

Rabbi Wurzburger is Editor of TRADITION. "Pluralism and the Halakhah" in the Spring 1962 issue was his latest essay to appear in these pages.

## ALIENATION AND EXILE

Much of current thought revolves around the theme of alienation and estrangement — and for good reason. Modern man has been subjected to a relentless process of de-personalization in the pressure chambers of a technological society whose operations are geared to mass production and standardization. Moreover, to cope with the increasing complexities of an age of automation, ever more delicate methods of control have become necessary. Thus, paradoxically, the more control man is capable of exerting over his environment, the more he himself becomes enmeshed in a network of pressures and forces against which he feels too helpless to assert himself. Far from enhancing man's sense of importance, his spectacular technological triumphs have actually left him with a gnawing feeling of impotence. Diminished in stature, he has become a thing rather than a person, an object rather than a subject, an "it" rather than a "thou."

Small wonder, then, that in artistic, literary, and philosophical circles, one encounters steadily mounting anxiety over the fate of the individual. It has even been said that the entire existentialist movement basically represents a reaction to the sense of alienation that has gripped modern man.<sup>1</sup>

Concern over self-alienation is by no means a monopoly of the intellectual elite. Revolutionary mass movements such as socialism and communism derive much of their messianic fervor from the Marxian ideology which held out to the disillusioned and frustrated the promise not only of a redistribution of worldly goods but of a society in which the light of a new social gospel would redeem mankind from the blight of alienation.

## *Alienation and Exile*

Other influential thinkers — both secular and religious — have indicated with varying effectiveness that our deep-rooted anxieties arise not merely out of social or economic dislocations, but out of the spiritual condition of modern man. In this view, self-estrangement is but the final phase in the long process of disintegration that began with the erosion of the religious basis which previously provided the foundation for our structure of values and ideals.

### I

Yet, not all thinkers share this aversion to alienation. Far from it! In many quarters a certain degree of alienation, instead of being viewed with apprehension as a major threat to man's humanity, is actually enthusiastically welcomed as a prerequisite to all genuine creativity. Considerable admiration is evoked by the alienated "outsider's" inability to feel at home in the universe; for it is this state of mind which is credited with inducing the creative tensions which in turn lead to the quest for moral, spiritual, and intellectual advancement. It was perhaps on the basis of such an orientation that Matthew Arnold went so far as to define religion as a "criticism of life." What ultimately seems to matter in this view is not so much the possession of a positive, definite set of values or commitments, but rather the sense of estrangement and detachment which is engendered by a religious approach to life. Religion is singularly equipped to fulfill this function because it calls for the ability to participate in the affairs of the world with a certain sense of detachment, to immerse oneself in the currents of time while retaining the consciousness of an eternal destiny.

Any ideology that makes a virtue out of not belonging is likely to hold a special attraction for the modern Jew who even in the open and democratic society—with all its assimilationist pressures and blandishments!—sooner or later experiences the frustrations of being a rejected outsider. But when one views the world from the perspective of the "outsider," the sting of bitterness is removed from the feeling of not belonging. An apparent

curse is converted into a genuine blessing. Being Jewish—or better, “not being a *Goy*” — becomes equated with the ideal of an authentic human life: not to feel at home in the universe, because one deliberately elects to remain a foreigner, refusing to become completely naturalized into a full-fledged citizen of the world. Jewishness, in the telling phrase of Ben Halpern, becomes “a ticket of admission to the community of alienated intellectuals.”<sup>2</sup>

Religiously non-observant Jewish intellectuals are especially prone to identify Judaism with such a negative stance. Intellectuals, in general, tend to be wary of specific, positive commitments. Because of their proclivity for detachment, they gravitate towards an orientation of alienation, which, as Daniel Bell put it, “guards one against being submerged in any cause, or accepting any particular embodiment of community as final.” And it is to be expected that the Jewish intellectual will project this mentality into his approach to Judaism. Understandably, his views on Judaism are bound to reflect the predilections of those who constitutionally seem to shy away from all positive commitments. Since the intellectual finds it so much easier to identify with a Judaism that is couched in negative terms, he is apt to define Jewishness as the negation of the pretensions of other cultures and religions.

