

Spiritual Exile and Political Redemption: *Teshuvah* and the Nation

Return to the Nation

1. Rav Soloveitchik, "The Individual and the Community," *On Repentance*, 44, 45

Completely contrary to the jointly owned sacrifice, which may have many owners – two or two thousand or two million, according to how many people are participating in it – a "communal sacrifice" has one sole owner, exactly as does an individual offering. Who is its owner? It is the entire community of Israel, which according to the law is not the sum total or arithmetic aggregate of such and so many individuals but a single, composite personality in its own right. *Knesset Israel* (the community of Israel) - and I employ the phrase in its practical connotation and not as it is used in the Kabbalah or in mystical thought constitutes an indivisible and separate legal body in the same way as any individual is a single, legal personality. Neither "Reuven" nor "Shimon" nor "Levi;" not all of them together, nor all of those who contributed a half-shekel toward the purchase of the offering, are regarded as the owners of the "communal sacrifice." It is *Knesset Israel* as an independent body in its own right and not as the cumulative total of such and so many individuals...

The same principle applies in communal sacrifice. The community as a whole owns the offering and the individual is represented by it **insofar as he identifies himself wholly, without any reservations, to the main body of Israel.**

2. "The Individual and the Community," 57, 58

The difference between individual and communal confession is tremendous. When the individual confesses he does so from a state of insecurity, depression and despair in the wake of sin. For what assurance has he that he will be acquitted of his sins? And who can promise him that his transgression will be forgotten and will not haunt him till the end of his days? In contrast, *Knesset Israel* – and each and every Jewish community is considered to be a microcosm of the whole of *Knesset Israel* – confesses out of a sense of confidence and even rejoicing, for it does so in the presence of a loyal ally, before its most beloved one. In fact, in certain Jewish communities (I myself heard this in Germany) it is customary for the whole congregation to sing the *al het* confession in heartwarming melodies...

For the achievement of individual acquittal he has to repent, do spiritual stock-taking, confess, acknowledge his sins, experience regret, and purify himself. And in order to partake of the communal acquittal he must be bound to the community; the stronger his bond, the greater the degree of acquittal he will enjoy through the intermediation of the community.

3. "The Individual and the Community," 62

A Jew who has lost his faith in *Knesset Israel*, even though he may personally sanctify and purify himself by being strict in his observance of the precepts and by assuming prohibitions upon himself - such a Jew is incorrigible and totally unfit to join in the Day of Atonement which encompasses the whole of *Knesset Israel*, in all its components and all its generations. Only the Jew who believes in *Knesset Israel* may partake of the sanctity of the Day and the acquittal granted to him as part of the community of Israel. **The Jew who believes in *Knesset Israel* is the Jew who lives as part of it wherever it is and is willing to give his life for it, feels its pain, rejoices with it, fights in its wars, groans at its defeats and celebrates its victories.** The Jew who believes in *Knesset Israel* is a Jew who binds himself with unseverable bonds not only to the people of Israel of his own generation but to the community of Israel throughout the ages. How so? Through **the Torah which embodies the spirit and the destiny of Israel** from generation to generation unto eternity.

4. Rav Soloveitchik, *Divrei Hashkafah* (1994), 110–111

The primary element of worship of the heart is ethical admixture within *Knesset Yisrael*. This is the source of purification. The individual sins when he sinks his entirety into his individual identity and his unique existence, separating from the community. The sin of the individual is in his aloneness—his self-creation as if as an isolated individual. Absolute individuality like this distorts a person's path in life. Collectivity is what purifies and draws the sinner closer to the Creator. A person's life must flow not into his inner life, but outwards—toward the other. Existence is all-encompassing and unification with the all [/with everything]. God dwells within the collective, within the *kenesset*, and within historical belonging. **The return to God is itself also a return to the community, to the collective.** Those who stray from the nation are not attached (*midabkim*) to God.

