Particularism vs. Universalism *Erev Rosh Hashanah 2025/5786*

Shana Tova.

I want to start with what you'll probably think is an easy question: What are we actually celebrating today? Why are you here?

Wait a moment. Don't rush to answer. Not everything you learned in Hebrew School is necessarily true.

I'm going to guess that all of us want to answer: "It's Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year." Right?

Only... it's not.

I hate to do this to you, but the name "Rosh Hashanah"—meaning "Head of the Year"—is actually a much later rabbinic term that appears in the Mishnah. It does not appear anywhere in the Torah. Not once.

Today—this day—is called in the Torah Yom Teruah or Zichron Teruah—the day of remembering or sounding the shofar. It's not called Rosh Hashanah.

And I hate doing this to you—shaking the ground you're standing on, destroying the image of your Hebrew school teacher, dismantling what you've learned in the past.

But today is not the first day of the first month of the Jewish year. Today is not the beginning of the Jewish calendar the way January 1st starts a new calendar year on the Gregorian calendar. Today is actually the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar.

You don't believe me?

Open the Torah and read Numbers 29:1: "In the seventh month—the seventh month—on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: …You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded."

Our unique Jewish New Year begins in the month of Nissan when we celebrate Passover. This symbolizes our own unique story as a people celebrating our freedom. Our "real" New Year celebrates our story of independence. Think about it as if we celebrated New Year's Eve on July Fourth.

So why, for God's sake, if it is Yom Teruah and not Rosh Hashanah—if it is not the first day of the first month—why do we wish each other a Happy New Year today?

Because we as a people have always been torn between feeling special and different, celebrating a unique story and purpose that was distinctively ours, and at the same time, wanting to be like everyone else, wanting to be an integral part of the world's nations.

It was the Talmudic Rabbis who turned attention from what was an exclusive celebration of a new year in the month of Nissan to what I will call "a global new year"—a celebration of the creation of the world, a celebration for all humanity, not just the Jewish people.

Friends, for thousands of years, we have been trying to find that fine balance—the equator line on the Jewish globe of thought between two opposing core concepts.

One pole we call Particularism—the concept of a unique relationship between God and the Jewish people based on a covenant which emphasizes our distinct identity, land, history, culture, and religious obligations—a distinct covenant that does not apply to all humanity.

And the other pole we call Universalism—the idea that Jewish ethical teachings, moral principles, and ultimately Jewish religious truth have universal application and relevance for all humanity, not just Jews.

For thousands of years, we have been trying to figure out if we should be particular Jews or universal Jews.

So, let me ask you: Do you feel mostly a part of a unique Jewish people, where your Jewish identity drives your understanding of who you are and your role in the world? Or do you feel you are part of a global family with Judaism being a smaller part of how you understand your role and place in the world?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory calls this search for balance a burden. He says: "Each of us carries the inescapable burden of duality, of being true to our faith while recognizing the image of God in, and being a blessing to, those who are unlike us."

I want to frame this question in simpler words and make it much more personal. The question I put in front of you today is: Are you an American Jew or a Jewish American?

How much of your identity—of what shapes how you think and act—is Jewish, and how much is American?

And this, my friends, is an important question, for the answer you give carries with it tremendous consequences.

The answer you give to this question guides you when it comes to tzedakah—sharing your wealth with others. Do you feel obligated as a Jew to share your wealth with your distinctive group—give only or mostly to Jewish causes—or with all causes regardless of religion or ethnicity?

The answer guides you when it comes to fighting antisemitism. Saying aloud that we are the "chosen people," allowing ourselves to be different and separate from others, has been the fuel poured on the fires of Jewish hate throughout history.

How do you balance your fear of being different versus your Jewish pride when you decide whether to wear a necklace with a Star of David or chai in public? When you keep kosher while everyone else enjoys lobster? When you decide to hang a mezuzah on your doorpost as a college student or decide to avoid the mezuzah and hide the fact that you are Jewish?

The answer guides you when it comes to supporting Israel. What is your responsibility, your sense of connection and obligation to the State of Israel when its political leadership acts in ways that contradict your universalistic values—your sense of obligation to all humans?

To answer these questions, I believe we first need to dive deep into the basis of each argument.

At the foundation stand two Jewish teachings:

The first is the concept of "Betzelem Elohim"—that all people were created in the image of God. From this teaching in Genesis, we derive that we are no different from any other human and therefore have the same obligations to all people as we do to Jews.

The second is that we are "am Segula," a "chosen people." This teaching found across the Torah does not necessarily imply superiority, but rather that we have a unique connection, covenant, and history, which leads to us having particular responsibilities. Our raison d'être is to be a light unto the nations.

The tension between these arguments can be illustrated by how rabbis interpreted the commandment from Leviticus 25:35—to take care of the poor.

