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Chapter

The Challenge of Sustainability: A New Covenant for Humanity

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Abstract

Never has humanity experienced so palpably and unambiguously a feeling of collective fate. The common experience of facing danger and suffering disrupts our faith in life and evokes questions of meaning and existence. Humanity facing the challenge of sustainability: global warming, climate change, new viruses, pandemics, and the new technology – Artificial Intelligence. From East to West, people find themselves in fear and exposed to the questions of their fate and real suffering. Nature demands that humankind join hands in the battle against ecological problems. The awareness of the collective fate that has been forced upon us, has the potential to mark a new kind of partnership for humanity as a whole. Jewish tradition tried to teach human beings that their mission in life is to turn fate into destiny, to turn a passive existence into an active one – to move from being an object dictated to by powers greater than he or she, to a subject who determines his or her own path and meaning in the world. The readiness of humanity to enter into the covenant of fate—the willpower of individuals to take responsibility for the community, to join together in times of distress, out of a sense of obligation and responsibility—is worthy of honor and recognition.

Keywords: sustainability, global warming, theodicy, pandemics, Soloveitchik, covenant, fate and destiny

1. Introduction

Never has humanity experienced so palpably and unambiguously a feeling of collective fate. The common experience of facing danger and suffering disrupts our faith in life and evokes questions of meaning and existence.

Humanity faces the challenge of sustainability: global warming, climate change, new viruses, pandemic, and the new technology—Artificial Intelligence. From East to West, people find themselves in fear, exposed to the questions of their fate and real suffering. Nature demands that humankind join hands in the battle against the ecological problems. An awareness of the collective fate that has been forced upon us has the potential to mark a new kind of partnership for humanity as a whole.

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her own path and meaning in the world. The readiness of humanity to enter into the covenant of fate—the will of individuals to take responsibility for the community and join together in times of distress, out of a sense of obligation and responsibility—is worthy of honor and recognition.

2. The epidemic of COVID-19 as an alarm for humanity

The epidemic of COVID-19 that accompanies all of humanity between the years 2020–2022, could be a milestone in human history. On the one hand, this epidemic is very reminiscent of other diseases and epidemics that have accompanied humanity since its inception. On the other hand, contemporary transportation and technology make this epidemic different from any other epidemic in human history [1].

I would like to think about our period—“our” pandemic—as another step in the journey of humanity toward a new alliance between peoples and nations. The focus of this article is to suggest new thinking about the “self-consciousness” of humanity, through the various ways people have responded to natural challenges. We need to differentiate between different kinds of human responses to these challenges: religious reactions, scientific explanations, and ethical relations [2–4].

There are religious rites, theological narratives, and cultural acts, that people used to give meanings to the mysteries of nature and to natural disasters [5, 6]. There are scientific explanations—classic, medieval or modern—that revealed the reality behind the history [7]. I would like to present another response to these natural challenges: the imperative of responsibility [8].

The call for responsibility will be a new environmental attitude that sees human existence as part of nature. It requires that people understand themselves as belonging to the earth and to nature surrounds them [9].

3. The natural disasters and the question of theodicy

In the years 2019–2022, humanity met one of the greatest challenges of human history. Of course, this is just another station—and not the worse one—in the history of maladies and pandemics of human beings. But there is something unique in the pandemic of COVID-19. This time, the plague encompasses all of humanity, and all the different countries and groups have to deal with it.

I would like to suggest a new perspective towards natural challenges—like maladies, pandemics, and plagues—be seen as a cultural mirror of humanity. Human reactions to these natural challenges can teach us about humanity with their cultural, practical, and political meanings [10, 11].

In more than one aspect, we can think about the natural challenges as the basis that moves people to create their cultures. It might be said that this is the underlying reason to establish religions—as theological responses to the mysteries of nature. A reasonable reading of Scripture might think about God as the saver of humanity, and thus define his divine authority.

A cynical look at the Scriptures can present them as a collection of stories about “divine violence,” and as a way of establishing religious authority. Divine violence is justified, and the ability to resolve the difficulty in dealing with nature and disasters is just in God’s hands. The meaning of the religious apparatus is to determine the way in which God participates in human history. In fact, the God of the Bible appears as the

one who can solve the problems of people and their behavior in nature, history, and in their human wars.