The secret of this attachment (*hidabkut*) is hidden within fateful, historical moments—in the collective responsibility of *Kenesset Yisrael*. All of Israel are responsible each for the other. Why? Because there is no existence within the inner, independent, constricted borders of many Jews. All of Israel is rooted in a shared historical reality. **The approach of the Jew to God is communal—together.**

National Return

5. Rav Soloveitchik, "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*" (1948), *Tradition* 53, No. 1 (2021), 1

The Sages of Israel developed the metaphysical-mystical idea of "the *Shekhina* in exile." The Ribbono shel Olam, the Master of the Universe, suffers in exile together with *Knesset Yisrael*, the Congregation of Israel. And just as the Jews need redemption and salvation, so does the *Shekhina*.

6. "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*," 2

The idea of the *Shekhina* in exile is associated with the Torah's very interesting relationship to the sinner. The Torah opened the gates of **repentance** to the sinner caught completely in the net of sin—whether because of wealth, honor, or emancipation. "Even if one was wicked all his days and repented at the end, none of his wickedness is remembered" (Hilkhos Teshuva 1:3), as it says, "as long as the sun does not darken, and the light and the moon and the stars and the thick clouds return to the rain" (Ecclesiastes 12:2)—a person can always do *teshuvah* even when he is mired in the 49th level of impurity... Completely independent of his crimes, the central kernel of the subjective I-consciousness remains pure and holy. Only external man sins, the superficial "I," who does not represent the inner essence of spiritual existence. The soul always remains pure.

7. "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*," 4–6

Sin is imposed on *Knesset Yisrael*. Sin never comes from the inner depths of its existence... The exile of the *Shekhina* can be conceptualized in a twofold sense. First, we understand it simply in the sense of the defilement of the *Shekhina* due to modern exile, in daily contact between *Knesset Yisrael* and the nations of the world. When socio-economic life is integrated within general political structures, the fundamentals of religion are broken, and the most beautiful values desecrated...

But we must also understand the exile of the *Shekhina* in a much deeper sense, in the sense of Her diminution, *tzimtzum*. In exile, even in the most religious and ideal circumstances, even when the *Shekhina* does not become impure, She contracts and is reduced. This contraction is due to the fact that man lives not only within his own private domain, but is also part of a society and a community. The more life becomes modernized, the more constrained the domain of his intimate, private life, while conversely, public-social life expands.

Piety in countries where one is a minority means being pious only in his private personal life—Shabbat, family purity, kashrut, etc.—surrounded by the curtains of one's home-sanctuary. It is completely impossible to represent such a life as an embodiment of a full and complete Torah. My social-economic existence is linked to the general political-economic

structure, which is based on other principles. As such, it does not embody my social, political, or legal relationships with society. Whether I sin or not is an entirely different question—the entire complex of my external interactions with society is divorced from Judaism...

Today, however, many of *Hoshen Mishpat* and *Even ha-Ezer* issues are halakhot only applicable to Messianic times. Judaism has been reduced to a few chapters in *Yoreh De'ah* and *Orah Hayyim*.

8. "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*," 15

With regard to the redemption of the *Shekhina* from *tzimtzum*, I understand this idea simply to mean the revival of many parts of the Torah, the rewriting of abstract letters upon the concrete parchment of historical reality. I specifically mean the public Torah laws. Indeed, there is Shabbat, the laws of forbidden foods, other commandments applying to individuals. But even in regard to public Sabbath observance, there is no *tzibbur*, no collective aspect. When an individual is multiplied by hundreds of thousands, their acts are not public per se. Their individual character remains. However, the social-political economic life of Israel, needs to be expressed via the seal of Judaism, of Jewish law and morality. The various phases of state life must be permeated with the Jewish spirit, understood and interpreted by Torah and spiritual giants.

9. "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*," 19

A Jewish state was created. A state does not exhaust itself in Jewish ministries, a Jewish post office, a Jewish army, or a Jewish representative in the United Nations. They are necessary instruments of a state, but they do not represent its essence. The State of Israel is expressed primarily in the form of a political nation. The nation is politically merged into an organic unity that expresses itself in a formal legal sense civically, but in social-philosophical terms in regard to the ideology of a nation in a political sense. In a Jewish state, a political nation must emerge. We already say that we, the Jews of exile, do not dare to mix ourselves into the affairs of the Land of Israel. This is simply because, in a formal legal sense, we are citizens of another country! In addition, on a social-philosophical level, the Jew in exile will have no relevance to the political state that in a period of time will appear in *Eretz Yisrael*. Does this mean that there will be a split in *Knesset Yisrael*, and we will be classified into two groups? God forbid! *Knesset Yisrael* must remain united. "And what one nation in the earth is like Your people Israel?" (II Samuel 7:23). If, God forbid, the concept of a political nation should be singularly dominant, then Jews in exile will become completely assimilated. And then the Jews of *Eretz Yisrael* will not be able to maintain the ancient chain of Israel's eternity. It will develop a visage that will not reflect the age-old gestalt of *Yisrael Saba*...

