

# LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITARIANISM Whither the Future of Jewish Life?

NORMAN LINZER, PH.D.

*Samuel J. and Jean Sable Professor of Jewish Family Social Work, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, New York*

*In American society, there is ongoing debate between the philosophy of liberal individualism, which underlies the Republican party, and communitarianism, which lends ideological support to the Democratic platform. Jewish tradition predominantly reflects the communitarian approach, and the focus on individual autonomy and rights is anathema to the development of a strong Jewish community.*

An ideological clash is ongoing in the United States between the two major political parties regarding the role of government in the lives of its citizens. Broadly speaking, the Republicans believe in less government, with the states assuming more responsibility and individuals taking more initiative. The Democrats believe in the central government's assuming a proactive role in assisting citizens.

This ideological clash may be broadly conceived as that between the individual and the community. Who should be of primary concern in American society: the individual or the community? What are the social ramifications of promoting individual initiative or community welfare? Where does Jewish tradition stand on this question? Do the classical Judaic sources incline toward the individual or the community or to both? Which ideology contributes more toward Jewish continuity?

This article discusses the conflict between the philosophical traditions of liberal individualism and communitarianism as reflected in Republican and Democratic ideologies and in Jewish tradition and their implications for the organized Jewish community.

## THE POLITICAL SCENE IN THE UNITED STATES

A leading article in the *New York Times* (April 9, 1995) classifies the Republican and

Democratic positions as the ethical theories of liberal individualism and communitarianism, respectively. Though not all Republicans are liberal individualists nor are all Democrats communitarians, this analysis traces the ideologies of the two parties to these two philosophical traditions.

For the past 60 years, since Roosevelt's New Deal, the government's duty was to set a minimum standard for civilized society and then to raise the oppressed and the needy to that level. The government felt responsible to provide a safety net to prevent people from falling through to suffer lives of poverty and waste. With their victory in the 1994 elections, the Republicans present an antithesis: what makes a civil society is not some mass standard, but each individual's freedom to pursue his or her own happiness and to learn from the pain of his or her mistakes.

As an illustration, the Democrats believe that society has a duty to compensate for a legacy of discrimination through affirmative action policies. The Republicans believe that affirmative action has not been effective and federal regulations have hamstrung individual initiative.

At the root of America's social crisis is the conflict between these opposing factions. The Democrats see a culture permeated by the desire for personal gratification, an increasingly rootless society, and an economy that no longer offers the unskilled jobs that once kept

poor families afloat. Their solution is to formulate a new compact—to rebuild neighborhoods and communities and promote common moral and social foundations. This activist approach is led by Amitai Etzioni and the founders of the Communitarian movement who espouse the dominance of community values over individual values.

In contrast, the new Republican order argues that activist government is not the solution, but the problem. Government has fostered too much dependency and destroyed the notion that people are responsible for creating their own lives. The country needs to return to individual struggle.

Democrats do not hesitate to conclude that the real impetus to the individual responsibilities movement is not ideology nor reasoned analysis, but rather old-fashioned selfishness, which has produced a culture of personal gratification. The new individualists are basically out to meet their own needs and are not concerned with community welfare.

The rash of corporate layoffs and company downsizing has impelled former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich to ask how to get the private sector to take more responsibility for their employees and communities. "The most eloquent moral appeal will be no match for the dispassionate edict of the market" (*New York Times*, Jan. 4, 1996, p. A21). The stock market has soared while pink slips have proliferated and the paychecks of most employees have gone nowhere. When AT&T announced the layoffs of 47,000 employees, its stock jumped. Individual profitability takes priority over community welfare.

Americans have come to feel that they are entitled to economic prosperity, peace, and progress, as accompanied by the decline of poverty, racism, and crime. Entitlement is seen as "the fatal defect of our postwar vision," according to Robert Samuelson, cited in a January 8, 1996 *Newsweek* article.

Entitlement reflects an ideology of individualism, whereas concern for the welfare of others reflects an ideology of communitarianism.

## PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Liberal Individualism

A parallel may be found between the Republican position and the theory of liberal individualism, which has been described as a "conception that in a democratic society a certain space must be carved out within which the individual is protected and allowed to pursue personal projects" (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994, pp. 70–71). It is a doctrine of human rights that protects basic liberties and individual interests, which are often at odds with communal or institutional interests. It is antithetical to utilitarian ethics, which is concerned with actions that promote communal welfare.

To have a right is to be in a position to determine, by one's choices, what others are to do or need not do, and to insist upon what is due. Rights are sometimes correlated with obligations, but sometimes they are not. For example, although we may feel obligated to give charity, no person can claim another person's charity as a matter of right (p. 74). These obligations are best seen as self-imposed oughts that are not required by morality and that do not generate rights or claims for other persons. Consequently, the poor have no rights that obligate society to care for them.

