Exile on Main Street

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SYNOPSIS

Exile is endemic to existence. I will explore the phenomenon as it manifests interpersonally and inter-culturally and also the attitudes of both Western and Jewish thinkers towards this tragically inevitable fate. I will discuss the virtues of exile and offer a vision of exile that, whilst respecting the agony of the experience, suggests that it is exile itself that offers humanity the greatest chance for redemption. I will highlight some of the major psychological obstacles in moving towards this way of thinking.

Self

To exist means to stand out. From the Latin 'existere', to exist denotes stepping out, away from, emerging.

Yalom regards isolation as one of the great existential angsts. 'Existential isolation', he writes, 'refers to an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being' (Yalom, 1980: 355). Courageous contemplation of our existence inexorably leads us to confront the brutal truth; that we are, and always will be, essentially alone. We may fraternize along the journey of life; however, ultimately we walk alone.

This correlation between the experience of one's individuality and existential isolation is eloquently articulated by Erich Fromm, when he writes:

> To the extent to which the child emerges from that world (the mother) it becomes aware of being alone, of being an entity separate from all others. This separation from a world, which in comparison with one's own individual existence, is overwhelmingly strong and powerful, and often threatening and dangerous, creates a feeling of powerlessness and anxiety. As long as one was an integral part of that world, unaware of the possibilities and responsibilities of individual action, one did not need to be afraid of it. When one has become an individual, one stands alone and faces the world in all its perilous and overpowering aspects. (Fromm, 1941: 29)

And yet in spite of the above, we strive constantly to fit in, to belong. We wish to commune, cathect and connect with people, places and things beyond ourselves. Writing of the transpersonal experience, those peak moments of human existence, Stanislav Grof states that through spiritual experience '...we may transcend the boundaries that make us feel separate from the rest of the world and have a sense of connecting with other people, groups of people, animals and plants, or even inorganic processes' (Grof, 1979: 155).

Personally, I have been profoundly influenced by the 18th century Hassidic movement, which proposes that it is through our interactions with the world around us that we are transformed. Freidman writes: 'our task in life is to gather insight, self-growth and enlightenment from all our interactions with the outside world. No encounter is by chance; every event demands a growth-oriented response' (Friedman, 2001: 11).

Rabbi Solomon Wolbe, a 20th century Orthodox Jewish philosopher and preacher, defined what it means to him to be a Jew. He writes that one who 'grasps the pillars of communal life' is a Jew. The obligation is to find a place that is uniquely yours within the greater community. The experience of surrendering ipseity in favour of fraternity engenders spiritual growth. He describes this as the ultimate act of self-sacrifice (Wolbe, 1997: 272).

Soothing though I find these ideas, I am starkly aware that there is an alternative view that purports that it is our isolation, not our connection, which provides the impetus for growth.

In psychoanalytic terms, Margaret Mahler (in Mitchell and Black, 1995: 46) saw object constancy, the realization of the separateness of the mother from the baby, as a precursor for healthy psychological growth. She saw the

capacity to tolerate separateness as a prerequisite to personal emotional development.

I have been left, therefore, to reflect upon these dual truths, namely that we are enlivened and enlightened through connection, yet we must face the ultimate truth, namely that we walk this earth alone.

This tension is reminiscent of the dialectic expressed by Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (1992) in his seminal work *Lonely Man of Faith* with regards to the destiny of religious man. Driven to manifest the glory of the universe through engagement with the world around him, man is simultaneously commanded by God to abandon his physical surroundings in the search for transcendence. Soloveitchik places this dialectic at the centre of the Jewish faith, arguing that it is through tolerating this conflict that one embodies the position of the man of faith. I would observe that in a similar vein to Camus' absurdist stance whereby the human condition is to be forever looking for meaning in a world that denies us that certainty, we are forever looking for unity in a lonely world. We are fated to be ultimately alone, and equally destined to strive for connection. It is the capacity to tolerate this tension that is the hallmark of the maturational process. Of the absurd, Camus writes, 'what is absurd is the confrontation with the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart' (Camus, 2005: 20)

Society

Crucial though this conflict may be for the individual, it is nonetheless deserving of attention when it manifests on the communal, national and indeed global stage. For a century the Western *weltanschauung* has been predominantly in favour of multiculturalism. In *Pluralistic Universe* (1909), William James espouses the idea of a plural society, which he saw as crucial to the formation of philosophical and social humanism to help build a better, more egalitarian society (James, 1909: 600–1).

