Studia Religiologica 55 (3) 2022, s. 33–53
https://doi.org/10.4467/20844077SR.22.014.19993
www.ejournals.eu/Studia-Religiologica

Interpersonal Relations and Sociability in the Thought of R. Mordeḥai Joseph of Izbica

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Abstract

This article addresses an important, yet to date neglected, issue in R. Mordeḥai Joseph of Izbica's thought – namely, interpersonal human relations. The subject preoccupied R. Mordeḥai both because "love your neighbour" is a biblical ordinance and because human contact is implicated in the service of God. His homilies demonstrate that, at the same time as being tolerant and inclusive in the spirit of love for the House of Israel, he could also be reserved, ambivalent, and provocative regarding the interpersonal and social sphere. This aspect of his world view and character was reinforced by his personal circumstances, his perception of human beings as individualistic, under the influence of Przysucha and Kotzker, and a competitive environment. His concept of interpersonal relations should thus be understood as a counterbalance to the prevalent social tendency within Ḥasidism, that holds that close human relations are bound up with intimacy with God.

Keywords: Ḥasidism, R. Mordeḥai, *Mei ha-Shiloaḥ,* Przysucha, Kotzk, Izbica, interpersonal relations, sociability, opposition
Słowa kluczowe: hasydyzm, R. Mordeḥai, *Mei ha-Shiloaḥ,* Przysucha, Kock, Izbica, relacje interpersonalne, towarzyskość, opozycja

Introduction

"When fortune is kind, what need of friends?"
Aristotle

As evinced in his seminal work, *Mei ha-Shiloaḥ*, R. Mordeḥai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (1800–1854) espouses a distinctive interpersonal and social outlook.[1] The numerous homilies in which he addressed interpersonal human relations exhibit a cautious, measured, and reserved tone towards the other that on occasion can even become rather conflictual.[2] This wariness, verging on asociality, is at odds with the characteristic social image of Ḥasidism drawn from Ḥasidic sources.[3] As is well known, the Ḥasidic movement had sought to establish communities/flocks of adherents led by

[1] Sefer Mei ha-Shiloaḥ: Collected and Annotated from the Teachings of Mordeḥai Joseph of Izbica, Reprinted in an Expanded, Amplified, and Corrected Edition with Numerous Supplements, 2 vols., Bnei Brak 2006 (henceforth MHS). The translation of Part I is based loosely on Living Waters – The Mei HaShiloaḥ: A Commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Mordeḥai Joseph of Izbica, B.P. Edwards (trans. and ed.), Northvale, NJ 2001. Page numbers herein refer to this volume. All other translations and emphases are mine. Biblical quotations follow the NRSV. The non-inclusive language employed throughout the article reflects the fact that R. Mordeḥai himself only referred to men. For the compilation of Mei ha-Shiloaḥ and its publication by R. Mordeḥai's nephews, R. Gershon Hanokh Hennikh (1839–1890) and R. Mordeḥai Joseph, see: R. Elior, *The Innovation of Polish Ḥasidism*, "Tarbiz" 1993, vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 381–432; A. Cohen, *Self-Consciousness in Mei ha-Shiloaḥ as the Nexus between God and Man* (PhD diss.), Be'er Sheva 2006, pp. 13–15.

[2] The term חבֵר/חבֵרו (friend/companion) appears frequently in *MHS* (ca. 200 times), רעהו/רעך (friend/partner) around 30. The theme is thus prominent in R. Mordeḥai's writings. In contrast, the expressions אהבת חברים (brotherly love) and דיבוק חברים (brotherly cleaving), which signify a close, even mystical, intimacy between companions, do not occur at all. R. Mordeḥai's hesitant and reserved attitude towards his fellows is reflected in his exegesis regarding the opening in the ark, for example:

"Place an entrance on the side of the ark" (Gen 6:16) – in other words, similar to the explanation of the midrash on the verse (Ps 34:15): "Seek peace and run after it – seek peace from your own place; and run after it – from a different place" (*Vayikra Rabbah* 9:9 and parallels). This means that, as far as you are concerned, do not create any obstacles to peace but also run after your fellow man, to bring yourself close to him. Yet this too is not always necessary, for in everything there is an amount of uncertainty. For it could be that this one is not fit to bring into your house. Yet to repulse him is also not permitted. So this is the explanation of "Place the entrance on the side: meaning, not in a readily apparent way" (*MHS* 1, Noaḥ, s.v. "These are the generations of Noaḥ," p. 29).

Here, R. Mordeḥai turns the original – and *midrashic* – meaning of Psalms 34:15 on its head. Rather than maintaining that peace must pursued beyond one's immediate context – in contrast to other commandments, which a person should seek where he is – he contends that those in the ark have no need to go outside ("yet also run after your fellow man, to bring yourself close to him. Yet this too is not always necessary"). The opening on the side was thus a way of not arousing discontent amongst human beings ("seek peace"). The passengers were in fact not to disembark on their own initiative in search of inter-relations at all but to "stay put" and see what life set before them. For an exaggerated cautiousness towards one's fellow lest he be hurt by us and we also suffer in consequence, see *MHS* 1, Tetzavei, s.v. "And these are the garments," p. 159.

[3] Scholarly literature generally regards Ḥasidism as a socio-religious reform movement, Mendel Piekarz even prioritizing the social over the religious aspect and maintaining (*contra* Scholem) that its only innovative dimension lies in its concept of the relationship between the *tzaddik* and his followers: M. Piekarz, *Ḥasidism as a Socio-Religious Movement on the Evidence of* "*Devekut*," [in:] *Ḥasidism Reappraised*, A. Rapoport-Albert (ed.), London 1996, pp. 225–248.

the *tzaddikim*, who formed collective bonds based on intimate interpersonal relations, particularly from the days of Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch.[4] Belonging to this movement, we might have expected R. Mordeḥai to have propounded the same doctrine.

In the following, I explore R. Mordeḥai's social outlook and the reasons behind the reserved attitude he adopted towards his fellow men. First addressing the individualism characteristic of his thought, which I submit serves as a central pillar of his social thought, I shall then look at his complex stance towards his peers.

Individualism in R. Mordeḥai's Thought

R. Mordeḥai's teachings were a continuation of the Przysucha and Kotzk Ḥasidism of eastern Poland, whose most outstanding representatives, in addition to R. Mordeḥai, were R. Jacob Isaac (the Holy Jew), R. Simḥa Bunim, and R. Menaḥem Mendel (the Kotzker Rebbe). Scholars have long noted the emphasis this tradition placed on individualism and autonomy, particularly since the days of R. Simḥa Bunim.[5] In line

