

# God Concepts and Community Structure\*

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## When It Is Good To Deny The Existence of God

*There is no quality and there is no power in man that was created to no purpose. And even base and corrupt qualities can be uplifted to serve God. When, for example, self assurance is uplifted, it changes into proud assurance of the ways of God. But to what end can the denial of God have been created? It too can be uplifted through deeds of charity. For if someone comes to you and asks your help, you shall not turn him off with pious words, saying: "Have faith and take your troubles to God!" You shall act as though there was no God, as though there were only one person in all the world who could help this man—only yourself.*

Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*, New York: Schocken Books, p. 85.

### I. Preface

IT was my rabbi<sup>1</sup> who first sensitized me to the observation that it has become unfashionable, indeed often embarrassing, to speak publicly about God. It would appear by what we say or don't say, as well as by what we urge our fellow Jews to do or value, that we as a sectarian community have decided for God that our Deity may now be out of style. A review of articles in this Journal would substantiate this view as evidenced by the fact that apparently no articles have been published in recent memory relating God and Jewish communal service as mutually interdependent subjects.

This omission is even more significant when one considers that sectarian communities are, by definition, built upon the foundations of shared religious beliefs. Furthermore, religions are through their view of their God, among other things, attempting to develop a value system which has an impact upon behavior. The God of any religion is the

ultimate role model and value source for that group and sets a tone for all else that is developed. In a field such as ours, which is largely concerned with values and behavior, it becomes doubly curious that God appears to be so effectively and consistently programmed out of our work. I view it as impossible to separate any religious group from its God. Since an intimate interrelationship of God, the Jewish community and each individual Jew is so basic to Judaism, it is my assumption that Jewish communal workers and any meaningful institutional structure, both within and of the Jewish community, ought to reflect this close relationship. Without this we stand on the verge of committing perhaps the most basic of Jewish sins, the encouragement and practice of idolatry. (Understanding that in Judaism idolatry is one of only three cardinal sins, idolatry may be summarized . . .

. . . in this manner. There are two orders of being and only two. God, on one hand, and all else, on the other hand. Sin, quite simply, occurs when man fancies anything in the order of creation, including himself, as divine or as a god. That is, sin is, in any way available to man's imagining, crossing the line of distinction. To deny God in any way is for man to set himself up as his own power; or to succumb to any force in creation is the loss of freedom, or sin, that comes from relaxing one's commitment to the sole Giver and Sovereign of all

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Eisenman, Rabbi, Congregation Rodef Shalom, Denver, Colorado.

forces in creation. To obey God (and nought else) is to be free of all gods.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of idolatry is even more out of fashion, and, therefore, may be even more awkward to discuss. God and idolatry, Jewish antonyms, are at the core of what we are about. It would be appropriate, then, to bring God out of the closet.

## II. Introduction

A. The structure and behavior of a sectarian community speak more loudly and accurately than its currently articulated values, views and visions.

If behavior indeed speaks more loudly than rhetoric, then how an institution or community actually structures itself is among its basic messages. Sanctioned structure may be considered the acting out of community values through behavior.

In a Buberian sense, how we relate to each other is a model of how we relate to God.<sup>3</sup> It would seem to be desirable, then, to try and reconcile community structure, behavior and relationships to man and to God in a manner consistent with tradition and teachings as documented through our basic religious sources, specifically the Jewish Bible, the *Tanach*. This is most important in Jewish tradition because of the expectation placed upon Jews to imitate their God.<sup>4</sup>

If one of the primary revelations of God's nature, as we shall see, is authentic emotion with a unique personality, then it would follow that Jews may do a high duty to God and to their fellow men by adhering to authentic behavior as exemplified by God.

B. At the outset, to expedite this presentation, there are several axioms which will be assumed:

1. There is a basic similarity between individual and group behavior. The basic dynamics are essentially the same for both. It is possible to extrapolate from one and then apply towards the other—interchangeably—and in either direction. In this sense the impact of Israel's God ought to apply to each individual, institution and to the Jewish community as a whole.

2. If individuals are held accountable for behavior and are expected to behave in certain fashions, then this should also be true for institutions and community. Each adheres to the same God model and the same Jewish traditions.

3. A sectarian community has by its very nature, to work towards some relationship with its God if it is to remain an authentic sectarian community.

