Jews and Others

Judaism has always sought a balance—between inward focus and outward focus, between the particular and the universal, attention to Jewish needs and attention to human needs, standing apart from the world and being an integral part of the world. The Sinai Covenant requires that Jewish attention be paid to both of these directions. On the one hand, there is work to be done on God’s earth and Jews need to join with non-Jewish allies to undertake and accomplish that work. No group can go it alone. On the other hand, Jews have always been committed to a vision of God’s will for the world that is unique. Our commitments—and the way of life that flows from them—have set us apart. As a small minority that has lived for most of our history in the midst of non-Jewish religions, cultures, and populations, we have had to take special care to guard our distinctiveness. The covenant thus impels Jews to care about and cooperate with others—and mandates, too, that we preserve our difference and, to some degree, our distance.

This balance has always been difficult to strike and maintain. I think it’s fair to say that Jews have often erred—and still do—by going too far in one direction or the other. I’m proud to say that Conservative Judaism has had noteworthy success over the past 150 years in getting the balance right. We need to think about how to continue to find that balance. The task has never been more difficult than it is right now, I think—and has never been more important.

When the prophet Balaam pronounced the people of Israel “a nation that dwells alone” (Num. 23:9), I think his prophecy carried at least as much curse as blessing. Isolation is not a good recipe for survival. Neither is it helpful in achieving the eternal objectives set for Jews by the Torah. There has always been a powerful strain in Jewish tradition that relishes isolation and counsels suspicion toward outsiders. In part, this attitude results from persecution and hostility that have rarely been absent from Jewish history. “Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations who know thee not,” the Passover Haggadah instructs Jews to pray as we symbolically open the door to the prophet Elijah, the harbinger of divine redemption. The prayer is a legacy of medieval persecutions.

And modernity has not brought an end to anti-Semitism. Today, too, the Jewish people has enemies, some of whom are bent on destroying the State of Israel. The “us versus them” mentality that remains widespread in some Jewish circles—especially among Orthodox Jews—is not without cause. But it is, I think, very sad. The Torah wants Jews to embrace the world, not to withdraw from it.

Thank goodness that inclusiveness, too, is a powerful strain in Judaism. Our Torah values Gentiles and good relations with Gentiles. The chapters from Isaiah that Jews read on Yom Kippur command us to feed the poor, house the
homeless, and free the oppressed—whether those who suffer are Jewish or not. The Sinai Covenant engages Jews in a partnership designed to make the entire world more just and compassionate. Rabbinic teaching has long accepted and codified Jewish responsibilities toward non-Jews as well as Jews. We know that Jews will not be redeemed unless and until redemption comes to all humanity. We are reminded time and again that all human beings are created in God’s image.

In the modern world, especially in America, Jews exercise unprecedented influence and work together with Gentiles in numerous ways on behalf of the common good. Opportunities for Jewish expression, individual and communal, are virtually unlimited. So are opportunities for relationships with Gentiles. As a result—and perhaps as a response to centuries of persecution—many Jews have opted to embrace Universalism and abandon particularism. They have abandoned the search for balance every bit as much as Jewish isolationists. This too, I think, is very sad.

The world’s need for Torah is urgent right now. Our tradition has something to say—about justice and mercy, about choosing goodness and life—that humanity needs to hear. The need for partnerships among faith communities is especially urgent at this moment when the very survival of God’s earth is threatened as never before, and the world’s religions exercise unrivalled sway over the thinking and behavior of the world’s peoples. We need a new understanding of the boundaries separating Jews from Gentiles, and how we should reach across those boundaries—our distinctive message intact—to work for a better world. Young people, in particular, require this from us, and they are right to criticize our failure to provide it.

Ironically, perhaps, the recent blurring of boundaries between Jews and non-Jews may threaten cooperation between them. Non-Orthodox Jews outside of Israel live and work in close proximity to non-Jews to an extent unprecedented in Jewish history. Most North American Jews number Gentiles among their closest friends. Nearly half of American Jews marry non-Jews. The differences and dividing lines separating Jews from non-Jews are fuzzy where they exist at all. Raising high walls of separation will not help Jewish outreach to the world. But neither will elimination of the distinctiveness that makes Jewish-Gentile cooperation valuable.

Conservative Jews must declare loudly and clearly that we are proud of being Jews, proud to be faithful to our tradition and, precisely because of that loyalty, insist that Gentiles be seen and treated primarily as partners rather than adversaries. We reject forcibly the “us versus them” stance adopted by some Jews in the name of God or Torah every bit as much as we reject the call by other Jews to eliminate what renders Judaism distinctive. We accept our share of responsibility for the communities in which we live and for the planet as a whole, even as we bear special obligations to Jewish communities and the Jewish people. Jews have much to learn from others, we know, and they have much to learn from Judaism.
In next week’s post, I will make several detailed suggestions for ways that Conservative Judaism can maintain the balance between “apart” and “a part” that is so crucial to our future.