

PURIM 2011

In a Twilight Zone episode entitled “One Hundred Yards over the Rim,” the great Cliff Robertson plays Christian Horn, an intrepid pioneer who was taking his family westward in 1847, shortly before the California Gold Rush. Horn’s son was suffering from pneumonia, and water was nowhere to be found, so he volunteered to go over the hill and see if possibly, just possibly, he could find hope on the other side. What he found was the year 1961. After accidentally shooting himself, a result of stumbling to evade an oncoming truck, Horn was given penicillin to treat his ailment. When he saw an encyclopedia, recognized what had happened, and noticed that his dying son would someday grow up to be a great medical researcher, he ran back over the hill and used that medicine to save his son’s life. In truth, Horn was lucky not only to walk into the 20th century but also to escape from it. The gun-toting Horn came across to everyone he encountered as an intransigent, delusional menace, and indeed, he literally had to evade the local sheriff in order to retain his freedom. But once back over the hill, in the century where he belonged, Horn was the portrait of class, poise, and forward thinking. Few actors can portray that sort of character better than Cliff Robertson.

The character of Christian Horn has always resonated with me, for in some respects, Horn presents us with a challenge of what it is like to be a Jew in the modern world. To be a Jew is to be a time traveler. Indeed, those rabbis who have tried to get to the essence of what it means to be a member of the people of Israel commonly say that a Jew is a person who was at Sinai. We were all there. Just as we were all slaves in Egypt. When a person converts to our faith, they are volunteering to go back in time, receive the burdens of slavery and enjoy the blessedness of the Torah. And they are also obliging themselves to learn as many insights as possible from the sweep of time, as well as from the span of space.

Historically, or should I say, *initially*, the Jew was as forward-thinking and modern as was Christian Horn in 1847. Our challenge today is to remain just as forward-thinking and modern according to 21st century standards, without losing our Jewish souls. It’s no easy feat – Horn certainly didn’t fare well when he traveled forward in time -- but it can be done. Part of the problem, though, is that no less than other people, time travelers can get stuck in a comfort zone.

And in the case of the Jewish people, our comfort zone is forged in an era that was much more communal, bucolic, and spiritual than the modern world. We have to be aware of that. And we must somehow adjust to the demands of living in a world enamored with individualism, technology and economics. Without leaving Sinai.

The trick of time traveling could be explored in many domains, but none is more central than the one I'd like to examine this evening. It deals with the dilemma we face between focusing on the universal and the particular. An argument can be made that whereas the Jewish soul was once heavily weighted toward the universal, we are now almost anachronistic in our devotion to the particular. That is certainly true for our Ultra-Orthodox brothers and sisters.

But before we examine the threat of becoming an anachronism (like Christian Horne circa 1961), let's enjoy for a moment Judaism at its best: as a timeless set of universalist ideals. One of our greatest teachers, Martin Buber, wrote in an essay called "Renewal of Judaism," that "The spiritual process of Judaism manifests itself in history as the striving for an ever more perfect realization of three interconnected ideas." One such idea was that of the deed. Another, was that of the future. And the third, the one he mentioned first and foremost, was the idea of unity. According to Buber, "The idea of unity and the tendency toward it inherent in the nature of the people originate in the fact that the Jew has at all times perceived more keenly the context in which phenomena appear than the individual phenomena as such. He sees the forest more truly than the trees, the sea more truly than the wave, the community more truly than the individual. He is therefore more inclined to pensiveness than to imagery, and for the same reason is also impelled to conceptualize the fullness of things even before he has wholly experienced it. But he does not stop with a concept; he is driven to press on to higher unity – to a highest unit that sustains as well as crowns all concepts and binds them into one, just as the phenomena had been bound into a single concept."

This "highest unit" to which Buber refers is, of course, God. But Buber went on to discuss how the Jew's "unitary tendency" compelled him not only to affirm God but to seek an ultimate synergy between God, self and world. For Buber, to be Jewish is to constantly build bridges, embrace the *other*, and encounter the Divine in all earthly manifestations. It is the most

universalistic of philosophies, for it seeks to *bring together*, not merely as a means of institutional outreach, or a power grab, but as a visceral compulsion ... a basic need. Just as a fish must swim, a Jew must expand her horizons and view each vista as a grand totality. There is little room in such a mindset for parochialism or divisiveness.

