

A chain that began millennia ago is at a critical juncture.

I would define the period immediately after World War II until just a few years ago as a period of recovery. The slaughter of 6 million Jews in Europe was not only a disaster from the standpoint of preserving human life. Europe, particularly Eastern Europe, was the center of our living civilization. With its destruction, the center shifted to two places: the United States and Israel. The United States had many advantages: an open society, it allowed Jews to prosper economically and participate politically. Thirsty for integration our parents and grandparents Americanized rapidly. At some point recently – the exact date we cannot be sure of – that period of recovery closed. We are at the beginning of a new period, a new era. Now our task is larger.

To heal ourselves and turn our culture away from narcissism, we need to curb living for ourselves and consider both our predecessors and posterity. As Christopher Lasch, author of the 1978 bestseller The Culture of Narcissism writes, “We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future” In Jewish language, we call this *ldor vador*.

To live with reference to the generation that precedes us and the one that follows us is the Jewish way. It shifts our focus away from our belly button and to a collective that journeys through history. The Talmud teaches, “Why was man

created last? So that all would be ready for him. God acted has a host who first prepared the banquet and then had His guest arrive.” What greater honor could there be than to be God’s honored guest in this world? The Talmud continues, however: “On the other hand, the timing of creation is a reminder in arrogant moments that we are of humble origins, for the gnat preceded us in the order of creation” (San. 38A). Both of these things are true. We are at one and the same time the pinnacle of God’s creation and the species whose creation followed that of the insects.

Grandeur and humility beckon us. The pride we take in our own lives is the grandeur. The ability to live as a chain in the generations is the humility. The Torah teaches in Deuteronomy, “Choose life.” It doesn’t mean “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” It insists rather that choosing life means pursuing proper conduct. We manifest gratitude when we acknowledge the choices we have and choose well. The Psalmist states, “Lord, you have examined me and know me...I am awesomely, wonderfully made” (Ps. 139: 1, 14). Each of us is created in the divine image, and the path that we choose reflects the extent to which we are willing to acknowledge Him. To generate our own uniqueness, we must recognize that God is unique – unlike anything else that exists.\* And indeed this takes me to my next point. How do we choose life? How do we best flourish? What I have focused on thus far is to warn against the idolatry of the individual. But this is

simply not the whole story. Equally important, we must avoid the idolatry of the communal. Yesterday, I explained that: “To be a people that leads humanity forward to its own self-realization, we have to possess some measure of unity.” And that is true! We must possess *some* measure of unity. I now emphasize the word “some”. We must possess *some* measure of unity.

After all, our unity must not be a homogeneous unity, but rather a heterogeneous unity. In other words, UNITY need not entail UNIFORMITY. We must not conflate the two. We must instead, consistent with the best in our religious heritage, *balance* the needs of the individual with the needs of the community. For when we do this, it becomes evident that the flourishing of the individual and the flourishing of the community are inextricably interdependent. Communal flourishing depends upon individual flourishing; full individual flourishing depends on communal flourishing. Therefore, individual responsibility and communal responsibility are *both* as vital as they are inseparable.

Some might wonder: if we, as a community, nurture and honor each individual as such, will there not arise profound tension between the idiosyncratic proclivities of the individual, on the one hand, and the needs of the community, on the other? The answer is YES. But, far from being a threat to the wellbeing of our Jewish community, when understood properly, it is part of our community’s strength. As the Rabbis remind us: nothing is created in vain. We need only take

that individual-communal tension and press it into the service of communal strength.

As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed, “The unapparent harmony is stronger than the apparent one.” What Heraclitus meant, was that a harmony that contains evident---even prominent---dissonance has a more rousing, bracing, and powerful effect than a “more harmonious” harmony, with its sweeter, less jolting effect. A contentious harmony, then, is stronger than an agreeable harmony. Putting all this in terms of the Jewish community, dissonance and dissent and valuing of the individual don’t have to make our community weak. These things are part of what make us strong---if they arise in a context of a Jewish community that is largely confident in the rightness of the Jewish mission, which therefore chooses its battles carefully, and is not prone to mistake mere criticism for enmity. And after all, Judaism itself provides us with the conceptual and spiritual resources for achieving synergy between the individual and the communal. In the words of the eminent historian Paul Johnson, as recounted by Jonathan Sacks, “There have been highly individualistic cultures in history---you know, like Athens or second-century Rome or today in the West. There have been highly collectivist cultures---like the Soviet Union or China. But nobody I know has succeeded in combining the two the way Judaism has. You teach people individual responsibility, and you teach them collective responsibility.”

In this regard, we might recall that Genesis begins the human story not with a group of people, but with just one human being: the first person, a single individual person. That all humankind is descended from one individual person signifies the unity and equality of the entire human race. It reminds us of the human fundamentality of individual personhood. Indeed, the great Talmudic sage ben Azzai went much further. He argued that God's creation of the first human in God's likeness was the great principle---the Klal Gadol---of the entire Torah! Ben Azzai identified Genesis 5:1 as the passage that best makes that point. "This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created the human, He make him in the likeness of God."

In Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of the Fathers, it asks and answers: "Who is honorable? He who honors others." The individual who desires honor acquires it by honoring other people. In turn, those others owe honor to the individual, if they themselves seek to become honored. This is not a zero-sum game! Not win-lose, but win-win.

