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REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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**Section 4 - Aspects of
Zionist Jewish Education**

For Those That Seek: Self-Fulfillment and Self-Realization (Two Terms — Two Outlooks)¹

Self-Fulfillment (Mimush Atzmi): Here and Now

Self-fulfillment is the right to a full life in the here and now. Man and woman are in and of themselves the end aim of human endeavor. This is so because of the intrinsic inner value of the human being. From this follows the right to life, to freedom, and to self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment means the right to fully develop physical, intellectual, and spiritual abilities in the here and now on condition that achieving this fulfillment does not undermine that same right for someone else.

The fulfillment of happiness will find expression both in the realm of work and in the realm of love. Work is to be differentiated from making a living. Work answers the psychological need of the individual for self-expression and satisfaction through shaping, controlling, manipulating, and processing the physical, social, and spiritual environment. In general, society (or a part of it) will ensure that self-fulfillment at work expresses itself in a way useful to that society. (The ways in which society may do so will differ.)

In the realm of love, man/woman expresses his/her need to combine his existence with that of another or others. The prototype is the full relationship between a man and a woman. But, in fact, we are referring to the full spectrum of human experience that awakens emotional openness to be “with” or “part of” nature, the arts, an intimate group. Work is doing. Love is experiencing.

The individual’s intrinsic right to self-fulfillment as a result of being the end aim and ultimate value of existence constitutes the humanistic inheritance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Humanism established the individual human being as an end and not just as a means to fulfill God’s will.*

Since then, many controversies in social and political thinking centered around the question: How can society be ordered so as to enable the individual to achieve maximum self-fulfillment?

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How Do We Realize Humanism?

Liberalism favored free competition and maximum freedom for the individual in his/her quest for self-fulfillment. The responsibility for using his/her strength and abilities to fulfill himself/herself is placed upon the individual.

The opponents of liberalism point out that there is no practical possibility of guaranteeing equal opportunities for self-fulfillment. Hence liberalism perforce undermines (directly or indirectly) the right of someone else to self-fulfillment.

Private Versus Public Responsibility

The rationale of socialism in attempting to relate to the inadequacies of liberalism is that the responsibility for ensuring maximum self-fulfillment is a public matter, that is, the general responsibility of society and government.

Critics of socialism claim that this approach necessarily leads to a limitation of the individual's freedom and is therefore unacceptable.

Where is the Focus of Public Authority?

Centralist socialism believes that public responsibility should be expressed through the central authority. (This is a common denominator for both democratic socialism and totalitarian socialism.)

Decentralist (anarchistic) socialism claims that the collective responsibility has to be expressed through a voluntary and egalitarian community of mutual responsibility. The state should constitute the minimal national framework necessary for supporting such an arrangement of voluntary community associations. Otherwise a state bureaucracy (a "New Class") will inevitably arise and become oppressive.

Centralist socialism rails against such a "Utopian" solution, which, in its view, is impossible to bring about in our modern complex world.

The centralist (anarchistic) socialist response is that the community of true partnership is the necessary crucible for creating the prototypes of human relationships that ultimately ensure both freedom of the individual and collective responsibility for self-fulfillment. Only in a community framework reflecting the idea of mutuality in human relationships will it be possible to combine the realm of work with the realm of love.

At the national level, the humanistic ideal of self-fulfillment led to the idea of a people's right to self-determination. Within this context, many national

movements have arisen in the last 200 years, including the national political movement of the Jewish people — the Zionist Movement.

Self-Realization (Hagshama Atzmit): The Link With the Eternal

The essence of the human (created in the Divine image) can be realized only by melding one's life with the purpose of human existence — that is, on-going “mending” of the world (*tikun olam*). This is the meaning of what A.D. Gordon called *chayei olam* (life eternal).

According to Jewish tradition, the aim is for the sovereignty of heaven to become indistinguishable from sovereignty on earth. This hope for *tikun olam b'malchut Shaddai* is part of the daily *Aleinu* prayer.