Jews, then, if they take the spirit of the faith to heart, are universalists. But there's a funny thing about the universal – the more you contemplate it, the more you are impelled to find its reflections in the particular. Take, for instance, our reverence for God. To love God is to recognize the divine in every animal, vegetable or mineral. To love God is to hear the divine word in every sound and every thought. For a person who lives in that manner, each sight and sound becomes a blessing, and perhaps none more than the sight of a human face and the sound of human speech. That attitude is the purest form of God worship, the purest type of devotion to the universal.

We see the same phenomenon when seeking the universal in society. There is nothing more off-putting than the so-called servant of universal truth or justice who treats individual people like they don't matter – like they're not important enough to warrant his attention. True social universalists ground their ethics in the honor they bestow upon individuals, and in the warmth they bring to every person-to-person encounter. From that base alone can you go on to fight the good fight for universal goals.

And when you begin embracing individuals, you soon realize that part and parcel of this embrace is to extend your respect to the wholesome groups and organizations that give our lives meaning. They become the bridge between the particular and the universal. They become the means by which the isolated individual can reach out beyond herself. To work together, study together, pray together, donate together, celebrate together, mourn together. No one institution has a monopoly on providing these riches. But when you consider that all are provided by the Hebrew culture and faith, and within a framework that poetically extols universalistic values, it's no wonder so many of us have forged a strong Jewish consciousness.

We all understand the concepts of “the universal” and “the particular.” But few people experience these words as a challenge that rocks their world. To me, they present not merely *a* challenge, but *the* challenge for our times. This world is at risk precisely because so many people seem unconcerned about the universal; their focus is strictly on their own personal needs and those of their family or community. Climate change is an example of what flows from this myopia. But lest it sound like we are at least in touch with “the particular,” it is more accurate to say that we seem to be in touch with a very narrow range of particulars; as for the rest of what comprises our world, it is either ignored or reviled. And that explains why, if we are exposed to two warring peoples with two competing historical narratives, most of us feel satisfied learning one such narrative and blowing off the other. Some call that being decisive. I call that being myopic.

While everyone should feel compelled to take seriously the challenge of confronting and balancing these concepts, it is particularly important for Jews. As Buber says, we come from a tradition of universalism. Yet today, Jewish parochialism is viewed as one of most significant threats to world peace. That’s no exaggeration. The Israel-Palestinian conflict is perhaps the most intractable dispute in the world’s most contentious region, and Israel is increasingly being portrayed as the party that can most easily make peace but refuses to do so.

Whether or not that critique is valid, it is out there and it places a responsibility on all Jews. We owe it to our critics to at least consider the charge of Jewish parochialism. Have we lost our universalist way? Or is our Judaism, in fact, a very reasonable and even enlightened manifestation of universalism. The answer, I believe, is a little of both.

Let’s start with the positive side of the ledger. Authentic American Jews in the 21st century encounter our society armed with a historical consciousness, a thirst for the universal, and a concern for the individual. And what do we find? A society that relative to its antecedents has become increasingly homogenized and materialistic. Now in some sense, the 21st century world does satisfy the Jewish love for universalism. Whereas our ancestors lived for centuries in isolated communities, we can click on a little box and suddenly, the whole world opens up for us. So yes, Disney was right: it is indeed a small world after all. But what it is *not* is a very Jewish

one. There is nothing less Jewish than a passive lifestyle in which we receive most of our communications from machines and feel isolated from our neighbors. To be sure, the computer is quite an advancement over the TV, but neither is a substitute for face-to-face encounters. And while today's obsession with financial security and self determination is certainly something to which we Jews can relate, they are not traditionally found at the center of our passions. As a Jew, our ultimate goal is to connect spiritually – with each other, timeless ideas, our planet and God. Self determination and financial security may be necessary conditions of our happiness, but they are not sufficient. Sadly, in the modern homogenized world, they have become both.

The gulf between the Jewish ethos and that of the modern society at large thus presents a stark choice. To enter one culture is to leave the other. And while many of us try to play on both fields, we realize that what's important isn't the playing field but the player. What kind of people are we when we go to shul? Are we deeply prayerful? Are we warm and gregarious? Are we interested in learning about the deepest wisdom of the ancient rabbis? And what kind of people are we when we go to the office? Are we pursuing the highest values extolled by our prophets and sages? Or are we just trying to please our bosses? Living Jewishly involves committing ourselves to a set of largely universalistic ideals, which are affirmed through a plethora of rituals and values. We call these rituals and values time honored; others might call them antiquated, or even silly. So while we may have started with a love of the universal, the way we have chosen as a people to tap into that vein has caused us to embrace something that is very *particular* and not necessarily in touch with conventional norms.

