogue *le-shem Shamayim*. Perhaps they will foster more nuanced habits of mind, always a valuable asset when considering the views of others with whom we disagree. Ultimately, engaging with

these topics may remind us of the Rav's concluding charge in "Majesty and Humility," one which has particular relevance for our current moment. Both our cosmic and provincial selves must recognize that "modern man is frustrated and perplexed because he cannot take defeat. He is simply incapable of retreating humbly" (36). Humility, that human virtue in such short supply these days, may help restore the majesty of Jewish community and universal polity.

– *Jeffrey Saks*

* Norman Lamm, "Upstream," sermon for *Beha'alotkha* (June 4, 1966); "The Purists," sermon for Hanukka (December 14, 1968); and "Religion with a Future," sermon for *Vayigash* (January 5, 1963), available at the Lamm Heritage Archives: www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage. I explored these themes in R. Lamm's thought in "The Extremes Are More Consistent But Absurd," *Tradition* 53:3 (2021), 206–216.