TRANSLATION

ON JUDAISM AND HUMANISM IN EDUCATION

by URIEL TAL *

A Moral Parable, by Nachman Krochmal, one of the first to combine tradition and modernism in Jewish historical thought, contains the following legend: ". . .And Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent at sunset, and lo an old man. . .came from the desert. . .and Abraham rose and hastened toward him and said: . . .Come to me, wash your feet and sleep here this night. . .and he urged him insistently, and he came to his tent. And he took butter and milk and placed them before him and baked unleavened bread, and he ate. And it came to pass that after they ate and after they drank Abraham said to him: Now let us bless the Lord, creator of heaven and earth that He gave us our fill from his wealth. And the man replied, saying, I know not your Lord and will not bless his name, but my God, . . . who dwells with me. . .And Abraham was angry at the man, and he rose and chased him out into the desert. And the Lord came to Abraham and said: Abraham, where is the man who came to you tonight? And Abraham answered, saying: I chased him away for he would not thank You, and God said, See here I have borne his sin a hundred and ninety years; I clothed him and fed him although he grieved me; and you, man . . . tired of feeding him one night. And Abraham said. . .I have sinned. . .and Abraham hastened to the desert and looked for the man and found him, and brought him back to the tent and spoke kindness to him."

With this legend, originally published in one of the first Hebrew Haskalah periodicals, *Yerushalayim Habnuya*, no. 1 (Zulkwa, 1844),[1] Krochmal presents one of the

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1 Professor Jacob Toury has informed me that this legend originated in the moralist literature of the Enlightenment in the second half of the 18th century, and was even attributed to Ben-

vital questions for the future of Judaism, the question of spiritual and social tolerance. It is our aim here to examine some possibilities of an educational encounter between Judaism as a tradition whose authority is derived from revelation, and whose way of life is determined by the Law and the precepts on the one hand, and on the other humanism, as a confession of the absolute value of each individual regardless of faith, opinion or origin, man for his own sake in his conscious moral autonomy.

By education we mean not the imposition of beliefs or ways of life, rules and regulations, precepts of commission and omission, on the pupil from childhood on, as some of the Orthodox would have it, but rather the kind of instructional activity aimed at providing the pupil with tools, that is, with information, understanding, intellectual curiosity, and also existential incentives, so that if he wished to turn to the primary sources of Jewish tradition in order to build his way of life with their help, he will not be alien to them.

This educational approach is in fact entailed by our essential interest here, which is not abstractly theological or philosophical, but the existential need of our pupils' generation. One of the motivations for a certain new appeal to the sources of Judaism by some of our youth far removed from tradition is not religious revival in the Orthodox, institutional or political sense, but the need to fill an existential spiritual vacuum that developed in the personal lives of this generation. Our pupils are seeking tools with which to shape their self-identification, to build themselves, their pesonalities, their future. Through this existential awakening some are becoming aware of spiritual emptiness, cultural dreariness, semantic poverty, and the paucity of associations from their own historical heritage. Not so much in search of an authoritative answer, this youth is thirsty for a treasure house where it can look for answers on its own and thus find itself.

One of the reasons for the vacuum and the growing awareness of its existence is historical. As industrial society developed and modern society became secularized, a considerable proportion of the fathers of political Zionism also rebelled against tradition. Later, among the second and especially the third generation of secular political Zionists, this revolt ruptured the consciousness of historical continuity and the individual felt cast into the present, a victim, an object. Not only did he come into the world against his will, but the world he was born into, grew up and was educated in, alienated him from tradition. Modern secular man, and paradoxically perhaps young secular Israelis, went into exile; they were exiled from their origins, and with the return to Zion, from their home, that is, from the tradition of their forefathers.

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jamin Franklin. It was published in *Vossische Zeitung*, 1764, p. 251. Cf. Jacob Toury, "Die Behandlung jüdischer Problematik in der Tagesliteratur der Aufklärung (bis 1783)" in *Jahrbuch des Instituts für Deutsche Geschichte*, Tel-Aviv University, Vol. 5, 1976, pp. 23-24. The Krochmal version was reprinted in *The Writings of Nachman Krochmal*, ed. by Simon Rawidowicz, 2nd enlarged edition, Ararat Publishing Society, London; Waltham, Mass.: 1961, p. 455 (Hebrew).