[4] See Ze'ev Gries' comments on the *mitnagdic* envy of Ḥasidism's success as a social movement: "The tension between Ḥasidim and *mitnagdim* does not rest on a sectarian deviation from a life lived according to *halakhah* but in the creation of a new communal center and rival leadership […] jealousy and hurt are exacerbated when the intensification of intimate social action is not confined to going to see the Rebbe but also takes the form of *minyanim* and bands within the communities within which Ḥasidim have no qualms over demonstrating their commitment to one another" (Z. Gries, *Ḥasidic Conduct Literature from the Mid-Eighteenth Century to the 1930s*, "Zion" 1981, vol. 46, no. 3–4, p. 236). He also points to the mystical communion amongst the disciples of R. Abraham Kalisker, a student of the Maggid of Mezeritch and leader of the Ḥasidic immigration to Eretz Israel in 1777: "[…] from the beginnings of Ḥasidism a communal structure was formed whose defining feature, internally and externally, is the relation between the *tzaddiq* and the community and between the individuals among themselves, with all the material responsibility and involvement this implies, with these also having a deep mystical foundation…" (Z. Gries, *From Mythos to Ethos: Contours of a Portrait of R. Abraham of Kalisk*, [in:] *From Tiberias, with Love*, Vol. 2: *R. Abraham ha-Kohen of Kalisk*, A. Glazer, N. Polen (eds.), Brookline, MA 2020, p. 94). For Ḥasidic "brotherly love" [*ahavat/dibbuk ha-haverim*] in R. Abraham Kalisker's thought and that of his teacher/colleague R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (a disciple of the Besht and the Maggid of Mezeritch), see: J. Weiss, *R. Abraham Kalisker's Concept of Communion with God and Man*, [in:] *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Ḥasidism*, D. Goldstein (ed.), London 1997, pp. 155–169. See also: M. Buber, *God and the Soul*, [in:] *The Origin and Meaning of Ḥasidism*, M. Friedman (trans. and ed.), New York 1990, p. 199; *idem*, *Love of God and Love of Neighbour*, [in:] *Ḥasidism and Modern Man*, M. Friedman (trans. and ed.), New York 2000, pp. 215–248.

[5] Aaron Aescoly argues that "Polish Ḥasidism really begins with Przysucha […which is] the epitome of Polish Ḥasidism […] the Ḥasidism intended for the elite who mocked that of the masses […] the Ḥasidism of the virtuous, the seeker who endeavours for elevated levels […] who works on himself" (A.Z. Aescoly, *Ḥasidism in Poland*, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 45, 49, 53). Raphael Mahler describes Przysucha and Kotzker Ḥasidism as a reaction to that which preceded it, remarking that both movements identified the attributes of truthfulness and mental profundity associated with the individualistic tendency as supreme principles, while Izbica Ḥasidism is a form of "extreme religious individualism […] [resting] on an unambiguously kabbalistic foundation." This religious elitism emerged by virtue of the fact that its adherents were primarily middle and upper class rather than proletarian: R. Mahler, *Ḥasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. E. Orenstein, A. Klein, J.M. Klein, Philadelphia, PA 1985, pp. 268, 278, 296–297, 301. Piekarz and Uriel Gelman have both raised objections to this identification, scholarly studies likewise casting doubt on the authenticity on sayings previously attributed to the Kotzker Rebbe (Jacob Levinger).

with this tendency, the *tzaddik* lost much of his prestige, being reduced to the status of a spiritual aid and helper.[6] This orientation found expression in the embodiment of the particular "I" and self-realization in the service of God, the perpetual pursuit of spiritual renewal, the lauding of erudition, a willingness to challenge social and religious conventions, and a personal search for truth.[7]

This individualistic tendency is a particularly prominent feature of R. Mordeḥai's thought, heavily influencing his attitude towards others. In a homily in *Mei ha-Shiloaḥ* dealing with the uniqueness of every Jew – one of many that illustrate his distinctive individualistic exegesis of the Bible – R. Mordeḥai redirects a biblical verse that addresses the collective (the command to conduct a census [Num 1:2]) and a rabbinic *baraita* lauding God, towards the individual:

> The matter of the counting relates to what is in the *Gemara*: "One man's mind is not similar to another's" (b. Ber. 58a). The blessed God allotted to each one goodness and life, and one is not similar to his fellow. Therefore it is said; "count [literally: raise] the head": each one to stand in his proper place. By means of this he will be in his place, prominent and elevated.[8]

According to R. Mordeḥai, the "heads" refer to each person and his distinctive features. Every person is a נשיא [one who has been "raised"], his "raising up" becoming evident when he is counted as a single soul. This individualistic approach also finds expression in R. Mordeḥai's statement that each person is attached to himself by nature: "For from a natural perspective, all the good things a person is capable of doing he puts into himself."[9] In order to be able to love one's neighbor, a person must thus consciously engage in a process of self-education, although this does not come naturally to human beings, who are customarily self-contained.

From Individualism to Opposition

Ḥasidism's social and individualistic orientations both draw on earlier Jewish sources – the Bible, rabbinic literature, and medieval Jewish thought, especially Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah). A clear inner-Jewish line of development can thus be

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In contrast see: T. Kauffman, "*In Ecclesiastes Everything Becomes Foggy and in Song of Songs the Reverse*": *On R. Simḥa Bunim of Peshischa's Path*, "Tarbiz" 2014, vol. 82, no. 2, p. 337; B. Brown, *Individualism, Truth, and the Repudiation of Magic as the Tsadik's Prerogative: Pshiske-Like Elements in the Theology of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kosov,* "Polin" 2021, vol. 33, pp. 77–96. Whatever the case may be in this respect, the features commonly ascribed to Przysucha and Kotzker Ḥasidism are consistent with R. Mordeḥai's thought.

[6] Cohen cites Simḥa Bunim's version of the "Story of the Treasure," according to which every Ḥasid who attended Bunim's court was given an audience: "Every *avrech* must know that when he comes to his *tzaddik* and Rebbe he will be given to understand that the treasure is to be sought in his own house rather than at the Rebbe's. When he returns home, he searches and digs wherever his hand reaches" (A. Cohen, *op. cit.* p. 426, quoting from *Simḥat Israel*). The term צדיק (*tzaddik* = the Ḥasidic Rebbe) appears in *MHS* 281 times, almost exclusively signifying a spiritual attribute rather than Rebbe/follower relations or the *tzaddik*'s social status.

[7] See: A. Cohen, *op. cit*., p. X; *MHS* 1, Chayei Sarah, s.v. "And Avraham waxed old," p. 53.

[8] *MHS* 1, Ba-midbar, s.v. "Count the heads," p. 269.

[9] *MHS* 2, Kedoshim, s.v. "Ve-ahavta le-rei'ekha kemokha," pp. 82–83.

traced between them.[10] Scholars have also analyzed the reasons behind the growth of these two trends in spatial and temporal terms. As Raphael Mahler notes, the individualism of Przysucha Ḥasidism and its branches evinces the influence of modernity – the Enlightenment, and Romanticism: the buds of rationalism and liberalism expressed in the personal worship of God and a Romantic desire for a personal greatness and self-realization.[11] According to Mahler, a parallel can also be adduced with the "new extreme, individualistic philosophy" of the time – in particular that propounded by Nietzsche.[12]

Brill observes that Maharal's thought may be regarded as a link in a chain leading from the Renaissance to Ḥasidism, in relation to a new perception of the "I."[13] He noted that while during the Middle Ages the "I" was thought to form part of the divine realm encompassing human beings, being revealed to a person from outside, as it were, during the Renaissance divine revelation came to be viewed more in terms of an inner truth manifesting itself in the "I" – an entity aware of the value of the

