

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
THE REBBITZEN OF TALNE, REBECCA TWERSKY,
A WOMAN OF VALOR — 1 TEVET, 5736

THE COMMUNITY*

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 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.

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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.

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.

1. Genesis 2:7.

2. *Ibid.*, *ibid.*: 18.

3. *Ibid.*, *ibid.*: 19.

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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.

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 comple-

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mentarity 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:

כל המקיים נפש אחת, כאלו קיים עולם מלא

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 (אבלות) 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.

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

4. The Halachic principle of אין צבור מתים (*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 ד"ה בכל.

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

6. M. *Sanhedrin* 4, 5.

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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

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

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 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.

Why was it necessary to create lonely man? Why was social

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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; the latter, for his creativity. Social man is superficial: he imitates, he emulates. Lonely man is profound: he creates, he is original.

2. Lonely man is free; social man is bound by many rules and ordinances. God willed man to be free. Man is required, from time to time, to defy the world, to replace the old and obsolete with the new and relevant. Only lonely man is capable of casting off the harness of bondage to society. Who was Abraham? Who was Elijah? Who were the prophets? People who dared rebuke society in order to destroy the *status quo* and replace it with a new social order. The story of Judaism is not only that of the community but also of man alone, confronted by the many. "What doest thou here Elijah?"

מה לך פה אליהו?

ויאמר: קנא קנאתי לה' אלקי צבקות כי עזבו בריתך בני ישראל את
מזבחותיך הרסו ואת נביאיך הרגו בחרב ואותר אני לבדי ויבקשו את
נפשי לקחתה.

I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant; cast down thine altars and slain thy prophets; and I, even I only am left and they seek my life . . .⁸

In other words: "I am remote from my people, there is complete alienation. I am a lonely individual, I defy the community. I rebel against the nation." The לבדו -awareness is the root of heroic defiance. Heroism is the central category in practical Judaism. The Torah wanted the Jew to live heroically, to rebuke, reproach, condemn, whenever society is wrong and unfair. The לבדו gives the Jew the heroic arrogance which makes it possible for him to be different. Did not the Jew display heroic arrogance by defying the world throughout the millennia? Does not tiny Israel exhibit heroic arrogance in rejecting the U.N.?

8. I Kings 19:9-10.

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Don't we American Jews experience a sense of heroic loneliness and alienation from the general society, whenever the problem of Israel comes up in a conversation, and we recognize the incommensurability of our viewpoint with that of the international political community? Lonely man is a courageous man; he is a protester; he fears nobody; whereas social man is a compromiser, a peacemaker, and at times a coward. At first man had to be created לבדו, alone; for otherwise he would have lacked the courage or the heroic quality to stand up and to protest, to act like Abraham, who took the ax and shattered the idols which his own father had manufactured.

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However, man was created a second time. He fell asleep a lonely man and awoke to find Eve standing beside him. God willed man to exist in solitude, to experience aloneness. He also willed man to break out of his loneliness, to move closer to the thou, and to share the existential experience with the thou.

To exist alone is not good — said the Lord God. Man is not only a protester; he is an affirmer too. He is not only an iconoclast, but a builder, as well. If man always felt remote from everybody and everything, then the very purpose of creation could not be achieved. Moses was both the greatest loner, who pitched his tent הרחק מן המחנה — “far outside the camp,” and, at the same time, the great leader, father and teacher of the people to whom the whole community clung. ויהי ממחרת כו' ויעמד העם על משה מן הבקר עד הערב.

“And the people stood before Moses from the morning until the evening.”⁹ In a word, man, in order to realize himself, must be alone, but, at the same time, he must be a member of a community.

⁹ Exodus 33:7; 18:13.

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II

1

How is the community formed? The answer is simple: two lonely individuals create a community in the manner that God created the world. What was God's instrument of creation? The word. The word is also the instrument with which man creates his own community. God, by saying יהי, which is identical with an act of recognition of the world, made it possible for a beside-Him existence to emerge, made it possible for finitude to co-exist with infinity, notwithstanding that, as a mathematical equation, finitude+infinity = infinity, or, in other words, that the co-existence of the infinite and the finite is an impossibility. God, in order to make "room" for the finite world, employed מדת הצמצום, the method of self-contraction or self-limitation, כביכול. He withdrew, and by engaging in a movement of recoil, כביכול, He precipitated "empty space" for the world. Otherwise the latter could not have come into existence, since it would have been "swallowed" by infinity. Thus, we may suggest the following equation: creation = recognition = withdrawal = an act of sacrifice.

