

OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND

*Essays on Mourning, Suffering
and the Human Condition*

by

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Suffering and the Covenant

Faith is a passionate experience, an experience of suffering. From the very dawn of our history, with the emergence of Abraham, suffering was considered both the main challenge which the covenantal community was expected to meet heroically and the great means of realizing the metahistorical destiny of this community. Abraham, as the incarnation of the knighthood of faith, was a great sufferer; a martyr. His greatness is manifested through his superhuman capacity for endurance and acceptance of sorrow. As a matter of fact, the election of his seed as a covenantal community was to be realized through suffering. The birth of the charismatic community was accompanied by affliction and pain. When we read the chapter in Genesis dealing with the covenant and God's pledge to Abraham respecting His involvement with Abraham's clan, we are impressed by the weird scene full of undefined dread and grisly uneasiness.

And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and lo, a horror of great darkness fell upon him. And He said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years" (Gen. 15:12-13).

The realization of the covenant is possible only if the people is tested in the crucible of affliction. The historical occurrence which is the realizer of God's covenant within His elected community is strange and enigmatic, containing the element of absurdity. It cannot be interpreted in simple human psychological and historical categories such as pleasure, happiness, etc., for these ideas were disclosed to man not through the apocalyptic-transcendental but through the immanent-natural revelation.

The covenant is born through the dialectic of suffering, through the contradiction implied in a shattered existence, in the mystery of a torn and desolate being. The person receiving the covenant must rise above his naturalness, above the order of creation, and ascend to a new event, to a new experience, namely, revelation. This departure from the natural-historical to the covenantal-metahistorical is possible only if the covenantal personality learns the mystery of *consummatio mundi* (consuming his natural world) by the fire of suffering, if he is experienced in affliction and toil. In order to confront God, man must purge himself and pass through a catharsis.

Cosmic man, whose world is replete with orderliness and beauty, serenity and peace, who has fulfilled all his ambitions and desires, who is satisfied with himself and his destiny, must forfeit, at least for a while, his neatly arranged world in order to discover God. The mere meeting with God is, according to Judaism, not only a great and blissful but also a shuddering and horror-filling experience. Not only does a bright sun rise upon the horizon of human existence, but also a darkness of a grisly night, full of strange echoes and visions, envelops the finite being. Chancing suddenly upon God, man becomes aware of his evanescence and the absurdity of a conditioned and relative existence. Infinity swallows up finitude. What importance can we ascribe to the flickering candle-flame when the latter comes close to the great all-consuming fire? Little man forfeits his identity when he is confronted by all-inclusive Divinity. Finitude is sucked in by infinity; a bounded being disappears in the eternal boundlessness. Temporality submerges in eternity.

Two Moments of the Revelational Experience

In recapitulation, let me state that the apocalyptic experience is paradoxical insofar as it manifests itself in an ambivalent state of mind. On the one hand, there is shock and violence which leave behind considerable mental anguish and horror. "And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and lo, a horror of great darkness fell upon him" (Gen. 15:12). On the other hand, there is a feeling of endless grace that remakes man in the image of God, who is enveloped in mystery and transcendence. Man passes over the boundary of selfhood and becomes greater than he really was destined to be in the cosmic scheme of things. While the confrontation of cosmic man with God is fundamentally an intellectual achievement via the "idea," via knowledge—the greatness of cosmic man manifests itself in his being the bearer of the idea, or in his cognitive genius—the encounter of covenantal man with *Deus Revelatus* is an experiential performance in which the total personality is involved. It is more a "sense-experience" than a noetic, intellectual act. It is an ultimate reality rather than an "idea." It is a frightening and fascinating vision that is real, powerful and overwhelming. As R. Yehudah Halevi writes,

The Kuzari said, Now the difference between the names "E-lokim" and "Hashem," the Tetragrammaton, has become clear to me, and I comprehend how broad is the distance between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle. For Hashem is the object of yearning of those who have perceived Him with the senses and on the basis of visual evidence, while E-lokim is the object of logical inference (Kuzari IV:16).

Suffering and Nihilism

What, basically, is suffering? It belongs to the realm of the spiritual personality, in other words, man's existential awareness. He realizes his uniqueness and otherness as a being who, while possessing a complex structure and a highly delicate nervous system that provides him with certain capabilities which were denied to other animals, is not just part of the physico-chemical world. The existential experience of man is the experience of man alone, of man who rises above the natural form of existence and discovers a new existential dimension. This experience denotes an existence which is not just a successful offshoot of the animal family forming another link in the endless chain of biological emergence, one whose existence has not begun and will not end with himself. It is rather a lonely, closed-in being, whose existence is limited to the narrow confines of an I. This strange being who ran away from the natural order is a man of sorrow and passion. Sorrow is fundamentally the encounter with non-being.