[10] For the influence of the social trend in biblical and rabbinic literature upon kabbalistic and Ḥasidic thought, see: J. Dekro, *Love of Neighbor in Late Jewish Mysticism*, "Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review," 1982, vol. 41/42, p. 77; B. Zak, *Man as Mirror and the Idea of Mutual Responsibility*, "Da'at" 1984, vol. 12, pp. 37–45; M. Ḥallamish, *The Evolution of the Kabbalistic Custom "Behold, I am Ready to Accept Upon Myself the Commandment of the Creator to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself"*, "Kiryat Sefer" 1977, vol. 53, pp. 534–556; J. Weiss, *The Emergence of the Ḥasidic Way*, "Zion" 1951, vol. 7, no. 3–4, pp. 69–82; *idem*, *R. Abraham Kalisker's…*, *op. cit*., pp. 155–169; Z. Gries, *From Mythos…*, *op. cit*., p. 101 – who points to both the evolution of the Platonic erotic androgynous myth within Jewish/non-Jewish renaissance sources on the one hand and kabbalistic texts as lying at the heart of Ḥasidic *ahavat haverim* on the other. For the social trend in Poland (Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira's mystical fraternity and its Kabbalistic/Ḥasidic background), see: Z. Leshem, *Mystical Fraternities: Jerusalem, Tiberius, and Warsaw: A Comparative Study of Goals, Structures, and Methods*, [in:] *Ḥasidism, Suffering, and Renewal: The Prewar and Holocaust Legacy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira*, D. Seeman, D. Reiser, A.E. Mayse (eds.), Albany, NY 2021, pp. 107–130. For the importance of brotherly love within Ḥasidism, see also: D.H. Fink, *Sefer Ahavat Haverim* [*The Book of Brotherly Love*], Jerusalem 1999. My thanks go to Prof. Jonathan Garb for bringing this reference to my attention. For individualism in kabbalistic and Ḥasidic literature, which finds expression in the doctrine that every person has his own commandments and letter he must identify and realize, see: M. Ḥallamish, *Everyone, One Commandment and One Letter*, "Da'at" 2010, vol. 71, pp. 25–52. For a closely related idea in *MHS*, see: *MHS* 1, Va-ethanan, s.v. "And you shall love Hashem your God," pp. 346–347.

[11] R. Mahler, *Ḥasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 282–283, 301–302. A pharmacist with a government diploma, R. Simḥa Bunim conducted commercial activities in Poland and beyond. During his various stays in Warsaw, where the Jewish community was also exposed to modernization processes, also he become involved in public life, and later in Polish politics.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 302. Cf. Nietzsche's definition of friendship as two people sailing together in separate boats, see: R.C. Miner, *Nietzsche on Friendship*, "Journal of Nietzsche Studies" 2010, vol. 40, p. 56. Nietzsche's ambivalence towards friendship, his awareness of the obstacles, stagnations, and dangers inherent in it, can be traced back to Schopenhauer's anti-social views as well as to the Darwinist principle of the struggle for existence. For solitude as an ideal in the thought of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in comparison with the Kotzker Rebbe, see: A.J. Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, Woodstock 1995, pp. 140, 213.

[13] "The Maharal's writings became important texts within Ḥasidism and for modern existential thinkers with a heightened sense of awareness and self-criticism" (A. Brill, *Maharal and the Early Modern Self*, [in:] *Maharal: Overtures – Biography, Doctrine, Influence*, E. Reiner (ed.), Jerusalem 2015, p. 325).

individual self, moral autonomy, and independent faith. This inner consciousness conflicts with the external social world (Bergmann's "fortification of the self").[14]

The relationship between the internal and external manifests itself as complex, confusing, and misleading, a person feeling misunderstood and that what is coming toward him from without is not perforce true. The world appearing as a mask, the subject feels obligated to assume a persona.

R. Mordeḥai's homily regarding the disparity between a person's essence and the way in which he is perceived from outside may be read in this light:

> "I have put my words in your mouth, and hidden you in the shadow of my hand" (Isa 51:16): when God puts words of Torah in a person's heart, he covers it with clothing that gives the appearance of being the opposite of the words of Torah implanted in his root […] of Moses it is thus written: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else" (Num 12:3); and of him Dothan and Abiram said: "wherefore then lift ye up yourself above the congregation of the Lord?" (Num 16:13): i.e., his outer, visible garb was contrary to the inner root of his soul.[15]

According to R. Mordeḥai, even close family ties are not necessarily essential, intimacy only appearing to be such and in fact being far from so:

> "[Take yourself] from your father's house" (Gen 12:1): In other words, not to look at the way things seem at first glance but rather into the root of the matter. This corresponds to the whole incident of "please separate from me" (Gen 13:9) which he [Abraham] said to Lot. Lot was very similar to Abraham in appearance, which means that Lot acted like Abraham (on the surface). Then the blessed God Himself looked and "smelled" his actions, which were not good. He thus sent an illumination to the heart of Abraham to separate from him [Lot], not to heed his wisdom or actions, for they did not come from the depth of his heart. […] even though it was favorable in Abraham's eyes to be connected to Lot, the blessed God commanded him to distance himself from him.[16]

The outward appearance of the external world – "your father's house" (here, Lot, Abraham's nephew) – confuses and misleads, thus being liable to make people deviate from their journey to themselves and God. Lot being Abraham's counterfeit clone, the two do not belong together. Abraham's attribute of grace must undergo meticulous examination and differentiation (*berur*) in order to distinguish the truth from its false exteriority. Abraham must separate himself from Lot ("please separate from me"), enabling Lot to choose for himself where to settle. Although at first glance, Lot seems to be close and loving to Abraham, he is in fact aloof and hostile. As in the homily cited above on the opening in the ark, human relations require בירור

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[14] *Ibidem*, p. 307; cf. MHS 1, Ta'azria, s.v. "A woman who conceives," p. 204; MHS 2, Bo, s.v. "Ha-ḥodesh ha-zeh lekḥem," p. 43.

[15] *MHS* 2, Yeshaya, s.v. "Va-asim dvarai be-fikha," p. 144.

[16] *MHS* 1, Lekh lekha, s.v. "Get yourself from your land," p. 37. See also his comments on the way Noaḥ treated his sons: 'Make lower second and third sublevels'" (Gen 6:16): meaning that Noaḥ was commanded to know how to conduct himself with his three sons, each according to his level (*MHS* 1, Noaḥ, s.v. "These are the generations," pp. 29–30). Understanding that he could not reason with Ḥam, Noaḥ thus only addressed him externally.

[clarification] – precise, detailed examination and, on occasion, limitation and segregation.[17]

R. Mordeḥai's notion of sociability finds expression not only on the individual level but also in his typological division of humanity into groups, such as Judah vs. Joseph, between whom a basic misunderstanding, tension, controversy, and opposition exist despite both being true worshipers of God: "As it is said: 'Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim' (Isa 11:13) – because these tribes are in truth always in conflict with one another […]."[18] The two not understanding one another, they are in constant conflict.

R. Mordeḥai underscores the difference and otherness of each individual, augmenting these traits further in descriptions informed by a social asperity. Such a contentious social consciousness can only be borne by Aaron the priest, who shouldered his people as a man carrying a heavy burden:

> God is called "He who discerns secrets" in the Gemara (b. Ber. 58a), having created multiple souls with different views that conflict with one another […] how then can they all be good? Aaron the priest indeed carried them on his shoulders as he who bears a burden thereupon, for this is his natural disposition, because he had a good heart that distinguished between all the Israelites, each of whom acted according to his attributes, transcending his knowledge and directing himself always towards God's will. And these and these are the words of the living God.[19]

R. Mordeḥai's personal circumstances also directly influenced his oppositional attitude towards his fellows and social environment. Both his teachers, R. Simḥa Bunim and the Kotzker Rebbe, had caustic natures, neither being afraid of – and even welcoming – confrontation. The Kotzker Rebbe in particular was critical of both other Ḥasidic courts and his own.[20] Although R. Mordeḥai's personal and public temperament was more moderate than the Kotzker Rebbe, however, he lived in the shadow of his bitter-souled pedantry, ultimately thus separating himself from him.[21]

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[17] For the centrality of *avodat ha-birurim* in R. Mordeḥai's thought, see: E. Yoggev, *Mei ha-Shiloaḥ: Between Parallel Worlds New Investigations into the Philosophy, Mysticism and Religious Outlook of Rabbi Mordehai Yosef Leiner of Izbica* (PhD diss.), Ramat-Gan 2017; I. Koren, *"Clarifications of Truth" in Mordeḥi Joseph of Izbica's Mei ha-Shiloaḥ,* "Kabbalah" 2021, vol. 48, pp. 197–257.