The Nation and the State: Against Political Idolatry

10. "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*," 8

The assumption that political-social exile is also exile of the *Shekhina* is a concept that is well accepted. However, the conclusion that the political redemption of Israel also means the redemption of the *Shekhina* is an idea that many do not understand. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out (*hotzeitikha*) of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2) is said loud and clear for all to hear. But the reading "*hutzeiti itkha* (I was taken out with you)" has often been silenced.

The entire emancipation movement in Western Europe in the last century, the so-called rationalist liberation campaign, as well as the social revolutionary movements of Jewish youth in Poland, Lithuania, and Russia in the beginning of the century, as well as the assimilatory ideology today, all wanted, and still want, to separate *hotzeitikha* from *hutzeiti itkha*. They wish to attain redemption and freedom precisely through forgetting the exile of the *Shekhina*, forgetting the sanctity of Israel, weakening our values, desecrating our ideals, abandoning the Sabbath, eliminating the Torah, and so on. In a word: It seeks to remove the specifically Jewish gestalt and thereby gain rights of equality.

We can justify ourselves for committing sins whose source is exile, as I mentioned before. But for the sin of a false liberation, of separating *hotzeitikha* from *hutzeiti itkha*, there can no longer be any mitigating circumstance. Such a sin is one of **idolatry**, and for this we must say "*al het*."

11. "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*," 19

Statehood is important not as a goal, but as a means. The goal transcends statehood, time, and history. I do not want you to misunderstand me. I do not underestimate the value of political sovereignty. I am just opposed to a cult of sovereignty; no idol must be made of the Land of Israel itself. She must serve a higher objective.

What is this objective? A *Knesset Yisrael* which represents not just any political nation, but a Torah nation, a kingdom-of-Heaven nation which is not limited to territorial borders.

12. "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the *Shekhina*," 24

The negation of exile should not be the motto now, even if certain Israeli Mizrachi leaders want it to be so. There should be only a feeling of obligation towards the exile—an obligation in the sense that the small country of Israel, with its political-legal nation, should be a force on behalf of the larger *Knesset Yisrael* that embodies the *Shekhina* and bears the flag of the Men of the Great Assembly with "great, mighty, and awesome" etched on her.

13. Rav Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, 143

Bondage to the state can also become idolatry. Were all the great men of the world to ask me to sign a declaration pledging my unreserved loyalty to the state which fulfills the highest ideals of Jews today, I would by no means be willing to do so. Subjugation of this kind is tantamount to idolatry!

Only one kind of bondage is permissible and that is to the Holy One, blessed be He, to the Torah He has given to us to guard our ways and to the set of spiritual values with which He presented us. If the state assists us in accepting this bondage, then we would be justified in professing devotion to it; but if the state interferes with these loyalties, there could be no room in my heart for any love for it.

This ideal of Judaism is epitomized in the *Malkhuyot* prayer. Family, friends, the state – none of them are absolutely binding. The only oath that can utterly bind us is allegiance to the Holy One, blessed be He, “for unto Thee every knee shall bow [and unto Thee, to thee alone] every tongue shall swear.”

The only pledge we must keep is the one made for the enactment of the Covenant – “that thou shouldst enter into the covenant of the Lord thy God and into His oath.” This oath releases man from all other pledges and bonds. If man is subjugated in other ways and bound by other oaths, he cannot assume allegiance to the oath of the covenant. "Said Moses to Israel: Is it with your knowledge that I pledge you to this oath?" Did you think that was the same as any of your other obligations? Of course not! "I cause you to take this oath, by my leave and by leave of the Holy One, blessed be He!" All other obligations and pledges are canceled when a free and liberated person stands before God in order to enter into His covenant and His oath.