Ostensibly, God acts in history through miracles, to establish justice. A wide look at biblical history, however, shows that it is not ethics that results in salvation, but God as the ruler of nature. One of the best examples of that biblical message is God's response to Job "out of the storm," which can justify this argument, in a clear and unbending way.

4. Lisbon's earthquake: theological crisis of the theodicy

This is not the first time that all of humanity has faced a common danger from a natural calamity, be it disease or social and political turmoil. The story of the beginnings of mankind tells of Adam's initial journeys on the face of the earth, and recounts thrilling, spectacular events as well as dark and threatening ones. There are remarkable and exciting discoveries, technological and economic progress, but also grim and bloodstained wars, unbearable violence, and humanity's heroic struggle with and against nature. Hidden in that chronicle is another volume, one in which human recounts His holy aspiration exemplified by values, longevity, and good health. It also includes the story of humanity's war with the disease, against tiny, invisible enemies that threaten his life and health. 'Contagious diseases' and 'great epidemics' have accompanied humanity from its earliest history and have impacted all of the aspects of society—politics, faith, economy—and at times even determined the size of the world's population. The chapter that is being written in our days about this year's epidemic—the corona epidemic—is but another episode in human's war against his fate.

One of the greatest events in the history of theological thought and the development of theodicy was the Lisbon earthquake (1755). This famous event was the great "disaster" in the history of Portugal in modern times. The earthquake that killed thousands of people has become a theological question about divine justice. The history of ideas is difficult to rewrite, but must be returned to. We have to ask ourselves: what was it about this event—more than any other event—that shook religious thought? It is difficult to give a responsible answer. Still, we know that this event caused a change in religious consciousness.

The question of human suffering caused by disease still plays a major role in religious thought. It is the question Moses asks as he pleads to God "pray let me know Your ways," and by Job, as he cries out "Let me know what You charge me with." It has stirred the passions of philosophers and theologians since the days of the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which caused vast destruction and engendered a similar philosophical and theological upheaval regarding the justification for the tragedy and God's actions. How is it possible to comprehend a natural calamity of such enormous proportions that is not the result of the sins of humanity? François-Marie Arouet, known by his pen-name Voltaire (1694–1778), was one of the strongest critics of the religious reaction that sought to justify natural disasters. In his "Candide," he paces his naïve young protagonist through the wide world which he imagines as "perfect," as all forms of tragedy and catastrophe befall him [12]. Its depiction of our world as "the best of all possible worlds" remains a classic until today, as does the scorn he heaps upon those who believe that no natural calamity or suffering can disturb their belief in God's righteousness (theodicy).

5. Covenant of fate and covenant of destiny

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a Jewish philosopher of the twentieth century, approached theodicy from a different perspective, one that focused upon human responsibility, not God and divine providence.

Rabbi Soloveitchik offers a distinction between two types of “covenants” for the individual, for a group of people, and I would like to read this as a suggestion for all of humanity. He distinguishes between the “covenant of fate” and the “covenant of destiny.”

The covenant of fate is the partnership that is forged between people when they are faced with an external challenge. People form partnerships to protect themselves from enemies, or from natural or economic challenges. The “covenant of fate” is the same contract and the same partnership, in which individuals are willing to give up some of their rights in order to create a fraternity of the group.

The “covenant of destiny” is the partnership that human beings create in order to create a common vision, a common future, and a common goal. The challenge of the “covenant of destiny” is not an internal or external threat.

The experience of facing a natural calamity, an epidemic, is an experience that subjects us to the hand of fate, one which has no easy explanation. Humanity experiences its fate as “being bound up in the chains of existence, [and] stands perplexed and confused in the face of the great mystery called suffering.” This is a most appropriate description of life during a plague, in the shadow of an invisible virus when the fear of our death and destruction and that of our loved ones becomes real. The words which Rabbi Soloveitchik chooses to describe the awareness of fate are bitter and painful:

“The sufferer wanders lost in the vacuousness of the world, with God’s fear spread over him and his anger tensed against it; he is entirely shaken and agitated. His agonies are devoid of any clear meaning and they appear as satanic forces, as outgrowths of the primal chaos that pollutes the creation whose destiny it was to be a reflection of the creator.” ([13], p. 6).

