

A Life of Meaning and Joy

In Search of Social Identity Man

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Preface

Make known to me the path of life.¹

This book describes a typology of man with a strong identity *and* meaningful, solid social relationships. I call this type of person *Social Identity Man*.² He is a man of joy, the supreme social emotion. In my view, this human type is increasingly absent from our society, and at the same time the need for this type is enormous. A healthy and strong society is based on the visible and tangible presence of *Social Identity Man*.

Two reasons underlie the writing of a book on the theme of social identity. First is my personal observation of the lack of a healthy balance between the “I” and the “we” in many people in today’s Western society. The natural equilibrium between the self and others seems to be chronically upset. Modern Western man is characterized as “selfie,” an egoistic person detached from meaningful and intimate social contact.³ I consider this a worrying trend which dominates daily conversations in the therapy room and the education of my students in my profession as a clinical psychologist. Most patients present themselves with both identity problems and relational issues. Joy is often absent. Meaningfulness hard to find.⁴

My personal concerns are in line with the perception of many contemporary thinkers. According to numerous philosophers, sociologists, psychiatrists, and psychologists, modern Western man, man and woman alike, is in crisis. Prior to Rosh Hashana 2022, Dutch newspapers wrote: “We live in a crisis society.” Distracted from meaningful social bonds, modern Western man feels alone. He is Selfie Man, prone to depression, anxiety, and addictions. He is dissatisfied.

In Western countries, we have observed a significant increase in registrations at mental health organizations. We have also noted an increase in the severity of these problems, even at a young age. Adolescents are increasingly vulnerable compared to previous decades. Families, long considered the heart of social life, are fragile. Nearly one in two marriages or cohabitants are shipwrecked prematurely; in 70 percent of these cases children are involved. When a blended family is formed after a divorce with a new life partner, this leads on average to a second divorce within five years in two-thirds of cases. Early breakups in Western countries are commonplace. Modern man is vulnerable.

The core of the problem in the current crisis is a one-sided focus on the individual. The dominant thinking is individually oriented. The ego had become the center and origin of the moral world. The human self has become the ultimate arbiter of all questions of value. We

¹ From a beautiful hymn, composed by Isaac ibn Hayat (1030-1089), as we bid our farewell to Shabbat in song. Day 8, for humans, was the counterpart of day 1 of creation by God. Just as God began creation by making light, so God invites us after each Shabbat to make light, to become His partners in the work of creation. In our work we ask Him to guide us.

² This theory has nothing to do with the social identity theory, as described by Henri Tajfel.

³ And often unable to live a meaningful and purposeful life in general.

⁴ Worrying, especially because we know that the quality of relationships and meaningfulness are the decisive factors for recovery from a psychological or psychiatric disorder (Kloens and Kloens, 2022).

live in an age of 'narcissism'.⁵ The good life is evaluated in terms of self-realization and happiness.⁶ There is an erosion of community thinking and social togetherness. Human nature is out of balance. After all, there has to be a healthy balance between the "I" and the "we." This one-sided view of life, with its emphasis on self-reliance, causes major problems in many areas, such as politics, economy, social behavior, education, and health. In the first chapter of this book, we will take a closer look at the crisis of modern man.

The second reason I wrote this book is that despite its richness, the Jewish philosophical perspective is lacking in the discourse in clinical psychology on the theme of social identity and their core values of meaning and joy. In my humble opinion, this theme can best be described from a Jewish philosophical point of view. This point of view is at odds with the dominant Greek philosophical, and later Christian and secular theories of being human in the West. The ego perspective dominates these dualistic theories.

The description of the characteristics of Social Identity Man are based on the standard diagnostic classification system from psychiatry and Jewish sources (see the introduction).

The book was written with the realization that a subject like social identity can never be fully described in one book. There are many points of view from which the theme can be explained. This contribution encompasses just one of those points of view. Hence, its subtitle: *In Search of Social Identity Man*.