Like so many commandments, it is vague and open to interpretation. After all, there are so many poor people, so many needs—who should we take care of first when resources are limited?

It reminds me of the story of three friends walking down the road, seeing a pile of $20 bills on the sidewalk. They wonder how they should split the money. The first suggests that they draw a circle on the ground—throw the money in the air, whatever falls in the circle they will give to God, meaning to charity. Whatever falls out of the circle they will divide among themselves. The second agrees, only he wants the part falling in the circle to go to them and the part outside to God—to charity. The third suggests that they throw the bills in the air, and whatever God wants God can take, and whatever falls to the ground they will split among themselves.

Well, the Talmud establishes a hierarchy of giving: First your family, then the poor of your city, then those of other cities. The main issue has to do with the term "the poor of your city."

For Particularists, the poor of your city are those closest to you in blood and faith. They argue for a clear hierarchy of obligations—you have greater responsibility to your family, then the Jewish community, and then the local community. They prioritize Jewish needs and institutions before directing resources elsewhere.

For Universalists, the poor of your city are those closest to you in proximity. They emphasize that the principle is about practical effectiveness, not ethnic preference. "The poor of your city" includes all residents regardless of religion. They argue it's about being most helpful where you can have the greatest impact, which often means starting locally but doesn't exclude broader concerns.

Notice that the debate is not about whether to help only Jews versus helping everyone equally. Both sides agree Jews should care about universal justice; rather, the debate is about how to balance competing moral claims when resources are limited.

Not to mention that today this question has become even more complex with our media bringing us news and photos of poor and hungry people all over the world. With modern media, distance is no longer relevant.

We sometimes know much more about what is happening in Africa than in our backyards.

How do we honor both our obligations to our own people as well as to the greater society we live in?

It is the dilemma Sandy Koufax faced in 1965 when he was asked to pitch Game 1 of the World Series—only the game fell on Yom Kippur. Imagine his dilemma. What comes first, what is more important: Yom Kippur or pitching at the World Series?

I will not ask you what you would have done, because it's impossible to answer unless you personally face the dilemma.

So let us discuss the real and relevant tensions of our time:

How do we fight antisemitism on college campuses and beyond—a particular Jewish concern of ours—without limiting freedom of speech and academic freedom, American values we all cherish?

How do we support Israel and its right to exist and fight for its safety—a particular concern—while acknowledging the universal pain and suffering this battle entails?

What do we do when the national interests of the United States don't align with those of Israel? Whose interests do we prioritize?

How will you allocate your philanthropic contributions this year between our particular needs as a Jewish community and universalistic needs? How do you decide if your biggest gift will be awarded to your temple or the local hospital or theater?

This question percolates on so many levels.

We are torn between sending kids to Hebrew School because we want them to be Jewish and having them play travel soccer because we want them to be part of the great American dream that even a short, chubby Jewish kid can become a professional soccer player.

We are torn between seriously engaging in Bar/Bat Mitzvah lessons because it is such an important rite of passage and swim team practices or the debate team that help build their college applications.

The tension exists when we fall in love with someone who is not Jewish and need to make complex decisions about whether we will have a rabbi or a friend officiate the wedding and how children will be raised.

It is the tension you feel when you have to work too late on Friday to make it to temple, or when your social circles value theater on Friday over temple attendance. When the opening game of UF college football falls on Yom Kippur.

It is the tension that sits heavy in your heart when you know you should go on that trip to Israel, but the trip to Iceland or Japan seems so much more appealing, easy, and safe.

At the end of the day, it's a question of balance. Are we Jewish Americans or American Jews?

When I first came to this country, I was an Israeli. Period. When I decided to go to rabbinical school, I remember Jeffrey Klein, who was the CEO of the Jewish Federation, saying to me that I had been converted from Israeli to Jewish.

Today I stand in front of you proudly declaring that I am a Jewish Israeli-American.

Today I stand before you and say that what guides me to be a better American, a better Israeli, a better person—are the Jewish values, ethics, traditions, and wisdom I carry with me and that are part of who I have become.

Today I stand here and share with you that I genuinely believe that the way to find the balance between particularism and universalism starts with a greater appreciation of one's Jewish identity.

I believe in every cell of my body that we have to reclaim our Jewish pride. We have to better embrace our Jewish heritage in order to bring the best of what we have to offer to our greater communities.

When we know more about who we are, when we understand what our unique gifts are, when we know what we can contribute, only then can we bring our gifts to the universal world.

I do not want to live in a universal world where everyone is the same. I do not want to imagine a world without Eastern meditation and yoga, without romantic chanson in French, without delicious Italian cooking.

I want a world full of amazing particularity—where different people bring the best of their cultures, religions, history, and wisdom to the table. And I want us to continue to have a seat at the table—at the head of the table! For that is where we as a Jewish community sat for centuries—bringing monotheism, Hebrew literature, ethical teachings, social justice, scientific innovation, and so much more to the table.

