

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

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Abstract. The relation of the individual Jew to the community and to the world at large has been occupying the minds of thinkers throughout the ages, from biblical to modern times. Over the centuries Jews have been variously referred to as a congregation, a nation, children of Israel or even a kingdom, all implying a connection among people. A sense of community, that always has been the defining characteristic of the Jewish identity, can be translated into a distinctive concept, which describes the feeling of belonging and commitment to the Jewish people and which serves as the primary organizing structure of Jewish life.

In mainstream understanding community is “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common”. English Oxford Living Dictionaries offer several specifications to this definition, including: 1.4 “the people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities; society.” (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016). The Jewish community can be determined through adding the number of its distinctive features to the above-mentioned notion. Some distinguished attributes can be found in this Talmudic statement: “A talmid haham [Torah scholar] is not allowed to live in a city that does not have these 10 things: a beit din that metes out punishments; a tzedakah fund that is collected by two people and distributed by three; a synagogue; a bath house; a bathroom; a doctor; a craftsman; a blood-letter; (some versions add: a butcher); and a teacher of children” (Sanhedrin 17b). Thus, the concept of community means that it must provide for all spiritual and physical needs of its members. Contemporary authors refer to elaboration of philosophical views on the nature of social relationships and give opinions of two Enlightenment philosophers John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Locke estimates a human being as a rational creature, and the social contract is thus intended to maximize what people can do together. Hobbes regards a human being as vulnerable essence therefore, the social contract is intended to protect the self. Modern authors contrast their opinions with the Jewish tradition, where a human being is viewed as created “in the image of God”, thence the community’s mission is

to allow people to fulfill mitzvot – obligations, which in its turn is intended to perfecting the human being and the world. The members of Jewish community are constantly reminded of their covenantal relationship with God and each other, so the essence of social relationship is the responsibility to respond, which, as Rabbi David Wolpe notes, is “the spine of Judaism”. Referring to the Torah, every Jew is commanded to participate in communal affairs and should respond to this demand with enthusiasm. They urge not to invest all of one’s efforts into business activities aimed at gaining wealth, but to spare some time for daily studying on individual and family levels. Such pursuit of knowledge, peculiar to the Jewish tradition and passed from generation to generation, results in appreciation of the invisible treasures of the mind, which is beneficial in multiple directions for: 1) the individual, as an opportunity to have an intellectually satisfying life; 2) the family, as a contribution to a warm and stimulating ambience; 3) the community, as an inspiration and enhancement of its total erudition. The view of the relationship between an individual and community is constantly evolving, and scholars are now approaching the issue of strong commitment to self-determination and individual freedom vs obedience to the Law within the historically covenanted community. Jewish thought seeks to achieve a balance between the needs of the individual and those of the community.

Keywords: Jewish communal life concept, autonomy, mitzvot as “the spine of Judaism”

Introduction

The relation of the individual Jew to the community and to the world at large has been occupying the minds of thinkers throughout the ages, from biblical to modern times. Over the centuries Jews have been variously referred to as a congregation, a nation, children of Israel or even a kingdom, all implying a connection among people. A sense of community, that always has been the defining characteristic of the Jewish identity, can be translated into a distinctive concept, which describes the feeling of belonging and commitment to the Jewish people and which serves as the primary organizing structure of Jewish life.

Objectives

In mainstream understanding community is “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common”. English Oxford Living Dictionaries offer several specifications to this definition, including: 1.4 “the people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities; society.” (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016). The Jewish community can be determined through adding the number of its distinctive features to the

above-mentioned notion. Some distinguished attributes can be found in this Talmudic statement: “A talmid haham [Torah scholar] is not allowed to live in a city that does not have these 10 things: a beit din that metes out punishments; a tzedakah fund that is collected by two people and distributed by three; a synagogue; a bath house; a bathroom; a doctor; a craftsman; a blood-letter; (some versions add: a butcher); and a teacher of children” (Sanhedrin 17b). Thus, the concept of community means that it must provide for all spiritual and physical needs of its members.

Arnold M. Eisen, chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America distinguishes three levels of community: 1) the local Jewish community; face-to-face community built on the basis of clear and present needs ... and held together primarily by the cement of personal connection linking each person and his or her re'a, or neighbor; 2) global, it comprises the Jewish people as a whole; 3) the “middle-range” level consists of local groups – synagogues, cultural organizations, regional authorities (Eisen, A.M., 1999).

Methodology

Rabbi Louis Jacobs allocates the same levels, which he designates as Tzibbur, Kehilah and 'Am Yisrael and offers an example of Anglo-Jewry to explain this classification: “An individual may belong to a particular synagogue, to which he pays membership dues [Tzibbur], and the synagogue may be affiliated to a particular movement, Orthodox or Reform or Liberal or Masorti [Kehilah]. Each individual Jew is, in turn, part of the wider Anglo-Jewish community, represented by the Board of Deputies. As a Jew, he is also a member of the Jewish people with duties and responsibilities to Jews everywhere [‘Am Yisrael] but especially in the State of Israel, which, of course, has its own national structures.” (Jacobs, L., 1992: 31).

