Particularism and Universalism in the Revelation at Sinai
Rabbi Yoel Finkelman

The holiday of *Shavuot*, the day on which the tradition tells us the Torah was revealed on Mt. Sinai, is an opportunity to reflect on the gift that God has given to the Jewish People. Jewish philosophy has spent considerable energy addressing the uniqueness of that event. In various different versions, Jewish theology has fairly consistently argued for the uniqueness of the event at Sinai, viewing it as the sealing of an exclusive covenant between the Jewish people and the Creator of the universe in an event the likes of which had never occurred and will never occur again. According to the Gemara, God offered the Torah to the nations of the world, but they declined to accept it (*Avodah Zarah* 2b). Only the Jews were long-sighted enough to accept upon themselves the satisfaction that comes with God's difficult yoke.

What is often downplayed in understanding the notion of revelation is the universalistic element that accompanies the particularistic aspect of Sinai. For a great many Jewish thinkers, it is a mistake to focus exclusively on the fact that only the Jewish people received the Torah. Other nations may not have been present at Sinai, but they, too, are cared for by God, who might, in some way, communicate with them.

Take Rabbi Yehudah Halevi (Rihal) as an example. In his seminal work of Jewish thought, *Sefer HaKuzari*, he earns himself a well-deserved reputation for focusing on the particularistic side of the coin. The book describes an ongoing conversation and debate between the *Haver*, the Jewish sage, and a pagan king, who eventually converts to Judaism after a long process of searching for the truth. The very first thing that the *Haver* says is that his belief is grounded in the unique history of the Jewish people: God having taken them out of Egypt, given them the Torah at Sinai, given them the Land of Israel, and watched over

them providentially since them (I:11). The king is surprised by this response, having expected more abstract and theological answer about belief in God and creation, answers that would seem appropriate for a gentile who is not a part of the Jewish people. But the *Haver* insists that God reveals himself to the Jewish people through their unique historical relationship with Him, and that rational and universal philosophy is beside the point.

Over the course of the conversation, the *Haver* returns to particularistic themes repeatedly. He claims that the Land of Israel is the only that has the conditions that allow for prophecy (II:8-14). The Hebrew language is similarly unique, the only language truly capable of expressing the unique relationship between the Creator and his beloved people (3:67-78).[1] The *Haver* continually attacks philosophy – seemingly universalistic and available to any rational human being – as being a helpless path to truth (e.g. V:15).

Furthermore, *Sefer HaKuzari* emphasizes the revelation at Sinai as the linchpin of Jewish uniqueness, and as the ultimate source of faith. The Jewish people experienced a mass revelation at Sinai, the kind of revelation that could not be easily denied, either by the people who experienced it or their descendents, who have heard the story of that revelation passed from parent to child over the generations (I:83-86). Other nations have not experienced such revelation, and must make due either with the weaknesses of philosophy or the ineffective rituals they have invented for themselves.

And it is not accidental that only the Jewish people experiences such a mass revelation, since only Jews have been blessed with the *Inyan HaElohi*, the psychological predisposition for spirituality and revelation (I:95). This *Inyan HaElohi* is passed on genetically from parent to child, and is present only among the Jewish people, who are the only ones who have the potential to receive divine revelation (even if that potential is not always actualized) (I:31-43).

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[1] How ironic that the book itself is written in Arabic.

Still, it would be a mistake, I think, to view Rihal as a strict particularist. There are several reasons for this. For example in one place Rihal describes the role of the Jewish people as being analogous to that of a seed. Just as the seed turns water, earth, and nutrients into fruit, the Jewish people will help transform the nations of the world into something more pure in the messianic future (IV:23). Similarly, Rihal refers to the relationship of the Jewish people with the world as that of the heart's relationship with the body (II:36-45), an image the implies a mutual dependence of the Jewish people on the nations.

Furthermore, examine the way Rihal constructs the story in which *Sefer HaKuzari* is embedded. The text of the book tells us that only Jews can experience prophecy and a genuine attachment to God. Yet, the frame story of the book involves a pagan king who receives a prophetic dream and finds himself searching for the truth of God and for higher spiritual meaning. How does that story fit with the claim that only Jews can achieve revelation? One might offer a technical answer to this question. There are extremely low levels of prophecy, cast-off leftovers of genuine prophecy, that can, on occasion, accidentally make their way over to gentiles. This is undoubtedly partially correct, but one also gets the impression that Rihal – the poet and master of irony – is hinting at a more universalistic approach in the subtext than he declares in the text.