This meeting with nihilism may take place in two ways. First, it occurs when the individual existence is threatened with extinction. The anticipation and fear of death is a singular trait of man alone, who was endowed with a strange time consciousness which runs out bit by bit, driving him gradually to his destiny—nihilism. Second, it takes place at the axiological level. The existential experience is an awareness of something which not only is but is worthy of its unique form of existence. In other words, man not only exists as a spiritual being but also values his existence as precious. His existence is not a static factum but an actus committed to something which fascinates him.

Physical Sensation and Spiritual Existence

To the Halakhab, suffering is the great medium through which God, of the all-consuming fire of Mount Sinai, discloses Himself to man. "And the sight of the Glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the Mount" (Ex. 24:17). He reveals Himself through the whirlwind, through the sharp pain and sorrow, and appears to man through the violent shock of encountering infinity. We have explained before that the apocalyptic trauma of revelation is due to the fact that finite-conditioned man, confronted suddenly by God, the numinous, all-powerful and all-negating, becomes aware of the suspension of his own selfhood. Man is tossed back from his existential position into the darkness of nihilism. However, as is the case in mathematics, an equation works both ways. Not only is the apocalyptic experience catastrophic, but the converse is also true. Whenever there is a catastrophic experience, there is disclosure—man is confronted by God. Sorrow delivers a message to the man of sorrow; God addresses the sufferer through his suffering. God speaks to him through every trauma, every swing-back of peaceful man from his position, every sharp pain. Suffering is the whirlwind out of which God addressed Himself to Job. Whenever the sun sets and man feels the horror of darkness, he comes face to face with God. The apocalyptic revelation, in contrast to the cosmic, is not an ontic-eudaemonic but a nihilistic-passional experience. Whenever man catches a glimpse of the nothing—an agonizing experience—he meets God.

Cosmic and Jobian Revelation

Let us return to our discussion of how God discloses Himself to man through suffering. Of course, we accept metahistorical revelation as a transcendental occurrence. Judaism originated in the revelation-experience, and to dismiss this event would mean to undermine the very foundation upon which Judaism rests. It is useless to rationalize it. It is a paradoxical event fraught with strangeness, horror and unknowability. Yet we believe that there is another revelational experience, one which is not associated with a metahistoric event.

This latter experience is revelational in the sense that it contains the element of the catastrophic. Disclosure and the catastrophic (the act of instantaneous overturning or shattering of existential patterns) are identical concepts in Judaism. Any form of suffering, any sharing in the travail of the world implies a movement of recoil, turning away from the old and familiar, from viewpoints so ingrained that they have become part of the personality, from attitudes so clear that they assumed apodictic significance, from activities so frequent that they turned into routine. In a word, the passionate experience is traumatic and as such it acts with catastrophic force—it tears man loose from his fixed attachments to himself and to others and shakes him out of involvement with his well-known environment. Wherever the catastrophic emerges, the great disclosure is made: man is confronted with God.

We know very well that Judaism distinguished between the natural and the visional revelation. Man may encounter God in His works, either in the external or in the spiritual order of creation. It is a commonplace in the Bible that the works of God attest to His existence, omnipotence and wisdom. Anyone who comes in contact with creation at all levels is *ipso facto* confronted with God. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork" (Ps. 19:2). Both through the cosmic occurrence and through the spiritual drama of man, God makes His wisdom and will known. This revelation

to which cosmic man is receptive is attained only in the rapturous experience of Being in all its glory and grandeur. Creation, abounding in orderliness, architectural magnificence and overpowering beauty, is the medium which is employed by God for disclosing Himself to man. In a word, God reveals Himself through the ontic experience, the experience of being, which abolishes the barriers of finitude and goes out toward the absolute. This cosmic experience of God is portrayed in Psalm 104: "Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, Thou art very great; Thou art clothed with honor and majesty; Who covers Himself with light as a garment; Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain . . ." *Majestas Dei* represents the revelation of God at a cosmic level. The Greeks were not immune to the majestic-ontic experience of God even though they did not know anything about creation.

Yet Judaism introduced another form of revelation: the Jobian catastrophic one, when God addresses Himself to man through the whirlwind. This doctrine of the catastrophic is most unique in the history of the philosophy of suffering: God's revelation in the dark night of existence, or—to phrase this idea in paradoxical terms—the revelation of God through His alleged abandonment and absenting Himself from man who finds himself suddenly *tête-à-tête* with nothingness. This motif was spelled out in the halakhic categories of repentance and prayer. The experience of the catastrophic in a variety of ways—and this occurs whenever one relapses to lower existential levels—must find its response in soul searching and prayer. Both *teshuvah* and *tefillah* are the outcry of man who has met catastrophe, whose joy and peace of mind are gone. There is no prayer and there is no soul-searching if man does not experience the "great desolation" (as the mystics called it).

When you are in tribulation and all these things are come upon you, even in the latter days, if you turn to the Lord your God, . . . (Deut. 4:30).
And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you shall call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, *asher hidhakhka*, you shall return to the Lord your God and hearken to His voice (Deut. 30:1).