MAN IN SOCIETY

Jewish Ethics in Action

By Norman Lamm

The Talmudic sage Rava compressed his understanding of the human condition into four Hebrew words: *O havruta o mituta.* "Either companionship or death." Without the possibility of human relatedness, man is empty. Without an outside world of human beings, there can be

no inside world of meaningfulness. Personality, liberty, love, responsibility—all that makes life worth living—depend upon a community in which man can locate and realize himself.

But man is more than the sum total of his connections with others. There must be a self in order for there to be communication; there must be an inner existence to relate to the outer world. If man is not an island, neither is he a switchboard, a maze of wires that transmits the messages of others

but has nothing of its own to say. God created men out of the dust of the earth and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, man became "a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). Onkelos, the Aramaic translator of the second century C.E., renders that phrase "a speaking soul." Speech is the vehicle of relationship. Man is a composite of both soul and speech, of self and a society to whom that self relates. Without "'soul" or self, he is no more than an elaborate cybernetic mechanism, lacking content or meaning. Without "speech" or social relations, he is only a species of protoplasm, so withdrawn he might as well be dead.

For man to be man he must maintain the delicate tension between self and society, between personal privacy and public relationships. Mediating between them is the family. Judaism is concerned with all three aspects of man's existence. It addresses itself to the question of his inner psychic and spiritual life, his dignity and destiny. But its major concern is with the quality of man's relationships to the world around him, and these are usually developed within the family.

This emphasis on family and community may best be understood in terms of the way Judaism treats the very beginnings of man. The Bible offers two accounts of creation, each giving a complementary insight. In the first, a rather general report, things are created day after day until we come to man, who is seen as part of the natural order. True, he is singled out as created in the "image" and "form" of the Creator; but he is essentially accepted in his natural setting: his lust for power, his reproductive function, his hunger and his appetites. God commends him, "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it" and rule over its creatures. Within this context, man's creation is not only good but "God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

The second account of creation sees man in a very special light, as a truly *human* being, separate from the rest of nature. Here the Bible no longer says what it had regularly said about the rest of creation, "Behold it was good." Instead it offers a judgment on man's condition and terms it *lo tov,* "not good." "The Lord God said, it is not good that man should be alone. I shall make him a help-meet for him" (Genesis 2:18). What was "not good" was man's lack of human companionship. As man he could not be fully satisfied by communion with the rest of nature. Raised above and alienated from the other creatures, he was placed in a position of exploitation and manipulation vis-à-vis nature, with non-human nature he would not form genuine relationships. Only society can satisfy man's craving for relating to someone outside himself; thus woman was created. The bond between husband and wife thus offers a model for all human relationships.

Two things stand out in this Biblical description of the origin of man's need for society: the use of the term "good" in relation to man's social inclinations, and the recognition that more than a relationship with God is required to satisfy man's need for social contact (and goodness).

At first blush, the verse "it is not good that man should be alone" seems only a judgment on man's welfare: it is bad for him to be lonely, it is better for him to enjoy the companionship of other humans. But the Torah intends more than this. The

structure of the Hebrew verse contains a sense of the meaning of goodness which runs through all of Judaism's teaching on man's responsibilities to others - his immediate family and the larger family of man.

The Hebrew word *tov,* as well as its synonym *hesed* (one of the most difficult words in the language to translate), implies the quality of giving. Goodness is givingness, generosity. A good person gives of himself, his goods, his talents to others. He is effluent. Goodness is functional and relational; it must therefore be seen in terms of what a person does with and to others rather than what he is inside of and by himself.

Thus, the phrase "God is good" means that He gives existence or life or happiness where there was none before. David put it succinctly: "The Lord is good to all, and His compassion is upon all His creatures" (Psalms 145:9). A modern commentator, R. Yaakov Zevi Meklenburg, reinterprets the Biblical refrain after every step of creation, *ki tov,* to mean not "that it was good," but: "because He is good." It is because God is good that He creates. Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah, is also aware of this idea. It acknowledges *hesed* (the equivalent of *tov*) as one of the ten divine *Sephirot* or emanations, and assigns to it the function of God's effluence, His creativity, His overflowing goodness. Similarly, Plato, in *Timaeus,* teaches that God brought the world into being because He was not envious; He did not begrudge existence to those other than Himself.

Jewish law (Halakhah) incorporates this understanding of goodness into practical affairs. For example, a person is required to offer a blessing upon acquiring a new possession. If the acquisition is something that benefits only the new owner, he recites the *She-heheyanu,* thanking God "who has kept us alive and sustained us and brought us to this day." But if the item is one he can share with others, such as a house or automobile, he blesses God as *ha-tov ve-ha-metiv,* "who is good and does good." Not only is God good by giving us this or that possession, but He does good by instructing us to let others benefit from it as well. There is no goodness without generosity.

Since man was created in the divine image, that is, he resembles his Maker, he must always strive to be Godlike. Since like God, he possesses the potentiality of goodness, he must give in order to be true to his nature. But how? And what? And to whom? Unlike God, man cannot create *ex nihilo.* To God, the Creator of all, he can give nothing; he can only return what he has received. To mute nature he cannot give out of love and compassion; he can only own and manipulate—with restraint and with wisdom perhaps, but not with the satisfaction which comes from giving personally to one like himself. So long as Adam was alone, his propensity for goodness was doomed to frustration. With no wife to love, no family to provide for, no persons in distress to whom he may show mercy, no companion whose joy and grief he can share, man cannot be good. Goodness can exist only when there are other human beings. The words of the Torah may thus be translated: "There can be no goodness as long as man is alone."

