

MAJESTY AND HUMILITY*

Man is a dialectical being; an inner schism runs through his personality at every level. This schism is not due to man's revolt against his Maker, as Christian theology has preached since the days of Augustine. Unlike this view, according to which it was man who, by his sinful rebellion against his Maker, precipitated the split in human nature, the Judaic view posits that the schism is willed by God as the source of man's greatness and his election as a singular charismatic being. Man is a great and creative being because he is torn by conflict and is always in a state of ontological tenseness and perplexity. The fact that the creative gesture is associated with agony is a result of this contradiction, which pervades the whole personality of man.

Judaic dialectic, unlike the Hegelian, is irreconcilable and hence interminable. Judaism accepted a dialectic, consisting only of thesis and antithesis. The third Hegelian stage, that of reconciliation, is missing. The conflict is final, almost absolute. Only God knows how to reconcile; we do not. Complete reconciliation is an eschatological vision. To Hegel, man and his history were just abstract ideas; in the world of abstractions synthesis is conceivable. To Judaism, man has always been and still is a living reality, or may I say, a tragic living reality. In the world of realities, the harmony of opposites is an impossibility.

The Psalmist proclaimed *אני אמרתי בחפזי כל האדם כוזב*. "I said in my haste all men are liars."¹ What kind of lie did the Psalmist have in mind when he hurled this serious accusation at man in general? Did he have in mind the lie which the I tells the thou? Did he refer to the everyday social lie? Did he refer to the commercial lie of the dishonest businessman, to the political lie of the faithless ruler, to the judicial lie of the perjurer? In a word, did he speak of the profitable, immoral lie? Does

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1. Psalm 116:11. Vide Rashi and ibn Ezra.

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man indeed engage constantly in immoral lying?² By no means! The Psalmist is concerned with a different kind of lie — the existential lie that man tells, not others, but himself. Man is indeed a liar, because he is involved in an unresolvable contradiction, in an insoluble dialectic, because he is caught like Abraham's ram in a thicket of antinomies and dichotomies. He swings like a pendulum between two poles: the thesis and the antithesis, the affirmation and the negation, identifying himself either with both of them or with neither. He must lie, but this inevitable lie is rooted in man's uniqueness and is a moral lie. It is the springwell of human creativity. That agony accompanies the process of creativity is due to the fact we mentioned above — that it is torn man who is the creator.

2

It is obvious that dialectical man cannot be committed to a uniform, homogeneous morality. If man is dialectical, so is his moral gesture. Judaism has indeed formulated such a dialectical morality.

There are two objectives which moral man pursues. Man is, quite often, a captive of two enchanting visions, summoning him to move in opposite directions. He is attracted by opposing norms, by two sets of values; two stars infinitely distant from each other beckon to him. Man must decide which alternative to take, which route to choose, which star to follow. The clash is staggering. Man, confused, kneels in prayer, petitioning God, who has burdened him with this dialectic, to guide him and to enlighten him. The Halacha is concerned with this dilemma and tries to help man in such critical moments. The Halacha, of course, did not discover the synthesis, since the latter does not exist. It did, however, find a way to enable man to respond to both calls.

2. א"ר סימון בשעה שבא הקב"ה לברוא את אדה"ר נעשו מלאכי השרת כתים וחבורות חבורות מהם אומרים: אל יברא, ומהם אומרים: יברא . . . ואמת אומר: אל יברא, שכולו שקרים . . .

R. Simon said: "When God came to the creation of Adam, the angels divided into groups; some said: let him not be created; and some said: let him be created . . . Truth said: 'let him not be created, for he is all lies'" (*Genesis R. 8*).

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3

The basic dialectic of man and his morality was beautifully captured in two midrashic homilies quoted by Rashi. In his comment to the verse "וַיִּצַר ה' א' אֶת הָאָדָם עֹפֶר מִן הָאֲדָמָה" — "And God created man dust of the earth,"³ Rashi says:

צָבַר עֲפָרוֹ מִכָּל הָאֲדָמָה מֵאַרְבַּע רִחוּת וְכו'.

