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HEBREW VERSUS GREEK TRADITIONS OF INDIVIDUALISM AND FREEDOM: A PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Differing Definitions of Freedom

The idea of freedom is defined differently in Hebrew and Greek thinking, as represented in the Greco-Roman tradition. This is true from the perspectives of literature, mythology, and psychology.

A pattern of gender hostility, family triangulation, and violence is reflected in the Olympian creation stories of ancient Greece. The greater optimism of the biblical religions is reflected in their own foundation story of a loving God who created the world and man as an act of love and in a mood of harmony, not foreboding and conflict. Yet modern psychology and psychiatry seems dominated by the ancient Greek rather than the biblical experience.

Over forty years ago, Eric Wellisch, medical director of Grayford Child Guidance Clinic in Kent, called for a biblical psychology, arguing that:

The very word "psyche" is Greek. The central psychoanalytic concept of the formation of character and neurosis is shaped after the Greek Oedipus myth. It is undoubtedly true that the Greek thinkers possess an understanding

of the human mind which, in some respects, is unsurpassed to the present day, and that the trilogy of Sophocles still presents us with the most challenging problems. But stirring as these problems are, they were not solved in the tragedy of Oedipus. In ancient Greek philosophy, only a heroic fight for the solution but no real solution is possible.

Ancient Greek philosophy has not the vision of salvation. No positive use has been made, so far, of the leading ideas of biblical belief in the attempts of modern psychology to formulate basic findings and theories. But there is no reason why the Bible should not prove at least if not more fruitful than the concepts of Greek or Eastern religious experience... Psychology and theology are at the crossroads. The atheistic and pantheistic aspects of modern psychology lead to dangerous conclusions. The non-biological aspect of theology is doomed to lead to frustration.... There is need for a biblical psychology (*Isaac and Oedipus*, 1954, p. 115).

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The problem of individualism or individuation is not such a simple matter because the approach to the entire issue depends on one's point of view. In the Hebrew writings, one is not free unless one devotes oneself to the study of Torah. This is stated specifically in *Avot* 6:2: "Read not *harut* (carved) but *herut* (freedom). One is not free unless he devotes himself to the study of Torah." Compare this, however, to an example from the Greco-Roman Stoic writings — Seneca's famous definition of freedom. "You see that yawning precipice? It leads to liberty. You see that flood, that river, that well? Liberty houses within them. You see that stunted, parched and sorry tree? From each branch, liberty hangs. Your neck, your throat, your heart are so many ways of escape from slavery. You imagine the road to freedom; you shall find it in every vein of your body" (Seneca, *De Ira*, 3.15.3-4). Seneca was a brilliant writer and thinker, but from a Jewish point of view what he is saying here is quite harsh and jolting. Despite his burning intellect, he came to the point of view in his life that suicide was the highest expression of human freedom.

We see some of this same outlook in America today with talk of death and the right to take one's life for the terminally ill. For Seneca, suicide went beyond the question of being terminally ill or being ill at all. It involved an existential illness, a sense of being trapped in this world with no way out, with no sense of being able to get out of this morass — Sartre's "no exit" — except through leaving this world.

This is a very different view of freedom than the view expressed in Jewish writings, for example in *Avot*, which equates freedom to something we would call more pro social — to study, to participate in community. These represent two very different ideas of what it means to be free.

Why should this be? There are probably many philosophical and theological reasons for it, but it is almost as if in the Western world every relationship is seen as a trap, and life itself becomes the ultimate trap. From this perspective, in a certain sense, individuation and individualism have to be defined against the other person. It becomes a freedom from something, a freedom from any sort of obligation or demand. This is the state that American society has reached, where every responsibility and every demand becomes thought of as a hassle that the individual wants to be free of.

Take, for example, one of the most important documents in America, the Bill of Rights. Looking at it psychodynamically, it is a protection from unwanted intrusions — it speaks of freedom from this and that.

There is no accompanying bill of responsibilities. There is no communitarian agenda equivalent to this strong isolationist, individualistic perspective. Many scholars have already written about this, such as Philip Slater in *The Pursuit of Loneliness* and David Bakan in *The Duality of Human Existence*. One of the very first people to look at this was Emil Durkheim in *The Study of Suicide*.

As a clinical psychologist who has extensively researched the questions involved in suicide, I have seen children who become suicidal because they have been unable to resolve what may be called their individuation-attachment dilemma. In such cases, they do not seem to be able at adolescence to differentiate from their family without losing their family's support. They are put in an impossible situation — what Israel Orbach calls an "insoluble problem" — that the price attached to being supported by the family means remaining infantilized and not differentiating oneself, which is an essential task of adolescence.