Jewish communities of all levels, even though they are non-homogeneous and embrace a wide diversity of opinions and needs, are endowed with particular strength – to bring people together despite the unwillingness to sacrifice their autonomy. This ensures the unity of the Jewish people and their close bond with traditions.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his column in the Yiddish daily ‘Der Tog Morgen Journal’ (November 19, 1954) draws attention to unity as a basic principle in Judaism, which is framed in one sentence “You are One, Your Name is One, and who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth?” (the Shabbat Minhah Amidah). (Soloveitchik, J.B., 2006: 33). Soloveitchik highlights the unity of Jewish people as members of a spiritual-religious entity tied through a unique Jewish way of life and tradition, a common past and a collective future. He calls it a “great testimony” and believes, that

nothing, but erasing this testimony from one's memory, can break the tie with the Jewish community.

Referring to prerequisites of this principle of unity, Soloveitchik marks, that it is based "upon the conclusion of the covenant in Egypt, which occurred even prior to the giving of the Torah at Sinai." (Helfgot, N., 2005: 145). He gives a quote from Exodus 6:7: "And I shall take you unto me as a nation, and I shall be unto you a God". This covenant predetermines one collective fate for the whole Jewish nation and so far as this nation includes all Jews, none of them can renounce his part of the unity.

Contemporary view

Ron Wolfson refers to elaboration of philosophical views on the nature of social relationships and gives opinions of two Enlightenment philosophers John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Locke estimates a human being as a rational creature, and the social contract is thus intended to maximize what people can do together. Hobbes regards a human being as vulnerable essence therefore, the social contract is intended to protect the self. Wolfson contrasts their opinions with the Jewish tradition, where a human being is viewed as created "in the image of God", thence the community's mission is to allow people to fulfill mitzvot – obligations, which in its turn is intended to perfecting the human being and the world (Wolfson, R., 2013). According to the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, "from the moment of birth we are obligated to each other by this system of mitzvot, which means not rights, but responsibilities." (Handelman, S., 1990: 62). The members of Jewish community are constantly reminded of their covenantal relationship with God and each other, so the essence of social relationship is the responsibility to respond, which, as Rabbi David Wolpe notes, is "the spine of Judaism".

Samson Raphael Hirsch asserts, referring to the Torah, that every Jew is commanded to participate in communal affairs and should respond to this demand with enthusiasm. Replying to the question "How and to what extent an average Jew, who's got no particular authority, influence or spare time, should contribute to the community?", Hirsch recounts the pilgrimage of Elkanah and Hannah and emphasizes their spirit, presenting them as a role model to follow, which requires understanding, achieved in its turn through learning. He urges not to invest all of one's efforts into business activities aimed at gaining wealth, but to spare some time for daily studying on individual and family levels. Such pursuit of knowledge, peculiar to the Jewish tradition and passed from generation to generation, results in appreciation of the invisible treasures of the mind, which, according to him, is beneficial in multiple directions for: 1) the individual, as an opportunity to have an intellectually satisfying life; 2) the family, as a contribution to a

warm and stimulating ambience; 3) the community, as an inspiration and enhancement of its total erudition (Hirsch, S.F., 1997).

Hirsch stresses the communal gain, saying, that every Jew has not only the obligation to learn, but likewise to observe the mitzvot with equal fervor, and when the entire congregation is knowledgeable and gathers to translate good purposes and resolutions into reality, then, as soon as an opportunity for action arises, the good cause will be able to draw on a concerted effort with results far above those to be expected from the endeavors of any individual.

Discussion

Insisting on the active, rather than passive, involvement of each member in the community life, Hirsch cites as an argument a typical of his time trend, which remains relevant nowadays. It is common to consider sufficient to cover some communal expenses by paying a membership fee, but to dedicate time, interest and effort to certain endeavors of the community runs counter to the modern life. He says, "Indeed, the religious affairs do not have even the remotest link with the pursuits by which we earn our livelihood." Therefore, many functions fall entirely on "clergy", the rabbis and other "religious professionals", which, as stated by Hirsch, is a tragic mistake, as long as the responsibility for the religious affairs of the community is a part of sacred duties of every Jewish individual. "It is not to the rabbis and boards of directors but to the community, to the Kehillath Yaakov, that God has entrusted His Torah as an inheritance or, as the Sages put it, as a betrothed bride", he writes, thus it is not with an individual Jew or a few prominent figures, but with the entire Jewish community, that God made the covenant. "Therefore, the first prerequisite for the fulfillment of God's Law is a community that is dedicated to Him," Hirsch continues. Accordingly, it is up to the whole community to fulfill the highest objectives, which implies, that the highest values are those, that the individual can only enjoy being not alone, but within the community, as part of an entity. This policy forms a special incredibly strong bond between the Jewish community and its members.

