

CATHARSIS*

The Halacha has never despaired of man, either as a natural being integrated into his physical environment, or as a spiritual personality confronting God.

This sufferance of man on the part of the Halacha is not an unqualified one. The Halacha demands that man purge himself in order to achieve his full worth. Isaiah, describing the future redemption of Israel, speaks of purgation as an indispensable condition of redemption: **אשיבה ידי עליך ואצרף כבר סיגך**. "I shall cleanse thy dross as with soap."¹ Similarly, our Rabbis have stated repeatedly that the purpose which Torah and Mitzvot pursue is that of purification of the human being.² In other words, catharsis is a *sine qua non* for a meaningful existence which Halacha approves.

What did Halacha understand under catharsis or purging? The analysis of a liturgical text will help us answer this question. Among the several benedictions comprising the **ברכות השחר** which we pronounce daily, thanking the Almighty for restoring us, each morning, to a full and active life, we recite two benedictions which, *prima facie*, appear to be synonymous and therefore redundant. One benediction reads **אזור ישראל בגבורה**, in standard translation, "who girds Israel with might"; and the other one, **הנותן ליעף כח** "who gives strength to the weary."³ Apparently

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1. 1:25.

2. Witness the following Midrashic statement:

**רב אמר לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הבריות
מה איכפת ליה להקב"ה למי ששוחט מן הצואר או מי ששוחט מן בערף
הוי לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הבריות.**

Rav said "The *Mitzvot* were not given but to purge men. For what difference is there for God if one slaughters from the neck, or slaughters from the nape? Say rather that the *Mitzvot* were given in order to purge men" (*Genesis R.* 44).

3. **אזור ישראל בגבורה** is one of the blessings enumerated in the Talmud (*Brakhot* 60b); earliest clear reference to **נותן ליעף כח** is medieval (vide *Tur* and *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, sec. 46 and commentators *ad. loc.*).

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our liturgists discriminated semantically between כח and גבורה. Had they considered the two terms fully synonymous, they would not have formulated two benedictions; one would have sufficed.

What does כח mean? כח denotes any aptitude which God has bestowed upon man at birth. The term כח denotes primarily physical strength, the capability of performing work which requires an unusual amount of physical vigor. This is the dominant meaning of the word in the Bible.⁴

כח as such, is not an exclusively human category, since it is related, in most of its aspects, to man's capabilities as a natural being. The beast shares with man all his organic aptitudes. Thus the category of כח is applicable to man and beast alike.

כח is not a unique gift bestowed by the Creator upon man. It is rather an integral part of the unbroken uniform functionality of a natural universe.

What is גבורה? גבורה, in contradistinction to כח, is an exclusive grant of God to man which demonstrates the latter's unique position in creation — man's charismatic endowment and his chosenness. Man, as a brute existing in the realm of immediate mechanical, uninterrupted life functions, was furnished with כח. Man as a personality distinct and different from the beast and fowl of the field, who confronts nature in a reflective, inquisitive mood, possesses the quality of גבורה;⁵ this he shares with no one.⁶

2

גבורה, in the context of the Biblical narrative and hymn, denotes the capacity of attaining victory, of defeating a foe who engages one in combat. The Scriptures use this term almost ex-

4. In later Hebrew, this basic meaning is expanded to include the senses (e.g. כח הראיה = sense of sight; כח השמיעה = hearing).

5. Apparent exceptions to this rule are to be understood either as figurative usage (e.g. Proverbs 30:30) or as elliptical formulations (e.g. Psalms 147:10, where the Psalmist refers to the גבורה of the horse's rider).

6. Both attributes, כח and גבורה, were applied to the Almighty, כביכול, since He is both, the source of cosmic dynamics (כח: e.g. Isaiah 40:26; Nahum 1:3) and the source of the charismatic human heroic gesture (גבורה: Deuteronomy 10:17).

clusively with respect to the exploits of the warrior — the victor. It refers to combat, and signifies successful action taken by one of the combatants.

The victory with which גבורה is identified is not military victory alone, or indeed any triumph which is merely the result of superior manpower and materials. On the contrary, at times the combatant who is defeated on the field of battle is the one who emerges as the גבור, victor in a higher historical sense; and not the apparent winner.⁷ גבורה is sometimes inversely related to כח, to the degree of might man has at his disposal. The greater the force one wields, the less גבורה one needs to display. Conversely, the weaker one is, the tougher the odds, the more exalted is the action of the גבור, which disregards practical reasoning and resorts to "the absurd."

Thus, a new element is introduced into the gesture of גבורה namely, heroism or action undertaken contrary to human logic and human practical judgment. This kind of action quite often leads to ultimate victory. There are situations in life with which clear-cut logical processes and utilitarian approaches fail to cope, while the sudden spontaneous leap into the absurd (to use a Kierkegaardian phrase) may save man when he finds himself in utter distress. This non-rational and impractical action is heroic, and is identical with גבורה.

3

ויאמר לא יעקב עוד שמך כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלקים ועם אנשים ותוכל.

