

Everything, Something, or Nothing – Thoughts for Yom Kipur 2015

During the nineteenth century there were two ideological movements that swept the western world. For want of a better term, I will call them universalism and particularism. Universalism was the message of Marxism, which spawned socialism and communism. Particularism was the ideology of nationalism. Religions caught between the two split into rival factions.

From 1848 onwards there were fierce civil battles across the states of Europe. America was spared them, but its Civil War and the rivalry of the states in their way, too, reflected this conflict between those who looked out and those who wanted to turn inwards.

Marxism's anthem was The Internationale. Its credo was and is the international brotherhood of man, the working classes, and freedom from any religious or national ideology. Nationalism on the other hand tried to promote one nation, one culture, one religion and we all know how disastrous both ideologies were for mankind and for Jews.

Despite the catastrophes of the Second World War, the Cold War and totalitarianism the world is still divided along the lines of those who stand for an open society and those who prefer a restricted and specific society. But like any attempt to pigeonhole, there are always exceptions, contradictions and hybrids.

Socialism yearns for the universal. Nationalism seeks to preserve a specific culture. Religious nationalism wishes to preserve a specific religion and predicates civil rights on an agreed understanding to accept its cultural traditions and not seek to weaken them.

All this is background to the current migration crisis Europe is experiencing which is the result of 50 years of socialism in one form or another. Even "conservative" European parties have been socialist-lite. This dirigiste, secular ideology has driven the culture of the European Union since its inception. It has emphasized universal civil and human rights and freedoms of thought and movement. Its culture of welfare actually began in Germany under Bismarck and spread out across the continent and beyond. Americans may not like to hear this, but today the USA is more socialist in its welfare and policies than any European country was before the Second World War. But let me focus on Europe.

Millions of immigrants from different cultures and religions, from all over the world have been moving into Europe, quite legally, since the 1950's to provide cheap labor for countries whose indigenous folk simply did not want to do the dirty work. Demographically, Europeans are getting older and having too few children to replace them, which will mean fewer taxpayers and a

greater burden on the state.

Europe needs immigrants. However what we are witnessing now is of a different scale as millions are fleeing the failed Arab and Muslim states of their birth, attracted by the prospects of a free life, generous welfare, and stable governments. We have never seen this scale of lawlessness and desperation before. Potentially it could involve tens of millions more. Human trafficking is now huge business.

This will make the integration of these different attitudes, cultures and religions much harder. In effect Europe has capitulated and thrown out its own laws and protocols. Once a country loses control of its system of Law and Order and is invaded, the consequences are far reaching. Most other countries are not so accommodating. Try China or indeed Russia!

Universalism says that we must take them in without limit. Anyone suffering or indeed wanting to better himself or herself should be given a chance. There can be no moral justification for a modern open society to deny refuge no matter how many, no matter what their background and no matter what the cost. But what the consequences will be, we do not know for sure. It might be better than some fear, or worse. Indeed in the European Union now some countries are bridling at this internationalism that they fear will ultimately destroy their indigenous culture. Are they wrong to try to preserve their laws and character?

Where do we stand as Jews? The Bible says, "Do not return a fleeing slave." The stranger was always welcomed and given equal civil rights, but the rider was that they had to accept the moral and religious character of the host community.

This is precisely where Israel finds itself today, in a moral quandary. Israel is an open society despite everything its enemies claim. The Israeli Left, loyal primarily to left-wing values, says, "Let in anyone who wants to flee to Israel; we are proud of our open, liberal society." The Right Wing says, "There are 50 Muslim majority states. Some are poor, but others are rich. Let them take in Muslim refugees who will be part of and help strengthen their own Muslim societies." As it is Israel has an uneasy balance between religious and secular Jews and between Jews and non-Jews. Taking in more people who are loyal to a culture that currently is overwhelmingly opposed to Israel and Jews and who might well ally themselves with those who seek to undermine the Jewish state would be simply suicidal.

So you have a clash of moralities, cultures, and ideology. It is with great reluctance and even a feeling of moral ambivalence that I agree that Israel has no alternative but to do its best to ensure its own survival. Of course it could take in a token amount without any problem. Say, the same amount proportional to its population as the USA, which is now "generously" offering to take in 10,000. But not to open the floodgates as Europe has.

The Jewish world is divided between the left and the right just as much as the political world is. Less Orthodox Jews tend to vote for left wing or democratic parties and see themselves more as universalist. Orthodox Jews see

themselves as more republican, conservative, particularist, struggling to preserve a very specific way of life. One wing inclines towards intermarriage and assimilation and less commitment to Judaism and Israel, the other inclines towards restrictions designed to preserve Jewish integrity.

I believe in choice, and I support the right of individuals to make their own decisions. However that right extends to the Orthodox and the nationalists too. In the end we humans decide based on our own experiences and loyalties. Each side has to accord the other this right. I am loyal to both. My secular education is liberal. My religious education is Orthodox. I draw on both. But in the end, survival of Judaism is my absolute priority. It is my, our contribution to the betterment of human society. It is our attempt to offer a specific, ethical counterbalance to self-interest, materialism, and the lowest common denominator that unites all humans. The world would be a poorer place without us.

Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, in his "Song of the Soul", said that we all have songs within our souls that sing of different aspirations. We all sing multiple songs. But we decide which song prevails. Each one of us decides one's own ultimate priority is.

This is the message Moses gives us in the final chapters of Deuteronomy. "You are all here today to enter into a covenant with God...a covenant that includes all future generations." But we have choices. Individual Jews have always abandoned the covenant. "Some of you may decide to turn away from your roots...and may choose to follow your hearts' desires." (Chapter 30:12-19) There will be consequences. The consequences will not be whether or not the Jewish people will survive. That has been guaranteed. But whether you or your children will still be part of it or not in the next generation.

That is the crucial decision here and now as it has always been and always will be. Do we put universal values before specific values? Both have their good points and their bad, their successes and their failures. But in the end it is like our children. No matter what they do they are still our children. So it is with us Jews. I weep for the suffering masses. But I fear for my own survival.

We are surrounded by enemies and prejudice. Our hopes that hatred would diminish have been cruelly denied. No doubt we share some of the blame. Yet we are, thanks to having a state of our own (with all its faults, imperfections, and blindness), in a stronger position than we have ever been for 2,000 years. It would be suicidal to throw it away.

This is a time to reflect on our choices and where we stand. What are YOUR priorities? As Joshua asked in the Bible, "Are you for us or against us?" Are you universalist or particularist?