For leading intellectuals such as Milton Konvitz,<sup>3</sup> Leslie Fidler, Arthur Cohen,<sup>4</sup> Will Herberg,<sup>5</sup> it is the consciousness of living in *Galut* that emerges as the defining characteristic of being Jewish.\* To be a Jew is synonymous with being in exile—the experience of a sense of alienation. In the words of Leslie Fidler, once Jews become “insiders, they cease to be Jews.”<sup>6</sup>

There can be no doubt that the ever-present awareness of living in a state of *Galut* (both physically and meta-physically!) has etched itself deeply in the consciousness of the genuine Jewish personality. For that matter, the yearning for Messianic

---

\* Cf. “To be a Jew means in a historical and more than a historical sense to be always homeless in space and time, always aware of the temporalities of security, of the possibility by no means remote, that I may have to find another place.” (Jacob Neusner, “The Jew’s Lesson for Mankind,” *The Boston Jewish Advocate*, December 12, 1963.)

## *Alienation and Exile*

redemption constitutes a vital ingredient of our religious faith. We must not forget this—even at the moment of gaiety and merriment. This is why at a wedding ceremony, a note of sadness is injected: a glass is broken to remind us that no joy can be complete until the dawn of the ultimate redemption.<sup>7</sup> Since only “*then* shall our mouths be filled with laughter” (Psalms 126:2), it is not permissible nowadays to abandon oneself completely to unrestricted hilarity. When one is conscious of the intrinsic limitations of *Galut* existence, one cannot embrace a philosophy of “letting go” and lose oneself completely in momentary thrills. He who yearns for ultimate redemption cannot help but maintain a certain degree of reserve and detachment—no matter how intense the satisfaction of the moment and however rewarding the immediate task at hand may be.

One must not, however, jump to the conclusion that Judaism basically represents a principle of negation. Purely negative definitions of Jewishness, as Aharon Lichtenstein already noted,<sup>8</sup> amount to distortions of the true character of the Jewish people. It is, of course, true that since the days of Abraham it has been the historic destiny of the Jew to function as the *Ivri* — the one who stands in opposition to the rest of the world.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, a good case could be made that the Jew personified what Tillich has called the “Protestant Principle”—the refusal to absolutize the relative. Throughout history Jews have protested against the various idolatries that have held sway. Time and again they have refused to worship at the shrine of the false gods. Yet, notwithstanding some prominent theologians, there is more to Judaism than the struggle against mythology. The smashing of idols—and for that matter, the breaking of a glass—does not exhaust the meaning of Jewish existence. Judaism is not merely a classic exercise in cool, critical detachment; there is ample provision for the romance of whole-hearted “engagement” with the fiery ideals of Torah. Torah was never conceived purely as a criticism of life; it was life itself! Those who concentrate purely on the critical function of Judaism without considering adequately its positive commitments end up not with a picture, but a caricature.

II

One of the most interesting illustrations of the distortions that are bound to occur whenever Judaism is forced into a strait-jacket of purely negative thinking is provided by Ahad Ha'am's famous description of the nature of Jewish ethics, which played such a decisive role in the making of the modern Jewish mind. It was largely due to the impact of this influential thinker that so many Jews were prepared to repeat uncritically the Christian cliché that Jewish ethics is one of justice and not of love. It must be borne in mind that only very flimsy "evidence" is adduced by Ahad Ha'am in support of his sweeping thesis that Jewish ethics is based exclusively upon justice. His case rests on the fact that Hillel, in his classic formulation to a prospective convert, reduced the "essence" of Torah to a commentary on the maxim "Do not unto your neighbor what you would not have him do unto you."

For Ahad Ha'am, it is of crucial importance that Hillel did not express the golden rule in positive terms. Why could not Hillel simply have quoted the biblical verse "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18)? Ahad Ha'am<sup>10</sup> concludes that Hillel was compelled to paraphrase the biblical verse in order to forestall misunderstanding on the part of the heathen. It had to be spelled out clearly that the Jewish interpretation of "Love thy neighbor as thyself" does not call for the cultivation of benevolence, kindness, or altruism. Love, so Ahad Ha'am contends, really does not figure in the Jewish scale of values. Insofar as Jewish ethical thinking is concerned, nothing but absolute justice truly matters.

