The Jewish liturgical calendar is set up to ensure that each year, parashat Be-Midbar (“In the wilderness”) is read before the festival of Shavuot, usually on the Shabbat right before the holiday. The connection between the parashah and the holiday is not immediately obvious, but interpreters often focus on why God chose to reveal the Torah in the wilderness. According to the most commonly cited Rabbinic explanation, the Torah was given in the desert in order to instill the virtue of humility in its students. As the Talmudic Sage R. Mattena teaches, “If one allows oneself to be treated as a wilderness on which everybody treads, one’s study will be retained by him; otherwise it will not” (BT, Eiruvin 54a). But another, very different interpretation forces us to confront some of the most basic questions of Jewish theology—and for that matter, some of the most complex questions about pluralism, universalism, and tolerance.

Interpreters often focus on why God chose to reveal the Torah in the wilderness.

A midrash teaches: “The Torah was given in a free place. For had the Torah been given in the land of Israel, the Israelites could have said to the nations of the world, ‘You have no

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1 For a very different approach, see Tosafot to BT Megillah 31b, s.v. Kelalot.
share in it.” But now that it was given in the wilderness publicly and openly, in a place that is free for all, everyone wishing to accept it could come and accept it” (Mekhila De-Rabbi Ishmael, Ba-Hodesh 1). The Torah was given in the desert, in other words, to emphasize its universal availability. Whatever the Israelites might have been tempted to believe, the midrash teaches, the Torah was not intended to be their exclusive possession; on the contrary, “the giving of the Torah in the desert—a no-man’s land—was a clear signal that the Torah was not the property of one nation but was intended for all peoples.”

In a similar vein, another midrash teaches that that there are three crowns in the world: the crown of priesthood, the crown of royalty, and the crown of Torah. The crown of priesthood was claimed by Aaron, the crown of royalty by David. But “the crown of Torah rests in place in order not to give those who come into the world an opportunity to argue ‘had the crowns of priesthood and royalty been in place I could have won them and taken them.’ The crown of Torah is a reproof for all those who come into the world [and would so argue], for whoever wins it I [God,] reckon it as if all three crowns had remained in their place and he had won them all. And whoever does not win it, I reckon it as if all three crowns had remained in their place and he had not won any of them” (Sifrei Numbers 119). Note how much more radical this midrash is than the previous one: If the first midrash suggested that non-Jews may come and accept the Torah, this one insists that non-Jews must come and accept it. Midrash scholar Marc Hirshman explains that according to this passage, “Torah is available to all those who come into the world. It remains in place, available for anyone to take it. Torah is the litmus

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test for all humanity, not just Jews. Whereas only a few are chosen for priesthood or monarchy, all are invited to partake of Torah, the ultimate crown.” The midrash cites two verses: “This is the law of a person (ve-zot torat ha-adam, 2 Samuel 7:19) and “The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe [God’s] commandments, for this applies to every person” (ki zeh kol ha-adam, Ecclesiastes 12:13). Hirshman notes that “both verses are addressed to ha-adam, a person in the most general and universal terms.” The implications of this perspective are startling: “The law is the law of humankind and the essence of the person is to fulfill God’s commandments.”

Needless to say, these are not the only—or even the dominant—voices in Rabbinic tradition. At the other extreme, the Talmudic Sage R. Yoḥanan declares that “a non-Jew who studies the Torah deserves death, for it is written, ‘Moses charged us with a Torah, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob’ (Deuteronomy 33:4)—it is our inheritance, not theirs.” Along the same lines, R. Simeon b. Lakish teaches that “a non-Jew who keeps a day of rest deserves death” (BT, Sanhedrin 58b-59a). To be clear: the idea that non-Jews who study Torah or keep Shabbat “deserve death” is a hyperbolic way of expressing disapproval and was never meant to be taken literally. What is not immediately apparent is why R. Yoḥanan and R. Simeon b.

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4 Cf. Arthur Marmorstein, Studies in Jewish Theology (1950), Hebrew Section, p. 84. Marmorstein observes that such forceful condemnations indicate that in antiquity at least some non-Jews “wanted and made efforts both to learn Torah and to keep the Sabbath.”
Lakish find the notion of a non-Jew studying Torah or observing Shabbat so utterly objectionable.

For Jews, the Torah is an immense treasure, a unique window into the love and will of the Creator of heaven and earth.

These two strains in Rabbinic theology could not diverge more starkly. According to one, non-Jews are condemned for studying Torah; according to the other, they are condemned for not studying it. Underlying this profound disagreement, I think, are two competing religious impulses. For Jews, the Torah is an immense treasure, a unique window into the love and will of the Creator of heaven and earth. Having discovered such incomparable riches, what are we to do? One approach wants to spread the word and share our riches with the whole world; the other sees the treasure as inherently private, a matter of marital intimacy between God and God’s people. To share it is to undermine and dilute it.

