

Halakhic Morality
Essays on Ethics and Masorah



*The publication of Halakhic Morality
has been made possible by a grant from
Susan and Barry Liberman
in memory of
their dear parents
Laura and Phillip Braun
Rose and Norman Liberman*

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

HALAKHIC
MORALITY
ESSAYS ON ETHICS
AND MASORAH

EDITED BY

Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler

Toras HoRav Foundation
Maggid Books

Halakhic Morality
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First Edition, 2017

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

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ISBN 978-1-59264-463-6, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

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Preface

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* (1903–1993) was one of the outstanding talmudists of the twentieth century and one of its most creative and seminal Jewish thinkers. “The Rav,” as he is widely known, brought Jewish thought and law to bear on the interpretation and assessment of the modern experience. He built bridges between Judaism and the modern world while vigorously upholding the integrity and autonomy of the Jew’s faith commitment, in particular the commitment to a life governed by Halakhah, Jewish law.

For over four decades, Rabbi Soloveitchik gave the senior *shi’ur* (class in Talmud) at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), affiliated with Yeshiva University. Generations of rabbinical students were taught and inspired by him, among them many of the future leaders of all areas of Jewish communal life. He was the halakhic authority and spiritual leader of the Rabbinical Council of America, founded the Maimonides School in Boston and also served as the chief rabbinic figure in that city (commuting weekly between there and New York). He contributed vitally to the dynamic resurgence of Orthodox Judaism in America.

Although many of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s writings and discourses have been published over the years, much additional material remains

Halakhic Morality

in handwritten manuscripts and tapes. The Toras HoRav Foundation was established by family members and former students to disseminate these and other works, with the aim of enhancing both our grasp of Rabbi Soloveitchik's philosophy and our understanding of the diverse topics he addresses.

This volume presents the Rav's reflections on Jewish ethics. We hope that by experiencing the Rav's rare blend of intellectual sweep and energizing passion, readers will find the Rav's thought an invaluable and integral part of their own spiritual quests.

David Shatz
Joel B. Wolowelsky
Reuven Ziegler
Toras HoRav Editorial Board

Introduction

Rabbi Soloveitchik's own introduction to the section "*Pirkei Avot* and Jewish Ethics" in this volume may serve as an introduction to this collection as a whole:

[A]n investigation and reformulation of practical ethical standards is vitally necessary in every epoch. The halakhic system is basically constant and unalterable.... The *ethos* must be differently conceived. Although its axioms as well as its general principles are of an *a priori* character and are rooted both in the human ethical *logos* and in the great transcendental experience of revelation, the particular norm – the specific ethical act, the detail – was never subjected to a legislative act as was the Halakhah. In the realm of ethics, no institutionalized authority has ever tried to accept or reject an ethical formula. The decision was left open to the individual. While, for instance, all halakhic controversies between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel were resolved in favor of the latter, the ethical problem of *din va-hesed*, strict justice versus mercy, was never solved....

Hence, nowadays a basic investigation of morality and *ethos* would be of great importance. There is a crying need for

clarification of many practical problems, both in the individual-private and in the social-ethical realms. There are too many uncertainties in which we live today, uncertainties about what we ought to do. We should try to infer from our ethical tradition certain standards that should govern our conduct. In particular, I notice confusion among rabbis as regards basic problems whose solution cannot be found in the *Shulhan Arukh* and must rather be inferred by way of deduction from ancient principles and axioms.

I will, therefore, concern myself here with the practical aspect of Jewish morality – problems of *hesed* and *tzedakah*, word and silence, humility and pride, extremism and tolerance, *din* and *emet*, *rahamim* and *shalom*, timidity and arrogance, the duties and prerogatives of the scholar, power and subordination, love and hatred, etc.

In Section I of this volume, the Rav approaches his project with a text in hand: *Pirkei Avot*, mainly as interpreted by *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* and the classical medieval commentators. This section ends with his observation on the “magnificent Jewish tradition of anonymous *tzedakah*, seeking to eliminate indebtedness on the part of the beneficiary to his benefactor.” It continues, in a sense, with an extensive monograph on “*Tzedakah: Brotherhood and Fellowship*,” the first of the volume’s “Aspects of Jewish Ethics.”

The following essay, “Halakhic Morality,” expands upon an idea discussed in the opening essay, namely, the distinction between objective halakhic law and subjective halakhic morality. Toward the essay’s conclusion, the Rav notes that “The morality-*masorah* is not a didactic but an inspirational affair; the master does not teach but influences the pupil. The student ... absorbs it by osmosis and recasts it in his own unique mold.” The unique and individualistic religious styles of various rabbinic greats, and the necessity of developing an individual style while walking on a common halakhic path, are taken up in the following essay. The final essay in the volume is a stirring oration on “Torah and Humility,” delivered by Rabbi Soloveitchik in memory of his wife.



The first stage in preparing the book consisted of deciphering, organizing and ultimately transcribing the Rav's handwritten manuscripts. To accomplish this, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, director of the Toras HoRav Archives, organized and supervised an able and devoted staff, and reviewed all the material.

The Rav had not readied these manuscripts for publication, and some editing was required. The editors selected the manuscripts for inclusion in this volume, divided the essays into sections and provided both section headings and titles for the chapters (other than the chapters "Halakhic Morality" and "Torah and Humility," which were so titled by the author). When necessary, the editors inserted references and furnished transliterations and translations of Hebrew and other foreign-language terms and sources.

- The essays in Section I, "*Pirkei Avot* and Jewish Ethics," are the manuscripts of a course Rabbi Soloveitchik taught at Yeshiva University's Bernard Revel Graduate School in either 1950–51 or 1951–52. This course encompassed an introduction to *Avot* and examinations of the first three *mishnayot* (pp. 3–103 below). The editors supplemented this with two undated manuscripts (probably from the late 1970s) on *Avot* 1:3–4, which begin with the section "Politicization of the *Masorah* Community" and extend to the end of Section I (pp. 103–120 below).
- "*Tzedakah: Brotherhood and Fellowship*" is the manuscript of a course Rabbi Soloveitchik taught at the Bernard Revel Graduate School in the summer of 1953. During the summer session, the Rav would teach in Hebrew, and the Hebrew manuscript was skillfully translated by Joel Linsider z"l.
- "Halakhic Morality" is an undated manuscript.
- "Religious Styles" is a lecture delivered in Boston to the Chevra Shas on March 19, 1972.
- "Torah and Humility" is the manuscript of the Tonya Soloveitchik Memorial Lecture delivered on March 5, 1972.

Many people deserve thanks for their contributions to the production of this volume. Rabbi Yair Kahn provided valuable comments on

the entire volume and carefully reviewed the translation of the essay on *tzedakah* against the original. Rabbi David Fuchs painstakingly prepared a critical Hebrew edition of the *tzedakah* essay. As mentioned, Joel Linsider, of blessed memory, translated the *tzedakah* essay; we mourn his untimely passing. David Strauss edited the *tzedakah* translation and provided translations of a number of Hebrew passages elsewhere in the book. Rabbi Aharon Rakeffet made a number of tape transcripts available to the editors, including that of “Religious Styles.” Professors David Berger, Shnayer Leiman and Richard Steiner generously shared their expertise. Meira Mintz checked the sources and proofread the initial manuscript. Ita Olesker and Nechama Unterman proofread the final manuscript, and Rabbi Dov Karoll prepared the indexes. Matthew Miller and his staff at Maggid Books were characteristically gracious and professional in bringing the book to print. It is a pleasure to extend our thanks to all of these people, and, as always, to Prof. David Shatz.

