

## CATHARSIS\*

The Halacha has never despaired of man, either as a natural being integrated into his physical environment, or as a spiritual personality confronting God.

This sufferance of man on the part of the Halacha is not an unqualified one. The Halacha demands that man purge himself in order to achieve his full worth. Isaiah, describing the future redemption of Israel, speaks of purgation as an indispensable condition of redemption: **אשיבה ידי עליך ואצרף כבר סיגך**. "I shall cleanse thy dross as with soap."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, our Rabbis have stated repeatedly that the purpose which Torah and Mitzvot pursue is that of purification of the human being.<sup>2</sup> In other words, catharsis is a *sine qua non* for a meaningful existence which Halacha approves.

What did Halacha understand under catharsis or purging? The analysis of a liturgical text will help us answer this question. Among the several benedictions comprising the **ברכות השחר** which we pronounce daily, thanking the Almighty for restoring us, each morning, to a full and active life, we recite two benedictions which, *prima facie*, appear to be synonymous and therefore redundant. One benediction reads **אזור ישראל בגבורה**, in standard translation, "who girds Israel with might"; and the other one, **הנותן ליעף כח** "who gives strength to the weary."<sup>3</sup> Apparently

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1. 1:25.

2. Witness the following Midrashic statement:

**רב אמר לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הבריות  
מה איכפת ליה להקב"ה למי ששוחט מן הצואר או מי ששוחט מן בערף  
הוי לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הבריות.**

Rav said "The *Mitzvot* were not given but to purge men. For what difference is there for God if one slaughters from the neck, or slaughters from the nape? Say rather that the *Mitzvot* were given in order to purge men" (*Genesis R.* 44).

3. **אזור ישראל בגבורה** is one of the blessings enumerated in the Talmud (*Brakhot* 60b); earliest clear reference to **נותן ליעף כח** is medieval (vide *Tur* and *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, sec. 46 and commentators *ad. loc.*).

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our liturgists discriminated semantically between כח and גבורה. Had they considered the two terms fully synonymous, they would not have formulated two benedictions; one would have sufficed.

What does כח mean? כח denotes any aptitude which God has bestowed upon man at birth. The term כח denotes primarily physical strength, the capability of performing work which requires an unusual amount of physical vigor. This is the dominant meaning of the word in the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

כח as such, is not an exclusively human category, since it is related, in most of its aspects, to man's capabilities as a natural being. The beast shares with man all his organic aptitudes. Thus the category of כח is applicable to man and beast alike.

כח is not a unique gift bestowed by the Creator upon man. It is rather an integral part of the unbroken uniform functionality of a natural universe.

What is גבורה? גבורה, in contradistinction to כח, is an exclusive grant of God to man which demonstrates the latter's unique position in creation — man's charismatic endowment and his chosenness. Man, as a brute existing in the realm of immediate mechanical, uninterrupted life functions, was furnished with כח. Man as a personality distinct and different from the beast and fowl of the field, who confronts nature in a reflective, inquisitive mood, possesses the quality of גבורה;<sup>5</sup> this he shares with no one.<sup>6</sup>

## 2

גבורה, in the context of the Biblical narrative and hymn, denotes the capacity of attaining victory, of defeating a foe who engages one in combat. The Scriptures use this term almost ex-

4. In later Hebrew, this basic meaning is expanded to include the senses (e.g. כח הראיה = sense of sight; כח השמיעה = hearing).

5. Apparent exceptions to this rule are to be understood either as figurative usage (e.g. Proverbs 30:30) or as elliptical formulations (e.g. Psalms 147:10, where the Psalmist refers to the גבורה of the horse's rider).

6. Both attributes, כח and גבורה, were applied to the Almighty, כביכול, since He is both, the source of cosmic dynamics (כח: e.g. Isaiah 40:26; Nahum 1:3) and the source of the charismatic human heroic gesture (גבורה: Deuteronomy 10:17).

clusively with respect to the exploits of the warrior — the victor. It refers to combat, and signifies successful action taken by one of the combatants.

