YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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**Shiur #27: Universalism vs. Cosmopolitanism**

We now come to the issue of universalism vs. cosmopolitanism. While these two concepts are usually regarded as overlapping or even identical, Manitou draws a distinction between them.

**Avraham's Transition**

We will approach the issue via a biblical episode that Manitou addresses in many places: the Tower of Bavel. We shall not dwell on the Tower itself, what constituted the sin, and how exactly the builders were punished. Suffice it to say that unity supposedly stood at the foundation of this project, but its execution led to the disintegration of mankind into different nations, each representing a different small piece of the overall picture of humanity. Each nation was left with its own specific, limited identity.

Given this situation, according to Manitou, any nation that seeks to be “universal” will necessarily become imperialistic. A nation knows only its own identity; therefore, any approach to other nations will become an attempt to make them subservient to itself and to impose its own identity on them. This phenomenon is what underlies major wars, as opposed to the smaller conflicts between neighboring nations over territory and resources. The major wars are waged between powerful nations, each with the potential to become an empire and rule the world. Manitou notes that such campaigns often lead to conflict with *Am Yisrael*, owing to the similar orientation. *Am Yisrael* also has a universal objective, but adopts a different approach. *Am Yisrael* has a truly universal identity, which actually unites all nations, rather than trying to impose a partial identity on them. The Jewish nation is not part of a puzzle seeking to recast the entire puzzle in its own partial image; rather, it aims to create a harmony that contains and includes all the different parts.

The ones who are truly in a state of diaspora, or dispersion, are the nations of the world, following the debacle of the Tower of Bavel. At that point in time, humanity was split into seventy nations – seventy different, partial aspects of humanity. A gentile can belong to only one nation; he can be French or English, but not both. He cannot be truly universal, because his identity is only one seventieth of the primal unity of humanity.

Since that time, nations have been in conflict with each other, because each represents an identity that is only partial and different from the others. This leads to wars. Each partial identity tries to dominate the others and force its own identity model on the whole world. All the major movements in history, such as Christianity, Islam, Socialism, etc., quickly became imperialist movements. The other common characteristic of those movements is antisemitism – even though a sizeable number of Jews feature among their leaders. This hatred for Jews arises from the recognition that Judaism is an exception to the general rule of humanity, with its call to genuinely rebuild the human universal, rather than forcing its own cultural model on all of humanity.

*Am Yisrael*, which came into existence **after** the collapse of the Tower of Bavel, is the only nation that retains the primal unity, and its identity is truly a universal one. In order to realize its dimension of “a kingdom of priests,” *Am Yisrael* has to encounter the other nations at the level appropriate to them, via the diaspora. Thus, the dispersion of *Am Yisrael* is secondary in relation to the phenomenon of dispersion of the other nations, and the aim of its dispersion is to fulfill the mission of being a “kingdom of priests” among them, for a limited time. (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* II, p. 161)

*Chazal* explain regarding the change of Avram’s name to Avraham and Sarai’s change of name to Sarah that the names Avraham and Sarah are more universal, alluding to their status as “father of a multitude of nations” and “princess over all,” respectively. But the context in which their names are changed is rather surprising. God informs them of their new names against the backdrop of the announcement of the impending birth of Yitzchak – in other words, in anticipation of the stage in which Avraham will focus on building up a single, particular nation. Most of the events in which Avraham is revealed as a universal figure occur in *Parashat Lekh-lekha*, when he is still called Avram (the encounters with Pharaoh, with the four kings, with Malki-Tzedek, and with those who come out to greet him), while as Avraham his orientation is more particularistic.

Manitou explains that there are two different types of all-inclusive orientation: universalism and cosmopolitanism. Avram is cosmopolitan; Avraham is universalist. What is the difference between them?

The ideal of cosmopolitanism is to be dispersed among the nations and to influence them in the moral sphere. It is an attempt to function as a “kingdom of priests” in the place where the dominant culture is developing, and thereby to influence the world, to be Israelite princes among the nations and to serve as an example. This is Avram’s approach and his path among the nations throughout *Parashat Lekh-lekha*. The universalist tendency is similar in terms of the objective, but different in terms of its approach. Its approach is to realize the national identity and to build up a model society in the Land of the Hebrews, so that through its unique, defined identity, God’s way of performing justice and righteousness can become manifest. This is Avraham’s path starting from the time he is told that Yitzchak will be born, and he indeed goes on to bequeath this path to Yitzchak.

