

REDEMPTION, PRAYER, TALMUD TORAH*

Redemption is a fundamental category in Judaic historical thinking and experiencing. Our history was initiated by a Divine act of redemption and, we are confident, will reach its finale in a Divine act of *ultimate* redemption.

1

What is redemption?

Redemption involves a movement by an individual or a community from the periphery of history to its center; or, to employ a term from physics, redemption is a centripetal movement. To be on the periphery means to be a non-history-making entity, while movement toward the center renders the same entity history-making and history-conscious. Naturally the question arises: What is meant by a history-making people or community? A history-making people is one that leads a speaking, story-telling, communing free existence, while a non-history-making, non-history-involved group leads a non-communing and therefore a silent, unfree existence.

2

Like redemption, prayer too is a basic experiential category in Judaism. We have appeared, within the historical arena, as a prayerful nation. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Solomon all prayed. Through prayer they achieved the covenant with God, and through prayer, we expect eventually to realize that covenant.

The Halacha has viewed prayer and redemption as two inseparable ideas. The Halacha requires that the Silent Prayer (עמידה) be preceded, without a break, by the benediction of גאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל, which proclaims God as the Redeemer of Israel.¹

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1. אָמַר ר' יוֹחָנָן אֵיזְהוּ בֶן הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא זֶה הַסּוֹמֵךְ גְּאוּלָּה לְתַפְסָּלָה
R. Yohanan said: "Who has a share in the World to Come? He who adjoins the blessing of גְּאוּלָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל to the Silent Prayer." (*Brakhot* 4b)

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What motivated the Halacha to link prayer with redemption? Apparently our Sages considered prayer and redemption to be structurally identical. Of what does this identity consist? In order to answer this question, it would be profitable to subject both ideas to precise phenomenological analysis.

3

Redemption, we have stated, is identical with communing, or with the revelation of the word, i.e. the emergence of speech. When a people leaves a mute world and enters a world of sound, speech and song, it becomes a redeemed people, a free people. In other words, a mute life is identical with bondage; a speech-endowed life is a free life.

The slave lives in silence,² if such a meaningless existence may be called life. He has no message to deliver. In contrast with the slave, the free man bears a message, has a good deal to tell, and is eager to convey his life story to anyone who cares to listen. No wonder the Torah has, four times, emphasized the duty of the father — a liberated slave — to tell his children, born into freedom, the story of his liberation.³ Free man who is eager to tell his story, is always surrounded by an audience willing to listen to his story. The slave has neither a story nor a curious audience. Moreover, he is not merely a speechless being, but a mute being, devoid not only of the word, but of the meaningful sound as well.

4

What is responsible for the dumbness of the slave? The lack of a basic experience, namely that of suffering or distress, which is perhaps the most central aspect of the human I-awareness.

Suffering is not pain. Though colloquially the two words are used as synonyms, they signify two different experiences. Pain

2. The use of the terms *speech* and *word* should not be understood in the colloquial physical sense, but in the metaphysical, phenomenological sense. When I say the slave is speechless, I mean to convey the idea that he is deprived of the meaningfulness of speech.

3. Exodus 12:26-27; 13:8, 14-15; Deuteronomy 6:20-25.

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is a natural sensation, a physiological reaction of the organism to any kind of abnormality or tissue pathology. It is, as Aristotle already knew, a built-in mechanical signal that warns man whenever his physical existence is menaced from within; it is an integral part of the body's security system. Pain, as instinctual reaction, is immediate and non-reflective. As such, it is not restricted to humans: the beast is also exposed to and acquainted with pain.

Suffering or distress, in contradistinction to pain, is not a sensation but an experience, a spiritual reality known only to humans (the animal does not suffer). This spiritual reality is encountered by man whenever he stands to lose either his sense of existential security (as in the case of an incurable disease) or his existential dignity (as in the case of public humiliation). Whenever a merciless reality clashes with the human existential awareness, man *suffers* and finds himself in distress.