The same is true of man. If lonely man is to rise from existential exclusiveness to existential all-inclusiveness, then the first thing he has to do is to recognize another existence. Of course this recognition is, *eo ipso*, a sacrificial act, since the mere admission that a thou exists in addition to the I, is tantamount to צמצום, self-limitation and self-contraction. A community is established the very moment I recognize the thou and extend greetings to the thou. One individual extends the *shalom* greeting to another individual; and in so doing he creates a community. The Halacha has attached great significance to casual greetings exchanged between two individuals. Rabbi Helbo said: "If his friend greets him and he does not return the greeting he is called a robber for it is said, 'It is ye that have eaten up the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses.'"¹⁰ What message does *Shalom* convey, if not encour-

10. *Brakhot* 6a; verse cited from Isaiah 3:14.

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agement and solace to the lonely and distressed. The Halacha commands us to return greetings, and in some cases to extend them, even during the recital of שמע.¹¹ To recognize somebody by greeting him or responding to a greeting does not contradict the performance of קבלת עול מלכות שמים (acceptance of the yoke of Heaven). Halacha says to man: Don't let your neighbor drift along the lanes of loneliness; don't permit him to become remote and alienated from you, even when you are busy reciting שמע. If הקב"ה willed a world to rise from nihility in order to bestow His love upon this world, then lonely man should affirm the existence of somebody else in order to have the opportunity of giving love. Again the same equation prevails: recognition *means* sacrificial action; the individual withdraws in order to make room for the thou.

2

Quite often a man finds himself in a crowd among strangers. He feels lonely. No one knows him, no one cares for him, no one is concerned with him. It is again an existential experience. He begins to doubt his ontological worth. This leads to alienation from the crowd surrounding him. Suddenly someone taps him on the shoulder and says: "Aren't you Mr. So-and-So? I have heard so much about you." In a fraction of a second his awareness changes. An alien being turns into a fellow member of an existential community (the crowd). What brought about the change? The recognition by somebody, the word!

To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that: it is an act of identifying him existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him.

The Halacha equated the act of publicly embarrassing a person with murder.¹² Why? Because humiliation is tantamount to destroying an existential community and driving the individual

11. M. *Brakhot* 2:1.

12. *Baba Metzia* 58b: כל המלבין פני חבריו ברבים כאלו שופך דמים.

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into solitude. It is not enough for the charitable person to extend help to the needy. He must do more than that: he must try to restore to the dependent person a sense of dignity and worth. That is why Jews have developed special sensitivity regarding orphans and widows, since these persons are extremely sensitive and lose their self-confidence at the slightest provocation. The Bible warned us against afflicting an orphan or a widow.

What kind of an affliction does the Bible prohibit? Murder, mutilation, causing of severe pain, destruction of property, etc.? Not only these, but lesser evils, as well. Whatever affects the peace of mind of the widow or the orphan is considered affliction. A word, a gesture, a facial expression by which the widow or the orphan feels hurt; in short, whatever causes an accelerated heartbeat — that comes under affliction.

וכשנאחזו רשב"ג ור' ישמעאל וגזרו עליהם שיהרגו היה ר"ש בוכה, ור' ישמעאל אמר: ברבי! בשתי פסיעות אתה ניתן בחיקן של צדיקים ואתה בוכה? א"ל: אני בוכה על שאנו נהרגין כשופכי דמים וכמחללי שבתות. אמר לו: שמא בסעודה היה יושב וישן וכאה אשה לשאול על נדתה על מהרות שלה ואמר לה השמש ישן הוא, והתורה אמרה אם ענה תענה אותו, ומה כתיב — והרגתי אתכם בחרב.