Faced with a stark contrast between the Jewish and the modern, millions of people in this world recognize Judaism not only as a gem, but as *their* gem. Most of these people were born to one or two Jewish parents. But some were not, and yet they have come to see the Jewish path as their own. The light that impelled Jacob, Moses, Ruth, Hillel and the Baal Shem Tov guides their choice of beloveds as well as their aversions. The ancient stories about the Jewish people move them in a way that the stories about Greece, Rome, or England simply cannot. Just as a night watchman who literally guards Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* in the Rijksmuseum takes personal responsibility for ensuring that this hallowed work survives and thrives, millions of us feel the

same way about the realm of the Jewish – be it as a religion, a culture, or both. We wish to hallow it, nurture it, proclaim it, preserve it.

We who wish to embrace Judaism do not want to denigrate the alternatives any more than the guard at the Rijksmuseum would denigrate the works at the Louvre. But that guard has *his* museum, and we have our faith and our culture. We don't believe that this makes us any less universalistic. A person can embrace the particular without forsaking the universal. In fact, as has been said, *only* if you are willing to embrace the particular can you truly honor the universal.

So how then, has the Jewish people gone wrong in forsaking the universal? We've done it the same way other groups have. The problems come when your embrace of the particular takes a certain turn – one that is grounded not only in guarding one's beloved, but in doing so *jealously*. Tragically, this tendency has religious roots of the most authentic kind.

Consider the words of the Torah. We're all familiar with the assertion that our Lord is "a jealous God." In English translations of the so-called "Old Testament," you'll find it in Exodus 20:5, Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 5:9, Deuteronomy 6:15. If you look at a modern Jewish translation of the Tanach, you'll likely see the word "jealous" replaced with "impassioned." But then, in the commentary, you'll see that this change is a distinction without a difference, because "impassioned" is defined in terms of having the quality of "jealous indignation," which is said to be embodied in the divine name or essence.

Jews are not alone in being taught to jealously guard against anything or anyone who'd place our own God as a part of a polytheistic pantheon. Worshippers of Jesus take pains to say that their Trinitarianism is not a philosophy of multiple Gods, but a vehicle for explaining how the one and only God is best understood in three persons. As for Muhammad, it is hard to imagine a historical figure more impassioned on behalf of God's unity, and more willing to take on any idol worshipper who challenges the unique and overarching majesty of the One True King.

It sounds benign enough, I suppose, until you start imagining real life encounters between the guardians of the Jealous God and those seen as His enemies. For centuries, we Jews were seen as “Christ Killers.” Others have been known as “Infidels.” Hindus, whose religion is associated with polytheism, are viewed by many as primitive. And atheists are commonly seen by monotheists as incapable of morality; after all, according to conventional orthodox wisdom, the ground of morality is nothing other than the fear of the Jealous God.

Yes, I am intentionally conflating the jealousy traditionally attributed to God, and the jealousy attributable to human beings when they see fit to protect the hegemony of a particular brand of God-worship. That’s because I’m convinced the one bleeds into the other in the human subconscious. But the fact is that you don’t even need to believe in God to jealously protect your beloved. Animals aren’t theists, and yet I for one wouldn’t want to get between any mother in the animal kingdom and its offspring. We are wired to protect what we believe is most precious.

As Jews, then, there is a strong tendency to protect at any cost the bulwarks of Judaism. Our values. Our rituals. Our God. Our people. In the early 1940s, Jewish values were surely alive and well. Even our rituals were kept, or at least they were kept to the extent possible under some very difficult circumstances. As for the Jewish God, the “divine creation” was being desecrated in the most horrific way; but the Holy One whose name is synonymous with the Infinite and the Eternal, was in no danger. The same, however, could not be said for the Jewish people.