Thy name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for thou hast striven with God and with man and thou hast prevailed.⁸

7. The Talmud (*Yoma* 69b) explains why the Men of the *Great Assembly* (אנשי כנסת הגדולה) received this appellation:

משה אמר האל הגדול הגבור . . . בא דניאל ואמר זרים משתעבדים בבניו א"ה גבורותיו לא אמר גבור . . . אתו אינהו ואמרו אדרבה זוהי גבורתו שכובש את כעסו שנותן ארך יפים לרשעים.

"Moses said: 'The great God, the גבור (Deuteronomy 10:17) . . . Came Daniel and said: 'Foreigners subjugate His sons where is His גבורה'; he did not say הגבור. The Men of the Great Assembly came and said: 'Precisely that is His גבורה, that He overcomes His anger and is patient with the wicked.'" Did not the Men of the Great Assembly interpret גבור and גבורה in terms of the heroic gesture, which defies כח and makes the impossible a reality? These great men identified גבורה with withdrawal and defeat.

8. Genesis 32:29.

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Jacob had emerged victorious from a most awesome encounter; he had held fast his mysterious foe, through a night of sorrow, fear and loneliness, until the new day dawned. Was Jacob's victory something to be expected; could it have been predicted logically? Was he certain of victory? Of course not. He was alone, weak and unarmed, a novice in the art of warfare. His antagonist was a powerful professional warrior. Why did Jacob not surrender to the foe who attacked him in the dark? Jacob acted "absurdly," and contrary to all rational practical considerations. In other words, he acted heroically. He, the lonely and helpless Jacob, dared to engage a mighty adversary in combat. He, who had displayed so much business acumen and the keenness of a pragmatic mind, during his long sojourn in Laban's household, suddenly, in the darkness of a grisly, strange night, made the leap into the "absurd." He refused to yield to a superior force and declared war upon an invincible enemy. What Jacob manifested was not *כח* but *גבורה*, heroism, which is always employed when reason despairs and logic retreats. With daybreak, the helpless, lonely, non-logical Jacob, found himself, unexpectedly, the victor, the hero.

The impossible and absurd had triumphed over the possible and logical: heroism, not logic, won the day. Is this merely the story of one individual's experience? Is it not in fact the story of *Knesset Israel*, an entity which is engaged in an "absurd" struggle for survival thousands of years?

4

At this point we may note that the narrative about Jacob is *toto genere* different from the classical epic. For classical man heroism was intrinsically an aesthetic category which fascinated man with its grandeur and glory. The classical man was an aesthete, endowed with a demonic quality; he longed for vastness. His creative fantasy was boundless and reached for the impossible. He suffered from a sense of frustration and disenchantment; since no man, not even the most accomplished aesthete, can ever cross the Rubicon separating finitude from infinity. In his agony the classical aesthete invented the image of the hero.

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The mere myth of the hero gave the aesthete endless comfort. At least, the classical aesthete said to himself, there was an individual who dared to do the impossible and to achieve the grandiose. In short, the hero of classical man was the grandiose figure with whom, in order to satisfy his endless vanity, classical man identified himself: hero worship is basically self-worship. The classical idea of heroism, which is aesthetic in its very essence, lacks the element of absurdity and is intrinsically dramatic and theatrical.⁹ The hero is an actor who performs in order to impress an appreciative audience. The crowd cheers, the chronicler records, countless generations afterwards admire, bards and minstrels sing of the hero. The classical heroic gesture represents, as I said before, frightened, disenchanted man, who tries to achieve immortality and permanence by identifying himself with the heroic figure on the stage. It does not represent a way of life. It lasts for a while, vibrant and forceful, but soon man reverts to the non-heroic mood of everyday living.

In contrast to classical aesthetic heroism, Biblical heroism, as portrayed in the narrative about Jacob, is not nurtured by an ephemeral mood or a passing state of mind. It is perhaps the central motif in our existential experience. It pervades the human mind steadily, and imparts to man a strange feeling of tranquility. The heroic person, according to our view, does not succumb to frenzy and excitement. Biblical heroism is not ecstatic but rather contemplative; not loud but hushed; not dramatic or spectacular but mute. The individual, instead of undertaking heroic action sporadically, lives constantly as a hero. Jacob did not just act heroically upon the spur of the moment. His action was indicative of a resolute way of life; he was not out to impress anybody. This type of heroics lasts as long as man is aware of himself as a singular being.

5

Jacob was victorious at daybreak when the mist began to lift. His adversary was defeated and Jacob was ready to consummate

9. For Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, the theme of tragedy is the noble, impressive action, and its function is the catharsis of the emotions of *eleos* and *phobos*, in other words, the pleasurable relief of the audience, its liberation from emotion.

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his victory. The mysterious enemy was at Jacob's mercy. All Jacob had to do in order to bring the engagement to a successful conclusion was to destroy his antagonist and thus eliminate the threat of another attack. Jacob acted differently, and contrary to what others in his place would have done; when the moment at which Jacob could enjoy his victory arrived, he released the attacker and set him free. What motivated such an act? Of course, the antagonist had pleaded with him. He had begged for his freedom: ויאמר שלחני כי עלה השחר
"Release me for the morning star hath risen."¹⁰ But why did Jacob listen to the plea of a man who, a short while ago, had been determined to annihilate him. The vanquished adversary did not even promise Jacob that he would not repeat his attack. To release such a dangerous fiend was "unreasonable." This very unreasonableness endowed the act with the quality of the heroic, and may serve as a pattern for Halachic heroism.