[18] *MHS* 1, Va-yeshev, s.v. "And Yaakov dwelled," p. 80.

[19] *MHS* 2, Tetzevei, s.v. "Ve-samtem et shtei ha-avanim," p. 59. See also R. Ḥayim Vital on "when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening" (Exod 30:8): "The acronym אהב"ה alludes to the fact that the priests served in grace, which is love" (H. Vital, *Sha'ar ha-pesukim im leshonot ha-Ari*, Jerusalem 2013, p. 102, §30).

[20] As the Kotzker Rebbe observes: "'To ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them' (Num 13:33). This was one of the spies' sins – and a grievous one. While we may understand: 'To ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers' – but what does 'so we seemed to them' mean? What does it matter to you how others view you?" (M.M. Morgenstern, *Sefer emet ve-emuna*, Jerusalem 1972, p. 76). An original and bold application of the kabbalistic-Ḥasidic principles of self-annulment and equanimity [*hishtavut*], the Kotzker Rebbe's doctrine of self- self-denial and dismissal of others' opinion of oneself assumes a provocative form: "Say: when he shows the middle finger to himself he can show it to the whole world" (*ibidem*, p. 26).

[21] See: R. Elior, *op. cit*., p. 408, n. 51; L. Weinstein, *Between Truth and Truth: Izbica and Kotzk*, "Galat: Ḥidushei Torah mi-Beit Midrashenu, Beit Va'ad ha-Torah" 2001, vol. 10, pp. 285–302. For the oppositional element within R. Mordeḥai's sociability doctrine as stemming from human otherness see: M. Gafni, *Radical Kabbalah*, vol. 1, Tucson, AZ 2012, p. 8. For Przysucha and Kotzker Ḥasidism as

Love of Israel

As we saw above, R. Mordeḥai ignores *tzaddik*-leader/followers-community relations, as well as brotherly love between Ḥasidism/small coteries: *אהבת חברים* [brotherly love] / *דיבוק חברים* [brotherly cleaving]. While he speaks of love for the House of Israel, rather than highlighting the ideal of organic or metaphysical unity he addresses Israel's love for God – and, even more significantly, God's love for Israel and each individual Jew.[22] The latter has directly implications for human interpersonal relations:

> "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18): This commandment amplifies God's glory. […] How does he know to do good to his fellow and give to him from what God has graced him with? He knows that just as he was created by God so too is his fellow, all having one father, the One God who created all.[23]

Rather than presenting this as an expression of love and fellowship between individuals, however, he regards it as avoiding anger and hatred: "The [high priest's] breast-plate [*ḥoshen*] hinted that there was no hatred for any soul of Israel in his heart, for the tribes of Israel were engraved on his heart."[24] The emphasis upon the complex and problematic aspects of sociability – on account of which the commandment "you shall not hate" (Lev 19:17) must be stressed over "Love your neighbor as yourself" – is one of the hallmarks of R. Mordeḥai's social teaching. He thus contends that Noah's ark was designed to protect him from his own anger:

> Concerning the ark, the blessed God gave Noah advice and protection until the days of wrath would pass. Similarly, all whose hearts are not yet refined can take an example from the ark as to how to find refuge and protection from all the evil that unsettles the world. […] The matter has to do with what is written in the Gemara (b. Pesah. 113b): "There are three whom the Holy One, blessed be He, loves – one who does not get angry, one who does not get drunk, and one who forgives." One who does not get angry is one who does not show anger through actions.

R. Mordeḥai's spiritual home see: M.M. Faierstein, *All is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teaching of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica*, Piscataway 1989, pp. 3–7. For the split between R. Mordeḥai and the Kotzker Rebbe see: *ibidem*, pp. 15–19; *idem*, *The Friday Night Incident in Kotsk: History of a Legend*, "JSJ" 1983, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 181–182, 188.

[22] See, for example, *MHS* 1, Bo, s.v. "This is the statute of the Pesach offering," pp. 125–127. Confer also his son and heir, R.J. Leiner: "God reveals to all that even though Israel perform deeds that appear to contravene God's will, they are always attentive to his mind" (J. Leiner, *Sefer beit Ya'akov al ha-Torah*, Jerusalem 1996; Va-yishlah, s.v. "Va-yishlaḥ Ya'akov mal'aḥim," p. 10a).

[23] *MHS* 2, Kedoshim, s.v. "Ve-ahavta le-rei'ekha kemokha," pp. 82–83. According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, love of Israel is the main topic and concern in the Torah of the Rebbe of Izbica. As such, it is the opposite of the Kotzker Rebbe's basic inclination, which in Heschel's view advocated the uprooting of lies and an uncompromising truth (A.J. Heschel, *Hasidim beyond the Limits – The Story of the Central Figures of Kotzk: From Lublin to Izbica*, trans. D. Reiser, A. Be'eri, Jerusalem 2023, pp. 258, 270. In my opinion, like the Kotzker Rebbe's, truth and its clarifications are the initial principles of the Rebbe of Izbica; yet they are "sweetened" by the attributes/virtues of moderation, kindness, and mercy – the love of all of Israel and each one of Israel as describe here. On these attributes/virtues as linked with the *three lines* in the structure of the *Sefirot* in Kabbalah – Hesed (right line), Judgement (left line), and Truth/Mercy (the middle line), see: I. Koren, *op. cit*., pp. 256–238.

[24] *MHS* 1, Tetzavei, s.v. "And these are the garments," p. 157.

> […] One who forgives means one who removes the anger from his heart, not leaving in his heart any complaints against his fellow man.[25]

The "remedy" R. Mordeḥai proposes for the difficulties and intricacies of sociability is primarily the cultivation of compassion and going "beyond the letter of the law." Defense of Israel as a whole is linked to that of each and every individual, via awareness of the harsh aspects of human relationships, which hold them back:

> This means that the blessed God will show truth to the face of him who points to the guilt of his neighbor and says that it is God's will that he do so. God reproves him by showing that the will of the blessed God is only to conceal all the sins of Israel.[26]

Rather than promoting psychic or spiritual intimacy, R. Mordeḥai focuses upon the avoidance of criticism, judgment, hostility, and anger towards the other:

> "You sit and speak against your brother, you slander your own mother's son" (Tehillim 50:20): this means that he does so even though he is obligated to love his neighbor […]. Man must ask in his prayers for compassion toward his fellow man, but still he wants to bring accusations against him.[27]

The commandment to love one's neighbor appears six times in *Mei ha-Shiloaḥ*, three of them occur in a single homily addressing the prohibition against fraud that indicates that brotherly love forms an integral part of God's love for and forgiveness of his people:

> The commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" must be observed, for a person loves himself although he knows his shortcomings, and nevertheless his love for his soul covers them all. A man must also love his friend despite knowing his shortcomings. This is taught by the statement "I am the Lord" (Lev 19:18): the Holy One loves them both despite knowing their shortcomings […] because in the face of God who can be justified and who can say: "I have purified my heart"? Despite all this, God keeps silent and does not disgrace anyone, even though he sins.[28]

This passage highlights the problem in loving the flawed other, whose imperfections make it difficult to love him. While a person loves himself naturally in spite of his knowledge of his defects, loving the other in the same way is a much greater challenge. An individual must restrain and educate himself in order to be able to treat

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[25] *MHS* 1, Noaḥ, s.v. "These are the generation of Noaḥ," p. 28. Anger also constitutes an essential problem in a person's relationship with God and the true understanding of reality, attesting to his failure to acknowledge that "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps 24:1): see: D. Seeman, *Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual in R. Mordechai Joseph Leiner's Mei Ha-Shiloah*, "AJS Review" 2003, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 254–257, 260. For the importance of anger as a motive, in contrast, see: *ibidem*, p. 258. In the present context, as an immediately accessible emotion in the social field, anger prevents a person from attaining the highest level of recognition that "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:3).

[26] *MHS* 1, Be-har, s.v. "And you shall not wrong one another," p. 248.

[27] *Ibidem*.

[28] *MHS* 2, Kedoshim, s.v. "Ve-ahavta le-re'ekha kemokha," p. 83.

everyone inclusively. The best way to achieve this is to recognize the other as unique and *sui generis* with his own distinctive path towards and relation with God:

> Even though the blessed God commanded man to reprove his neighbor and to try to distance him from all evil as much as is possible, this is only possible in a place where he knows he can help him by bringing him to the good, or through prayer, which will arouse compassion upon him to return him to the path of ethical behavior. However, if he cannot remove him from his errors, then he must judge him meritoriously, and not accuse him. Thus one cannot judge his neighbor as guilty, for perhaps his neighbor's *yetzer* [inclination (to evil)] is greater than his own. Or, perhaps what he sees as an error or sin is actually permitted to his neighbor, for there are many things that are forbidden to one but permitted to another.[29]

Rather than limiting the practical implementation of the commandment of reproof by restraining criticism and complaint – frequent motives for rebuke – R. Mordeḥai expands the ordinance's reach so that it embraces a deep recognition and clarification [*berur*] of the other's psychic and spiritual existence. In terms of the soul, a person who has been reprimanded may – at that moment, if at all – be incapable of overcoming his inclination with regard to a specific issue; criticizing or judging him is thus fruitless at best or liable to backfire at worst. On the spiritual plane, God himself permits something to one person but not another. Rather than empathizing with the other, putting oneself in his shoes, and identifying with him, R. Mordeḥai focuses on the will to avert clashing and critique. Such censure is a form of defrauding [*hona'ah*] God, who always weighs his children on the favorable side of the scale. This trait can take the form of fraud – an attempt, even unwitting at times, to "steal" God's intention embodied in his attribute of mercy that seeks their good.

R. Mordeḥai points out that even great souls, *tzaddikim* or righteous people, exhibit a critical attitude, their stature making it difficult for them to accept flaws in those around them:

> "And you shall not wrong one another, and you shall fear your God […]" (Vayikra 25:17). This verse is also directed towards great souls of precious value when they see someone doing something against the will of the blessed God, and want to accuse him, punish him. […] "do not wrong" […] means that he does so even though he is obligated to love his neighbor, as is commanded of him […]: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18).[30]

In principle, a person should be strict with himself and forgiving towards others. This will enable him to know when to reprove his companion:

> "Justice, justice, shall you pursue […]" (Devarim 16:20). This means to be scrupulous with regard to the commandments. "Shall you pursue": means you specifically, and not to become angry with your fellow man who is not so scrupulous. "That you may leave": means that by means of this way of conduct you will merit understanding of when to reprove your fellow man.[31]

The individual's path towards God, which R. Mordeḥai regards as man's primary purpose, necessarily passes through contact with his fellows. Rather than the final

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[29] *MHS* 1, Be-har, s.v. "And you shall not wrong one another," pp. 248–249.

[30] *Ibidem*, p. 248.

[31] *Ibidem*, Shoftim, s.v. "Justice, justice, shall you pursue," p. 363.

goal, however, this interaction serves as a melting pot in which his soul is clarified and refined. It thus demands a high level of self-overcoming.

According to R. Mordeḥai, the material from which Noaḥ's ark was constructed (עצי גופר = גופרית = fire, judgment, wrath), its form (the entrance at its side) and measures, and its protection of Noaḥ, all evince that the "days of wrath" and the "evil that unsettles the world" are primarily the social phenomena: "For the sin of the generation of the flood was envy, everyone casting an evil eye on the portion of his neighbor. Regarding this, God said to Noaḥ, 'and you shall swarm in the land' (Gen 9:7) – 'swarming' (*shirtsu*) indicates smallness […]."[32]

The Other as Enemy

"In one's friend one should have one's best enemy."
Nietzsche

Rigor with regard to oneself rather than other is a prerequisite for gaining (from God) the ability to understand when to reprove one's fellow. This involves deep insight into the other's soul, his unique individual nature and distinctive mysterious path and discourse with God. The person who seeks to impose his own attributes and path – or the divine commandments in general – upon someone else is in error, mistreating his fellow and acting towards him as an enemy who threatens to destroy him. Even if motivated by good intentions, he must be treated as an adversary:

> One does not call into question the attributes of his fellow, for he understands that his fellow can only keep the *mitzvah* in his own way, and not in his way. Therefore it says: "To cast out all your enemies from before you" (Devarim 6:19). This refers to those involved in fierce disagreements in Israel. Yet the meaning is not that they should be destroyed, God forbid, but rather to cast out their kind of service from before you, so as not to disturb you from your own service.[33]

The power of the other to lead one astray or pose a threat troubled R. Mordeḥai greatly. In his commentary on the priestly blessing (Num 6:22–27), for example, he reads the commands "the Lord lift up his countenance upon you" and "give you peace" (v. 26) as referring to safeguarding or protection from the other:

> The *birkhat kohanim* [priestly blessing] contains eleven words, not counting the words that are repeated. These correspond to the eleven spices in the incense offering […]. May God raise His countenance unto you": means elevation. "And give to you peace": means the greatest elevation. Even if you have many opponents, do not fear them, for God is with you. This is the meaning of "to you" – you personally.[34]

R. Mordeḥai regards the 11 words of the priestly blessing – which correspond to the eleven spices in the incense offering – and the priestly blessing as "sweetening" the *dinim* governing social relations. He thus interprets the priestly blessing as

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[32] *Ibidem*, s.v. "And shall be fruitful and multiply," pp. 30–31.

[33] *MHS* 1, Va-ethanan, s.v. "You shall surely guard the commandments," p. 348.

[34] *Ibidem*, Nasso, s.v. "Birkhat kohanim," pp. 279–280.

reflecting the human wish for God to ensure that one has no opponents – and if he does, that he will not fear them; and if he does, that this will not distract him from his primary focus or lead him off the path he is following.

The above discussion evinces that R. Mordeḥai views the social sphere as a complex, threatening arena against which a person must seek to guard himself on all sides – from the behavior of others and with respect to his own attitude towards them alike. In both these regards, others must be given personal and private space in which to develop and grow as unique individuals.