So when the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, declared in 2010 that attempts to build a multicultural society in Germany had 'utterly failed', I for one was taken aback. In addition to my instinctual fear of racial divisiveness emanating from a country with a catastrophic history of racism, I was philosophically perplexed. If humanity will not unify, can we co-exist?

In addition to this socio-political dilemma, a very personal question has been evoked within me regarding my own intra-psychical multicultural identity. For those with more than one nationality or ethnicity such as myself, an Orthodox Jewish Englishman, the challenge of multiculturalism plays out on both an inter-psychic and intra-psychic level. Can my religious identity reconcile with the secular values of my nationality? Do they need to?

"... it is our recognition of our differences.. which facilitates unity..."

In pondering this conflict, I am further faced with the existential question of my identity within these collectives. I struggle to surrender my individuality to any collective, be it Britain or Judaism. I have grappled with the British nationalistic ideology, an ideology that seems to me to be largely relegated in the collective psyche to sporting events, the royal family and alcoholic beverages. Furthermore, many of the archetypical notions attributed to Jewish identity have seemed outdated and irrelevant to me. Ideas such as the Chosen Nation, the Wandering Jew and the People of the Book seem to me antiquated and parochial. I have been left to ponder whether I am open to absorbing and being absorbed by notions about which I am so deeply uncertain. This has left me wondering what it truly means to me to be a Jew and an Englishman.

The emeritus chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, addresses the subject of unity and individuality on a global scale in his book *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations* (Sacks, 2002). Written in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, it proposed a modus vivendi for cultural individuation in a multicultural world. He suggests that it is our recognition of our differences, our 'otherness', rather than mere apologetic pluralism, which facilitates unity and genuine intercultural respect.

Exile

In his work *Spectre of the Stranger* (Bazzano, 2012), Bazzano proposes that it is only through coming to

accept the space between 'I' and the 'Thou', and the inherent isolation that results, that we are able to authentically experience the other. By surrendering my desire to overwhelm or be overwhelmed by you, I am able to experience your otherness in its truest sense. It is when I am able to suspend *ipseity* that I experience the spirituality of genuine fraternity. This may be akin to the illusive intimacy that Buber writes of when he puts forward his vision of the 'I'–'Thou' relationship.

Bazzano draws upon a wide variety of sources to support his vision, most notably for me, as an orthodox Jew, a novel understanding of Judaism that I had previously overlooked. He writes:

> To Abraham, a central figure in Judaism, we owe not so much the ambivalent legacy of monotheism, with its obligation of violent devotion to an exclusivist deity, but rather the positive affirmation of exodus.... As for Jerusalem, we take for granted that its contribution consists in the one-God perspective and forget the centrality of exile, that is, the vision of humans as transient, and the refusal to give in to an atavistic attachment to the soil.
>
> (Bazzano, 2012: 9)

Bazzano romanticizes the concept of exile as departure from ipseity and criticizes Weizmann, the theoretician of political Zionism, who understood exile as 'an abnormal state from which one can be cured by being integrated into the bosom of a nation or indeed by the creation of a new homeland' (ibid.: 12).

Bazzano is perhaps drawing upon observations made some 65 years before by the analyst Otto Rank. Rank distinguishes the Jewish people for their capacity to sacrifice statehood for family, for their decision to move the focus from atavism to propagation and survival. He writes:

> In this conflict between family and state, which was essentially a conflict between the individual immortality provided by the child and the collective immortality guaranteed by society or between the religious and sexual eras the Jews have been the most effectively evasive of all peoples. With their unusual adaptability they have accommodated themselves best to a sexual ideology, sacrificed state for family, and, by 'multiplying like the sands of the sea', maintained themselves while other peoples suffered from hypertrophy of statehood.
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> (Rank, 1950: 76–7)