Since rights precede obligations, individual needs are to be satisfied before those of the common good. Nozick (quoted in Avineri & DeShalit, 1992, p. 9) argued that rights should not be pushed aside for the sake of any idea of a general good. The role of government is to ensure basic rights; it is not the business of government to promote or sustain any idea of the common good.

### Communitarianism

A parallel may be found between the Democratic position and the ethical theory of communitarianism. Communitarian theory views everything fundamental in ethics as deriving from communal values, the common good, social goals, and traditional prac-

tices. This theory repudiates Kant's autonomy and liberal individualists' advocacy of individual rights. Communitarianism proposes that we give up the principles, politics, and language of rights in favor of the principles, politics, and language of the common good and the community's way of life. "The importance of traditional practices and the need for communal intervention to correct socially disruptive outcomes are standard themes in communitarian thought" (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994, p. 81).

The large number of abandoned children and elderly parents, social and familial fragmentation, the disappearance of meaningful democracy, and lack of effective communal programs are, according to communitarianism, the disastrous effects of liberal individualism. The Democratic platform regarding the government's responsibility for the safety net reflects communitarian values.

Liberalism, in so far as it is individualistic, is the politics of rights while communitarianism is the politics of the common good. This suggests that liberalism is about how to limit the sphere of politics while communitarianism is about how to extend it. Communitarians advocate involvement in public life and increased participation in such mediating structures as small communities, firms, and clubs (Avineri & Shalit, 1992).

#### Summary

The two philosophical theories—liberal individualism and communitarianism—reflect different views of the individual's role in society. Liberal individualism aggrandizes the pursuit of individual goals and rights and insists that the political system guarantee them. Communitarianism promotes the central role of the community in social life and encourages individuals to become involved in mediating structures to facilitate the building of community and the strengthening of society. Liberal individualism lends ideological support to the Republican platform, and communitarianism lends ideological support to the Democratic platform.

Are there any parallels in Jewish thought with these theories? Can Jewish thought illuminate the contemporary conflict between liberal individualism and communitarianism to assist the American Jewish community in its struggle with Jewish continuity?

### JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

#### Obligations and Rights in Jewish Law

Liberal individualism emphasizes rights, whereas communitarianism emphasizes obligations. Rights refer to what individuals claim from others; obligations refer to what individuals owe to others. The Judaic perspective predominantly reflects the communitarian approach.

The term *hiyyuv*—obligation—originates in the word *hov*, meaning both the obligation which is imposed on the debtor (*Baba Basra* 10:6) and the right to which the creditor is entitled (*Bikkurim* 3:12; *Gittin* 8:3).

The two parties to an obligation are the debtor (*hayyav*, *Baba Metzia* 12b)—on whom the duty of fulfilling the obligation is imposed—and the creditor (*baal hov*)—who has the right to claim that the obligation be fulfilled (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 12, pp. 1310–1315).

When the nature of rights and obligations in Jewish law is examined, a subtle but significant distinction appears. The debtor has an obligation to pay, the creditor has a right to be paid. Which comes first? The obligation precedes the right because a duty makes a greater moral demand than a claim.

Justice Silberg (1961) locates obligation in the religious duty to perform *mitzvot*. The term *mitzvah*, which denotes commandment, implies the duty to perform, to accede to expectations, to fulfill responsibility. In the Talmud, the payment of a debt is a *mitzvah* (*Arakhin* 22a). It is not done to satisfy the creditor's right, but to fulfill the Torah's command. The duty to pay the debt precedes the right to collect it. In Judaism, the analysis of human behavior focuses on the individual's

duties, rather than the rights of others against the individual.

### *Tzedakah*

Just as in the payment of a debt the duty precedes the demand, so too in the laws of *tzedakah* the duty to give precedes the demand to receive. All the laws regarding gifts to the poor, including leaving the corner of the field for the poor, the sabbatical year, hospitality to visitors, monetary gifts, and personal outreach, focus on the responsibilities of the donor and not on the demands of the recipient. The metaphor—*ke'ani bapesach*—like a poor person at the door who has no claim on the other's benefaction, is an apt description of Judaism's view of the donor-recipient relationship. The duty does not wait for the request.

There is a constant interplay between the philanthropic duties of the individual and the philanthropic duties of the community. At times it seems that the central figure in Judaism is the individual who is commanded to seek out needy people and respond to their requests. At other times, *halakhah* has assigned an indispensable, all-inclusive role to the community. The community has central responsibility for the care for the needy—the sick, poor, aged, and disturbed. Philanthropy is thoroughly institutionalized.