The victory with which גבורה is identified is not military victory alone, or indeed any triumph which is merely the result of superior manpower and materials. On the contrary, at times the combatant who is defeated on the field of battle is the one who emerges as the גבור, victor in a higher historical sense; and not the apparent winner.<sup>7</sup> גבורה is sometimes inversely related to כח, to the degree of might man has at his disposal. The greater the force one wields, the less גבורה one needs to display. Conversely, the weaker one is, the tougher the odds, the more exalted is the action of the גבור, which disregards practical reasoning and resorts to "the absurd."

Thus, a new element is introduced into the gesture of גבורה namely, heroism or action undertaken contrary to human logic and human practical judgment. This kind of action quite often leads to ultimate victory. There are situations in life with which clear-cut logical processes and utilitarian approaches fail to cope, while the sudden spontaneous leap into the absurd (to use a Kierkegaardian phrase) may save man when he finds himself in utter distress. This non-rational and impractical action is heroic, and is identical with גבורה.

3

ויאמר לא יעקב עוד שמך כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלקים ועם אנשים ותוכל.

Thy name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for thou hast striven with God and with man and thou hast prevailed.<sup>8</sup>

7. The Talmud (*Yoma* 69b) explains why the Men of the *Great Assembly* (אנשי כנסת הגדולה) received this appellation:

משה אמר האל הגדול הגבור . . . בא דניאל ואמר זרים משתעבדים בבניו א"ה גבורותיו לא אמר גבור . . . אתו אינהו ואמרו אדרבה זוהי גבורתו שכובש את כעסו שנותן ארך יפים לרשעים.

"Moses said: 'The great God, the גבור (Deuteronomy 10:17) . . . Came Daniel and said: 'Foreigners subjugate His sons where is His גבורה'; he did not say הגבור. The Men of the Great Assembly came and said: 'Precisely that is His גבורה, that He overcomes His anger and is patient with the wicked.'" Did not the Men of the Great Assembly interpret גבור and גבורה in terms of the heroic gesture, which defies כח and makes the impossible a reality? These great men identified גבורה with withdrawal and defeat.

8. Genesis 32:29.

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Jacob had emerged victorious from a most awesome encounter; he had held fast his mysterious foe, through a night of sorrow, fear and loneliness, until the new day dawned. Was Jacob's victory something to be expected; could it have been predicted logically? Was he certain of victory? Of course not. He was alone, weak and unarmed, a novice in the art of warfare. His antagonist was a powerful professional warrior. Why did Jacob not surrender to the foe who attacked him in the dark? Jacob acted "absurdly," and contrary to all rational practical considerations. In other words, he acted heroically. He, the lonely and helpless Jacob, dared to engage a mighty adversary in combat. He, who had displayed so much business acumen and the keenness of a pragmatic mind, during his long sojourn in Laban's household, suddenly, in the darkness of a grisly, strange night, made the leap into the "absurd." He refused to yield to a superior force and declared war upon an invincible enemy. What Jacob manifested was not *כח* but *גבורה*, heroism, which is always employed when reason despairs and logic retreats. With daybreak, the helpless, lonely, non-logical Jacob, found himself, unexpectedly, the victor, the hero.

The impossible and absurd had triumphed over the possible and logical: heroism, not logic, won the day. Is this merely the story of one individual's experience? Is it not in fact the story of *Knesset Israel*, an entity which is engaged in an "absurd" struggle for survival thousands of years?

### 4

At this point we may note that the narrative about Jacob is *toto genere* different from the classical epic. For classical man heroism was intrinsically an aesthetic category which fascinated man with its grandeur and glory. The classical man was an aesthete, endowed with a demonic quality; he longed for vastness. His creative fantasy was boundless and reached for the impossible. He suffered from a sense of frustration and disenchantment; since no man, not even the most accomplished aesthete, can ever cross the Rubicon separating finitude from infinity. In his agony the classical aesthete invented the image of the hero.

