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(Gdańsk)

Human Life as the Highest Good in Early Judaism

One of the most interesting and also practical anthropological issues in Old Judaism¹ is human life as a value. It is mainly so because a human being entertains a privileged position among living creatures² and has important functions³ to fulfil.

Somatic notion of a human being

A characteristic feature of anthropology of Old Judaism is a somatic view of a human being. A human being is "flesh and blood" (Hebrew: *'basser wa dam'*). A detailed analysis of Biblical texts of Old Testament clearly shows that the Hebrew language itself stresses the bodily aspect of a human being.⁴ Thoughts

¹ By "Old Judaism" we understand Biblical Judaism because the main source of its knowledge is the Old Testament (Bible). In Hebrew it is called TANACH from the first letters of their three parts: *Tora*, *Newiim*, *Ketuwim* (consonant *k* after vowel *a* is pronounced as *ch*). We can recommend the following recent Polish works concerning Judaism: W. Tyloch, *Judaizm*, Warszawa 1987, M. Grant, *Dzieje dawnego Izraela*, translated by J. Schwarckopf, Warszawa 1991.

² Analysis of the value of a human life constitutes a necessary and central aspect (under many respects) of all historico-sociological analyses of value. It can be claimed without risking an error that the way in which the human value is evaluated and the place occupied by this good in a social system of values characterizes a culture of a given group and its changes in a sensitive and detailed way. See K. Żygulski, *Wartości i wzory kultury*, Warszawa 1975, p. 160.

³ According to cosmogonic and anthropogonic content of stories in *Genesis* and of some later biblical books, a human being entertains a special position among human creatures and has a clear supremacy over them. E.g. Ch1,28.

⁴ The most important functions of human beings (according to biblical texts) include: protective function changing often into domination over the world, social functions — a man should

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are always thoughts of heart, words are words of mouth, anger is swelling of a nose, conscience is represented by kidneys. That is why God examines human kidneys to find human failures and sins. Right kidney is the place where good is located and left kidney is home of bad impulses.

Long life as an award for good life

The somatic notion of a human being has a significant meaning of estimation of value of human life in the context of his earthly existence. The authors of Biblical books recognize this life as the highest good of a human being on earth.⁵ That is why the long life was an ideal for every Israelite who wished to enjoy present existence on "the earth of living" as long as possible and to die like Abraham "at a good old age."⁶ Some Biblical texts express regret that the human life lasts so short and that they see the lack of God's blessing in this. Prophet Isajah clearly says that even "[...] the sinner a hundred years old shall be accused."⁷ Also the author of the Sirach book expresses sentimental regret because of shortness of human life:

"What is man, and of what use is he?
What is his good and what is his evil?
The number of a man's days is great
if he reaches a hundred years.
Like a drop of water from the sea
and a grain of sand
so are a few years in the day of eternity."⁸

Having children was a subject of warm desire in the society of Old Israel not only because children are support for parents in the old age but mainly because they prolong their lives.⁹

It is important to note that Israelites did not wish wealth, happiness or peace to their newly elected king but they wished a long life. "Long live the king" — people were cheering at the election of Saul for a king.¹⁰

live for other people, he should transfer to younger generations deeds and the good performed by God-Jahwe for the chosen nation. More on this subject is written by M. Filipiak, *Aksjologiczne treści antropologii biblijnej*, Lublin 1991.

⁵ See *Z mądrości Talmudu*, selected and translated by S. Datner and A. Kamieńska, Warszawa 1988.

⁶ Ch 25,8.

⁷ Is 65,20.

⁸ Sir 18,8–10 see also Ps 90,10. In other texts one can find texts complaining of the necessity of death: "O death how bitter is the reminder of you" (Sir 41,1). The subject of human thought is "agony of heart is the thought about what awaits them — death". (Sir 40,1–2).

⁹ See Za 8,4–5; Sir 30,4.

¹⁰ Sam 10,24.

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Also wise Kohelet perceives life as the highest value and expresses this truth in the following way: "a living dog is better than a dead lion."¹¹

The famous quotation from Talmud also supports anthropological claims of Old Judaism concerning human life:

"The one who saved one life
saved the whole world."¹²

The rigorous law of *Sabbath* allowed to perform all activities connected with helping a woman giving birth to a child.¹³ We can see that *Sabbath* rest which is treated in Judaism as superior religious value gives way to the value of human life.

The reasons for high evaluation of human life

Which reasons contributed to a very high evaluation of human life? There are several reasons.