Types of Suicides

Durkheim tells us there are different kinds of suicides. There is *egoistic* suicide which occurs when a person is insufficiently connected to the outside world. There is also *altruistic* suicide. For Durkheim, altruistic is not a positive word because it denotes the suicide of a person who is insufficiently differentiated from the outside world — the opposite of the egoistic. Yet another, most lethal, category of suicide is called *anomic* by Durkheim. Here the person's boundary between himself and the outside world is totally confused, a combination of the worst of the first two types.

To better understand the continuum of interpersonal distance, nearness or farness from the other, we must recognize two separate underlying dimensions — nearness or farness to oneself (i.e., individuation-deindividuation) and nearness or farness to the other (i.e., attachment-detachment). Dr. Mordechai Rotenberg has talked about this a great deal in his work *Dialogue With Deviance*. Somehow our conception of togetherness in the West does not take into account the need of the individual for his own boundary or self-definition. This results in an enmeshed structure where the definition of closeness usually involves agreement and any kind of disagreement is usually defined in Western society as estrangement or disloyalty or disconnection. How can a person be himself or herself in relationships? How can one establish a genuine I-Thou kind of relationship? It really becomes impossible unless one is able to express oneself, even to the point

of disagreeing with somebody that one is in dialogue with. The key is to be able to differentiate oneself from another without losing the relationship. My own work, TILT (Teaching Individuals to Live Together), offers a system of differentiating boundaries from walls. Boundaries exist to "keep the self in"; walls are formed to "keep the other out." Boundaries are thus intrapersonal, while walls are interpersonal.

Durkheim tells us that an altruistic suicide is one who has let down his defenses in relation to the outside world before he has sufficiently defined who he is. He becomes overincorporated into a group superego, enmeshed in the larger social structure. This person has a relationship that is not a genuine connection; it is a pseudo-relationship, a pseudo-attachment, in fact a symbiosis. It involves a dialogue without individuality, being with somebody without being oneself. The opposite type for Durkheim is the egoistic suicide, one who has developed a strong sense of self or boundary, but whose outer walls vis-a-vis the outside world remain rigid. This is a person who is a disengaged self. His individuation is not genuine, but formed in opposition to any genuine attachment with the other.

The first type is akin to a fetus that is expelled before it is fully formed — a premature birth — where really the fetus is not formed well enough to leave the protection of the womb. Its opposite is akin to a fetus who is not born when it should be born and remains festering in the womb. Each type is pathological, the first representing egoistic disengagement and the second altruistic enmeshment. Oftentimes, in an attempt to try to restore some kind of normality and gain a more balanced life, people revert to an anomic position where they go back and forth between enmeshment and disengagement.

There are two other possible combinations of walls and boundaries that are not necessarily pathological. In one, a person may have an ill-formed ego but have strong outer walls. This is actually developmentally necessary and good. If a person is in a very ill-defined and fragile position, probably the best thing he can do is put a protective wall around himself. As he becomes stronger, the walls decrease in coordination with the ego getting stronger. In the remaining type, we have a person whose ego is strong enough to allow a permeability in outer wall structure.

The Story of Narcissus

Let us now apply this logic to some primary Greek and Hebrew stories to better understand the differences in approaches of the two cultures. We will concentrate

on the stories of Narcissus and Jonah.

The late psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut talks about two types of narcissism: idealizing and mirroring. Idealizing narcissism is the search for the omnipotent other and mirroring narcissism is the search for the grandiose self. For Freud, narcissism usually means ego investment — the internalization of energy in the configuration: "I am perfect." This is Kohut's "mirroring narcissistic" position. Kohut also speaks of a second narcissistic position: "you are perfect and I belong to you. You are perfect and I am part of you." In Kohut's language, this "idealizing narcissistic" configuration would include many martyrs.

In the first part of the legend of Narcissus, as told by Ovid and later by Conon, Narcissus is described as a beautiful young bi-sexual boy who rejects lovers of both sexes and acts especially unkindly toward Echo, a nymph who loves him. Narcissus' mother Leirpe had been raped by the river god Cephisus and Narcissus was the product, so perhaps he is venting his anger at knowing this. Narcissus is filled with himself. This is the Greek idea of *hubris*, overweening pride. Finally, one of his rejected lovers appeals to the god Nemesis, and we see the idea of "pride going before a fall," or *hubris* being brought down by nemesis. Nemesis punishes Narcissus by having him fall in love with his reflection in a brook. Narcissus is not aware that the reflection in the brook is his own. He thinks it is somebody else and he pines away out of love for this reflection, but he is not suicidal yet. Then slowly as he begins to look at the reflection in the brook he becomes quite delusional. He says that he wishes to separate himself from his body. As he realizes that the reflection is his, he becomes completely delusional and wishes for a joint death of himself and his beloved.

