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 #6: "Majesty and Humility"

Part 2 of 2

COSMIC MAN AND ORIGIN-QUESTING MAN

Last week, in analyzing the introduction to "Majesty and Humility," we examined the concepts of imitatio Dei and dialectic. Now let us proceed to explore how these concepts receive expression in the rest of the essay. Along the way, we will discover some of Rav Soloveitchik's views on the nature of man and the role of Halakha in shaping it.

"The basic dialectic of man and his morality was beautifully captured in two midrashic homilies quoted by Rashi. In his comment to the verse, 'And God created man dust of the earth' (Bereishit 2:7), Rashi says: 'God gathered the dust [from which man was fashioned] from the entire earth - from its four corners. Another explanation: 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 [Temple's] altar.'" (p. 27)

On this basis, Rav Soloveitchik develops a dual typology of man; both types are inherent in human nature. The two midrashim regarding man's creation are thus complementary. I would first like to outline the characteristics of cosmic man and origin-questing man, and then analyze this description and its consequences.

I. ATTITUDE TO THE WORLD

Cosmic man is characterized by a sense of expansiveness, questing for vastness in all areas of endeavor. Intellectually, his curiosity is of universal dimensions; he believes nothing is beyond the grasp of his mind. Experientially, he wishes to be everywhere, to leave his familiar environs and experience the unknown. He is cosmic in his mobility and in his ability to adapt to new settings. "In short, cosmic man is mesmerized by the infinite numbers of opportunities with which his fantasy presents him. He forgets the simple tragic fact that he is finite and mortal" (p. 29).

On the other hand, man was also created from the dust of a single spot. As origin-questing man, he is rooted in a particular place and looks not outward toward the uncharted vastness, but rather inward to the source of his being. No matter how far he travels, he is attached to his origin and strives to return to it.

II. SEARCH FOR GOD

Both types of man search for God, even though they are not always aware of it. Cosmic man, in his feverish haste to leave home, quests for God within the vastness of the cosmic drama. "In times of joy and elation ... when man is drunk with life, when he feels that living is a dignified affair, then man beholds God in infinity" (p. 32). Origin-conscious man, in his yearning to return home, quests for God within the narrowness of finitude, within the roots of his very being. In times of crisis and suffering, he senses God not in His infinite vastness and distance, but rather in His nearness and relatedness. The Rav brings a personal example of this experience, from the time his wife lay on her deathbed:

"...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 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, ki-veyakhol (as it were), on my shoulder, I hugged His knees, ki-veyachol. He was with me in the narrow confines of a small room, taking up no space at all." (p. 33)

In short, cosmic man experiences majestas Dei (the majesty of God), and origin-questing man experiences humilitas Dei (the humility of God).

III. TYPES OF MORALITY

Perceiving God's majesty and kingship, cosmic man seeks to embody these qualities as well, therefore formulating an ethic of victory. He is a creator, a conqueror, who seeks to subjugate the forces of nature to his own needs. Beyond this, he attempts to establish "a true and just society, and an equitable economic order" (p. 34). Relying only on his intellect, he develops an orderly and rational system of ethics. His enterprise is ultimately based on the mystical doctrine that God purposely left creation incomplete so that man could join Him as co-creator.

However, when man experiences humilitas Dei, he formulates not an ethic of triumph but one of retreat, sacrifice and humility. He imitates the divine act of tzimtzum, of self-contraction by which the Infinite "makes room" for a finite world or is "contained" within the precincts of a temple or a supplicant's small room. In a similar fashion, humble man constrains himself and accepts his limitations (for example, by obeying divine laws which his intellect cannot fathom [chukkim]).

THE ETHIC OF VICTORY AND THE ETHIC OF DEFEAT

Asserting his sovereignty in every realm, cosmic man formulates a morality which is comprehensible to him and serves his needs. Historically, most forms of philosophical ethics have been geared toward man's social functioning, not towards his metaphysical aspirations (such as sanctity). The human goals pursued by these systems include the development of regulated societies and dignified gentlemen. Aristotle's ethics is a good example of this approach.

Some theorists formulated theories of natural law which assert that just as nature is orderly, so should man's life be. They failed to take into account that in nature there is also chaos, ugliness, and cruelty. John Cardinal Newman (19th century England) asserted: "I do not believe in God because I see order in nature; I see order in nature because I believe in God." Not everything in the world is comprehensible to man, nor is man's intellect adequate to serve as an exclusive guide to his actions.

The morality of cosmic man must be complemented by another morality not only because it unjustifiedly asserts the absolute hegemony of the human intellect, but because it also does not encompass all of man's existential situations. There must be an ethic which takes into account human failure and helplessness. When man experiences his own humility and vulnerability, he seeks God's nearness and support. In his total reliance on God, humble man willingly accepts God's authority to curtail and even defeat his own desires.