Rejection and Isolation

Last year I attended an informal group discussion of orthodox Jewish psychotherapists on the subject of the Egyptian exile as reported in the Bible. Amidst the chorus of condemnations, emanating from my colleagues, of the sins of the Jewish patriarchs that precipitated the first great Jewish exile, I proposed an alternative viewpoint. I suggested that the reason for the Israelite exile amongst that great Egyptian civilization, and indeed for all subsequent exiles, was so that the Jewish people could cultivate acceptance of 'the other', both indigenously and universally. My proposition that the experience of exile may not be an altogether negative one was not received well. Whilst some of my peers mocked my hypothesis, the more genteel politely enquired from where my suggestion had arisen. When I quoted the non-Jewish Bazzano, I was instantly rejected. 'He will never understand the Jewish exile, after all he is not one of us. He has not experienced 2000 years of homelessness and oppression. Of course he romanticizes this most vicious of fates, he is trying to assuage his national guilt.' I challenged my peers to rise above ad hominem arguments and to respond logically, something that, given the emotive nature of the subject, they were unwilling or unable to do.

Fraternity

Bazzano is certainly not the first to find virtue in exile. Indeed, Jewish philosophy has expounded on the process of exile for millennia. In 16th- and 17th-century Kabbalistic literature, exile was understood through the concept of Fallen Sparks. This idea proposes that the wandering Jew is tasked with the reuniting of the Fallen Sparks of holiness that were dispersed amongst the four corners of the earth upon its creation, through the elevating practice of Torah study, Prayer and Good Deeds (Kramer, 2007: 43). Classically, one can turn to the biblical concept of 'Light unto the Nations' prophesied by Isaiah – namely, that the Jews were tasked with spreading idealism, altruism and humanism to the world through the medium of exile. The redeeming dimension of exile is central to authentic Jewish philosophy.

Rabbi E.E. Desler, an Orthodox Jewish philosopher and contemporary Kabbalist, expresses sentiments that closely echo aspects of Bazzano's thinking: 'The exile, as with all matters that are guided by heaven, comes to enlighten, teach and guide us towards self-perfection.' (Desler, 1994: 207) He defines the essence of exile, not in terms of oppression and torment but in terms of spiritual exile. The heart of exile is the loneliness of faith, in a land of disbelief and the struggle to maintain ethics, values and faith in the face of doubt, self-will and lust. It is the internal exile of our most precious values and ideals amidst a

landscape of insecurity, doubt and self-gratification that epitomizes the exile of the Jewish people.

Although he proceeds to expound upon the need for differentiation and isolation of the Jewish people, he concludes his treatise, saying that by witnessing the transience of all ipseity and physicality, the exiled are allowed unique insight into the core of what it means to be human, to be a Jew.

Whilst contemplating the etymology of the Classical Hebrew word for entering into exile, 'LeGalot' – 'תולגל', I noted that the Hebrew word has another meaning – namely, to reveal. The root of the word for both revelation and exile is 'Galeh' 'הלג'. Perhaps this is because in Jewish thought, the true purpose of exile is revelation, both intra-psychic and extra-psychic.

Furthermore, the Classical Hebrew word for rejoicing, 'Gilah' 'הליג', shares the same root of 'הלג'. This may allude to the biblical promise that 'Those who sow in tears will reap with joyous song' (Davis, 1995: 126: 5), as interpreted by Rabbi David Kimchi (1160–1235) to refer to the joy of the ultimate redemption (or transcendence) that will follow the oppression of exile.

Bolstered by these findings I was more driven than ever to offer credence to Bazzano's hypothesis and left with a gnawing question. Why was I alone in my thinking?