Liable to give rise to misunderstanding and misreading of the social situation that forms their context, interpersonal relations often induce complaint, jealousy and violence. On R. Mordeḥai's reading, Cain's sin involved all three factors, the consequence being revenge:

> "If you do well […]" (Bereshit 4:7). The first sin emerged in the world from the power of jealousy—even though it seems clear that Cain had a reasonable complaint, for he was the one in whose spirit it first arose to bring a sacrifice. It seemed to Cain that his brother Hevel, who brought a sacrifice afterward, was doing it because it was just expected of him. Therefore Cain had a great and angry complaint against the blessed God. Yet in truth Hevel waited to bring his sacrifice until he understood the reason and even the secret of the *avodah* [service]; therefore it is not considered as if he was just bringing the sacrifice because his brother did. God thus appeared to Cain and asked him why he was so angry and despondent, for if Cain had no legitimate claim, the blessed God would not have appeared to him. In other words, if you improve your heart to yearn for an accepted *avodah*, without any jealousy or selfish motives, then it will be raised, or rather, elevated in your levels to the highest heights. […] you will serve according to your own yearning, but not according to the level of your brother, for each man has a level unto himself.[35]

Cain begrudged God's rejection of his sacrifice, believing that Abel merely copied his example and therefore acted on his own accord, thereby disregarding his right as firstborn to bring an offering. He thus thought that God had treated him unfairly. R. Mordeḥai notes that, had it not been for this misunderstanding on Cain's part, God would not have addressed him at all. The statement "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" indicates that Abel did not sin, even by performing a "human commandment learned by rote," but was completely innocent. From the offset, Cain in contrast never desired to "serve God properly."

Spiritual Ambition, Jealousy, and Competitive Comparison

> "Hell is other people."
>
> Sartre

The fact that Cain dismissed God's advice suggests that, on a deeper level, he was driven more by jealousy of his brother and his lot than a sense of deprivation. This

[35] *MHS* 1, Bereshit, s.v. "If you do well," pp. 25–26. For competition and jealousy that lead to violence, see also: R.J. Leiner, R. Mordeḥai' son: "In heaven, all is clear. There, it is explicated that a person does not touch what belongs to his companion. On earth, however, all men seem violent" (J. Leiner, *Sefer beit*…, *op. cit*., p. 28a).

idea is based on the fact that, once God had informed him that the fault lay with him rather than Abel, he remained aggrieved. *A priori*, he preferred to complain against his brother and God rather than examine his own heart. From the outset, he thus exhibited a lack of sincerity and self-awareness. He might not even have considered inner purity expedient, laying his stake on his sacrifice being accepted because he was the firstborn who brought first an offering before God. He also erred in envying his brother's portion rather than focusing on his own. God thus explained to him that he should first take care of his own state ("If you do well…"), and then he would attain a higher spiritual level, "but not according to the level of your brother, for each man has a level unto himself."

This tragic tale/exegesis includes spiritual desire, murmuring, jealousy, and comparative rivalry. According to R. Mordeḥai, the latter is not only over God's acceptance of the offering but also over spiritual stature – who will be higher than the other. These traits only occur in one brother, Abel being indifferent to his sibling's existence and failure. He thus sought neither to appease nor to make peace with him. Indeed, the two appear completely disinterested in one another.

In contrast to Abel's disinterest in his brother's plight, those who achieve an elevated status may look at their fellows with pride and arrogance. R. Mordeḥai strictly cautions against such behavior:

> "You shall not ascend by steps on My altar, in order not to uncover your nakedness on it" (Shemot 20:23). All the hearts of Israel are called "My altar," and this is "do not ascend": meaning, do not boast in your own soul over any soul of Israel. This is as it says, "in order not to uncover your nakedness": meaning so as not to come to shame by means of this, for if you pride yourself over anyone else, in the end you will descend below and he will go up into your place.[36]

If a person lords it over his fellow because he thinks himself above him, thereby exposing his neighbor's "nakedness," as it were, his own flaws will ultimately be revealed in public and he will yield his rung on the ladder to his companion. The potential for rivalry is liable to prompt people to focus on others' flaws, targeting their weak spots and airing them in public – like a woman who holds the genitals of the man beating her husband.[37]

Here, too, we may surmise that R. Mordeḥai's reading stemmed from his biographical background: men filled with spiritual ambition – *tzaddikim* and *Ḥasidim* – coveting a high spiritual level, they compare themselves with others, are jealous of them, and alienate them; the latter in turn evince a similar attitude to their fellows. Some may even have felt that their companions had attained their rank unrightfully, prompting jealousy and envy and a grievance against God. R. Mordeḥai's spiritual journey quite clearly took place in an inimical and antipathetic environment. The other side of the desire for spiritual elevation is a competitive, oppositional social attitude.

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[36] *MHS* 1, Yitro, s.v. "You shall not ascend by steps," pp. 146–147.

[37] *Ibidem*, Bereshit, s.v. "Vay-yomer el ha-isha af ki amar Elohim," p. 16; Tetzei, s.v. "Ki yenatzu anashim yaḥdav," p. 191.

In contrast to R. Mordeḥai's reading of the story of Cain and Abel, other homilies in *Mei ha-Shiloaḥ* dealing with jealousy legitimize personal spiritual ambition based on competitive comparison:

> For when Abraham observed how many great and mighty generations would descend from him, he became despondent, thinking that he might not stand up to them. So God showed him that they would all need to begin from where he started and add from there […].[38]

Rather than reproving Abraham for looking at his fellow's lot or the stature of later generations, God appeases him by noting that his descendants will always need to begin from him.

The legitimacy issue regarding competitive comparison is resolved by a third scriptural passage. Addressing the sacrifices in *parashat Tzav*, R. Mordeḥai discusses the meaning of the peace offerings [שלמים] in detail. Because their meat is eaten by the offerer, the latter is more personally affected by them than in the case of other sacrifices. R. Mordeḥai associates this phenomenon with the desire to know one's future spiritual status and taste the goodness stored up for the world to come already in the present:

> Therefore, before each prayer for any kind of good one could ask from God, one must precede it with the complete acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven. […] This notion refers to the rest of the forms of sacrifice, but the *shlamim* [peace-offering] sacrifice teaches that man prays to the blessed God that He may allow him to taste of the good that is hidden for him in the world to come. This is because he wants to see his place, to see whom he is greater than, for he desires a state of spiritual elevation. […] [He should] not plead with brazenness, for thereby he may take away from his fellow man. At present, he seems to be on a similar level as his fellow, and afterward he is elevated above him.[39] Yet, truly, in the future all Israel will stand in a place as one, and each one will show how he is in some way elevated above the rest of Israel. […] If a man wants to taste from the good that is reserved for him in the world to come and asks the blessed God to show him his place, then he must be clean. Then if the blessed God shows him that he is smaller in stature than someone whom it seemed to him was lesser than him in this world, it will not distress him. But if he does not pray over this matter in this world, it could be that he will be greater than his fellow all the while in this world, and just in the future his fellow will be greater than him. This, too, is a favor from God, who arranged that in this world he should become greater than his fellow. But if he should want to make certain of this, it might be that he is smaller than his fellow, and he might sink lower than his fellow. Thus, if he wants to make certain, he may still ask and it will not distress him, since he wanted to know it clearly […].[40]

Rather than denying the wish of the person who "desires a state of spiritual elevation" – i.e., personal stature – to know "to whom he is greater in comparison" instead of being satisfied with his place irrespective of that of his fellow, R. Mordeḥai treats it as a scriptural permission (based on his exegesis of the commandment) conditioned on the clarifier's purity of intention.