4. If the structure and behavior of that group are an important statement, then that community's professional leadership (civil service) ought to understand the community's *raison d'être* and work towards the creation or maintenance of a structure which reflects and supports these underlying values.

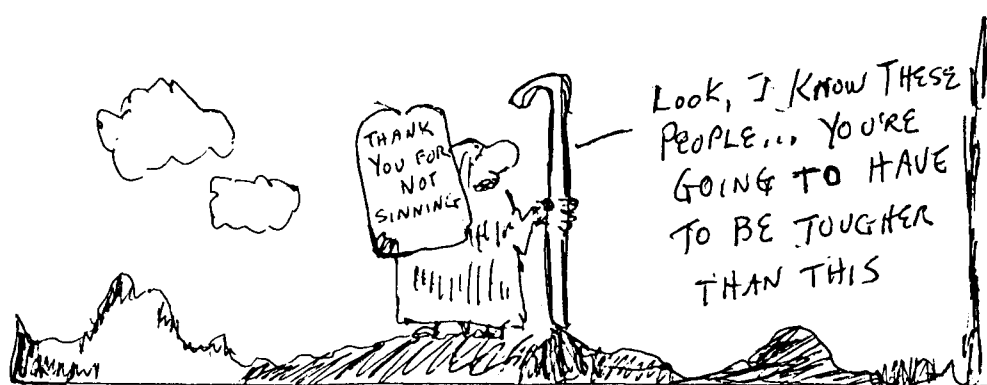
5. Behavior tendencies may be encouraged, but not accurately predicted, in a manner not unlike plant pruning. In order to achieve and to encourage growth in one part of a plant it is often necessary to deprive the plant of other parts which are also perfectly good and healthy, but which do not achieve the desired effect. Similarly, it is an essential tendency among sectarian groups to discard one legitimate value pattern (part) for another (part) which is perceived as more desirable.

6. Individual and group behavior are, at least in part, modeled after the God selected by a specific sectarian group. A view of God fostered from birth is a powerful influence on behav-

<sup>2</sup> James A. Sanders, *Torah & Canon*, Fortress Press, 1972, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (2nd Edition). New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> *Leviticus* 19.2.



ior since that God model is the vehicle through which values and views are communicated.

7. Sectarian ethics based upon the God model of a specific religious group must prevail over other professional ethics at points of apparent conflict.

8. In Judaism, idolatry, reactions against idolatry and perceptions of it are also necessary to understand. Not to follow the ways of the God of Israel is to follow another god.

C. This presentation will trace one view of 1) God, 2) idolatry, 3) some effects on the interaction between God and the Jewish community and 4) then try to explore some possible influences stemming from these views on community structure as well as our role as Jewish community professionals.

### III. The God of Israel

Because the relationship between God, Jews and the Jewish community is fundamental let's begin by talking about God, first to try and review some of God's attributes and then to explore how these attributes as concepts might affect behavior and a Jewish view of life.

Perhaps the most obvious and most basic fact Jews must accept is that this God has no clearly identifiable physical image to which Jews can relate.

—no appearance. At best God appears in pieces or as metaphor, i.e., "with an outstretched hand . . ."<sup>5</sup>

—nor a name which Jews may speak. Interestingly, while in normal human relationships we place great emphasis on addressing each other by name as an aid towards relating, Buber's Eternal Thou, the model of meaningful relations, is never to be referred to by name.

What is most clearly shown are individuality and emotions. What a wide range of emotions and personality are revealed to us!!!

—anger<sup>6</sup>

—love<sup>7</sup>

—jealousy<sup>8</sup>

—remorse<sup>9</sup>

—playfulness—even to the point of apparent insensitivity to persons the Lord would appear to wish to pity or protect and on and on.

Hardly any emotion is hidden or missed. God can be flattered and occasionally even loses an argument. The Lord bargains, makes deals (or covenants) and is vulnerable to being called to account. Our God is even challenged or chastised when it appears this Deity

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 5.15.

<sup>6</sup> Hosea 11.5-7.

<sup>7</sup> Hosea 11.5-7.

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 5.9.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 6.5-7.

has participated in a perceived injustice.<sup>10</sup> God can be arrogant, humble or caring.<sup>11</sup>

The Lord is often unforgiving, indeed at times deadly, to those who create idols or practice idolatry.<sup>12</sup>

Since God does not always control or predict events, occasionally repents and backtracks,<sup>13</sup> it may be reasoned that the Lord is far from omnipotent—all seeing, all knowing and all controlling. If the Children of Israel are God's chosen students, one may even question the Lord's teaching abilities and skills.