Just as the human's intrinsic value confers upon him/her the right to self-fulfillment, so does it impose the obligation to live a life of purpose. Without a link to the eternal (or perhaps — without being a link in an eternal process), momentary self-fulfillment is meaningless in truly human terms (as distinct from the animal-existential). For this reason, self-realization calls for a dimension of work and love beyond the dimension of the here and now (*chayei sha-ah*). Without denying the validity of the finite, self-realization relates to the infinite and eternal — *chayei olam*.

Only through social existence of full togetherness, “shared land, shared work, a shared way of life, shared faith” (Buber), can we realize fleeting expressions of those relationships between people that herald the realization of the Eternal in the here and now.

It is the mission of humankind and the human community to live lives of self-fulfillment that are also self-realization. This is the significance of “world mending” — *tikun olam*. The contemporary Jew, no longer sure whether he/she was/is chosen for this vocation, must confront the issue of his/her personal choice. The question is not “Are we a chosen people?” Rather, the question is: “What do I and my community choose?” Do we freely and willingly become part of the eternal challenge?

Alternatives to Self-Realization

The joining of one's personal life to the life of one's people as “people-person” (A.D. Gordon: *am-adam*) by working in and on the land (*am-adam-adama*) was the Zionist pioneering interpretation of how the prophetic ideal (*tikun olam*) was to be furthered in practical terms in their own lives (*hagshama atzmit*¹). Moreover,

1. Self-realization.

the social framework for the practical realization of this vision was to be based on a radical interpretation of the equal value of all humans and their human endeavor (work). This was the essence of the *kvutza* idea for many of the Second *Aliyah* founders of the kibbutz idea.

But today the issue before us is not merely the confrontation between the right to personal self-fulfillment and the obligation (self-imposed) for self-realization as it appeared to the protagonists of a previous generation. Today, alongside a renewed concern with personal self-fulfillment (catalyzed by an ever greater feeling of powerlessness to shape events in mass society), we also have alternative paths for realizing the eternal.

The philosophies of the Far East tempt us to seek the eternal not through social action in community but rather by an inward journey to coalesce with our personal essence.

Christianity also offers an alternative. Christianity (and Protestantism in particular) justified personal self-fulfillment in the here and now because self-realization could be achieved only in Kingdom Come.

Jewish Self-Realization: Then and Now

Past generations saw themselves as commanded from on high to fulfill divine injunctions (*mitzvot*) for the sake of self-mending and world mending. From the belief in a Creator who commands stems compliance with commandments. Those constitute norms of behavior not necessarily compatible with the contemporary ideas of freedom and sovereignty. Thus we have the clash between humanism based on the ultimate intrinsic value of the individual and between traditional *Halachic* Judaism where ultimate intrinsic value is assigned to the divine commandments.

The Zionist pioneering movement (*chalutzit*) innovated and legitimized the concept of self-realization as a willed act on the part of an individual where he/she joins together with others for the purpose of self-mending, people mending, and world mending. This was the path to both self-fulfillment and self-realization. This requires taking on obligations that will express themselves both in the life of the individual and in the life of the community.

A community of self-realization will be one unit in a federation of communities. The quality of the relationship amongst the communal units reflects the quality of interpersonal relationships within the individual communities. The federation will be a community of communities that constitutes a base for a movement active politically and educationally in the propagation of and agitating

for true community in the surrounding society. (This conceptual description is derived from Martin Buber's *Paths to Utopia*.)

The Zionist pioneering ideal of self-realization is a synthesis of Western humanism, with its focus on individual *rights*, and traditional Judaism, which focuses on the *obligations* of the individual *and* the community and where the rights of the individual stem from his/her obligations to fulfill *mitzvot* (commandments).

An example of this synthesis is our relationship to the value of freedom as illustrated by our redemption from slavery in Egypt. We were not redeemed because of our democratic-liberal "right" to self-determination, but rather our freedom was necessary to fulfill the commandments of God, the traditional norm for self-realization. The creative tension between rights and obligations in the call of Moses, "Let my people go that they may worship me" (Exodus 7:26), was inherited by the Zionist pioneering movement.

