

# THE DUALITY OF MAN: A STUDY IN TALMUDIC ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

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An often-neglected area of study is the talmudic readiness to use rather radical allegorical interpretations of biblical texts. An example that adequately illustrates this process is three verses dealing with the duality of man. In its attempt to understand and perceive embedded meanings in these verses, the Talmud (with the Midrash) allegorically interweaves multifaceted considerations of man/woman, Divine and mortal, body and soul, as we shall see. These verses are:

*And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them (Gen. 1:27).*

*Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (2:7).*

*And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the place with flesh instead thereof. And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man (2:21-22).*

It will be noted that all narrate the actual creation of the First Man, though one is in Chapter 1 of Genesis and the others in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the texts lay problems before us. Each contains ambiguities of its own, and each is in a way inconsistent with the other verses. Does Genesis 1:27 mean to say that a human being was created both male and female? If so, then, intertextually, the verse is in conflict with the other two quoted verses, which do not speak of a joint creation of male and female, but rather of respective separate creative processes for each. Genesis 2:7 implies that man was created only as male, and verses 2:21-22 explicitly state that woman was created from the rib of an already existing man.

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The Talmud uses these verses from Genesis in a discussion centered upon understanding Psalm 139:5, in itself an example of ambiguous duality. The Psalm begins with a description of an omniscient God who examines and knows man completely. Then, in verse 5, it states: *Thou hast hemmed me in behind and before, and laid Thy hand upon me*. Ostensibly, this verse has no connection with the creation of man. Nevertheless, with this verse, the Babylonian Talmud (Brachot 61a-61b) begins a lengthy discussion on man's duality by referring to the verses in Genesis. R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar said: "God created *two countenances in the first man* [italics mine], as it says, Behind and before hast Thou formed me [a rephrasing of Ps. 139:5]."<sup>1</sup>

The reference to the "two countenances in the first man" is an evident allusion to Genesis 1:27: . . . *male and female created He them*. The introductory reference to Psalm 139:5 appears to obviate the possibility that Genesis 1:27 be understood as referring to man in general as if in the same category as other animals, male and female (as in Gen. 6:19). If "male and female" in Genesis does not mean two separate beings, what then does it mean?

The Talmud perceives the necessity of an allegorical interpretation to understand "male and female" and finds it embedded in the phrase "behind and before" of Psalm 139:5. Thus, the Talmud initially interprets "the first man" as being created with "two countenances."

Joseph B. Soloveitchik<sup>2</sup> pushes R. Jeremiah's dictum further. He proposes that the verse is not referring to the physiology of man, but conceptually to the "image of God" in man. The phrase "male and female" is to be understood not physically, but as representing abstract psychological tendencies; namely, passive and active. The "two countenances" describe two poles of human behavior that are found in all mankind, male and female alike. Soloveitchik's conception is implied in the talmudic allegorization of Genesis and Psalm 139.

Soloveitchik delves even further: he understands these traits not only as psychological categories, but also as having religious and philosophical aspects as well. In a later work, on the basis of Jewish mysticism, he develops this dual aspect of being into transcendental proportions:

The principles of creativity and receptivity, acting and being acted upon, energizing and absorbing, aggressiveness and toleration, initiating and completing, of limitless emanation of a transcendental

being and measured reflection of the cosmos, are portrayed by the dual motif of masculinity and femininity within our religious experience. . . . Unconditioned, creative, infinite transcendence and self-conditioned, receptive finite immanence of God are symbolized by masculinity and femininity.<sup>3</sup>

God's creation of male and female is thereby understood allegorically, and the "two countenances" explain man as dualistically passive and active, receptive and creative, reflecting his experience of God as transcendent and immanent.

The Talmud then proceeds with a different allegorical approach, regarding Genesis 2:21-22, the apparent creation of woman: *And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man made he a woman*. Rav and Samuel explained this differently. One said that [the rib] was a face, the other that it was a tail. No objection can be raised against the one who says it was a face, since so it is written, *Behind and before hast Thou formed me*. But how does he who says it was a tail explain *Behind and before hast Thou formed me*? As stated by R. Ammi:

. . . for R. Ammi said: "'Behind' [that is, last] in the work of creation, and 'before' [that is, first] for punishment. We grant you he was last in the work of creation, for he was not created till the eve of Sabbath. But when you say 'first for punishment,' to what punishment do you refer?

. . . . [After rejecting the possibility that the first punishment was Adam/Eve's expulsion from Eden, the Talmud proceeds:] I must say then that the punishment of the Flood is meant, as it is written, *And He blotted out every living substance which was upon the face of the ground, both man and cattle*" (Berachot 61a-61b).

Allegorical interpretation is now applied to the "rib" itself. The "rib" represents a face and/or tail, indicating that man is both the first in creation and the last in creation. Man as the first in creation indicates a level of significance. Being the last in creation may suggest that he is actually the goal of the creative developmental process. On the other hand, being the last may indicate nevertheless a lack of significance as compared to the overall grandeur of creation. In any case, the last part of the talmudic exposition regard-

ing punishment preserves the concept of man/woman as a duality somehow singular.