Think about it this way: a symphony doesn't work when every instrument plays the same note. It works when each instrument contributes its unique sound to create something greater than the sum of its parts. The violin doesn't try to sound like the trumpet; it plays its violin part beautifully, and together they create harmony.

I love the way Jonathan Sarna resolves this tension.

In his book "American Judaism: A History," he suggests that we describe ourselves as Jewish-hyphen-American.

In Sarna's framework, this hyphenated identity reflects a deliberate choice about how to balance dual loyalties and identities. When he discusses being "Jewish-American," he's making an important distinction about which identity takes precedence or serves as the primary lens through which one views the world.

This Jewish-hyphen-American identity acknowledges that Jewish identity comes first because Jewish peoplehood and tradition span millennia and transcend national boundaries, while American identity is more recent and geographically specific.

But the hyphen also serves as connection, not separation—it represents an active integration where being American enhances one's ability to live as a Jew, while Jewish values inform one's American civic participation.

I believe that Sarna is right—that the path forward isn't about choosing between being a Jewish American or an American Jew. It's about becoming Jewish-hyphenated-Americans.

Being authentically Jewish in order to be fully American.

Our particularism is not about separation; it's about contribution. When we deeply understand our Jewish values—tzedek (justice), tikkun olam (repairing the world), chesed (loving-kindness)—we don't retreat from the world. We engage with it more meaningfully.

I don't want anyone to blame me for having "dual loyalty." I don't want to exclusively care only about my Jewishness. What I want is to be a better Jew, a stronger, more knowledgeable Jew, a more devoted Jew, a more compassionate, generous, engaged Jew—so that I can be the best American, Israeli, human I can possibly be.

But it can't happen if we behave like our grandparents and great-grandparents who came to this country and desperately wanted to be as American as they could, at times, many times, paying the price of losing their connection to their particular identity to be able to fit in—prioritizing American values, traditions, and culture over their particular Jewish identity. And since the end of World War II, American Reform Jews have done their best to be as American as we can, mainly through engaging in tikkun olam, making our world better by fighting for what we deemed were just causes, fighting against hate, for acceptance and equality. Only to discover that even though we see ourselves as universal Jews, the world around us sees us as particular Jews—so if they do, why won't we?

We have to keep fighting for justice, but we have to do it as we announce to the world around us that we are doing so as proud Jews, that it is the Jewish values, the same ones our Constitution is based on, it is the Jewish values that guide our conviction to seek justice, equality, and peace. It is our Jewish values that guide us as we try to bring light and love into this world. We will join hands with anyone who shares our values and accepts us for who we are.

Gone are the days we accepted the notion that in order to fight for universal values we must give up or hide our Jewish particularity, our Jewish pride.

So, as we enter this new year—I challenge you to embrace both sides of this sacred tension:

First, deepen your particularism. Engage more seriously with Jewish texts. Connect more meaningfully with Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life. Make choices that reflect Jewish values even when they are inconvenient.

Yes—I am willing to go to great measures to battle antisemitism in this country even when at times it conflicts with my core American values and requires me to limit freedom of hateful speech or deport agents that spread Jewish hatred from this country.

Yes, I will continue to support Israel's right not only to exist but to defend itself while I keep doing all I can as a Jew to bring an end to wars and to the suffering of all people. I will do all I can to push Israel to fulfill its prophetic mission to be a light unto the nations, not a stain.

Yes, I will continue to direct my philanthropic giving to Jewish causes first, and only when I feel I have fulfilled my obligation to my people will I continue as a proud Jew to share what I have with the rest of those in need. (We are only 2% of the population of the United States, and yet the vast majority of Jewish philanthropy does not go to support Jewish causes.)

Yes, I will continue to look at that lobster with longing eyes but feel a sense of pride that I represent a religion that is beautiful and meaningful and realize that what I am gaining is much greater than my sacrifice.

And yes, I will hang that mezuzah, walk with my kippah, and be proud of it.

And I hope you will as well. Make this year a year in which you strengthen being a particular Jew—because then, and only then, when we each deepen our sense of commitment to our people—only then will we be able to expand our care for the world in a meaningful way.

Let us use our Jewish values as a lens through which to engage the broader world. Let our commitment to justice, learning, and human dignity guide our involvement in our community, our country, and global issues.

As we blow the shofar today—that ancient Jewish sound that echoes across centuries—let us reawaken that pride in who we are as a people,

of our particular gifts, abilities, and contributions. Let us not shy away from them but rather double down on them and let the sound of the shofar proclaim to the world that a people committed to justice, learning, and human dignity is ready to do its part in the year ahead.

May this year bring us the wisdom to honor our particular Jewish calling and the courage to fulfill our universal human responsibilities.

Ken y'hi ratzon—may this be God's will.

Shana Tova u'Metukah—a good and sweet year to all.