First of all we must mention the lack of precise consciousness concerning the life after death,¹⁴ in contrast to the eschatology of Islam where vision of life after death is presented very vividly.¹⁵ For an Israelite the life on earth was the only widely accepted chance of achieving happiness. This chance should be taken advantage of in all its aspects.¹⁶ In this way we should understand the author of the *Kohelet Book* who encourages to use earthly goods in the following way: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do [...]. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love [...]. Because that is your portion in life and your toil at which you toil under the sun [...] for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in *Sheol*¹⁷, to which you are going".¹⁸ However, it has to be remembered that this largely hedonistic attitude was connected with faith in God, with conviction that possession and enjoyment of earthly goods is a sign of God's blessing.

¹¹ Ecc 9,4.

¹² Quote: Filipiak, p. 43.

¹³ Sabbath XVIII,3.

¹⁴ See S. Zedda: *L'Escatologia biblica*, Brescia 1972. G. Gerleman, "*Szeol. Totenreich*", in: *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* II, pp. 837-841.

¹⁵ Description of the Muslim paradise contained in the *Koran* presents the land of life after death as a wonderful garden where the faithful will rest on esmerald, silver or golden beds or, if they like it, they will live in a pavillion made of mother pearl. They will have everything in abundance and black-eyed hurises will sweeten their lives.

¹⁶ See Filipiak, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Sheol* in the Old Testament is a land of all dead without distinction whether they obtain happiness or punishment.

¹⁸ Ecc 9,7-10.

Further reason for evaluation of human life as the highest value in Old Judaism anthropology is a specific understanding of the notion of life. Comparative analysis of Biblical texts shows that human life is in Old Testament understood in a complementary way, i.e. as a sum of all values constituting a successful existence which gives a chance for many-sided development. Therefore, the life is for the Israelites not only a biological lasting but also general happiness connected with peace of mind and such values as good social status, wealth and health above all.

This is testified by the author of the *Sirach book*:

"Better off is a poor man who is well
and strong in constitution
than a rich man who is severely
afflicted in body.

Health and soundness are better than
all gold
and a robust body than countless
riches.

There is no wealth better than health
of body
and there is no gladness above joy
of heart."¹⁹

The greatest error of a human being is sacrifice of health for other benefits. Health is a necessary condition for human achievements and enjoyment of life. "Light is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun."²⁰ but this can be enjoyed in the best way by a healthy human being.

Marian Filipiak, an expert on anthropology of Old Judaism, draws attention to the fact that the idea of life in the Old Testament is often presented in context of such notions as: peace at home and among people in every situation, living at one's country, brightness and light and also happiness in all aspects of its meaning. In some texts life means not only living at one's home but also a close presence of a wife, husband, sons and daughters and possession of one's own vineyard.²¹ Thus the Biblical notion of life means, qualitative-quantitative fullness; to live means to take advantage of all values constituting an honorable human life. Human destiny is neither biological functioning similar to animal lives nor human vegetation but the life having all qualities corresponding to the human dignity. People who cannot use these values which condition the proper quality of human life do not live but last in death."²²

¹⁹ Sir 30,14-16.

²⁰ Ecc 11,7.

²¹ Dt 28,30.

²² Filipiak, pp. 44-45.

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³² Ps 36,10.

³³ Gen 1,26.

Nevertheless, there are factors which destroy the life conceived in this manner. These factors are mainly: suffering, illness, danger of being dead and extreme poverty. They bring about that a human being does not live with fullness of life but lasts in death. Sirach, who is a good observer of life, rightly notes that: "My son, do not live the life of a beggar; it is better to die than to beg. When a man looks at the table of another, his existence cannot be considered as life."²³

Life exists for an Israelite when it has conditions for a full and many-sided development. When such conditions are not available then a human being does not live but "lasts in death". Ill and suffering Hiob screamed to his friends: "My days are past, my purposes are broken off (even), the desires of my heart."²⁴ His life is gone because his present situation marked by suffering is not a life. Also the protagonist of *Psalms 116* who got into "oppression and suffering" complains: "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me."²⁵ It is worth to consider J. Hempel's²⁶ commentaries on Biblical texts concerning the concept of life in the Old Testament. He notes that: "Life in its full meaning as ascribed to gods and kings is the only existence in worship and health. Quick death in a war is better than a long existence in hands of an enemy."²⁷ Short life of a hero is better than a long vegetation in the beyond [...]. Senility and a lasting illness or having a bad woman²⁸ may lead not only to foresaking of the day of one's birth²⁹ but to claims like «those who are never born are happier than those who live» or «eternal silence has priority over lasting silence».³⁰ That is because health is better than wealth and money."³¹

The high evaluation of human life in the doctrine of Old Judaism is also influenced by a conviction of theological character. There existed a belief that God himself is the source of life.³² This is why blood cannot be consumed with meat because blood is a synonym of life in the Bible. Blood of sacrificial animals could not be spilt on the ground but only on the altar. However, above all, it was not allowed to «shed blood», i.e. to kill a man who had been created as an imitation of God.³³ There existed a death penalty for "shedding blood" already in the epoch

²³ Sir 40,28-29.

