

The Universalism of Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno

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Section 1 – Approaching Jewish Particularism

Throughout history, Jews have often experienced a conflict between a more particularistic worldview asserting Jewish chosenness and the more universalistic tendencies of their surrounding society. This tension between universalism and particularism was central to the clashes between Judaism and the respective ideas and cultures of Ancient Greece, Christianity,¹ and the European Enlightenment. Within the Jewish people itself, modernizers advocate for more universalistic approaches, and traditionalists as well as nationalists emphasize particularism. The terrible massacre we suffered on Simchas Torah (October 7, 2023), the subsequent multi-front war, the dramatic increase in anti-Semitism and shocking support for Hamas in the West, the steadfast support Israel received from large numbers of non-Jews, the criticism Israel also received, and the increase in political polarization, all call for us to think carefully about the relationship of *Am Yisrael* to the other nations. How is a traditional Jew to approach conflicts between particularistic and universalistic impulses? Must such a person reject the universalistic notions which to him are intuitive²? Do these universalistic notions have a solid basis in

¹ See Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1987), p. 131–132, who argues that one of the main “innovations” of Christianity was to place selected teachings of Judaism in a more universal context. For an interesting perspective on the claim that Christianity is more universal than Judaism, as well as an assertion that in some contexts it was the universalistic as opposed to particularistic claims of Judaism which were offensive to other nations, see Dr. Malka Simkovich, “Some Reflections on Jewish Universalism,” *Tradition* (54:3) Summer 2022.

² A sharp distinction must be drawn between universal ideas and ideas currently popular on the extreme political left. Far left (“woke”) notions of social justice are actually in conflict with universal ideas. See, for example Yascha Mounk,

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our tradition, or are they foreign to that tradition? In this paper, I will approach these questions based on the teachings of Rav Ovadiah Sforno (c. 1475³–1550).⁴

Sforno⁵ was born in Cesena, near Bertinoro, lived in Rome for around 30 years, and lived for at least the last ten years of his life in Bo-

The Identity Trap (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), David Bernstein, *Woke Antisemitism* (New York: Post Hill Press, 2022), and John McWhorter, *Woke Racism* (New York: Portfolio / Penguin, 2021).

³ His birth year is given in different sources as being between 1470 and 1475.

⁴ There is a significant amount of background material on Sforno both from the traditional and academic worlds. One scholar who has credentials in both of these worlds is Rabbi Moshe Kravetz, who has published a number of Sforno's works including *Peirush Rabbeinu Ovadiah Sforno al HaTorah Mervar U' Menukad* (Israel: Oz Vehadar, 5778) with extensive footnotes which I found very helpful. See his interview with Rabbi Ephraim Zalman Galinsky, "Renaissance Rav," *Mishpacha Magazine*, Succos Supplement 5784, September 26, 2023, <mishpacha.com/renaissance-rav/> and his interview with Nachi Weinstein on Seforimchatter, December 5, 2020, "With R' Moshe Kravetz discussing the Sforno (Rav Ovadia Sforno, 1475–1550)." Kravetz also contributed a chapter to Giuseppe Veltri, Giada Coppola, and Florian Dunklau, *The Literary and Philosophical Canon of Ovadiah Sforno*, Maimonides Library for Philosophy and Religion, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2024) <https://brill.com/display/title/69288> which is a volume of collected essays resulting from two international conferences held at University of Hamburg in 2017 and 2018 on Sforno. In that chapter, Kravetz argues that not only was Sforno's *Ohr Amim* written for non-Jews, Sforno's Torah commentary was also written to address criticisms from the non-Jewish world. Among the other scholars who contributed chapters is Dr. Saverio Campinini, who has published both on Sforno and on Johannes Reuchlin, the non-Jewish German scholar who was a student of Sforno and fought in the early 1500s against the efforts of Johannes Pfefferkorn to condemn the Talmud to being burnt. One of the important contributions Rabbi Kravetz makes in his footnotes on Sforno's commentary on the Torah is referencing Sforno's other works, especially the philosophical work *Ohr Amim*, where many of Sforno's ideas in his commentary on the Torah receive further elaboration. In doing research for this paper, I benefited from a number of other works as well. Rabbi Dr. Zev Gottlieb published *Biur Sforno al HaTorah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5752), which includes an extensive introduction and helpful footnotes, and *Kol Kisvei R Ovadia Sforno* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1987), which includes a number of works including *Ohr Amim* and Sforno's commentary on *Avos*, with many helpful footnotes. Rabbi Yehuda Cooperman published *Peirush Rabbeinu Ovadia Sforno al HaTorah* (Jerusalem: 5776), with many helpful footnotes, and I also benefited from Rabbi Raphael Pelcowitz, *Sforno Commentary on the Torah* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1987).

logna. While the identity of his teachers is unknown, he was influenced by Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel, who lived in Italy at the same time as Sforno, although it not known if they had personal contact. Sforno received his medical degree in 1501 in Ferrara.

Sforno was known as a leading rabbinical figure both in Rome and Bologna. He gave *shiurim* in Rome and served as a tutor, established a yeshivah in Bologna, and was a *dayan* on the *beis din* of Rav Avraham b. Moshe HaCohen. Sforno was active as a *posek* and interacted in *halachah* with Rav Meir Katzenellenbogen (Maharam Padua, c. 1482–1565), considered among the greatest of *poskim*, and was referred to with great respect by Rav Meir in his *teshuvos*. Among Sforno's noteworthy halachic activities is that he created a *cherem* against those who used non-Jewish courts, and he derived halachic measurements which were later cited by Shach (*Yoreh Deah* 294:15). Sforno was motivated in many of his Torah teachings to address challenges to authentic Jewish faith. He interacted with the non-Jewish world, and even corresponded with the French King Henry II, including by sharing with him his commentary on Ecclesiastes as well as his philosophical work *Ohr Amim*.