My perspective on the theme of social identity is by definition personally colored, as is everyone's (whether that outlook be religious, secular, or influenced by the discipline of psychology). Diversity on earth is a great asset. I hope the reader will respect my viewpoint, realizing that I respect the perspectives of others. I also hope readers will share their perspectives with me.

I wrote most of this book before and after Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and during Sukkot 2022, mainly during the seventh month of the Jewish year, the month of creation (Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the birth of the world and humankind). A number of references testify to this. The final finishing touches were completed in the spring of 2024. The reader is warned: it is my most Jewish contribution to date.

Many friends, colleagues, and patients have helped me to shape my views on the theme, in particular my dearest life partner, Gilah, to whom I am deeply indebted. Her wisdom and lifestyle are a daily inspiration for me. I laud her: "Many women have excelled, but you have surpassed them all."⁷ A special thanks to Debbie Ismailoff, a fantastic editor, my good friends

⁵ Wurzburger, 2000, pp. 11-12.

⁶ This refers to the dominant Greek approach to ethics and their branch of knowledge in Western philosophy, designed to guide individuals in their quest for what constitutes a good life evaluated in terms of self-realization and happiness (Wurzburger, 2000, p. 21). Professor Robert Nozick (1981) described this as a 'push-morality', a morality designed to enable individuals to overcome obstacles impeding their development into personalities enjoying a happy existence. Jewish philosophy categorically rejects all egocentric approaches [and Greek-based theories in general] and operates, to employ Nozick's terminology, with a 'pull-morality', because the self is pulled by the claims of the other.

⁷ A reference to *Eshet Chayil*, the hymn based on the last chapter of the book of *Mishlei* (Proverbs 31), which extols the virtues of the Jewish wife and mother, who sets the tone for Shabbat in the home and her family.

at Bookstore Pomerantz for their love of books and willingness to publish this book and Daniel Tavenier, who has once again made a beautiful and striking artistic contribution.

This book is also a tribute to both Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993) and Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020). Their work belongs to the treasury of my heart and is an integral part of the conversations at our Shabbat table.

A Life of Meaning and Joy: In Search of Social Identity is written for a wide audience, from family to friends, colleagues and people seeking help in mental health care, and anyone with an interest in the theme of social identity. I sincerely hope that the content is of inspiration. I will greatly appreciate your responses.

I hope you will enjoy reading this book.
Dr. Gershom Jochanan Kloens

Introduction

First separate, then connect; it is the carefully calibrated distance allows us to grow as individuals and create stronger relationships together.⁸

This book is written from two distinct perspectives. The first is that of clinical psychology as a scientific discipline. In the second chapter of this book, we will define the traits of Social Identity Man based on the description of personality as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*.

The DSM-5 is the predominant classification system for the diagnoses of mental disorders, among other things the field of personality disorders. A disorder can be defined as a set of problems that result in causing significant difficulty, distress, impairment, and/or suffering in a person's daily life. Key terms are imbalance and disharmony.

From this classification system we are able to describe basic healthy personality qualities. A healthy person is able to adapt his behavior in a desired way to any given circumstances and situation, so that he can be satisfied with himself and function well within his living environment. This type of person leads a balanced and harmonious life. A healthy person is defined in the DSM by two core concepts: (a) personal functioning and (b) interpersonal functioning. They lead a so-called “good-enough-life”: a good-enough self (personal functioning) and [at the same time] good-enough relationships.⁹ Balancing between the “I” and the “we” is at the core of the description of a person’s personality within this psychiatric classification system. These two core concepts “I” and “we” and the principle of “good-enough” are at the heart of Social Identity Man.

The second perspective we’ll use to define Social Identity Man is through that of Jewish sources. In the third chapter of this book, we’ll describe a view on the nature of man based on the work by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, one of the twentieth century’s greatest philosophers and teachers of Judaism. Rabbi Soloveitchik characterizes man based on the two accounts of man's creation from the first chapters of *Bereshit*, the first book of the Tanach (Jewish Bible). This typology of man highlights a fundamental principle, a principle of polarities in which exist opposites and paradoxes as well as a striving for integration and harmony.