When individual and collective responsibility are intact, our defenses against evil are well-fortified. The forces of evil are strong in our world, and we will not be able to defeat them as matters currently stand. Evil exists in the world, and disease is one of the primary evils that afflicts us. The natural world is not all illustrious mountains and fathomless sky. Built into creation is illness. Fortunately,

our tradition is not only about recognizing God's greatness; it also allows for an element of critique. "Accusing God of injustice is a serious, permissible, and even inevitable business." (143)

"As we might expect, part of the Rabbinic attempt to cope with the problem of evil in this world is a pained outcry against God who permits it to occur."

(144). This is illustrated by an aggadah from the Talmud: "Moses initially described God to the people as: 'The great God, the might, the awesome' (Deut. 10:17). Later Jeremiah saw that strangers were destroying God's Temple. How then could God be termed "awesome"? So he omitted the word "awesome". Still later, Daniel saw that strangers enslaved God's children. Where then are God's "mighty" deeds? So he omitted the word "mighty" (145).

Rather than being depicted as heresy, the Rabbis affirm Jeremiah and Daniel's actions because for the sake of sanity, we must be able to express our outrage, even if that outrage is directed at the Creator of the universe. Because of the relationship that Israel enjoys with God, we are permitted in dire circumstances to rebuke Him when we suffer. Once we have registered our protest, we can accept His consolation.

Indeed, the rabbis argue that when we suffer, God suffers too. The Midrash states, "How can we prove that when even one individual suffers God too is afflicted? It is proved by the verse in the Psalms: 'When he calls on Me, I will

answer Him; I will be with him in distress; I will rescue him and make him honored." (147)

As unimaginable as it might seem, God is with us in our suffering during this COVID crisis. In fact, the Talmud notes on several occasions, that God, in fact, weeps at the suffering of His creatures. Sorrow is not only a human affliction but a cosmic event in that God suffers alongside us. We should hope that we endure this suffering for a greater good, but if that does not appeal to our sensibility, we have a right to simply take consolation that God is with us in our pain. God listens to our cries, recognizes our agony.

Levi Yitzhak of Bereditchev was preparing for the High Holiday. The time for prayer arrived, and he was silent. His disciples looked upon him with worry. Finally he said, "Dear God, we come before You this year to, as we do every year, to ask Your forgiveness. But in this past year, I have caused no death. I have brought no plagues upon the world, no earthquakes, no floods. I have made no women widows, no children orphans. God, You have done these things, not me! Perhaps You should be asking forgiveness from me." Having exclaimed this passionate speech, Rabbi Levi paused and then said, "But, since You are God, and I am only Levi Yitzhak, I will begin to pray.

Sometimes we need to cry out - even accuse God. But we cannot stop there. Eventually, we have to recognize that between us and Him is a gap that cannot be ultimately bridged.

The founder of the Hasidim, the Baal Shem Tov told a story: In the palace of the King, there are many secret chambers, and there are keys for each chamber, but one key unlocks them all. The palace is the House of God and the King is God Himself. The key that unlocks them all is in fact an ax. It breaks through every one of the doors leaving the rooms of the House of God open to inhabitation. When we inhabit these rooms, we are in the Presence of God. What is the ax? The ax is the broken heart.

More than anything, what God seeks on this day is a broken heart. If you are sure of yourself, if your heart is stolid and solid and you are beaming with confidence, then you have not approached this day properly. Rather, we should seek to experience in this day all the suffering that we have endured through this year, and that suffering will break our hearts, and the broken heart is the key that will give us access to all the rooms in the palace of the King of the Kings.

We have cultivated the broken heart. Our heart first broke during the Three Weeks when we contemplated the destruction of our beloved city, Jerusalem. It broke further on Tisha B'Av, the day the Temple was twice destroyed. At the beginning of Elul, when we first heard the sound of the shofar, a sound we would

hear for the next thirty days, yet another crack ran down and through our hearts.

Selichot shattered the heart still further, laying our pride to waste. Rosh Hashana and the Ten Days of Repentance were the final acts of breaking and prepared us for this moment, the moment we come before You, the Holy One. We ask you to heal us, heal our congregation, heal our county, our state, our country, the world. Heal us from this pandemic. Remove this plague from our midst.

Oh Lord, You looked upon us and You noted that we were not united, that humanity was not united. That we live in strife, that we war with each other. And You withdrew Your countenance and in that turning away You permitted this horrific virus to come alive, inflicting all of us with worry and pain as if to say to us you will not unite in peace; you will be united in pain.

We're going to have to learn something through this pandemic. We're going to have to learn about the unity of this congregation, the Jewish people, and all of humanity. To do that, we have to transform ourselves; we have to renew ourselves. We can no longer afford to practice the same ways. Nothing but a complete revolution in our behavior will strengthen us to turn the unity of pain into the unity of harmony.

Today we affirm the uniqueness of the individual as well as the strength of the collective. We acknowledge that both are integral to living according to the Torah. Our healing and our flourishing require that we resist narcissism while still

affirming individuality and that we acknowledge the force of contentious harmony.

Contentious harmony has been the hallmark of the Jewish people, and if we can reinvigorate it, we can play the role that the Jewish people is meant to play in the world as bringers of God's light down to earth.