By introducing the concept of first and last of punishment, the Talmud introduces moral choice as distinctly generic man's, thereby burdened with accountability. Clearly, man must be worthy, because he is accountable. An elaboration of this is seen in midrashic literature:

*And God said: let us make man* , . . . (Gen. 1:26). R. Johanan commenced [his discourse]: "Thou hast formed me behind and before, . . ." (Ps.139:5). Said R. Johanan: "If a man is worthy enough, he enjoys both worlds, for it says, 'Thou hast formed me for a later [world] and an earlier [world].' But if not, he will have to render a full account [of his misdeeds], as it is said, *And laid Thy hand upon me*" (ibid.) (Midrash Rabbah Gen. 8:1).

The accountability of man focuses on both the creation of man as male and female as well as on the procedure with the rib. This suggests that the creation of male and female, the creation of "woman" from the "rib," and the elaboration in Psalm 139 of "behind and before" are understood as one thematic axis.

This accountability is not limited to individual man, but to man in general. *Midrash Rabbah* continues:

R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah and R. Judah b. R. Simon in R. Eleazar's name said: "He created him filling the whole world. How do we know [that he stretched] from east to west? Because it is said, *Thou hast formed me behind [ahor] and before [kedem].*"

Man is responsible not only for himself, but for the entire world.

A further rabbinic elaboration of the basic theme of the duality of man perceives his being of both heaven and earth.

R. Tifdai said in R. Aha's name: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'If I create him of the celestial elements he will live [for ever] and not die, and if I create him of the terrestrial elements, he will die and not live [in a future life]. Therefore I will create him of the upper and of the lower elements: if he sins he will die; while if he does not sin, he will live'" (Midrash Rabbah – Gen. 14:3).

As David the psalmist cries to the Creator: *What is man that You are mindful of him, / mortal man that you have taken note of him, / that You have made him a little lower than the angels* (Ps. 8:4).

As noted, "Rab and Samuel explained this [the rib] differently. One said that [it] was a face, the other that it was a tail" allegorically implying that man is to be viewed as both animal and human. Rabbi Abbahu goes even further:

R. Abbahu contrasted two texts. It is written, *Male and female created He them*, and it is also written, *For in the image of God made He man*. How are these statements to be reconciled? At first the intention was to create two, but in the end only one was created (Berachot 61a).

Man is not just of this world, but created in the image of God. The image of God within represents man's intellectual and cognitive being, as Soloveitchik asserted, a creature aware of his existence, cognizant of moral implications and able to choose. As one entity, he resembles his Creator, only "a little lower than the angels"; as a dual entity, he resembles all other earthly creatures, created separately male and female. In the Midrash:

R. Simeon b. Lakish maintained: "He [man] was the latest in the work of the last day and the earliest in the work of the first day." That is consistent with the view of R. Simeon b. Lakish, for he said: "*And the spirit of God hovered* (Gen. 1:2) refers to the soul of Adam, as you read, *And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him* (Isa. 40:7)" (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 7:2).

Amazingly, R. Simeon b. Lakish allegorizes *the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters* in Genesis 1:2 as referring to the soul of man! The duality of man is radical indeed, human/animal, man/angel, human/godly, creature/creator.

To summarize, man's uniqueness is seen in his duality. Both human and godly, man is part of the creative process of the natural world, and at the same time recipient of the image of God. It is his duality that is expressed in the various descriptions of his creation and is ultimately the expression of his uniqueness. His uniqueness is manifested in his intellectual and cognitive abilities as well as his self-awareness and his ability to choose and to create to the limits of his earthly ability. As part and parcel of the natural process, an animal driven by needs and subject to brute lack of sensitivity, he may

passively accept his natural self, with its challenges and limitations, or he may actively take charge of his existence and turn his fate into a challenge of destiny.<sup>4</sup> This frail physical product of a long creative process becomes the being morally accountable for the universe.

Refracting from *And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them* (Gen. 1:27), from *And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man . . . And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the man, made He a woman* (2:21-22), and from *Thou hast hemmed me in behind and before* (Ps. 139:5), the Midrash notes: "R. Samuel b. Nahman said: 'When the Lord created Adam He created him double-faced'" (Midrash Rabbah – Gen. 8:1).

Man gazes from one end of the world to the other. Knowledgeable and aware, he is also, sometimes tragically, accountable and responsible. Janus-faced, he alone amongst his fellow creatures is aware of his past and anticipates his future. The sages of the Talmud and Midrash studied the strange contradictions describing the creation of man, and almost unanimously adopted an allegorical approach to the verses, thereby describing the at times glorious, and at times tragic, duality of man.

#### NOTES

1. Talmud and *Midrash Rabah* translations are by Soncino, as found on their CD-ROM.
2. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Hamesh Drashot* (Jerusalem: *Machon Tal Orot*, 1974) p. 46-47. Also in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Fir Drashot* (Jerusalem: *Machon Tal Orot*, 1967) pp. 65-66.
3. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed* (New York: *Toras HoRav Foundation*, 2000) pp. 69,70.
4. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny* (*Kol dodi dofeq*, English) (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992).



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