

Parshat Reeh
September 3, 2016
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“America First!”

One of the controversial slogans that has been tossed around in this unprecedented political season has been the phrase: “America First.”

I would like to take a few moments this morning and discuss that concept with you. Not the political dimension of it, not the use of a term that resonates from earlier political campaigns where associations of: “America First” was used to promote xenophobia and prejudice. No – I will leave that discussion for the political pundits.

But, isn't it reasonable to in fact put America First – to put ourselves first, to place our needs and our priorities as a nation, as a people, as a religion, as a family – ahead of the needs of others who are not us – not Americans, not of our religion, our town, or our family? Shouldn't we in fact be willing to put America First?

There is a beautiful verse in today's reading, Deuteronomy (ch. 15 v. 7) which states: “If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen, in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.”

From this verse we learn that it is an obligation, in Judaism, to support the needy. And, it is not just a nice thing to do, but it is a *mitzvah*, a religious requirement. The statement is clear and unequivocal. When someone is in need, you must open your hand and give him whatever he or she needs to survive.

Now as simple and straightforward as this verse appears, it does not take long before the rabbis reveal some inherent challenges as one attempts to fulfill it. First, it is based on an assumption - an assumption that too often is *not* the case in the “real world”. When the torah states: “If someone in need comes to you, you must open your hand give him all that he needs,” the assumption underlying this statement is that you have *more* in your hand to give than he *needs* to take. What if the needs of the poor within our midst exceed the ability of the rest of us to provide? What if the needy in our community require a thousand dollars and we only have five hundred to give them? Who gets the limited funds that are available? How do we decide which need is to be met first? What cause deserves priority? These questions are not addressed in today's torah portion.

This verse was intended for a time and an age when people lived in small villages – and the people seeking your help were those who lived in your neighborhood, in close proximity to you. They were few in number and their needs were modest. But how are we to apply this verse? How are we to fulfill this mitzvah – in 2016 when we live in a global village? When the needs of the world are endless and the cry for help may be from half a world away – and there are literally millions in need and trillions of dollars that are needed to help them?

Certainly we as Jews must respond, and respond generously to those in need. The Bible tells me so. But, how much should we send - and does it take priority over the needs of Jews and Jewish causes? The needs of the world are so great and our resources are so meager - how does one begin, where does one start - and where does one stop? What is a caring person to do? Is it not reasonable for me to say: "America First? Jews first? Lucas'es first?"

Unfortunately – the biblical verse from today's *parasha* does not help us resolve this aspect of the demand to help. But, while the Bible does not say much on this matter, the rabbis of the Talmud fortunately, did. In the *Mechilta* of *Rebbi Yishmael*, a collection of *midrashim* on the Book of Exodus that dates back some 2000 years to the Talmudic period, there is a discussion that centers precisely on this question, on the legitimacy of America first. The *Mechilta* deals with four cases. In each of these four cases, two people stand before you in need of money - and the problem it deals with is that you only have you sufficient funds for one of them. Confronted with a limited amount of resources the rabbis want to help us determine a hierarchy of need. The first case they outline is fairly simple: *ani v'ashir omdim lefanecha lelavot, ani kodem. If a poor person and a rich person stand before you to borrow money and you only have enough for one, the poor person should receive the money.*" (although there are probably some who would argue we should lend the money to the rich person who will create jobs that will eventually trickle down to the poor person as well and this way you will end up helping both the rich and the poor – but let's not go there now – ok?) Clearly the rabbis had a simpler and a pretty straightforward approach – rich and poor – only money for one, help the poor. The rabbis then go on to case number 2 & 3: *Ani ircha v'ani ir acheret, ani ircha kodmin. If the poor of your city and the poor of another city stand before you, the poor of your city should receive preference.*

Aniyecha v'aniyey ircha omdim lefanecha, aniyacha kodmin. If a poor relative and a poor stranger from your city stand before you, your family member should receive preference." Now these two cases are a little more problematic, but after a little thought, I think that most of us would agree that with limited resources we have the right, WHEN ALL OTHER THINGS ARE EQUAL, to provide for the needs of those closest to you first. I emphasize: when all other things are equal because clearly in the case of a cousin who wants to borrow money to buy a vacation home in the Hamptons and a poor stranger who needs money to eat, - the importance of the cause should become a factor in addition to the relationship.

But, then comes the most interesting case in this progression of values: *Yisrael v'goi omdim lefanecha lelavot, ami kodem!*" *If a poor Jew and a poor gentile stand before you to borrow money, the Jew should receive preference.*"

Uh oh. I can hear the college kids protesting already. How, provincial, how narrow, how particularistic can you be?

Yisrael v'goi omdim lefanecha lelavot, ami kodem!" *If a poor Jew and a poor gentile stand before you to borrow money, the Jew should receive preference.*"

Yet, is this not an ancient rabbinic version of America First?

And if there is something about "America First" that seems to rub us the wrong way – shouldn't this as well? And are the college kids right – that these both represent an outdated, overly

particularistic way of thinking – out of tune and out of step with the needs of the 21st century?

When a rich or a poor person stands before us - of course the poor person deserves special attention – his/her need is greater. When there is a limited amount of money, who would question your decision to help your relative, or neighbor, before you help a total stranger. But the idea that we help one person over another, simply because he or she is Jewish, and the other is not, just because he or she is American – just because he or she is us – well, that just does not sit well with our modern sensibilities, our American universalism, our global consciousness; not well at all.

There is no doubt an element of counter-culture thinking wrapped up in the America First movement – and I think those that subscribe it would be the first to admit that they are in fact *not* universalistic, *not* global citizens – they are: Americans! America First! And rabbi – don't you frequently preach a Jewish version of America First – when you encourage our young people to date Jews, to marry Jews – isn't that a form of Jewish First?