Human compansionship is thus the prerequisite to goodness, the necessary condition for being human. This approach of Judaism is in marked

contrast with certain widely accepted modern views. Freudian theory views man as brutish, with society censoring him and sublimating his drives. Rousseau believed that man in his primitive state is endowed with a nobility which is corrupted by a society which is inevitably evil, distorting and perverting man's essential nature. Unlike Freud, Judaism holds that man possesses an inner core of God-like goodness. And unlike Rousseau, Judaism does not condemn society as totally evil, even while recognizing its imperfections. Rather, Judaism holds that society makes it possible for man to be good by doing good. The presence of other men elicits his goodness, sometimes discourages it, but always challenges it. Without relationships with others, man is no longer — or not yet — man.

This distinctive Jewish attitude toward family and society is so important that even God, as it were, cannot do for man what the human community can. From the very beginning of his creation, though man has a relationship with God, his reservoir of goodness is released only in a relationship with equals; only thus can he attain mutuality and reciprocity. Goodness is actualized not merely by giving but by giving out of personal relationship and acknowledgment of the other as a kindred being.

In truth, Judaism regards the "good" life primarily in social terms of ethics rather than worship. The *hasid* (the saint, the man of hesed or goodness) is primarily one who is generous in character and self-renouncing in his relations with others rather than one who is only meticulous in his purely "ritual" duties. This becomes apparent in the complex interplay between the two major types of duty imposed upon the Jew: towards God and towards his fellow man. Judaism demands both without discriminating between them, as can be seen in the constant interlacing of both types of commandments throughout the Torah. Exodus 22 and 23 are typical, and Leviticus 19 is especially noteworthy.

Yet it is no simple matter to determine how Judaism evaluates the man-man duties vis-a-vis the man-God obligations. Man's social responsibilities derive their ultimate validity from the divine law, yet there is a certain independence about them. Thus, on the one hand, the authority for man's duty towards family and society lies in the fact that God is the Lord: "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18). It is God who validates and commands neighborly love. On the other hand, the Talmud clearly implies that the man-man relation is in a measure independent from the man-God relation. Thus it rules that fasting and prayer on Yom Kippur absolve only the sins of man against God, not his sins against his fellow man. These latter can only be forgiven by God when the sinner has made restitution of the wrong and obtained forgiveness of the offended individual. An even more striking example of the autonomy of social ethics is to be found in the rule that applies when the person sinned against has died before the offender could apologize. Even then it is not enough to ask God's forgiveness. Rather, the Talmud requires the offender to assemble ten people at the grave of the one he wronged and declare, "I sinned against the Lord God of Israel and against so-and-so, whom I injured" (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 87a). Only then will God forgive him.

In Judaism, assault against another human being is not just a refracted sin against God; it is also an independent and autonomous transgression against a fellow mortal.

This equating of sins against man with sins against God underpins the Jewish concept of goodness. A purely "religious" sin is an act of disobedience, a failure to discharge an obligation to an infinitely higher Power. An offense in the realm of social ethics is a failure of goodness, a refusal to give in order to relate with an equal.

This is not to say, however, that Judaism conceives of man's duties to his fellow-man exclusively on a one-to-one basis. Each man must relate responsibly to the collectivity as well—to family, to community, to state, to all humanity. These obligations to society, though perhaps less precisely defined, are no less significant. Admittedly, it is often difficult to distinguish between individual and social ethics because they are strongly interrelated. Unless individuals act morally in their own homes, how can there be a stable, moral society? Judaism has often been contrasted with other religions on the basis of its intense community concern, its care for the disadvantaged, and its experience in holding together a widely scattered people.

To many observers, Western man grows progressively more individualistic. Our culture often seems to regard the single human being as the source of all truth and worth, the touchstone of all value. Nation and society appear as almost artificial conglomerations whose rules individuals may feel free to flaunt when their self-interests are threatened or curtailed. Such a radical attitude, so different from the more balanced view of previous ages, would appear to be a cultural bias without particularly compelling reasons to commend it. It is equally possible to view national or ethnic groups, for instance, as the important units and regard individuals merely as differentiated members of a collective organism. When "We the people of the United States" declared independence from England, they did so not as a collection of single Americans limited in time and space; they spoke as a corporate whole and included Americans yet unborn and states not yet admitted into the Union. Similarly, when the Torah was given to Israel at Sinai, that covenant committed all Jews in every age, for each Jew is a member of that indivisible entity called Israel. This is what Jewish tradition meant when it asserted that the soul of every Jew in every generation was present at Sinai and consented to the terms of the covenant. This does not mean that Judaism forces Jews to choose between the individual and the collective as the major source of value. Rather, it is a reminder that man is both a single person and a member of a group.

The question of man's goodness, of his relationships, therefore includes both other individuals and the various social forms created by the human family. Jewish tradition often considered them as interchangeable. Thus, all men must feel responsible for each individual. "All Israelites are guarantors one for the other" (Babylonian Talmud, *Shevuot* 39a), and the life or death of a single human being is as important as the survival of the entire world (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 37a). Goodness is neither exclusively individual nor purely social, but both of them at once.   END