Individuals make their contribution to the community chest and thus apparently discharge their obligations. They may act mechanically, almost anonymously, by responding to the demand of the collectors "who go about among the people every Friday soliciting from each whatever is assessed upon him" (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor).

*Tzedakah* thus emerges as an individual obligation that is fulfilled corporately. It is a premeditated arrangement. The community does not step in and assume responsibility *ex post facto*, after individuals have shirked their duty or failed to manage matters properly. The community initially appears as a modified welfare city-state, with its special functionaries who collect the compulsory levy

and act as trustees for the care of the poor and needy (Twersky, 1963).

Both the individual and the community share responsibility for the care of the poor. *Tzedakah* thus imposes, along with other *mitzvot*, the duty to perform God's will and to ameliorate deplorable human conditions—*tikkun olam*. The poor have no face, but it is their presence that evokes the duty of the individual and the community to remove their anonymity by reintegrating them into the community (Berman, 1978).

In traditional Jewish thought, the pervasiveness of *mitzvot* implies that obligations precede rights. Obligations to the community therefore precede self-gratification.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

In modern times, the emphasis on rights in lieu of responsibilities is pervasive. By rights we understand "that which a person has a just claim to; power, privilege, etc. that belongs to a person by law, nature or tradition" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1957).

The ethic of rights presupposes a concentration on the self and the satisfaction of individual wants. The focus is on the individual's claims on others, on entitlements owed by others to oneself. The "I" comes first, as the ethic of responsibility is negated. With the negation of responsibility comes the diminution of caring (Linzer, 1995).

In the Jewish community, the ethos of rights can be destructive to planning, building, and strengthening Jewish life because it focuses on what the community owes individuals and not what individuals owe the community. In the culture of rights, there is less commitment to volunteering, participation in community events, and service to others.

The culture of consumerism is a byproduct of the culture of rights. In this culture, consumers even in nonprofit institutions seek satisfaction of their personal wants. They are interested in what the philanthropic institution can do for them, and it is obliged to satisfy their needs if it desires their mem-

bership and participation. Consumers feel a minimal obligation to contribute to the maintenance and growth of the institution.

To counteract this ethos, lay and professional leaders will need to translate Jewish traditional values and behaviors into modern language and behavior. We are teaching communal responsibility when we expect children to respect their parents and elders and to visit the elderly in nursing homes; when we encourage people to give *tzedakah*, to attend religious services in synagogues, and to celebrate Shabbat and festivals with one's family and with others; and when we create projects that build institutions and develop programs to meet communal needs. We possess the knowledge, values, and skill to translate Jewish tradition into language that speaks to people today and inspires them to put caring for others ahead of satisfying their personal needs. This is not easily done, but neither are we free to desist from making the effort.

A parallel to the Judaic ethic of individual responsibility to the community is the contemporary ethic of care, which can be contrasted to an ethic of rights.

Men tend to embrace an ethic of rights, using quasi-legal terminology and impartial principles, accompanied by dispassionate balancing and conflict resolution, whereas women tend to affirm an ethic of care that centers on responsiveness in an interconnected network of needs, care, and prevention of harm. Taking care of others is the core notion, and it is modeled on relationships such as those between parent and child (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994, p. 86).

This view has been applied by Peck to the leadership potential of women in Jewish communal agencies.

We agreed that a community culture would reflect our values more than a corporate culture. The components of this culture would include commitment, caring, collaboration, communication, and competence. It would

include those skills and practices associated with "women's ways"—women's investment of time, thoughtfulness and process; our ability to articulate and transmit our level of caring; our use of an interactive style of leadership that encourages others' participation and at the same time energizes others' involvement; our ability to seek consensus and articulate/communicate to others; our desire to have input rather than a traditional "command and control;" and, finally, the industrious and thorough manner with which we address any task before us (Peck, 1995, p. 150).

Peck's goal is not merely to appoint more women to leadership positions, but rather to bring about a change "in the Jewish communal culture to reflect women's values and ways of doing things" (p. 151). Women's values are directed toward interdependence, relationship, family, and community. Women are oriented toward connectedness. They tend to think of others before the self. Peck contends that women's voices need to be heard in order to slow the male-dominated organized Jewish community's slide into liberal individualism and ultimately preoccupation with the self.

The slide toward individualism is reflected in such alarming trends as the decline of Jewish philanthropy, synagogue membership and attendance, fertility, formal Jewish education, and ritual observance, and the rise in intermarriage (Kosmin et al., 1991). There has been a decline in federations' allocations to Israel, and American Jews are turning away from Israel toward their own problems (Abramovitz, 1995). For many American Jews, turning away from Israel does not translate into increased involvement with Jewish causes at home, but rather no involvement in the secular world.