Even though Rihal lands so firmly on the particularist side of the line, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Jewish people and the uniqueness of the revelation at Sinai, he also suggests, or at least hints, at a dialectic that leaves room for some kind of universal revelation as well. Rambam, know to be much more of a universalist than Rihal, suggests a similar dialectic, in which some sources about revelation in general, and Sinaitic revelation in particular, point to the uniqueness of the Jewish people, while others point to something more universal.

Despite the vast differences between their respective worldviews and philosophical stances, Rambam shares with Rihal the tension between universalism and particularism when analyzing the notion of revelation. Rambam works hard to distinguish Moshe's prophecy from that of other prophets, which is why "there never has been a Law and there never will be a Law except the one that is the Law of Moses our Master" (*Guide* II:39) The revelation at Sinai is different from all other ones; it is unique and irreplaceable.

In particular, Rambam explains that all other prophets experience prophecy with both their intellects and their imaginations. The intellect allows them to apprehend truths at a higher level, while the imagination allows them to express those truths in a metaphorical or symbolic language that can inspire, educate, and motivate the masses. Yet, explains Rambam, different people in different times and places respond to different metaphors and images. Hence, all prophecy is focused on a particular time, place, and audience. This implies that there is something transitory about prophecy, a position that if applied to the Torah would be in violation of Rambam's own ninth principle of faith. Hence, explains Rambam, Moshe prophesied only with his intellect; there was no imaginative element to his prophecy. Moshe's prophecy – the very Torah given at Sinai – is eternal, and not time bound (*Guide* II:35-39; *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah* 7:6). Only the Jewish people have been worthy of such an eternal and purely intellectual revelation, making their revelation unique and distinctive.

Furthermore, Rambam (like Rihal) distinguishes between the experience of the Jewish people at Sinai and the experiences of others who experienced miracles under other circumstances. One never accepts the validity of a self-proclaimed prophet based on his ability to perform miracles. Miracles are a weak proof indeed, since using slight of hand it is so easy for a charlatan to fool others into believing that he has performed a miracle. The

miracles experienced by the masses at Sinai is a very different kind of miracle, one which cannot be faked (*Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 8:1-2).

In both these sources, Rambam declares a radical difference between the revelation at Sinai, and all other kinds of revelations, thereby highlighting the unique nature of the Torah, and by implication stressing the particularistic aspects of Judaism.

But, in another place, Rambam provides a radically different definition of divine law, one that opens the door for a much more expansive conception of God's commandments, a conception that could apply even to the traditions of the gentiles. He explains that one can distinguish a divine law from a human law not in terms of its source, but in terms of its *function*. A human law serves to maintain a stable, safe, and equitable society. This is no easy task, but even when it is achieved successfully it elevates that legal system only to the status of a good and worthy human law. However, when a legal system not only succeeds in maintaining a well-ordered society, but also succeeds in teaching people true beliefs about God and the universe, then it gains the status of a divine law (*Guide* II:40). There is nothing in this definition that limits the notion of divine law to one particular tradition or nation. Since, according to Rambam, the basic truths of physics and metaphysics can be determined largely by human reason, there is no reason to believe that there is only one law that succeds in teaching those truths, thereby qualifying as divine, even if that law never reaches the unique level of the revelation to the Jewish people at Sinai.

Rambam, of course, goes much further down the universalist path than does Rihal, in that Rihal only hints at the possibility of a low-level revelation to individual seekers, while Rambam imagines an entire gentile nation living under a form of divine law. Still, it would be a mistake to view the distinction between Rihal and Rambam as a distinction between a particularist and a universalist. Both thinkers raise both sides of the coin. Both are particularist and also universalist. As we approach the holiday of Shavuot, it is perhaps wise

to focus on the Sinaitic side of the coin, the one in which we stress God's unique relationship to his people. But we must never lose track of the other side of the coin, the fact that God finds ways of communicating with all of humanity, who are creatures of God just as we Jews are.