When R. Shimon b. Gamaliel and R. Ishmael appeared [before the Romans], and were condemned to death, R. Shimon wept, and R. Ishmael said: "Sir, you are but two steps from the bosom of the righteous, and yet you weep?" He answered: "I weep because we are being executed as if we were murderers . . ." To which [R. Ishmael] answered; "Perhaps you were at the table or asleep, and a woman came to inquire about her ritual purity, and the attendant told her: 'He is asleep'; for the Torah said: 'If you torment them [the widow and orphan] . . . , and continued: 'Then I shall kill you by the sword.'"¹³

What was wrong in R. Shimon's conduct? He had come home exhausted after a full day's work, and lay down for a short rest. It had been a busy day: the entire load of communal responsibilities pressed heavily on his frail shoulders. Cruel Rome continued its ruthless policy of religious persecution and economic

13. Tractate *Semahot* 8:4; verse cited from Exodus 22:22-23; variant in *Mekhilla of R. Ishmael* on Exodus.

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ruin of the people. R. Shimon b. Gamaliel had to perform an almost impossible task, to negotiate with, as well as to defy the conquerors; to communicate with his Jewish brethren, telling them not to despair, and at the same time to ready them for rebellion and the supreme sacrifice.

While he was dozing, a woman entered with an inquiry: is she ritually pure or impure? The attendant, knowing how fatigued R. Shimon was, advised her to wait until he awoke; he did not wish to disturb R. Shimon. How, then, the question arises, did R. Shimon afflict the woman? The woman was a poor widow, and extremely sensitive. While waiting for R. Shimon, the thought went through her head: had my rich neighbor come with a similar question, the attendant would have acted differently: he would have aroused R. Shimon. Because of my poverty and loneliness, she thought, he didn't mind making me wait; she sighed, and brushed away a tear. So R. Shimon did afflict a widow, and thus violated a Biblical prohibition. Her tear was responsible for the tragic death of R. Shimon:

אחד ענוי מרובה ואחד ענוי מועט

"A great affliction and a small affliction are all the same."¹⁴ The degree of hurt is irrelevant; causing transient humiliation and causing severe physical pain are both subsumed under affliction.

III

1

Once I have recognized the thou and invited him to join the community, I ipso facto assumed responsibility for the thou. Recognition is identical with commitment.

Here again we walk in the ways of our Maker. God created man; God did not abandon him; God showed concern for him. God cared for Adam: God said: It is not good for man to be alone. He provided him with a mate; He placed him in Paradise, and allowed him to enjoy the fruit of the Garden. Even after man sinned and was exiled from the Garden, the Almighty did not desert him. Of course, He punished him. Yet He was con-

¹⁴. *Mekhilta* version, *ibid.*

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cerned with man even while man was in sin. In a word, God assumed responsibility for whatever and whomever He created:

נותן לחם לכל בשר כי לעולם חסדו.

“He gives bread to all flesh for His loving-kindness is everlasting.”¹⁵ As we have said above, the same relationship should prevail between me and the thou whom I have recognized, and with whom I have formed a community. I assume responsibility for each member of the community to whom I have granted recognition and whom I have found worthy of being my companion. In other words, the I is responsible for the physical and mental welfare of the thou.

2

When the I becomes aware of his being responsible for the well-being of the thou, whom he has helped bring into existence, a new community emerges: the community of prayer. What does this mean? It means a community of common pain, of common suffering. The Halacha has taught the individual to include his fellow man in his prayer. The individual must not limit himself to his own needs, no matter how pressing those needs are and how distinguished he is. Halacha has formulated prayer in the plural. There is hardly a prayer which avails itself of the grammatical singular. Even private prayers, such as those offered on the occasion of sickness, death, or other crises, are recited in the plural.

המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים.

“May the Almighty comfort thee among all mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

שתשלח רפואה שלמה מן השמים בתוך שאר חולי ישראל.

“I beseech Thee to cure this individual as well as other sick

15. Psalm 136:25. Vide Maimonides' *Guide* III, 54.

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people and restore them to full health.”¹⁶ Whatever the needs, the prayer must not be confined to an individual. Moses prayed for the community forty days in succession, and God tolerated his intercession on behalf of the community. Indeed, He granted atonement to the people.

ואתנפל לפני ה' כבראשונה את ארבעים היום וארבעים הלילה. לחם לא אכלתי ומים לא שתיתי על כל חטאתכם.

And I fell before the Lord as before forty days and forty nights; I did not eat bread or drink water, for all your sins.¹⁷

On another occasion, however, when Moses tried to pray to the Almighty, God stopped him in the middle. He did not permit him to continue praying; neither did He grant his wish. Moses prayed for himself; the Almighty rejected the prayer.