Of his many written works, Sforno is best known for his commentary on the Torah, although he did not publish this during his lifetime. It was most likely started while he lived in Rome, and it was first published in 1567 based on a manuscript that Sforno possessed at the end of his life. Sforno published his major philosophical work, *Ohr Amim*, in 1537, and published the Latin translation in 1548, towards the end of his life. He also published his commentary to *Avos* in 1540. Sforno wrote a number of other works, including commentaries on several books of *Tanach*.

As a first step in addressing this topic, let us define our terms. Dr. Malka Simkovich⁵ makes the important point that in discussions of these issues, the terms “universalism” and “particularism” are often inadequately defined. She offers a definition based on whether other communities can remain apart from the covenantal community and still maintain a distinct relationship with *HKBH*. Dr. Menachem Kellner⁷

⁵ This biographical information is based on the introduction to Rabbi Moshe Kravetz's *Peirush Rabbeinu Ovadiab Sforno al HaTorah Mevuar U' Menukad* and the introduction to Rabbi Dr. Zev Gottlieb's *Biur Sforno al HaTorah*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Menachem Kellner, “Today's Perplexed: Between Maimonidean Promise and Peril,” *Tradition* (53:4) Fall 2021, p. 23. In his work, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (New York: 1991), Dr. Kellner characterizes the universalist position as maintaining there is no fundamental difference between the soul of

works with an intuitive understanding of these concepts when he criticizes the particularism of parts of contemporary Jewry for believing that *HKBH* does not “care about” other nations. While I think both of these definitions are useful, I want to suggest a definition which encompasses these other ones and allows us to consider universalism and particularism in the context of specific halachic and hashkafic subtopics, and to explore a range of views within Torah thought ranging from more universalistic to more particularistic.

I will use a definition from Dr. Fons Trompenaars,⁸ a scholar who studies conducting business across cultures. Dr. Trompenaars defines seven dimensions where cultures differ, one of which is universalism versus particularism, and has validated his work with empirical research based on surveying participants from numerous countries. He defines universalistic cultures as those which refer to general rules as the source of morality versus particularistic cultures where particular relationships and personal loyalty are of greater importance than abstract rules.

Based on Dr. Trompenaars’s definition, we can suggest alternative ways to understand chosenness. Those who adopt a universalistic perspective on the concept of the chosenness of *Am Yisrael* would maintain that other nations are not essentially different or excluded from a relationship with *HKBH*. They would maintain that *Yisrael* has simply done a “better job” of following the general rules, which apply to everyone, and therefore have earned a closer relationship. A particularistic explanation would assert an innate difference between *HKBH*’s relationship with *Yisrael* and with other nations. *HKBH*’s relationship with *Yisrael* does not need to follow the “regular” rules and other nations are excluded from this special relationship.

The topic of universalism vs. particularism impacts many concrete areas of *hashkafah* and halachah. On some of these issues we find disagreement between authorities. Some authorities adopted positions that are more universalist while others tended towards particularism.⁹ Recent

the Jew and of the non-Jew, while the essentialist position, basing itself on a Platonic view of the soul as being fully formed at birth, maintains the souls are essentially different. Rabbi Hanan Balk follows this formulation in his article, “The Soul of a Jew and the Soul of a Non-Jew,” *Hakirah*, vol. 16, 2013 pp. 47–76, <http://www.hakirah.org/Vol%2016%20Balk.pdf>.

⁸ Fons Trompenaars and Peter Woolliams, *Business Across Cultures* (England: Capstone, 2006).

⁹ I do not believe that universalism vs. particularism is actually a binary question. If we were to come up with a list of all halachic and hashkafic debates which related to universalism and particularism, we would not find all authorities tak-

writers have pointed to Rambam,¹⁰ Meiri,¹¹ Rav Hirsch,¹² Rav Abraham Isaac Kook,¹³ Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin,¹⁴ Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg,¹⁵ and Rav Aaron Soloveitchik¹⁶ as examples of universalistic thinkers.

In this paper, I will make the argument that Sforno is an example of a Jewish universalist. We will compare his approach with the approach of other thinkers in the context of two subtopics that fall under the broader topic of universalism and particularism. Specifically, we will consider the purpose of the creation of the world and of mankind, and whether *Yisrael* and other nations are intended to play similar or different roles in fulfilling *HKBH*'s purpose in creating the world. We will also consider the topic of divine providence—*hashgachah pratis*—and explore whether there are fundamental differences in how *HKBH* interacts with *Yisrael* and with other nations.

As an introduction to Sforno's approach, consider his comments on the verses describing the most seminal moment in Jewish history, the Revelation at Sinai, in *Shemos* 19:4, 19:5, and 19:6. Sforno writes that *Yisrael* has a unique relationship with *HKBH* but that the difference between *Yisrael* and other nations is not absolute—it is a matter of degree:

ing consistent positions on all of these issues. Nonetheless, it is useful to group Torah authorities as tending towards more universalistic positions vs. those tending towards more particularistic ones.

¹⁰ See Rabbi Hanan Balk, *ibid.*, Kellner, *ibid.*, and Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (New York: 1991).

¹¹ See David Berger, "Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts," *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age, The Orthodox Forum Series*, ed. by Marc D. Stern, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2005, pp. 83-108.

¹² See Rabbi Shmuel Leshner, "For the Love of Humanity: The Religious Humanism of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch," *Hakirah* (32) Fall 2022, p. 65.

¹³ Rabbi Bezalel Naor writes about Rav Kook's universalism in a number of places, including "The Universalism of Rav Kook," <http://orot.com/universalism-rav-kook/> and "Rav Kook on Jewish Universalism" <http://orot.com/rav-kook-on-jewish-universalism/>, "The Two Faces of Messianism,"

<<http://orot.com/the-two-faces-of-messianism/>>, and *Orot*, Introduction, Translation, and Notes by Rabbi Bezalel Naor, 2014, p. 298, note 21.

¹⁴ See Rabbi Ze'ev Kraines, *Sefer Chassidei U'mos HaOlam* 6:3.

¹⁵ See Marc Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884–1966* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002), p. 183.

