

CONFRONTATION

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rosh Yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, is the acknowledged intellectual leader of and spokesman for halakhic Judaism. That more of his original scholarly insights and creative philosophical ideas be made available in print has been the long-cherished hope of the many who seek his guidance on the baffling problems of our age. The Editors of this journal are deeply grateful to the revered mentor of the Rabbinical Council for having chosen TRADITION for the publication of his first major essay in English. Widely acclaimed as "*The Rav*," Dr. Soloveitchik, in his capacity as Chairman of the Halakhah Commission, is also formally recognized by the Rabbinical Council as its authority in all halakhic matters. Because of Rabbi Soloveitchik's pre-eminent position, his approach to one of the most delicate and sensitive issues that faces world Jewry is bound to have far-reaching repercussions on future developments. Portions of this paper, which was specifically prepared for TRADITION, were read by Rabbi Soloveitchik at the 1964 Mid-Winter Conference of the Rabbinical Council. Its presentation led to the formulation of a Rabbinical Council policy statement dealing with the major issues Rabbi Soloveitchik had discussed. The text of this statement is therefore appended to this essay.

I

1.

The Biblical account of the creation of man portrays him at three progressive levels.

At the first level, he appears as a simple natural being. He is neither cognizant of his unique station in the cosmos nor burdened by the awareness of his paradoxical capability of being concur-

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rently free and obedient, creative to the point of self-transcendence and submissive in a manner bordering on self-effacement. At this stage, natural man is irresponsive to the pressure of both the imperative from without and the "ought" from within — the inner call of his humanity surging *de profundis* — ממעמקים. For the norm either from within or from without addresses itself only to man who is sensitive to his own incongruity and tragic dilemma. The illusory happy-mindedness of natural man stands between him and the norm. Natural man, unaware of the element of tension prevailing between the human being and the environment of which he is an integral part, has no need to live a normative life and to find redemption in surrender to a higher moral will. His existence is unbounded, merging harmoniously with the general order of things and events. He is united with nature, moving straightforwardly, with the beast and the fowl of the field, along an unbroken line of mechanical life-activities, never turning around, never glancing backwards, leading an existence which is neither fraught with contradiction nor perplexed by paradoxes, nor marred by fright.

וכל שיח השדה טרם יהיה בארץ וכל עשב השדה טרם יצמח . . . ואדם אין לעבד את האדמה. ואד יעלה מן הארץ והשקה את כל פני האדמה. וייצר ה' א' את האדם עפר מן האדמה ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים ויהי האדם לנפש חיה.

"And every plant of the field was not yet in the earth and every herb of the field had not yet grown, . . . and there was no man to till the ground. But there went up a mist from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. And the Lord God formed the man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:5-7)¹

Man who was created out of the dust of the ground, enveloped in a mist rising from the jungle, determined by biological immediacy and mechanical necessity, knows of no responsibility, no opposition, no fear, and no dichotomy, and hence he is free from carrying the load of humanity.

1. While the Biblical phrase נפש חיה refers to natural man, Onkelos' רוח ממללא is related to a typologically more advanced stage.

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In a word, this man is a non-confronted being. He is neither conscious of his assignment vis-a-vis something which is outside of himself nor is he aware of his existential otherness as a being summoned by his Maker to rise to tragic greatness.

2.

When I refer to man at the level of naturalness, I have in mind not the *Urmensch* of bygone times but modern man. I am speaking not in anthropological but typological categories. For non-confronted man is to be found not only in the cave or the jungle but also in the seats of learning and the halls of philosophers and artists. Non-confrontation is not necessarily restricted to a primitive existence but applies to human existence at all times, no matter how cultured and sophisticated. The *hêdoné*-oriented, egocentric person, the beauty-worshipper, committed to the goods of sense and craving exclusively for boundless aesthetic experience, the voluptuary, inventing needs in order to give himself the opportunity of continual gratification, the sybarite, constantly discovering new areas where pleasure is pursued and happiness found and lost, leads a non-confronted existence. At this stage, the intellectual gesture is not the ultimate goal but a means to another end — the attainment of unlimited aesthetic experience. Hence, non-confronted man is prevented from finding himself and bounding his existence as distinct and singular. He fails to realize his great capacity for winning freedom from an unalterable natural order and offering this very freedom as the great sacrifice to God, who wills man to be free in order that he may commit himself unreservedly and forfeit his freedom.

Beauty, uncouth and unrefined but irresistible, seducing man and contributing to his downfall, emerges in the Biblical arena for the first time — according to the Midrash quoted by Nachmanides (Genesis 4:22) — in the person of Naamah (the name signifies pleasantness), the sister of Tubal-Cain.

ומדרש אחר לרבותינו שהיא האשה היפה היא מאד שממנה טעו בני האלהים והיא הנרמזת בפסוק ויראו בני האלהים את בנות האדם.

