

"HISTORY AS HIS STORY"

The change of the natural seasons often induces a retrospective mood in people. Therefore, at this time of the year, when we have just ushered Autumn out and Winter in, we tend to look back upon the past and contemplate our own lives. We survey where we are, what has happened to us, and how all this has come to be. And it happens that we wonder: could I have done things differently? And if I had, would it have made a difference?

Sometimes we see ourselves now as a product of all our past decisions. We recognize that both our failures and our successes are the results of specific actions that we have taken -- or that we have failed to undertake. As a result, we feel satisfied or dissatisfied, as the case may be, because we recognize that we were ourselves responsible for what we have done and what we have become. At other times, we tend to feel that the facts of life are so insurmountable, that the direction of events so ineluctable, the tide of life is so irreversable, that we are what we are almost despite ourselves, and that we had and have very little to say about it. No matter what we did or did not do in the past, we would be in approximately the same position today.

In asking such questions, we confront one of the great problems in life, which has been of concern to philosophers, theologians, and ordinary people in all walks of life, from the days of antiquity down to our own times.

Secular thinkers often view this question largely in the course of their interpretations of history. There are many who are determinists, such as Marx, who believe that we are propelled by massive, impersonal forces of history, and that individual men and women have little influence on the course of events. Others, however, believe that individual men play crucial roles at specific points in history. We know, for instance, of the theory of Carlyle who believed that "heroes" or outstanding men and women are the ones who by force of their personalities determine the direction of events. Several years ago, Prof. Oscar Handlin wrote a book (Chance and Destiny) in which he discussed eight turning points in American history: at each of these stations, a different decision could have sent all of American history into a different path. The American lawyer Benjamin Barondess, writing of Abraham Lincoln, maintains that different decisions by Lincoln at certain specific points in his career would have changed the face of American society, civilization, and politics. He writes, "there is no such thing as History. There is only His Story. An act is without significance unless we know the actor." In other words, history is your story and my story and his story; it is the unfolding of events initiated and changed by individual minds and personalities.

To which of these opinions do the Jewish sources subscribe? For one thing, mainstream Judaism does not consider blind fate, impersonal and uncontrolled forces, as dominating events. Judaism objected to Greek Fatalism -- and modern determinism as well. The

question in Judaism is not between fate and choice, but between destiny, as the unfolding in history of God's will, and human initiative.

Generally, we may trace the two opinions in Judaism to two root-theories. One has been called "Quietism," the belief that man attains his fullest spiritual development when he acknowledges that he is fundamentally a nothing in the presence of God, and when he suppresses his desire to impose his will and assert his ego. The highest act of man is to convert his *אני* to *אין*, his self or ego to nothing. Therefore, man must not make any attempt to interfere in the historical process, because that is an act of arrogance and presumptuousness against God. And, in effect, any such effort is doomed to failure. Taken to its extreme, this becomes the ideology of the Neturei Karta.

The second school is that of Activism, the belief that man, created in the image of God, must exercise his freedom, his power, his initiative -- and that that is the will of God.

Both schools can point to sources in the Jewish tradition. Quietism can cite support in the fact that Abraham was told in advance that his children would go to exile and that later they would be redeemed -- apparently the Divine Will worked independently of what individual humans want or do not want to do. And the Rabbis were even known to make a statement as broad and comprehensive as: *כחשן וזרעו וזרעו וזרעו*, everything depends upon luck, even the very scroll of the Torah in the Ark.

Activism has an even broader range of support. The whole concept of reward and punishment symbolized and expressed in the *חלק א' פ' י' ס' ז'* portion, is based on the idea that man can determine and that he is responsible for his actions. Those who did not return to Zion with Ezra were blamed for their recalcitrance. Rabbi Akiba supported Bar Kokhbeh, the revolutionary against Rome. Rabbi Ishmael interpreted the words of the Torah *וְיָרַם יְהוָה אֶת הָעָם וְיָרַם אֶת הָאָרֶץ*, that we shall give healing, that *וְיָרַם יְהוָה אֶת הָעָם וְיָרַם אֶת הָאָרֶץ*, one must not feel that interfering medically in the course of a disease is an act of presumption against the Divine Will, but that man is permitted to interfere in the natural process. And the Ramban, himself a physician, maintains that this is not only *מִצְוָה*, a privilege, but *מִצְוָה*, a commandment to interfere in the process and impose our desire for health upon a naturally deteriorating situation. So too do the Rabbis say that *אִי שֶׁלֹּא עָמַד לְעֹלַם שַׁבָּת לֹא יֵאָכֵל בְּשַׁבָּת*, one who did not prepare before the Sabbath does not deserve to eat on the Sabbath. Or, *אִם אָדָם עָמַד בְּיָמָיו וְהִקְדִּים לַעֲבוֹדָתוֹ וְלַעֲבוֹדַת הָאֱלֹהִים*, man works with his hands, and the Holy One blesses the work of his hands.