This Deity also allows "democratic access"<sup>14</sup> by any person. Moshe Greenberg observes that a normal mode of prayer in the Bible—over 70 recorded episodes—is from the individual (through no intermediary, priest or group) directly and personally to God. Prayers, and the relationship implicit in them, are not delegated.

This is an emotionally authentic God, who by very nature demands authenticity in return. There are few human emotions that are not sanctified by God's own reported behavior. It may be argued, through this model, that diversity of emotion and uniqueness are not only accepted but desirable.

What exists is a glorious model of a certain type of a human or "extra-human" personality, with no tangible physical attributes; a somewhat fallible God whose fallibility signals acceptance of imperfection in others.

Jews are asked to enter into relationship with this Entity which can be neither seen, nor called by name, nor

touched. Indeed, our tradition takes us to the point of explicitly forbidding any efforts to place a fixed identity upon the Deity. By not offering a clear-cut picture of God's appearance, yet a very clear glimpse into God's full inner life, the direction is set within Judaism (just as the plant is pruned) for a system which encourages conceptual thought, a search for inner reality—the psyche, an approach to open, authentic interaction together with a de-emphasis of valuing physical or tangible attributes.

A relationship of this type must be unconditional in trust without a guarantee of reciprocity. It may appear either as a one-sided relationship or, as with many human relationships, "open-ended."

Incidentally, this tendency towards "open-endedness", reluctance to always offer a definition or clear-cut black and white answers—even on self-identity by God, while perhaps not the main theme of the Bible appears often enough that it ought not be discounted as a persistently clear message in and of itself.

Example: "I am what I am,"<sup>15</sup> God's answer to Moses suggests an open model which will not be pinned down.

Example: None of the three major divisions of the Bible, Torah, Prophets, and Writings ends with a clearcut finish, rather each ends as a prelude to or at the brink of another epoch.

Consistent with this God model is a de-emphasis of the concrete. Significantly, what is not sanctified or made holy are places and things. There is a movement away from the sanctification of places and things to the sanctification of time and events, toward intangibles.

One may consider, then, that at least one portion of the Jewish tradition would encourage a view of life which could argue:

*If the Jewish people have consciously, and*

<sup>10</sup> *Genesis* 18.22-33.

<sup>11</sup> *Hosea* 11.1-5.

<sup>12</sup> *Numbers* 25.1-15.

<sup>13</sup> *Genesis*, 6.5-7.

<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, Ph.D., Prof. of Bible at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel; presented "Personal Prayer in the Bible" at the University of Denver's Jewish Culture Center, March 23, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> *Exodus*, 3.14.

*with great effort and sacrifice, avoided the evolution of a tangible God, Judaism must place a high value upon being reluctant to place matters in the concrete and should structure itself accordingly. It has placed a higher value on choosing to live in the conceptual and has structured itself accordingly. It has placed itself in the realm of time—of relationships—of give and take—in a world colored by shades of grey.*

This tradition would also define "memory" as being consistently reminded of this relationship through regularly associating God with our thoughts and actions. It consistently connects God with events. As with any other primary relationship this one too must be reinforced, worked on and deepened. As with other relationships it becomes "more" or "less" meaningful. It does not remain constant.

At times it is difficult to project omnipotence upon this Deity. It could be an error to de-humanize YHWH. It could be the ultimate irony to idolize the Deity who abhors idolatry.

What has been made available to us through this model is the God of Relationships.

#### IV. On Idolatry

*"Thou Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me"*

2nd Commandment

If, for the Jew, it is essential to struggle with the nature of God, it may be equally important and helpful to understand what God is not. As suggested at the outset, God and idol are antonyms—opposites. In that sense, if the Jewish God model represents the ultimate of what is good and desirable in behavior, it should follow that idolatry represents what is undesirable in behavior and the tendencies it fosters among humans. It is the other end of the same continuum.

To emphasize how abhorrent idolatry

is in our tradition, in the *Talmud*<sup>16</sup> idolatry is considered one of only three cardinal sins for which one is enjoined to suffer martyrdom rather than transgress. (The other two are incest and murder).