Only after the Holocaust have modern Jews developed an institution designed to guard the Jewish people against any possible enemy. This institution has a symbol – or should I say five symbols. One is the young, strong, olive-colored Israeli man. Another, the young, strong, olive-colored Israeli woman. The third is the uniform they wear when they reach the end of the teenage years, a uniform that has become synonymous with victory, often against seemingly insurmountable odds. The fourth symbol is the gun that goes with the uniform. And the fifth symbol is the star of the great warrior king David – in Dachau it was a symbol of martyrdom, but now, in the Land of Zion, it has become a symbol of pride, community, and yes, justice. For what it most deeply signifies is that the Hebrew people once again have their own state,

something the Germans, the Italians, the French, the English, the Chinese, and yes, the followers of Muhammad, have enjoyed for centuries.

These symbols, collectively, have become the face of Jewish autonomy – a response to all who would threaten to make us lose our ability as a people for self determination. These symbols are loathed by some and loved by others. Nobody is neutral about them. You can be conflicted, but not neutral. The emotions that these symbols evoke are way too primal for that.

As a Spinozist and a Jew, I of all people should be a universalist – at least if you buy into Martin Buber’s view of Judaism. And yet, for the reasons discussed, it should be clear by now how even a Spinozist Jew like me can become an ardent Zionist. Does Zionism advance a passion for the particular? Sure. Does it promote particularism over universalism? Not at all. The principles I affirm in embracing Zionism are universalistic in nature. In my ideal world, you would indeed see melting pot countries, like our beloved America. But you would also see countries where one ethnic group or set of interrelated tribes has created a single place on earth where it, as a people, predominates and sets the tone. And as long as we can embrace these countries peacefully, and not approach them jealously, we can all benefit from the unique and beautiful expressions of each people’s creative energies. Otherwise, what do you have but a tapestry with a single design -- as boring as it is harmonious.

If the world is big enough for a German State, a Dutch State and an Italian State ... then it is plenty big enough for a Jewish State. For remember, the word “Jewish” in that sense is meant primarily in the form of a community of people, not a community of faith.

The problem, as one of my Muslim friends likes to say, isn’t Zionism in principle, it is Zionism in practice. In practice, we have allowed this hallowed word, this hallowed ideal, to be enmeshed with the idea of jealousy and paranoia. We jealously guard against any threat to the Jewish control over pre-67 Israel. And we do so with such verve that we have permitted expansionist tendencies among Jews who claim that by expanding the scope of Israeli control, we can somehow better protect Haifa, Tel Aviv, or West Jerusalem. Oh, I don’t doubt that Israel

has legitimate security interests that need to be protected, and for that reason I was an early supporter of the Wall separating Israel from the land controlled by Palestinians. Of course, what I supported was the Wall *in theory*. Once that Wall started meandering eastward so as to protect Jewish settlements that were purely expansionistic in motivation, that's when I became a critic.

For me, whether or not to embrace Zionism is not the issue. I hope all Jews become unabashed Zionists. Those who have not yet done so may want to stop apologizing for simply wanting for their own community what almost every other people has – its own piece of earth. Rather, the real issue is how can we be Jewish Zionists and not be equally committed Palestinian nationalists? How can we affirm the right of Jews to have our own state in pre-1948 Palestine while denying a state to the Palestinians we displaced? *That* is the attitude that reflects particularism run amuck. That is the attitude that has forsaken the universalism that made us great in the first place.

Yes, I know. One problem is that there are so few Arabs who are willing to proclaim their own Zionism, at least publicly. If they won't do that, why should we fight like hell for a free and autonomous Palestine and give up our claim to some of the holiest spots in the Jewish religion, like Hebron and Bethlehem? The answer, for starters, is because peace making requires proactivity from each side. And because it is easier for us Jews, who have the upper hand militarily, to embrace the Palestinian claims than it is for the Palestinians, who live under Jewish rule, to embrace the claims of Israel. But most importantly, we must become Palestinian nationalists as sure as we are Zionists because universalism demands it. And once we give up our universalism ... once we let our embrace of the particular not merely work within a universalist motif but become dominant ... that is when we will have truly lost our way. That is when we will have done things on behalf of the Jewish *people* that are against the spirit of the Jewish *religion*. After all, before there were Jews, there were plenty of peoples who preached a brand of particularism. Our greatest contribution is precisely the preaching of the universal – be it in the form of our ethics or our metaphysics. As Jews, we recognize that diversity may be the ultimate in beauty, but unity is the ultimate in truth.