The Dilemmas of Self-Realization in Our Time

The Zionist pioneering movement internalized the synthesis between Western humanism, self-fulfillment, and democracy in its path of self-realization, though it would be a gross misrepresentation to suggest that this was accomplished without tremendous tensions. *Hagshama atzmit*, as a modern way of interpreting the purpose of Jewish existence, that is, *tikun olam*, was the unique spiritual and practical contribution of the *chalutzim* — and it became an integral component of the ethos of the embryonic Jewish state.

But in our time, the idea of self-realization has run aground for a number of reasons. First, because of our inundation by Western culture, we have become unable, at the conceptual level, to differentiate between self-fulfillment and self-realization. What was crystal clear to the pioneering generation has become blurred since the establishment of the state. Is the state an *end in itself* (national self-fulfillment), or is it a *means to national self-realization*? A basic tension has always existed within Zionism between national self-fulfillment (our right to self-determination "like all the nations") and national self-realization (the necessity of having our own political framework in order to fulfill our special obligation — whether imposed from without or within — to strive for *tikun olam*). A state of Jews does not need *tikun olam* more or less than any other state. A Jewish state cannot do without it.

The establishment of the state immediately "legitimized" the appellation "self-realization" for all those who chose the state as a career. Certainly, the

personal motives of many of those who did so (and still do so) are praiseworthy. But that is not the issue. Nor can we avoid the ideological implication that for many, state-careerism was linked to the idea of the state as an aim rather than the state as a means for *tikun olam*.

Second, and perhaps the more essential reason in understanding our estrangement from *hagshama atzmit* lies in its being an extension of *shlichut* — mission.

Hagshama Atzmit: The Zionist Drash¹ on Shlichut

The idea of *shlichut* for the sake of *tikun olam* began when God commanded Abraham to “Go forth.” For the *chalutzim*, *chalutziut* was their conscious affirmation of “going forth” to an alternative form of Judaism and Jewish identity. The *chalutzim* came from a totally Jewish environment. Their Jewish identity was not in question, but the abandonment of Jewish tradition by the original *chalutzim* left their children bereft of Jewish identity. *Chalutziut* became a symbol of the New Jewish State for many, but of a new Judaism for only a few.

A nontraditional point of view could maintain that every generation has the right and the obligation to relate to the symbols of Judaism in a way relevant to the felt needs of that generation. This includes the idea of God itself — which might possibly be seen as the word symbol for that state of ultimate completedness and harmony which is the end aim of *tikun olam*.

The secular Zionist movement of self-realization (*hagshama atzmit*) did not find or create an educational alternative to the symbols of traditional Judaism for inculcating the ideas of *shlichut* and *tikun olam*. In traditional Judaism, the idea of mission and purpose is immanent in the annual cycle of holy days, the weekly cycle of creative work and creative rest, and the individual’s rites of passage. The intellectual rationale for a universal ideology (socialism) without these symbols has remained an intellectual rationale — as sterile as the sterility in many cases of Jewish ritual in the Diaspora that it sought to replace.

A community dedicated to self-realization is characterized by its allocation of resources both to working for a decent existence in the here and now as well as to sustaining the spiritual tension necessary in order to nurture a constant awareness and practical expressions of *shlichut* to promote *tikun*.

The function of traditional symbols in the Jewish community is their potential power to maintain that awareness, which then expresses itself in action. No less important is the educational function of the symbols referred to above.

1. Interpretation

Abandoning these symbols exposes the individual and then the community to the danger of a crisis of identity and purpose leading to that sense of drift and ideological malaise characteristic of the kibbutz movement in its third and fourth generation.

The resultant vacuum is quickly filled in by the values of normative Western society with its liberal worship of the right to self-fulfillment. Can an autonomous Jewish polity maintain itself in its historic homeland without active commitment to self-realization as expressed in the value quality of its social fabric?

It is the same question that the prophets asked and our sages pointed out.

It is not for you to finish the task — nor are you free to desist from it.