

Rosh Hashana--Birthday of Mankind-- Is Time for Realizing Man's Limits

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

True to its pure monotheism, Judaism on Rosh Hashana celebrates the birthday of mankind, not of any divinity.

Man is born in God's image. This means that man can relate to God, but not replace Him. Perceiving man's divine aspects, Judaism nevertheless insists on his utter humanity: man and God are never intermingled. God is never represented in any finite entity, beast or man. Man is never idolized as God or semigod.

Further, there is no hero worship in Judaism. God alone commands and merits worship; men may deserve respect, contempt or criticism, but never worship. There is no one human personality in the center of the Jewish faith. The worship of, and the belief in, a particular person (as infallible or divine) is repugnant and idolatrous in Judaism; so is the full reliance on and faith in man — one man or all men (mankind). Judaism expects dignity from man, but does not "trust" or "believe" in him as a self-sufficient source of ultimate values.



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IDEALISTIC and naive were those Jews who in the late 19th century entertained a fanatic, fantastic belief in mankind, a euphoric dream of the ultimately victorious power of "the spirit of man" (presumably, all pure and noble). How pathetic and disastrous! In the flames of Auschwitz, this belief became a shattered myth; the dream, an unbearable nightmare.

This belief and dream are still alive, however, in a popular Hebrew song by Tchernichowsky, written in 1892, called "Ani Maamin" (I Believe).

Sings the poet: "Ridicule as you wish my dreams (laugh! laugh!), I still believe in man." In a maskilic, spiteful, overblown genre, the hallowed "Ani Maamin" of old is at once replaced with the then-fashionable faith in man and his indomitable spirit.

That this was a sharp deviation from Jewish tradition was well known to the poet (obviously he so intended it to be). The

The maskilic "Ani-Maamin" is indeed a mockery of Judaism's true estimation of man.

IT IS PRECISELY because Judaism has great expectations of man, insisting on his dignity, that it warns him not to be dazzled by his own virtue and assets — not to worship himself but rather elevate himself.

Authentic Jewish prayer points to man's deficiencies and flaws in order to appeal to his sense of duty and honor, his strivings for greatness.

Only through man's humility and self-scrutiny can he pave his way to greatness. It is God's concern with man, not man's obsession with himself, that signifies man's importance and his awesome task: perfecting himself and the whole world.

From the old prayer: "You (God) have distinguished man from the beginning (creation), and You have recognized him to stand in your presence." (Neila service).

Imbued with this sense of worth — man celebrates his birthday.

Point of View

label pagan probably did not bother him a bit. An avowed secularist, he did not mean to provide lyrics for liturgy, nor did he dream that this unmistakably heretical poem would ever be included in a Jewish prayer book, as if it represents Jewish theology. (See "New Prayers for the High Holy Days," page 24, a Conservative work, and "Gates of Prayer" page 690, a Reform prayer book).

IN THE POET'S defense, it must be noted that he wrote his "confession of faith" before the Holocaust. But what excuse have the editors of the "modern" prayer books. Ingenious and important as this "new" "Ani Maamin" is, artistically and historically, it is nevertheless a blatant affront to normative Judaism. It is false Jewish theology, and inserting it into sacred worship shows poor judgment and bad taste; moreover, it is insensitive and anachronistic. After the Holocaust, when belief in God is a heroic challenge, belief in man is sheer stupidity.

You may ask: is not the humanistic belief in man and the ultimate victory of his spirit the same as (or, at least, close to) the traditional belief in Divine messianic redemption in the future? Are not both equally positive, optimistic, hopeful and "admirable?"

Wrong! The one is pagan, the other is not. Analogy: the difference between "blessing the wine" (sanctifying it), which is pagan, and blessing God (thanking Him) for the wine, which is Jewish; or, singing the glories of nature (pagan) and singing with nature the glories of God (Psalms); one is adoring creation; the other, the Creator.

INDEED, CONTRARY to simplistic current notions, Judaism is not overly optimistic about the "innate goodness" of human nature, but is rather quite realistic and cautious. Judaism is cognizant of man's existential predicament: that man has both consuming temptation to go astray and considerable freedom to go "straight." He has his choice.

Judaism is well aware of the demonic, bestial, destructive and corruptive elements in man, which he must and can restrain; of the inborn, evil impulse ("yetzer hara") which he must and can control. Man cannot ignore or abolish his bad impulse; he can learn to overpower it with his good impulse ("yetzer tov"), thus realizing his basic, human decency.

Only by being aware of his ingrained capacity to evil, is man equipped to cope with it and thus develop his potential for goodness. But this Jewish positive expectation from man and hopeful anticipation of his morally improved future must not be confused with the liberal, secular humanistic self-adulation. Man must never worship himself, nor underservedly "believe" in himself. To do so is unwise, un-Jewish and pagan. Instead, man must work on himself and demand of himself.

Thus, the invented "liberal" religious doctrine of "original virtue" is no less alien to Judaism than the rigid, dogmatic concept of "original sin" (which, in a milder form, is rooted in rabbinic sources (TB Shab. 55a-b)).

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