What does it mean when we speak of idolatry? It is, in part, a process which leads to de-humanization and to the avoidance of relationships, rather than to the sanctification of them.

It is the opposite of Buber's "Eternal Thou"—God. Consider his distinction between "I-thou" and "I-it." "I-thou" is a word which speaks to a relational state. "I-it" is a word which speaks to things.<sup>17</sup>

Just as the discussion of God concluded by emphasizing a process which leads to relationships, both to God and to humans, idolatry should be viewed as describing the process away from relationships, towards dehumanization.

The process, rather than the end result, is of concern here because both (relationship and idolatry) are approached in a step-by-step fashion and rarely through a quantum leap. What is insidious about the process leading towards idolatry is that it most often begins with good intentions but is often taken to unfortunate lengths.

This process leading away from God towards idolatry, towards the glorification of things rather than relationships, is graphically described by Maimonides<sup>18</sup> in a remarkably contemporary fashion. While somewhat lengthy it bears repeating:

In the days of Enosh, the people fell into gross error, and the counsel of the wise men of the generation became foolish . . .

Their error was as follows: "Since God," they said, "created these stars and spheres to guide the world, set them on high and allotted to them honor, and since they are ministers who

<sup>16</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 74A.

<sup>17</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, passim.

<sup>18</sup> Isadore Twersky, Ed., *A. Maimonides Reader*. New York: Behrman House, Inc. pp. 71-2.

minister before Him, they deserve to be praised and glorified, and honor should be rendered them; and it is the will of God, blessed be He, that men should aggrandize and honor those whom He aggrandized and honored just as a king desires that respect should be shown to the officers who stand before him, and thus honor is shown to the king." When this idea arose in their minds, they began to erect temples to the stars, offered up sacrifices to them, praised and glorified them in speech, and prostrated themselves before them—their purpose, according to their perverse notions, being to obtain the Creator's favor. This was the root of idolatry and this was what the idolaters who knew its fundamentals said. They did not, however, maintain that there was no God except the particular star (which was the object of their worship). Thus Jeremiah said, "Who would not fear You, O King of nations? For it befits You; for as much as among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdom, there is none like You. But in one thing they are brutish and foolish. The vanities by which they are instructed are but a stock" (Jer. 10:7-8). This means that all know that You alone are God; their error and folly consists in imagining that this vain worship is Your desire.

From this graphic description of how well-intentioned persons can initiate a process of institutionalization and dehumanization, Maimonides continues with a description of how the priests asserted themselves, gave instruction on specific religious rites and traditions until, in time, only the priests and the rites remained. The original intent, to relate with God, was forgotten. Purpose and history were gone. The symbols replaced the essence. The priests were in a position to manipulate for there was no one with the courage to raise question until Abraham, who risked death in order to question and recall the essence and purpose of God. It was in his time, Maimonides says, a major challenge to power, a calling to task of those who thought to lead in a manipulative mode, against the establishment and against the populace who were apparently content to go along. By his actions he became the first in our tradition to

assume the traditionally Jewish prophetic role.

His choice to reaffirm commitment through articulating a relationship with God started us on the path which we, over three thousand years later, are still committed to follow.

The effects of idolatry are more vividly described by Rabbi David Hartman:<sup>19</sup>

—"idolatry takes the form of man's inability to live with his finitude." In effect, man attempts to become more than what he can be—even immortal. The same may be true of communities and institutions.

—"the concept of absolute power (or any absolute—Ed. note) is idolatry." Jewish tradition provides vehicles wherein persons may discipline themselves not to strive for power, to choose to give up power. He offers as an example the self-imposed constraints of Sabbath observance.

—"any group that is beyond criticism has created idolatry." Remember, even God is not beyond criticism.

Extending Hartman's thoughts, idolatry also provides answers that are too easy and deprives one of the opportunity to grow, to relate and to think fully for oneself.

There is often a risk in applying theory to specific situations. However, it is often through these specifics, each often insignificant as an individual step, that this process occurs.

Take, for example, the evolution of a simple idea such as the "Central Address of the Jewish Community:"—a very nice promotional slogan. Taken lightly and with tongue-in-cheek—it has an appealing rhetorical ring. However, through a series of small steps:

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi David Hartman, Director, Sholom Hartman Institute of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University; in an address delivered to International Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Jerusalem, August 25, 1981.