Answers and Explanations

It is possible that the difficulty of my colleagues in accepting the merits of exile was more influenced by modern Western thought than by classical Jewish theology. The gap that must be sustained in order to experience otherness is anathematic to our modern society. The social theorist Zygmunt Bauman concerned himself with the phenomenon of ambivalence, that extraordinary state whereby we cannot attribute a specific definition or classification to a word or experience:

> The typically modern practice, the substance of modern politics, of modern intellect, of modern life, is the effort to exterminate ambivalence, an effort to define precisely and to suppress or eliminate everything that could not or would not be precisely defined. Modern practice is not aimed at the conquest of foreign lands, but at the filling of the blank spots in the *compleat mappa mundi*. It is the modern practice, not nature, that truly suffers no void.
>
> (Bauman, 1991: 7–8)

However, given the isolationist attitude of my Ultra-Orthodox Jewish friends, surely modernity could not be blamed for the conclusions that they have come to. Reflecting on my experience and the rejections of my peers, I was left to contemplate the psychological process that engendered such unanimous rejection. I was at first drawn to the Kleinian concept of Paranoid Schizoid splitting. Perhaps something as painful as exile needed to be kept unsullied by virtue. The depressive attitude of finding redemption whilst recognizing the tragedy of exile had perhaps aroused the inevitable anxiety that this position brings, and resulted in the rejection I had experienced.

However, it was the Transactional Analysis concept of the Victim Starting Gate Position, whereby the trapped are invested in perceiving themselves and being perceived by others as victims, that made the most sense to me. But I am loath to accept this conclusion. Has the Jewish nation become so identified as unwilling victims of oppression and exile that we unconsciously desire to be defined as such? Surely, when an alternative, both externally and internally, is offered, we will not hesitate to embrace it?

Redemption

The Jewish nation is a people of great dignity and fortitude, who have found light in the darkness myriad times before. Could we not rise to this new challenge? Could we not become our own redeemers through embracing our own strength and recognizing the tremendous benefits, both to our people and to humanity as a whole, of our torturous past?

I see this as a spectacular example of fulfilment of the biblical dictum '...and I shall submit you as a light unto the nations' (Isaiah, 49:6). In an age of redemption, when the oppressed people of the world are finding freedom through globalization and Western 21st-century libertarian attitudes, perhaps the Jewish people can reclaim their rebellious heritage and shirk the shackles of victimhood, thereby providing a liberating inspiration to those who find themselves free for the first time.

Postscript

A dimension that I had perhaps overlooked in my initial hypothesis was brought to my attention by my friend and colleague Phillip Sobel. Whilst agreeing with my premise that recognizing the virtues of exile could provide the very redemption that the exiles seek, he challenged my psychological formulation of the reason for my Orthodox Jewish colleagues' rejection of this proposal. He suggested that perhaps when we shine a light on the positive aspects of exile, this serves to place the pain of

the experience out of view, thereby inviting the rejection that I had experienced. Indeed, perhaps my colleagues' refusal to see light in the darkness of pain could be seen as an empathic response to the collective suffering of the exiles. If I want to communicate the virtues of exile, it is important to demonstrate recognition of its tragedy in the same breath.

Additionally, he cautioned me to be wary of writing off the tragedies of Jewish history as victimhood. Speaking of his experiences of working with the second and third generation of Holocaust survivors, he was reluctant to dismiss their very real intergenerational trauma as victimhood. He suggested a dialectical approach, whereby a compassionate appreciation for the trauma of the exile co-exists with an appreciation for the redeeming qualities of the experience of exile.

Edward Said's paper 'Reflections on exile' further drove home to me the importance of empathy when discussing the virtues of exile. The opening line of his essay demonstrates this elegantly, where he writes, 'Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience' (2012: 137). Said goes on to describe exile as a fragmented existence, crushingly isolating, a perpetually insecure life and a breeding ground for jealousy and triumphant ideologies. He laments with a flourish the pain of this condition, and concludes the paper with the following statement:

> Exile, in the words of Wallace Stevens, is a 'mind of winter' in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of nearby spring are nearly unobtainable. Perhaps this is another way of saying that the life of the exile moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home. Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew. (Said, 2012: 148–9)

Simultaneously, Said recognizes the transcendent properties of exile. In his reading of Said, Salama writes, 'exile... is the abandonment of the concrete, the static, and the common...for the sake of the abstract and the universal. This notion is at the heart of Said's philosophy of exile' (Salama, 2007: 242).

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