We express our profound appreciation to the Toras HoRav Foundation for affording us the opportunity to prepare these essays so that a long-waiting public can gain further understanding and appreciation of the Rav’s Torah. We are particularly grateful to Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l* and, *tibbadel le-hayyim*, Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein for their continuing guidance throughout the entire editorial process.

As this volume was being edited, *Am Yisrael* experienced the loss of one of its great leaders and teachers, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l*. Rabbi Lichtenstein fully embodied the themes of ethics and *masorah* elaborated in this volume. He received both the formal halakhic *masorah* and the intimate-personal *masorah* from his great master, Rabbi Soloveitchik *zt”l*, and recast them in his own unique mold. In turn, he tirelessly trained his students, delivering *shi’urim* in Gemara that were breathtaking in their depth, scope and structure, propounding a philosophy that was multifaceted, intellectually honest and yet profoundly inspiring, and, above all, serving for many – even beyond the walls of his *beit midrash* – as a model of personal wholeness, *yir’at Shamayim*, sensitivity, integrity and humility. The members of the Toras HoRav editorial board particularly recall, with gratitude and esteem, how over the years Rabbi Lichtenstein guided and encouraged our joint endeavor of conveying the teachings of the Rav to future generations. May his memory be a blessing.

Part I

*Pirkei Avot and
Jewish Ethics*

Two Dimensions of *Masorah*

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF JEWISH ETHICS

The problem that bothered the Jewish mind since time immemorial was not *why* we ought to act in a certain way – the great question of the Hellenistic, metaphysical mind – but rather *what* we ought to do. We did not raise cosmogonic and metaphysical questions with the same alertness with which we formulated practical problems in the realm of action. The midrashic scholars have even questioned the significance and importance of the story of Genesis (*Yalkut Shim'oni* 187, *Parashat Bo*). The Torah was never considered a book of metaphysics, and hence the fragmentary chapters concerning creation *ex nihilo* appeared incomprehensible.

The first group that displayed a genuine interest in matters of a speculative and metaphysical nature were the mystics, the *Ba'alei ha-Kabbalah* – and even those God-intoxicated and wisdom-thirsty men indulged in the mysteries of being and divinity not out of sheer intellectual curiosity, but for a practical end. They uncovered the mysterious bond between the theo-cosmic and human destiny, and they raised man's action to an event of metaphysical significance that had a bearing upon the dynamics of the universe. Hence, they explored the outer fringes of creation, where the mechanical cyclic occurrence and the boring monotony of repetition end and the free, spontaneous and intelligent divine act begins. They wanted to interpret not the cosmic process, but the role of man in the infinite.

The quest for the great ecstatic experience of divinity as the absolute primordial unity of all things – for the rebirth of the theo-cosmic harmony – is in its very essence an ethical drive for the redemption of God, as it were, and of the world. After the mystical journey into the unknown is accomplished, the mystic returns home with the highest principles of being, the ten *sefrot*. What are they if not the foundation of the ethical universe?

Our “demand” for ethics, therefore, is not concerned with ethical metaphysics but with an ethical Halakhah, a demand for a definite, practical norm that is binding on the conscience – in a word, for an ethical *Shulhan Arukh* rather than an ethical *Moreh Nevukhim*. It is a search for the halakhization of the subjective *ethos*.

What is more, an investigation and reformulation of practical ethical standards is vitally necessary in every epoch. The halakhic system is basically constant and unalterable. Very seldom does it take cognizance of the flux of events and the kaleidoscopic metamorphoses of the environs in which the halakhic norm is realized. The Halakhah is a postulated, impersonal, formal, self-sufficient and bounded-in performance – one which interferes with historical realities and tries to impose its normative and doctrinal authority upon them, rather than an act which grows out of the multifaceted everyday human experience. It is a promulgation of a norm that solves all difficulties once and for all, and lays down beforehand what everyone has to do or refrain from doing in every situation. The changes in the realm of fact do not have a bearing upon the *a priori* halakhic norm, but rather on its application and its technical aspects.

The *ethos* must be differently conceived. Although its axioms as well as its general principles are of an *a priori* character and are rooted both in the human ethical *logos* and in the great transcendental experience of revelation, the particular norm – the specific ethical act, the detail – was never subjected to a legislative act as was the Halakhah. In the realm of ethics, no institutionalized authority has ever tried to accept or reject an ethical formula. The decision was left open to the individual. While, for instance, all halakhic controversies between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel were resolved in favor of the latter, the ethical problem of *din va-hesed*, strict justice versus mercy, was never solved.

Even the objectified ethical norm does not lend itself to halakhic authoritative legislation and promulgation, and this for two reasons. First, the ethical act, whose center of gravity is to be discovered in the inner experience, is too subjective and elusive to be pressed into a certain legislative matrix. Second, the norm and the act do not present linear straightforwardness and constancy. They are, rather, better understood if we see them in the form of a zigzag curve, a unique intimate expression of a living persona woven into the texture of an environment, cultural climate, etc. Devising a bill of particulars and all their ramifications and details would be futile. The performance is not monolithic but diverse, expressing itself in a variety of attitudes owing to the specific *modus existantiae* of the individual lonely being. That is why we find our scholars engaged not in Socratic symposia on the universal idea of the good, but in the elucidation and examination of acute actual problems, of living morality in action instead of abstract morality.

Pirkei Avot, Bahya, Maimonides, R. Yehudah he-Hasid, R. Yonah he-Hasid, R. Avraham he-Hasid, Cordovero, Luzzatto and others did not deal with ethical abstraction but with actualities; instead of formulating a philosophy of the *ethos*, they tried to give us ethical codes consisting of rules of moral behavior. And while they do not differ in the field of Halakhah as to the basic methodology and procedure, their moral treatises manifest a multiplicity of ethical approaches that are at times incommensurate and formulae that reflect individual, personalistic distinctness and incongruity. They think in terms of almost different dimensions, although the point of departure is the same.

Hence, nowadays a basic investigation of morality and *ethos* would be of great importance. There is a crying need for clarification of many practical problems, both in the individual-private and in the social-ethical realms. There are too many uncertainties in which we live today, uncertainties about what we ought to do. We should try to infer from our ethical tradition certain standards that should govern our conduct. In particular, I notice confusion among rabbis as regards basic problems whose solution cannot be found in the *Shulhan Arukh* and must rather be inferred by way of deduction from ancient principles and axioms.

I will, therefore, concern myself here with the practical aspect of Jewish morality – problems of *hesed* and *tzedakah*, word and silence,

humility and pride, extremism and tolerance, *din* and *emet*, *rahamim* and *shalom*, timidity and arrogance, the duties and prerogatives of the scholar, power and subordination, love and hatred, etc. I shall also differentiate between the maxims of pure morality and such rules that were later incorporated into the halakhic code.

However, I am not going to deliver a systematic survey of all these problems without taking recourse to a text. As the basis of our investigation, we will take *Pirkei Avot*, mainly as interpreted by *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* and by the classics of the Middle Ages, Rashi and Maimonides.