¹⁶ See Rabbi J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, vol. VII (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2016), pp. 175–176, fn. 20. See also Rav Aaron Soloveitchik, "Jew and Jew, Jew and Non-Jew," *Jewish Life*, May–June 1966 for more on Rav Soloveitchik's thought on this issue.

והייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים. אף על פי שכל המין האנושי יקר אצלי מכל יתר הנמצאים השפלים, כי הוא לבדו המכוון בהם, כאמרם ז"ל (אבות) חביב אדם שנברא בצלם מכל מקום אתם תהיו לי סגולה מכלם:
כי לי כל הארץ. וההבדל ביניכם בפחות ויותר הוא, כי אמנם לי כל הארץ וחסדי אומות העולם יקרים אצלי בלי ספק:

In the sections below we will return multiple times to this idea that Sforno characterizes the difference between *Yisrael* and other nations to be a difference of degree. Another important aspect of Sforno's approach which emerges from his comments on these verses is a dialectic between the charge to influence other nations and the responsibility for *Yisrael* to focus inward and remain separate from other nations to deepen their connection to *HKBH*.¹⁷ Sforno interprets the verse that we were "carried on the wings of eagles" as a charge to remain separate from the other nations in order to develop a deeper relationship with *HKBH* while simultaneously interpreting the verse that we are "a kingdom of priests" as a charge to inspire and influence other nations to come close to *HKBH*.

Section 2 – The Purpose of Mankind

We will consider the purpose of the creation of the world and of mankind, and then consider the relationship of the role of *Yisrael* to the role of other nations. I will show how universalists maintain that *Yisrael* and other nations are intended to accomplish similar roles, while particularists sharply distinguish between their roles. In particular, I will focus on the approach of Sforno, and contrast his universalistic approach both to more essentialist approaches as well as to the universalistic approach of Rambam.

¹⁷ An earlier source that expresses a similar dialectic found in Sforno is *Bereishit Rabbah* (46:2–3). Abraham objected to the *mitzvah* of *bris milah* specifically on the grounds that *milah* would create a barrier between himself and other people and this would undermine his ability to influence them (see *Michtav M'Elyahu*, Vol. 2, p. 162). *HKBH* responds to him, "It should be sufficient that I am your G-d." The Midrash notes furthermore that the reason that the *mitzvah* of *milah* was given to Abraham at an advanced age and not earlier in his life was specifically for this reason: not to interfere with his ability to impact other people.

Generally, to explain the purpose of the world and of humankind, authorities adopt a variant of one of two approaches:¹⁸

Approach 1 – Opportunity for mankind to achieve perfection: The world was created so that mankind has the opportunity, through utilizing free choice (*bechirah*), to reach human perfection.¹⁹

Approach 2 – *Kavod* of *HKBH*: The world was created to give honor to *HKBH*. Human beings contribute to realizing this purpose through their actions. This purpose is fully realized in Messianic times.

Rambam's Approach

Deciphering Rambam's position on the purpose of creation is challenging because there appear to be differences between the approaches he takes in *Introduction to Mishnah* (Chapter 8) and in *Moreh Nevuchim*. Nonetheless, I believe that both adopt elements of Approach 1 and reject Approach 2.

In his *Introduction to Mishnah* (Chapter 8), Rambam writes that everything on earth (*tachat galgal hayerach*) is for man. Although man performs many actions, which makes it difficult to ascertain the purpose of man, all of man's actions are to enable him to engage in intellectual activity. The most important intellectual activity is "*l'tzayer benafsho sodos hamuskallos*" and "*l'tzayer benafsho achdus HKBH*"—to deeply understand the Oneness of *HKBH*. The purpose of the world and everything in it is for a man who is wise and good—and this man is extremely rare. This is a clear endorsement of Approach 1, although it appears sufficient for Rambam even if only a small minority of people achieve perfection, and there is no indication of him adopting Approach 2.

¹⁸ Note that Rav Saadyah Gaon (*HaEmunos VeHaDeos*, end of *Maamar* 1) offers three reasons for the creation of the world, including versions of Approach 1 and Approach 2.

¹⁹ This perfection is conceived of in different ways. According to Rambam, as I explain below, it is utilizing the intellect to come close to *HKBH*, *l'tzayer benafsho sodos hamuskallos*. In contrast, Ran argues that the purpose cannot be to attain wisdom because the wisdom that a human being can attain is too insignificant to justify creation. Instead, the perfection is *yiras Hashem* (*Derashos HaRan* 7). As I discuss below, according to Sforno it is to become similar to *HKBH* in intellectual understanding, actions, and character traits. For additional sources on the purpose of creation and the nature of the perfection of man, see the commentary by Rav Shlomo Cohen at the end of *Maamar* 1 in *Sefer HaEmunos VeHaDeos* (of Rav Saadyah), (Ohr Etzion: 2013).

Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:13) explicitly rejects Approach 2. He says the world is not for the purpose of man serving HKBH. How could man's service add anything to HKBH?²⁰ He continues that even if one grants that serving HKBH is ultimately for man's benefit, one still must ask what greater purpose does this serve? Rambam's ultimate conclusion is that the existence of the world is the *Ratzon* of HKBH or the *Chochmah* of HKBH. Rambam addresses *Avos* (6:11) and verse in Isaiah (43:7) that indicate HKBH created the world for His *kavod* by interpreting them to mean that HKBH created the world based on His will—not for His honor.

Rambam (3:25) rejects that the world was created simply based on the *Ratzon* of HKBH with no purpose. Instead, the world was created according to the *Chochmah* of HKBH which is beyond our understanding. He states (3:13) that the heavens,²¹ *galgalim*, stars, and angels were not created for man. Furthermore, he questions (3:13 and 3:25) the idea that everything on earth was created for man based on the many verses in *Bereishis* that each creation was “good” which indicate that each part of creation was good in and of itself. Rambam does assert that vegetation was created for animals to eat and in general believes that some creations are intended for an alternative purpose and some are for themselves alone.