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The mere myth of the hero gave the aesthete endless comfort. At least, the classical aesthete said to himself, there was an individual who dared to do the impossible and to achieve the grandiose. In short, the hero of classical man was the grandiose figure with whom, in order to satisfy his endless vanity, classical man identified himself: hero worship is basically self-worship. The classical idea of heroism, which is aesthetic in its very essence, lacks the element of absurdity and is intrinsically dramatic and theatrical.<sup>9</sup> The hero is an actor who performs in order to impress an appreciative audience. The crowd cheers, the chronicler records, countless generations afterwards admire, bards and minstrels sing of the hero. The classical heroic gesture represents, as I said before, frightened, disenchanted man, who tries to achieve immortality and permanence by identifying himself with the heroic figure on the stage. It does not represent a way of life. It lasts for a while, vibrant and forceful, but soon man reverts to the non-heroic mood of everyday living.

In contrast to classical aesthetic heroism, Biblical heroism, as portrayed in the narrative about Jacob, is not nurtured by an ephemeral mood or a passing state of mind. It is perhaps the central motif in our existential experience. It pervades the human mind steadily, and imparts to man a strange feeling of tranquility. The heroic person, according to our view, does not succumb to frenzy and excitement. Biblical heroism is not ecstatic but rather contemplative; not loud but hushed; not dramatic or spectacular but mute. The individual, instead of undertaking heroic action sporadically, lives constantly as a hero. Jacob did not just act heroically upon the spur of the moment. His action was indicative of a resolute way of life; he was not out to impress anybody. This type of heroics lasts as long as man is aware of himself as a singular being.

### 5

Jacob was victorious at daybreak when the mist began to lift. His adversary was defeated and Jacob was ready to consummate

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9. For Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, the theme of tragedy is the noble, impressive action, and its function is the catharsis of the emotions of *eleos* and *phobos*, in other words, the pleasurable relief of the audience, its liberation from emotion.

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his victory. The mysterious enemy was at Jacob's mercy. All Jacob had to do in order to bring the engagement to a successful conclusion was to destroy his antagonist and thus eliminate the threat of another attack. Jacob acted differently, and contrary to what others in his place would have done; when the moment at which Jacob could enjoy his victory arrived, he released the attacker and set him free. What motivated such an act? Of course, the antagonist had pleaded with him. He had begged for his freedom:

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר

"Release me for the morning star hath risen."<sup>10</sup> But why did Jacob listen to the plea of a man who, a short while ago, had been determined to annihilate him. The vanquished adversary did not even promise Jacob that he would not repeat his attack. To release such a dangerous fiend was "unreasonable." This very unreasonableness endowed the act with the quality of the heroic, and may serve as a pattern for Halachic heroism.

### 6

What is heroism in the Halacha? What does the Halacha recommend to us, that we may attain heroic stature? The answer is: one must perform the dialectical movement. The Halachic catharsis expresses itself in paradoxical movement in two opposite directions — in surging forward boldly and in retreating humbly. Man's heroic experience is a polar, antithetic one. Man drives forward only to retreat and to reverse, subsequently, the direction of his movement.

The Torah wants man, who is bold and adventurous in his quest for opportunities, to act heroically, and at the final moment, when it appears to him that victory is within reach, to stop short, turn around, and retreat. At the most exalted moment of triumph and fulfillment man must forego the ecstasy of victory and take defeat at his own hands. Jacob acted in this manner; he engaged in the dialectical performance. He did not consummate his victory; instead, he set free the antagonist whom he had defeated and whom he could have destroyed. By freeing the defeated enemy Jacob defeated himself. He with-

10. Genesis, *ibid.* 27.

drew from a position he had won through courage and fortitude. He engaged in the movement of recoil.