But it should be remembered that in contrast to this existence, there is another experience, the awareness that a person has a destiny. The experience of ‘existence under the awareness of destiny’ relates to humanity’s active existence:

“...when man confronts the environment into which he has been cast with an understanding of his uniqueness and value, freedom and capacity, without compromising his integrity and independence in his struggle with the outside world...Man is born as an object, and dies as an object, but it is within his capability to live as a “subject”—as a creator and innovator who impresses his individual imprimatur on his life and breaks out of a life of instinctive automatic behavior into one of creative activity.” ([13], pp. 5–6).

For Rabbi Soloveitchik, the distinction between “fate” and “destiny” is one of the most important ideas in Jewish tradition in dealing with the problem of suffering. Our entire doctrine of suffering, he says, is based upon two dimensions of existence—one of humanity as a child of fate, and the other as a child of destiny, with humanity moving between these two experiences ([13], p. 2).

In Rabbi Soloveitchik's terms, Judaism teaches that humanity's mission in life is to turn fate into destiny, to turn a passive existence into an active one—to move from being an object dictated to by powers greater than he, to a subject who determines his own path and his life's meaning in his world.

In an image taken from the Hebrew calendar, the unique journey of the Jewish people from the Exodus from Egypt to the Covenant at Sinai is replicated by Jewish tradition every year during the period between Pesach to Shavuot. Two distinct covenants connect the individual Jew to the people of Israel: the covenant of Egypt and the covenant of Sinai, the covenant of fate and the covenant of destiny. The days between Passover and Shavuot are characterized as a period during which the people learned to transform their covenant of fate into one of destiny. Israel entered the "covenant of fate" against their will. The covenant of Egypt bound the fate of the nation together in a situation that was forced upon them, a life of slavery, and the feeling of being pursued. Out of the experience of individual suffering, the people of Israel learned that suffering was an experience that was shared by all, and emerged from it to enter into the collective covenant of fate and became a nation. This conferred upon them an identity formed by a collective historical experience, one of decrees and persecutions, pain and common suffering, and of the realization of the need to 'be as one' for the sake of the entire community. The readiness to enter the covenant of fate is worthy of honor and recognition: the readiness of individuals to take responsibility for the community, and the readiness and will to join together in times of distress, out of a sense of obligation and responsibility.

However, there is also another covenant, the "covenant of destiny," which is entered into when the shared bond between people is not 'the product' of common suffering but rather a shared ideal, the desire and readiness to enter into an agreement to lead an ethically elevating and worthwhile life. The "covenant of destiny" is one:

"that the people have chosen of its own free will...which manifests itself as an active experience full of purposeful movement, ascension, aspirations, and fulfillment... the life of destiny is a directed life, the result of the conscious direction and free will."
([13], p. 65).

In these days, the "covenant of fate" of the Jewish people about which Rabbi Soloveitchik taught can be understood in broader terms as a "covenant of fate of humanity." The need to fight fear, chaos, and danger, and the fear of impending suffering and the threat of death—can serve as the basis for a covenant that we must enter into with others in order to save ourselves. I would like to think that the message taught by Jewish tradition—to transform fate into destiny—can become a message for all humanity. We can find the power of the spirit in these days, when all of humanity cooperates in making parallel and collective efforts to fight the threat of the virus in any way possible, and enter into a "covenant of fate." This covenant can then be transformed into another covenant and partnership, a "covenant of destiny" for the elevation of all humanity.

An all-inclusive covenant of destiny for all of humanity conveys the idea of a combined effort to create an inspiring and noble foundation for life and survival, one in which humanity's involvement is not only a response to distress, but also a part of its ability to become a partner in the greatest project of all—human's creation. In biblical terms, a covenant can be created in this time that represents mankind's readiness to respond to God's call: "Let us make a human being"! It is as if He says:

“you and I together will create human”—human being becomes God’s partner in his own creation. The next step is for this unique covenant to transform it into a covenant of destiny, which has the potential to give new meaning to the concept of the partnership of humanity.