It seems from these statements in *Moreh Nevuchim* that Rambam rejects not only Approach 2 but also Approach 1, unlike his statements in *Introduction to Mishnah* cited above. However, I think Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* still endorses key parts of Approach 1. Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:13) acknowledges that man is the loftiest creation on Earth and that serving HKBH is the highest achievement of man. But how does the creation of man fit into a larger purpose? On this question, Rambam first maintains that the creation of man is not for the benefit of HKBH but for the benefit of man himself. And Rambam furthermore asserts that the purpose of creating man for man's own benefit ultimately must be explained as coming from the *Chochmah* of HKBH, not fully knowable to us.

²⁰ Note that Maharal (*Derech Chaim* 6:11) vigorously disputes this position of Rambam.

²¹ Rambam's thinking about heavenly bodies needs to be understood in light of *Hilchos Yesodei Torah* 3:9, where Rambam maintains that these are living beings. Rambam, in fact, uses this idea to explain the orbital motion of *galgalim* in *Moreh Nevuchim* (2:4).

Rambam's understanding of *Techias HaMeisim* and *Olam HaBa* provides further evidence that he accepts Approach 1 and rejects Approach 2. According to Ramban, in contrast to Rambam, *Techias HaMeisim* occurs as part of the process of *Olam HaZeh* transitioning into *Olam HaBa*. With this transition, the world reaches a state of perfection in its development. However, according to Rambam, the ultimate purpose and destiny of mankind is distinct from this world—it is the *Olam HaNeshamos*. The function of *Techias HaMeisim* is to give a deserving group of people an opportunity to achieve perfection and to earn reward in the *Olam HaNeshamos*.²²

I want to emphasize that Rambam in his formulation does not indicate a difference in the role of *Yisrael* and the role of other nations in achieving perfection. Although he indicates that achieving perfection is rare, he does not, to my knowledge, limit this aspiration to *Yisrael*. On the contrary, Rambam (*Hilchos Shemittah V'Yovel* 13:13) appears to include all people as being capable of achieving the loftiest levels of spirituality.²³ Note that the fact that Rambam adopts Approach 1 does not necessarily make him a universalist. One could accept Approach 1, and unlike Rambam, limit the pursuit of perfection to *Yisrael*. The reason Rambam is a universalist is because he maintains that all nations have essentially the same mission of pursuing perfection.

Sforno's Approach

Rambam is unique in maintaining Approach 1 to the exclusion of Approach 2. I believe that most authorities accept both Approach 1 and Approach 2 to explain the purpose of creation,²⁴ while others may adopt only Approach 2.²⁵

²² These issues are discussed by Rambam in *Introduction to Perei Chelek*, and by Ramban in *Shaar HaGmul*, among other places. The explanation suggested above of Rambam's understanding of *Techias HaMeisim* is offered by Rav Chaim Friedlander, *Sifsei Chaim, Pirkei Emunah U-Bechirah*, vol. 2, p. 197) and by Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank, *Illuminating Jewish Thought: Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife, and the Messianic Era* (New Milford, CT, 2018), section 20.2.

²³ A number of others have also pointed out that this passage appears inclusive of *Yisrael* and other nations. See Rabbi Hanan Balk, Rabbi Asher Benzion Buchman, "Israel's Inheritance: *Olam Haba*," *Hakirah*, vol. 10, 2010, pp. 133–160, and Aryeh Leibowitz, *Hashgachah Pratit* (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 2009), p. 59 fn. 28.

²⁴ It needs to be explained how Approaches 1 and 2 can be reconciled and how authorities can endorse both of these approaches. While I focus in the main

Sforno endorses both Approach 1 and Approach 2. In *Ohr Amim* (2:2, p. 414), Sforno says that the purpose of creation is for humankind to become as similar as possible to *HKBH* in character traits and intellectual understanding. In his commentary to *Vayikra* (13:47), Sforno writes that the purpose of creation is for humankind to become similar to *HKBH* through actions and intellectual understanding. Despite their slight differences, Sforno is clearly affirming Approach 1 in these passages. Similarly, Sforno writes (*Ohr Amim* 18:9 and 19:14) that by choosing the path of kindness and truth, a person can become more similar to *HKBH*. Nonetheless, Sforno also endorses Approach 2. Unlike Rambam, Sforno in his commentary on *Avos* adopts a straightforward reading of *Avos* 6:10 and describes *kevod* for *HKBH* as the ultimate perfec-

text on how to reconcile this according to Sforno, I address this question based on Ramban and Ramchal in this footnote:

Ramban (*Devarim* 22:6) states that the purpose of *mitzvos* is to help people develop “good” beliefs and character traits and is not for the *kevod* of *HKBH*. Even *lulav*, *succah*, and *tefillin*, which each offer testimony to the exodus from Egypt, are not for the *kevod* of *HKBH* but are for the spiritual wellbeing of people. However, Ramban (*Shemos* 13:16) also states that the purpose of *mitzvos* is so that people will believe in *HKBH*. He says that *HKBH* has no other desire from mankind other than that people should recognize that it was *HKBH* Who created us. (For additional relevant passages from Ramban, see the comments of Ramban on *Shemos* 29:46, *Devarim* 10:12, and *Devarim* 32:26. See also Ramban, *Devarim* 1:17.)

Ramchal similarly expresses both ideas in an apparently inconsistent way. An overarching theme of Ramchal’s *Daas Tervunos* is that the purpose of the world is the revelation of the *achdus* (oneness) of *HKBH* (see, for example, section 34). In *Mesillas Yesbarim*, chapter 19, Ramchal says the ideal motivation is to serve *HKBH* not for one’s own needs but to increase the *kevod* of *HKBH*. Yet Ramchal also repeatedly says (*Mesillas Yesbarim*, chapter 1; *Daas Tervunos*, section 18; *Derech Hashem* 1:2) that *HKBH* created the world to give pleasure to his creations by enabling them to reach perfection through their connection to *HKBH*.

