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CONFRONTATION AND
OTHER ESSAYS

Maggid Books

Contents

The Community 1

Majesty and Humility 25

Catharsis 41

Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah 63

Confrontation 85

Publication Information 121

The Community

*Dedicated to the Memory of
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The very instant we pronounce the word “community” we recall, by sheer association, the ancient controversy between collectivism and individualism. Willy nilly the old problem of who and what comes first (metaphysically, not chronologically) arises. Is the individual an independent free entity, who gives up basic aspects of his sovereignty in order to live within a communal framework; or is the reverse true: the individual is born into the community which, in turn, invests him with certain rights? This perennial controversy is still unresolved.

Today the controversy transcends the limits of theoretical debate. People try to resolve it, not by propounding theories or by participating in philosophical symposia in the halls of academia, but by resorting to violence and bloodshed in the

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jungles of Asia and Africa. The political confrontation between the West and the East is, *ipso facto*, a philosophical encounter between one-sided collectivism and one-sided individualism.

Let us ask a simple question: what does Judaism say about this conflict?

And let us give a simple answer: Judaism rejects both alternatives; neither theory, *per se*, is true. Both experiences, that of aloneness, as well as that of togetherness, are inseparable basic elements of the I-awareness.

The Bible tells us that God created a single individual, a lonely being:

וייצר ה' אלקים את האדם עפר מן האדמה ויפח באפיו נשמת
חיים ויהי האדם לנפש חיה.

Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life and the man became a living soul.¹

The Bible also tells us that the Almighty, having created Adam, said:

לא טוב היות האדם לבדו אעשה לו עזר כנגדו.

It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helpmeet for him.²

God created Eve and brought her to Adam.

1. Genesis 2:7.

2. Genesis 2:18.

ויבן ה' אלקים את הצלע אשר לקח מן האדם לאשה ויבאה אל האדם.

And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man made He a woman and brought her unto the man.³

Who comes first – the community, the pair, or man (or woman) alone? Who takes precedence – Adam and Eve in the utter loneliness which both of them experienced at the hour of creation, or Adam and Eve as a couple, after they had been brought together to become united in marriage?

As we have indicated before, both the community-related and the lonely individual, be he man, be she woman, were created by God. Hence, it would be absurd to equate the Biblical doctrine with either philosophical alternative. The answer to the problem is rather a dialectical one, namely, man is both. He is a single, lonely being, not belonging to any structured collectivity. He is also a thou-related being, who co-exists in companionship with somebody else.

In fact, the greatness of man manifests itself in his inner contradiction, in his dialectical nature, in his being single and unrelated to anyone, as well as in his being thou-related and belonging to a community structure.

2

Let us investigate this strange philosophy of man, which seems to embrace two mutually exclusive outlooks.

Permit me, however, to preface the analysis with the following remarks.

3. Genesis 2:19.

1. Judaism deals with the problem of individualism versus collectivism, not at a socio-economic, but rather at an existential-metaphysical level. Judaism is not concerned with the problem which intrigued many philosophers of the age of reason – whether or not man is a self-sufficient being, whether a Robinson Crusoe is reality or fantasy. Judaism asks a completely different question. Was the human charisma, the *imago dei*, bestowed upon solitary, lonely man or upon man within a social frame of reference? In retreat or in togetherness – where does man find his true self?

2. The community in Judaism is not a functional-utilitarian, but an ontological one. The community is not just an assembly of people who work together for their mutual benefit, but a metaphysical entity, an individuality; I might say, a living whole. In particular, Judaism has stressed the wholeness and the unity of *Knesset Israel*, the Jewish community. The latter is not a conglomerate. It is an autonomous entity, endowed with a life of its own. We, for instance, lay claim to *Eretz Israel*. God granted the land to us as a gift. To whom did He pledge the land? Neither to an individual, nor to a partnership consisting of millions of people. He gave it to the *Knesset Israel*, to the community as an independent unity, as a distinct juridic metaphysical person. He did not promise the land to me, to you, to them; nor did He promise the land to all of us together. Abraham did not receive the land as an individual, but as the father of a future nation. The owner of the Promised Land is the *Knesset Israel*, which is a community persona. However strange such a concept may appear to the empirical sociologist, it is not at all a strange experience for the Halachist and the mystic, to whom *Knesset Israel* is a living, loving, and suffering mother.

