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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner on...

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Rav Kook's approach –vs– focus on the individual

[From "Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Parashat Acharei Mot 5768 – Translated by Rafael Blumberg]

Question: Perhaps, with our generation being so focused on the individual, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook's approach, which focused on the good of the group at large, has become outdated? Perhaps he's no longer so relevant and Chabad or Breslav (which focus more on the betterment of the individual) are better? The fact is that those two groups are winning over the youth.

Answer: Your analysis is correct except for one detail. It applies not just in this generation but throughout all the generations. People have always been more interested in themselves. They've always had an exaggerated self-love, and they've always had an evil impulse which said, "Me! Me!" I am not against self-love. After all it says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18). That's a sign that you've got to love yourself, too. Yet I'm talking about exaggerated self-love.

What has changed, however, is that this proclivity has become a central ideal, replacing the ideal of extricating oneself from egocentrism. Indeed, during the past 200–300 years, the individualist bent has been becoming stronger in the West, and we are being dragged along, like a tail, as we proclaim, "I set MYSELF before me always." We forget that there is only One

Being who can truly say "I", and that is G-d, and we are supposed to respond to Him, "Here we are!"

Obviously, it isn't so that Rav Kook only focused on the group. Only people who haven't learned his writings make this claim. Rav Kook was not just interested in the group, and not just interested in the individual, but in the Torah, which is concerned with them both, for each needs the other. Or, more precisely, as Rav Kook's son, Rav Tzvi Yehudah put it, "the individual, from within the group and for the sake of the group". See Mesillat Yesharim at the end of Chapter 19.

Individualistic worship of a divinity existed before Avraham. Idolatry is likewise individualistic, and similar to the contemporary language of the New Age, flowing out of the pagan Far East, which makes reference to "the god within me". Avraham represents the focus on the group. His worship constitutes an enormous step upward. Slowly we ascended from the private altars to the universal Beit Ha-Mikdash. Whoever talks now about individualism in worship is regressing to the primitivism of before Avraham.

The truth is that the Exile involved a focus on the individual as well. Mine is mine and yours is yours. Even its spirituality was private, with people thinking, "My place in Heaven is mine alone (see Rav Kook's Orot 111). My worship is mine alone. My emotions are mine alone." Yet that approach represents sickness, not health, a band-aid, not an ideal approach. The Master of the Universe decided that we should be returning to the concern with the aggregate. Out of that concern, we have done many things: building up the Land, the return to Zion, the establishment of a Jewish State, and especially our army, the epitome of concern for the public good. When there is the brotherhood of fighters, the one is ready to die for the other.

We are becoming more and more concerned with the general fate. Some explain our Sages' utterance that "the son of David will not come until money disappears from pockets" (Sanhedrin 97a) as meaning, "until focus on the individual ceases." How very fortunate we are that we have come back from the concern for the individual! How forlorn the western world – and those amongst us who ape it – for being so focused on the individual. Things there are so bad that people don't get married, let alone stay married. Marriage is likewise man's main way of extricating himself from focus on the individual.

Indeed, it is seemingly a pleasant thing to be focused on oneself. The ancient Greeks have a legend about a fellow named Narcissus who stared at his reflection in the water, and he was so enchanted by it that he couldn't take his eyes off it. Ultimately he put down roots and became a flower – the narcissus. Freud created from this an emotional prototype, the narcissist, who finds all his satisfaction from preoccupation with himself. By contrast, our holy Sages told about a boy who came to fill a pitcher of water from a spring. His evil impulse took hold of him and showed him his beautiful hair, seeking to deprive him of the World to Come. He immediately took on the vow of a Nazir so that at the end of the month he would cut all his hair off (Nedarim 9b).

Indeed, focusing on the public good is harder than focusing on one's own needs, as Rav Kook taught, "True, public-welfare-oriented Torah observance is much harder than individual-focused observance" (Ma'amarei HaRe'iyah, page 174). Yet such is the unique divine service of the Jewish People. Therefore, "a person must constantly extricate himself from his individualistic mindset which fills his whole being, rendering him totally preoccupied with his individual fate. Such is the opposite of the way of G-d, imprinted on the Assembly of Israel...When a person focuses constantly and totally on his own interests and welfare that counts as 'following the ways of the Amorites'. It is not Jewish, and we are better off viewing it as something forbidden and out of bounds " (Ein Aya, Shabbat 2, 127-128).

"When we were in our Land, and the Temple stood, it was our center, our place of unity, hence private altars were forbidden, even though they could have served as a means of Jews uniting in smaller groups. Yet that desire by a small group would bring separation from the larger center, and the nation's unity would be nullified. Only from that national unity can G-d's ultimate will be realized." (Ein Aya, Berachot 1, 76).