—the tongue-in-cheek, the humor, goes and

—the rhetoric may develop a meaning of its own and

—Central Address of the Jewish community becomes a concrete goal which may then become

—representatives of the Jewish community, which may then become

—The Jewish community, with its well-intentioned adherents presuming to assume leadership over *am ha'aretz*, the masses, using slogans and symbols, often with no real meaning.

This scenario evolves again and again in many types of institutions and in many different situations.

At what point in the small steps of this process has the movement toward idolatry become factual and clear, perhaps irreversible? A matter of judgment? Probably!! In some ways, it is like diluting soup to make it go further by very slowly adding water. At what point is the watered-down soup no longer soup? Similarly, at what point on the continuum is the diluted process of relationship no longer a relationship?

"As in the days of Enosh"—it would appear that this is a regularly repeated route from well-intended service delivery to well-rationalized involvement towards power.

The process of idolatry and the process of bureaucratization are similar. Both lead to the purpose of replacing the institution as a primary concern. This may not only happen with institutions, but between institutions, within communities and among communities.

This "evolution-towards-power" syndrome almost inevitably includes blaming others, discouraging dissent and discounting persons. It relies upon slogans, symbols, and intimidation. It is very, very un-Jewish.

The choice to give up power is not a sign of weakness but an affirmation of Jewish power through Jewish behavior.

Indeed, agencies, as individuals, have a responsibility to look for ways to give up power rather than to seek it.

In a sense, the struggle of the Jews and the Jewish community has not changed over the years. The Jewish agenda continues to be to struggle against a very human tendency towards idolatry. Probably conscious discipline and awareness expand the opportunities we have to enter into true relationships but does not totally prevent slipping into the process which leads toward idolatry, what Buber would describe as the entering into I-thou relationships and then out again into an I-it state; from meaningful human relations to de-humanization, to things. It can probably be safely stated that the road to idolatry is paved with good intentions.

## V. The Argument with God

An additional and important aspect of this presentation deals specifically with the interaction between man, community and God. It stems from an article which appeared in *Commentary* some time ago titled, "The Jewish Argument with God."<sup>20</sup> In his article, Dr. Kaplan suggested that unique to the Jewish tradition, although not normally the dominant thrust of our religion, is that even "God has something to answer for. . . ." He also writes:

There is a stream of Jewish thought which holds that God needs man . . .

God unquestionably cares about man, the Jew argues, it's in his own interest. God himself is everlasting, but His kingship . . . comes to an end when man refuses to acknowledge Him . . .

. . . (which) leads to the paradoxical conclusion that it is man who created God . . . His being the God of worship does depend on there being worshippers. "God" is a relational term like "wife" . . . she could not be a wife were there no man to marry her . . .

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Abraham Kaplan, "The Jewish Argument With God", *Commentary*, October 1980.

We must identify ourselves—that is, give ourselves, an identity. Only then does He have an identity . . .

Abasement of the self denigrates the only thing man has to offer God—himself . . .

Between God and man, who is the employer, and who is the employed, for the Jew, is also subject to negotiations.

This unusual series of propositions could lead to certain conclusions which are appropriate in this context of a discussion on community structure.

—each person, each institution, has a responsibility to discuss and to challenge regardless of the potential power of the other.

—each person, each institution, has a responsibility carefully to arrive at his or its own conclusions as part of developing an identity.

—covenants, agreements and contracts are by their very nature two-way agreements. Each party offers something needed by the other.

—arguing, reasoning, bargaining and confrontation with God (or among ourselves) stems from our own self-respect, which ought to be viewed as part of a developing identity. Certainly, if it is acceptable, indeed expected, that God will be held accountable for actions then, too, individuals and institutions would also be held accountable.

It ought to follow, then, that in Jewish life there is no absolute hierarchy. Indeed, our tradition would appear to speak consistently against it.