According to R. Soloveitchik, Thomas Hobbes described the natural state, and how the state is a kind of “political or social contract” in order to preserve and defend itself. Humans make a social contract that allows them to move from the “natural state” to the “political state.” For Hobbes, as well as for Rousseau and Spinoza, these are the ways in which society—as a society—faces the challenges of the natural state. The natural state is threatening, in the behavior between one person and another. The natural state threatens the challenges that nature poses to man.

The motivation to preserve, each for himself, his unlimited natural rights, will lead to an all-out war. The “Social Contract” describes the way in which human beings, of their own free will, are willing to give up some of their personal rights in order to create a “society.” Human society means the existence of political authorities.

6. Reading genesis again: two stories of the creation of man

One of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s best-known descriptions concerns the distinction between the creation of man in chapter one in Genesis and his creation in chapter two. For R. Soloveitchik, these two chapters are not proof of two different traditions, but the biblical explanation of the inner duality found within all human beings. This is the deep understating of the contradiction in the nature of man: “The two accounts deal with two Adams, two men, two fathers of mankind, two types, two representatives of humanity, and it is no wonder that they are not identical”.

In order to understand this description, there is a need to reread Genesis with the nuances of the narratives of creating a human being. The first human being is described as the first man in chapter I:

“So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female created He them. And God blessed them and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the heaven, and over all the beasts which crawl on the earth.”
(Genesis 1: 27-28).

The story of creating man in Genesis II reads differently:

“And the eternal God formed the man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul. And the eternal God planted a garden eastward in Eden ... And the eternal God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to serve it and to keep it.” (Genesis 2: 7–8, 2: 15).

In the first, man comes out of nature, and is given the role of controlling nature. The commandment that appears in Genesis “and multiplied and filled the earth and conquered it, lowered the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air,” is the prototype of the conquering man, who conquers the continent that would become the United States, and seeks to control the nature around it, and fill the whole country. This

is man, for whom outer space and the ocean depths are the subjects of his interest, primarily to control them, to understand them, and to use them.

The first person of chapter one in Genesis is the person who is commanded by God. He is called to live in the land, to work and guard it. His cosmic function is to preserve as much as possible the flora, the fauna, and the whole of nature. This is the person who finds himself limited by prohibitions and rules. He is the one who accepts the restriction of “and from the tree which in the garden you shall not eat of it ... for in the day you eat of it you shall die.”

“Adam the first, majestic man of dominion and success, and Adam the second, the lonely man of faith, obedience, and defeat, are not two different people locked in an external confrontation ... but one person who is involved in self-confrontation. ... In every one of us abide two personae—the creative majestic Adam the first, and the submissive, humble Adam the second.” ([13], pp. 84–85).

“God created two Adams and sanctioned both. Rejection of either aspect of humanity would be tantamount to an act of disapproval of the divine scheme of creation which was approved by God as being very good.” ([13], p. 85).

7. The current state and the covenant of fate

Can we think of the “current state”—of the plague, of the challenges of sustainability—as the natural state, which requires human partnership? Does the “current state” of “global warming” and other diverse environmental and technology issues require a new social contract? I would like to think of the current situation, as a change that humanity is facing these days.

There can be a new social contract to connect people, to deal with the problems of the natural challenges that are common to all of humanity. We should think about the historical circumstances of this time—and how to connect all of humanity together. Instead of competing with each other, instead of separating the rich and poor countries, instead of creating competition between economic and medical needs between country and country—we can allow for the signing of a new international contract.

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Our time allows us to engage in hope, but at the same time make place for fear and despair. Although we want to think that global warming is common to all of humanity, and therefore, should lead to a universal human partnership, it is possible that the results of the current situation will lead to a struggle against each other. It may be that the consequences of the ecological crisis, will eventually lead to a series of wars, and even world wars. Why? Because humanity may be too large a group to think of a social alliance. Humans may prefer to keep their means and abilities to themselves rather than share it with all other humans. Indeed, this may be a mistake, but for any country, it is a good enough reason for the political powers not to share with others.