The sense of exile from the spiritual home, from tradition, is today becoming sharper and harsher, as it exists and emerges in the consciousness of this generation, in its own home, in the earthly motherland. Youth in its native land is alienated from its sources, and thus material Zion became spiritually a foreign country, and being away from home, the young person became a stranger to himself.

At this point we are in the midst of a new developmental phase of the phenomenon of alienation in modern civilization, especially as it took shape in the transition from the metaphysical Hegelian view to the anthropological Feuerbachian and the Marxian social view, and from there to the existential experience of Martin Buber. In a relatively early essay on the difference between the philosophical systems of Fichte and Schelling, Hegel states that all of existence is still split between two planes. On the theoretical plane existence is conceived as an absolute unified totality, as a complete and closed conscious self-identity in the realm of the spirit. On the other plane, existence is conceived as consciousness split between being and non-being, between existence itself and the idea of existence, between infinity and the finite. This duality is part of the context for the notion of alienation in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* which was the point of departure for Karl Marx's inverse teachings. Here the spirit is not alienated from consciousness, nor the phenomenon from its idea or concept, but man is alienated from the material world and thus also from his self, the essence of his being. The empirical expression of this alienation is manifested mainly in the labor and production relations of pre-revolutionary society. As man's essence is expressed in his labor and its product, in losing the ownership and control of these, man becames alienated from his own essence. Subsequently, in the wake of Feuerbach's anthropology, Buber transferred the concept of alienation as a situation whereby man is totally dependent on social reality beyond the existential plane. At this point Buber indicated the way by which man may regain his anthropological uniqueness, by means of a return to the spirit: as an experience in real life.[2] This conception of Buber's implies a possibility of man's return to spiritual freedom and autonomous identity, but this time not on the philosophical or ideological plane, but in concrete reality, in life. And indeed it appears that this structure of regaining existential substance provides support for some young intellectuals in their efforts to extricate themselves from the condition of alienation and secularization. By means of that structure some seek to return to the historical roots of Judaism, and this return is conceived by them as a progression, and not a reversion to extreme mysticism or a political religion.

Against this background, our interest here as educators is less in divinity and more in humanity, less in the traditions between man and God, and more those between man and his fellow, and between man and himself. Humanism, especially in the

2 Franz von Hammerstein has clearly pointed out that in Buber's anthropology man tends to function as his own normative binding power, cf. *Das Messias Problem bei Martin Buber*, W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart: 1958, p. 85. See also Pinchas H. Peli on Buber's "religiosity" as opposed to institutionalized religion, in "Literary Supplement," *Yediot Aharonot*, February 10, 1978.

rational-critical schools, did not solve the ontological question of divinity, and left it in ambiguous antimonies. It is even more doubtful, in our era of existential crisis, whether it is possible to return to unequivocal answers on the purely theological plane, such as that strong mystic faith that "a person does not move a finger below unless it is so ordained above." (Tractate *Hulin*, 7/b); or the ontological response to Abraham, "I am the master of the world" (*Bereshit Raba*, 39). To the extent that a modern humanist consideration utilizes the concept of divinity, it is not the metaphysical, but the existential symbolism and its relevance which are likely to appeal, like Rashi's exegesis of *Exodus* 15:7 – "This is my God and I will glorify him": "I will make myself like him to cleave to his ways." Accordingly, "Be like Him" (*Shabbat* 133/b) means "to pursue the virtues of the Holy One Blessed Be He." It has been taught that these moral virtues are to be realized in everyday social life, in the relations between man and community, man and his fellow man, and man and himself. Indeed Saadia Gaon, one of the first systematic moralists in Judaism, devoted the last chapter of his *Beliefs and Opinions* not to theology but to "the conduct of man," to anthropology, to problems also of major concern to humanism even though in humanism those ways of life are formed through man's autonomous reason and applied to aspects of human and social life such as eating and drinking, coition and desire, the raising of children, social welfare, the accumulation of wealth, power, love or revenge, wisdom, labor and repose.