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[38] *MHS* 2, Ḥayei Sarah, s.v. "Vay-yosef Avraham vay-yikah isha u-shma Ketura," p. 21.

[39] I.e., the person who sacrifices a peace-offering wishes his fellow, whose stature resembles his at present, to be lower than him in the world to come.

[40] *MHS* 1, Tzav, s.v. "Speak to the children of Israel," pp. 195–196.

Aware of the risks involved, he recognizes their dual nature – to the person asking and to his fellow, thus asserting that the former must precede his sacrifice/prayer by "complete acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven" and the "removal of affliction from the side of man […] that man exists only by the will of the blessed God alone."[41] The danger to the other lies in the possibility that when a person desires to know his lot and whether his fellow has a higher status he will wish to diminish his fellow and not seek his good. The risk to himself comes when he realizes that he is not as great in comparison with his companion as he believed. This recognition being liable to cause him great frustration, he takes a fateful step that endangers his self-image. God may show him that he is "smaller in stature than someone whom it seemed to him was lesser than him in this world." The person who seeks to know his lot and place must thus be capable of acting with restraint and accept his destiny. Then God may reward him. Whatever God decides, a person may ask to be greater than his fellow without this coming at the latter's expense, for this does not directly harm the other. The peace-offering thus assures a save entry into the *pardes* of competition and envy.

What relation does the peace-offering – of which the Sages stated: "R. Yehudah says: Whoever brings *shlamim* brings shalom (peace) to the world" – have with R. Mordeḥai's interpretation of it, which, in adducing competitive comparison between individuals and thus opening the door to egocentricity, jealousy, and narrow-mindedness, appears to be the very opposite of "peace"?[42] R. Mordeḥai seems to link the term *shlamim* with שלמות [*shlemut*] and שלום in the sense of fullness – i.e., the person who engages in competitive clarification must be "at peace" with himself and live harmoniously with his fellows and God before he does so-irrespective of its results.[43] He must thus cultivate these traits even before he conducts the clarification, as though he were prepared to offer a personal sacrifice – himself – on the altar of clarification. Cain was unable to meet these conditions.[44]

R. Mordeḥai observes that the portion in the Torah in which the peace-offering occurs is the "garment in this world for the River Dinur in the world of *atsilut*."[45] As spoken of in Dan 7:10, this is the place where souls are judged and burned after death. The person who wishes to know his status in the world to come in comparison with his fellow must be ready to pass through this refining and purifying torrent. This preparative act ensures that he will not be condemned in the judgment but escape in peace. Only in the future, when each individual achieves his proper and unique stature, will competition end—although people will still occupy different levels:

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[41] *Ibidem*, p. 195.

[42] *Sifra Va-yikra*, Dibbura d'nedavah 16:1.

[43] *MHS* 1, Tzav, s.v. "Speak to the children of Israel," p. 195.

[44] Unsurprisingly, R. Abraham Kalisker warned against such ambitious and competitive individuaa lism in light of the risk of strife and dissension. Instead, he champions communication as *dibbuk haverim* [cleaving to one's fellow] in its mystical sense – self-effacement before the other that brings down upon them the blessing of peace (R. Abraham Kalisker, in: M. Menahem of Vitebsk, *Sefer Pri ha-Aretz al ha--Torah*, Jerusalem 1986, Letter 28, p. 199). It is worth noting, that in Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira's approach the two trends (the individualistic and the social) do not clash: Z. Leshem, *op. cit*.

[45] *MHS* 1, Tzav, s.v. "Speak to the children of Israel," p. 195.

> This is even so for the future, of which it is said (Yeshaya 11:9), "and the world will be filled with the knowledge of God": for it is also said: "behold, the days are coming, says God, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Yehuda, with the seed of man, and the seed of beast" (Yirmiya 31:26). These are conflicting levels. Man will no longer experience dread before his teacher, for man shall no longer learn from his brethren, but all that one innovates in the words of Torah will be made known to his neighbor with a brilliant countenance. This is because at this time everyone will know what his portion in Torah is with perfect clarity.[46]

In the future – i.e., a utopia anticipated in the present – no one will need a spiritual guide. Companionship defined by dependence on the other's ability ("man shall no longer learn from his brethren") will similarly become obsolete. When everyone is in his allotted place – and only then – a person will present a "brilliant countenance" to others – i.e., without any of the rivalry or jealousy that undermine the principle of sociability. Rather than closing themselves off and separating themselves, everyone will seek to do good to others and accept what is offered them. Hereby, individualism will be transformed into social inclusion, the tension between egalitarianism and stratification and hierarchy disappearing.

"*Ezer ke-negdo*": Growth via Confrontation

> "Opposition makes friendship."
> William Blake[47]

R. Mordeḥai addresses one more ubiquitous figure – one's wife. His comment on the clause "I will make him [Adam] a helper as his counter-helper" [*ezer ke-negdo*] in Gen 2:18 suggests that contentious human relationships give rise to blessings, thereby enabling personal growth:

> The explanation of the matter is that it is the will of the blessed Creator that help should emerge for man from that which is opposite him, like a student and teacher. We find this in the *Gemara* (b. B. Meṣ. 84b) with R. Shimon ben Lakish who would raise 24 difficulties in the argument of R. Joḥanan, and he would return with 24 possible solutions, and by means of this the law would be clarified and settled. Not like R. Elazar who, after Resh Lakish died, would respond to R. Joḥanan with: "There is a teaching that supports your words." For it is by means of seeing how one is challenged that he may strengthen his words with greater proofs, and thus his words will come well into being.[48]

Here, God himself appears to treat friction as a necessary factor in human development. A person is most aided by that which challenges him, only this being a true help in the fullest sense. Social confrontation affords an opportunity for self-examination. Eve serves as Adam's ultimate "counter-helper" because in an essential sense she constitutes for him (and he for her) "the Other." This status exemplifies par excellence the importance of difficult relations. Without such a counter-helper, the individual cannot fully attain the state of: "It is not good that the man should

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[46] *MHS* 1, Toldot, s.v. "Lavan, son of Betuel," p. 63.

[47] For Nietzsche's view regarding this issue see: R.C. Miner, *op. cit*., pp. 60–64.

[48] *MHS* 1, Bereshit, s.v. "I will make him a helper opposite him," pp. 23–24.

be alone" (Gen 2:18). The assistance a person receives from someone who largely resembles him is not growth-inducing and thus not really "good" – despite relieving him of the burden of existential loneliness. One who is not a "counter-helper" is thus only a partial or specious abettor. Difference, confrontation, and abrasion are better aids than empathy and support; affirmation from the other and compliments intended to bolster one's self-esteem not forming fertile ground for personal growth.