Given that point, is there a way that that Jewish people can come to embrace the universal most profoundly without sacrificing the particular? To somehow place the particular at the service of the universal? To fight so that religious and ethnic pride can be viewed as a source of overarching social unity, rather than divisiveness? If we cannot answer these questions in the affirmative, then every day we spend at a place of worship, or at a celebration of ethnicity, may not only be a waste of time, but a social menace.

Fortunately, though, that need not be the case. Speaking, for example, about divisions among religions, the antidote is right before our eyes. It's called the interfaith movement. And mark my words, it will be the wave of the future ... or else.

“Interfaith” has negative connotations to many of us. It sure did for me. I would picture groups of insipid people proclaiming one platitude after another, all of which were aimed at making the point that we're all creatures of God and we all believe in the same God, so there's no need to fight. Well, I would suppose that message might be OK for a four year old. Intellectual adults, however, understand that we don't all believe in the same God – for that matter, we don't all believe in any God, nor should we. Our beliefs about ultimate issues should be forged diligently over the course of an entire life, and it is entirely reasonable to go through twists and turns, adopting atheism at one point, say, then theism, and then panentheism. That at least was my approach; someone else's might be different. And it is precisely that diversity and our ability to communicate about it that enriches us as a species.

The connotation I hated most about interfaith was precisely that it destroyed the beauty of particularity. It sought to rub out the differences that are truly the spice of life. And take it from a vegan: without spices, what we've got left is oppressively bland.

When I was about to co-found an interfaith group in 2008, I had but one condition: that we not turn into another band of kumbaya singers. Religion can be stupid enough when it's authentic; to add inauthenticity to the mix is simply intolerable. But what I didn't realize originally, was that when you do approach interfaith authentically -- when you do allow Jews to be Jews,

Christians to be Christians, Hindus to be Hindus, and let the chips fall where they may – what you get can be positively invigorating. For there's no question in my mind that exposure to different points of view is absolutely essential both to our own enlightenment and to our ability to heal the world outside our communities. Once we make it clear that we approach *the other* with love and not jealousy, what I've found is that you will be cut all sorts of slack when you share your ideas. And others will respond by sharing their own. There's plenty of truth to be shared by talking and listening.

As I reflect on the Jewish-Islamic Dialogue Society of Washington in its third year, what moves me most is that we've figured out a way to keep it real. To embrace the particular within the context of a community created in support of the universal. We talk about our differences with passion, we talk about our similarities with passion, and the more we knock heads during these sessions, the stronger our friendships are forged. When I see Jews and Muslims going at it with gusto and love, that's when I see religion at its best. Where's the universalism in that, you ask? Fighting for fighting's sake? Hardly. What we're doing is what every grandson and daughter of Abraham should do – we're wrestling with God, wrestling with ideas, and wrestling with each other. And when we leave the pit, when we go to our respective homes and reflect on the perspectives we've heard and shared, that's when the real learning takes place. That's when we come to appreciate the ultimate truth about religion – that no one faith has a monopoly on insight. And that's why if there's ever a choice between a Jew reading her 200th book on Judaism or her first book on Hinduism, there's no question which one has more potential to enlighten.

Nine years after 9/11, we saw in the Ground Zero Mosque controversy just how far we are from becoming an interfaith society. Trust me, this movement is still in its inception. It was hardly existent a half century ago, and even now, its numbers are small. The schools who train our clergy have for the most part only paid lip service to the concept, and without clergy buy-in, the interfaith gatherings will want for numbers. That's just the reality.

But the good news is that the interfaith movement is now on the map. The seminaries know about it, and they're grappling what they think about it, and so far, nobody can come up with a

good argument that we do not need a robust interfaith movement in today's world. Only a troglodyte would even make the effort. To be sure, troglodytes abound in the realm of organized religion, but time is not on their side. If they want to compete in this millennium, they're going to have to offer a product that is compelling to the modern soul.

So, if the question is raised – how should we best marry our devotion to the universal and the particular? – the answer for me is clear. Steep your children in a faith tradition that is always devoted to the universal above all else. Then turn them loose on the world to learn about other faiths and teach about their own. As adults they won't see themselves as Jews, Muslims, or Hindus. They'll see themselves as Interfaith Jews, Muslims or Hindus.

And they will be the ones to lead our collective fights for justice and peace. If not them, who? If not you, who? Next time you see a prayerbook, please ask yourselves those questions.