The transfer of emphasis from divinity to man provides us with an old but revitalized methodological tool, which has in recent years been of immense help in the modern understanding of religious morality and in facilitating the contact between different and even opposing spiritual worlds: this is hermeneutics. In the methods of Hans G. Gadamer, Rudolf Bultmann, W. Pannenberg, and lately also Hans D. Bastian in *The Theology of Questions*, hermeneutics is constructed according to the pattern of a question, and is careful not to limit freedom of understanding and depth of experience by providing normative answers. The essence of man's renewed encounter with the text is the way he is affected by it and attempts to experience through it, to absorb what the text has to say in signs and symbols and in existential meanings. This kind of hermeneutical approach to a living tradition breaks through rigid laws or edicts or regulations forced on society by "authoritative" religious leaders or institutions. Through exegetical hermeneutics, man's rational and moral autonomy in the midst of society may be preserved. The symbolism in hermeneutics thus points to the possibility of reformulating religious traditions in an open humanistic vein rather than Halachic, authoritarian institutionalization.

This rapproachement between Judaism and humanism makes man its main concern. According to Jewish tradition, by virtue of his creation (and despite *Genesis* 5:21) man is essentially good, as the morning prayer puts it: "Lord, the soul you gave me is pure," while according to humanistic thought, man is essentially a rational being. The two methods are different, but have an important common denominator, which is that man is set apart from the status of object applying to other natural phenomena, bearing the responsibility for himself, for what he intends to do, for

his deeds and for their consequences. Man is unique in having the ability to choose between good and evil, between life and death (*Deut.* 30:19), and this is well worded in the encounter with the culture which historically prepared the ground for humanism. IV Maccabees, which Josephus Flavius and some of the Church fathers called *On the Rule of Reason*, and in which elements of Stoicism are discernible, has this to say of man's moral responsibility: ". . .it is within the province of reason to control desire and instincts and invert some of them toward the good and suppress some of them. . ." (2:6; 18; 3:2-5; 7:20). Generations later Maimonides stated: ". . .every man has the right if he wishes to incline toward the path of the good and be a righteous man, it is his privilege; and if he wishes, to incline toward the bad and be a scoundrel, it is his privilege. . .thus this species man is unique in the world and no other resembles him in this matter that he himself in his mind and thought knows good from evil. . .and no one can stop him. . .and do not imagine. . .that the Holy One Blessed Be He decrees that a man from the beginning of his creation should be righteous or evil. . .but he himself of his own mind leans toward the path he desires. . ." (*Hilchot Teshuva*, 5:1-3).

Judaism as a religious heritage sees these two planes – the law (*mishpatim*) that can stand up to the critique of reason and the regulations (*ḥukim*) which do not necessarily follow from reason – as a normative system imposing a way of life and the yoke of divine sovereignty (Tractate *Yoma*, 67/b). On the other hand, humanism as a historical heritage sees one plane only, the one that stands up to rational criticism, as a normative system imposing a way of life based on the autonomy and critical thought of man.

Let us now pass from the individual as a rational human being, or as a person for whom the world was created, to the individual in his relations with others, the community, society. One of the principles of historical Judaism is the individual's responsibility to the group. In Tractate *Berachot* 49/b, Samuel said: ". . .an individual should never exclude himself from the generality." The Gemara here ostensibly deals only with three men invited to say grace after a meal, and the difference between the host saying "Let us bless" and "Bless." But in actual historical tradition, as it came to be explained in the course of generations, the issue acquired a much broader, more social meaning in the spirit of the social morality found, for instance, in Tractate *Taanit* 11/a: "When the group is in trouble, let no man say I will go home and eat and drink and rest my soul. . .but he should sorrow with the group. . ." This feeling of partnership between the individual and society is expressed in Jewish tradition not only for times of trouble. On the contrary, it embodies a general, positive, optimistic and constructive notion of a social structure preserved thanks to a division of labor, and of a social morality enabling that division to operate. We find an expression of this in the Tosephta to Berachot (7:2) and in *Berachot* 58/a in what Ben Zoma says when contemplating the group: "How much effort the first man expended till he found bread to eat. He ploughed, sowed, reaped, tied, threshed, winnowed, sifted and ground. . .and he kneaded and baked, and then ate, and I get up and find it all ready before me; and how much effort the first man expend-