This is without doubt an elitist social approach, being difficult to implement on the mental plane in its requirement of self-confidence and inner fortitude. Following R. Mordeḥai, we might even state: "If a person is fortunate, his fellow is against him; if not, he is his helper."[49] This view recalls the kabbalistic principle that when two contradicting elements clash, they "beat against" one another [*haka'a*], thereby creating vessels [*haka'a osa kelim*]; or *zivug de'haka'a* [matching through beating].[50] *Contra* Aristotle (*Eth. nic*. 9.4), who considers one's friend as "another self," R. Mordeḥai holds that the other is his Other.[51]

The example R. Mordeḥai adduces in support of his exegesis – the well-known story of Resh Lakish and R. Joḥanan – goes beyond not only the marital relationship but also contentiousness and provocation to conflict and breakdown; to a relationship that ends in disaster and the death of both individuals. When Resh Lakish died from an illness, the Sages sought to console R. Joḥanan, bringing R. Eleazar b. Pedat to study with him and so distract him from the death of his friend and his part in it. When R. Eleazar adduced additional proof for each halakhah R. Joḥanan issued, the latter complained to him when he understood the extent of his loss – his helpmeet – despite the fact that Resh Lakish had troubled him greatly. One of the messages this tale conveys is that "A knife will only become sharpened at the side of another. So too, a Torah scholar can only become sharpened by a friend" (Gen. Rab. 69:2). It also attests to what is liable to happen when this does not happen – the knife becoming embedded in its bearers.

It is difficult not to attribute an ironic tone to this homily – an example that ends badly. R. Mordeḥai may have wished to draw attention to the duality of social reality, standing as "a sword flaming and turning" in the way of a person's path to the tree of life (Gen 3:24) – i.e., to clarification of the truth and God who is true. Although the "counter-helper" is generative he is also dangerous and destructive, the loved one

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[49] *Contra* the midrashic dictum: "If he [Adam] is fortunate, she [Eve] is a help; if not, she is against him" (Gen. Rab. 17:3).

[50] H. Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Ḥakdamot*, Jerusalem 1974, p. 15b. The mutual "beating" of the two elements against one another joins them together, thereby giving rise to a new entity.

[51] See Aristotle's remark: "But there is much difference of opinion as to the nature of friendship. Some define it as a matter of similarity; they say that we love those who are like ourselves: whence the proverbs: 'Like finds its like', 'Birds of a feather flock together', and so on. Others on the contrary say that with men who are alike it is always a case of 'two of a trade'. […] Heracleitus says: 'Opposition unites', and 'The fairest harmony springs from discord', 'Tis strife makes the world goes on'" (*Eth. nic*. 8.1). R. Mordeḥai sides with Heracleitus on this issue. *Confer* also Nietzsche's dictum: "convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies" (*Human, All Too Human*, quoted in R.C. Miner, *op. cit*., p. 61). Modern scholars criticize Aristotle for regarding the "affinities" between individuals as a prerequisite for profound, sustainable friendship rather than the uniqueness of each person that is the hallmark of modern individualism.

quickly turning into an enemy – capable of "swallowing up" his fellow and denying the value of his existence and his legitimacy.

We will now turn to a homily related to the same topic (a helper as his counter-helper), which is about giving bad advice:

> "And Adam said: 'The woman whom You gave to be with me gave me of the tree […]'" (Bereshit 3:12). This is truly the mistake of the First Adam and his sin. The blessed God said: "I will make him a helper opposite him"—since when Adam was forbidden from eating from the tree, he became greatly frightened. He said to himself: "Certainly the blessed God made this forbidden to me only because He knows that I am deficient." Then when the blessed God created Eve and gave her to him as a helper, meaning that he would go according to her understanding, just as we find with Abraham (Bereshit 21:12): "Everything that Sarah tells you, you are to listen to her." Adam's mind became calm. Adam understood that "the woman whom You gave to be with me" meant that it would be permitted to eat if she said it was. The matter of his sin concerns what is written in the *Gemara* (b. Qidd. 70b): "If someone teaches a law, if he does so before he does an action pertaining to it, you listen to him. However, if he does it pertaining to an action he has just done, do not listen to him" – for maybe he is just saying it to justify the action he has just performed. So it is here: even though he was supposed to listen to the woman, since she had just done the action, he should not have listened to her when she gave him to eat.[52]

Adam was partly right in listening to his wife and eating from the tree because God "gave her to him as a helper, meaning that he would go according to her understanding." R. Mordeḥai learns this from the case of Abraham, to whom God said: "Everything that Sarah tells you, you are to listen to her" (Gen 21:12). While Sarah opposed Abraham and thus served as his helpmeet, God approving of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion, Eve prompted Adam to disobey God, thus causing him to stumble. Adam's error lay in listening to his wife in a matter in which she had personally been involved, having already eaten of the fruit herself—and then, as per human nature, drawing her husband in her wake. Adam should have examined her advice in line with the halakhic principle of giving a new ruling before or after performing the action. Had he done so, he would have rejected it because she had already eaten: "if he does it pertaining to an action that he has just done, do not listen to him."[53] He was thus in fact more mistaken than sinful, Eve functioning more "against him" than as a helper.

Conclusion

> "Love your neighbor as yourself – God is your supreme neighbor."
>
> R. Ḥayim Vital

Herein, I have examined R. Mordeḥai's (rather unsociable) view of sociability as deriving from his individualistic and contentious attitude towards the other and awareness of the hindrances and risks a person faces in the social sphere.

[52] *MHS* 1, Bereshit, s.v. "The woman whom You gave to be with me," pp. 24–25.

[53] Although R. Mordeḥai does not state so explicitly, we may surmise from this event that it was helpful in some way in accord with the rabbinic principle (which R. Mordeḥai adduces on nine occasions) that "A man does not arrive at a full understanding of the words of Torah unless he has first stumbled in interpreting them" (b. Git. 43a).

R. Mordeḥai's homilies clearly evince that this was an issue that greatly troubled him, very likely stemming from his life circumstances, including the Ḥasidic school in which he grew up – Przysucha individualism and its more extreme Kotzker form. This Ḥasidic school regards truth and its "clarification" as the pillars upon which a man's path towards God rests – and thus more important than the social aspects of divine worship. According to this stance, as the God of truth God is man's ultimate fellow, all social relations being secondary to the human-divine relationship – an expression or payment of debt to God's will that people act mercifully towards one another, aiding them rather putting stumbling blocks before them. A person's journey through social reality is full of difficulties and challenges, recalling the Besht's well-known parable about the walls and partitions that divide human beings from God and the obstacles that impede their path to him. In R. Mordeḥai's thought, these appear to be embodied in the social fabric: as in the parable, this comes from God.

R. Mordeḥai's contribution to the ongoing discussion of sociability in religious and philosophical circles lies, I suggest, in his application to this sphere of Beit Shammai's principle: "The bride as she is" (b. Ketub. 17a).[54] Complex, challenging, and difficult, the social realm should not be made to look pretty or "beautiful and graceful." In contrast to the idealistic approach adopted by Ḥasidism, for example, which highlights its light side, this "dark" aspect is gloomily realistic. This perspective is embodied in a discussion of what is unfit to speak of or acknowledge—unsociable personal ambition that undermines the social structure. To a certain degree, it releases preoccupation with the issue of sociability from the idealistic banality to which it is susceptible, raising problems to the surface as it does.

Although R. Mordeḥai's outlook is somewhat one-sided, this is also true of the opposite camp. The two viewpoints – the light and dark – together constitute sociability in its fullness. Buber's I-Thou social idealism and Lévinas' responsibility for the Other are thus countered by Sartre's "hell is other people." As the Talmud says, these *and* these appear to be the words of the living God (b. Eruv. 13b).

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[54] I.e., the bride must be given the truth when dancing and singing on her wedding day in order not to transgress the commandment: "Distance yourself from falsehood" (Exod 23:7). Beit Hillel, in contrast, argue that she ought always to be said to be "beautiful and graceful" (b. Ketub. 17a) on the grounds that: "Always should the disposition of man be pleasant with people" (b. Ketub. 17a).

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