3. The personalistic unity and reality of a community, such as *Knesset Israel*, is due to the philosophy of existential complementarity of the individuals belonging to the *Knesset Israel*.⁴ The individuals belonging to the community complement one another existentially. Each individual possesses something unique, rare, which is unknown to others; each individual has a unique message to communicate, a special color to add to the communal spectrum. Hence, when lonely man joins the community, he adds a new dimension to the community awareness. He contributes something which no one else could have contributed. He enriches the community existentially; he is irreplaceable. Judaism has always looked upon the individual as if he were a little world (microcosm);⁵ with the death of the individual, this little world comes to an end. A vacuum which other individuals cannot fill is left. The saying: *כָּל הַמְּקִיִּים נַפֶּשׁ אַחַת, כֹּאֲלוֹ קַיִם עוֹלָם מֵלֵא*, “Whoever saves one life, it is as if had saved the entire world,”⁶ should be understood in this way. The sensitive Halachic rules pertaining to mourning (*avelut*) are rooted in the Halacha’s perception of the tragic singleness of man, in the awareness that man as a natural being exists once in an eternity. Because of that singleness, individuals get together, complement each other, and attain ontological wholeness.

4. The Halachic principle of *אין צבור מתים*, “A congregation does not die” (*Temurah* 15b), is rooted in the concept we have indicated, namely, that the existence of the community as a metaphysical unity surpasses the physical existence of its individual members. Vide also Nahmanides, Genesis 24:1 s.v. *bakol*.

5. This idea is basic in the philosophy of Ibn Gabirol and attains its classic formulation in Maimonides’ *Guide*, I, 72.

6. Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 4:5.

These two traits of the community (individuality and complementarity), we find in the Biblical portrayal of the marriage-community. The latter consists of two unique personalities. The male and the female represent two different existential experiences; man and woman differ, not only as natural beings, but as metaphysical personae as well. Man is man in all his thoughts and feelings, while the same is true of the woman: she is a woman in her whole existential experience. When both join in matrimony, a community of two “incommensurate” beings is formed. Woman and man complement each other existentially: together they form, not a partnership, but an individuality, a persona. The marriage-community is like the general community; its strength lies, not in that which is common to the participants, but in their singularity and singleness.

3

Now let us proceed with the analysis of the individual vis-à-vis the community.

What does it mean to be alone? It signifies, not physical distance, but ontological-existential remoteness, or ontological-existential alienation of the I from the thou, regardless of how close the thou and the I may be.

Two people love one another. The young handsome husband and the young lovely wife are dedicated unqualifiedly to each other. They share joy and grief together. Suddenly, God forbid, disaster strikes. One of the two loving mates takes sick; the prognosis is discouraging. What happens in such a situation?

At the very outset the loving mate who enjoys good health finds himself in a state of shock. He or she simply cannot imagine a life without the participation of the other

person in all occasions of joy and anxiety. He or she is exposed to black, cruel despair; temporarily, he or she lives in a state of complete mental dislocation, bordering on insanity. Life becomes, for him or for her, an absurdity, a nauseating affair, ugly and monstrous. However, with the passage of time and the gradual assimilation of the cruel prognosis into his or her mind, the ruthless process of alienation sets in. The sick person and the loving mate begin to drift, to move away from each other, and the process of estrangement reaches frightening proportions. Love turns into indifference; the latter, into hostility. The once-loving mate begins to resent the mere fact that he, or she, must stay in one room with the sick person. He or she is angry at the sick person because the latter is still alive. The ontological remoteness between the once-loving mates reaches fantastic proportions.⁷

4

I have tried to portray ontological alienation in radical, harsh terms, depicting a grisly and awesome situation in which love is replaced by fear, hysterical confusion and brutish cruelty. However, ontological remoteness and alienation can be observed even under normal circumstances. I dare say that, in everyday life, alienation or existential detachment is proportionate to the intensity and depth of emotional attachment. The more intense the sense of dedication and love, the greater the disappointment or estrangement. There is, in every love-experience, a streak of alienation; the greater the love-experience, the stronger the streak of alienation. A young mother, drunk with love

7. Leo Tolstoy, in his classic story *The Death of Ivan Ilich*, portrays such a tragic spectacle of alienation and loneliness.

for her pink-cheeked baby and her young husband, is awakened, at two in the morning, by the darling girl. The tired, exhausted mother tries to quiet the baby and put her back to sleep. Her husband does not stir; she wonders: Is he asleep or awake? The young mother, who carries the load alone, whose patience is at breaking point, whispers bitterly: What do you both want of me? Why is there no sympathy for me? For a short while she rejects both daughter and husband. For a few seconds ontological remoteness separates them. Whether the young mother is right or wrong in her brief rebellion against the institution of marriage is irrelevant. What is relevant is that, for a few seconds, she has withdrawn from a together-existence into existential remoteness and solitude. She has become, for an infinitesimal moment, conscious of her loneliness, despite the fact that she is happily married. For a fraction of a second she has identified herself with the man or woman created alone that mysterious Friday.

Of course, psychology is rich in nomenclature, and has many terms to describe such behavior. Judaism, however, is concerned, not with behavioral patterns, but with the existential experience. Existentially, man realizes quite often that he is lonely, and that all talk about being together is just an illusion.

5

Why was it necessary to create lonely man? Why was social man not created at the very outset?

1. The originality and creativity in man are rooted in his loneliness-experience, not in his social awareness. The singleness of man is responsible for his singularity;