

Rabbi Yonason Sacks

## Individualism and Collectivism: A Torah Perspective

A central theme of political and social philosophy is the existence of two distinct and often conflicting concepts, individualism and collectivism. The individualist attitude as advanced by Thomas Hobbes, perhaps the most analytic of all contractarian theorists, sees the individual as temporally and logically prior to the sovereign or state. Hence, at least theoretically, Hobbes recognizes a time when no such collectivity existed; a time which he refers to as the “state of nature.”<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to John Locke’s relatively peaceful and calm state of nature,<sup>2</sup> Hobbes pictures this era as a state of war in which individuals, essentially antisocial, are motivated purely by self interest. Because of this human condition, it becomes necessary for individuals to collectively enter into a type of agreement commonly referred to as a “social contract.” Accordingly, the collectivity is merely a conglomerate or partnership binding those who choose to become a part of it.<sup>3</sup>

Other philosophic schools of thought, particularly theorists of the general will, are often quite critical of individualism. In his classic formulation of the general will, Jean Jacques Rousseau sees the relation of the individual to the collectivity as a matter of will, not merely as one of agreement. The collectivity possesses its own identity, distinct from that of its individual members.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Rousseau argues that, “each individual can have as a man a private will that is contrary or different from the general will he has as a citizen.”<sup>5</sup> For Rousseau, the general will is endowed with a transcendent quality which supercedes individual aims and needs, and, as a result, an individual can be forced to obey the

general will. Accordingly, he paradoxically asserts that by pursuing the general will man is being “forced to be free.”<sup>6</sup>

Jewish tradition, in a quite different framework, acknowledges both individualism and collectivism. From its perspective, however, the issue is not one of a socio-economic nature but rather of an existential and metaphysical one. The question, as formulated by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, becomes, “was the human charisma, the *imago dei*, bestowed upon solitary, lonely man or upon man within a social frame of reference? In retreat or in togetherness—where does man find his true self?”<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere Rabbi Soloveitchik asserts that the dialectical nature of man, who is both individual and community oriented, stems from the two accounts of his creation.<sup>8</sup> In the first account of the creation of man, Adam and Eve emerge as independent personalities lacking a sense of community. ויברא אלקים את האדם בצלמו בצלם אלקים ברא אותו וזכר ונקבה. ברא אותם (Gen. 1:27). Accordingly, Rabbi Soloveitchik argues that, “the whole theory of the social contract brought to perfection by the philosophers of the Age of Reason, reflects the thinking of Adam the first, identifying man with his intellectual nature and creative technological will and finding in human existence coherence, legitimacy and reasonableness exclusively.”<sup>9</sup>

In the second chapter of *Bereshit*, however, a sense of coexistence and community emerges. לא טוב היות אדם לבדו אעשה לו עוזר כנגדו (Gen. 2:18). In fact, comments Rabbi Soloveitchik, both aspects are true. “The greatness of man manifests itself in his inner contradiction, in his dialectical nature, in his being single and unrelated to anyone, as well as in his being thou-related and belonging to a community structure.”<sup>10</sup>

The inherent and infinite worth of the individual is perhaps best expressed in the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* IV:5):

לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו אבד עולם מלא. וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא . . . לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר בשבילי נברא העולם.

Central to this doctrine is the belief that the life of the individual cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the community. The Rambam, basing himself on the Mishnah and the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Terumot* VIII:4), writes:

וכן אם אמרו לכם עובדי כוכבים תנו לנו אחד מכם ונהרגנו ואם לאו נהרוג כולכם, יהרגו כולכם ואל ימסרו להם נפש אחת מישראל.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Torah confirms several elements of individualist philosophy, it would be incorrect to equate the concept of individualism from a

Torah perspective with its counterpart in secular philosophy. Whereas secular individualists are largely concerned with personal rights and liberties, the Torah stresses individualism as a foundation of self-worth and sanctity.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, individualism from a Torah perspective can hardly be characterized as a state of war in which everyone pursues his or her own self interest. The principle of *'arevut* or collective responsibility requires, both philosophically as well as halakhically, that each individual concern himself with the aims and needs of others. This biblical imperative demands that one view the obligations of his fellow man as an extension of his own.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, one is even required to perform a *mizvah* a second time in order to insure that one's fellow man fulfills his personal obligation. The principle of *'arevut* with respect to *mizvot* is most succinctly formulated by the Ritva who writes:

כל הברכות שהם חובה על האדם, וחבירו שהוא גדול חייב באותה ברכה כמוהו, מוציאו ידי חובתו אע"פ שכבר הוציא עצמו. והטעם לפי שכל ישראל ערבין זה לזה וכשחבירו חייב הרי הוא כאילו הוא עצמו חייב, לפיכך יחיד מוציא לחבירו.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, in a different context, the Ritva formulates the principle of communal responsibility in a collective sense: הרי כל ישראל ערבין זה לזה וכולם כגוף אחד *'Arevut* implies a singular collective unit of *Knesset Yisra'el* of which each individual is responsible to be a part.<sup>15</sup>