ואתחנן אל ה' בעת ההיא לאמר וכו' אעברה נא ואראה את הארץ הטובה אשר בעבר הירדן את ההר הטוב והלבנן ויתעבר ה' בי למענכם ולא שמע אלי ויאמר ה' אלי רב לך אל תוסף דבר אלי עוד בדבר הזה.

And I besought the Lord at that time saying . . . “O Lord God . . . let me go over and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill country and Lebanon.” But the Lord was wroth with me . . . and harkened not unto me, and the Lord said unto me: “Let it suffice; speak no more unto me of this matter.”¹⁸

16. *Shabbat* 12a-b:

ת"ר הנכנס לבקר את החולה אומר . . . ר' יהודה אומר: המקום ירחם עליך ועל חולי ישראל; ר' יוסי אומר: המקום ירחם עליך בתוך חולי ישראל (רש"י: שמתוך שכוללן עם האחרים תפילתו נשמעת בזכותן של רבים).

“The Rabbis taught: When one visits the sick, one says, according to R. Judah: ‘May God have mercy on you *and* other sick people of Israel’; according to R. Jose: ‘May God have mercy on you *among* other sick people of Israel.’” (Rashi: “Through inclusion of the others, his prayer is heard, for the sake of the many.” אמר אביי: לעולם לישתף איניש נפשיה בהדי צבורא; (רש"י: אל יתפלל תפלה קצרה בל' יחיד אלא בל' רבים שמתוך כך תפלתו נשמעת).

Abbaye said: “One should always include oneself together with the community.” (Rashi: “Let him not pray . . . in the singular but in the plural; for through this, his prayer is heard.”)

17. Deuteronomy 9:18.

18. *Ibid.*, 3:23-26.

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When Moses' prayer was recited in the plural, all the gates of prayer were open and the Lord allowed him to intercede many, many days for the people. When Moses changed his prayer to the singular, the gates of prayer and loving-kindness were slammed in his face.

The Midrash states that, had the community joined Moses in his prayer, God would have granted the request. He would not have rejected the prayer of the many.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the community did not understand the secret of prayer-by-the-many. As a consequence of their ignorance, Moses died in the desert.

The individual prayer usually revolves about physical pain, mental anguish, or suffering which man cannot bear anymore. At the level of individual prayer, prayer does not represent the singularly human need. Even a mute creature in the field reacts to physical pain with a shriek or outcry. Such a reaction was, to be sure, equated with prayer: שומע תפלה עדיך כל בשר יבאו.

"Hearer of prayer, unto You all flesh must come."²⁰ However, prayer in the plural is a unique human performance. Why do I use the plural form when I pray? Because I am aware, not only of my pain, but of the pain of the many, because I share in the suffering of the many. Again, it is not psychological; it is rather existential awareness of pain. The I suffers the pain of millions. The I is sensitive to the pain of all people. Said Yehuda Halevi:

ישראל באומות כלב כאברים . . . שהלב בזכך הרגשתו . . . הוא מרגיש בדבר מועט שיפגעהו.

"The people of Israel among the nations is like the heart in the

19. *Sifre* (Deuteronomy 3:24):

בשעה שסרחו במעשה העגל . . . עמדתי והתפללתי עליהם ושמעת תפלתי וסלחת לעונם, הייתי סבור שאני עמהם בתפלה והם לא התפללו עלי, והלא דברים ק"ו: אם תפלת יחיד על הרבים כך נשמעת תפלת הרבים על היחיד עאכ"ו?
"When they made the calf . . . I stood up and prayed for them and You heard my prayer and forgave their sin; I thought that I was with them in prayer, but they did not pray for me. It should be *à fortiori*: if the prayer of an individual for the many was heard, the prayer of the many for the individual so much more?"

20. Psalm 65:3.

body . . . the heart . . . is sensitive to the slightest trauma."²¹ *Knesset Israel* is a prayerful community, in which every individual experiences, not only his pain, but also that of countless others. I still remember the distress we young boys experienced when we heard of a pogrom in some Jewish town thousands of miles away. Our anguish was due not to fear, but to sympathy and compassion. We felt the pain of the nation as a whole. Our glorious charity-tradition, through the ages, is the result of our having been a prayerful, compassionate community.