META-HISTORICAL CONTINUITY

Let us investigate first the premises upon which *Pirkei Avot* is based. At the very outset, we must analyze the name of this tractate, *Avot*. The Talmud used this term in application to the tractate, which contains ancient ethical dicta and aphorisms: “Whoever wants to be a *hasid*, an ethical personality, must live in conformity with ... the sayings incorporated into *Avot*” (*Bava Kamma* 30a). Usually, the name of a tractate denotes the subject matter with which it deals. Me’iri explained the term *Avot* in a twofold way. First, *Avot* means principles or foundations:

[*Avot* are] things that constitute the basis, foundation, root and essence of all wisdom and every *mitzvah*, and the road and path to every virtue ... All the more so when concealed within it are many foundations of the Torah and roots of faith (Introduction to *Avot*, *Makhon ha-Talmud ha-Yisraeli* edition, p. 10).

Second, *Avot* means fathers. This is the conventional translation:

They alluded to this idea in the name of the book, *Avot*, which teaches that they are things that issued from the fathers of the world, the pillars upon which the edifice of the Torah rests (*ibid.*).

In the introduction to his commentary on *Avot*, Tosefot Yom Tov implicitly accepted Me’iri’s second interpretation, translating *Avot* as “fathers”:

This tractate is called *Avot* because the Sages are truly fathers, as Elisha said of Elijah, of blessed memory: “My father, my father” (II Kings 2:12). And similarly, disciples are called sons.

The *Mahzor Vitri* uses the same explanation.

The crux of this interpretation lies in the first sentence of this tractate, which records the continuum of *masorah*, our tradition. This unique phenomenon, unequalled in historico-cultural annals, is the opening remark of the tractate on ethics. Many theoretical hypotheses were advanced as to why the editor and codifier found it necessary to start this treatise with a public profession of faith in the truthfulness and veracity of the oral tradition. I believe that the genuine motif which prompted the decision is to be found in the unique medium through which the ethical tradition has passed.

There is a double aspect to *masorah*. First, we have the formal halakhic *masorah*, which is in its very nature a dialogue tradition. The master addresses his disciples and opens up to them the treasure of knowledge. There is a gesture of generosity, almost one of grace, on the part of the teacher who lets his disciple share with him the holiest of all possessions – wisdom. Of course, a relationship of mutual love and respect is bound to develop, and it holds teacher and disciple firmly together. The bond which was formed during the discipleship years does not disappear even after teacher and student part. There is something permanent in the teacher-disciple contact which does not terminate with the conclusion of teaching. Yet the relationship, although personal, does not transcend the bounds of objective attachment. The contact is not direct, but is established via the objective medium; teacher and pupil have a common interest. However, this does not imply that the barrier of uniqueness and individuality has been breached. This relationship may spring into existence even when master and disciple have never established direct personal contact, as, for instance, through the medium of books. Maimonides considered Alfasi and R. Joseph ibn Megas as his masters, regardless of the fact that he never met either of them. In such a case, teaching is almost an impersonal dialogue.

It is superfluous to emphasize that this type of *masorah*, one based upon technical teaching and training, is of utmost importance. The Oral Law is a very difficult and complex thought system, a cognitive method

which requires many years of study, a multitude of data that has accumulated over long periods of legislation and interpretation. One must devote a lifetime in order to cope with both the texts and the abstract methodology.

Second, there is the intimate-personal *masorah*. The medium of transmission is not the word, if it is to be understood in its phonetic dimensions, but an experience, a state of mind, a mode of self-manifestation. Man is witness to the will of God, to His norm, and his personality merges with the Torah eidos and quickens it into a personal existence, thus turning himself into a *sefer Torah*, a divine sacred book consisting of all possible personal means of expression at the intellectual, emotional and volitional levels. Such a *masorah* cannot be considered a dialogue, a conversation between the two persons, just as laughter expressing one's happiness or embarrassment or utter despair or crying in the night cannot be treated as a dialogue. Teaching Torah may resemble a conversation, as two people address each other; yet the appearance is misleading. It is rather a monologue. The master addresses, or rather expresses himself, revealing some aspects of his unique personality, and the disciple spies on him and overhears his whisper. The teaching in such a case is not consummated via formulated principles, via memorizing laws and texts, through the transmission of theoretical wisdom, but through life itself. The Oral Law is both Halakhah (walking) and Aggadah (relating or telling); the delivery of the message is realized through walking.

The Torah manifests itself in the unfolding of personal patterns; it finds expression in deeds, in personal resolutions and daring experiments, in moments of joy and despair, in meditation and states of ecstasy. The personal realization is identical with *masorah*; the student learns by observing and watching the gradual revelation of his master's soul in the most intimate and tender moments. As a matter of fact, in the area of ethics and morality, the *hasid* refuses to teach at an abstract-technical level.

Attending to [those who study] Torah is greater than studying [Torah under them], as it is stated: "Here is Elisha the son of Shafat, who poured water on the hands of Elijah" (II Kings 3:11). [In describing the connection between Elisha and his teacher Elijah,] the verse does not say that he studied Torah under him; rather, the verse states that he poured water on his hands (*Berakhot* 7b).

To be Elijah's valet and companion, to watch him and his actions in the daily routine, is more important than to be instructed by Elijah at a technical level.

The *hasid* does not teach formally, for only the most perfect one may teach his fellow men – and who is perfect besides God? The *hasid* acts in full retreat, in solitude and aloneness – for himself, by himself and to himself. The disciple intrudes into the most intimate domain of human experience and tries to emulate. Instead of understanding, he becomes infected with an idea. Instead of maintaining the usual distance separating two existences, the disciple breaks away from himself, through the barrier of uniqueness. To learn, in the sense of *masorah*, means to try to merge with someone else – the master who unknowingly reveals himself to the student.

Man learns from God by imitating Him. The approach to God begins with *imitatio Dei* and ends with an ecstatic yearning for closeness and attachment – *devekut*. The same is true of inter-human relationships at the *masorah*-personal level. The wellspring of the spoken word is not a philosophical exposition, but a living personality who sets up standards and abides by them.

As emphasized above, the ethical personality is shy and reticent. He does not teach, nor does he exhort, nor does he challenge others through a dialogue to abide by his ethical rules. The challenge is a mute one. His modesty and humility spell command. Hence, the master-pupil relationship on the *masorah* level is one of utmost intimacy, of two persons being bound together by a great love in an unparalleled way. Two pairs of glowing eyes, that of the pupil and master, stare at each other and penetrate the veil of guarded privacy. Their mutual knowledge of one another, the desire on the part of the disciple to be near his master, to feel his noble spirit, to become like him, creates a community of existence, a deep-felt and experienced partnership. Master and pupil cannot break away from each other by simply parting company (as is the case on the level of theoretical teaching) or by denying their connection.

At this point, the master becomes the father, the disciple the child. The unique relationship between parent and child comes to expression in many laws, aphorisms and idioms in the Bible. The severity of the punishment for any maltreatment of a parent, which is reminiscent of

the ruthlessness with which the Torah penalizes the idol worshiper or blasphemer, attests to the unique fellowship that prevails between parent and child. The idioms in the Bible, “And he was gathered unto his people” (e.g., Gen. 25:8) and “You shall come to your fathers in peace” (Gen. 15:15), express the singular union of parent and child. The child is gathered into his parent. The parent is more than a mere progenitor on a biological level; he constitutes the ontic support of his child. Similarly, the idea of parenthood applied to God does not spell the causal relationship but rather the fellowship between man and God, the community of existence.