God gathered the dust [from which man was fashioned] from the entire earth — from its four corners.

ד"א: נִמְלַ עֲפָרוֹ מִמְּקוֹם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר בּוֹ: מִזְבַּח אֲדָמָה תַעֲשֶׂה לִּי

He took the dust [from which man was made] from that spot which was designated by the Almighty, at the very dawn of creation, as the future site of the altar. As it is written: "An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me."

Man was created of cosmic dust. God gathered the dust, of which man was fashioned, from all parts of the earth, indeed, from all the uncharted lanes of creation. Man belongs everywhere. He is no stranger to any part of the universe. The native son of the sleepy little town is, at the same time, a son of parts distant and unknown. In short, man is a cosmic being.

He is cosmic in a threefold manner:

First, man is cosmic through his intellectual involvement. His intellectual curiosity is of cosmic, universal dimensions. He wants to know, not only about the things that are close to him as, for example, the flowering bush in his backyard, but also about things far removed from him, things and events millions of light years away. Human cosmic inquisitiveness borders almost on the arrogant. Man is restless because he has not yet resolved the *mysterium magnum* of the cosmic drama. Remoteness magnifies, rather than diminishes, man's curiosity. The farther the

object, the greater and more hypnotic the curiosity. Man asks himself: to whom does the universe belong? The answer was given by the Psalmist: "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof" — לה' הארץ ומלאה⁴ To whom did God entrust this earth and its fulness? To man who studies and comprehends the cosmic drama. Ownership of the stars, the planets, the dark interplanetary or interstellar spaces, is granted by the Almighty only to those who make the effort to understand them, to those who are curious about them. Man owns the world through his intellectual involvement in it. The old Aristotelian and Maimonidian theorem about the unity of the subject-knower and the object of inquiry, gives man the credentials of cosmic citizenship.

Second, man is cosmic through his experiential involvement; man is cosmos-oriented not only intellectually, but emotionally as well. He loves the cosmos. He, in person, wants to be everywhere. Man is questing, not only to know the universe, but also to experience it. Explorer and adventurer, he feels bored by the monotony and the routine of familiar surroundings. He is out to "see the world." Man is not satisfied sending up unmanned vehicles to gather scientific data. He is eager to do it himself. He wishes to move, with the velocity of light, into a world of the unknown. Man wants to experience and to enjoy vastness. This quest, in contrast to the first, is of an aesthetic rather than an intellectual nature. If we ask again: Who owns the stars? the answer is: Whoever loves them.

Third, man is cosmic through his mobility. Man is a mobile being. He can easily detach himself from native surroundings and adapt himself to new environs. His adaptability to new conditions transcends that of the plant and the animal. The verse in Deuteronomy: ⁵ כי האדם עץ השדה לבא מפניך במצור contains a rhetorical question: "Is man like the tree of the field?" Is the tree as mobile as man? Certainly not! Man's greatness and distinctiveness find expression in his ceaseless mobility. The tree is inseparable from the soil. Man can, and does, move away from home.

3. Genesis 2:7.

4. Psalm 24:1.

5. Deuteronomy 20:19; following Rashi.

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In short, cosmic man⁶ is mesmerized by the infinite number of opportunities with which his fantasy presents him. He forgets the simple tragic fact that he is finite and mortal, and that to reach out for infinity and eternity is a foolhardy undertaking.

II

Let us examine the other interpretation of the verse in Genesis: man was created from the dust of a single spot. Man is committed to one locus. The Creator assigned him a single spot he calls home. Man is not cosmic; he is here-minded. He is a rooted being, not cosmopolitan but provincial, a villager who belongs to the soil that fed him as a child and to the little world into which he was born.