“Our sages offered another Midrashic interpretation, that Naamah was the fairest of all women, who seduced the sons of the

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mighty, and it is she who is referred to in the verse: 'and the sons of the mighty saw the daughters of man that they were fair.' Her seductive charms captivated the sons of the mighty and led to their appalling disregard for the central divine norm enjoining man from reaching out for the fascinating and beautiful that does not belong to him. The sons of the mighty yielded to the hedonic urge and were unable to discipline their actions. They were a non-confronted, non-normative group. They worshipped beauty and succumbed to its overwhelming impact.

Naamah, the incarnation of unhallowed and unsublimated beauty, is, for the Midrash, not so much an individual as an idea, not only a real person but a symbol of unredeemed beauty. As such, she appears in the Biblical drama in many disguises. At times her name is Delilah, seducing Samson; at other times she is called Tamar, corrupting a prince. She is cast in the role of a princess or queen, inflicting untold harm upon a holy nation and kingdom of priests whose king, the wisest of all men, abandoned his wisdom when he encountered overpowering beauty. The Book of Wisdom (Proverbs) portrays her as the anonymous woman with an "impudent face" who "lieth in wait at every corner" and the Aggadah — also cited here by Nachmanides — as the beautiful queen of the demons tempting man and making him restless.

No less than their seductress, the sons of the mighty also represent a universal type. Non-confronted man — whether he be a primitive caveman, the king depicted in *Ecclesiastes*, or a modern counterpart — is dominated by two characteristics: he can deny himself nothing, and he is aware of neither the indomitable opposition he is bound to meet in the form of a restrictive outside, nor of the absurdity implied in man's faith that the beautiful is a source of pleasure rather than one of frustration and disillusionment. The aesthete of today, like the aesthete of old, is prisoner of — no matter what her name — beauty unethicized and unreclaimed from aboriginal immediacy. He enjoys a sense of oneness with the natural scheme of events and occurrences and his transient successful performance encourages him to strive for the absurd — an unopposed and uncontradicted hedonic *modus existentiae*.

ויטע ה' א' גן בעדן מקדם וישם שם את האדם אשר יצר. ויצמח ה' א'

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מן האדמה כל עץ נחמד למראה וטוב למאכל ועץ החיים בתוך הגן ועץ הדעת טוב ורע.

“And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is desirable to the sight and good for food; the tree of life in the midst of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” (Genesis 2:8-9)²

Man depicted in these verses is hedonically-minded and pleasure-seeking, having at his disposal a multitude of possibilities of sense-gratification. Before him stretches a vast garden with an almost endless variety of trees desirable and good, tempting, fascinating, and exciting the boundless fantasy with their glamorous colors.

3.

At the second level, natural man, moving straightforwards, comes suddenly to a stop, turns around, and casts, as an outsider, a contemplative gaze upon his environment. Even the most abandoned voluptuary becomes disillusioned like the king of Ecclesiastes and finds himself encountering something wholly other than his own self, an outside that defies and challenges him. At this very moment, the separation of man from cosmic immediacy, from the uniformity and simplicity which he had shared with nature, takes place. He discovers an awesome and mysterious domain of things and events which is independent of and disobedient to him, an objective order limiting the exercise of his power and offering opposition to him. In the wake of this discovery, he discovers himself. Once self-discovery is accomplished, and a new I-awareness of an existence which is limited and opposed by a non-I outside emerges, something new is born — namely, the divine norm. “ויצו ה' א' על האדם” — “And the Lord God commanded the man.” With the birth of the norm, man becomes aware of his singularly human existence which expresses itself

2. Maimonides translated טוב ורע into aesthetic terms as “pleasing and displeasing”. Paradisical man, violating the divine commandment by eating from the tree of knowledge, suspended the ethical and replaced it with the aesthetic experience (*Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 2).

in the dichotomous experience of being unfree, restricted, imperfect and unredeemed, and, at the same time, being potentially powerful, great, and exalted, uniquely endowed, capable of rising far above his environment in response to the divine moral challenge. Man attains his unique identity when, after having been enlightened by God that he is not only a committed but also a free person, endowed with power to implement his commitment, he grasps the incommensurability of what he is and what he is destined to be, of the *יהי* and *יהי*.

God, in answer to Moses' inquiry, gave his name as *אֱהִי אֲשֶׁר אֱהִי* — I am what I am. God is free from the contradiction between potentiality and actuality, ideal and reality. He is pure actuality, existence par excellence.³ Man, however, is unable to state of himself *אֱהִי אֲשֶׁר אֱהִי* since his real existence always falls short of the ideal which his Maker set up for him as the great objective. This tragic schism reflects, in a paradoxical fashion, human distinctiveness and grandeur.