## II

Halacha teaches that at every level of our total existential experience — the aesthetic-hedonic, the emotional, the intellectual, the moral-religious — one must engage in the dialectical movement by alternately advancing and retreating. The Halacha was cognizant of the program the Creator set for man:

ויברך אתם אלקים וכו' ומלאו את הארץ וכבשה  
"Replenish the earth and subdue it."<sup>11</sup> Man was called upon to defy opposition on the part of nature and to march to victory. Biblical man is out to subdue his environment. Yet, when conquest is within man's reach and the road to realization has been cleared of all hindrances, man-victor, who needs only to reach out and grab everything his heart has anxiously desired, must change his course and begin to withdraw. When victory is near, man must invite defeat and surrender the spoils that he had quested for so long. The movement is dialectical: forward-marching ends in retreat, which, in turn, leads to a resumption of the forward-march. After man withdraws from the position which he has acquired through hard labor and sacrifice, he begins once again to swing forward. Again Halacha encourages man to pursue greatness, vastness, to experiment daringly with his liberties, to search feverishly for dominion. And again, Halacha will command man to halt, and to make an about-face. This dialectical movement, no matter how incomprehensible to modern man, forms, as we stated above, the very heart of Halachic living. In a word, the Halacha teaches man how to conquer and how to lose, how to seize initiative and how to renounce, how to succeed, how to invite defeat, and how to resume the striving for victory.

### I

The idea of catharsis through the dialectical movement mani-

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11. *Ibid.*, 1:28.

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fest itself in all Halachic norms regulating human life. Nowhere, however, does this doctrine of dialectical catharsis assert itself more frequently than it does in the aesthetic-hedonic realm.

How does man purge himself in this realm? By engaging in the dialectical movement, by withdrawing, at the moment when passion reaches its peak. The stronger the grip of the physiological drive is felt by man, the more intoxicating and bewildering the prospect of hedonic gratification, the greater the redemptive capacity of the dialectical catharsis — of the movement of recoil.

במנך ערמת חטים סוגה בשושנים — אדם נושא אשה בין ל' שנה בין מ' שנה משמוצא יציאותיו הוא בא לזקק לה והיא אומרת לו כשושנה אדומה ראיתי יפורש ממנה מיד. מי גרם לו שלא יקרב לה איזה כתל ברזל ביניהם איזה עמוד ברזל ביניהם איזה נחש נשכו איזה עקרב עקצו שלא יקרב לה, דברי תורה שרכין כשושנה שנא' בה ואל אשה בנדת טמאתה לא תקרב. וכן מי שהביאו לו תמחוי של חתיכות אמרו לו חלב נפל שם ומשך ידו ולא טעמו מי גרם לו שלא לטעום איזה נחש נשכו שלא יטעם ואיזה עקרב עקצו שלא יקרב ויטעם אותם. דברי תורה שרכין כשושנה שכתיב בה כל חלב וכל דם לא תאכלו.

Thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies. It often happens that a man takes a wife when he is forty years of age. When, after going to great expense, he wishes to associate with her, she says to him, 'I have seen a rose-red speck,' he immediately recoils. What made him retreat and keep away from her? Was there an iron fence, did a serpent bite him, did a scorpion sting him? A dish of meat is placed before a man and he is told some forbidden fat has fallen into it. He withdraws his hand from the food. What stopped him from tasting it? Did a serpent bite him; did a scorpion sting him? Only the words of the Torah which are as soft as a bed of lilies.<sup>12</sup>

Bride and bridegroom are young, physically strong and passionately in love with each other. Both have patiently waited for this rendezvous to take place. Just one more step and their love would have been fulfilled, a vision realized. Suddenly the bride and groom make a movement of recoil. He, gallantly, like a chivalrous knight, exhibits paradoxical heroism. He takes his own defeat. There is no glamor attached to his withdrawal. The latter

12. *Shir ha Shirim R. to Song 7:3.*



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is not a spectacular gesture, since there are no witnesses to admire and to laud him. The heroic act did not take place in the presence of jubilating crowds; no bards will sing of these two modest, humble young people. It happened in the sheltered privacy of their home, in the stillness of the night. The young man, like Jacob of old, makes an about-face; he retreats at the moment when fulfillment seems assured.