As a matter of fact, the link between father and child is basically different from the one which unites mother and child. A desire for protection and assistance manifests itself in the child’s clinging to his mother. Man’s very survival depends upon motherly care. In the child’s infancy, mother is the provider; without her love, the child would perish. But even later there is the yearning for motherly love, for the caress and warm smile that satisfy one’s need for approval and acceptance. Life is many a time an unfriendly, impersonal and rigid affair. The human soul longs for the soft touch of the loving hand, for the pouring of tenderness into the hard shell in which human existence is encased. Man, lonely and helpless, longs for the company of his mother, for her comforting words and approving glance. That is why God appears to us as mother, since we are dependent upon Him for both our physical well-being, like that of an infant, as well as our mental and moral comfort: “As one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you” (Isa. 66:13); “Surely I have stilled and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother... Israel, hope in the Lord, now and forever” (Ps. 131:2–3).

However, the incessant drive on the part of the child to his father is rooted in a different dimension. Neither acceptance nor comfort is he soliciting from his father. The latter is quite often taciturn as to emotions and stern in his ways and actions. Not in his embrace may the child find the warmth which he misses in life. What keeps the child spellbound to his father is an urge of a strange quality – the urge for discovering the origin, the source, the cause of one’s existence; the crying need for finding one’s roots and moorings; the fear of being chased senselessly like a dry leaf driven by the wind on a dark November night. Love for father may be equated with the love for one’s existence, which attains

its meaningfulness only in the individual awareness of belonging somewhere in the infinite series of being, of having a place within the order of creation, of attachment and closeness, of an existent united with another subject. The absence of this feeling renders one's life void, drifting in empty, endless spaces without purpose and destination. As a child, he feels that he is close to his father, who stands there alongside him and lends him ontic support. This is something irrevocable. Either we hold together or we forfeit our true being. In this sense, we understand the idea of the fatherhood of God. It is not practical helplessness or psychological fear of some tangible danger that drives man to his Father in heaven, but rather ontological weakness and fear that pushes man to God, the root, source and origin of his being.

The idea of the father and son community that transcends mere biological causation applies also to teacher and disciple. The unique aspect in these relationships (father and teacher) is that my personalistic reality – not my physical existence, my existence as an object, but my human existence – is inextricably linked with another existence. I am anchored to some human being who stands there alongside me and who trails me like a shadow. I cannot flee him, nor can I free myself from his magnetic spell over me. He is my parent. This is the meaning of “Whoever teaches his fellow's son Torah is considered by the Torah to have begotten him” (*Sanhedrin* 19a) and “Disciples are considered sons” (*Sifrei Devarim*, 34).

This is also the meaning of *Pirkei Avot*. Ethics is taught by fathers, by those masters who not only teach but captivate, whose magnetic pull we cannot resist, who teach through silence and solitude, who challenge unintentionally and who indissolubly bind our existence to theirs. These are masters with whom we unite and from whom we cannot separate unless we allow the bottom of our existence to fall out and lead a life of loneliness and misery. They transmit their *masorah* tremor to us in the same way that parents pass on their physical traits to their offspring. There is meta-historical continuity, ontic unity and personalistic togetherness. This is the teacher-father idea proclaimed by God to Abraham – “For a father of many nations have I made you” (Gen. 17:5) – which has been formulated in halakhic terms: “The convert may ... recite the text which speaks of ‘*avotenu*, our fathers’” (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Bikkurim* 4:3).

Ethical teaching consists of a living tradition, of the transmission of values not via theoretical learning but through sympathetic understanding and human closeness. The disciple endeavors to act like his teacher. He wants to be him, to realize all values he discovered in the master. It is paradoxical yet true: discipleship is equivalent to an act of re-personification, of reincarnation of the teacher's personality. What happens is nearly miraculous: a transmigration of soul qualities. The pupil shares in the richness emanated by the master. "I will take of the spirit which is upon you and will put it upon them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you" (Num. 11:17). God let the seventy elders share in the spirit which descended upon Moses. They were inspired by him and enjoyed the divine light reflected by his countenance.

Similarly, we read, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit, and lay your hand upon him ... and you shall put some of your splendor upon him'" (Num. 27:18, 20). Moses gave away a part of his glory and honor to Joshua. He invested him with powers that, up to that moment, had been exclusively his, a part of the unique Moses personality. What transpired at the ordination of Joshua was not a mere formal, juridic transfer of authority, but also the passing of singular charismatic qualities from Moses to Joshua, an outpouring of personal charm and grace. A unique personalistic endowment was transmitted from the master to Joshua. The latter reincarnated at the *masorah* level his master's personality. This was symbolized by the ceremony of *semikhah*, by the laying of Moses' hands upon Joshua, a gesture symbolic of passing on something from master to pupil, of merging of both into the common ethical community of *masorah*.

Physical death is somehow defeated by this mysterious flow of one existence into another, by this continuous fulfillment of a great *telos* by a variety of individuals who, in spite of their uniqueness and separateness, join together into one great endeavor. There is unity not only of purpose but also of heart, identification of master and disciple. Hence, tradition serves not only as an information medium, but also as a living community that exemplifies the almost metaphysical relationship of master and disciple, the personal union of minds and hearts. Only within such a continuum is an ethical tradition possible. That is why this tractate is called *Avot*.

Avot 1:1

From Sinai to the Men of the Great Assembly

THE FELLOWSHIP OF MASORAH

Avot begins with a solemn profession of faith in the fellowship of *masorah*:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly (*Avot 1:1*).

Rashi, in his commentary, noted something of great importance in the opening sentence:

Moses received the Torah and taught it to all of Israel, as it is stated: “And Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the Children of Israel” (Deut. 31:22). Why does it say that he transmitted it to Joshua, and not to Elazar and Phinehas or to the seventy elders who prophesied in the camp? Because he wished to transmit it to one who from his youth would deny himself all pleasure in the tents of wisdom and who had acquired a good name in the world. This is Joshua, as it is stated: “Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart out of the tent” (Ex. 33:11).

This is despite the fact that about Phinehas it is written, “The Torah of truth was in his mouth” (Mal. 2:6).

Rashi advances two ideas of paramount significance. First, the performance of *masorah* is not to be identified with teaching. While the latter is a purely pedagogic-dialectic gesture, the former signifies not only a technical act but also spiritual engagement, a personalistic commitment of teacher and pupil. Hence, there is a possibility that the master, in spite of teaching his wisdom to many, selects only one to succeed him in the realm of *masorah*. Moses was the universal teacher of Israel; however, the specific endowment of *kabbalah*, the receipt of the personalistic *masorah*, was transferred to Joshua alone. Second, the act of *masorah* involves a sympathetic relationship between master and pupil expressing itself in a personal union of hearts, in a feeling of loyalty and devotion. In this sentiment of sympathy, the pupil feels the other person “as a bit of himself,” or rather considers himself as a bit of the other person. Devotion to the master implies devotion to a common idea that unites them both.

