

Man's Lowliness and His Greatness

Judaism views man neither as absolutely good nor irredeemably wicked – rather he or she is caught between the angels and the animals, able to ascend to the heights or descend to the depths. Standing before God on Yom Kippur forces us to consideration both our potential and our reality.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, the rosh yeshiva for 40 years of Yeshivat Har Etzion, is one of my greatest teachers and one of the chief exponents of modern orthodoxy. In an essay on the relationship between Judaism and Humanism he captures how this theme lies at the centre of the Neilah service.

Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) was one of the greatest scholars of literature in the 20th century and wrote his classic work *Mimesis*, whilst living in exile in Istanbul during World War II. In its opening chapter he contrasts Biblical characters with those of the ancient Greek literature of Homer. He argues that where the Greek heroes are essentially one-dimensional, heroes or villains, the Biblical heroes fall to great lows but rise to the heights. This complex, demanding and inspiring position is Judaism's view of man.

Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, from 'Mah Enosh – What Is Man?'

Judaism has always insisted upon man's natural worth—upon the sanctity as well as the dignity of human personality. On the one hand, then, man is regarded as a majestic and exalted being. And yet, on the other, we are confronted by the radical pessimism of Kohelet: “For that which befalls the sons of men befalls beasts; even one thing befalls them; as the one dies, so dies the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that man's pre-eminence over the beast is naught, for all is vanity.”

For devotees of biblical criticism, it would of course be easy to dismiss this apparent contradiction on historical grounds, to regard the conflicting statements as the contrasting expressions of individual personalities or the Zeitgeist of different periods. Not only easy, however, but facile. The Rabbis, in any event, thought otherwise. They insisted on incorporating both attitudes in adjacent passages of one of the oldest and most august of our standard prayers, the ne'ilah recited at the end of Yom Kippur:

*What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? What our virtue?
What our help? What our strength, what our might? What can we say to
Thee, Lord our God and God of our fathers? Indeed, all the heroes are as
nothing in Thy sight, the men of renown as though they never existed,
the wise as without knowledge, the intelligent as without insight. For the
multitude of their actions is empty and the days of their life vanity in Thy
sight; and man's pre-eminence over the beast is naught, for all is vanity.
Yet, from the first Thou didst single out man and acknowledged him [as
worthy] to stand in Thy presence. . . .*

Quite apart from its allusion to the element of divine grace—one of the central motifs of Yom Kippur and one whose role within Judaism is often greatly underestimated—the import of the passage is clear. In and of himself, man is simply a part of the natural world and, as such, of little ultimate consequence. However, inasmuch and to the extent that he relates to God, he assumes immense significance. As Rambam noted in commenting on this passage, this relation is initiated through an act of grace. There is no ground here for vainglorious arrogance. It is God who invests human life with meaning—first, by electing man in the act of creation proper, and then by maintaining community with him. Once established, however, the relation radically alters the very fibre of human

personality and existence. “Why did he [i.e., the Psalmist] call the Holy One, blessed be He, the king of glory?” asks the Midrash. “Because He imparts glory to His adherents.”

Through his election, man becomes unique not only as the passive object of special Providence but as a creative spiritual being. In all spheres of activity, he realizes himself as a person rather than as an individual object. Even apart from his religious relation, narrowly conceived, his life attains a genuinely meaningful dimension. It is only through that relation, however, that his *sui generis* character develops. Of man on his own one can only say, “Man’s pre-eminence over the beast is naught, for all is vanity.”

Erich Auerbach, ‘Odysseus’ Scar’, in Mimesis

Each of the great figures of the Old Testament, from Adam to the prophets, embodies a moment of this vertical connection. God chose and formed these men to the end of embodying his essence and will— yet choice and formation do not coincide, for the latter proceeds gradually, historically, during the earthly life of him upon whom the choice has fallen. How the process is accomplished, what terrible trials such a formation inflicts, can be seen from our story of Abraham’s sacrifice. Herein lies the reason why the great figures of the Old Testament are so much more fully developed, so much more fraught with their own biographical past, so much more distinct as individuals, than are the Homeric heroes.

Achilles and Odysseus are splendidly described in many well-ordered words, epithets cling to them, their emotions are constantly displayed in their words and deeds—but they have no development, and their life-histories are clearly set forth once and for all.

So little are the Homeric heroes presented as developing or having developed, that most of them—Nestor, Agamemnon, Achilles—appear to be of an age fixed from the very first... Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier. But what a road, what a fate, lie between the Jacob who cheated his father out of his blessing and the old man whose favourite son has been torn to pieces by a wild beast!—between David the harp player, persecuted by his lord’s jealousy, and the old king, surrounded by violent intrigues, whom Abishag the Shunnamite warmed in his bed, and he knew her not! The old man, of whom we know how he has become what he is, is more of an individual than the young man; for it is only during the course of an eventful life that men are differentiated into full individuality; and it is this history of a personality which the Old Testament presents to us as the formation undergone by those whom God has chosen to be examples. ... And how much wider is the pendulum swing of their lives than that of the Homeric heroes! For they are bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation—and in the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their acts and words reveal the transcendent majesty of God. There is hardly one of them who does not, like Adam, undergo the deepest humiliation—and hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God’s personal intervention and personal inspiration.

Humiliation and elevation go far deeper and far higher than in Homer, and they belong basically together. The poor beggar Odysseus is only masquerading, but Adam is really cast down, Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold. The reader clearly feels how the extent of the pendulum’s swing is connected with the intensity of the personal history —precisely the most extreme circumstances, in which we are immeasurably forsaken and in despair, or immeasurably joyous and exalted, give us, if we survive them, a personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence, a rich development.