YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RAV SOLOVEITCHIK

by Rav Ronnie Ziegler

LECTURE #18a: "The Lonely Man of Faith" (Continuation)

Part 4 - A Perpetual Dialectic

In Chapter 8 of "The Lonely Man of Faith," the two parallel tracks we have been examining finally intersect.

"...Adam the first, majestic man of dominion and success, and Adam the second, the lonely man of faith, obedience and defeat, are not two different people locked in an external confrontation ... but one person who is involved in self-confrontation. ...In every one of us abide two personae - the creative majestic Adam the first, and the submissive, humble Adam the second." (pp.84-85)

Thus, according to Rav Soloveitchik, each of us is fated to live in a perpetual dialectic, constantly oscillating between two modes of existence and between two types of community. This fact has several important ramifications which we shall now examine.

GOD DESIRES BOTH ADAMS

"God created two Adams and sanctioned both. Rejection of either aspect of humanity would be tantamount to an act of disapproval of the divine scheme of creation which was approved by God as being very good." (p.85)

This is a radical message for a religious thinker. Clearly, any person animated by faith will proclaim to others that God calls upon them to live out the values of Adam II, covenantal man. But here Rav Soloveitchik reciprocally calls upon people of faith not to forsake the goals of Adam I, majestic man! The Rav grants powerful affirmation to this-worldly existence, reminding us that just as God wants us to strive for personal and communal sanctity, He also bids us to build and to create within the world.

In other words, contrary to the popular understanding, there is religious value not only to the actions of Adam II but to those of Adam I as well. He fulfills the divine mandate of "Fill the earth and subdue it" and displays his tzelem Elokim (divine image) through his creative involvement in the world of human affairs. Thus, he occupies a central position within the divinely-willed scheme of events.

Rav Soloveitchik's approach silences the Enlightenment critique of religion (still voiced in our day), which portrays religion as the enemy of human progress and cultural development. According to these critics, religion produces at best a quietistic and passive personality who has no interest in engaging the world around him. The Rav, in an about-face from this position, states that not only are science, technology and culture not inherently antithetical and challenging to religion, but they are in fact desired by God and therefore integrated into the broader religious worldview!

Furthermore, the Rav asserts what amounts to the independent value of man's creative cultural endeavor. Of course, he believes that these efforts must ultimately be within the bounds of Halakha. But once this is assured, their value is not dependent on the service they render to that which is religious in the narrow sense. The attainment of dignity is a value in its own right. For example, we do not have to say that it is good that man lofts satellites into orbit because now we can broadcast shiurim by one or another rabbi around the globe. Rather, we value the human conquest of space because it is a breathtaking expression of man's majesty, his technical prowess and his creative spirit.

"Let us not forget that the majestic community is willed by God as much as the covenantal faith community. He wants man to engage in the pursuit of majesty-dignity as well as redemptiveness." (p.81)

COMPLETE REDEMPTION IS UNATTAINABLE

The perpetual dialectic between two modes of existence has another, more tragic, consequence:

"The dialectical awareness, the steady oscillating between the majestic natural community and the covenantal faith community renders the act of complete redemption unrealizable." (p.80)

Had majestic man and covenantal man been two separate people, each abiding in his own community, all would have been well. Each one would have confronted a certain set of problems and would have been provided with the means to solve them. However, the fact that God bids man to adopt both modes of existence gives rise to insoluble difficulties, foremost among them being the problem of loneliness.

Adam I is unaware of his loneliness, while Adam II confronts this burdensome experience and is capable of redeeming himself from it (via his covenantal relationship with both God and man). However, the fact that man must oscillate between two ways of living and perceiving the world places him in a quandary. While living as Adam II, he becomes aware of his loneliness, but he is not afforded the opportunity to overcome it totally. The only way to defeat loneliness is to immerse oneself fully in covenantal existence, and God denies man this option by demanding that man participate in the majestic community as well.

"When man gives himself to the covenantal community the Halakha reminds him that he is also wanted and needed in another community, the cosmic-majestic, and when it comes across man when he is involved in the creative enterprise of the majestic community, it does not let him forget that he is a covenantal being who will never find self-fulfillment outside of the covenant and that God awaits his return to the covenantal community." (pp.82-83)

This results in what we referred to earlier (lecture #15) as the man of faith's ontological loneliness (thus designated because this type of loneliness is woven into the very fabric of the religious experience).