It is interesting to note that Maimonides concurs:

Even though the Oral Law was not committed to writing, Moses, our teacher, taught the whole of it in his court to the seventy elders. Elazar, Phinehas and Joshua received [the tradition] from Moses. In particular, Moses transmitted the Oral Law to Joshua, who was his disciple, and charged him regarding it (Maimonides, Introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*).

Maimonides draws the same line of demarcation dividing teaching from transmitting, *limmud* from *masorah*. Moses taught the Torah to the seventy elders and to Elazar and Phinehas. However, only to Joshua, who was Moses’ primary disciple, did Moses commit the Oral Law and charge him concerning it. Furthermore, in his table of the oral tradition, Maimonides places Phinehas after Joshua. The Oral Law was delivered to him by Joshua (Eli from Phinehas, Phinehas from Joshua, Joshua from Moses). The teaching of the Oral Law and its commitment to a successor constitute two separate acts. Moses taught the elders. However,

Joshua merited the distinct honor of being chosen as Moses' successor because he was his disciple. In other words, he distinguished himself in being a disciple. The others were also Moses' disciples, but Joshua's relationship was unique and praiseworthy. The succession of *masorah* is determined not so much by intellectual excellence – in this regard Phinehas was superior to Joshua (Rashi, *Avot* 1:1) – as by emotional commitment and a sense of loyalty which spells unity of existence. All this confirms our original contention that *masorah* must be considered on the level of spiritual merger and identification.

In light of this, we begin to understand a few seemingly obscure points. “Moses received (*kibbel*) the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it (*mesarah*) to Joshua” (*Avot* 1:1). Two questions arise: First, why didn't the *mishnah* use the identical term in describing the commitment of the Torah to Moses and by him to his successors? The *mishnah* could have phrased both in either the grammatical form of receiving – “Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and Joshua received it from Moses, etc.” – or in terms of transmitting – “God transmitted the Torah to Moses, and Moses transmitted it to Joshua, etc.” Second, why did the *mishnah* use the metaphor of Sinai and omit the name of God?

Consider our exposition regarding the nature of succession in the realm of *masorah* as a unity of endeavor manifesting itself in a unique *modus existentiae*, in the act of the individual who is insanely enclosed within himself, within his own egocentricity, breaking through the barriers of separateness and merging with another individual. It is self-evident that we cannot take God, the exalted and transcendent One, into such a fellowship. God always remains outside this community. He is the cause and root of everything, but at the same time is beyond everything. In order not to draw God into this ontic union, the *mishnah* operates with the term Sinai. God is the distant cause; His separateness is not affected by the giving of the Law to Moses. Hence, the *mishnah* could not possibly say that God transmitted the Torah to Moses, for God is always outside this continuum.

It is interesting that the table of the *masorah* enumerates (with the exception of Joshua) not individuals, but groups: “Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly.” *Masorah* is a uniting factor, an idea whose

realization spells union of minds, the rhythm of heartbeats; in a word, the *masorah* expresses itself in a community existence. However, this community is not limited by the boundaries of the present, but rather stretches both to the past and into the future as well. It is a unique sort of fellowship that embraces not only the living, but also those who had already passed on and those who have not yet been born.

A covenant of union in antiquity was not limited to the immediate parties involved in the conclusion of the contract; it bound together future generations as well. Biblical man did not discriminate between himself as a person and his offspring. He somehow had the feeling of sameness with the distant future and also with the dim past. Clannist continuity was experienced as personal identity. Biblical man would assume obligations, reach agreements and commit himself to certain norms also on behalf of the unborn generations. "Now therefore, swear to me here by God, that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son, but according to the kindness that I have done you" (Gen. 21:23). The covenant was the medium through which the generations stretched their hands out to each other across the abyss of time. The physical memorial to such a mysterious institution was the *matzevah*, the pillar, which is also called *gal-ed*, the heap of witness (see Gen. 31:44-49).

In Hebrew, the word *edah* denotes community, but its original connotation is equivalent to that of testimonial, memorial, something in the present which is closely knit with the past and the future as well, something that symbolizes the convergence of the "already" and the "not yet" upon the immediate. *Edah* means a fellowship that cuts through many levels of temporal existence and mergers of tenses. One is united with all. The *edah* is a community not in a physical sense – a congregation bounded in by a certain area in space and time – but a community on a metaphysico-historical level, boundless in time, expanding both in the retrospective and prospective directions.

It is quite interesting that halakhic legislation adopted the ancient formula of the covenant institution. It imposes norms and laws upon future generations as well as upon the members of the present community. And let us not forget that the legislative authority does not rest with any particular body, as is the case in all legal systems, but with the

community at large. Any ordinance, although decided upon and passed by the legislative branch (*beit din*), is not effective until it is accepted by the people. A decree on the community is not accepted unless the majority of the community can uphold the practice (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Mamrim* 2:5). As a matter of fact, a precedent set by practice without being formulated by a legitimately constituted court carries almost as much weight as any ordinance formally legislated. On this premise rests the validity of the *minhag*, custom.

In a word, halakhic decrees instituted by each generation are enacted by authority but freely accepted by all of Israel. And yet the universal free acceptance is binding not only on those who committed themselves, but also on those who will be born thousands of years hence.

The answer to this problem lies in the unique concept of community which was evolved by the Bible and which is the foundation of the historic experience expressing itself in the equation of continuity and identity. Moses emphasized this point: "Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath; but with him that stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day" (Deut. 29:13–14). This strange community-*edah* experience is based upon the living ethical tradition, which is realized through personal identification with and commitment to a great idea, the divine message.

We have never lost contact with our heroes and ancestors who lived thousands of years before us. Distant events address themselves to us directly; there is in their appeal a note of immediacy and urgency; we experience their full emotional impact upon us and somehow identify ourselves with them. Abraham to us is not a mythical personality enveloped by the shadows of a dead world, but a "living" person, tangible and real, whose existence is tied into ours and whose deeds have acute relevance for us. He addresses himself to us; we answer him and ask him questions. The atmosphere is not one of cold, detached archeological study and discovery, but one permeated with warmth and intimacy, personal charm, tenseness and expectation. The same applies to Joseph, to Moses and to others. The past somehow is not gone; it is here, converging upon the present and submerging in it; bygone events find their duplicate-appearance in contemporary history, in current happenings.

The “once upon a time” recurs continually. The “then” reemerges in the now all over again and finds therein its fulfillment. Only today the meaning of yesteryear’s occurrences becomes clear. And if this is so, the event of yesterday is woven into the texture of today.

The Halakhah has helped develop such a peculiar time-awareness. We are enjoined to rejoice on Passover not for the sake of celebrating an ancient exodus, but mainly because this drama is being reenacted time and again. We observe our own liberation. “In each generation one is obligated to see oneself as if he himself had been freed from Egypt” (*Pesahim* 116b). We mourn every year the destruction of the Temple, and the halakhic dictum has prescribed mourning after this distant event equal in scope and intensity to the emotional distress caused by the untimely death of a beloved member of the family. “Thus was the custom of R. Yehudah the son of Rav Illai: On the afternoon before Tish’ah be-Av, they would bring him dry bread with salt, and he would sit between the oven and the stove, and there eat his dry bread, and he would drink with it a container of water – and he resembled one whose deceased relative is lying before him” (*Ta’anit* 30a–b). Personally feeling the presence of a nineteen-hundred-year-old calamity is required by the Halakhah.