This principle is described in current science as the theory of integrated diversity or the dialogic principle of life.¹⁰ Rabbi Sacks describes this principle as “harmony between conflicting elements.”¹¹ Conflicting elements relate to diversity. The term “integrated” then clearly stands for a calibrated harmony between the various elements, each in its own position, each in its own role: “Integrated diversity values the dignity of difference.”¹² Integrated diversity is “goodly and gracious symmetry.”¹³ The theory of integrated diversity

⁸ Sacks (2020b), p. 20. *Judaism’s Life-Changing Ideas*, number 4.

⁹ Kloens and Kloens (2022), pp. 50–52.

¹⁰ Kloens and Kloens (2022), pp. 41–42.

¹¹ Sacks (2017b), p. 105.

¹² Sacks (2007), p. 22.

¹³ Sacks (2007), p. 139.

describes the phenomena in realistic terms of “and/and,” in contrast to the theory of dualism, which describes phenomena in idealistic terms of “either/or.”¹⁴

However, the heart of this book concerns a second Jewish source. In chapter 4, we’ll highlight the explanations of several commentaries about a saying by Hillel the Elder in *Pirkei Avot*. That statement, Hillel’s most famous, appears in *Pirkei Avot* 1:14 and goes as follows: “He [Hillel] used to say: (i) If I am not for me, who is for me? (ii) If I am for myself, what am I? (iii) And if not now, when?”

Pirkei Avot is a short, six-chapter-long, practical lifestyle manual on how one should behave, together with instructions about the importance of the Torah¹⁵ and how to learn it. *Pirkei Avot* means “Chapters of the Fathers.” The teachings in *Avot* are offered by rabbis who lived at various times between the era of the Second Temple and in the 130 years or so after its destruction in 70 CE. *Pirkei Avot* forms part of the Six Orders of the Mishna, the element of Jewish law based on oral tradition that complemented the written law of the Five Books of Moses (Torah). The redaction of the Mishna by Rabbi Yehuda the Prince (ca. 200 CE) represented the end of a long process wherein the Mishna itself became the formative document in the shaping of Talmudic Judaism.

Hillel’s statement highlights, in line with the DSM-5 and Rabbi Soloveitchik’s typology, the aforementioned fundamental principle: a principle of polarities in which exist opposites and paradoxes as well as a striving for integration and harmony. Distinguishing the “I” from the “other” (and the “we”), and at the same time striving for togetherness, Hillel’s saying is a striking example of the theory of integrated diversity. Our human typology of Social Identity Man is thus partly derived from this well-known saying of Hillel.

In addition to delving into the work of Rabbi Soloveitchik and the saying of Hillel, we will explore in our epilogue a core trait of Social Identity Man. This is the quality of joy, which lies at the heart of Judaism and can be distinguished from happiness. Happiness can be defined as an emotion that can occur only as the result of a specific situation, which is then experienced as pleasant. Happiness is not necessarily a social emotion. By contrast, joy is a supreme value. Above all, joy is a social emotion. A person can experience joy only when it is shared. This implies an open house. A well-occupied and full table is the way to give shape to this – hence, the illustration on the cover of this book.

Another way in which joy differs from happiness, as we show based on our sources, is that joy lives in the moment. It celebrates the power of the now. Social Identity Man is a person of joy.

In the following chapter we will delve more deeply into the theme of the crisis of modern man.

¹⁴ Dualism entered the West through Persian Manichaeism and Greek gnosticism and is based on its either/or philosophy, a constant temptation to those who seek to locate the source of evil in some inhuman or antihuman force, some externalized Other, rather than within ourselves. Those unable to acknowledge the good and evil within themselves sometimes project the evil onto others. “Dualism is incompatible with monotheism; it is also responsible for some of the great hatreds of history” (Sacks, 2016a, 352–55).

¹⁵ Literally, “instruction,” the Torah refers to the Five Books of Moses (*Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bemidbar, and Devarim*).