

SELF-EFFACEMENT IN THE BIBLE

GLORIA WIEDERKEHR-POLLACK

What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You think of him? Yet You have made him but a little lower than the angels, and You crown him with glory and honor O Lord our Lord how majestic is Your name in all the earth! (Ps. 8:5-10).

Says the Malbim: "Such is the majesty of the Lord: the imbuing of *enosh* [man] who is frail and transient, with wisdom, cunning, and strength to dominate the universe in the physical realm."¹ What is the human condition? On the one hand, he is *a worm, and not a man* as King David referred to himself in Psalms 22:7. On the other hand, he may be elevated to positions of honor and strength: *Yet You made him but a little lower than angels* (Ps. 8:6): In common with the animal kingdom, man is a mortal, vulnerable, physical entity, yet the *image of God* (Gen. 1:27) endows him with mighty spiritual strengths.² Thus, while Abraham avers he is *dust and ashes* (18:27) and Moses asks *Who am I?* (Ex. 3:11), both have the temerity and the capability to challenge God. This article will focus on the biblical aspect of *bittul hayesh*. Such is the paradox of *bittul hayesh* – the concept of self-effacement [*hitbatlut*].

This concept of self-effacement and its corollaries is usually attributed to Platonism and its teachings, which include the goal of mystical union, the return to the source, unawareness of the self (or "the flight from the body"), the oneness of reality, the transcending of nature. But indeed it is a teaching integral to Judaism, its literature, and its philosophy, from the Bible to modern times. This paper focuses on the origin and pervasiveness of self-effacement in the Bible and its prominence in the exegesis of the Bible. Within the course of this work the paradox of *bittul hayesh* and its multifaceted dimensions will be unraveled. Various biblical incidents of self-effacement are surveyed: the sin of Adam; Abraham who is *afar v'efer* [dust and ashes]; the humility of Moses; David's dance; the pilgrimages (espe-

cially Sukkot); martyrdom; the inheritance and conquest of the Land of Israel. However, this is only a selective study and by no means exhaustive.

Bittul hayesh is the doctrine of surrender of man's thoughts, desires, and, indeed, his very life to the Divine will. It includes the teaching that God nullifies all, tangible and intangible. Man has no independent existence, but is absorbed within the light of the *Ein Sof*.³ Humility and self-negation are axiomatic, leading to the state of *devekut* [cleaving] to God. *Bittul hayesh* has been described as a "power unique to the Jewish nation," at the core of Jewish nationhood, the attachment to its Land, the festivals, and the essence of the Sabbath day.⁴

Integral to this concept of self-effacement is the negation of the phenomenal world: that all is nullified within the word of God, and that there is no existence apart from God.⁵ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who was one of the most profound theologians of our day, similarly defined this concept, referring to it as ontic monism: "There is only one form of reality, God. He and Being are identical. Creation is the inclusion of other finite substances into the Divine Being. The world, the real and the ideal, the concrete and the transcendental, exist in him." The definition of *ehad* of Deuteronomy 6:4 "signifies that only God exists; nothing else beside him and besides him. *Ehad* means negation of the ontic autonomy of finite creation separated from God."⁶

ADAM'S SIN

Actually, the first test of self-effacement is recorded in Genesis 2-3. Tragically, the first test of mankind did not produce the intended *devekut* – neither in the physical nor in the spiritual realm. Failure to submit to the Divine authority brought shame and exile.

Why did Adam sin? Soloveitchik supplied the psychology of the sin: It involved the development of the egoistic personality, the "I" that exploits his partner to satisfy his quest for pleasure and/or power. ". . . [H]e chose the way of the pandemic eros of sin, of finding and thou depersonalizing. He tripped and fell." Although according to Soloveitchik the tragedy could not be eliminated, it may be redeemed via the postulates of self-effacement: surrender or sacrificial action that is bound up with any act of redemption.