We may point to our Aggadah, which has an enormous grip over us, and ask what is its modern equivalent. As a matter of fact, the Jewish sermon is organized along a standard pattern. Since the times of the Midrash, we take current events and problems and place them in biblical perspective. In other words, we identify an occurrence of the present with a similar event in the past and we interpret them in symbolic terms that serve as archetypes of our historical drama. This method is still the most creative one in the field of sermons. I wish to emphasize that *derush* does not consist of homilies and metaphors, as the name homiletics suggests. It introduces biblical and talmudic motifs not for the sake of illustration, but because we want to understand events as belonging to a fixed order and as parts of a great historic drama whose structural designs have been prepared thousands of years ago. The past is the framework into which the present is cast, and, on the other hand, it is in the present that the past begins to crystallize into some meaningful patterns.

Nahmanides developed this idea into a philosophy of the history of our people; for instance, he calls Genesis “the book of creation,” both of nature and of the archetypes of our historical destiny (see the introduction to his commentary to Exodus). We believe that although the historical stage and its decorative motifs from time to time undergo basic changes, and in spite of the fact that the actors playing their historical roles are differently disguised, the drama enacted is very old. Of course, we are far from accepting the myth of repetition of events, of continuous completions of circular movements. To us, history signifies advancement, conquest, ascent, creativity; yet the arrangement of things, the meaningfulness of events, becomes clear to us only when placed in retrospect. This approach, however paradoxical, is a result of our existential community awareness, which is more than mere cognizance of the fleeting moment. It stretches into all tenses and unites us with all fellow believers in the ultimate goal, regardless of the evanescence of human physical existence. This is how the Jewish people have defeated death not only at a transcendental level, but also within the historical dimension. The *masorah* community is an immortal one, a community of the committed.

ANONYMITY AND COMMUNITY

The anonymity of the *hakhmei ha-masorah*, the sages of the *masorah*, is very characteristic. The *masorah* community is everything; the individual, however great and saintly, can not and must not separate himself from the community. He is always a servant to the cause and to the people who identified themselves with the cause-ideal. Nobody is prominent enough to become a central figure, outshining others and self-sufficient unto himself. A scholar is not an independent entity but rather one to whom the community lays claims. He belongs to it and can never emancipate himself from the community's hold over him. Torah cannot be learned and understood in isolation, and the *masorah* is far from being a technical coalescence of individuals who just pass on their wisdom to each other.

Judaism, of course, believes in the creative role of an individual, the uniqueness of the human personality made in the image of God. Yet, it violently disagrees with the Robinson Crusoe figure that

dominated the imagination of the period of Enlightenment. The latter believed in “the idea of the self-sufficient individual, to whose existence the coming of a second and third individual does not essentially bring anything new,” and therefore saw the emergence of the community within the framework of the social contract (Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* [London, 1937], p. 297). However, God has declared from the first morning of creation that a lonely existence is not good (Gen. 2:18) – and an individual existence is always a lonely one, notwithstanding the manifold relationships one maintains by virtue of the social contract. The dwelling together because of a contractual arrangement does not affect the ontological status of the individual. The pertinence of such being together does not transcend the bounds of the *pragmos* and utility. It can never become an existential community, which should redeem the individual from his being alone that is “not good.” On the other hand, Judaism also rejected the Romantic theory of the community as an organism that is present wherever an individual existence develops.

Man, according to the story of Genesis, was created alone; therefore, the singular existence precedes coexistence. Man is lonely because he was created in the image of God, who is the loneliest Being because He is the only One, negating any other existence as such. In man’s loneliness is hidden his most creative capacity – his spiritual personality. Man is creative as an individual, as a being who is unique, different, indispensable and one-timely. No one else can perform in the same manner; no one is like him. On the other hand, man is driven to share his destiny with others, to organize a communal existence not because of utilitarian motifs, but due to an inner anxiety which stems from the depths of a soul craving for a full existence, for a being that is complete. Existential loneliness is great in its being tragic; it is a blessing and a curse at the same time.

Judaism apparently operates with two contradictory ideas: the existential primacy of the individual’s lonely existence on the one hand, and, on the other, the ethical disapproval of such an existence and the yearning for a communal form of being, of uniting not interests and actions but entities, of creating unities of meaning in one ontic community. This is symbolized by the creation of Eve – man’s adventurous

undertaking to surrender to the thou his aloneness, separateness and otherness and to establish himself within a new framework of reality. This exceeds by far the biological factor involved in the intersexual relationship, the problem of “*zakhar u-nekevah*,” male and female. That is why the first account of creation of man as a bisexual body, *zakhar u-nekevah bara otam* (Gen. 1:27), does not in the least contradict the story of the emergence of Eve, since the latter appeared not just as a female alongside Adam the male, but also as a woman beside Adam the man. It is not the need for sexual cohabitation, a natural phenomenon, that is emphasized in the narrative about the creation of Eve, but rather the craving for a community of existences, for fellowship at an ontic level. “That is why a man leaves his father and his mother, and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

Nahmanides already noticed this pertinent point in the story of Genesis. Let us review the few cryptic sentences dealing with the creation of the woman:

The Lord God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help to match him.” And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field, but for the man there was not found a help to match him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon man ... And the man said, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man” (Gen. 2:18–23).

What is incomprehensible in this story is the sudden shift from, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone,’” to the account concerning the man’s classification of the zoological kingdom. The latter has *prima facie* very little in common with the creation of the woman. For the sake of preserving the continuity of the narrative, the Torah should have left out two sentences and begun right away, “And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon man.”

The key to understanding this strange arrangement of the text lies in the Torah's characteristic approach to man. Man is more than a physical animal; he is a person, an individual – unique and lonely. God had pronounced the maxim, “It is not good that man should be alone,” implying the great truth of loneliness, which is tantamount to uniqueness. His individual existence could be placed only against and alongside an existence that was as singular as his:

In my opinion, however, the “calling of the names” is identical with the “help,” and the purport thereof is as follows: The Holy One, blessed be He, brought before Adam all the beasts of the field and all the fowl of the heavens, and he, recognizing their nature, called them names, that is, names appropriate to them ... And among them he did not find a natural help for himself so that it could be called by his name, for the calling of the names signifies the division of the species ... It is correct to say that it was His will, blessed be He, not to take Adam's rib from him to make him a wife until he himself would know that among the created beings there is no help suitable for him and until he would crave to have a help suitable for him like her. This is why it was necessary to take one of his ribs from him. This is the meaning of the verse, “But for Adam there was not found a help to match him” ... and she was called by his name (Nahmanides, Gen. 2:20).

Judaism has always been faced with the dichotomy of loneliness and community. Both are genuine forms of existence, while both are mutually exclusive. Communal existence becomes an ethical end, a goal which not only cannot but must not be fully realized, since complete realization would spell the doom of existential loneliness, which has been willed by God. The relationship between the lonely person and the community expresses itself in ambivalence – daunting and fascinating. Man feels wretched and helpless in his utter existential aloneness and otherness; he craves to set himself up within a new existential context, to participate in a supra-personal existence, in a community. Yet while realizing his yearning partially, he suddenly becomes aware of his own ontic richness and originality, of which he

cannot divest himself, and he retreats from the communal coexistence into his lonely mono-existence.