²⁴ Hi 17,11.

²⁵ Ps 116,3.

²⁶ J. Hempel, *Ich bin der Herr, dein Arzt*, "Theologische Literaturzeitung" 82, 1957, 816-817.

²⁷ 1 Sam 31,4.

²⁸ Ecc 7,27.

²⁹ Hi 3,3n; Jr 29,14n.

³⁰ Ecc 4,2-3; Sir 30,17.

³¹ Sir 30,14n.

³² Ps 36,10.

³³ Gen 1,26.

of patriarchs as testified in Genesis: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed: for God made man in his own image."³⁴

Human life was protected by the Israeli law. In its oldest form it was based on customary revenge: "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."³⁵ However later, law was modified and it forbade seeking justice privately. The commandment in decalogue forbids to kill: "Thou shall not kill" (Hebrew: *lo tirsch*).³⁶ Commentators of that commandment maintain that the full sense of the words "Thou shall not kill" embraces both protection of biological life of a human being and quality of this life. Everything that threatens human life is killing a man. Among the authors of Biblical texts especially the prophets emphasize this. According to Isajah *lo tirsah* means: "To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"³⁷ Therefore, to fulfil the commandments does not only mean to respect biological life but also to "respect specificity of quality of human life. It is necessary, then, to exclude everything that leads to hunting down a man, humiliation of his humanity, condemnation to vegetation."³⁸ This commandment should be understood in a similar way as preached by Jesus in his 'Sermon on the Hill', where it is prohibited not only to murder but also to hate. Jesus also demands respect for everybody.³⁹ Such interpretation — taken over by the entire Christianity, postbiblical Judaism and to a large extent by Islam — is righteous because a man can not only be killed but he can be being killed step by step, slowly, year by year. It is not necessary to shed blood in order to kill. It is possible to kill by hatred, egoism or gossip. *Lo tirsah* means: "Thou shall not kill" with any weapon!

³⁴ Gen 9,6. See also 24,17,21.

³⁵ See: Exod 21,23-25, Lev 24,19-20; Pwt 19,21. A. Alt notes that in times where the judicial system was not properly organized, the customary law of revenge was a successful protection against banditism of criminal elements. This nonhumanitarian and cruel "law of revenge" (in talionis) in the Near East conditions was humanitarian for two reasons: It was a barrier and a warning against crime. Moreover, it was a limited punishment with respect to the obtained harm and it protected a wrongdoer from limitless torments characteristic of barbarian times. The law of revenge is a symptom limiting one's wilfulness. See A. Alt, *Zur Talions — Formel*, "Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft" p. 3, 1934.

³⁶ Exod. 20,13. Pw t 5,17. See also: H. Turkanik, *Dekalog*, Warszawa 1988, pp. 105-115. P. Leks, "Nie będziesz zabijał", "Roczniki Teologiczno-Kanoniczne" vol. XIII, 1966, pp. 35-48. See also: M. Filipiak, "Nie zabijaj". *Studium egzogetyczno-teologiczne*, "Roczniki Teologiczno-Kanoniczne" vol. XXX, 1983, pp. 5-14.

³⁷ Is 58,6-7.

³⁸ See M. Filipiak, *Aksjologiczne...*, p. 47.

³⁹ Mt 5,21-22. 43-48; Lk 6,27-36.

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⁴⁰ Ecc 3,1-4.

⁴¹ Ecc 7,2-4.

⁴² Ecc 9,7.

⁴³ Ecc 11,8.

⁴⁴ Sir 14,14nn.

⁴⁵ Ecc 5,17.

⁴⁶ Ps 126,5-6.

⁴⁷ Is 16,10.

