

CHAPTER I

Individual significance

It is a truism that Judaism is centred around the Jewish people. This is expressed in the very names for the religion: Judaism, derived from the Greek, and *torat yisrael* or *dat yisrael* in Hebrew. When called to the reading of the Torah, the Jew recites the benediction: 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has chosen us from all peoples, and hast given us thy Torah.' The Jewish festivals and fasts commemorate events, joyous or tragic, in the history of the people: the Exodus on Passover; the giving of the Torah on Shavuot; the dwelling in booths on Tabernacles; the deliverance from Antiochus on Hanukkah and from Haman's machinations on Purim; the breach of the walls of Jerusalem on the seventeenth of Tammuz and the destruction of the Temple on Tisha be-Av. Even on Rosh ha-Shanah, when the universalistic note is sounded, and on Yom Kippur, when individual remorse finds its strongest expression, the prayers are voiced in the plural form in such a way that it is the people of Israel who come to present themselves to God on these solemn occasions. Reform Judaism, too, is people-centred, with the Reform idea of the 'mission of Israel' to be 'a light unto the nations'. After the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, an even greater emphasis has naturally been placed on Jewish peoplehood.

This stress on the Jewish community has provided Jews with the fortitude to survive and it has freed the individual Jew from a morbid retreat into egotism and selfhood. Yet it cannot be denied that it has often resulted in a marked imbalance in which the needs of the individual Jew, both material and spiritual, tend to be relegated to the background of Jewish life, if not completely ignored, as, to give a contemporary instance, when some Rabbis urge their flock to have more children solely in order to make good the incredible losses by increasing the Jewish population.

The aim of this book is to demonstrate that, for all the admitted emphasis on peoplehood, there are equally powerful individualistic tendencies in Judaism it is perilous to overlook. In any balanced view of Judaism, what the individual does with his life has eternal significance for him, not only for the Jewish people, itself made up of individuals. It is only in totalitarian systems that the individual exists for the group rather than the group for the individuals of which it is comprised.

A good starting-point for an investigation of how Judaism views the significance of the individual is the oft-quoted statement in the Mishnah, tractate *Sanhedrin* 4:5. This passage in the Mishnah discusses the procedure to be adopted by the ancient Court of Law in warning the witnesses to a capital charge of the sacredness of human life. (It should be remarked that by the time the Mishnah was compiled, towards the end of the second century, the right of the Courts to inflict capital punishment had long been in abeyance, but the fact that the discussion is academic in no way renders it irrelevant to our inquiry.) A man is on trial for his life and though it is the duty of the witnesses to his crime to testify against him, if he is guilty, they must not embark on this without being fully conscious of the enormity of destroying an innocent life. As a reminder of the seriousness of what they are doing, the witnesses are to be referred, states the Mishnah, to the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve, in which all mankind is descended from these two, ultimately from a single human being since Eve was formed from Adam's rib. This is how the Mishnah puts it:

Therefore but a single man was at first created in the world, to teach that if anyone has caused a single person to perish Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish; and if anyone saves the life of a single person Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved a whole world. Again [but a single man was created] for the sake of peace among mankind, that none should say to his fellow: 'My father was greater than your father' [since all have ultimately the same father, Adam]; also that the heretics should not say, 'There are many ruling powers' [each creating his own race of humans]. Again [but a single man was created], to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed is He; for when a man stamps many coins with the same seal they are all alike; but the Holy One, blessed be He, has stamped every human being with the seal of the first man, yet no two are exactly alike. Therefore, everyone is required to say, 'For my sake the world was created'.

It has been noted that, in the original texts of the Mishnah (in

many current texts the word *yisrael* has been added without warrant) it is the significance of every human being that is affirmed, as is clear from the proof-text from the Adam narrative, the father of the whole human race. In polytheistic religion, the Mishnah implies, each god can have his favourite but in monotheism all human beings are ultimately of equal worth in terms of human dignity. Moreover, each individual, a potential progenitor of a whole world, is a world in himself and is entitled to see himself as the reason in himself for the creation of the whole world. He is not simply a minute fragment of the human race. He is the human race and whatever purposes God has for creating the human race are totally realized in him. There are, of course, billions of other members of the human race but each of these, too, is an end in himself, not only a means to a more glorious, because more embracing, end, that of humanity as the whole. The Mishnah also points to the fact that no two persons are exactly alike. (We now know that, for example, no two human beings have an identical set of fingerprints.) Each individual is a unique creation.