The need for the individual to associate and concern himself with other members of the community is clearly evident in the obligation of prayer. Even when one engages in private prayer, he is required to incorporate the needs of others into his personal supplication. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 12b) states:

ואמר רבה בר חיננא טבא משמיה דרב, כל שאפשר לו לבקש רחמים על חבירו ואינו מבקש נקרא חוטא שנאמר גם אנכי חלילה לי מחטא לה' מחדול להתפלל בעדם.

Furthermore, the Talmud (*ibid.*, 8a) emphasizes the effectiveness of public prayer: רבי נתן אומר מנין שאין הקב"ה מואס בתפילתן של רבים שנאמר: הן קל כביר ולא ימאס.

Public prayer, however, does not simply refer to individual prayer in a group setting, but rather to a singularly collective prayer on behalf of the community as a whole. Whereas the former is called *tefillah bi-zibbur* or prayer within a community framework, the Rambam terms the latter *tefillat ha-zibbur*, the prayer of the community.<sup>16</sup> Hence, even those who already engaged in private prayer together with the group are obligated to remain standing for the reader's repetition of the *'amidah* which is the collective prayer of the community.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the Rambam does not speak of congregational prayer as a categorical obligation, but rather as a qualitatively superior form of prayer: תפילת הציבור נשמעת תמיד, "The communal prayer is always heard."<sup>18</sup>

The notion of halakhic collectivism is not unique to prayer but is evident throughout the Torah. The Torah ascribes added significance to a *mizvah* by virtue of its collective nature. Hence, should an individual lose a close relative during a festival, his personal obligation to mourn is suspended until the conclusion of that festival in order to allow him to fulfill the obligation of *simḥah* or rejoicing during that *yom tov*. In explaining the priority given to the obligation of that *simḥah*, the Talmud (*Mo'ed Kattan* 14b) states: אתי עשה דרבים ורחי עשה דיחיד. The Rambam maintains that both of these obligations, mourning the loss of a relative and rejoicing on a festival, are biblical commandments.<sup>19</sup> Hence, even from a biblical perspective, preference is shown to a collective obligation. Furthermore, basing themselves on an incident involving Rabbi Eliezer who freed his slave in order to insure *tefillah bi-zibbur*, *Tosafot* asserts that even a collective rabbinic obligation can override a personal biblical prohibition.<sup>20</sup>

The distinction between individual and collective obligations is often evident in the Torah's formulation of the commandment itself. Whereas individual obligations are often stated in the plural, collective imperatives are formulated in the singular, thus emphasizing the collectivity as a whole. An example of the latter is the obligation of counting the years of the Jubilee cycle. Unlike the *mizvah* of taking a *lulav* on *Sukkot* which is formulated in the plural, ולקחתם לכם (Lev. 23:40),<sup>21</sup> here the Torah states, וספרת לך (Lev. 25:8). For this reason, the *Sifre* (*ibid.*) comments בבית דין, בספרת לך, limiting the obligation of counting the Jubilee years to the highest court which represents the people of Israel as a whole.

Another example is the obligation of counting the 'omer which, although initially rendered in the plural, וספרתם לכם (Lev. 23:15), is later repeated in the singular, תספר לך (Deut. 16:9). Accordingly, the Torah requires each individual to count the 'omer, thereby accounting for the initial plural formulation of this commandment. However, basing himself on the second singular formulation, Rabbi Eliezer argues (*Menahot* 65b) that the counting must be תלויה בבית דין, dependent on the highest court as well. Hence, this court, the collective representative of Israel, must determine when the counting begins. The *Sifre* (Deut. 16:9) requires that the 'omer be counted twice, once individually and a second time collectively, by the highest court.<sup>22</sup>

A further example of a *Parshah* which contains individual as well as collective elements is the *tokhahah*, the portion of the Torah which discusses divine retribution. The *tokhahah*, like the commandment to count the 'omer, is found twice in the Torah. In the book of Vayikra (Chapter 26), it is formulated in the plural, addressing each individual member of *Bnei Yisra'el*. In Devarim (Chapter 28), however, it is repeated in the singular, which the Gaon of Vilna explains is directed to

the collective unit of *Knesset Yisra'el*.<sup>23</sup> The collective quality of this *tokhahah* is emphasized by the verses (Deut. 29:13–14) which follow it:

ולא אתכם לבדכם אנכי כרת את הברית הזאת ואת האלה הזאת כי את אשר ישנו פה  
עמנו עמד היום לפני ה' אלקינו ואת אשר איננו פה עמנו היום.