At first he says "My love himself desires to be embraced, for whenever I lean forward to kiss the clear water he lifts up his face to mine and tries to reach me." But then he says "Alas I am myself the boy I see. I know it. My own reflection does not deceive me.... What I desire I have. My very plenty makes poor. How I wish I could separate myself from my body." This is the exact kind of image oftentimes reported by schizophrenics.

And then, "A new prayer this for a lover to wish the things he loves away. Now grief is sapping my strength. Little of life remains for me. I am cut off in the flower of my youth. I have no quarrel with death. For in death I shall forget my pain. But I could wish that the object of my love might outlive me. As it is, both of us will perish together when this one life

is destroyed."

We have the example here of a person who first is in a disengaged or egoist position, as when Narcissus mirrors and abandons Echo. Narcissus then goes from disengagement to enmeshment when he idealizes the face in the brook. Here, Narcissus is altruistic. Finally Narcissus becomes suicidal, oscillating between enmeshment and disengagement. He is unable to integrate individuation and attachment, a pattern typical of many Greek stories, whether it be Iphigenia or Ajax or Macaria or Polyxena. All through the plays of Euripides and Sophocles there is one suicide after another where a character is unable to resolve individuation and attachment. The characters are unable to have dialogue with others and still be themselves. One after another, they wind up killing themselves as a solution.

Narcissus is a proto-typical story of a person who loses touch step by step because he cannot integrate individuation and attachment, and finally reaches an anomic situation where he has the worst of everything — both enmeshment and disengagement — and commits suicide.

The Story of Jonah

The Book of Jonah presents a contrasting view of this whole problem. Jonah has a terrible identity conflict. He is asked by God to go to Nineveh and does not want to say no to God. But he does not want to say yes to God either because to him Nineveh is a symbol of evil. He feels that the people in Nineveh ought not be saved, that they are so wicked that they are beyond redemption. But if he says no to God he is rejecting his attachment with God and Jonah is a God-fearing man. If he says yes to God, he is violating his own sense of self. So he behaves like any teenager and runs away. He goes to Jaffa and takes a boat to Tarshish which is the end of the world, but God finds him. Obviously Jonah is not narcissistic, for when others on the ship are endangered by the storm sent by God, he admits he is the cause and insists on being thrown overboard. He is not a coward; he could have said nothing. Jonah is very suicidal at this point.

But God works as a divine therapist. He does not let Jonah die. He sends a fish that protects him and saves his life, because Jonah cannot exist in the alien environment of the sea. In other words, God provides a wall to protect Jonah's ill-defined boundary. The fish swallows him up and from the belly of the fish Jonah prays to God and he strengthens himself. As he strengthens himself and his boundary becomes firmer, the wall is no longer necessary. The fish spits him out

on dry land where it is safe for Jonah to be. Again God tells him to go to Nineveh. This time he goes to tell them of God's message.

Jonah then leaves the walls of the city to sit outside. He is confused and again he expresses the wish to die. The sun beats down on his head and again God intervenes, providing a protective gourd to shield him from the elements and from his own self-destructive tendencies. Slowly, as the story goes on, God is able to engage him in a dialogue. If Jonah mourns the gourd which he only knew for one night, why should God not care about the people of Nineveh who are so many and who do not know their right hand from their left hand. This dialogue was not possible earlier in the story as Jonah was not yet ready for it.

This tells us that there is another path besides the path of Narcissus. Jonah rejects either the enmeshed alternative, which would have been for him to go straight to Nineveh, or the egoistic alternative, which would have been for him to say no to God. He did not do either. He regressed back into boundary confusion, but in the confusion God built a wall around Jonah to enable him to strengthen himself, and when he was strong enough the wall became more diffuse.

This represents a different pattern, a developmental idea that Durkheim did not discuss. Where the narcissistic pattern points to vacillation back and forth between enmeshment and disengagement — going back and forth between impossible alternatives — the Jonah path begins with a regression back to a state of weak ego and strong outer walls, moving ahead to a position of moderate ego and moderate walls, and finally developing to one of a strong ego and minimal outer walls.

