

The Individual in Torah Life

One of the most radical and difficult statements of the relationship between the individual and the community in Torah life is that of the Rambam in Part III Chapter 34 of the Guide:

He writes: “Among the things that you likewise ought to know is the fact that the Law [that is, the Torah] does not pay attention to the isolated. The Law was not given with a view to things that are rare...it is directed only towards the...majority of cases and pays no attention to...the damage occurring the unique human being because of this...[the nature of the Law’s government is such that] the purpose of the Law is not perfectly achieved in each individual...[and none the less] the Law ought to be absolute and universal...for if it were made to fit [each] individual(s), the whole would be corrupted...[as it is said]:

במדבר פרק טו : טו תקהל תקה אחת לכם.

As for the congregation, there is one Law for you” (Bemidbar, 15:15).

Now this is a pretty harsh formulation of the problem. But it well expresses the fact that the Torah is a collective project. Its not only about the lives of individuals but about the life and redemption of People of Israel.

Torah requires the individual to accept the yoke of working out the binding meaning of the commandments, the halacha, together with other Jews, even when one feels that Truth with a capital T lies somewhere else. And this in turn means that the individual Jew must constantly relate to a common agenda - what the community is doing and what community is thinking about - even if that common agenda isn't on the mark personally.

But having said this, I think that Rambam’s formulation captures only part of the relationship between individual and community.

In the shulchan aruch even ha-ezer siman aleph it states:

חייב כל אדם לישא אשה כדי לפרות ולרבות. וכל מי שאינו עוסק בפריה ורביה כאלו שופך דמים, וממעט את הדמות, וגורם לשכינה שתסתלק מישראל

Each man must marry a woman in order to be fruitful and multiply. (and this is of course a mitzvah deoraita). Whoever doesn't do the mitzvah, is like one who spills blood, and decreases the image of God in the world, and causes the Shchinah to depart from Israel.

Now, the idea that not having children is akin both to murder **and** to decreasing the image of God in the world was suggested by a Tanna named Shimon Ben Azzai. Interesting, Ben Azzai himself had no children and probably was never married. When accused of not practicing what he preached, Ben Azzai responded:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יבמות דף סג עמוד ב

אמר להן בן עזאי: ומה אעשה, שנפשי חשקה בתורה, אפשר לעולם שיתקיים על ידי אחרים.

Said to them Ben Azzai: “what can I do? My soul desires Torah, and the world will exist through others [ie the reproduction of others].

I think some important points are to be learned from Ben Azzai.

First, Ben Azzai justifies his failure to fulfill a mitzvah deoraita (positive Biblical Commandment) by saying “what can I do?”, that is, he sort of claims that he is *anoo*s or forced not to fulfill the mitzvah. But what is he forced by? נפשי חשקה בתורה – he's forced by his love of Torah. In other words, Ben Azzai knows that fulfilling this mitzvah would compromise his individual way of *dveikut* (attachment) to God and Torah, and since this *dveikut* is the meaning and purpose of a Jew's life, he is, as it were, forced not to fulfill it.

However, Ben Azzai not only accepts that this mitzvah exists and binds him, he's one of the *machmerim* (strict ones). It is Ben Azzai who suggested that one who does not have children both murders *and* reduces the image of God in the world.

So how can he both accept the mitzvah and not perform it? He says: אפשר לעולם כל שיתקיים על ידי אחרים – Ben Azzai says that he is part of the people of Israel and כל ישראל ערבין זה לזה – all Jews are responsible one for the other. There may be Jews that cannot fulfill Talmud Torah like Ben Azzai can, but they can fulfill פריה ורביה (the commandment of reproduction) while he cannot. Together, with their individual strengths and weaknesses, the People Israel fulfill the whole Torah.

So I conclude that the community does bind and limit the individual as the Rambam made clear, but at the same time the aravut, the joint responsibility of all Israel, also liberates the individual by making room for his or her particular character.

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