Lesson Plan – Universalism vs Particularism

The following lesson plan is a suggestion of how some of the Universal vs Particular ideas and resources contained in this unit could be incorporated into a 60-minute class period for a high-school age class. This lesson plan will focus solely on one particular idea within the thought of Rabbi Sacks. There are many other themes found in this unit of resources which would take more classroom-time to explore with your students.

Goal: To understand what universalism is, why it is not an ideal compatible with Judaism (despite having some Jewish values at its core), and why, according to Rabbi Sacks, Judaism models particularism as way to value what he calls “the dignity of difference”.

1-10 minutes: Activator

- Ask your students to close their eyes and rest their heads on the desk. Take your students on a guided fantasy to “Utopia”, asking them to picture a perfect world. While your students are in their ‘utopian world’ ask them to look around and notice what it is that makes it utopian and perfect. Ask them to pay particular attention to the people there. Individuals and groups of people. What are they doing and how are they behaving? Ask them to take a souvenir from there that can fit into their pocket. Bring your students back to your classroom from the fantasy of utopia and ask them to share what they saw and what their souvenir was (and why it represents the Utopia they visited). It is likely a recurring theme among their answers will be that everyone managed to get along and this was a peaceful place. Ask your students what it was that the people in their utopia were doing differently from people in our world (who often do not seem to get along). Also ask them if the people in their utopia were all similar, living similar lifestyles, and whether they all believed similar things.

- Using John Lennon’s song *Imagine* as an activator, continue the conversation to include his vision of a utopian society. Study a portion of his lyrics. Make sure your students understand that this involves removing all the things from society that make us different. Ask them what they think of this vision? Ask them what they think Judaism has to say about this?
11-30 minutes: Universalist Societies:

Using the following sources as a starting point, ask your students in small groups to research a society from history that was universalist.

- The three periods of universalism in history (*Not in God’s Name*, pp. 190-191)
- The five universalist cultures in Western civilisation (*The Dignity of Difference*, p. 20)

Ask them to consider the following questions:

- What were the positive aspects of the society you chose to research?
- What were the negative aspects of the society you chose to research?
- How does the society you researched compare to the vision described in the song *Imagine*?

Ask for 2 or 3 groups to share their findings with the class.

31-45 minutes: Texts from the writings of Rabbi Sacks on the universal and the particular:

In *chavrutot* (pairs), have your students learn the texts in the following sections from the texts of Rabbi Sacks, and consider the core questions contained there:

- A particular people with a universal message
- Universalism as a threat to the dignity of difference

46-55 minutes: Come back together as a class to discuss what Judaism and specifically the way Rabbi Sacks sees Jewish thought considering the themes of universalism and particularism. Make sure your students consider the message of Judaism in this respect, and the way the Jewish people can transmit this to the world.

56-60 minutes: Summing up

During the final few minutes of the discussion, ensure your students have understood the following points:

- Universalism has been seen in many forms throughout history.
- It is often based on good values, values that are compatible with Judaism, but in practice, universal societies are antithetical to Torah values.
- The Torah has a universal message that it articulates through a particular people (the Jewish people) and their particular religion (Judaism)
- The national mission of the Jewish people is to model difference and particularism, in order to show there is a *Dignity of Difference*, while at the same time humanity is a glorious guild of different groups with all of its beautiful difference and particularism.