Characterizing an ideal relationship between an individual and community, Jacobs specifies that a person, paying homage to the congregation, should be guided not by selfish and mercantile, but by spiritual motives, taking it as a service rendered to God. To illustrate that such sincere dedication is in divine favor and, as stated in Mishnah, it will be rewarded, he gives a quote from tractate Avot ('Ethics of the Fathers'), attributed to Rabban Gamaliel: "Let all who labour with the community labour with them for the sake of Heaven [i.e. not in order to gain power over others]. For the merit of their fathers is their support, and their righteousness stands for ever. And as for

you [who work for the community] I grant you reward [God says] as if you had done it [on your own without the support given through the merit of their ancestors].” (Jacobs, L., 1992: 33).

After stating the need to work for the community, as above, Gamaliel continues with: “Be cautious in your dealings with the government, for they do not make advances to a man except in their own interest. They seem like friends at the time when it is advantageous for them, but they do not stand by man when he is in trouble.” (Jacobs, L., 1992: 34). Unlike the government, which fails to operate under the utopian ideals, brought forward by Plato in his ‘Republic’, the Jewish community foremost is aimed to supply the physical and communal needs of its members and therefore is furnished to make it possible, comprising of all parts listed in the Talmud. Hence, the Plato’s concept of state as the incarnation of justice turns out to be abstract, the Jewish concept of tzedakah emerges as very pragmatic. As the community is equipped with all the resources needed, it should provide support to its vulnerable members upon request and foster individual well-being materially, morally and intellectually full time. The aforementioned Talmudic guide to organizational structure of the community is explained: the presence of a beit din helps to protect residents from falling victim to crime. A tzedakah fund under appropriate supervision aids community members who have fallen into poverty. A synagogue offers a place for prayer, as well as for communal gatherings. The bathhouse, bathroom, doctor, craftsman, blood-letter and butcher provide for the physical needs of residents. The teacher ensures that the next generation is versed in Jewish tradition and prepared eventually to assume leadership of the community.

When an individual particularly craves for connection with God or desires human company to express one’s deepest concerns or greatest joys, the community is here to help, allowing each member to speak out and to satisfy their urge. The institution of the minyan is intended for this very purpose – certain Jewish prayers and rituals are designed to be performed on behalf of the community, thus a quorum of 10 people was established, so that a pronounced prayer would come from the whole congregation, rather than from one person.

Jacobs believes, that belonging to a community presumes giving back to this community: when the community is in trouble, the individual must share the distress and try to fix it, no matter how much and whether one is affected personally. He substantiates this idea, citing a quote from Talmud: “If an individual separates himself from the community when it is in distress, the two ministering angels that accompany every man place their hands upon his head and say, ‘Such and such a man has separated himself from the

community, let him not live to witness the comfort of the community.” (Jacobs, L., 1992: 35).

Conclusion

The view of the relationship between an individual and community is constantly evolving, and scholars are now approaching the issue of strong commitment to self-determination and individual freedom vs obedience to the Law within the historically covenanted community. Lenn Goodman conducts a historical analysis and traces the evolution of views from biblical through prophetic and rabbinic periods to the modern era. He admits, that in the framework of the modern Jewish thought along with powerful individualistic tendencies arise certain tensions between the individual/communal interests, while the early literature sees autonomy not as the antithesis, but as the aim of the norms of the community (Goodman L., 1992). Eugene Borowitz and Kenneth Seeskin approach the issue of individual freedom and autonomy and obedience to the Law. Seeskin argues from a position of Kantian protagonist (Seeskin, K., 1992), Borowitz starts from the standpoint of an anti-Kantian religious existentialism (Borowitz, E., 1992), but for both of them, it is crucial to find a way to develop a robust sense of a Jewish self without causing any damage to the individual's commitment to the Jewish people. Ze'ev Levy addresses the issue of tradition and autonomy too and urges to give new meaning to the vital aspects of the tradition, to shape them into something new (Levy, Z., 1992). Jewish thought seeks to achieve a balance between the needs of the individual and those of the community. The Jewish philosophy will carry on the conversation with primary sources, but Jewish life is concerned with the actual needs of the Jewish people in the present, so tradition must be adapted to the present-day tasks and requirements in order to assure a meaningful existence for Jewish people. Despite the fact, that the roughness of relationship between the individual/community was not completely smoothed so far – neither in Jewish thought nor in Jewish practice. Jews have always felt the need to belong to a community and, on the wider scale, to the whole Jewish community. Even the Jewish mystics, seeking for an intense personal relationship with their God, felt the need to organize themselves into brotherhoods to assist them in their quest.

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