## VI. Some Possible Effects Upon Behavior

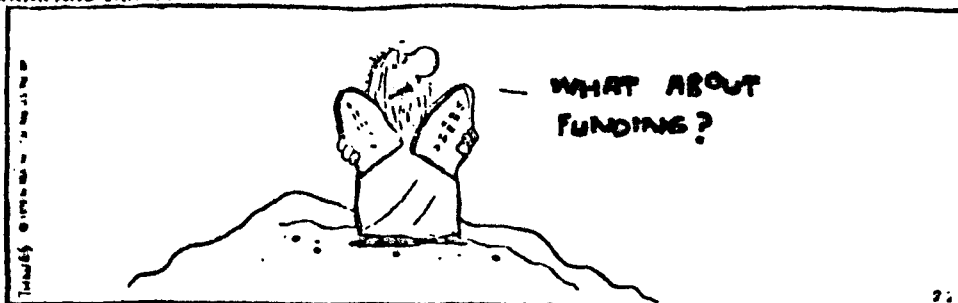
At this point it would be best to introduce a caveat. It is not my intention to talk about Jewish behavior traits or to compare them with those of other religious groups. However, I am comfortable in reviewing some possible behavior tendencies whose development might be encouraged, albeit minimally, by encountering with the God model which I've discussed. Some of these tendencies might be:

1. *An encouragement to think more conceptually.* Why? Well, the God of Israel is a conceptual God, One who can only be related to internally. Remember, there are no physical attributes. Extend this to what is also valued in the Jewish tradition: time rather than place, behavior rather than physical characteristics. There is a conscious discouragement of placing most things into tangible form!

2. *An encouragement to be more accepting of each other in relationships.* How? By recognizing that the essence of relationships is internal and at the choice of the one who chooses to relate. We learn about acceptance from living with our own (and God's) imperfections. To work with these is an excellent exercise in learning to accept imperfections and flaws, both in our God and, ultimately, in each other.

3. *An encouragement to live with external uncertainty, but with internal reality.* This God model encourages relationships

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more through the mind and the heart and less through the eyes.

4. *An encouragement to avoid absolutes*—because of their tie-in to idolatry and the previously mentioned tendency towards “openendedness.”

5. *An encouragement to feel free to challenge power and centralization*, because of the tradition of questioning, dialoguing and challenging and the idolatrous implications inherent in the seeking of power or the centralization of power.

6. *An encouragement to be more authentic emotionally* in an effort to imitate our God.

7. *An encouragement to enter into symbiotic<sup>21</sup> relationships*, a recognition that there is a meaningful interdependence among both persons and institutions. Leaders and followers need each other and are often situationally interchangeable.

8. *An encouragement to accept and live with differences*. If God and man can disagree, certainly man and man can disagree. The *Talmud* represents an extension of this attribute. By its structure the *Talmud* recognized that one could be a good Jew and still differ with mainstream views; the *Talmud* carefully and respectfully recorded different and often conflicting views for posterity.

## VII. One View of Community

For the purpose of this presentation “Jewish community” represents the system which includes all Jewish individuals, families, small groups, large groups, institutions—indeed each smaller system interacting with and becoming part of a larger system of community. In this sense it is possible to

<sup>21</sup> In recent years some confusion seems to have clouded the meaning of this word. Webster's 7th New Collegiate Dictionary, G. & C. Merriam Co., Springfield, Mass., 1969, defines symbiosis:

“the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship.”

speaking of institutions, local communities, regional, national and international communities. Each of these systems is dynamic, vital and interactive with others. Within this context it may be expected that it is incumbent upon Jewish institutions, as well as Jewish individuals, to strive for the attributes which are consistent with the Jewish God, to strive for a model of behavior and to attempt to reflect the same behavioral guidelines.

Institutions, as individuals, are vulnerable to idolatry by

—taking themselves too seriously

—believing they may be beyond error and, therefore, criticism

—taking away from others (institutions and persons) the responsibility for self-determination and growth

—telling other institutions and individuals how they should think, feel and behave

—often placing themselves upon a pedestal and thus preventing others from emerging, growing, and entering into true relationships

—and trying to achieve immortality, often at the expense of others.

Without the same cautions and conscious effort expected of individuals, institutions may also become the antithesis of the model for which Jewish institutions ought to be striving. Institutional narcissism is every bit as unfortunate, every bit as idolatrous, as is narcissism by individuals.

Institutions are, by definition, created to serve, to meet certain expressed or perceived needs, to be a means, not to become their own end product. The institutionalizing of service delivery is often self-defeating in that the person or service recipient is too often forgotten in the thrust of the institution to strengthen and to perpetuate itself.