To explain how Ramban and Ramchal can endorse both approaches and they are not actually mutually exclusive, one can assert that both reasons are valid but address different questions. The underlying motivation in creating the world was for the benefit of man (Approach 1). The method of accomplishing this was to create a world whose purpose was to give glory to *HKBH* through the acceptance of *HKBH* as King (Approach 2). Although *HKBH* does not “need us,” He created a world in which we are “needed” to accept Him as our King. By participating in this effort, man “earns” closeness to *HKBH*. These ideas are explained in detail in Rabbi Chaim Dovid Sapirstein, *Yadav Emunah*, *Shaar* 2 and in Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank, *Illuminating Jewish Thought*, Chapter 13.6.

²⁵ See Maharal, *Derech HaChaim* (6:11), *Be’er HaGolab*, *Be’er* 4, and *Tiferes Yisrael* 6.

tion. He explains that *HKBH* achieves his purpose in creation with five acquisitions—Torah, the creation of the world, particularly mankind, Abraham, *Yisrael*, and the Beis HaMikdash, and that all five of these contribute to the ultimate purpose which is the *kavod* of *HKBH*.

A deeper understanding of Sforno's perspective emerges from a cryptic passage in *Ohr Amim* (17:3). Sforno argues that human action cannot add or detract from the perfection of *HKBH*. Therefore, the existence of all beings is an expression of the *chesed* of *HKBH* and their purpose is to fulfill the *ratzon* of *HKBH*. Sforno also equates this idea to that of *kavod* of *HKBH* by citing *Avos* 6:10. Does Sforno in *Ohr Amim* read *Avos* 6:10 differently than in his commentary in *Avos*? I do not believe there is a contradiction. Rabbi Moshe Kravetz in his unpublished commentary to *Ohr Amim* interprets Sforno to mean that for man to achieve perfection, he must become as similar as possible to *HKBH*. And since *HKBH* derives no benefit from his creation of mankind, man must act devoid of selfish motives, by focusing on increasing the *kavod* of *HKBH*. *HKBH* created the world based on *chesed* to enable man to reach perfection (Approach 1). Man only reaches perfection when he acts for the *kavod* of *HKBH* (Approach 2).

On the basis of Sforno's acceptance of Approaches 1 and 2 we cannot draw conclusions about his universalistic or particularistic tendencies. However, numerous other passages throughout his writings demonstrate Sforno's universal vision. He cites (*Shemos* 4:22 and *Shemos* 19:6)²⁶ the verse in Zephaniah (3:9) to describe the end of days as a time when all of humankind will serve *HKBH* in unity. He asserts (*Shemos* 19:6) that the selection of *Yisrael* is with the intention that they should influence the rest of humankind to reach this point of serving *HKBH* in unison.

...להבין ולהורות לכל המין האנושי לקרוא כלם בשם ה', ולעבדו שכם אחד...

Sforno states that all of mankind, especially the righteous, are precious (*Shemos* 19:5), and that the purpose of creation can be achieved through all people, although it is primarily and only fully achieved through *Yisrael* (*Vayikra* 13:47, *Avos* 6:10, *Ohr Amim* 17:8). The difference between *Yisrael* and other nations is a matter of degree but is not absolute (*Shemos* 19:5). It is noteworthy that his *Sefer Ohr Amim* (1:5) is explicitly addressed both to *Yisrael* and to other nations, as indicated by

²⁶ He also cites this verse in Zephaniah in his commentary to *Devarim* 32:12 in a slightly different context.

the title itself and the fact that Sforino personally translated it into Latin. Moreover, throughout *Ohr Amim*, Sforino refers to humanity as a whole, and occasionally draws distinctions between *Yisrael* and other nations. For example, throughout his discussion of the eternity of the human soul (*Ohr Amim* 16), he does not distinguish between *Yisrael* and other nations.²⁷

It is important to point out that Sforino in several places in his writings feels the need to engage with the question of why there is a distinction between *Yisrael* and the other nations. He does not appear to simply accept an essential difference but instead offers rational explanations for why there is a difference. In *Ohr Amim* (15:10) while discussing *hash-gachah*, Sforino writes that *Yisrael* tends to live their lives more closely aligned with the intended purpose than other nations, who rarely do so. In another passage in *Ohr Amim* (19:15), Sforino writes that *HKBH* takes more pride in *Yisrael* than in other nations because *Yisrael* recognizes *HKBH*, upholds a covenant, and serves *HKBH* more than other nations. *Yisrael* is considered the “son” of *HKBH* because they serve Him from love and not out of self-interest, and are considered “firstborn” because they served him first, while other nations turned away from Him (*Shemos* 4:22).

Another “advantage” of *Yisrael* is that while individuals from other nations can excel, it will not be passed down to their children (*Devarim* 32:9). I think one could explain that the reason for this is because *Yisrael* is not simply a collection of individuals who are dedicated to *HKBH* but is a nation that, as a whole, is dedicated to *HKBH*. The ideas and values of Torah can most effectively be passed down to the next generation because they are transmitted within the framework of a nation.²⁸

Sforino furthermore asserts that the selection of *Yisrael* is because they are most likely to achieve the universal purpose of mankind—some already have this knowledge of *HKBH* and everyone has it as a tradition from our forefathers (*Vayikra* 13:47):

...וכאשר בחר באומה הישראלית כאמרו בך בחר ה' אלקיך להיות לו לעם
סגלה וזה מפני שתקות המכוון מאתו יתברך היא יותר ראויה ומצויה באישי זאת
האומה ממה שתהיה באישי זולתה, כי אמנם מציאות הבורא ואחדותו נודע
בקצתה ומקובל בכולה מהאבות...

²⁷ See in particular 16:25. The fact that he appears to treat all souls as equal is noteworthy in light of the way in which Rabbi Hanan Balk, *ibid.*, approached the issue of universalism.

²⁸ See also Rabbi Yehuda Cooperman's notes to explain this comment of Sforino.