The *masorah* has indeed reckoned with this ambivalent relationship between individual and community. The passing on of the Oral Law is, as I emphasized above, not a technical gesture; it implies more than that. It spells fellowship and personal union, the commitment and total dedication of the many to a single purpose. The *hakhmei ha-masorah* formed a community, not only in a sociological sense but also within a higher order, a community of the committed, of those who personify the Torah eidos, who carry the historic and metahistorical burden of *masorah*, who tried to abandon the barriers of the uniqueness and inapproachability and “blend” into one *masorah* community their talents, thoughts and feelings – in a word, their personal existences. Of course, they could not make that miraculous leap from complete loneliness to full communal being, since it is both undesirable and impossible, and they returned from time to time to their lonely existences, retreated into themselves, into their mysterious realms of absolute aloneness and inwardness. *Hakhmei ha-masorah* have been engaged in a double movement – on the one hand, toward the outside, breaking through the hidden introspective personality and its segregating barrier of individualism toward uniting with others through self-expression, self-revelation and incursion into new existential realms; and, on the other hand, the backwards movement toward an inexpressible, mute and lonely existence, to the tranquility of a hermit-like mono-existence whose only companion is God: the flight of the lonely one to the Lonely One. Each *hakham ha-masorah* gives a part of himself to others, yet cannot succeed in giving himself up completely.

We observe this ambivalent behavior in the life of Moses. We find him in retreat and in the crowd, fleeing from the repose of a separate and all-exclusive existence to the people, addressing himself to, establishing intimate relationships with, and pouring his personal graces into their dull and wretched lives, passing on the word which has a part of his life itself. “Moses gathered all the congregation of the Children of Israel together and said to them: “These are the words which the Lord commanded”” (Ex. 35:1). “You stand this day all of you before the Lord your God, your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with

all the men of Israel ... from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water” (Deut. 29:1–2). Moses joins the community, merges with it and submerges into it. However, we also see him retiring to his lonely tent, which was put up far from the camp. “Moses would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp” (Ex. 33:7), and there he escapes the community, the public, and in the great loneliness of primordial creation, he finds the Lonely One. “And it came to pass, as Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the Tent, and He talked with Moses” (Ex. 33:9). God is alone and He addresses Himself to the one who found himself in loneliness.

Therefore, we encounter in the annals of the *masorah* something paradoxical – the lack of biographical data. We know almost nothing about the Men of the Great Assembly; the whole institution is shrouded in mystery and anonymity! What has history recorded of the great lives of other *hakhmei ha-masorah*, of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, of Rabbeinu ha-Gadol, of Rav, of Shmuel, of Rashi? Our knowledge consists of fragmentary details that have reached us incidentally, mostly in connection with the passing on of halakhic material! (R. Yohanan ben Zakkai’s encounter with Vespasian was recorded because our Sages felt that the narrative about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem must be told to future generations. Since the Halakhah has decreed mourning for the Temple and the holy city, it was necessary to perpetuate the episodes of the calamity that had befallen our people at that time. That is why the Talmud has related to us some of the horrors of the *hurban*. Otherwise, we would not have known of the whole meeting that took place between Vespasian and R. Yohanan. If we are to relive these events, we must be acquainted with them.)

While, for instance, Christianity has developed a comprehensive literature concerned with the lives of its saints, Judaism has displayed many a time an almost annoying unconcern and disregard for the destiny of its heroes, builders, teachers and sages. While we know a great deal about Aristotle, for instance, we know so little about Shimon the Just. Whereas we know so much about Voltaire, we hardly know anything concerning the Ba’al Shem Tov. We possess no information about the lives of scholars who lived as late as the second half of the nineteenth century. That this is not just a coincidence or due to a lack of historical

sense but rather due to a philosophy is confirmed by the ancient formula of “Moses received,” which, instead of enumerating individuals, speaks of groups and movements: elders and prophets, the Men of the Great Assembly. The tendency to ignore the individual name and to cast light upon the community is as old as the *masorah* itself.

The reason for this peculiar treatment accorded the individual is clear. Under whatever aspect we would consider his life – either the aspect of complete surrender and commitment to the community or that of the unaffected, lonely self – there is no need to take public note of him. As a member of the community, he submerges in it; self-effacement is the appropriate attitude on the part of the *hakham ha-masorah*. He is a servant to this people, and in this role, the scholar cannot pretend to be a central figure or claim historical gratitude. This service is accepted like the service of a soldier; his name remains unknown forever. Important is the scholar as a bearer of eternal truths, and as such, he has joined the community of the committed and disappeared in it. The historic continuum is relevant; the singular facets and dimensions are not. What he had, he has given away to his disciple. On the other hand, the scholar as an individual, a self, a lonely being who can never redeem himself from his strangeness in the world of coexistence – he is outside the *masorah* community, and hence holds no interest for us. Within the peculiar order of uniqueness, in the eternal flight from loneliness to the Lonely One, man finds himself outside historic existence and therefore does not lend himself to historical recording.

That is why our Sages have always emphasized that the disciple is permitted to share only a small fraction of his master’s wisdom; the major part of the treasure remains hidden from the inquisitive eye of the pupil, since self-expression reveals only one aspect of the personality as it moves toward merger and a united existence. As soon as the disciple begins to come closer to the teacher, as soon as glances begin to meet and souls to address each other, the veil of mystery descends and the teacher begins to retrace his steps. That is exactly what *Hazal* meant when they said that Moses acquired his radiant countenance while writing the Torah (Deut. Rabbah 3:12), and what R. Eliezer thought when, a few hours before giving up his soul to his Maker, he said to his disciples:

I have learned much Torah, yet I have skimmed from my teachers' knowledge only as much as a dog laps from the sea. I have taught much Torah, but my students have drawn from my knowledge only as much as an applicator that is dipped in a tube of eye-powder (*Sanhedrin* 68a).

After decades of teaching, instructing, imparting living knowledge and personal charm, guiding and drawing one's students toward oneself, toward more intimate communal existence, the master departs from them a lonely, unknown figure. The pupils cannot hold out in the abundance of light which the master's face emanates, and the latter dons a mask. "When Aaron and all the Children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him ... and he put a veil on his face" (Ex. 34:30, 33).

The fact that the Halakhah recognizes the model of the *talmid haver*, the disciple-colleague, does not contradict our main thesis. The disciple may surpass the master in intellectual excellence and even in knowledge; yet this attainment is not due to the complete self-revelation of the master, but to the phenomenal ability of the disciple to absorb, retain and assimilate wisdom from many sources and to develop new methods of research.

Very characteristic is the following *mishnah*:

And why do we mention the words of Shammai and Hillel [only in order] to set them aside? To teach future generations that a person should not insist on his opinion, for even the patriarchs of the world did not insist on their opinions.

And why do we mention the opinions of an individual among the majority, since in any case the Halakhah does not accord with him but rather with the opinion of the majority? So that if a court prefers the opinion of the individual, it may rely upon him (*Eduyot* 1:4–5).

The principle of anonymity assumes here paradoxical proportions. The *mishnah* is puzzled by the fact that a minority opinion is recorded even though the Halakhah has accepted the opposite point of view. Such

a generous gesture on the part of the *masorah* is only due to practical reasons: it either implies a moral lesson or may affect halakhic legislation. Otherwise, we would not know a single scholar by name and his viewpoint would have been completely forgotten. Greater self-effacement has not been recorded in history.