If the relationship between God and man is symbiotic, this would suggest that the relationship between institu-

tions is equally symbiotic. Another way of suggesting this is that leadership in effect is situational, with certain institutions assuming legitimate leadership depending upon expertise and circumstances. Leadership emerges, it cannot be imposed. In each situation, leadership is valuable only to the degree that there are groups or individuals who will willingly accept that leadership.

#### *A Possible Model*

Consistent with this view, the model of Jewish community which appears to me to make the most sense is horizontal, and de-centralized with no competition for a "central address of the Jewish community". (Jews decide that with their feet and/or checkbook.) Centralizing communities increases the chances of creating the conditions for idolatry by putting too much potential power in the hands of too few persons. Leadership emerges with need (and then quietly fades away) in an "open-ended" structure that "hangs loose." In short, the structure is built and altered by the members of the community to reflect their needs.

This structure allows for more involvement, makes it more difficult to discourage dissent and provides maximum opportunity for Jews to choose how they wish to make Judaism a part of their lives.

This is, in effect, the way it is anyway, the way it ought to be. It should be no surprise that those exposed to the God model discussed earlier would function best in this type of structure. It is built into the tradition. If there is occasional frustration or confusion it is on the part of persons or groups who try to control others who, by this tradition, are encouraged to be independent thinkers and independent actors.

### **VIII. The Jewish Community Professional as "Hired Hand", And as Professional**

Let's face it. All Jewish communal workers are hired hands, employees, hired to do a job and to be an extension of someone else's will and ego. This is a reality with which we live and of which many of us are reminded daily. I say this because we Jewish communal workers, bureaucrats, are also at times in danger of taking ourselves too seriously and too easily becoming functional narcissists. In so doing it is not difficult to forget the purpose for which we were hired, to provide service not to place ourselves into the center of the agency or to have the agency revolve around us.

Having said this, not only to make a point but to express a view of reality, is that all there is to it?

I believe that the image of ourselves as employees, an extension of agency services and volunteers' wishes, is O.K. It's a reminder of our service orientation and why we receive our paychecks with some regularity.

However, a Jewish employee comes from the tradition which has just been discussed. That worker is expected to be authentic, to speak out, to bear witness as a part of his job expectation. That worker is expected to care, to relate, to understand interdependency without confusing it with denial of difference. The worker's impact is by action, by affirmation of self, not by rhetoric. The impact is from understanding that each agency needs its staff every bit as much as the staff needs the agency.

Understanding the role of the worker as a Jew ought to include enough self comfort to guide, teach, learn, encounter, be aggressive, back off when necessary and so on. And here is where the Jewish communal worker makes the most profound contribution and that is

to be a role model, to be as a Jew should be in imitation of God.

This role may in time affect other Jews, other Jewish institutions and the Jewish community. In this sense we "hired hands" are acting out one of the most important aspects of our job. Each of us faces dozens of small, often subtle, choices every day. These are our own little crossroads which lead us in small steps either towards valuing relationships (God) or to dehumanization (idolatry). These choices are ours. No one else can make them for us.

### IX. Summary and Conclusion

There is sometimes a paradox in being a Jew. While Jews are urged to act and to behave as if God were everywhere, it could be argued I suppose, that if God is expected to be everywhere, God could just as easily be nowhere. It may be that neither view is terribly important. It may also be that the God of Israel and the children of Israel chose each other precisely because neither was without flaws (omnipotent) and, in that sense, we were both reassuring to and very much like each other.

To an outsider it may appear that a Jew acts for himself and not for God

because the motivations and choices are internal. For the Jew, it may not always be easy to remember God's presence. If God cannot be seen, then God and relationship to God as purpose have to stay as a constant disciplined reminder. Without this, even behavior can be empty and its significance forgotten. So, too, with institutions in a sectarian setting—the motives for structure are often invisible, but without purpose and understanding they too can indeed be empty and pointless.

Rabbi Zusya and his brother Rabbi Elimelekh were once discussing the subject of humility. Elimelekh said: "If a man contemplates the greatness of the Creator, he will arrive at true humility."

But Zusya said: "No! A man must begin by being truly humble. Only then will he recognize the greatness of his Creator."

They asked their teacher, the maggid, who was right. He decided it in this way. "These and those are the words of the living God. But the inner grace is his who begins with himself, and not with the Creator."<sup>22</sup>

Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964; p. 243.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.