Tanakh, too, struggles with the question of who must worship the God of Israel. The book of Deuteronomy instructs the Israelites: “When you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them.” But such worship is prohibited only to Israel, for “these [celestial bodies] the Lord your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven.” What is expected of Israel is different, because “you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt… to be [the Lord’s] very own people, as is now the case” (Deuteronomy 4:19-20). In dramatic

5 Cf. also Deuteronomy 29:25. For Rabbinic struggles with the idea that God grants permission to non-Jews to worship celestial bodies, cf. Midrash Sifrei to Deuteronomy 17:3.
contrast, the prophet Isaiah calls upon the nations of the world to turn to God—not in some far off messianic future, as other prophets held, but right now: “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is none else. By Myself I have sworn... To Me every knee shall bend, every tongue swear loyalty” (Isaiah 45:22-23). Bible scholar Moshe Weinfeld notes that for Deuteronomy, which is not bothered by gentile idolatry, “the election of Israel serves to separate Israel from the nations and to distance it from them; in other words, it serves a national purpose.” But for Isaiah, in contrast, election serves “to bring the nations closer to Israel and its faith; in other words, it serves a universal purpose.”

As Isaiah declares, “I the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations (or goyim)” (Isaiah 42:6); “I will make of you a light of nations, that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth” (49:6).

It might be tempting to think that there are obvious “good guys” and “bad guys” in this debate: We might hold that the “universalism” we’ve seen in the midrashim is Judaism at its best, while the particularism of R. Yoḥanan and R. Simeon b. Lakish is Judaism at its worst and most chauvinistic. But in fact the picture is far more complicated than such simplistic dichotomies would allow.

In theological terms, “universalism” can entail the affirmation that as Creator of all, God cares for every human being on the

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face of the earth. But such universal concern can bring with it the insistence that all of humanity must serve God in the one true way right now—and human (and Jewish) history is littered with the corpses of those who resisted other people’s universalist passions. “Particularism,” in contrast, can take chauvinistic forms, whereby God loves us but is indifferent—or even hostile—to everyone else. But particularism can also enable people to make space for others without tyrannizing them. Confidence in divine election can render Jews arrogant and at times even indifferent to the fate of others, but it also frees us from the temptation of global conquest. A sense that Christ is the truth that must be embraced by all can lead Christians to a deep sense of kinship with all humanity, but, as history has shown, it can also turn them violent and imperialistic.7 As Daniel Boyarin wonderfully puts it, “the genius of Christianity is its concern for all the peoples of the world; the genius of Rabbinic Judaism is its ability to leave other people alone.”8

**Universalism need not entail pluralism.** The point I am making is that universalism need not entail pluralism. On the contrary, as the history of religion amply demonstrates, it often stands at loggerheads with pluralism. If one were to choose between Deuteronomy (particularism) and Isaiah (universalism) with an eye towards limiting the potential to violence—to be clear: I am not suggesting that this is the only criterion by which we should evaluate religious ideas—Deuteronomy could well be the safer bet. And if one were to choose between the midrashim

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7 It goes without saying, I hope, that my point is not to tar all Christians—or all Jews—with one brush; I am interested here in the possibilities, both positive and negative, implicit in each stand.

that want Torah embraced by all or the Sages who want to keep Torah for Jews alone, the latter, too, could well be the safer bet.

There are many forms of universalism. I am not suggesting that universalism necessarily leads to imperialism, or tyranny, or violence; it can also lead to a robust sense of human solidarity and mutual responsibility. Sometimes it can lead to both impulses in the same person—or people, or religious tradition. I am suggesting something more modest, which is that questions of particularism and universalism are almost always more complex than we are tempted to assume. Both paths in all their multifarious forms can be fraught with theological (and moral) peril, and both can yield enormous richness and generosity of spirit.

Jewish theology attempts to negotiate this minefield by means of the Noahide covenant, which “places all peoples in a relationship of grace and accountability with God.” This implies that in Judaism, as Jon Levenson argues, “Israel’s relationship to God is both unique and universal: No other people has it, yet all humanity has something of the same order.” A full consideration of the covenant with Noah in Jewish theology and law is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is no doubt worth noting that “one of the reasons for the absence of a missionary thrust in [most of] [R]abbinic theology is the doctrine of human dignity in general,
whether Israelite or not. Those who think outsiders can have a proper relationship with God as they are will feel less of an impulse to make them into insiders.”

The goal, we might say, is to care deeply about people while also remembering how to leave them alone.

Shabbat Shalom.

See Shai Held’s other divrei Torah on parashat Be-Midbar:

- 5774 – Divine Love and Human Uniqueness

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