It can readily be seen that this doctrine roughly represents the equivalent of the Kantian categorical imperative. As Max Scheler<sup>11</sup> and others have pointed out, the Kantian scheme is essentially not a positive formulation of ethical precepts or maxims, but rather a principle of criticism which can serve as a criterion for the *rejection* of certain attitudes or actions. The Kantian morality is not a system of *material* content, but a purely *formal* principle which enables us to deny the propriety of certain types of motivation.

## *Alienation and Exile*

It could be maintained with a high degree of plausibility that Ahad Ha'am's formulation—and for that matter many other positions which reflect preoccupation with purely negative aspects of Judaism—arise out of the matrix of Kantian rather than genuinely Jewish categories of thought. Otherwise, how would it have been possible for him to gloss over such a pivotal concept as *Chessed* (loving-kindness), which plays such a primary role in Jewish religious and ethical thought?<sup>12</sup> In view of the continued emphasis upon love in both biblical and rabbinic literature, there is not the slightest shred of evidence to support the contention that, because of its preoccupation with absolute justice, Judaism is completely indifferent to the cultivation of altruistic sentiments. What has happened to such concepts as compassion and mercy which in rabbinic literature are defined as the tell-tale mark of the Jew? Are we not supposed to balance justice with mercy?

It is, of course, true that without the restraint of justice, the blind application of love can lead to morally disastrous consequences. But this merely indicates that we cannot dispense with justice as a *regulative* principle, not that justice is superior to love. Notwithstanding Ahad Ha'am, who spoke of the preference of Judaism for abstract principles, there is ample room within the Jewish ethical and religious scheme for personal sympathetic involvement in the fate of one's fellow-man. It is simply not correct to speak of Judaism as a cold, detached scheme that eliminates "subjective attitudes" because it is only concerned with the application of something "abstract and objective." Justice, to be sure, is essentially a negative concept; it rules out inequalities of treatment. But it is theoretically possible to devise rules of behavior which are equally bad for all parties concerned. Though satisfying the criterion of equality, they could hardly be termed just. Hence, even justice transcends considerations of equality. Moreover, it is highly questionable whether justice is the fundamental ethical concept. Kabbalistic doctrines (e.g., the primacy of *Chessed* [love] over *Gevurah* in the order of *Sefirot*) could be cited to buttress Professor Tillich's contention that not justice, but love is primary and that justice must be defined in terms of the proper distribution of love.

III

The claim that the "essence" of Judaism lies in the *negation* of all pretensions to finality\* rather than in the affirmation of specific positive values may be buttressed by citing the *prima facie* kinship of this position with the world view of Maimonides. After all, Maimonides did not merely formulate a "negative theology" in his "theory of attributes," but even his ethical ideal of the "middle road" appears to be primarily an attempt to negate any form of extremism. At first sight, the advocacy of a middle course on the part of Maimonides strikes one as a sort of "caveat" prescribed by a detached sage who views with skepticism any manifestation of unbridled radicalism. Such counsel of moderation is to be expected from the classical philosopher who looks askance at the excesses of romanticism and warns us not to go emotionally overboard in the pursuit of any specific value. But, in reality, Maimonides is far from espousing a prudential morality of compromise. His views cannot be attributed to the "outsider's" reluctance to become completely "engaged" with any specific ideal or goal. Anyone who has read his moving account of love for God which is couched in such passionate terms<sup>14</sup> will be unable to label Maimonides a reserved, detached, or even disillusioned philosopher who out of his disenchantment put the brakes on any genuine emotional involvement. As a matter of fact, notwithstanding its obvious resemblance to the Aristotelean "golden mean," Maimonides' ideal of the "middle road,"<sup>15</sup> does not reflect so much the classic aversion to any form of imbalance ("Nothing in excess") but a fundamental Jewish religious ideal of striving to "walk in the ways of God."\*\* In

\* For a striking illustration of this position see Leo Baeck's statement "Absence of the supporting crutch of dogma is in the very nature of Judaism" (*The Essence of Judaism*, p. 16). Equally revealing is the following passage: "The price Judaism paid for the possession of a philosophy was the sacrifice of certainty, of a formula of creed" (*ibid.*, p. 12).