At this juncture we encounter the old Biblical idea of נחלה, inheritance or homestead. We recall the solemn words, spoken with trepidation, by Naboth, in response to Ahab's request that he exchange his vineyard for another one:

חלילה לי מה' מתתי את נחלת אבתי לך

"The Lord forbid me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."⁷ Man is rooted in his נחלה. When torn away he becomes נע ונד, another Cain, a restless vagabond, a dislocated being. Homelessness, uprootedness is a curse. Man quests for נחלה, for the origin. Because of this origin-consciousness, he is curious to know everything about his roots, about the מקור which sustains his selfhood.

Yes, man may roam along the charted and uncharted lanes of the universe, he may reach for the skies. Yet the traveler, the adventurer out to conquer infinity, will surely return home. If this homecoming did not occur during his lifetime, because he was too preoccupied with motion and exploration, it will certainly take place posthumously when his body will be brought

6. It is obvious that the term cosmic man should not be taken literally, as referring exclusively to those who have penetrated interplanetary spaces or those who are committed to this objective. The term is much wider in scope and it characterizes man as a quester and searcher for vastness and boundlessness in any area of endeavor, be it the sciences, be it commerce and industry, be it political community or *hedoné*.

7. I Kings 21:3.

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home, to the quiet, lonely graveyard which had long been expecting him.

What is the meaning of death in the Biblical tradition? Return! What kind of return? Return to whom, to what? Return to the origin, to the source.

עד שובך האדמה כי ממנה לקחת כי עפר אתה ואל עפר תשוב
“. . . till thou return unto the ground for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”⁸ The Bible also identified dying with return to the ancestors:

ו.אתה תבא אל אבותיך בשלום.⁹

Did not Jacob request of Joseph:

ושכבתי עם אבותי ונשאתני ממצרים וקברתני בקבורתם
“Carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their [his ancestors’] burying place”?¹⁰ The old man wanted to rest with his ancestors, the originators of the covenant.

The dust of which man was fashioned was not taken from all parts of the universe, according to the Midrash, but from a single spot on a mountain where an altar was many, many years later constructed. As we said before, each man is created from and attached to a single spot, the origin, from which he cannot escape. The home for which man yearns attracts him like a powerful magnet; it brings him back, no matter how far he has traveled. “Home is the sailor, home from the sea, and the hunter home from the hill”: these beautiful lines by Robert Louis Stevenson contain more than a nostalgic note.

Occasionally, when I am at the airport, I happen to observe the loading of a double coffin, containing the body of a Jew who has lived, worked, raised children, prospered or failed, in the United States. It is being shipped for burial in the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The mystery of the origin apparently casts a spell even upon people who have few religious commitments. The modern secular Jew wants to rest in eternal peace, in proximity to the site where the patriarchs found their rest.

— כי האדם עץ השדה לבא מפניך במצור

The man is indeed like the tree in the field. In this context, the

8. Genesis 3:9.

9. *Ibid.*, 15:15.

10. *Ibid.*, 47:30.

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verse should be interpreted as an affirmative statement,¹¹ not a rhetorical question. Man is indeed a rooted being, attached and committed to a homestead — no matter how far he may have traveled.

2

Both cosmos-conscious man and origin-conscious man quest for God, although they are not always aware of this quest. Man yearns for God, both in his feverish haste to get farther and farther from home, and in his lonesomeness for home and his experiencing the spell that home casts upon him. Cosmic man finds God (if ready for Him) in the vastness and boundlessness of the cosmic drama, in the heavenly galaxies billions of light years away. Home-bound, origin-minded man finds God in the limitedness and narrowness of finitude, in the smallness of the modest home into which man was born and to which he willy-nilly returns. He discovers God in the origin, in the source, in the center of the burning bush.¹² Either infinity cannot contain God, or God, if He so wills it, addresses man from the dimensionlessness of a point. What is the center of a bush if not a point! And out of that point, God spoke to Moses.