Admittedly, there are passages in Sforno which appear to make more of a fundamental distinction. He states that *HKBH* has no portion in the other nations and if not for the eventual emergence of *Yisrael*, *HKBH* should have destroyed humanity at the time of the *Dor Haflagah* (*Devarim* 32:9):

כי חלק ה' עמו. כי אין לאל יתברך חלק במין האנושי אלא עמו. כי כל שאר האומות הם בני אל נכר. ובכן התבאר שלולא עמו שהיה עתיד אז לצאת מאותן האומות, היה לו לאבדם בענין הפלגה:
יעקב חבל נחלתו. שהוא ובניו עבדים לאל יתעלה אבל באומות העולם אם ימצא ביניהם איזה חסיד לא ימשך זה לבניו:

I would suggest that while Sforno says the differences between members of *Yisrael* and members of other nations are a matter of degree, the relationship between *HKBH* and *Yisrael* as a nation is unique. Only through having a nation dedicated to *HKBH* can *HKBH*'s plan for the world come to fruition.

Sforno also refers to the destruction of other nations (*Vayikra* 26:9, *Bamidbar* 24:17). This does not contradict his anticipation of a Messianic future when all nations will serve *HKBH*. Nations that refuse to recognize *HKBH* will be destroyed, but members of these nations can choose to ultimately recognize *HKBH*.²⁹

Does Sforno anticipate a Messianic future when other nations and *Yisrael* will be equal, or will differences remain? I personally would have read Sforno's paraphrase of Zephaniah (3:9) that all the nations will serve *HKBH* in unity to imply an equality with *Yisrael*. Additionally, Sforno's description (*Ohr Amim* 15:10) that in Messianic times *HKBH*'s *hashgachah* will apply to other nations just as it applies to *Yisrael* (discussed in more detail in the section below) would have also indicated that Sforno believes other nations will be equal to *Yisrael* in Messianic times. However, Rabbi Moshe Kravetz pointed me to lecture notes from a student of Sforno which indicate otherwise. In *Amar HaGaon* to Psalms 2:12 (available on AlHaTorah.org as *Shiurei Sforno*), Sforno inter-

²⁹ See also Sforno on *Bereishis* 49:10–11 where he refers to Judah ruling over the remnants of other nations. Sforno bases his statements on Biblical verses including Jeremiah 30:11. I believe this is also indicated in Isaiah Chapters 60 and 66 where the *navi* both describes other nations coming to serve *HKBH*, and also failing to do so and being destroyed. Zechariah (14:16) also describes a remnant of other nations celebrating *Succos*. Another source for future destruction is *Avodah Zarah* (2b–3b), while sources for nations accepting *HKBH* in Messianic times is the liturgy on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* and *Berachos* 57b.

prets Zephaniah (3:9) that those who convert in Messianic times will have the status of *ger toshav* based on the *gemara* (*Yevamos* 24b) which states that *Yisrael* will not accept converts in Messianic times due to a concern of impure motivations.³⁰ On a practical level there will be differences, but conceptually, *Yisrael* and other nations have the same role.

These passages from Sforno illustrate both the consistency of Approach 2 with a universalist approach, and that Sforno's universalism is expressed differently than the universalism of Rambam who does not accept Approach 2. Sforno believes that the purpose of creation is to bring *kavod* to *HKBH*, and all people can contribute to the *kavod* of *HKBH*.

I think there are two other noteworthy differences between the approaches of Rambam and Sforno. Put simply, I would argue that Rambam may be more universalist, while also being more elitist.³¹ I am not aware of passages in Rambam's writing where he emphasizes the distinction between *Yisrael* and other nations even in the way Sforno does—as a matter of degree and not as an essential difference. In the passages I cited above, Rambam does not seem to pay attention to the specific role of *Yisrael*. On the other hand, Rambam does not emphasize the importance of the entire world coming to recognize *HKBH*—Rambam is focused on the elite few who achieve great spiritual heights. Part of this is that Rambam does not embrace Approach 2. However, even a propo-

³⁰ Rav Saadyah (*HaEmunos VeHaDeos* VIII:6) writes that while many members of the other nations eventually recognize *HKBH* in Messianic times, there remains a hierarchy between *Yisrael* and other nations, with the other nations subservient to *Yisrael*. See *Pesachim* 68a which is a relevant source for this position. Professor Kellner, *ibid.*, Chapter 5, argues that Rav Hai in *Taam Zekeinim* (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/21280> beginning on p. 129), who writes that the other nations will convert based on Zephaniah 3:9, takes the opposite view of Rav Saadyah. Kellner argues that according to Rambam, in Messianic times, all nations will become Israelites and the distinction between *Yisrael* and other nations will disappear. This also appears to be the approach of Ran (*Derashos HaRan* 7) when he describes other nations converting and joining *Yisrael* in fully keeping all of the *mitzvos*, based on *Avodah Zarah* 24a (see also Rashi who maintains they will not be fully accepted as converts and Maharsha who says they will only accept the Noahide laws). Other sources for the future conversion of other nations include *Berachos* 57b (see Rav Kook in *Ayn Aya* that not only R Shimon ben Elazar but both opinions agree other nations will convert). For additional discussion of whether the distinction between *Yisrael* and other nations will remain in Messianic times, see Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank, *Illuminating Jewish Thought*, section 23.8.

³¹ See Dr. Kellner's *Tradition* article cited above.

ment of Approach 1 could believe it is important for as many people as possible to achieve a connection to *HKBH*. To Sforno this is very important, while to Rambam it does not appear to be.

To contextualize Sforno's stance, I will contrast it with another possibility for interpreting the roles of *Yisrael* and other nations in bringing the world to perfection. Both of these approaches take Approach 2 described above as their starting point:

Approach 2A (universalists): All nations can participate in bringing the world to perfection: *Yisrael* and other nations are intended to be working towards the same goal and have the same basic mission. In the end, everyone serves *HKBH* in a similar way. There is a practical need for a nation to play a unique role in bringing the world to perfection, and *Yisrael* earned this role. I believe Sforno, among others, adopts this approach. Some within this camp (the "most" universalist) would say that in the end, *Yisrael* and other nations are equal.³² However, Sforno maintains that on a practical level there is a difference in status—other nations have the status of *ger toshav*.