5

The animal is exposed to pain; so is the slave. When the slave meets with pain he reacts like the animal, uttering a sharp, shrill sound. However, the howl of the beast, like the shriek of the slave, lasts a moment in the darkness and hush of the night. In a split second all is silent again. There is no aftermath to the pain-sensation of the animal or the slave; there follows no complaint, no request, no protest, no question of why and what. The slave does not know suffering, lacking, as he does, the very existential need-awareness which generates suffering. He is never in distress because he has no *human* needs. The needs of a slave are, like his shriek, not human: the etiology of his needs is exclusively biological. The absence of suffering mitigates the sharpness of pain. Former inmates of concentration camps have told me that they had, with the passage of time, become inured to any pain or torture, as if they had been totally anesthetized. They were dumb beings. They not only stopped speaking, but ceased to emit coherent sounds, as well.

The Zohar tells us:

תא חזי כתיב הן בני ישראל לא שמעו אלי ואיך ישמעני פרעה ואני ערל שפתים. מאי ואני ערל שפתים והא בקדמיתא כתיב לא איש דברים אנכי וגו' כי כבוד פה וכבוד לשון אנכי וקב"ה הוה אותיב ליה מי שם פה לאדם וגו' והוא אמר ואנכי אהיה עם פיך מ"ד דלא הוה הן והשתא אמר ואני ערל שפתים אי הכי אן הוא מלה דאכטח ליה קב"ה בקדמיתא אלא רזא איהו משה קלא ודבור דאיהו מלה דיליה הוה בגלותא והוה איהו אשים לפרשא מלין ובגין דא אמר ואיך ישמעני פרעה בעוד דמילה דילי איהי בגלותא דיליה דהא לית לי מלה הא אנא גלא מלה גרע דאיהי בגלותא ועל דא שתף קב"ה לאהרן בהדיה תא חזי כל זמנא דדבור הוה בגלותא קלא אסתלק מניה ומלה הוה אשים קול כד אתא משה אתא קול ומשה הוה קול בלא מלה בגין דהוה בגלותא וכל זמנא דדבור הוה בגלותא משה אזיל קלא בלא דבור והכי אזיל עד דקריבו לטורא דסיני ואתייבת אורייתא וכהוהא זמנא אתחבר קלא בדבור וכדין מלה מלול הה"ד וידבר אלקים את כל הדברים האלה וכדין משה אשתכח שלים במילה כדקא יאות קול ודבור כחדא בשלימו ועל דא משה אתרעים דמלה גרע מניה בר ההוא זמנא דמלילת לאתרעמא עלוי בזמנא דכתיב ומאז באתי אל פרעה לדבר בשמך מיד וידבר אלקים אל משה.

And Moses spake before the Lord, saying: "Behold, the children of Israel have not harkened unto me, how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?" How did Moses dare say this? Had not the Holy One already promised him, when he said that he was not eloquent, that He "will be with his mouth" (Exodus 4, 10-12)? Or did the Holy One not keep His promise? However, there is here an inner meaning. Moses was then in the grade of "Voice," and the grade of "Utterance" was then in exile. Hence he said, "How shall Pharaoh hear me, seeing that my 'utterance' is in bondage to him, I being only 'voice,' and lacking 'utterance.'" Therefore God joined with him Aaron, who was "utterance" without "voice." When Moses came, the Voice appeared, but it was "a voice without speech." This lasted until Israel approached Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Then the Voice was united with the Utterance, and the word was spoken, as it says, "and the Lord *spake* all these words" (Exodus 20, 1). Then Moses was in full possession of the Word, Voice and Word being united. That was the cause of Moses' complaint (v. 23), that he lacked the word save at the time when it broke forth in complaint and "God spake to Moses."⁴

4. Zohar, *Ra'ya Mehemana* וארא.

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The text divides the process of redemption in three stages. First it identifies bondage with the absence of both word and meaningful sound, with total silence. Then redemption begins with finding sound while the word is still absent. Finally, with the finding of both sound and word, redemption attains its full realization.

Before Moses came there was not even a single sound. No complaint was lodged, no sigh, no cry uttered. Only an agonizing un-human shriek would penetrate the weird silence of the night. The slaves were gloomy, voiceless and mute. The women did not cry when their infants were snatched from their arms; the men kept quiet when they were mercilessly tortured by the slave drivers. Torture was taken for granted. They thought this was the way it had to be. The pain did not precipitate suffering. They were unaware of any need.