"Because of this onward movement from center to center, man does not feel at home in any community. He is commanded to move on before he strikes roots in either of these communities and so the ontological loneliness of the man of faith persists." (p.87)

CONTRADICTORY OR COMPLEMENTARY?

Throughout most of the book, Rav Soloveitchik portrays man's oscillation between majesty and redemption in dialectical terms. He depicts an unending tension between two conflicting modes of existence:

"[God] summoned man to retreat from peripheral, hard-won positions of vantage and power to the center of the faith experience. He also commanded man to advance from the covenantal center to the cosmic periphery and recapture the positions he gave up a while ago." (p.81)

(Note that the Rav uses different metaphors to describe the relationship between majesty and covenant: in the above quote from p.81, he refers to them as periphery and center, respectively, while in the preceding quote from p.87, he terms them two alternating centers.)

However, in a brief but highly significant passage (pp.82-84) which I would like to examine closely, the Rav paints a different picture.

"[M]any a time I have the distinct impression that the Halakha considered the steady oscillating of the man of faith between majesty and covenant not as a dialectical but rather as a complementary movement... [T]he task of covenantal man is to be engaged not in dialectical surging forward and retreating, but in uniting the two communities into one community where man is both the creative free agent and the obedient servant of God." (pp.83-84)

Before addressing the contradiction between the previous two passages, let us first examine the meaning of the latter one.

UNITING THE NATURAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

The ability to view man's oscillation between majesty and covenant as a complementary movement is based upon Rav Soloveitchik's assertion that

"[T]he Halakha has a monistic approach to reality and has unreservedly rejected any kind of dualism. The Halakha believes that there is only one world - not divisible into secular and hallowed sectors - which can either plunge into ugliness and hatefulness, or be roused to meaningful, redeeming activity, gathering up all latent powers into a state of holiness." (p.84)

This statement should be understandable in light of our discussion in lecture #8 of the sanctification of physical life. Much of medieval philosophic and religious thought was permeated by dualism, which viewed the physical and the spiritual to be warring opposites, only one of which could prevail. The task of religion or of philosophy, according to this approach, was to ensure the victory of the spiritual over the natural by freeing man from the shackles of physicality as much as possible (via asceticism, contemplation and solitude). Dualists despaired of this-worldly existence. Believing that one should strive to become purely spirit, since physicality is the source of evil and hence irredeemable, they felt that one could come close to God only by abjuring the material world.

Rav Soloveitchik rejects this approach completely. According to him, Halakha denies the dualist contention that the physical and the spiritual are mutually exclusive, and therefore Halakha opposes the dualist conclusion that one must flee the physical if he wishes to attain spirituality.

"The Halakha has never despaired of man, either as a natural being integrated into his physical environment, or as a spiritual personality confronting God." ("Catharsis," p.38)

Rather, Halakha believes that "God saw everything that He had created, and, behold, it was very good" (Bereishit 1:31). Man must not attempt to escape to ethereal realms, contemptuously abandoning the world, but rather must infuse his this-worldly existence with sanctity. The task of the Halakha is precisely to ensure that man lives this kind of life:

"Notwithstanding the huge disparity between [the majestic and covenantal] communities which expresses itself in the typological oppositions and conflicts described previously, the Halakha sees in the ethico-moral norm [i.e. the mitzvot] a uniting force. The norm which originates in the covenantal community addresses itself almost exclusively to the majestic community where its realization takes place. To use a metaphor, I would say that the norm in the opinion of the Halakha is the tentacle by which the covenant, like the ivy, attaches itself and spreads over the world of majesty." (p.84)

In other words, mitzvot emanate from the covenantal realm, where man communes with God, but they can be fulfilled only by man who participates in the majestic realm: "When you build a new home... When you cut down your harvest..." etc. By addressing every aspect of man's mundane existence, Halakha expresses its desire that man should 1) take part in the earthly endeavor, and 2) sanctify that endeavor. What Rav Soloveitchik is describing here is exactly the process of catharsis, which we have examined at length in previous lectures (e.g. #6-9 and #14; see Reference #3 below for a reminder about the meaning of catharsis). Catharsis results in the sanctification of natural man; seen differently, the cathartic dialectic assures that covenantal man does not become otherworldly and that majestic man does not become demonically unrestrained and egocentric. This leads us to the question of the central goal of Halakha.

(Continued in lecture #18b.)