There are two main possibilities in acting on our concern for universal humanity. The first – the cosmopolitan view – maintains that *Am Yisrael* should be dispersed among the nations, and especially amongst the dominant civilization of each era, and serve as the moral educators of those nations. This was the approach of Nachor, brother of Avraham, as well as his son, Betuel, and his grandson, Lavan. But Lavan soon turns out to be the sworn enemy of the other branch of the family, which adopts the universalist approach. “But Lavan sought to uproot everything” [as we read in the *Haggadah*] – even though he is Yaakov’s uncle and his father-in-law, the grandfather of the twelve tribes!

The universalist approach maintains that the realization of the ideal taught by Ever – rebuilding the human universal in the wake of the great division sown by the Tower of Bavel – requires the realization of the national identity of his descendants, in the land of the *Ivrim* (Hebrews). When Avraham decides to leave “exile,” his decision represents an outright rejection of cosmopolitanism. He casts off his Aramean garment and goes back to being an *Ivri* (Hebrew). (*Sod Midrash Ha-Toladot* I, pp. 31-33)

**The Failure of Acculturation Among the Nations**

*Am Yisrael* tried at various times to be cosmopolitan. One of these periods was the time that Yaakov spent in Lavan’s home. Yaakov remained loyal to his beliefs and values even in that difficult environment, radiating his truth and influencing his environment, so much so that we derive *halakhot* of guardianship from his testimony concerning his devotion to his duty as a shepherd. He is a walking Torah that brings great light to his surroundings. However, even he eventually found it impossible to remain in that environment. Yosef, too, had an opportunity to take the cosmopolitan approach; he had tremendous influence in Egypt in his position as second to the king. We can only imagine how much power Yaakov’s family held, with their status in the Egyptian empire.

Ultimately, Yaakov’s cosmopolitanism was terminated by Lavan’s persecution. In Egypt, too, his descendants became the object of hatred. (According to Manitou, had Yosef returned to *Eretz Yisrael* in time, with the rest of Yaakov’s family, the remainder of their stay and their enslavement in Egypt would have been avoided, and the historical mission of *Am Yisrael* would have been achieved sooner.) This phenomenon has continued throughout the generations. Specifically in those parts of the diaspora where Jews became acculturated, successful, and influential, they encountered fierce opposition. And as in the case of Yaakov and Yosef, the Jews were generally slow to recognize the approaching catastrophe and to leave in time.

**Two Trends in *Sefer Bereishit***

With this in mind, Manitou asserts that the story of *Am Yisrael* does not begin with *Parashat Lekh-lekha*; rather, this *parasha* is a continuation of the stories that preceded it. Avram the *Ivri* (Hebrew) is not the first *Ivri* in the world. He continues the progression that started from Adam, via Shet, and continuing to Shem and Ever. He continues the progression of humanity towards its ultimate purpose – a progression that began with Creation, with the question being who would lead it.

According to Manitou, this explains the beginning of the story of Avraham, which is recorded at the end of *Parashat Noach*. Nachor and Avraham both set off on the journey, but Nachor chooses the path of cosmopolitanism, while Avraham heads in the direction of establishing a nation. This also helps explain the issue of the Land of Israel. Seemingly, the special status and importance of the Land of Israel are manifest only from the time of God’s promise to Avraham. In fact, the land will seemingly assume its importance only after Avraham’s descendants come back to it; in the meantime, the land belongs to the Canaanites.

Manitou disagrees with this view. He argues that the Land of Israel was never meant for these descendants of Cham. This idea appears already in Rashi’s commentary on *Bereishit* 12:6: “’And the Canaanites were at that time in the land’ – they gradually conquered the land from the descendants of Shem, for the land had fallen to the lot of Shem when [Noach] divided the land among his sons.” The children of Noach had clearly defined regions of inheritance: Shem received the continent of Asia, Cham received Africa; Yefet received Europe. Cana’an, a descendant of Cham, conquered areas that were part of the inheritance of Shem, including *Eretz Yisrael*. These conquests were part of the changes in the fundamental order that humanity experienced as part of the episode of the Tower of Bavel and the story of Nimrod, as recorded in *Bereishit* 10-11. As a result, branches of Shem’s descendants were scattered over different areas. The *beit midrash* of Shem and Ever remained in *Eretz Yisrael*. Shem remained in the land, but the children of Cham conquered it. When Avraham arrives on the scene, the question is whether he will return to *Eretz Yisrael* and settle there. Nachor chooses to reside in exile and to influence his environment there; Avraham builds up a nation in *Eretz Yisrael*.