\*\* My interpretation of Maimonides' "middle road" can in some measure be later attributed to my recollection of a lecture delivered by Rabbi Soloveitchik in Detroit at the 1954 convention of the Rabbinical Council of America. As I recall, Rabbi Soloveitchik demonstrated how the Kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefirot* with its emphasis upon the synthesis of *Chessed* and *Gevurah*, or of

## *Alienation and Exile*

the Maimonidean scheme, choosing the middle road ceases to be an exercise in prudential morality; it becomes the fulfillment of a most positive religious imperative: "the imitation of God." It is to the extent that man succeeds in harmonizing polar values that he emulates his Creator; for, according to rabbinic theology, it was through the fusion of love and justice, mercy and love, truth and peace, that God—both immanent and transcendent—created the universe. Thus the "middle of the road" approach as espoused by Maimonides does not at all amount to a negation of any specific value. What it does reflect is an awareness of the need for creative tension between polar values. Conceived in this fashion, the middle of the road is far from being a state of equilibrium. It is a *road* in the fullest sense of the term calling for dynamic movement and engaging man's total moral and intellectual resources.

It must be noted that this creative tension which is so indispensable to all genuine human progress need not be induced—as so many modern intellectuals suggest—by a sense of alienation and estrangement. As Maimonides seems to imply, creative tension may have its source in the spiritual restlessness which grips those who experience a sense of genuine relatedness and commitment to God. Veering between polar values, at once drawn to God in love and recoiling from Him in fear, the righteous have ample cause for the restlessness which, as the Talmud asserts, is their eternal lot.<sup>16</sup>

For a proper appraisal of Maimonides' position, it must also be borne in mind that, with all his emphasis upon the essentially negative character of all theology, the *Guide* concludes on a most affirmative note. The ideal to which man is summoned calls not merely for the purely intellectual endeavor to master the doctrine of negative attributes. The knowledge that God is Wholly Other—the very apex of the entire philosophical quest—must be counterbalanced by *imitatio dei*, the attempt to emulate the ways of God in a relentless quest for loving-kindness, justice, and charity. Lest the consciousness of God's utter transcendence give

---

*Netzach* and *Hod*, which result in the emergence of *Tiferet* and *Yesod* respectively, parallels Maimonides' notion that the middle road is the road of God.

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

rise to a sense of total alienation, man is bidden to pattern his conduct after the divine “attributes of action,” which enable him to “walk in His ways.”

### IV

It may, of course, be argued that the very ideal of holiness entails a sense of alienation from the world. The very concept of “*Kedushah*” (holiness) denotes “separation.” In talmudic language, holiness implies *Geder Ervah* (the limitation imposed upon the *libido*.) The contrast between natural inclinations and holiness is stressed in Numbers 15:39, where we are admonished to submit ourselves to the discipline of the *Mitzvot* instead of following the inclinations of our own “hearts and eyes.”

Yet, we are not justified in concluding that holiness stands in irreconcilable opposition to the natural. Within Judaism there is no antithesis between nature and spirit, for both are religiously neutral. It is for this reason that Judaism aims not at the suppression but the utilization of the natural in the service of the Creator—the Author of both nature and spirit. The network of the *Mitzvot* provides a formula designed to enable man to fulfill a supernatural but not un-natural vocation. Through the performance of the *Mitzvot*, the domain of the mundane can be hallowed and endowed with supernatural significance.

The attainment of this goal is by no means an easy task. It unquestionably demands a good measure of self-control and discipline. But the further man advances in his spiritual quest, the less resistance he encounters. He may even reach the point where he can identify himself with the divine task, because Torah ceases to be merely imposed from without. It is at this stage that Torah truly becomes his own—part and parcel of his very personality. At this ideal level, man becomes really free; for he is fully “engaged” in Torah. He is no longer merely an object manipulated by all sources of internal or external pressures. He is a subject in the fullest sense of the term, actively molding his existence in keeping with a divine purpose. Thus, for the *Tzaddik*, in the Chabad scheme, all struggle has been overcome. He is completely liberated from the sway of forces that restrict his inner freedom.

## *Alienation and Exile*

Or, as Rabbi Kook put it, man is truly his own "natural" self to the extent that he is suffused with the love of God.