3

The prayer community, it is self-evident, must at the same time be a charity-community, as well. It is not enough to feel the pain of many, nor is it sufficient to pray for the many, if this does not lead to charitable action. Hence, *Knesset Israel* is not only a prayerful community but a charitable community, too. We give, we pray for all because we are sensitive to pain; we try to help the many. We Jews have developed a singular sensitivity to pain which is characteristic of the Jew. The term for it — רחמנות — is a Hebrew word, most commonly used as a Yiddish colloquialism derived from the Hebrew, רחמן, רחם.

What is the semantics of רחמן, in contrast with that of מרחם. מרחם denotes an activity; it tells us one thing, namely, that a particular person acts with mercy; the word does not reveal to us what motivates those acts. רחמן, in contradistinction with מרחם, tells us, not only that a person acts with kindness, but that he is himself, by his very nature, kind. The רחמן commiserates, as if he had no choice in the matter; he is kind because his kindness is compulsive.²² רחמנות describes kindness as a trait of personality. רחמנות, then, signifies utter sensitivity to pain, and describes beautifully the specific, unique relationship of a Jew to suffering.

21. Kuzari II:36-41.

22. Cf. the comment in the Vilna Gaon's Prayerbook, סדור אשי ישראל, p. 442, citing Rashi *Baba Metzia* 33a, ד"ה רובץ ולא רבץ.

The Community

4

The prayerful-charity community rises to a higher sense of communion in the teaching community, where teacher and disciple are fully united. The teaching community is centered around an adult, the teacher, and a bunch of young vivacious children, with whom he communicates and communes. He is as young as they are; and they are as old as he is.

יש לנו אב זקן וילד זקונים קטן.

"We have an old father and a young child,"²³ the brothers told Joseph in Egypt.

The central figure in Jewish history has been not the king, nor the field marshal, nor the political leader, but the very old teacher surrounded by very young children.

והיה כי יאמרו אליכם בניכם מה זאת, והגדת לבנך. ושננתם לבנך.

And when your children say to you, 'What is this?' . . . you shall tell your children . . . and repeat to your children.²⁴

What does the teacher do? He tells a story. What is the nature of the story that has been told and retold hundreds of times through the generations? We tell the children the story of laws which form the foundation of Jewish morality; we tell them the story of honesty and sincerity, love and sympathy; this story is meant to teach the child not to steal, not to lie, not to be vindictive. We also try to tell the child the story of statutes whose meaning we do not fully grasp. We tell him the story of *הקיים* laws whose rationale is beyond our grasp, of man's surrender to his Maker, the story of the suspension of human judgment in deference to a higher will.

We also tell the child the story of people who met God and joined Him in a covenant, who engaged the Almighty in a dialogue; we tell the child the story of our past; we help the child develop a historical memory; we train the child not to forget past events. We tell the child the story of our confrontation with

23. Genesis 44:20.

24. Exodus 12:26; 13:8; Deuteronomy 6:7.

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God in the desert; we urge the child not to forget our liberation from bondage and our encounter with Amalek, the destructive Satan. We teach the child to be loyal to those memories, to a land, to a sanctuary, etc.

We not only tell stories describing events; we tell stories precipitating the re-experiences of events which transpired millennia ago. To tell a story is to relive the event. We still sit on the floor and mourn the destruction of the sanctuary, an event which took place 1,900 years ago. We still celebrate the Exodus, an event which lies at the dawn of our history. Our stories are concerned, not only with the past, but with the future, as well. We tell our children the story of patient waiting for the great realization of the promise, no matter how slow the realization is in coming.

In short, it is an exciting story that we tell them. It is the story of a teaching community which cuts across the ages, encompassing people who lived millennia ago, who made their contribution to the *Knesset Israel*, and have left the stage. We also tell them the story of people who, at some point in the distant future, will enter the historical stage. Our story unites countless generations; present, past, and future merge into one great experience.

Contrary to the popular medieval adage,²⁵ our story tells of a glorious past that is still real, because it has not vanished, a future which is already here, and a creative present replete with opportunity and challenge. It is a privilege and a pleasure to belong to such a prayerful, charitable, teaching community, which feels the breath of eternity.

25. עבר אין, ועתיד עדין, והיה כהרף עין, ואם כן דאנה מנין?
(quoted in E. Ben Yehuda's Dictionary *s.v.* עבר, Vol. 9, pp. 4291-2.) It has been translated into English as follows:

The past already gone by;
The future not yet nigh;
The present must fly
Like the blink of an eye:
So wonder: worry? why?!