

Parashat Matot

Ambivalence in Human Existence

(Inner and Outer)

The deeper one investigates the inner spaces of personality, the more one's ambivalence intensifies:

I need to have confidence in God

- and – I need to put every effort into attaining my desired goals.

I need to believe that all is Divinely decreed in heaven

- and – I need to believe that everything hinges on my own free choice.

I have an immediate existence

- and – I have an ultimate destiny.

I have a fleeting present moment

- and – I have an eternal future.

I see things as they are

- and – I see things as I wish they were.

Thinking something – and – thinking about something... Which is truer? The feeling of happiness or of sorrow? Within the reality of emotions, feeling exists in the tension created by a combination of these two.

We might attempt to define a difference between *shvua*, an oath and *neder*, a vow. *Nedarim* apply in mitsva-related areas, unlike a *shvua*, in which one prohibits oneself, as opposed to a prohibition about something else in relation to oneself. One can make an oath, a *shvua*, that 'I will not sit in the succa', but since one has been sworn into the oath at Sinai of fulfilling the mitsvot – *ain shvua hala al shvua*, one oath cannot undo another, and therefore one cannot exempt one's own person from one's personal obligation. "It is valid and binding; one cannot swear to transgress the commandments." See above in that same section: (Torah Temima, Matot, Ch. 30, sect. 17) "For with *nedarim* one is making a prohibition about an object in relation to oneself, so it is not similar to one who vows that he will cancel a commandment. For after all, he has accepted nothing upon himself. It is only the object in relation to himself that he has prohibited, and if he were to nevertheless fulfill that mitsva, it would only be called *mitsva haba'a be'aveira*, a mitsva that comes with a transgression. Which is not the case with an oath, in which he prohibits himself from

relating to a particular thing.” See also Ramban who distinguishes between *nedarim* and *shevuot* – in which the *nodair*, the one who vows, is vowing by the life of the king, whereas the *nishba* is swearing by the king himself.

This may be the difference between thinking something and ‘thinking about’ something. An oath is connecting with the thing itself – ‘thinking it’. A vow is thinking about it. Thinking about the thing from outside; objective thinking.

Judaism’s focus of interest is on the ambivalence inherent in existence. This explains the misleading impression that Judaism merely takes the pragmatic approach, and is supposedly devoid of spiritual principles and ideals. Halacha deals with the track that runs between two opposite, complementary extremes, and it has no interest in one extreme as opposed to the other.

“Is learning great or is action great?” The Gemara investigates this question, and arrives at the conclusion that – learning is great because it brings about action.”

One must not imagine that this investigation by the Gemara is an inquiry as to whether the means are preferable to the ends or vice versa. Rather, the goal – the ends – is the main thing, and each case is different, and depending upon the particular situation; it can sometimes happen that the means is the end, or perhaps a part of the final goal...

The Torah deals with the point where theory encounters practice, where sorrow encounters happiness. Rabi Akiva laughed and wept when he saw a fox crawling out of the ruins of the Holy of Holies. He wept in the presence of the destruction, and laughed that the verse had been fulfilled, that “foxes would walk therein”, since that meant that the verse telling of the future redemption would be fulfilled as well.

“A time for every purpose.” Each thing has its moment; each thing has its time. The situation itself is not what is ambivalent. Every situation sanctifies the place that it occupies.

What the Jewish approach demands is the experience created by the pendulum swing between the two opposite extremes. Between self-preservation and creativity. Between being inside an experience, *ahava*, and thinking about an experience from the outside – *yira*. Between thinking and ‘thinking about’. Between knowing and

'knowing about'. "And Adam knew Hava, his wife" versus understanding the distinction between good and evil by thinking about good and evil... The difference between "Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding..." and "Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to..."

Hava, who caused the separation between knowing and 'knowing about', by causing Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge About Good and Evil, is to this day the embodiment of ambivalence. Therefore the relationship to woman creates ambivalence between self and other. It is an encounter of conflicting interests – between matter and spirit, principles and reality, object and subject, with the crossroads of the encounter being the human element formed of the encounter between male and female, in which is born of relating out of belonging.

Ambivalence is thus found in the halachot that relate to human behavior: "There is such a thing as a degenerate with the permission of the Torah." "And you shall be in awe of your Lord." "Well within the line of the law", etc. The human element – its ambivalent movement toward truth – is the reason that the need to save human life pushes the entire Torah aside. It is why there is such severe stringency with regard to saving human life, while there is no such excessive stringency with regard to the written law. It is why "one must be more stringent with danger than with a prohibition."

It is why the Talmud shows such contempt for the one whose concern for legalities overshadows his concern for his fellow human being. "With purity of the vessels he is strict and with bloodshed he is lax." It is why the Torah *she'be'al peh* determines the direction of the Torah *she'bichtav*; the one who determines the halacha must be a living wise man – one who is himself living reality – rather than the written book.

It is why erroneous beliefs grow in the minds of many, who, rather than moving toward truth by the incessantly ambivalent search for the golden mean that lies somewhere between one extreme and the other, simply seize hold of one extreme and ignore the other.

In Mendelssohn's era, Judaism was perceived as a book of technical-practical rules devoid of spirituality, devoid of sublime ideals and principles. This was one side. The other side adopted all manners of reform, which completely ignored halacha, the

Torah's practical application. They understood Judaism to be a collection of principles and theories that had no application to reality.

Indeed, these many and miscellaneous reform approaches are nothing but the outcome of a perception of Judaism by Jews who, though devout, were capable of ignoring life entirely, of imposing the written law upon lived reality, with a complete lack of consideration for human needs and with a complete lack of practical flexibility.

Ambivalence in Parashat Matot:

1. God tells Moshe: Take b'nei Yisrael's revenge upon the Midianim. Moshe tells b'nei Yisrael: Take God's revenge upon the Midianim. God's revenge becomes b'nei Yisrael's revenge, and vice versa.

"And Moshe grew angry" despite the joy of victory. Why did they include, among the saved Midiani captives, those very women who had been responsible for the deaths of so many of b'nei Yisrael?

The ambivalence of the two tribes, Gad and Reuven: Their (perhaps excessive) concern for livestock seems to overshadow their concern for their own families. They say "we shall build fences for our sheep and houses for our children", and Moshe responds, "you shall build houses for your children and fences for your sheep." From Moshe's heated response, and from the clear conditions he sets forth, requiring them to take a fully equal (and perhaps more than equal) share in fighting for the Land, we discern that there was ambivalence in their request – pure motives mingled perhaps with other motives.

For the daughters of Tslofhad, Moshe knew no answer to give them, because of the dual meaning represented by women.

In the next Parasha, Masei – "these are their travels, and what befell them..." "And they traveled, and they camped." Reality runs incessantly, ever onward. It hates to be fixed, or pinned down. *Yelchu maihayil el hayil*. "They shall go from prowess to ever greater prowess." "Seven times the tsadik falls – yet rises up." The failure is not in the sin, but in getting pinned down to the sin. Teshuva is the movement between sin and mitsva.

A man's relationship to a woman is his point of departure as well as his hold on reality. From her, he acquires a meaningful understanding of his existence, yet on the other hand, she compels him toward a practical confrontation with his existence. Therefore one cannot understand the relationship to woman without recourse to theory, yet on the other hand, one cannot understand it through theoretical formulation alone. A man's ambivalence moves along the axis of theory. A woman's ambivalence moves along the axis of lived reality. When the two are joined, an ambivalent harmony is created.