Simultaneously with man's realization of his inner incongruity and complete alienation from his environment, the human tragic destiny begins to unfold. Man, in his encounter with an objective world and in his assumption of the role of a subject who asks questions about something hitherto simple, forfeits his sense of serenity and peace. He is no longer happy, he begins to examine his station in this world and he finds himself suddenly assailed by perplexity and fear, and especially loneliness. *וַיֹּאמֶר ה' א' לֹא טוֹב הָיְוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ* "And the Lord God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone.'" The I-experience is a passionate one and real man is born amid the pains of confrontation with an "angry" environment of which he had previously been an integral part.

Confronted man is called upon to choose either of two alternatives:

1) To play an active role as a subject-knower, utilizing his great endowment, the intellect, and trying to gain supremacy over the objective order. However, this performance is fraught with difficulty because knowledge is gained only through conflict and the

3. See *Guide of the Perplexed*. I, 63.

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intellectual performance is an act of conquest.⁴ The order of things and events, in spite of its intrinsic knowability and rationality, does not always respond to human inquiry and quite often rejects all pleas for a cooperative relationship. The subject-knower must contest a knowable object, subdue it and make it yield its cognitive contents.⁵

2) Man may despair, succumb to the overpowering pressure of the objective outside and end in mute resignation, failing to discharge his duty as an intellectual being, and thus dissolving an intelligent existence into an absurd nightmare.

Of course, the Torah commanded man to choose the first alternative, to exercise his authority as an intelligent being whose task consists in engaging the objective order in a cognitive contest. We have always rejected the nirvana of inaction because the flight from confrontation is an admission of the bankruptcy of man. When man became alienated from nature and found himself alone, confronted by everything outside of him, God brought the "animal of the field and every fowl of the heaven unto the man to see what he would call it . . . and the man gave name to all the beasts and the fowl of the heaven and to every animal of the field."

4. The Latin *objectus* derived from *obicere*, to oppose, the German *Gegenstand*, denoting something standing opposite, the Hebrew תַּפְּז having the connotation of something intensely desired but not always attainable, are quite indicative of the element of tension which is interwoven into the logical subject-knower knowable-object relationship.

5. The element of tension in the subject-object relationship is a result not of sin but of the incongruity of "attitudes" on the part of the confronters. The attitude of man is one of dominion while the "attitude" on the part of the objective order is one of irresponsiveness. The knowable object refuses to surrender to the subject-knower. The result of man's sin was not the emergence of tension and resistance — since this state of affairs prevailed even before man's expulsion from Paradise — but the change from tension to frustration, from a creative, successful performance to defeat. In imposing this metaphysical curse upon man, God decreed that the latter, in spite of all his glorious achievements, be finally defeated by death and ignorance. Judaism does not believe that man will ever succeed in his bold attempt to unravel the *mysterium magnum* of being and to control nature as a whole. The human cognitive and technological gestures, Judaism maintains, have a chance to succeed only in small sectors of reality. וְקוֹץ וְדַרְדָּר תַּצְמִיחַ לָךְ — "Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee."

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ויצר ה' א' מן האדמה כל חית השדה ואת כל עוף השמים ויבא אל האדם לראות מה יקרא לו . . . ויקרא האדם שמות לכל הבהמה ולעוף השמים ולכל חית השדה.

Man no longer marched straightforwards with the brutes of the field and the forest. He made an about-face and confronted them as an intelligent being remote from and eager to examine and classify them. God encouraged him to engage in the most miraculous of all human gestures — the cognitive. Confronted Adam responded gladly because he already realized that he was no longer a part of nature but an outsider, a singular being, endowed with intelligence. In his new role, he became aware of his loneliness and isolation from the entire creation. וילאדם לא מצא עזר כנגדו. “And for the man [God] had not found a helpmeet opposite him.” As a lonely being, Adam discovered his great capacity for facing and dominating the non-human order.⁶

4.

The Book of Genesis, after describing the four rivers which flow from the Garden of Eden, offers us a new account of the placing of Adam in this garden.

ויקח ה' א' את האדם וינחהו בגן עדן לעבדה ולשמרה.
“And the Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to keep it.” This sentence in Genesis 2:15 is almost a verbatim repetition of Genesis 2:8, yet the accounts differ in two respects.

First, in the second account, the Bible uses a verb denoting action preceding the placing of man in the Garden of Eden — “And God *took* (ויקח) the man and placed him” — whereas in the previous account, the verb “he placed”, וישם, is not accompanied by any preliminary action on the part of the Almighty. The expression ויקח does not occur in the first account. Second, there is no mention in the previous account of any assignment given to man while this account does specify that man was charged with the task of cultivating and keeping the garden.

The reason for these variations lies in the fact that the two accounts are related to two different men. The first story, as we have

6. See Nachmanides, (Genesis 2:9).