8. Responsible theology facing contemporary challenges

There are different and varied ways to think about the meanings of the COVID-19 epidemic and its challenges [14–16]. Some are related to the ongoing suspicion that the scientific world is out of control. Some suspect that the plague is not a result of a natural disaster, but the result of the development of science and medicine. It could be worse, like the unwanted result of creating biological weapons, one that gave birth to an unplanned mutation. It might have been developed purposely to create chaos, or maybe something went wrong in the process.

Like the descriptions of the Golem, man's attempt to control his environment led to a devastatingly unplanned outcome. This suspicious approach is not an immediate political or socio-economic suspicion, but a description in the microcosm, of industrial and economic processes, in which the person seeking to control nature, to control the world, and is surprised to find that nature continues to control it. Man creates the Golem—or robot—so that a machine can help him manage his personal or national affairs. And here it turns out that the Golem is nothing but a destructive and dangerous monster. And as in a horror movie, the creature created by man, gets his monstrous nickname and threatens society and even its creator.

We may be dealing with an act of natural destruction, of ecological damage, whose severe effects are encountered through melting glaciers, global warming, and climate change, including the outbreak of new diseases we have not known to date. The twenty-first century is the century of man's encounter with ecological processes and their impact on man: significant damage to flora and fauna—extinction of animal species and of plants—which ultimately harms man himself. Previous warnings of diseases have become a global warning through the epidemic of Covid 19. However, it becomes a threatening warning against the next diseases we face.

We may have to direct our thoughts to the modesty of mankind, to his limits, to the ability of science and politics to organize our lives. The Covid epidemic has brought us face to face with a lot of uncertainty and question marks, about what we can and cannot know about our environment. It has revealed to us the human limits in knowledge, deed, and influence. The most important discovery of the plague is not what we know, but rather what we do not know.

I want to suggest that these questions are the great questions of sustainability facing humanity at this time. Humanity pretends on the one hand to control nature, but on the other hand, understands the limits of her knowledge and learns in the hard way about the limitations of her actions. The Age of COVID forces us to rethink the meaning of human action, and its religious meaning in particular.

I want to think of the story of heaven as a parable, since we have supposedly turned the whole earth into a paradise on earth [17, 18].

We knew most of the paths of the Garden, like the first man we were able to name all the animals, like the first man we learned to know which tree should be eaten from and which is forbidden, and like the first man we guarded and nurtured the garden ... for human needs. In this parable, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is not a particular tree, but represents what we do not know completely, and those things whose purpose we do not understand. And here, as a man of the parable of the garden—the man and the woman in heaven—if we too are not careful about guarding and respecting the garden, we will find ourselves expelled from heaven. In a sense, what seemed like a parable of divine punishment, seems now the necessary result of the activity of man in a world that he does not respect.

The close reading of the parable of the garden also reveals the moral significance of human activity. Not only within the relationships between God and man, but within the relationships between man and man. The parable of the garden in Eden, becomes our world, a world in which ecological deterioration becomes a problem of climate crisis, provokes diseases and epidemics, and turns out to be a theological problem.

9. Conclusion


Never has humanity experienced such a feeling of collective fate so palpably and unambiguously. In order to offer a way to deal with this dilemma, I reflected upon ideas taken from the writings of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903–1993), one of the most prominent thinkers and leaders of modern Orthodoxy in the twentieth century. “Existence in the awareness of fate” says Rabbi Soloveitchik, destabilizes humanity, as if his life is in the control of external forces, a mere object, subject to the forces of nature. The common experience of facing danger and suffering disrupts our faith in life, and evokes questions of meaning and existence. Humanity’s battle against the corona virus has succeeded in crossing borders and surmounting walls. Enemies and allies both near and far, are threatened alike by the vicious storms of corona and its effects. Different societies and states—from East to West—find themselves in fear of an invisible enemy, the epidemic, which has already exposed everyone to the question of fate and suffering. Fear of the epidemic places the fate of humanity on everyone’s shoulders, as nature demands that mankind join hands in the battle against corona in order to save ourselves and the entire world. In these times, the need for humanity to come together is stronger than ever. The awareness of the collective fate that has been forced upon us has the potential to mark a new kind of partnership for humanity as a whole.

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