The wise King Solomon asked:

כי האמנם כי ישב אלקים על הארץ הנה השמים ושמי השמים לא
יכלכלוך אף כי הבית הזה אשר בנית.

But will God, in the very truth, dwell on the earth? Behold the heavens and the heavens of heavens cannot contain Thee; how much less this house that I have built.¹³

The logical answer to Solomon's question should have rendered

11. Following Ibn Ezra.

12. מתוך הסנה: שאל נוי א' את ר"י בן קרח מה ראה הקב"ה לדבר עם משה מתוך הסנה . . . א"ל: למה מתוך הסנה ללמדך שאין מקום פנוי בלא שכינה, אפי' סנה.

A Gentile asked R. Yehoshua b. Korhah: Why did God choose to speak with Moses from within the bramble bush . . . He answered: "To teach you that there is no place devoid of *Shekhinah*."

13. I Kings 8:27f.

the effort to construct a sanctuary futile, if not nonsensical. We would expect the wisest of all men, once having formulated this question, to regret the construction and call off the dedication festivities. Nevertheless, Solomon was not frightened by his question. He did dedicate the Sanctuary and did speak of it as the abode of the Almighty. Apparently God *does* descend from infinity to finitude, from boundlessness into the narrowness of the Sanctuary. The Midrash calls the awesome mystery of descent צמצום,¹⁴ the mystery of God, the infinite, residing in finitude.

3

As we have stated above, cosmic man beholds the vision of God in infinity, in the endlessness of the distance which separates him from God, while origin-minded man experiences God in His closeness to man. As a rule, in times of joy and elation, one finds God's footsteps in the majesty and grandeur of the cosmos, in its vastness and its stupendous dynamics. When man is drunk with life, when he feels that living is a dignified affair, then man beholds God in infinity. In moments of ecstasy God addresses Himself to man through the twinkling stars and the roar of the endlessly distant heavens:

ברכי נפשי את ד', ד' אלקים, גדלת מאד, הוד והדר לבשת
 "O Lord my God Thou are very great, Thou are clothed with glory and majesty."¹⁵ In such moments, *majestas Dei*, which not even the vast universe is large enough to accommodate, addresses itself to happy man.

However, with the arrival of the dark night of the soul, in moments of agony and black despair, when living becomes ugly

14. בשעה שאמר הקב"ה למשה עשה לי משכן התחיל מתמיה ואומר כבודו של הקב"ה מלא עליונים ותחתונים והוא אומר עשה לי משכן . . . אמר הקב"ה לא כשם שאתה סבור כך אני סבור אלא כ' קדש בצפון וכ' בדרום וכי במערב ולא עוד אלא שארד ואצמצם שכינתי בתוך אמה על אמה.

When God told Moses to make Him a Sanctuary, Moses began to question, saying: "God's Glory fills heaven and earth, yet He says — Make me a Sanctuary . . ." Said God: "It is not as you think, but twenty planks in the north, twenty in the south and eight in the west; moreover, I shall descend and *contract* my *Shekhinah* within one cubit by one" (*Exodus R.* 34).

15. Psalms 104:1.

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and absurd, plainly nauseating, when man loses his sense of beauty and majesty, God addresses him, not from infinity but from the infinitesimal, not from the vast stretches of the universe but from a single spot in the darkness which surrounds suffering man, from within the black despair itself. Eleven years ago my wife lay on her deathbed and I watched her dying, day by day, hour by hour; medically, I could do very little for her, all I could do was to pray. However, I could not pray in the hospital; somehow I could not find God in the whitewashed, long corridors among the interns and the nurses. However, the need for prayer was great; I could not live without gratifying this need. The moment I returned home I would rush to my room, fall on my knees and pray fervently. God, in those moments, appeared not as the exalted, majestic King, but rather as a humble, close friend, brother, father: in such moments of black despair, He was not far from me; He was right there in the dark room; I felt His warm hand, כביכול, on my shoulder, I hugged His knees, כביכול. He was with me in the narrow confines of a small room, taking up no space at all. God's abiding in a fenced-in finite locus manifests His humility and love for man. In such moments *humilitas Dei*, which resides in the humblest and tiniest of places, addresses itself to man.^{15a}