The individual – when he comes the nearest to the *masorah* community and merges his destiny with that of his brethren, communicating to them something of his unique, hidden being, passing on not only formal but living wisdom, inspiring them with a great passion and a deep love, instilling in them emotions and cravings – becomes an idea, an archetype, an ideal, a supra-individual, in which everybody takes his share. Since the individuality is transposed into an idea, the name of this particular person is irrelevant. On the other hand, the individual, in his backward movement from the community to himself, represents the antithesis of historical existence. In such an instance, he takes himself out of the historical order, which is synonymous with the flow of the stream of events within the communal bed. As such, his life has no pertinence for history and does not have to be recorded; it is beyond the reach of the historian since it is unique and inaccessible, concealed from the inquisitive eye of the outsider.

Even the lives of the patriarchs and prophets have not been recorded fully in the Bible. Our knowledge of them is fragmentary and meager. The Pentateuch has not passed on to us any information about the life of Abraham before he reached the age of seventy-five and departed for the land of Canaan, and even from this point on, the Bible did not write the full life story of Abraham, but relates to us single episodes that remain incomplete. Our curiosity is only the more stimulated; the unknown outstrips the known and comprehensible. The same is true of Isaac. Moreover, of him we know so little, and what we know has been presented to us in such a unique way, that the whole figure is shrouded in mystery. And what about the greatest of all prophets, Moses? We are acquainted with one incident of his youth, the encounter with the Egyptian and his flight to Midian, and then we meet him again at the Mount Horev when he reached the ripe age of eighty. What happened during this transitional period, in the course of which an Egyptian prince became a fugitive from the law, a son-in-law

of a Midian priest, an ordinary shepherd who suddenly met God while tending to his flock? If we knew about these years, which embrace a full lifespan, we would better understand later events in Moses' life. Yet the Torah has suppressed any biographical data concerning sixty or more years of an active life.

All the Torah is interested in are those events that form the juncture at which the individual meets the community and commits himself to its destiny and ultimate end. The lives of Abraham, Isaac and Moses have historical relevance in oneness with *Keneset Yisrael*; however, the same heroes, though they were the fathers and architects of our people, are outside our historical consciousness, which is a community awareness, if seen in their existential solitude and privacy, in the sanctum of uniqueness and exclusiveness. The individual in exile from the community, alone and for himself, severs his relationships and bonds with everybody. He meets only himself – and, of course, his Creator, since then and only then he discovers his affinity with God.

The biblical and *masorah* heroes must be treated under a double aspect. First, they are treated as ideas, or rather ideals, as hypostasized abstractions, setting standards of conduct – these ideas have been crystallized into a living personality who succeeded in emerging from the shadows of ontic seclusion and joining others in a great venture of living together and coexisting. Second, they are treated as individuals who could not free themselves from the ontic confinement into which their Creator cast them. However hard they tried to liberate themselves from the shackles of otherness, incommensurability and non-conformity, they failed to tear down the Jericho walls surrounding their lonely existence and resigned themselves to the fate of living for themselves, within themselves and by themselves. There is the universal Abraham and also the individual Abraham, Moses within the community and Moses in his tent far away from the people. They were great in both roles. Yet, while in their first role they have been perpetuated in history, in their second one they became a great enigma, an unknown being, a *persona abscondita*, who is mysterious and incomprehensible.

God Himself is experienced in this dual role – as *Deus Revelatus*, sharing His existence with others, keeping us company, omnipresent and all-enveloping, and, on the other hand, as numinous and dreadful,

unapproachable and hidden. The same psalmist sings and recites, “The heavens manifest the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork” (Ps. 19:2) – His will and wisdom are discernible everywhere – and, “Awake, why do You sleep, O Lord, arise, cast us not off forever; why do You hide Your face?” (Ps. 44:24–25); “You have covered Yourself with a cloud, so that prayer should not pass through” (Lam. 3:44).

THE MEN OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY

The sayings of *Avot* are not just pearls of wisdom, beautiful aphorisms that the Sages formulated incidentally at one time or another. Rather, they represent cardinal maxims, a digest of the philosophy characteristic of the authors. Thus, the three maxims that originated with *Anshei Keneset ha-Gedolah*, the Men of the Great Assembly, and which the *Tanna* placed at the very beginning of *Avot*, give us the synopsis of their philosophy and the sum total of their great historical accomplishments. “They said three things: ‘Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and make a hedge for the Torah’” (*Avot* 1:1).

Of course, the chronology, form and constitution of such a Great Assembly are obscure. We know very little about them and their activities. However, their accomplishment stands out as a singular contribution toward Jewish survival. They introduced the new concept of community based upon historico-halakhic commitment rather than upon political premises like statehood or other concrete manifestations of a sociological grouping. The historic experience was expanded into an ageographic, apolitical, asocial consciousness. It became boundless in time and space, an experience of unity with the committed ones of all generations whose consecration to an idea, to a specific *modus existantiae*, a way of existing, a singular form of communing with God, is unqualified. They accomplished the improbable, perhaps the impossible – the survival of a nation and a people within a historical continuum of spirit.

The prophets were divine messengers who were charged with a specific task, delineated and circumscribed by God. No departure was tolerated and complete conformity was demanded. The prophets were not free people who could reach their own decisions. They acted according to divine dicta. Their immediate concern was not the present but the distant future. With the exception of isolated episodes, Isaiah, Jeremiah

and others always beheld the messianic vision. They prophesied the *aharit ha-yamim*, the last days, the days of fulfillment and complete realization which will bring about the merger of the *masorah* community with that of the *politeia* – the establishment of the Divine Kingdom, *Malkhut Shamayim*. They developed the blueprint of messianic aspirations and eschatological anticipations. They formulated our ideals and organized our scale of values, the axiological hierarchy; they pointed to our final destination and great destiny, and assured us of our ultimate success in our perennial march.

Yet the task of organizing the present, of creating a community capable of carrying on the historic work and of surviving superhuman odds, was left to the scholars, who were free in their decisions and guided by practical wisdom and the needs of the hour. Hence, while the prophets challenged the people to build the *Malkhut Shamayim* and to continually and gradually move toward this goal, the scholars began to exercise a different calling. It was not only to reveal to the people the distant objective, but to chart the course of the present, to put them into a historical mold out of which they emerged as a spiritual community, bound together not by political ties, but by an existential all-awareness – as a fellowship with law within itself, not outside of itself, pushing forward from different directions toward the great goal set by the prophets. The Talmud relates that there were among the members of the Great Assembly many prophets (*Megillah 17b*), yet they participated in the role of scholars, not in the role of messengers of God. After all, what good would have come out of prophecy if the *masorah* community had not been organized by the Men of the Great Assembly?

The prophets did not succeed in protecting Israel from disintegration and destructive assimilation in its short sojourn in Babylonia. We know the pitiful state of affairs in which the exiles in Babylonia found themselves after the termination of the divinely decreed seventy-year period of exile. Yet we also know of the fortitude and heroism of the people after the destruction of the Second Commonwealth and their triumph over all despots and demagogues who tried to obliterate Jewish distinctness. The Men of the Great Assembly were responsible for such a miracle. While biblical Israel associated the community ideal with concrete forms of political or social existence, the Jews of the Second