ABRAHAM

Bittul hayesh is said to effect union with God [*devekut*] and to evoke a reciprocal Divine response that has the paradoxical effect of engendering true greatness for man.⁷ Thus the *Sefat Emet* says that Abraham's observance of circumcision is an example of "*bittul habasar* [surrendering the flesh]" that resulted in the encountering of God, as Job had stated, . . . *after my skin is torn from my body, I would see God* (Job 19:26).⁸ Indeed, the *Meshekh Hokhmah* (Rabbi Meir Simha Hacoheh of Dvinsk, 1843-1926) reads the statement of Genesis 18:27: *And Abraham answered and said, 'Behold now I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord, and I am but dust and ashes'* as a total surrender of the physical and a return to the natural elements of "dust and ashes."

Being *dust and ashes* meant a denial of all physical enjoyment, a return to the natural source, and hence a purification by the Lord, "as plants of *trumah* which became impure, which were replanted and then become pure; and as impure water becomes pure on contact with pure water." Yet, the return to *dust and ashes* effected a purity that resulted in an attachment to the Lord enabling Abraham to challenge the Lord.

MOSES

There are some perplexing questions in regard to the personality of Moses: Is it not astonishing that Moses would not be affected by the colossal events that were wrought through him, and remained *the most modest man upon the face of the earth* (Num. 12:3)? God referred to him as *'My servant Moses, the trusted one in all My house'* (12:7). God spoke to him directly (12:8) and affirmed his superiority over every prophet, past and future: *And there arose not a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and the wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the Land of Egypt . . .* (Deut. 34:10-12). Nevertheless, he was never proud.

The key to the answer, according to the *Meshekh Hokhmah*, is the correlation between modesty and the knowledge of God: It was precisely Moses' *face to face* knowledge of God that superseded anyone else's conception of God that nullified his physical existence and made him realize that he was *efes v'ayin* [naught and nothingness]. Because Moses disclaimed himself saying *'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?'* (Gen. 3:11), God chose him for leadership. His modesty qualified him to be the messenger of God.⁹

DAVID

Although we usually associate dance with stimulating joy, dance could convey the state of surrender to the will of God. One of the most outstanding instances of self-effacement in the context of dance is related in II Samuel 6, the chapter that describes King David's leaping and dancing when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem. This aspect of self-effacement shows that David's dance was part of a multi-faceted submission to the Lord, expressed not only in the physical act of dancing and leaping before the Lord but also in his dress and in his social conduct. He wore a linen apron, the uniform of the priest, rather than regal dress, and he had also joined with the masses. Indeed, Michal's condemnation of King David's demeanor and dress reflected the essential difference between the House of Saul and the House of David: The one valued outward appearance and glory of man; the other valued the glory of God. The one viewed man as apart from God; the other viewed man as part of God.¹⁰ King David's *hitbatlut* [self-surrender] achieved attachment to God that transcended natural limits: He reaped not only great esteem but an everlasting kingship; he

Gloria Wiederkehr-Pollack, Ph.D., is the coordinator of the Hebrew/Yiddish Program at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York.

merited that God *is with him* (I Sam. 18:14) and that the law was in accordance with his opinion (Sanhedrin 93b). But Michal, following in the footsteps of Eve, suffered the severest embarrassment of her age.

SUKKOT AND SABBATH

The holiday of Sukkot is also seen as the tangible symbol of *bittul hayesh*. The commandment of the Torah to live in frail, makeshift booths demonstrates the lack of permanence of the material world. This motif is linked with the message of Ecclesiastes that is read on Sukkot. Although there is indeed a season for everything, everything in this world is short-lived and ultimately vanity or *hevel* [vapor], in the sense that all evaporates; all except fear of the Lord: *The end of the matter, when all is said and done: fear God and keep His commandments, for that is the whole duty of man* (Eccl. 11:13-14). The sukkah is a temporary dwelling to commemorate not only the sojourn of the Israelites in the wilderness, but to teach that "there is no permanence in this world . . . and all the plans of man are illusions of vanity."¹¹ Actually, the Malbim (on Leviticus 23) had previously called attention to the sobering effect of Sukkot as an antidote to arrogance because Sukkot is the tangible expression of the temporary and fleeting quality of this world, a reminder that this world is *merely a lodging for the night* (Jer. 14:8), not a permanent abode.¹²