4

The dual religious experience of *majestas* and *humilitas Dei* has had its impact upon Judaic morality. There are, indeed, as we have indicated above, two moralities: a morality of majesty and a morality of humility. The moral gesture of cosmic man aims at majesty or kingship. The highest moral achievement for cosmic man is sovereignty; man wants to be king. God is king of the world; man, imitating God, quests for kingship, not only over a limited domain, but over the far and distant regions of the cosmos, as well.¹⁶ Man is summoned by God to be ruler, to be king, to be victorious. Victory, as the most important aspect

15a. See Exodus 20:2 and Rashi citing the Mekilta.

16. In contradistinction to some Christian theologians, who look askance at man's attempts to reach the stars, Judaism is not only tolerant of these bold experiments, but indeed considers them to be ethically warranted.

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of kingship, is an ethical goal and the human effort to achieve victory is a moral one, provided the means man employs are of a moral nature. To live, and to defy death, is a sublime moral achievement. That is why Judaism has displayed so much sympathy for scientific medicine and commanded the sick person to seek medical help.¹⁷ Curing, healing the sick is a divine attribute reflecting an activity (רופא חולים) in which man ought to engage.

5

Underlying the ethic of victory is the mystical doctrine that creation is incomplete. God purposely left one aspect of creation unfinished in order to involve man in a creative gesture and to give him the opportunity to become both co-creator and king. The individual who is not engaged in the creative gesture can never be king; only a creator may lay claim to kingship and sovereignty. The creative gesture aims at the control and domination of a hostile environment. Under victory we understand, not only the subjection of nature to the needs of man, but also the establishment of a true and just society, and an equitable economic order.

6

This explains why the moral law was often identified, by cosmic man, with natural law. Surely, there is regularity in the natural universe. Why, asks cosmic man, should order not prevail in the human world as well? All the talk about natural law, which originated with the Stoa and found its philosophical formulation in Grotius' theory of *jus gentium*, has been indicative of cosmic man's approach to morality. In the opinion of cosmic man, morality must be intelligible and rational, appealing to the conscience and to the mind. Acceptance of חקים, statutes which the logos cannot comprehend, is alien to the philosophy of cosmic man.

17. On the Jewish view of medicine, vide Nahmanides on Leviticus 26:11, and my discussion in "The Lonely Man of Faith" *TRADITION*, 7:2 (Summer 1965), footnote pp. 51-52.

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Philosophical ethics, beginning with Plato and Aristotle and concluding with the pragmatic situational morality of today, is victory-minded and success-oriented. Man sets himself up as king and strives to triumph over opposition and hostility.

Judaism, however, knows that the kingship-victory morality is not always adequate. We said before that man meets God, not only in moments of joy and triumph, but also in times of disaster and distress, when God confronts him in the narrow straits of finitude — ממעמקים; מן המיצר — from out of the depths. Then he encounters, not *majestas Dei* but *humilitas Dei*, God's glory compressed into the straits of the human finite destiny. It is self-evident that the humility-experience has to express itself in another set of ethical value judgments, in a unique morality. We do have two moralities, one of victory and triumph, one of withdrawal and retreat.

7

The ethic of retreat or withdrawal is rooted in the old mystery of צמצום, self-contraction, without which, not only the building of the Sanctuary, but even the creation of the world, would have been impossible. Reading the story of creation, a question arises in our minds: How can a finite world prevail beside God-infinity? From a mathematical point of view, infinity would swallow finitude: an infinite number plus a finite number equals infinity. The answer Lurianic Kabbalah offered is to be found again in the mystery of צמצום: the act of creation is identical with צמצום or withdrawal. God (metaphorically speaking) retreated in order to make room for a finite world. He created the world by engaging in a movement of recoil. For the sake of His love for man and for the world, God forsook infinity and stepped aside, כביכול.