This kind of divine dialectical discipline is not limited to man's sexual life, but extends to all areas of natural drive and temptation. The hungry person must forego the pleasure of taking food, no matter how strong the temptation; men of property must forego the pleasure of acquisition, if the latter is halachically and morally wrong. In a word, Halacha requires of man that he possess the capability of withdrawal.<sup>13</sup> Of course, as we have made evident above, man is called, following the movement of withdrawal, to advance once again, toward full victory.

### 2

The Torah demanded cathartic action, not only in the hedonic, but in the emotional world of man, as well. In the carnal hedonic realm, catharsis expresses itself in the movement of recoil from something extraneous; e.g. the retreat of the bridegroom from the bride, or the renunciation of food by the hungry man. In the emotional sphere, however, the cathartic act consists in retreating or disengaging from oneself, from one's own inner world, in renouncing something that is a part of oneself, such as a sentiment, a mood or a state of mind. Can we indeed withdraw from ourselves, rejecting the feeling which grips us with enormous force, dismissing an experience which at times is overpowering? Halacha says yes. The Torah formulated laws governing the deeds of man; such as "thou shalt not murder," "thou shalt not bear false witness." It has also tried to control the inner life of man. Laws such as "thou shalt not covet," "thou shalt not hate thy brother," are as integral a part of the Halachic normative system as are those related to human external action. In a

13. איזהו גבור? הכובש את יצרו. Who is a גבור? He who conquers his drives. (*Avot*, 4:1).

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word, the Halacha thinks there is an ethic, not only of action, but of feeling, as well. Man is master over his own emotional world, capable of disowning feelings or emotions, however compulsive or powerful, if they seem to be disruptive; and, conversely, of assimilating redemptive emotion into his personality. Catharsis in the emotional sphere, according to Halacha, consists in active human interference with the emotive experience.

Let me illustrate the Halachic idea of inner withdrawal or emotional catharsis. Aaron the high priest met with disaster. On the most joyous day of his life, when the Tabernacle was dedicated and he was inaugurated into his office, two of his sons died. Death is always the great evil which man cannot accept. It is certainly unacceptable to a father whose grief over the loss of a son is limitless. How much more so the unreasonable death of two sons, who had entered the sanctuary to worship and to serve the Lord and were devoured by a fire from the Lord. Moses addressed the following words to Aaron immediately after the disaster struck:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה וְכוּ' רֵאשִׁיכֶם אֶל תִּפְרְעוּ וּבְגְדֵיכֶם לֹא תִפְרְמוּ וְלֹא תִמְתּוּ  
וְעַל כָּל הָעֵדָה יִקְצַף וְאֲחִיכֶם כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל יִבְכוּ אֶת הַשְּׂרֵפָה אֲשֶׁר  
שָׂרַף ה' וּמִפֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תִצְאוּ פֶּן תִּמְתּוּ כִּי שֶׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת ה'  
עֲלֵיכֶם.

Let not the hair on your head go loose, neither rend your garments; lest ye die, lest wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord hath kindled. Ye shall not go out from the door of the Tabernacle, lest ye die; for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you.<sup>14</sup>

Moses enjoined Aaron and his children from mourning for Nadav and Avihu. Aaron and his two surviving sons were enjoined from shedding a tear for them. Why? Because the priests constituted a community of the anointed who were consecrated exclusively to the service of the Lord. The inalienable right, to which every parent is entitled, of mourning the death of a child, was denied to Aaron and his sons. The commitment or consecration of a priest to God is ultimate, all-demanding, and all-inclu-

<sup>14</sup>. Leviticus 10:6-7.

sive. God lays unrestricted claim not to a part but to the whole of the human personality. Existence *in toto*, in its external and inward manifestations, is consecrated to God. Aaron belonged to no one, not even to himself, but to God. Therefore he was not even free to give himself over to the grief precipitated by the loss of his two sons; he had no private world of his own. Even the heart of Aaron was divine property.