It is true that the Mishnah is not making any hard and fast, precise theological statement. Of these, there are very few indeed in the Talmudic literature, and there are, without doubt, Talmudic observations with a more pronounced group or community emphasis. For all that, after this Mishnah, it cannot be seriously maintained that Judaism ignores in any way the role of the individual.¹

Working back from the Mishnah to the Bible and forward to the Talmud and the middle ages it is not at all difficult to see the role of the individual as a prominent theme throughout all the periods of Jewish history.

With regard to the Biblical period, the contention of some Old Testament scholars that all the stress was on the nation, until the later prophets taught individual responsibility,² must be rejected even on a superficial reading of the earlier sources. In the patriarchal narratives, for example, while it is now axiomatic that these often reflect tribal motifs,³ yet each of the patriarchs and matriarchs appears as a person with the strongest individual characteristics. The pioneering Abraham is different from an Isaac who follows in his father's footsteps and both are different from a Jacob who relies on his grandfather's and father's teachings to build the 'house of Israel'.⁴ Of the three leaders of the people through the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses is the stern lawgiver, Aaron the

priestly figure, bent on compromise for the sake of peace, while Miriam adopts the feminine role, watching over her infant brother and eventually leading all the women in singing her own song of deliverance at the shores of the sea.

Both the first paragraph of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9) and the Decalogue (Exodus 20:114; Deuteronomy 5:6–18) are in the singular and are addressed to each individual; the same is true of the majority of the laws in the three Pentateuchal Codes (Exodus 21:1–23:19; Leviticus 19:1–37; Deuteronomy 21:1–25:19).⁵

As for the prophets, each of these speaks as an individual, his communication from God expressed in terms of his own temperament and particular circumstances. And, while the prophetic message is generally to the people as a whole, the call of the prophets is for the individuals of that people to be governed by justice, righteousness, holiness and compassion. Ezekiel chapter 18 is a powerful plea for individual responsibility. Micah's famous declaration of what it is that God demands is in the singular and is addressed to each member of the group:

It hath been told thee, O man,
 what is good,
 And what the Lord doth require
 of thee:
 Only to do justly, and to love
 mercy, and to walk humbly with
 thy God. (Micah. 6:8)

In the Talmudic and Midrashic literature, the emphasis is generally on peoplehood but statements regarding individual duties, responsibilities and needs are found throughout this literature. Each of the Rabbis is an individual with his own particular virtues and failings, so much so that it has been possible, with a fair degree of success, to reconstruct Rabbinic biographies from the hints scattered in this vast literature.⁶ In the story of Hillel and the prospective proselyte,⁷ Hillel states the golden rule in the singular: 'That which is hateful unto thee do not do unto thy neighbour.' In a typical passage in the Babylonian Talmud,⁸ after the various rules for communal prayer have been stated (the statutory prayer, the *Tefillah*, is in the plural form and the same for all), a number of individual prayers are recorded, each of the Rabbis mentioned composing his own prayer in accordance with his particular

circumstances. And over and above the numerous statements about the Torah for Gentiles in the form of the seven Noahide laws,⁹ there are references to the Gentile as well as the Jew as an individual, as when a Rabbi said¹⁰ that Scripture declares: ‘Which if a man do, he shall live by them’ (Leviticus 18:5). It does not say a priest or a Levite or an Israelite but a *man*, to teach that a Gentile who practises the Torah (i.e. follows the Noahide laws) is the equal of the High Priest. A late Midrash¹¹ is even more emphatic: ‘I bring heaven and earth to witness that the Holy Spirit rests upon a Gentile as well as a Jew, upon a woman as well as a man, upon a maid-servant as well as a man-servant. All depends on the needs of the particular individual’ (*le-fi ma‘asav shel adam*).

In the philosophical tradition in the middle ages, especially in Maimonides,¹² Judaism is so interpreted that the aim of the religion is ultimately for the individual, the social thrust of Judaism being treated as a means to an end; a sound social order helps the individual to rise towards perfection. Maimonides’ thirteen principles of the Jewish faith¹³ are directed towards the individual Jew. It is no accident that Maimonides does not list the belief in Israel as the Chosen People among his thirteen principles. It is not that Maimonides does not believe that Israel has been chosen by God but that such a belief is not so prominent a feature of the Jewish religion that it can be designated a principle of the faith.¹⁴

In the Kabbalah, every human soul is a spark of Adam’s soul, bound to engage in the task of restoration of the holy sparks that fell into the demonic realm when Adam sinned. In the Kabbalistic doctrine of *tikkun*, ‘rectification’, each individual has his own special role to play according to his particular soul-root.¹⁵ In Hasidism the soul-root idea is developed still further. Not only does the *hasid* have to find the Zaddik whose personality is in accord with his particular soul (because they are of the same ‘root’) but there are fallen sparks in creation which only a particular individual can raise because these, too, belong to his soul-root.¹⁶

Of course, to rely solely on the above is to distort Judaism. The truth of the matter is that throughout all periods there has been considerable tension between peoplehood and individualism in Judaism as there has been between Jewish particularism and universalism. The aim of this chapter has been to note, especially, the individualistic trends. In the following chapters the inevitable qualifications to individualism will be examined. It will become

clear, I hope, that there is no simple answer to the question: Does Judaism centre on the people or on the individual? It centres on both.