Approach 2B (essentialists): *Yisrael* was assigned the lead role in order to influence other nations: *Yisrael* has the central role in bringing the world to its *tachlis*. The mission of the other nations is to accept the teachings of *Yisrael*. By fulfilling this role, the other nations join *Yisrael* in revealing the glory of *HKBH* in this world. The roles,

³² Rav Hirsch (*Bamidbar* 29:13) describes that the 70 bulls brought on Succos allude to the eventual disappearance of the difference between *Yisrael* and the other nations and the time when everyone will serve Him together as one. Referring to the contrast between *Yisrael* and the other nations, Rav Hirsch writes, "Under the influence of Israel's mission and the effect of the silent example of their lives in the midst of the nations this contrast becomes smaller and smaller...the contrast will have entirely disappeared..." And yet, Rav Hirsch continues, "But regarding the historical guidance and participation in solving the mission of mankind in general, the position of Israel in the midst of the nations does not cease to be a special one. Israel and the nations, the nations and Israel remain, in accordance with their historical development and their different kinds of capacities and efficiency for the purpose of Mankind; remain two separate great factors in leading the world for the purpose of humanity, both equally near and equally precious to God in His Direction of world-history."

however, are essentially different.³³ The more extreme version of this essentialist approach maintains that the role of other nations is merely to facilitate the *avodah* of *Yisrael*. *Yisrael* alone, through their spiritual *avodah*, brings the world to its *tachlis*.³⁴

Section 3 – *Hashgachah Pratis*

In this section, I consider the question of whether *hashgachah pratis* applies uniquely to *Yisrael* or whether other nations can also qualify. In particular, I will focus on Sforno's approach and contrast his approach with the approach of Ramban and Ramchal.

First, I will point out that this discussion is complicated by the fact the term *hashgachah pratis* is used to mean a number of things including the following:³⁵

³³ Ramchal says the actions of other nations will not impact the revelation of *HKBH* in the world but they have an impact on themselves and their angel (*Derech Hashem* 2:4:9). Rav Kook (*Ayn Aya*, *Berachos* 57b) asserts that *Yisrael* alone must serve a central role as the source from which other nations can come to know *HKBH*. Netziv says the purpose of creation is the revelation of the *kavod* of *HKBH* throughout the world, among both *Yisrael* and other nations (*Haamek Davar Bamidbar* 14:21), and that "other nations are part of the purpose of the world" (*Shemos* 4:22). Yet Netziv (*Vayikra* 26:3) holds that the *mitzvos* of the other nations lost their power to sustain the world. Netziv also draws a sharp distinction between the role of *Yisrael* and the role of other nations. While it is intended that other nations will recognize *HKBH*, *Yisrael* is expected to also have *yiras Shamayim* (*Haamek Davar* and *Harchev Davar Bereishis* 17:4). While for other nations it is enough to perform acts of *tzedakah* in order to be considered a person of worth, *Yisrael* must be connected to Torah (*Devarim* 4:1).

³⁴ Rav Dessler describes the role of the other nations as being "*keilim*," supporting the *avodah* of *Yisrael*. It is this *avodah* of *Yisrael* that fulfills the purpose of creation (*Michtav M'Eliyahu*, vol. 3, p. 200). Other nations do not directly participate in *avodas Hashem*. Rav Chaim Friedlander, following the approach of Rav Dessler, writes, "other nations are not the purpose of the creation" (*Sifsei Chaim*, *Pirkei Emunah VeHashgachah*, p. 48). However, it appears that even Rav Dessler's position is somewhat more complicated. Rav Dessler (vol. 1, p. 269) writes that the 70 bulls of Succos symbolize that *HKBH* will reveal Himself to the other nations. Moreover, he states that the world is not perfected until this happens.

³⁵ Thus, while Radak (*Ezekiel* 20:32, *Jonah* 1:2, and *Amos* 3:2), Abarbanel (*Devarim* 4:15), and Rav Dessler (*Michtav M'Eliyahu*, vol. 2, p. 76) all distinguish between *hashgachah* for *Yisrael* and other nations, they all mean different things. For Radak, it means other nations are not subject in most situations to reward and punishment. For Abarbanel, the lack of *hashgachah* for other nations means being abandoned to *mazalos* and natural forces without Divine protection. For

1. *HKBH* intervening in the natural course of events in response to a person's actions.
2. Reward and punishment based on the actions of a person.
3. Protection from *mazalos* or natural forces / *mikra*.
4. A message being sent to someone to alert them to do *teshuvah*.

Many thinkers maintain that at least some of the aspects of *hashgachah pratis* apply to other nations, and that there are differences in how it applies to *Yisrael* and other nations. I will argue that Sforno agrees, and again applies his general approach that the differences between *Yisrael* and other nations are differences of degree and not essential.

An important indication that *hashgachah* applies in a different way to *Yisrael* than to other nations is the idea that while *HKBH* personally interacts with *Yisrael*, the other nations are assigned angels which interact with them. A source for this is *Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer* (Chapter 24). Ramban frequently emphasizes³⁶ the contrast between *Yisrael* having a direct relationship with *HKBH* compared to the other nations being assigned to 70 angels, citing *Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer*. Ramban attaches meaning to the specific number that there are 70 angels assigned to the 70 nations, and explains that 70 represents all of the various aspects of the world whose focal point is *Yisrael* and *HKBH*. In these passages, Ramban does not feel the need to justify the distinction between *Yisrael* and other nations the way Sforno does; the differences are seemingly woven into the fabric of creation.³⁷ Another source is Recanati (*Parashas Noach* 10:5), who specifically traces this distinction between *Yisrael* and the other nations to the *Dor Haflagah*. Ramchal (*Derech Hashem* 2:4:8) makes the connection between the 70 angels and *hashgachah pratis* explicit. He says that based on the existence of the 70 angels, *HKBH* does not apply *hashgachah pratis* to other nations, only *hashgachah klalis*. It is the angels that interact with the other nations in the sense of *hashgachah pratis*.

Rav Dessler, it means that Divine intervention impacts them not for their own sake but vis-à-vis how they impact those who do merit *hashgachah pratis*.

³⁶ Ramban on *Shemos* 19:5, *Vayikra* 18:25, *Bamidbar* 11:16, *Devarim* 4:15, and *Devarim* 32:12.