What does all this mean in psychological terms? God wanted Aaron to disown the strongest emotion in man — the love for a child. Is it possible? As far as modern man is concerned I would not dare answer. With respect to Biblical man we read that Aaron acted in accord with the divine instruction:

ויעשו כדבר משה

— “And they did so, according to Moses’ word.”<sup>15</sup> Aaron withdrew from himself; he withdrew from being a father. This kind of movement of recoil is tantamount to self-denial. Such action is certainly cathartic, because it is certainly heroic; as such it is far more exalted than the aesthetic Aristotelian catharsis, which Judaism did not accept.

Not only Aaron, but the entire covenantal community, was summoned by God into His service. Once man enters the service of God, be it as high-priest, be it as an ordinary humble person, his commitment is not partial; it is total. He is subject to the divine call for total inner withdrawal. Here the Halacha intervenes frequently in the most intimate and personal phases of our lives and makes demands upon us which often impress the uninitiated as overly rigid and formal.

Let us take an example. We all know the law that a festival suspends the mourning for one of the seven intimate relatives. If one began to observe the *shiva* period a short time before the holiday was ushered in the commencement of the latter cancels the *shiva*. Let us not forget that אבלות (mourning) in Halacha, consists of more than the performance of external ritual or ceremony. It is far more than that. It is an inner experience of black despair, of complete existential failure, of the absurdity of being. It is a grisly experience which overwhelms man,

15. *Ibid.*

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which shatters his faith and exposes his I-awareness as a delusion. Similarly, the precept of שמחת יו"ט (to rejoice on a holiday) includes, not only ceremonial actions, but a genuine experience of joy, as well. When the Torah decreed ושמחת בחגך, "and thou shalt rejoice in thy feast,"<sup>16</sup> it referred, not to merry-making and entertaining, to artificial gaiety or some sort of shallow hilarity, but to an all-penetrating depth-experience of spiritual joy, serenity and peace of mind deriving from faith and the awareness of God's presence. Now let us visualize the following concrete situation. The mourner, who has buried a beloved wife or mother, returns home from the graveyard where he has left part of himself, where he has witnessed the mockery of human existence. He is in a mood to question the validity of our entire axiological universe. The house is empty, dreary, every piece of furniture reminds the mourner of the beloved person he has buried. Every corner is full of memories. Yet the Halacha addresses itself to the lonely mourner, whispering to him: "Rise from your mourning; cast the ashes from your head; change your clothes; light the festive candles; recite over a cup of wine the *Kiddush* extolling the Lord for giving us festivals of gladness and sacred seasons of joy; pronounce the blessing of שהחיינו: 'Blessed art Thou . . . who has kept us in life and has preserved us and has enabled us to reach this season'; join the jubilating community and celebrate the holiday as if nothing had transpired, as if the beloved person over whose death you grieve were with you." The Halacha, which at times can be very tender, understanding and accommodating, may, on other occasions, act like a disciplinarian demanding obedience. The Halacha suggests to man, broken in body and spirit, carrying the burden of an absurd existence, that he change his mood, that he cast off his grief and choose joy. Let us repeat the question: Is such a metamorphosis of the state of mind of an individual possible? Can one make the leap from utter bleak desolation and hopelessness into joyous trust? Can one replace the experience of monstrosity with the feeling of highest meaningfulness? I have no right to judge. However, I know of people who attempted to perform this greatest of all miracles.

16. Deuteronomy 16:14.

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This leap is certainly heroic. It is less spectacular than the death of an Achilles; yet it is more heroic, more redeeming, because it is performed in humility and in the hush of a dark night of loneliness.