There is a further severe problem to be faced in this inquiry. The term 'individual' with its abstract connotation was unknown in the classical sources of Judaism and is foreign to their way of thinking. Except in purely numerical contexts, the individual is never seen in isolation from the group to which he belongs.

Take the Mishnah quoted above. Superficially, there can be no more cogent evidence of emphasis on the individual than the statements in the Mishnah that to save a single human life is to save a whole world and that one is obliged to say: For my sake the world was created. And yet in both statements the individual is not given a completely autonomous status. The life of the individual is indeed declared to be of supreme significance but only in the context of the whole world. To save a single human life is to save a 'world' since, as in the case of Adam, a single human being can be the progenitor of a whole world of other human beings. And it is the 'world' that the individual is obliged to say was created for his sake.

The same kind of ambivalence is to be observed in another Talmudic passage¹⁷ relevant to our theme. The passage reads:

Our Rabbis taught: if one sees a crowd of Israelites,¹⁸ he recites the benediction: Blessed is He who is wise in secrets, for just as no two faces are exactly alike so, too, no two minds are exactly alike. Ben Zoma once saw a crowd on a step on the Temple mount, whereupon he recited: Blessed is He who is wise in secrets and blessed is He who created all these to serve me. He used to say: What labours Adam had to perform before he could eat his bread. He had to plough, to sow, to reap, to bind the sheaves, to thresh, to winnow, to select the ears, to grind them, to sift the flour, to knead the dough and bake it, and only then could he eat; whereas when I arise I find all these have been done for me. And how many labours Adam had to carry out before he could put on clothes. He had to shear, to wash the wool, to comb it, to spin it and weave it, and only then could he have a garment to wear; whereas when I arise I find all these things have been done for me. All kinds of people come early to the door of my house, and I rise in the morning to find all these before me.

In this passage, while the uniqueness of every individual is stressed – no two faces in the crowd are exactly alike and no two minds, God alone knowing the 'secrets' of each – the interdependence of human beings is also stressed. Ben Zoma blesses God for creating the

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diversity to be observed among human beings and also blesses God for creating so many to serve him. But, it is obviously implied, each of those who serve Ben Zoma is himself served in this way by others.

In other Talmudic passages, too, the significance of the world is invoked in the very process of stressing the importance and uniqueness of the individual. R Meir said¹⁹ that the whole world was created for the sake of the scholar who studies the Torah for its own sake. Of the miracle-working saint, R Haninah b. Dosa, it is said that a Heavenly voice used to proclaim: 'The whole world is sustained in the merit of Haninah My son.'²⁰ On the verse, 'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter, fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man' (Ecclesiastes 12:13), two comments are made by Rabbis;²¹ one understanding the verse to mean that the whole world was created for the sake of the saintly man (who 'fears God, and keeps His commandments'), the other, that the whole world was created to be a companion to this kind of man.

This interdependence between the individual and the 'world' prevents an understanding of the passages mentioned as expressing a Jewish version of Nietzsche's Superman. In *Aḥad ha-'Am's* famous attack on Micah Joseph Berdichevsky (1865–1921), who argued for a transvaluation of values in which all are made subordinate to the Superman, the ideal type for which the whole human race exists,²² *Aḥad ha-'Am* admits that Judaism knows of the idea of a Superman but such a type is, in Judaism, one who serves humanity not one who is served by humanity. *Aḥad ha-'Am* quotes the above passages in support of his view but he fails to appreciate that, in the Talmud, no such clear and precise distinctions are made. It is certainly going too far to say, as *Aḥad ha-'Am* does, that, according to these Talmudic passages, the saint was not created for others but, on the contrary, is an end in himself. Each individual is, in one sense, an end in himself but, in Rabbinic thinking, this does not warrant the conclusion that he was not created for others.

Aḥad ha-'Am refers, also, to the Hasidic Zaddik as the spiritual Superman who is the apex of creation in Hasidic thought. But, as Martin Buber rightly points out,²³ the Hasidic ideal is to begin with the self but not end there. Buber quotes the tale of the Zaddik of Zanz who said to another Zaddik that the fact that he had grown old and had still not atoned for his sins ate at his heart, whereupon his colleague replied, 'O my friend you are thinking only of yourself.