If, then, we have two opposing views within the context of Judaism, how are we today to interpret the events of our history and, even more important, our own individual biographies?

If we turn to our Sidra this morning, we find, paradoxically, that both principles are contained within one narrative, that of the meeting of Joseph with his brothers. In the beginning of the Sidra,

Joseph has not yet revealed himself to Judah and the others. We find Judah making his great plea in his confrontation with Joseph, demanding that Benjamin be released. Often we wonder: why did Joseph make his brothers go through all this agony, this traveling back and forth, threatening to take away Simon and then Benjamin -- can any sin by the brothers against Joseph justify this apparently calm and premeditated sadism? The answer, of course, is that there is no sadism whatsoever intended by Joseph, whom tradition has called צדיק ישראל, Joseph the Righteous. What Joseph is doing is, simply and logically enough, leading Judah and the brothers through the paces of that process called תשובה or repentance. He wants to put them in the position once again where they will have the choice of accepting or abdicating responsibility for a younger brother, in this case, Benjamin. When we find Judah and Joseph opposite each other at the opening of today's Sidra, that is precisely the position Judah is in -- and he comes through with flying colors. The same Judah who seemed to be concerned only with the price he could get for Joseph earlier, now declares his life forfeit in favor of Benjamin, he is willing to give everything for a brother. It is therefore at this time that Joseph drops his disguise and reveals himself. But the very fact that Joseph wanted to make Judah atone for his sin, means that he held Judah responsible for the original crime, that of selling Joseph. No matter what subsequent developments were, Judah must be responsible for the original act, or else all of Joseph's actions cannot be explained except as a sadistic satisfaction of a desire for vengeance.

Yet, immediately thereafter, when Joseph reveals himself, and his brothers are aghast and overwhelmed, Joseph at once proceeds to lift from them the burden of responsibility and guilt.

אלה אל תזכור אלא יחד בלעייכם כי אנחנו אלה
כי לאחיה אהני אלקים לבתיכם.

"Do not be upset and angry with yourselves that you sold me here, because it is the Lord who sent me here in order to provide for you" and the entire family.

What Joseph appears to be saying is that both opposite ideas are true -- simultaneously! The brothers were responsible, and yet they were not the only actors in this great drama. Joseph in his speech uses two key verbs -- twice he uses the word מכר, to sell, and three times the word שלח, to send. It is as if he is saying to his brothers: from one point of view you are guilty because you perpetrated the act of selling your brother down the river. You must be held responsible for this act, and you have every reason to feel guilty and contrite. Yet, at the same time, you are only pawns in the larger drama of the destiny of the People of Israel, for it is God who sent me here through you. You were merely performing an act determined by God who is ultimately responsible for our final felicity. So it is both human initiative and divine destiny that converge and act in parallel and simultaneous form.

We find a Midrash giving us a similar insight, in ironical and charming manner, into how the two levels work out together, how history is a combination of our story and His story. The Midrash

comments on the verse from Isaiah, *כי אלהי חשבותי לא חשבותיכם*,
"for My thoughts are not your thoughts." How so? And the Midrash
answers: the sons of Jacob were busy with the selling of Joseph;
Jacob our Father was mourning and grieving for his lost son; Judah
was busy finding himself a wife (Tamar).

אבל הקדש היה פלוג, בלילה של חתונה היה

and also the Holy One, as it were, was preoccupied; He was busy
creating the light of the Messiah -- the descendants of the match
between Judah and Tamar -- and the Messiah could never have come
unless these individual acts took place separately and in
apparently self-contained manner. Each scene in the drama does
indeed seem to be self-contained. Each man acts responsibly; and yet,
God stands behind all and weaves all the various strands together,
and the resulting tapestry presents a picture of totally different
dimensions.