A young woman, home from college for the summer shared with me her personal dilemma that she had while she was away at school this past year. She was out on a date with a young man, the third time she had gone out with him, and finally she got up the nerve to ask him if he was Jewish (having waited unsuccessfully for some hint before that). "Yes" he replied. "But, why is it important to you? What difference does it make if I am Jewish or not? I am who I am - does the fact that I am Jewish make me more worthy of your attention. And if I had answered no - would it have made me less worthy of your attention? Isn't it more important that I am nice and honest and a host of other qualities that you should concern yourself with before you ask of some accident of birth?"

Unable to adequately respond, the young woman found her way to my office. Is being Jewish sufficient reason to give someone preferential treatment, or is this an archaic trapping that we best divest ourselves of if we wish to become full members of the 21st century. In this age of globalism are we Jews still speaking the language of parochialism? Shouldn't we Jews become more universalistic and be less particularistic?

But – if any of you have been listening to me – 'lo these past 22 years – you will know that time and time again I have stressed the universalistic nature of our sacred Jewish tradition. These same rabbis who taught the particularistic, Jewish Firstism of the text from the *Mechilta* are the very same rabbis who asked in the Talmud: *Lama adam nivra yechidi? Why was only one man created?*" Every other animal and vegetative group described in the first chapters of Genesis were created fully populated with the exception of humankind - and this fact did not escape our rabbis attention. And they answer that this was done to teach us all an important lesson. "So that we would all realize that every person alive in the world today is a descendant of Adam and therefore we are all brothers. And no one person may claim to be superior to another."

When directly confronted with this America First question, this Jews first question, the rabbis emphatically replied: no!

The ethics of Judaism is dominated by a spirit of universalism. If we had more time I could multiply the teachings that prove this. Judaism makes no distinction of any kind whatsoever

between one person and another with respect to morality or eligibility. All children of this world are at the same time children of God, qualified and able to realize the good and to extend its dominion in the world. The messianic teachings of Judaism are recited every day, we will sing it out loud today at the end of these Services when we conclude our rendition of *Aleinu*:
v'neemar v'haya adonai l'melech al kol haaretz bayom hahoo yiyeh adonai ehad u'shemo ehad - And there shall come a day when the Lord will be recognized as ruler of the whole earth. And on that day, all will accept that God is one and God's name is one!"

Jews First? No way! Moses Maimonides, the great Rambam summarized it this way: "As to your question regarding the nations of the world, know that God requires the heart and that all depends upon the allegiance of the heart and its intent. Therefore our ancient sages taught that the righteous of the nations of the world will also have a share in the world to come..." "What race is honorable?" asks Ben Sira "The race of man. Which race is honorable? They that fear the Lord. Which race is dishonorable? The race of man. Which race is dishonorable? They that transgress God's commandments."

I believe in Jews first – but not the way it is being taught in certain narrow particularistic sections of the Jewish community today. I believe in America first – but not the way it is being shouted from the stage in today's political conversation.

To me – the idea of Jews First that at first glance seems to contradict the teaching that all human beings are on equal footing, upon closer inspection actually promotes it. The deepest meaning of God's choosing the Jews is to place upon us a mission, a mission to share our torah with all mankind, a mission to be a light unto the nations by the way we live and lead our lives.

And so I said to that young woman who came to my office – your boyfriend was right that the most important thing is that he be honorable and decent. But, it is also important that he be Jewish. For the price of unadulterated universalism is nothing less than the survival of Judaism itself.

Similarly – I believe in America First – but it is because I believe that we need an America to be a shining beacon to the world of freedom and justice – of openness and acceptance – a nation that proclaimed on its Statue of Liberty – "Give me your tired and your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

So how to I square this circle? How to I explain Jewish particularism in the context of Jewish universalism? And how to I explain America first in the context of the American vision I just gave voice to?

I contend that every time these universalistic rabbis made Jews and Judaism a priority – it was a case of survival. I contend that EVERY use of particularism in Jewish sources deals with some aspect Jewish survival. That every time Jews put Jews first – it was because our lives were on the line.

Charity does begin at home. If we use the wonderful ethics which thousands of years of accumulated Jewish wisdom and learning has taught us - and give generously to the needy - as our Torah teaches us - but do not take care of our own Jews, soon there will be no Jews

and no Torah to teach us the need to give generously. If we do not marry Jews, we will soon assimilate into the modern world and all of the wonderful values and all that love for universalism will be lost.

The Jews protect the values of Judaism, but who protects the Jews? As a group, we must survive in order to promote the lofty values upon which our way of life is based. There are times when we must and should promote ourselves in order that we will survive so that we may continue to promote others.

Similarly – if we do not put America first – there will be no America to serve as a model of freedom and equality for all. There are times when we must and should promote ourselves in order that we will survive so that we may continue to promote a democratic vision that the world desperately needs.

But are we not a nation that is successful enough, big enough, rich enough to take care of ourselves and be concerned about the needs and welfare of the world? Are we not a Jewish people that can both survive and embrace a broader and wider world?

When Jews first comes at the price of devaluing those who are not Jewish and when America First comes at the price of devaluing those who are not Americans they are not Jewish values or American values – they are perversions of our worldviews.

Are we Jews special? Are we Americans special? Of course not, every one of God's creatures is special. But if we Jews and we Americans are not around to remind the world of that – the world will be a darker place.

So let me put this as simply as I can: America First? Absolutely – because we are a country that teaches no one should be second. And we Jews? Well, I think we Jews are special too and what makes us special is that we were placed here to remind the world that no one is special.