If the Jewish community is to be viable, if it is to imbue its young with Jewish values and traditions and the desire to transmit them to future generations, the communitarian ideal will need to become preminent. This means that there can be no Jewish continuity without Judaism, and Judaism cannot be taken seri-

ously unless it articulates a language of norms, values, commitments, and expectations.

Those who advocate continuity emphasize a language of inclusivity, individual self-fulfillment, and what Judaism can do for the individual. They refer to *mitzvot* but at the same time they shy away from speaking of Judaism as a religion of laws, obligations, and norms. They do not call for sacrifice and limitations on personal choices. Jewish leaders want continuity but are unwilling to pay the price: a cultural commitment to living more intense Jewish lives at the expense of other values of American culture, such as romantic love and interfaith tolerance.

If Jewish leaders interested in perpetuating continuity want to combat the forces of modernization and the attractiveness of a welcoming society,

The Jewish community may have to adopt a view of Jewish identity at least partly in tension with the values of liberal, universalist modernity, and any effort to strengthen "the fabric of Jewish life" may necessarily entail challenging if not rejecting aspects of that very ethos, an ethos with which both secular Jewish leaders and many religious ones as well have been prominently allied (Wertheimer et al., 1996, p. 51).

Jewish identity, incorporating the communitarian ideal, requires the erection of higher boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, the experience of dissonance between the Jewish self and the secular self, and the curbing of unlimited life-style choices (Linzer, 1996). The Orthodox who make sacrifices to pay for intensive Jewish education and those Jews who emphasize obligation and commitment are striving to achieve the communitarian ideal. These trends are counterbalanced by the Reform insistence on the primacy of individual autonomy (Borowitz, 1984), which strikes with centrifugal force at the heart of the concept of community. Even the quest for greater spirituality runs the risk of greater emphasis upon personal self-fulfillment, rather than commitment to the Jewish people.

With some exceptions, those most actively engaged in Jewish life have adopted a critical stance toward some of the central values of modern culture, including its preference for individual autonomy at the expense of communal responsibility and its preference of choice over obligation (Wertheimer et al., 1996).

The sanctioning of homosexual marriages illustrates the endemic divisions with the Jewish community and the tensions between individual aspirations and communal needs. In testimony before a Congressional subcommittee considering a ban against same-sex marriages in the United States, two representatives of the Jewish community were deeply divided over the issue. Dennis Prager spoke of the traditional Jewish value of heterosexual marriage and the Torah's insistence that all sexual activity be channeled into marriage. He concluded that "the acceptance of homosexuality as the equal of heterosexual marital love signifies the decline of Western civilization."

On the opposing side, Rabbi David Saperstein noted that the Reform movement passed formal resolutions supporting gay civil marriages. He testified against the bill, citing violation of states' rights and individual rights, and calling the bill a form of gay bashing and scapegoating. This stance seems to have been legitimated by Borowitz who had similarly suggested that "autonomy should not be subservient to the *Halakhah* in sexual matters, but at the same time, the law, in all its details, does not hesitate to make its claim on the committed autonomous Jewish self" (Borowitz, 1984, p. 47).

For Prager, the bill in Congress offends traditional Jewish values of marriage and family; for Saperstein, the bill offends secular values of fairness and individual rights. Though oriented toward building community, the Reform predominantly espouse the ideology of individualism; the other groups, though supporting fairness and individual rights, predominantly espouse the ideology of communitarianism. Attitudes toward the sanctioning of gay marriage symbolize the crux of the conflict in the Jewish community

between liberal individualism and communitarianism.

### CONCLUSION

At this critical juncture in Jewish life, when the future of a viable Jewish community is threatened by external forces of modernity and assimilation and internal forces of autonomy and equality, internecine conflict among Jews has been located in the ideologies of liberal individualism and communitarianism.

The focus on individual autonomy and individual rights is anathema to the development of a strong Jewish community. It contributes to intermarriage and the inclusion of Gentiles into all echelons of synagogue and communal life. It negates the impact of tradition and four thousand years of Jewish history. It diminishes a particularistic Jewish identity, which then has to be shared with a more universal secular identity.

We need to reestablish our roots in community. Communitarian policy advocates participating in mediating structures, including synagogues, Jewish schools, Jewish Community Centers, and other communal institutions as indispensable for perpetuating the community. It is only through our involvement in the community, with its joys and sorrows, that we become fully Jewish and contribute to its continuity.

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