ed till he found a garment to wear; he sheared and bleached, and beat and spun and wove, and then found a garment to wear; and I get up and find it all ready before me. . ." This almost lyric approach to the everyday social situation is implied in the Halachic famework in most areas of daily life – in law, economics, politics, and in Jewish self-government in the Middle Ages, and in fact in all areas of life which systematic anthropology deals with today: birth, adolescence, reproduction, old age and death. However, in all these, tradition issues a warning to preserve the uniqueness of the individual within the group, as an inseparable part of it. In Tractate *Sanhedrin*, Ch. 4, the Gemara explains how to caution witnesses in cases involving people rather than money, and indicates the fateful responsibility they assume in testifying in cases where a man's life is at stake; and most of the explanation revolves around man's unduplicable individuality: ". . .for a man mints several coins with one mould and they are all alike, but the Holy One Blessed Be He mints every man in the mould of the first man, and not one is like another . . . " (Tractate *Sanhedrin*, 37/a). And the sages noted this individuality also in Tractate *Berachot* 58/a when they said: ". . .whoever sees the population of Israel says Blessed be the Omniscient for their opinions are not alike and their faces are not alike. . ."

With all these, various possibilities were presented for a meeting between Judaism and humaism which can enrich education. Such possibilities are created through the interpretation of the sources with new meanings. As educators, our question is, what can the text tell us, us and our pupils and thus "Jephthah in his generation as Samuel in his." Furthermore, the history of humanism which contributed so much to the creation of modern society has taught us that there is no need for us to be bound or restricted by old or obsolete interpretations, for interpretations too are a response to needs or wishes which arose in different times, places and circumstances.

Theoretically, in Judaism there is no institution, no post, no political person or body with the authority to impose an interpretation on anyone unwilling to accept it, or desiring to retain his spiritual, educational and intellectual freedom. In political reality, however, a coercive authority of this kind did evolve. Yet it is doubtful whether it fits in with the essential principles of true education.

One of the chief sources of authority which the traditional interpreters in Judaism appealed to in the past and still appeal to is the Midrash stipulating that on Mount Sinai not only the ten commandments and the Torah were given, but everything said by the prophets and the sages in all ages, for the Holy One Blessed Be He showed Moses "interpretations of the Torah and interpretations of the sages and what the sages are destined to innovate . . . " (Tractate *Megilah* 19/b); and Yerushalmi Tractate *Peah*, 2:4) and similarly Rabbi Akiba also explained that the Torah, its laws and exegeses and explanations were given by Moses on Sinai: (*Sifra* to Leviticus:8). Through those exegiticists, interpretations were accepted and acquired obligatory authority. But the interpretations developed, were modified and changed, and more than once even contradicted each other. This constant renewal is one of the reasons for its great historical vitality. Also Rabbi Yossi Bar Hanina indicated

that there were decrees issued by Moses which the prophets rescinded, so that man himself would learn to bear the responsibility for his actions, for himself (Tractate *Macot* 44/a).

In education and teaching there is not the slightest need to gloss over the essential difference between a theology which considers divinity and its revelations the ultimate authority for all mankind, and humanism which considers man and reason and perhaps experience the source of authority for the cognition of being, for building, and shaping man's universe. On the contrary, it is the living encounter between these two different spheres that may enrich education.

Thus a humanistic approach has the right, or even the duty, of comprehending and explaining tradition anew and liberating pupils from their alienation to the sources. Educationally and morally, thus we learn in tradition, the main thing is not the quantity of precepts and "duties of the limbs," but rather the "duties of the heart" and the establishment of a just way of life; ". . .one the more, and one the less, just that he should direct his heart to heaven" (Tractate *Berachot* 16/b, 17/a).

So humanists who seek to maintain Jewish tradition but without considering the decisions of various rabbis in the course of history to be the only and obligatory or even coercive law are close in spirit to the explanation provided for the question of "whether the Holy One Blessed Be He really cares whether someone slaughters from the throat or from the nape": ". . .the precepts were given only for the purpose of refining people" (*Bereshit Raba* 44) so that the essence of Judaism is its moral force which refines and purifies man.

In conclusion, perhaps most important to us educators interested in a conjunction of Judaism and humanism is the lesson taught by Rabbi Hanina Bar Papa (Tractate *Nida* 17/b) in telling of the angel in charge of pregnancy, called Laila. He takes a drop and places it before the Holy One Blessed Be He, and says, Lord of the Universe, what will this drop become, brave or weak, wise or foolish, rich or poor, but he does not say "evil or righteous." For everything is in divine hands except the fear of God, or in humanistic terms, with all the historical determinism that shapes man so often against his will, the moral decisions are in his hands, and moral responsibility is laid on man and man alone.