Rashi explains that this phrase *ולא אתכם לבדכם* includes *דורות העתידים* and *להיות*, even generations that are destined to yet come into existence.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the collective nature of the *tokhahah* in particular, and *Knesset Yisra'el* in general, includes any future member of *Bnei Yisra'el* as well.

Implicit in the concept of *Knesset Yisra'el* is a collective unity which exceeds the sum of the individuals who make it up. This transcendent quality is evident from the views of the Rambam and *Tosafot* regarding the ownership of Erez Yisra'el. The Talmud (*Baba Kamma* 70a) states that a lender who wishes to collect his debt through an agent must formally transfer the power of attorney to him, otherwise the borrower can maintain that the agent has no claim against him. In order for this transfer to occur, a formal acquisition is necessary. One possible method is a *kinyan agav*, whereby the lender transfers the loan to the agent via property. The Geonim maintain that even an individual who lacks property can nonetheless perform a *kinyan agav* utilizing *ד' אמות שבארץ* *ישראל*, his share in the ownership of the Land of Israel.<sup>25</sup> Both *Tosafot* and the Rambam disagree, maintaining that only an individual that owns private property in Erez Yisra'el can perform this *kinyan*.<sup>26</sup> True, Erez Yisra'el was given to *Knesset Yisra'el*, but this is to be understood exclusively in a collective sense. Erez Yisra'el was God's gift to the independent collectivity of *Knesset Yisra'el* which in no way implies individual rights of property.

Similarly, the Mishnah (*Nedarim* IV:5) states: . . . *הריני עליך ואת עלי* . . . *שניהם מותרין בדבר של עלי בבל* . . . כגון הר הבית והעזרות והבור שבאמצע בית הכנסת כמי שאין בו כדי, *הדרך*. Rabbi Yosef argues and maintains that, *חלוקה דמי*. Even a synagogue is considered as an entity which cannot be divided<sup>27</sup> and, as such, the Ramban claims should also not be subject to a personal vow.<sup>28</sup> Implicit in this Mishnah is the notion that *Knesset Yisra'el* is not to be viewed merely as a conglomerate or partnership of many individuals but rather as an independent collective unit. Hence, a vow uttered by a single individual cannot affect the use of that which is communally owned.

In summary, from the Torah's existential and metaphysical perspective, individualism and collectivism are not mutually exclusive doctrines. Both experiences, that of independence as well as that of togetherness, are inseparable basic elements of man's religious experience and awareness. The Jew must recognize that having been created in God's image, he is personally endowed with infinite worth and sanctity. At the same time,

however, he must see himself as part of a covenantal community, the unique and indivisible collectivity of *Knesset Yisra'el*.

## NOTES

1. See D. J. Bronstein, *Basic Problems of Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, 1955), 140–43.
2. For a discussion of Locke's political philosophy, see S. P. Lamprecht, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of John Locke* (New York, 1918).
3. For a detailed analysis, see J. H. Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (New York, 1957).
4. R. D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, 1968), 323–34.
5. *Ibid.*, 323.
6. See G. H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York, 1961), 590–91.
7. Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, "The Community," *Tradition* XVII:2 (1978), 9.
8. *Idem.*, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* VII (1965), 20.
9. *Ibid.*, 21.
10. See "The Community," *op. cit.*, 8.
11. *Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* V:5.
12. See S. Roth, *Halakhah and Politics* (New York, 1988), 109.
13. See, for example, *Responsa Sha'agat 'Aryeh*, #13.
14. *Ritva, Hilkhhot Berakhot* 5:1.
15. *Ritva, Rosh Hashanah* 29a, s.v. *di-tani*.
16. *Hil. Tefillah* VIII:1, 4; IX:1.
17. *Ibid.*, IX:3.
18. *Ibid.*, VIII:1.
19. *Hil. Yom Tov* VI:17; *Hil. Avel* I:1.
20. *Tosafot*, s.v. *'asei, Mo'ed Kattan* 14b. See also Ran, *Gittin* 38b, (Rif 20b), s.v. *kol*.
21. See *Tosafot*, s.v. *u-lekahtem, Sukkah* 41b.
22. See the reading of the Gra, *Piska* #84, "*yakhol bi-bet din* etc."
23. See Hagahot ha-Gra, *Sifri*, Behar, Parshata 2.
24. Rashi, *Deut.* 29:14, s.v. *ve-'et*.
25. See *Tosafot*, s.v. *de-lo, Baba Batra* 44b; Rambam, *Hil. Shlukhin ve-Shutfin* III:7.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Nedarim* 47b.
28. See Ran, *Nedarim* 48a, s.v. *ve-lo*. See also Rambam, *Hil. Nedarim* VII:1–2 and *Lehem Mishneh*, *ad. loc.*, VII:2.