What is wrong with Nachor’s choice? Manitou explains that Nachor’s identity is Aramean. He is a descendant of Shem and Ever, but because he lives within an Aramean environment, he takes on the Aramean identity. Every nation has its own identity, and in any encounter with others, it will try to impose its own identity on them. Therefore, when an *Ivri* who serves God lives amongst another nation, he will not influence them; rather, he will end up taking on their identity. A German Jew aspires to radiate his Jewishness, but what happens is that his Jewishness will be molded in the image of the German identity.

The junction of choice between the two possibilities appears again later on. Avraham bequeaths the cosmopolitan option to Yishmael, who is born when his father is still “Avram.” Yishmael is the progenitor of a cosmopolitan religion that believes in one God and seeks to impose that faith on the entire world by force. Both options are also found within Yaakov’s family, as reflected in the difference between Rachel and Leah and between Yosef and Yehuda. Leah is identified with *Eretz Yisrael*, while Rachel represents a level of identification with the diaspora as well; for this reason, she is buried “on the way,” between *Eretz Yisrael* and the lands of exile. Yosef – who, as Manitou points out, spent only his youngest years in Lavan’s home and was not in a position to fully understand and internalize the failure of the cosmopolitan approach – tries to apply it in Egypt. He introduces Hebrew values into a foreign culture, operating out of faith, his identity real and authentic, but low-key, in Egyptian garb. Most of the brothers reject Yosef’s approach, having witnessed its failure when the family fled from Lavan. Instead, they follow the approach of Yehuda, maintaining the proudly separatist identity of Yaakov’s house.

Although ultimately Yosef’s messianism meets with failure, throughout history there have been periods in which that messianism enjoyed a period of success. Yaakov manages to be Lavan’s shepherd, and brings Lavan much blessing, just as Yosef later brings blessing to the house of Pharaoh. Throughout history there are periods when *Am Yisrael* – whether as the concealed Hebrew nation or the revealed Hebrew nation – brings blessing to the nations of the world. These periods are the first stage of the messianism which we might attribute to Yosef. But if during those times *Am Yisrael* (whether as the concealed Hebrew nation or the revealed Hebrew nation) hesitates to return to *Eretz Yisrael*, crisis and failure soon follow. If Yosef had decided, while still occupying his lofty position in Egypt, to act in accordance with the promise he gave at the end of his life – “God will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones from here” (*Bereishit* 50:25) – and to return to *Eretz Yisrael*, perhaps history could have come to an end. But *Bnei Yisrael* remained in Egypt, and this was a failure. As we read in the *Haggadah* – “this indicates that they were prominent (‘*metzuyanim’*) there.” Indeed, we can read this humorously as an allusion to our own times: they were “Tzionim,” Zionists, but “there” – not living in the Land of Israel. *Am Yisrael* fails to return to the land in time, because it is difficult to pinpoint the moment, the right time to shift to the other dimension, the dimension of redemption, and to return. (*Misped Le-Mashiach*, p. 59)

The practical expression of this question is the debate that has been waged within Judaism over the past hundred and fifty years, principally between the approach of R. Shimshon Refael Hirsch and that of R. Kook: influencing the nations from within the diaspora vs. building a Jewish state in *Eretz Yisrael*. It is specifically in the diaspora that a Jew cannot be universal. He will always be a Jew with the borrowed, specific identity of the surrounding culture. He will be a French Jew or a Polish Jew – recalling the Aramean identity of Nachor. He can only wander among the nations, from one partial, specific identity to another. Only an *Ivri* in his own land can be connected to all of humanity.

As an example, the “*Torah im Derekh Eretz*” (“Torah combined with accepted social mores”)[[1]](#footnote-1) movement founded by R. Hirsch claimed a universalist orientation, but in truth it was the expression of a specific identity: It was “Torah with accepted German mores.”

Admittedly, so long as a Jew is detained in exile against his will, he unquestionably has the potential to project a moral light for those around him, but it is important that he realize that this is a temporary and risky situation, and that he wait for the moment he can return to his Hebrew identity. In our times, history has settled the question in accordance with the view of the Vilna Gaon and R. Kook, who spoke of a return to the Hebrew identity in *Eretz Yisrael*. The *aliyah* of Jews from the world over in our times parallels the story of Avraham, and it is therefore important that we study this story in order to be able to navigate the process successfully.

In conclusion, we might point out that Manitou himself followed the same path, returning from the diaspora – where his impact was felt specifically in France, the cultural and philosophical center of Europe – to his Hebrew identity and *Eretz Yisrael*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. In his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, R. Hirsch defines “*derekh eretz*” as encompassing “ways of earning a livelihood and maintaining the social order; … the customs and considerations of [etiquette](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etiquette)… as well as everything concerning [humanistic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanities) and civil education." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)