Let me ask the following question: Is this Lurianic doctrine of צמצום just a Kabbalistic mystery, without any moral relevance for us; or is it the very foundation of our morality? If God withdrew, and creation is a result of His withdrawal, then, guided by the principle of *imitatio Dei*, we are called upon to do the

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same. Jewish ethics, then, requires man, in certain situations, to withdraw.

Man must not always be victor. From time to time triumph should turn into defeat. Man, in Judaism, was created for both victory and for defeat — he is both king and saint. He must know how to fight for victory and also how to suffer defeat. Modern man is frustrated and perplexed because he cannot take defeat. He is simply incapable of retreating humbly. Modern man boasts quite often that he has never lost a war. He forgets that defeat is built into the very structure of victory, that there is, in fact, no total victory; man is finite, so is his victory. Whatever is finite is imperfect; so is man's triumph.

8

In what areas of human endeavor does Judaism recommend self-defeat? Self-defeat is demanded in those areas in which man is most interested, where the individual expects to find the *sum-mum bonum*, the realization of his most cherished dream or vision, where, in the opinion of pragmatic man, it is absolutely necessary for the individual to win, since losing the battle would mean total failure and frustration. It is precisely in those areas that God requires man to withdraw. God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most. It is true of the father of the nation, as well as of plain ordinary people.

What was the most precious possession of Abraham; with what was he concerned the most? Isaac. Because the son meant so much to him, God instructed him to retreat, to give the son away:

קח נא את בנך יחידך אשר אהבת את יצחק

“Take your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac.”¹⁸ What of the ordinary person? Is there, for example, a more sensitive area in the lives of two young people — man and woman — than their love-relationship? Therefore, the principle of self-defeating action must govern the relationship in this area. Sex, if unredeemed, may turn into a brutal, ugly performance which man shares with the beast. Sex, therefore, is in need of redemp-

18. Genesis 22:2.

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tion. It must be purged of its coarseness and animality. What action did Judaism recommend to man in order to achieve this purpose? The movement of withdrawal and self-defeat. Only in light of this principle can we begin to understand many of the strict halachic rules of separation.¹⁹

What does man cherish more than the intellect, around which his sense of dignity is centered? Precisely because of the supremacy of the intellect in human life, the Torah requires, at times, the suspension of the authority logos. Man defeats himself by accepting norms that the intellect cannot assimilate into its normative system. The Judaic concept of חק represents human surrender and human defeat. Man, an intellectual being, ignores the logos and burdens himself with laws whose rational motif he cannot grasp. He withdraws from the rationalistic position. In a word, withdrawal is required, in all areas of human experience and endeavor; whatever is most significant, whatever attracts man the most, must be given up.

What happens after man makes this movement of recoil and retreats? God may instruct him to resume his march to victory and move onward in conquest and triumph. The movement of recoil redeems the forward-movement, and the readiness to accept defeat purges the uncontrollable lust for victory. Once man has listened and retreated, he may later be instructed to march straight to victory.

Abraham was told to withdraw, and to defeat himself, by giving Isaac away. He listened; God accepted Isaac but did not retain him. God returned him to Abraham:

וּיְרֵשׁ זֶרַעְךָ אֶת שַׁעַר אוֹיְבֶיךָ

And thy seed shall take possession of his enemies' gate.²⁰

Abraham found victory in retreat.²¹

19. Vide "Catharsis" for an elaboration of the principle of self-defeat.

20. Genesis 22:17.

21. Moses was less fortunate. He withdrew; he gazed upon the land from afar; but his prayers were not fulfilled. He never entered the Promised Land which was only half a mile away. He listened, though his total obedience did not result in victory. God's will is inscrutable.