When Moses came, the sound, or the voice, came into being *בי אתא משה אתא קול*. Moses, by defending the helpless Jew, restored sensitivity to the dull slaves. Suddenly they realized that all that pain, anguish, humiliation and cruelty, all the greed and intolerance of man vis-à-vis his fellow man is evil. This realization brought in its wake not only sharp pain but a sense of suffering as well. With suffering came loud protest, the cry, the unuttered question, the wordless demand for justice and retribution. In short, the dead silence of non-existence was gone; the voice of human existence was now heard.

ויהי בימים הרבים ההם יומת מלך מצרים ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבדה
ויזעקו ותעל שועתם על האלים מן העבדה.

And it came to pass in the course of the many days that the king of Egypt died and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage and they cried and their cry came up unto God . . .⁵

Why hadn't they cried before Moses acted? Why were they silent during the many years of slavery that preceded Moses' appearance? They had lacked the need-awareness, and experienced no need, whether for freedom, for dignity, or for painless existence. They did not rebel against reality; they lacked the tension that engenders suffering and distress. The voice was restored to them

⁵. Exodus 2:23.

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at the very instant they discovered, emotionally, their need-awareness and became sensitive to pain in a human fashion. Moses' protest precipitated this change.

7

Even Moses, the Zohar emphasizes, who helped the people move from the silent periphery to the great center, did not acquire the word until he and the people reached Mount Sinai. Although Moses had the existential *awareness* of need, he had not as yet discovered the *logos* of need which would, in turn, have endowed him with the charisma of speech. When the Almighty advised him that he had been chosen to be the redeemer of the people, Moses argued and was reluctant to accept the mission because the word was not, as yet, given to him; therefore, he was ערל שפתים (slow of speech).⁶ Surely Moses had protested; he had killed the tyrant, rebuked the wicked Jew, etc. What he lacked was the logical understanding of the teleology of the גלות - experience, as well as the firm faith in the destiny of the slave-community. He did not believe that those slaves would ever be liberated. Hence, while Moses, and with him the whole community, had already broken out of their silence, they had yet to find the word. Only at Sinai was the *logos*, both as word and as knowledge, revealed to him. He finally understood the covenantal past, beheld the vision of a great future whose realization was dependent upon him.

II

1

This story is indicative, not only of the political slave of antiquity, but of slavery today, as well. Slavery is not only a juridic-economic institution of the past; it is also a way of life which is still a reality. The unfree man differs, existentially, from the free man: one may, existentially, be a slave in the midst of political and economic freedoms. To use Biblical term-

⁶ *Ibid.* 6:12.

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inology, slavery constitutes a תהו ובהו existence.

What does the existential slave look like? How does existential *tohu va-vohu* express itself in daily life? There are two basic characteristics of which we may avail ourselves in identifying the slavish תהו ובהו existence in every era: 1) Anonymity; 2) Ignorance.

How does the anonymity of man express itself? In the tragic reality of being forgotten. The history of mankind is the history of countless millions of forgotten, nameless people, who have vanished into nothingness, along with their gravemarks (if any). Men come and go, like Peretz's Bontsche Schweig,⁷ without leaving a trace or making a mark. The anonymity which envelops man is part of the curse God imposed upon Adam. Man experiences his anonymity as a great loneliness.

If this is true of man in the past, it is certainly true of modern man. Urban life has contributed greatly to the anonymity and loneliness-experience of the individual. When Kohelet said:

כי בחשך בא ובחשך ילך ובחשך שמו יכסה

"For he comes in darkness and departs in darkness and his name is covered in darkness."⁸ — he referred not only to the unknown timid soul, to the poor and meek, but to everybody: the great ruler, the daring warrior, the captain of industry and the famous orator. All of these people live in anonymity and darkness and are existentially peripheral, mute beings. All of us, no matter how popular, are people whose destiny consists in being forgotten.