In general, the festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem embraced features and phenomena associated with *bittul*: An unnatural protection from harm, social unity and joy that derives from self-detracting measures, and even the ability to transcend the physical limitations of the Temple when bowing down before God. The latter was considered a main component and objective of the festival pilgrimages (as stated in the *Musaf Amidah* of the Festivals) and an expression par excellence of complete submission and effacement.¹³ The Israelites, on their pilgrimages, demonstrated disregard for their property left at home. Refraining from mundane pursuits during their pilgrimages eradicated from the Israelites feelings of envy or competition. Perhaps most outstanding is the phenomenon recorded in the Talmud (Yoma 21a) that the Israelites, though crowded together in the Temple, were able to prostrate themselves with ample space. This miraculous occurrence has been attributed to the ability to achieve absolute nullification and union with God when bowing before Him.

The Sabbath, too, is accompanied by the surrendering of activity to testify to the Creation of the universe. Thus Israel merited that the Sabbath lends blessing and creativity to the days of the week.

KIDDUSH HASHEM

When the will to live is nullified for the will of God, then the highest mode of self-effacement is achieved – sanctifying the Name of the Lord.¹⁴ The first instance of the quintessence of self-effacement and its ultimate expression in martyrdom is described in the episode of the Akedah [the binding of Isaac] recorded in Genesis 22:1-19. In the words of Maimonides, Abraham was willing to perform an act "not equaled by any surrender of property or by any sacrifice of life, for it surpasses everything that can be done . . . solely because it is man's duty to love and to fear God, even without hope of reward or fear of punishment."¹⁵ But in consonance with the paradox of *bittul hayesh*, the complete surrender of Abraham culminated in the Lord's oath to *exceedingly multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand upon the shore* (Gen. 21:16). Furthermore, Abraham's sacrificial action has become a vital ingredient for the atonement for the descendants of Isaac.¹⁶

The Torah commands in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: *Hear O Israel. The Lord thy Lord, the Lord is One. And you shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.* This became the manifesto of *bittul hayesh* and its expression in martyrdom. The Talmud (Berakhot 54:1) explains:

and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart means with your two impulses . . . *with all your soul* means even if He takes your soul. *With all thy might* means with all your money. Another explanation of *with all your might* is whatever treatment He metes out to you.

Total commitment is a requirement – surrendering intellect, impulses, worldly possessions, and even one's life. Nahmanides teaches *And with all your heart* means with one's intellect, *and with all your soul* means "that you should love Him as you love your soul – that you should relinquish your soul with love."¹⁷ Rabbi Jonah of Gerona (1200-1263) maintains that the spelling of "*levavekha* [your heart]" with an extra "*bet*" indicates the required undivided devotion to the will of God, for the heart cannot be divided, part to God and part to man.

The verses of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 have become the source for the laws of *yehareg v'al yaavor* [those instances in which one must sacrifice one's life rather than transgress the law of the Torah]: the epitome of nullifying one's will for the will of God. One must allow oneself to be killed rather than transgress the laws of idolatry, murder, or adultery at any time – whether or not the conditions are related to religious persecution. However, during times of religious persecution, *yehareg v'al yaavor* – one is compelled to allow oneself to be killed for transgressing any law.¹⁸

Eretz Yisrael [The Land of Israel], the Torah, and the Sabbath – the national trappings of the Jewish nation – were acquired and given permanence by national surrender and self-sacrifice. The sojourns of the Jews in the desert enumerated in Numbers 30-36, as well as the apportioning of the Land, have effected the permanent association of the Eretz Yisrael with the Jewish nation. The Jews acquired Eretz Yisrael by surrendering both themselves and the Land to the will of God through their sojourns in the desert and by obeying the law. Eretz Yisrael thus became the *inheritance of the Lord* (Ps. 127:3).