### 3

Judaism insisted upon catharsis in another area, namely, the intellectual. Judaism insisted upon the redeeming of the *logos* and maintained that there is an unredeemed cognitive gesture, just as there is an unredeemed carnal drive. When I say there is an unredeemed cognitive gesture, I do not refer to mythical thinking, which is not guided by scientific method and precision, but to the most modern system of scientific inquiry. The latter may be considered unredeemed if the scientist does not subject his cognitive act to an extraneous catharsis, which consists in the dialectical movement: marching forward, inspired by victory, and retracing one's steps in defeat. Let me explain: when I speak of cognitive withdrawal or self-negation, I do not mean to suggest that the scientist should conduct his inquiry without thoroughness or inconclusively. On the contrary, every scholar is guided intuitively by an ethical norm, which tells him to search the truth assiduously and not to rest until he has it within his reach. Cognitive withdrawal is related, not to the scientific inquiry as a logical operation, but rather to the axiological experience of scientific work. Knowing is not an impersonal performance which can be computerized, emptied of its rich, colorful, experiential content. It is, instead, an integral part of the knower as a living person, with all his complex emotional experiences and axiological judgments. Next to the religious experience, knowledge is perhaps the most vibrant and resonant personal experience. It sweeps the whole of the personality, sometimes like a gentle wave infusing the knower with a sense of tranquility and serenity; at other times like a mighty onrushing tide, arousing the soul to its depth and raising it to a pitch of ecstasy. As we have said before, the catharsis of knowledge refers to something which takes place, not within the formal logical realm, but within the experiential.

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Cognitive catharsis consists in discovering the unknowability of being. Commitment to knowledge, to scientific inquiry, implies, *ipso facto*, the recognition of the eternal mystery, which grows with the advance of knowledge, which deepens with the triumphant march of the human mind, and which becomes, with every cognitive breakthrough, more baffling, perplexing and challenging. Often we raise a Kohelet-type question: is man indeed a knower? For man always faces the paradoxical situation of solving one problem, only to discover another problem, more complex and inclusive than the first, and which has been precipitated by the very solution to the old problem. Furthermore, man discovers that the scientific gesture and the *mysterium magnum* belong to different realms. Science explores a world of its own making — a world of relational constructs and freely-created conceptual series. The *mysterium magnum*, which is imbedded in our qualitative environment consisting of sound, color, touch, fragrance, sensations of heat, moisture and the like, can never be subjected to scientific interpretation and elucidation. What the scientist does is not to explain the qualitative phenomena but to create a parallel quantitative order of abstract mathematical correlates which he manipulates with great freedom since they are ultimately creations of his own mind. There is no scientific explanation of our real problem: what is the essence of the qualitative world we live in? There is, to be sure, a creative duplication which serves well, so far as technology is concerned, and which gradually places our environment under human control. However, the lanes of creation which we sense, feel, enjoy and fear, in which we are enmeshed, body and soul — these remain uncharted. Hence, the cognitive experience contains not only the rapture of knowing but also the terror and awe of the great mystery of the strange and uninterpretable being, namely, the universe as a qualitative rather than a quantitative entity.

If the scholar, simultaneously with the ecstasy of knowing, experiences also the agony of confusion, and together with the sweetness of triumph over Being, feels the pain and despair of defeat by Being, then his cognitive gesture is purged and redeemed. Then, and only then, does this gesture become heroic.

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Then, and only then, is the scientific experience a humble and not an arrogant one. Catharsis requires of the scientist two basic admissions. First, as we have already pointed out above, that he may, at best, attain knowledge and understanding of the cosmic process when the latter is translated into quantitative abstract constructs. However, he must recognize that the human mind will never comprehend the link between the mathematical idea and the event, between the formula, which is a product of the mind, and the behavioral patterns of organic and inorganic matter. Second, the moral law can never be legislated in ultimate terms by the human mind. Any attempt on the part of scientific research, no matter how progressive, to replace the moral law engraved by the Divine hand on the two stone tablets of Sinai with man-made rules of behavior, is illegitimate. Adam tried to legislate the moral norm; he was driven from Paradise. In our day, modern man is engaged in a similar undertaking, which demonstrates pride and arrogance, and is doomed to failure.