³⁷ I acknowledge that Ramban in at least one passage (*Devarim* 32:26) does justify the role of *Yisrael* based on their unique knowledge of *HKBH*. Ramban in that passage says that *Yisrael* could in theory be totally lost among the nations because they lacked any merit and had even exhausted the merits of their forefathers. Their continued existence and eventual redemption is because they are needed to fulfill their role in bringing humankind to a recognition of *HKBH*. It is in this context that Ramban justifies their unique role.

Does Sforno accept these ideas? Sforno³⁸ does in fact distinguish between whether or not *HKBH* uses an intermediary to interact with people, and he draws a distinction between *Yisrael* and other nations. Related to this, Sforno at the beginning of *Re'eh* (*Devarim* 11:26) says that, unlike other nations who tend to experience an “average” existence, *Yisrael* will experience extremes, whether for good or bad. In another key passage (*Bamidbar* 28:11), Sforno says that *Yisrael* is like the moon and can only reflect the light of *HKBH*, in contrast to other nations, who possess their own light.

I believe that while Sforno distinguishes between *Yisrael* and other nations, a careful analysis of his writings indicates a difference between his approach and the more particularistic approach of Ramban and Ramchal.

First, Sforno's distinction is not essential, it depends on the actions of *Yisrael*.³⁹ Sforno maintains that spiritual beings are eternal and merit the direct *hashgachah* of *HKBH*. The human soul is spiritual but when it is embedded in an individual person and through that combination with the physical becomes fully distinct, whether this combination is sufficiently spiritual to merit eternity and direct *hashgachah* depends on the choices of the individual. *HKBH* intended for *Yisrael* to merit this spiritual state of being and to receive direct *hashgachah*. This was part of the covenant between *HKBH* and Abraham, and *Yisrael* in fact reached this level at Sinai. Following the sin of the golden calf, however, their status was diminished and Moses prayed to *HKBH* and was successful that *Yisrael* merited a reduced spiritual level and connection to *HKBH* through the *Mishkan* and sacrifices.⁴⁰

In another important passage in *Ohr Amim* (15:6, 15:10), Sforno indicates that *hashgachah* applies to both *Yisrael* and other nations. While Sforno states that there is a difference between *Yisrael* and other nations, a close reading indicates that the distinction is not essential. He writes that *Yisrael* tends to live their lives more closely aligned with the intended purpose than other nations and that as a result, *hashgachah* applies to a greater degree to *Yisrael*. However, in the future, when the other nations serve *HKBH* along with *Yisrael*, *HKBH* will apply *hashgachah* equally.

In the above passage, Sforno refers specifically to individual members of *Yisrael* and individual members of other nations. Thus, it may

³⁸ See *Ohr Amim* 16, and commentary on *Bereishis* 1:27, 17:7; *Shemos* 19:6, 29:45; *Vayikra* 11:45, 19:2, 22:32–33, 26:12, *Bamidbar* 15:41; *Devarim* 4:20, *Devarim* 26:17, 29:12, and the comments of Rabbi Moshe Kravetz on these passages.

³⁹ See Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz, *ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴⁰ Commentary on *Vayikra* 11:2.

also be that Sforno attributes unique *hashgachah* to *Yisrael* as a unit more than he would attribute unique *hashgachah* to individual members of *Yisrael*. To the extent that Sforno accepts more of an essential distinction between *Yisrael* and other nations, he may be referring to *hashgachah* to *Yisrael* as a whole and not to individual members of *Yisrael*. This aligns with my suggestion above that only through having a nation dedicated to *HKBH* can *HKBH*'s plan for the world come to fruition, and thus *hashgachah* for the collective nation is unique.

There is a passage in Sforno that appears to negate *hashgachah pratis* for other nations. In the context of describing *tzaraas*, Sforno (*Vayikra* 13:47) writes that the other nations, along with most of *Yisrael*, do not merit *hashgachah pratis*. The statements of Sforno in *Vayikra* and in *Ohr Amim* seem to contradict each other.⁴¹ Both Rav Dessler (vol. 2, p. 76 and vol. 5, p. 309) and Rav Chaim Friedlander⁴² understand Sforno in *Vayikra* in line with their thinking that other nations only receive *hashgachah klalis*.⁴³ Neither Rav Dessler nor Rav Friedlander take note either of the statement of Sforno in *Ohr Amim* or the other statements of Sforno cited above which suggest a difference but one which is not essential.

I would suggest that this apparent contradiction could be explained based on context. Sforno is specifically discussing a form of *hashgachah* designed to alert a person of the need for *teshuvah* when a person sins accidentally. Sforno means that although other nations could receive *hashgachah*, the *hashgachah* to alert someone to do *teshuvah* is a form of *hashgachah* which they, along with most of *Yisrael*, do not receive. In the case of *tzaraas* for houses or clothing which is supernatural, the eligibility requirements are even higher, and may never have actually been met.⁴⁴



⁴¹ Rabbi Kravetz notes this contradiction.

⁴² *Sifsei Chaim, Pirkei Emunah VeHashgachah*, pp. 46–48.

⁴³ In reality, Rav Dessler's position is more nuanced. He states (vol. 5 p. 309) that individual members of other nations are judged based on their actions. However, he qualifies that in contrast with *Yisrael*, this is only within the framework of the perpetuation of *Olam Ha-zeh*.

⁴⁴ Acknowledgments: The author wishes to acknowledge Rav Moshe Kravetz for the expertise he provided in understanding Sforno's approach, to an anonymous reviewer for incisive comments, and to the following people for helpful suggestions on the topic of the paper and / or specific comments on earlier versions of the manuscript: Rav Elchonon Adler, Rav Yitzchak Adlerstein, R' Meir Brea, Rav Asher Benzion Buchman, Rav Yitzchak Grossman, Rav Aaron Lopiansky, R' Nosson Rossman, Rav Jeffrey Saks, Rav Meir Wakschlag, Rav Moshe Walter, and Rav Netanel Wiederblank.