This dialectic of advance and recoil, of victory and defeat, is built into the structure of man's existence and constitutes the essence of halakhic living. On the one hand, God desires that man move forward and attain mastery over his surroundings. On the other hand, from time to time man must halt his headlong rush towards triumph and success, and be willing to retreat, to be defeated by a higher authority. "The movement of recoil redeems the forward-movement, and the readiness to accept defeat purges the uncontrollable lust for victory" (p. 37). In other words, left to itself, man's desire for victory can be merely an expression of his egocentric interests and self-aggrandizement. His forward-movement can be regarded as a response to divine mandate only if he is willing to curtail it when God so demands. In this way, not only is his retreat sanctified, but so is his advance.

The Rav expresses the idea thus:

"Man, in Judaism, was created for both victory and defeat - he is both king and saint. He must know how to fight for victory and also how to suffer defeat." (p. 36)

It is clear why victorious man is called "king" - kingship is expressed by ruling or conquest. But why does the Rav refer to defeated man as "saint"? The word saint derives from the Latin root "sanctus," or sanctity - the saint is a holy person. Why, according to the Rav, is holiness expressed in defeat? Rav Soloveitchik does not explain this here, but several (mutually acceptable) answers can be proposed. 1. The holy person negates his will before Go's. 2. The holy person makes room for the will of other people, not insisting on his own. 3. The classic understanding of "You shall be holy," quoted by Rashi (Vayikra 19:2), is "You shall be separated (perushim)," i.e. you should separate yourselves from sinful desires and from situations which are likely to arouse them. The upshot of all of these explanations is that the act of retreat is inherently endowed with holiness; the act of advance is not in itself holy, but can be imbued with this quality through the willingness to accept defeat.

It is precisely in those areas in which man most fervently desires success that he must be willing to withdraw, to suffer defeat at his own hands. This is true of sublime acts such as the Akeda (the binding of Yitzchak), and of more mundane acts such as the regulation of sexual passion by the halakhic laws of separation. Only by refraining when the Halakha so demands is the physical relationship between man and woman redeemed; it is purged of its "coarseness and animality" and becomes a sacred, divinely-mandated act. [The specific examples of defeat mentioned by the Rav here - particularly regarding sexual life and the intellectual gesture - are more fully treated in "Catharsis." We will therefore delay our discussion of them.]

In a very acute analysis, the Rav observes that modern society is marked by crisis because it is unable to deal with the duality of advance and retreat:

"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." (p. 36)

This tantalizing remark anticipates a theme developed at great length in "The Lonely Man of Faith;" in fact, to a great extent, it constitutes the main point of that essay. [In the terms of "The Lonely Man of Faith," modern man develops only the Adam I side of his personality and neglects the Adam II side.] We will explore this point further in a few weeks when we study "The Lonely Man of Faith."

TWO CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we have seen that man must integrate both majesty and humility into his life. Is one of these primary? If so, we could raise two theoretical possibilities: a) defeat only serves to purify the desire for victory, but it is the forward movement which is more important; b) the advance is only a means for one to defeat himself, but defeat is an end in itself (or is itself a victory). Which is the ultimate end of man - victory or defeat? Does Judaism champion a three-part movement (advance-retreat-advance) or a two-part movement (advance-retreat)?

I believe that, true to his general approach, the Rav maintains both these conceptions in dialectical tension. Perhaps we can state it differently: victory and defeat are of equal value. Majesty and humility are two basic facets of the human personality, and neither can be denied.

The essay "Majesty and Humility" has, if we note carefully, two different endings. [I believe the phenomenon of dual endings recurs several times in the Rav's writings, as I will point out in future shiurim.] On the one hand, the Rav writes:

"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: 'And thy seed shall take possession of his enemies' gate' (Genesis 22:17). Abraham found victory in retreat." (p. 37)

Here the Rav portrays a three-part movement, ending in victory. Note, however, that he qualifies his statement: "God MAY instruct him to resume his march to victory ... he MAY later be instructed to march straight to victory." Right after ending the essay on a note of triumph, we see a little footnote, which explains the reason for his qualification:

"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."

Who has the last word - Avraham or Moshe? Which is the true ending of the essay - the text or the footnote following the last sentence? Does the essay end on a note of victory or defeat? The answer is: both. True, the note of ultimate victory is sounded in a major chord and the note of defeat in only a minor chord (since the former is stressed in the main text and the latter in a footnote). But the Rav is honest enough to admit that there is not always a happy ending, and defeat is perhaps as valuable to man and as pleasing to God as victory. Man must know how to live with the tension between victory and defeat, advance and retreat, with no assurance of how it will ultimately end.

Next week we will discuss the essay "Catharsis," which elaborates the principle of withdrawal or self-defeat.