Encouragement to live a joyful life

There is also a very characteristic trace in anthropology of Old Judaism, which deserves attention because of its practical implication i.e. the appeal and encouragement to lead a joyful life. Life as the highest value cannot be wasted but it should be lived with joy but seriously remembering that "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up a time to weep and a time to laugh."⁴⁰ Although in the *Kohelet's Book* we can exceptionally find praise of sadness⁴¹ (probably understood as a meditational silence in contrast to a noisy joy), there is a conviction in the whole Bible that in spite of many dark sides of human existence a man should try to live joyfully. Encouragements to live joyfully are very frequent in the Old Testament especially in the literature on wisdom and they often refer to everyday life: "Eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart,"⁴² "For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all."⁴³ "Do not deprive yourself of a happy day; let not your share of desired good pass by you."⁴⁴

According to biblical authors, every day gives a man many occasions for joy. It can be an everyday consumption of food, e.g. as it is understood by the wise Kohelet: "This is what I recognize as good: a beautiful thing is to eat and drink and enjoy happiness thanks to my work."⁴⁵ Everyday work is also an occasion for enjoyment because work is not only acquisition of means for living but it is also a way to fulfil one's dreams and a material support of happiness. A farmer — as author of the *Psalms* notes — works in hardship but collects his crops with joy.⁴⁶ In vineyards where wine is made there is the atmosphere of joy and one can hear songs.⁴⁷

Except for work love is a source of satisfaction and enjoyment. The author of the *Psalms* stresses harmony of marriage, joy from having children and joy of "being together":

"Behold how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity! [...]"

⁴⁰ Ecc 3,1-4.

⁴¹ Ecc 7,2-4.

⁴² Ecc 9,7.

⁴³ Ecc 11,8.

⁴⁴ Sir 14,14nn.

⁴⁵ Ecc 5,17.

⁴⁶ Ps 126,5-6.

⁴⁷ Is 16,10.

For there the LORD has commanded the blessing
life for evermore."⁴⁸

Even the greatest hardships will not break life of a human being when he will be supported by a friendly help. The Bible praises the friendship:

"A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter
he that has found one has found a treasure."⁴⁹

Encouragement for a joyful living of life is supported by psychological, existential and theological reasons.

From psychological point of view sadness kills joy which is necessary for a normal life not less than bread and fresh air: "A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones."⁵⁰ "Do not give yourself over to sorrow, and do not afflict yourself deliberately. Gladness of heart is the life of man, and the rejoicing of a man is a length of days. Delight, your soul and comfort your heart, and remove sorrow far from you for sorrow has destroyed many and there is no profit in it."⁵¹

Existential point of view orders a man to realize that he has only one life which flows very fast: "Remove vexation from your mind and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity."⁵²

Theological reason for a joyful life is the fact that the man is created by God. The consciousness that God is at the beginning of the human life should be foundation of his trust, hope and also joy: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"⁵³ "For thou, O Lord art my hope, my trust, O Lord from my youth. Upon thee I have learnt from my birth; thou art he who took me from my mother's womb."⁵⁴ In view of the above the author of the *Psalms* asks himself with wonder: "Why go I mourning?"⁵⁵ Sadness has no justification in life because tragic and unpleasant moments will pass and then joy will come according to God's promise "the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people He will take away from all the earth."⁵⁶

Also statements in New Testament are close to those contained in the Old Testament. Jesus reminds that "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted"⁵⁷ Also Saint Paul from Tars saying good-bye to the Thessalonians

⁴⁸ Ps 133,1.3.

⁴⁹ Sir 6,14-16.

⁵⁰ Prov. 17,22.

⁵¹ Sir 30,21-23.

⁵² Ecc 11,10.

⁵³ Ps 27,1.

⁵⁴ Ps 71,5-6.

⁵⁵ Ps 43,2.

⁵⁶ Is 25,8-9.

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at the end of his Letter One encourages them not only to pray but also to be joyful: "Rejoice always, pray constantly."⁵⁸

Tradition and the present

Traditionally high evaluation of human life is also present in the contemporary Judaism.⁵⁹ Today, more and more often a notion of individual, human responsibility is connected with the human responsibility for "all creation." Every single human life is limited in its value. Simon Greenberg's statement is very characteristic in this matter: "Estimating the price of human life we do not count human bodies and we cannot claim that it is necessary to sacrifice several people for the benefit of many."⁶⁰ Both biblical tradition and *Talmud*'s commentaries are constantly present in the anthropology of Judaism and *lo tirsah* is still relevant today.

⁵⁸ 1 Tes 5,16-17.

⁵⁹ See S. Greenberg, *Judaizm we współczesnym świecie*. In: *Judaizm. Wybór tekstów*, W. Jaworski, A. Komorowski, Kraków 1989, pp. 63-75. See also: H. and M. Simon, *Filozofia żydowska*. Translated by T. G. Pszczółkowski, Warszawa 1990. A. Unterman, *Żydzi — wiara i życie*, Translated by J. Zabierowski, Łódź 1989.

⁶⁰ Greenberg, op.cit. p. 67.