How about forgetting yourself and thinking of the world?’ Buber sees in this something more than a reassurance by the friend of the Zanzar that he greatly overrates his sins. As Buber paraphrases it, the friend is saying in quite a general sense: ‘Do not keep worrying about what you have done wrong, but apply the soul-power you are now wasting on self-reproach to such active relationship to the world as you are destined for. You should not be occupied with yourself but with the world.’

Buber, as a Jewish religious existentialist, is grappling with the problem of the other that is so bound to be of concern to existentialist philosophers with their preoccupation with the authenticity of the self. Kierkegaard, in particular, discerns different attitudes to the individual self in Judaism and Christianity. Kierkegaard comments on ‘Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and the one is left’ (Matthew 24:41):²⁴

What a fearful separation and isolation! What a difference from paganism and Judaism, where the family and then the town and then the province and then the country participate in the individual, so that, for example, when a man distinguishes himself then immediately the family, the town, the province and the country share in his fame. Whereas Christianity means the separation of the individual, paganism and Judaism means the supreme power of the category of the race and the generation.

Kierkegaard, in his typically broad generalization, is fair neither to Judaism and paganism on the one hand nor to Christianity on the other, as if such problems can be reduced to neat categorization. Even the most extreme versions of existentialism cannot escape the problem of the ‘other’. As Jaspers puts it,²⁵ ‘The human being cannot become human by himself. Self-being is only real in connection with another self-being. Alone, I sink into gloomy isolation – only in communication with others can I be revealed.’²⁶

More than any other contemporary Jewish thinker, Abraham Chen,²⁷ without mentioning Kierkegaard, turns the tables on the Danish thinker in seeing Judaism rather than Christianity as strongly individualistic, but Chen is as one-sided as Kierkegaard. S. J. Sevin, in his Introduction to Chen’s book *be-Malkhut ha-Yahadut*, remarks that he had heard Chen tell more than once this tale regarding the Hasidic Zaddik Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. (Sevin is doubtful whether anyone can accept the implications of the tale but he admires Chen both for telling it and for the one-sidedness that can perhaps help to redress the balance.) R Levi Yitzhak, one Yom

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Kippur, was acting as the prayer-leader. Towards the end of the long day of prayer and fasting, his disciples observed that the Zaddik was prolonging his prayers with such sweet melodies and with such yearning that they had a profound sense that something unutterably awesome was about to take place. But suddenly the Zaddik stopped for a moment and then rushed through the service and quickly sent the people home to break the fast. Afterwards, R Levi Yitzhak explained that he sensed that the time was opportune for God to be entreated to send the Messiah to redeem the world and he knew that if he persisted in his fervent prayers he could, indeed, bring about the advent of the Messiah. But then he noticed an old man who would not dream of leaving the synagogue to break his fast until the service was at an end and he sensed that if that were to happen the old man would certainly die. So the Zaddik's dilemma was whether to continue to pray and to succeed in bringing the Messiah or whether to rush through the prayers so that the old man might live. He came to the conclusion that his immediate duty was to save the life of the old man even if this meant postponing the advent of the Messiah for a long long time.

CHAPTER 2

Self-realization as a religious value

The statement in the Mishnah, quoted in the previous chapter, that it is necessary for a man to say, 'For my sake was the world created', is not, of course, an invitation to megalomania. Unbridled self-esteem and self-centredness is as stultifying as complete disregard for one's own interests. The famous maxim attributed to Hillel (*Avot* 1:14) is pertinent: 'If I am not for myself who is for me? But if I am only for myself what am I?', as is the saying of the blind Hasidic master R Simhan Bunem of Psycha. This teacher observed that a man should have two pockets, in each of which he places a slip of paper. On one slip he should inscribe the words of the Mishnah, 'For my sake was the world created', on the other the plea of Abraham, 'I am but dust and ashes' (Genesis 18:27). When a man begins to doubt his worth, when he sees himself surrendering to despair, he should take out the slip reminding him that the whole world was created for his sake. But when he is at risk of thinking too much of himself he should read the inscription on the other slip as a reminder that even an Abraham thought of himself as but dust and ashes in the eyes of the Almighty.

In the same vein this Hasidic master used to say that he often entertained the notion, how good it would be if he could change places with Abraham. He would be Abraham, no less, and Abraham would be 'the blind Bunem'. But then, he reflected, how would such an exchange benefit the Almighty? Before the exchange, God would have in His world an Abraham and a blind Bunem and after the exchange had been effected God would still have an Abraham and a blind Bunem. In other words, God requires, as it were, each individual in his uniqueness.¹

In this chapter the idea is explored to what extent Judaism acknowledges that a man has a duty to himself.

It has to be said right away that the whole notion of a man having