6

What is heroism in the Halacha? What does the Halacha recommend to us, that we may attain heroic stature? The answer is: one must perform the dialectical movement. The Halachic catharsis expresses itself in paradoxical movement in two opposite directions — in surging forward boldly and in retreating humbly. Man's heroic experience is a polar, antithetic one. Man drives forward only to retreat and to reverse, subsequently, the direction of his movement.

The Torah wants man, who is bold and adventurous in his quest for opportunities, to act heroically, and at the final moment, when it appears to him that victory is within reach, to stop short, turn around, and retreat. At the most exalted moment of triumph and fulfillment man must forego the ecstasy of victory and take defeat at his own hands. Jacob acted in this manner; he engaged in the dialectical performance. He did not consummate his victory; instead, he set free the antagonist whom he had defeated and whom he could have destroyed. By freeing the defeated enemy Jacob defeated himself. He with-

10. Genesis, *ibid.* 27.

drew from a position he had won through courage and fortitude. He engaged in the movement of recoil.

II

Halacha teaches that at every level of our total existential experience — the aesthetic-hedonic, the emotional, the intellectual, the moral-religious — one must engage in the dialectical movement by alternately advancing and retreating. The Halacha was cognizant of the program the Creator set for man:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱתֶם אֱלֹקִים וְכוּ' וּמִלֵּאזוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשָׁה
“Replenish the earth and subdue it.”¹¹ Man was called upon to defy opposition on the part of nature and to march to victory. Biblical man is out to subdue his environment. Yet, when conquest is within man's reach and the road to realization has been cleared of all hindrances, man-victor, who needs only to reach out and grab everything his heart has anxiously desired, must change his course and begin to withdraw. When victory is near, man must invite defeat and surrender the spoils that he had quested for so long. The movement is dialectical: forward-marching ends in retreat, which, in turn, leads to a resumption of the forward-march. After man withdraws from the position which he has acquired through hard labor and sacrifice, he begins once again to swing forward. Again Halacha encourages man to pursue greatness, vastness, to experiment daringly with his liberties, to search feverishly for dominion. And again, Halacha will command man to halt, and to make an about-face. This dialectical movement, no matter how incomprehensible to modern man, forms, as we stated above, the very heart of Halachic living. In a word, the Halacha teaches man how to conquer and how to lose, how to seize initiative and how to renounce, how to succeed, how to invite defeat, and how to resume the striving for victory.

I

The idea of catharsis through the dialectical movement mani-

11. *Ibid.*, 1:28.

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fest itself in all Halachic norms regulating human life. Nowhere, however, does this doctrine of dialectical catharsis assert itself more frequently than it does in the aesthetic-hedonic realm.

How does man purge himself in this realm? By engaging in the dialectical movement, by withdrawing, at the moment when passion reaches its peak. The stronger the grip of the physiological drive is felt by man, the more intoxicating and bewildering the prospect of hedonic gratification, the greater the redemptive capacity of the dialectical catharsis — of the movement of recoil.

במנך ערמת חטים סוגה בשושנים — אדם נושא אשה בין ל' שנה בין מ' שנה משמוצא יציאותיו הוא בא לזקק לה והיא אומרת לו כשושנה אדומה ראיתי יפורש ממנה מיד. מי גרם לו שלא יקרב לה איזה כתל ברזל ביניהם איזה עמוד ברזל ביניהם איזה נחש נשכו איזה עקרב עקצו שלא יקרב לה, דברי תורה שרכין כשושנה שנא' בה ואל אשה בנדת טמאתה לא תקרב. וכן מי שהביאו לו תמחוי של חתיכות אמרו לו חלב נפל שם ומשך ידו ולא טעמו מי גרם לו שלא לטעום איזה נחש נשכו שלא יטעם ואיזה עקרב עקצו שלא יקרב ויטעם אותם. דברי תורה שרכין כשושנה שכתיב בה כל חלב וכל דם לא תאכלו.

Thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies. It often happens that a man takes a wife when he is forty years of age. When, after going to great expense, he wishes to associate with her, she says to him, 'I have seen a rose-red speck,' he immediately recoils. What made him retreat and keep away from her? Was there an iron fence, did a serpent bite him, did a scorpion sting him? A dish of meat is placed before a man and he is told some forbidden fat has fallen into it. He withdraws his hand from the food. What stopped him from tasting it? Did a serpent bite him; did a scorpion sting him? Only the words of the Torah which are as soft as a bed of lilies.¹²

Bride and bridegroom are young, physically strong and passionately in love with each other. Both have patiently waited for this rendezvous to take place. Just one more step and their love would have been fulfilled, a vision realized. Suddenly the bride and groom make a movement of recoil. He, gallantly, like a chivalrous knight, exhibits paradoxical heroism. He takes his own defeat. There is no glamor attached to his withdrawal. The latter

12. *Shir ha Shirim R. to Song 7:3.*