We may then assume that Judaism teaches that both these elements
are always present, and we never have the right to dismiss either
the role of God or the role of man, either the element of destiny
or initiative. Of course, it then becomes a matter of emphasis.
Some will emphasize reliance on God and faith in His destiny more
than human initiative. Thus, Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzatto in his
famous work pleads for a minimum of what he calls *אדם*, human
initiative, and a greater measure of *אמונה*, or faith in
divine guidance. Others reverse the proportions, and ask for more
human initiative and less passivity or quietism. But never do we
abandon either role.

We find the same tendency to one extreme or another in Talmudic literature, but never do we completely abandon either end. Thus, for instance in a famous passage (M.K. 28A) Rava says, in a brooding contemplation of the different fortunes that befell two great teachers, alike in sagacity and saintliness, that

חיים ובריאות ילדים ונכסים -- מה שנתקל בו

life and health; children and how they turn out and whether they give us "nachas"; and sustenance and wealth -- these are matters which depend upon luck rather than upon our own initiative or worthiness. And yet one of the great scholars of medieval days, the Meiri, refuses to accept this Talmudic dictum as binding and authoritative. אלוהים יחליט, pay no attention to this opinion, he counsels us: הוא דעת רובא דביתא it is only a minority opinion, and cannot receive the sanction of religion under any circumstances. Rava places more emphasis on divine destiny than on human activity; Meiri declares the un-Jewishness of the "bashert" concept, and prefers to maximize the human role. But whichever opinion we feel more constrained to accept, both elements must be present.

Are there any practical conclusions to this dilemma, or is it a purely theoretical problem? Since we can never know the proportions of significance of our own and divine activity, since we can never know where they intersect and where they contradict, and since we can never know which element predominates -- does all of this make any practical difference?

I believe it does. Take the matter of effort we put into our daily activities, our ambitions, our careers, or any branch of human life. The affirmation of the human role means that we can never absolve ourselves of responsibility and adopt a theologically sanctioned laziness or passivity, but we must always work and always try our very best. But the element of divine determination and fore-ordination means that we must never overdo, we must never become obsessive or compulsive or overanxious about our efforts in any direction. We must at all times remember that our task is to try to succeed, but that success itself is something that God gives or withholds. Given the circumstances in which I can act, I must act to the best of my ability; but those circumstances are circumscribed, they are limited, and I can never know the ultimate divine plan.

So too, since human initiative does play a role, since there is always some element of *חֵסֶד*, therefore I must retain my sense of responsibility. I am guilty if I have failed to try, I deserve credit if I have fulfilled my tasks. But, since the divine will plays some role in human events, therefore never must I let my guilt or my anxiety over my failures to crush me and become pathological. Recall the words we cited before, which Joseph used to comfort Judah and the brothers: *אֲנִי אֶסְתָּוֶה וְאַתָּה אֶסְתָּוֶה*. Don't become overly anxious, do not allow your sense of responsibility to hurt you by crushing you, because unbeknownst to you, you are part of a larger divine scheme.

And so too, since the divine will does play such key role in

human affairs, there can be no arrogance if I succeed -- because my success, even with all my efforts, is nothing that comes automatically with effort, but may be a divine gift, and for ends which I do not understand. And, because of the same reason, while I may hold those who offend me accountable for their actions, I must always respond, as did Joseph to the brothers, with forgiveness, forbearance, understanding, tolerance -- because the responsibility of man for his actions, good or bad, is limited, and who knows to what extent another human being had to do what he did because of forces of which he is totally unconscious.

Such are the moral and psychological conclusions to be drawn from this philosophical and theological dilemma. We must see man not as a competitor or displacer of God, and not even as a pawn of God. Rather, he is His *rise*, His ambassador.

Man must always use *דפולן*, creative and original thought, in determining his course of action. And yet he must always remember that verse the Midrash cited, the words of the prophet Isaiah - *פולן וברן* *לדו*, no matter how deep and profound and original and creative our thinking is, it is not the same as divine thought. We are responsible for what we do to ourselves and to others; and yet, we must always remain conscious of that mysterious, hidden divine destiny that shapes our ends.