MITZVOT: THE COMMANDMENTS

The concept of self-effacement with its corollaries is biblical: It is congruent to the limiting purpose of the *mitzvot*, to restrict man's animalistic and instinctual drives . . . *that you seek not after your heart and your eyes after which you go astray* (Num. 15: 39). *After your heart*, our commentators agree, "this is heresy," that precludes attachment to the Lord. *After your eyes*, they say, "this is immorality," which includes the egoistic pursuit of pleasure.¹⁹ It contains the purpose of the *mitzvot* as set forth in Leviticus Rabbah 13:3 and Genesis Rabbah 44:1: "The *mitzvot* were given to Israel only to purify them." The paradox of this concept of how the surrender of natural inclinations engenders a nullification of nature and the transcendence over nature and its limitations was expressed so perfectly by King David: *Yet you made him but a little lower than the angels* (Ps. 8:6).

NOTES

1. Malbim on Psalms 8:2. Rabbi Meir Leib ben Yehiel (1809-1879), Rabbi of Posen and opponent of Reform, is noted for his commentary on the Bible, *Torah Im Malbim*. Cf. the Radak (Rabbi David Kimhi) on Psalm 8:10.

2. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin's (1749-1821) exposition of Genesis 1 and 2 in his work, *Nefesh Hayyim* (Vilna 1824) provides an insight into this supernatural dimension of *bittul hayesh*. He sets Vol. 35, No. 3, 2007

for himself the objective of defining the meaning of *tzelem elokim* [the likeness of man to God] which derives from Genesis 1:27 (*And God created man in his own image...*) and to explain how man is similar to God. He focuses on the word *tzelem*, which he says refers not to a similarity in form, as God is not anthropomorphic, but to "somewhat of a likeness, and not an exact likeness."

Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin explains that the word *Elohim* refers to God's omnipotence, including His power to create *ex nihilo* and to sustain the universe. The term *elohim* refers also to earthly powers; however these earthly powers all derive their strength from God, that is, *Elohim*; therefore God is called *Elohei Haelohim* – the God of gods or *Elohim Emet*, the True God. In a way, he says, God created man to be similar to Him, also to be an "architect of the upper worlds." As God is the source of all forces, God created man to rule and control the forces of the universe. With his good deeds, words, and thoughts man can sustain and empower the holy supernal forces and worlds; and so the reverse, he can destroy various forces and supernal holy worlds with his deeds, words, or thoughts. On the basis of the grammatical construction of Genesis 2:7 Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin infers that man, with the breath of life in him, became a living soul *for* multiple worlds. As it is written *lenefesh hayah* with a "lamed," not a "bet," which, translated literally, means *and the man was* [to] *a living soul*, he concludes that man "is the life force and the soul that animates upper and lower worlds, that are all controlled by him." Hence, man's soul is not static within, but reaches beyond; and the worlds can react to man's deeds.

3. Literally, the "Endless, Infinite," a term used to indicate the Unknowable God.
4. The *Sefat Emet*, commentary on *Parshat Mas'ei*, pp.198-200.
5. See *The Tanya*, Ch. 43.
6. Jacob B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* (New York: Ktav, 2003) pp. 133-134.
7. See *Zohar Hadash* 1:122b, "He who is small is great." See also *Chasidic Perspectives*, pp. 193-202. Cf. the Alter of Navardok: "To acquire the world one must nullify the world." (Katz, p. 215).
8. *Sefat Emet on Parshat Vayera*, 1899.
9. *Meshekh Hokhmah, Parshat Shmot*, p. 52
10. Malbim on II Samuel 6:14.
11. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav Me'Eliyahu* (Jerusalem: Seriatim, 2002) vol. 2, p. 107.
12. Malbim on Leviticus 23:43.
13. See Rabbi Jacob Reiss, *Pa'amei Moed*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 2004), pp. 319-321; *Sefat Emet, Parshat Ki Tavo* (1896); Malbim II Samuel 6.
14. See Mishnah Avot 2:4.
15. Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, (New York: Dover, 1956) 3:34, p. 306.
16. See Midrash Tanhuma, *Parshat Vayera* and Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, *Sefer Rabenu Bahya Al Hatorah*, pp. 74-77.
17. Nahmanides, Commentary on the Torah, Deuteronomy 6.
18. Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah* 5:7.
19. Ramban on Numbers 15:39; Ibn Ezra on Numbers 15:39; *Meshekh Hokhmah, Vayera*, p. 19.

