Quiet Time

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks זצ״ל

Sukkot represents more clearly than any other festival the dualities of Judaism. The four species (*lulav*, *etrog*, *hadassim* and *aravot*) are a symbol of the land of Israel, while the *sukkah* reminds us of exile. The four species are a ritual of rain, while eating in the *sukkah* depends on the absence of rain. Above all, though, there is the tension between the universality of nature and the particularity of history. There is an aspect of Sukkot – rainfall, harvest, climate – to which everyone can relate, but there is another – the long journey through the wilderness – that speaks to the unique experience of the Jewish people.

This tension between the universal and the particular is unique to Judaism. The G-d of Israel is the G-d of all humanity, but the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humanity. It is conspicuous that while the other two Abrahamic monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, borrowed much from Judaism, they did not borrow this. They became universalist faiths, believing that everyone ought to embrace the one true religion, their own, and that those who do not are denied the blessings of eternity.

Judaism disagrees. For this it was derided for many centuries, and to some degree it still is today. Why, if it represents religious truth, is it not to be shared with everyone? If there is only one G-d, why is there not only one way to salvation? There is no doubt that if Judaism had become an evangelising, conversion-driven religion – as it would have had to, had it believed in universalism – there would be many more Jews than there are today. A recent study (the Pew Report, undertaken in 2015) found that there are an estimated 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and only 14 million Jews. The disparity is vast.

Judaism is the road less travelled, because it represents a complex truth that could not be expressed in any other way. The Torah tells a simple story. G-d gave humans the gift of freedom, which they then used not to enhance creation but to endanger it.

Adam and Chavah broke the first prohibition. Kayin, the first human child, became the first murderer. Within a remarkably short space of time, all flesh had corrupted its way on earth, the world was filled with violence, and only one man, Noach, found favour in G-d's eyes. After the Flood, G-d made a covenant with Noach, and through him with all humanity, but after the hubris of the builders of the Tower of Bavel, G-d chose another way. Having established a basic threshold in the form of the Noachide Laws, He then chose one man, one family, and eventually one nation, to become a living example of what it is to exist closely and continuously in the presence of G-d. There are, in the affairs of humankind, universal laws and specific examples. The Noachide covenant constitutes the universal laws. The way of life of Avraham and his descendants is the example.

What this means in Judaism is that the righteous of all the nations have a share in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 105a). In contemporary terms it means

that our common humanity precedes our religious differences. It also means that by creating all humans in His image, G-d set us the challenge of seeing His image in one who is not in our image: whose colour, culture, class and creed are different from our own. The ultimate spiritual challenge is to see the trace of G-d in the face of a stranger.

Zechariah, in the vision we read as the Haftarah for the first day of Sukkot, puts this precisely. He says that in the End of Days, "Hashem shall be King over all the earth; on that day Hashem shall be One and His name One" (Zechariah 14:9), meaning that all the nations will recognise the sovereignty of a single transcendent G-d. Yet at the same time, Zechariah envisages the nations participating only in Sukkot, the most universal of the festivals, and the one in which they have the greatest interest since they all need rain. He does not envisage them becoming Jews, accepting the "yoke of the commands", all 613 of them. He does not speak of their conversion. The

practical outcome of this dual theology – the universality of G-d and the particularity of Torah – is that we are commanded to be true to our faith, and a blessing to others, regardless of their faith. That is the Jewish way.

Shemini Atzeret reminds us of the intimacy Jews have always felt in the presence of G-d. The cathedrals of Europe convey a sense of the vastness of G-d and the smallness of humankind. The small shuls of Tzfat, where the Arizal and Rabbi Yosef Caro prayed, convey a sense of the closeness of G-d and the greatness of humankind. Jews, except when they sought to imitate other nations, did not build cathedrals. Even the Beit HaMikdash reached its greatest architectural grandeur under Herod, a man better known for his political ruthlessness than his spiritual sensibilities.

When all the universality of Judaism has been expressed, there remains something that cannot be universalised: that sense of intimacy with and closeness to G-d that we feel on Shemini Atzeret, when all the other

guests have left. Shemini Atzeret is chamber music, not a symphony. It is a quiet time with G-d. We are reluctant to leave, and we dare to think that He is reluctant to see us go. Justice is universal, love is particular. There are some things we share because we are human. But there are other things, constitutive of our identity, that are uniquely ours – most importantly our relationships to those who form our family. On Sukkot we are among strangers and friends. On Shemini Atzeret we are with family.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 until his retirement in 2013. He spent decades bringing spiritual insight to the public conversation through mass media, popular lectures, and more than 30 books. Rabbi Sacks passed away in 2020, leaving behind a legacy as one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of our generation, one who bridged the religious and secular world through his remarkable and ground-breaking canon of work.