It should be noted that the emphasis upon estrangement, aloofness, and detachment from the "world," which is so characteristic of modern Jewish thought, has largely been the result of thinkers who have "emancipated" themselves from the yoke of the *Mitzvot*. Having stripped Judaism of all traditional practices and belief, they were left with only one facet of Jewish existence: the state of living in Galut. To be a Jew was to be different, different for the sake of being different. Accordingly, the Galut was no longer looked upon as a dismal blight. It became the highest type of Jewish existence, providing conditions where Judaism could shine in the brightest colors. It was felt that only the Galut could fully reveal the uniqueness of the Jewish people, a uniqueness which was defined in purely negative terms: a stance of critical non-conformity and alienation with respect to the "natural."\* Thus, by a strange twist, the tragic necessity of the Galut was converted into a supreme religious virtue.

Obviously, this kind of orientation is incompatible with Halakhah-centered Jewish thought. How can the Galut be enthusiastically endorsed as the apex of Jewish spirituality, when so many vital areas of Halakhah are inoperative in the Diaspora? Galut dealt a crippling blow to Jewish religious life. Gone is the opportunity to practice *Mitzvot ha-teluyot ba-aretz* (*Mitzvot* which are dependent on the land of Israel) and to fulfill the numerous laws that are applicable only under "normal" conditions, when the Jewish people settled in its natural habitat rallies around a central *Bet Hamikdash* (Temple) as the abode of the *Shekhinah*.

From the standpoint of Halakhah, the abnormal Galut existence is not a desideratum, but a serious handicap. To be sure, Jewish piety has been able to flourish even under such adverse conditions. By the same token, under "normal" conditions there loom certain dangers to the spiritual integrity of the Jew who may

---

\* Thus, for Leo Baeck, "The special task of Judaism is to express . . . the ethical principle of the minority . . . it stands for the enduring protest of those . . . who assert their right to be different . . . (*op. cit.*, p. 273). See also David Riesman's "A Philosophy for 'Minority' Living", *Individualism Reconsidered*, New York, 1955, pp. 48-66.

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

crave that "the house of Israel be like all the nations." The Jew possesses no natural immunity protecting him against the spiritual diseases that so frequently strike the *body politic* of all types of communities.

Twice in our history it became necessary for the Temple to be destroyed because the Jewish people was on the verge of completely perverting its religious ideals. But the resulting *Galut* was viewed as a *punishment*, not as the emergence of a "higher" or more rewarding form of spirituality. To overcome the alienation of the *Galut* (both in the physical and metaphysical sense) became the beckoning goal for the Jew. The plight of *Galut* was bearable only because there abided in the Jewish heart the hope for a more "natural" life, when to be a Jew will not mean to be an "outsider" but to be involved in temporal affairs and to be engaged with mundane matters in a society that bears witness to the Kingdom of God; in short, a world where the *Shekhinah* will no longer be in exile.

### NOTES

1. F. H. Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, New York, 1953.
2. Ben Halpern, "A Theological Jew," *Jewish Frontier*, February 1964, p. 13.
3. Milton R. Konvitz, "Zionism: Homecoming or Homelessness," *Judaism*, Summer 1956, pp. 204-211.
4. Arthur Cohen, *The Natural and The Supernatural Jew*, New York, 1962.
5. Will Herberg *Judaism and Modern Man*, New York, 1951, pp. 275-281.
6. *New York Times*, June 9, 1963.
7. *Berakhot* 31a; see *Tosafot ad loc.*
8. Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Jewish Fraternity," *Judaism*, Summer 1963, p. 279.
9. *Bereshit Rabbah* 42:13.
10. Ahad Haam, *Essays, Letters, Memoirs*, Oxford, 1946, pp. 130-137.
11. Max Scheler, *Der Formalisms in der Ethik und die Materiale Wertethik*, Halle, 1921.
12. See David S. Shapiro, The Concept of Hessed in Judaism, *Yavneh Studies*, Fall 1962, pp. 27-45.
13. Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice*, London, Oxford University Press, 1954.
14. *Hilkhhot Teshuvah* 10:6.
15. *Hilkhhot Deot* 1:5.
16. *Berakhot* 64a.