2

Man is not only anonymous, but ignorant as well. Let me qualify: when I say that man is ignorant, I do not refer to his

7. This is how Bontche Schweig is described: "Bontche Schweig's death made no impression whatsoever. No one knew who Bontche was. Bontche lived mutely and died quietly. Like a silent shadow did he pass through our world. At Bontche's circumcision no toasts were raised, no glasses were clinked. At his Bar Mitzvah no rousing speech was delivered. He lived in anonymity like a grey minute grain of sand on the beach of a stormy sea, among millions of identical sand particles . . . no one noticed that one of the particles was picked up by the storm and carried across the sea."

8. Ecclesiastes 6:4.

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scientific achievements; in this area modern man is clever and ingenious. What man fails to comprehend is not the world around him, but the world within him, particularly his destiny, and the needs of which he is supposed to have a clear awareness.

Many would say that to accuse modern man of being unaware of his needs is absurd. The reverse, they would maintain, is true. Modern man is aware of many needs; in fact, there are too many needs which claim his attention. An entire technology is bent upon generating more and more needs in order to give man the opportunity to derive pleasure through the gratification of artificially-fabricated needs.

Though this assertion is true, it does not contradict my previous statement that contemporary man is unaware of his needs. Man is surely aware of many needs, but the needs he is aware of are not always his own. At the very root of this failure to recognize one's truly worthwhile needs lies man's ability to misunderstand and misidentify himself, i.e. to lose himself. Quite often man loses himself by identifying himself with the wrong image. Because of this misidentification, man adopts the wrong table of needs which he feels he must gratify. Man responds quickly to the pressure of certain needs, not knowing *whose* needs he is out to gratify. At this juncture, sin is born. What is the cause of sin, if not the diabolical habit of man to be mistaken about his own self? Let me add that man fails to recognize himself because he is man. As man, he was cursed by the Almighty, condemned to misuse his freedom and to lose his own self. In other words, adoption of a wrong table of needs is a part of the human tragic destiny.

The confusion about one's true needs is typical of man as man, without distinction of life-experience. Does the young man understand his basic needs? If he did, we would have no problem of crime, drugs and permissiveness in general. Is the middle-aged man oriented toward his real needs; does he know what is relevant and what is irrelevant to him? If he did, there would be fewer deaths from heart disease. Does the old man know what should and what should not matter to him? Let me speak for myself: I know that I am perplexed that my fears are irrational, incoherent. At times I am given over to panic; I am afraid of

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death. At other times I am horrified by the thought of becoming, God forbid, incapacitated during my lifetime. One of my greatest fears is related to the observance of the Day of Atonement: I am fearful that I might be compelled, because of weakness or sickness, to desecrate this holiest of all days.

I don't know what to fear, what not to fear; I am utterly confused and ignorant. Modern man is, indeed, existentially a slave, because he is ignorant and fails to identify his own needs.

3

This principle, that a man often perceives as his own the needs of some other self, finds expression in several areas of Halacha. The central position which *תשובה* occupies in our system of thought is based upon our belief that man is free to establish himself or to determine his own identity, in either a positive or a negative manner. While, in sin, man mis-identifies and alienates himself from himself, in the case of *תשובה* he reverses the process of mis-identification: he discovers himself, and "returns" to his true self.

Two Halachic legal concepts, *התרת נדרים* (the absolution of vows and oaths) and *אסמכתא* (collateral security with condition of forfeiture beyond the amount secured), rest upon the doctrine of man as self-fooling being. In the case of *אסמכתא*, the law declares certain agreements null and void, if they were engendered in a mood of overconfidence on the part of one of the participants. We accept that opinion in Halacha which maintains that a contract precipitated by such optimistic anticipation is not always valid,⁹ although the contract was signed voluntarily, without coercion. The individual who made the promise is regarded as having been guided by the wrong table of needs, pressed upon him by the "phoney I." Consequently, the agreement is invalid: it was signed, in effect, by the wrong person.

The same principle underlies the concept of *התרת נדרים*. What is *התרת נדרים*? One takes a vow or an oath, to engage in or refrain from an action. Later he discovers the difficulties connected with the execution of his vow or oath. He appears before three people, and they dissolve the vow or the

9. *Baba Batra* 168a.