### 4

Man must be ready to accept defeat not only in the carnal-aesthetic, emotional, or intellectual world but also in the moral-religious world, in his relationship with God.<sup>17</sup> Man must be capable of recognizing that he is subject, willy-nilly, to the dialectical movement even in his encounter with God, even when he is certain that God is close to him and all he has to do is to make the final leap into the embrace of his Maker. There is an unredeemed moral and religious experience, as there is an unredeemed body and an unredeemed logos. Let us be candid: if one has not redeemed his religious life he may become self-righteous, insensitive, or even destructive. The story of the Crusades, the Inquisition and other outbursts of religious fanaticism bear out this thesis. Judaism has sanctioned man, has stated that there

17. Withdrawal, in the moral-religious sphere, differs from withdrawal in other areas. While, in other areas, the Torah requires of man that he withdraw voluntarily from certain positions he conquered, in the moral-religious sphere withdrawal is identical with the awareness of imperfection and sin.

## *Catharsis*

is a spark of divinity in man; Judaism has never subscribed to the philosophy that man is intrinsically sinful. On the contrary, we have taught that the moral challenge which confronts man and the opportunities offered him are unlimited. Man, as seen by Judaism, is potentially a good, progressive being. However, man often finds himself in the grip of an overwhelming, irresistible force that pulls him downward. The ascent up the mount of the Lord often turns into a rapid descent down the mount. The impetuous and passionate rush toward God may suddenly become a flight from God. Man moves toward the fulfillment of his destiny along a zig-zag line; progress frequently superseded by retrogression; closeness to God, by the dark night of separation. Man not only rises but falls as well; and rises again from his fall only to fall once more. Moral erring and culpability are interwoven into our very existential fabric. No man can claim that he is perfect, that his existential experience has been purged of all selfish, undignified brutish motives. In a word, the Bible is confident of man, but it is also very suspicious of man.

Catharsis of religious life consists exactly in the awareness of the long interludes during which man finds himself at an infinite distance from God: the periodic states of ecstasy engendered by the feeling of closeness to God alternate with the states of black despair, which even the prophet encounters during moments of exile from the presence of the Almighty. Those long periods of black despair (הסתר פנים) contain the cathartic element which cleanses and redeems religious life. The breaking of the covenantal tablets is an experience every committed individual must endure. Only after Moses had lost everything he was questing for, did he ascend Mount Sinai to receive, not only two new tablets of stone but also the radiant countenance and the great mission of transmitting and teaching Torah to the covenantal community. On the long life journey, at one point or another, one must reach the absurd stage at which one finds oneself bankrupt and forlorn. The Bible, with ruthless honesty, recorded such experiences of failure in the lives of our greatest. Man must be cognizant of this tragic fact, which sooner or later he must encounter, if his metaphysical destiny is to be realized. Great is not the man who has never faltered but the man who tripped,



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fell and rose again to greater heights.<sup>18</sup> Sin is a reality, not just a potential threat. Perfect man has never been created.<sup>19</sup> If a man is not conscious of the contradiction inherent in the very core of his personality, he lives in the world of illusion and leads an unredeemed existence. It matters not what we call such a complacent state of mind — self-righteousness, pride, haughtiness, stupidity — it is all a manifestation of a brutish and raw state of mind. At this point the idea of תשובה emerges and conveys to man the message of catharsis. In what does this catharsis express itself? In the aptitude of man to take a critical look at himself and to admit failure, in the courage to confess, to plead guilty, in the readiness to accept defeat. The outcry of Judah, the outcry of aristocrat and judge, who admitted that he was wrong and the poor harlot was right —

ויכר יהודה ויאמר צדקה ממני.

“She has been more righteous than I<sup>20</sup> — was the great cathartic act, which cleansed him and redeemed his life. To recite ודוי, a confession, is the greatest of all virtues, the most heroic act; it is catharsis *par excellence*.

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה ה' דורש ממך כי אם עשות משפט ואהבת חסד והצנע לכם עם אלקים.

“He hath showed thee, man, what is good and that doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”<sup>21</sup> In paraphrase I would say: He showed thee, man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to move forward boldly, to triumph over and to subdue thy environment and to retreat humbly when victory is within thy grasp.

18. Vide Maimonides' *Eight Chapters*, Ch. 6.

19. Vide Ecclesiastes 7:20.

20. Genesis 38:26.

21. Micah 6:8.