This idea can be applied across the lifespan. It includes the idea that one always has to go backward to go forward. A life event will push a person into a situation where he is going to feel insecure. The very act of growth, whether it be birth, weaning, toilet training, control of sexual impulses — these are the stages of Freud and Erikson — can be seen to create a situation where a person is in a fragile boundary state, where a wall has to be put up. If the wall is not put up, the individual might kill himself or be otherwise self-destructive.

What Can We Learn?

What does the story of Jonah tell us and why are Hebrew legends like this not used in psychotherapy? The entire structure of a Greek story is tragic, saying that basically there are no other options. What would

have happened to Jonah if he did not have the God of the Bible? He would have died; it would have been a short story.

But, alternatively, what would have happened to Narcissus if he had been dealing with the God of the Hebrew Bible? How would his life been different? Would he still have committed suicide? How can we as social scientists, educators, political scientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, or theologians act to introduce the sense of a concerned deity into our narcissistic and ultimately suicidal culture? Where is there even a handle to reach a society that is so alienated from a biblical way of thinking? How do we even approach a child or, on a more macro level, a family or society or institution or country that basically feels that they are on an axis that veers back and forth between enmeshment and disengagement, and often winds up in very suicidal behavior? How do we create a kind of protection to allow that society to go back in its confusion — to reject Hobson's choices, to reject false alternatives, to provide a structure to wean them off of their insecurity and off their immaturity, to allow them as they mature to then slowly take away the interpersonal wall and let them stand on their own two feet? This is really the task these kinds of stories have.

Curiously, the Jewish community in America today is probably much more Grecophile than the non-Jewish community. The Christian community is much more familiar with biblical stories than they are with Greek stories, but the educated Jewish community is more familiar with Greek stories than they are with Hebrew stories from their own tradition. Sadly, the secular Jewish community in Israel too is alienated from the Hebrew tradition. How can we counter this?

We suggest the use of biblical master stories in psychotherapy to replace the traditional Greek ones employed in contemporary psychoanalysis. There is no reason why the story of Isaac should not be seen as an alternative to the legend of Oedipus, or, for that matter, the story of Ruth as an alternative to the narrative of Electra. We have suggested the Book of Jonah as an alternative to the myth of Narcissus. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible contains many of the foundation stories of Western civilization. But up to this point there has not existed a set of biblical master stories which the therapist has at his side to employ in psychological cases. Continuing to rely on these same Greek master stories as a basis for psychotherapy perpetuates the problem. This approach will continue to introduce these destructive attitudes into the patients' lives in the very attempt to cure them. We suggest a biblical psychotherapy as an antidote to the destructive attitudes regarding individuation and attachment so prevalent in Western society.

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**Community and Polity:
The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry**
Revised and Updated Edition

By Daniel J. Elazar

The organized life of American Jewry is of interest in its own right. It is the largest Jewish collectivity in the world today, perhaps of all time. For students of politics, the American Jewish community is an example of a voluntary political order that functions authoritatively for those who acknowledge their connection with it, but does not seek a monopoly on the loyalty of its members.

The first edition of *Community and Polity* offered a description and analysis of the developments in the American Jewish community through the first postwar generation — roughly, 1946 through 1976. Since the appearance of the original edition of *Community and Polity* in 1976, the aggressive advancing Jewish community of the late 1960s and early 1970s has given way to a far more quiescent and even troubled one.

This edition of *Community and Polity* explores in depth these and other issues. Like the first edition, it is designed to serve two purposes: to provide a basic survey of the structure and functions of the American Jewish community and to suggest how that community should be understood as a body politic, a polity that is not a state but is no less real from a political perspective.

This revised and updated edition of *Community and Polity* examines the transformations taking place in local community federations and in the countrywide federation movement, the decline of the mass-based organizations, the shift in the forms and organization of Jewish education, the changes taking place in the synagogue movements, and the problems of Jewish unity generated by inter-movement competition.

The book also looks at the new ambiguity in the sphere of community relations, the impact of demographic shifts on Jewish community organization, the institutionalization of new relationships between the American Jewish community and Israel, and the emergence of new model organizations to mobilize and serve the Jewish community.

This book is a product of four decades of study of the American Jewish community. It took its present form as a result of a growing need for an understanding of the importance of the structural and institutional aspects of American Jewish life. While the commitment of individual Jews and Jewish families to Jewish life is obviously a prerequisite to the life of a Jewish community, the character of Jewish life is ultimately shaped by the institutions that Jews create collectively.

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