FORUM I

On the Ethics of Self in Judaism: Searching for the Middle Ground Between Selflessness and Selfishness

BERNARD DUCOFF, PH.D.

Some years ago, one of the wealthiest financiers in the United States made a major contribution to the construction of a new facility to house the largest library of Judaica in the country. The new library building was to be named in memory of his mother. Shortly after the multimillion dollar gift was announced, the financier was indicted and pled guilty to violations of insider trading and stock manipulation. He requested that the plaque on the building to be named be removed, he started to study at the seminary that sponsors the library, and it is rumored that he spent much of his time in prison reading books on Jewish ethics.

Yet, the ideal he represented before his fall is still largely prevalent in the organized Jewish world—that of the self-made millionaire who turns to philanthropy as the expression of thankfulness for the blessings he has received. The nonprofit world of Jewish organizations praises these tycoons for their spirit of generosity by electing them to high office, honoring them at fund-raising dinners, and affixing their family names to edifices as blessed building givers even before we affix the mezuzah that signals thanksgiving to the source of all blessing.

Our Jewish communal organizations, dedicated to learning, caring, compassion, and succor, yet run on the fuel of largesse of large gifts and major contributions by the few individuals who have succeeded in the quest for gain and distribute it with a free hand. Does the example of these individuals then constitute the ideal personality of Jewish tradition, of the multiplicity of teachings through the ages that sought to identify the elements that make up the ideal self? Have we indeed reached that moment when our friendly financier, except for his legal problems, represents the best that is and will be for the future of American Jewry?

In referring to the traditional teachings about the realization of self and its limits in Judaism, one generally starts with the widely quoted aphorism of Hillel from *Pirke Avot,* the talmudic treatise known popularly as the *Ethics (or Wisdom) of the Fathers:* "He used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And being for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?" (*Pirke Avot,* 1:14). The text supports the contemporary understanding that calls for self-realization coupled to the creed of sharing and generosity and demanding immediacy of action. In short, more than one philanthropist has been praised as the living embodiment of Hillel's dictum.

Yet, upon reading the traditional commentaries on *Pirke Avot,* which have been edited and translated by Judah Golden (1957) in *The Living Talmud,* one becomes aware of an entirely different context, a world view not connected to the realization of the mercenary self that animates the contemporary interpretation of this saying. It is not *wealth* that I need to acquire in order to be for my self, it is *merit.* According to Rabbi Nathan, as quoted by Golden, the meaning of this aphorism can be stated as follows: "If I do not lay up merit in my lifetime, acquire knowledge of the Torah,

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Boca Raton, FL, June 5, 1989.

and the doing of good works, who will acquire them for me? Every man should acquire merit for himself and not depend upon the merit of others being laid up in his behalf" (Golden, 1957, p. 69).

However, if the pursuit of merit, the doing of good deeds, is the way in which I will realize myself, what then is one to make of the follow-up demand that "being for myself, what am I." It is clear that it is inadequate for the doer of good to concentrate only on his or her own path of goodness, as Golden (1957, p. 70) translates: "It is therefore not enough that he see to it that he himself walks in upright ways; he must also direct others along the right path." The last phrase, "And if not now, when," can be interpreted as meaning, "Let no man say, 'Today I am busy with my work; tomorrow I will turn to the task of perfecting myself' " (Golden, 1957, p. 70).

What is one then to make of the talmudic teaching that at first reading would appear to contradict or at least limit these interpretations that focus on a life of acting in virtue and teaching others to live virtuously? R. Elai said: "They ordained at Usha that if a man spends liberally on charity, he must not spend more than a fifth (of his possessions) lest he himself become dependent upon his fellow man" (Talmud Bavli, *Ketubot* 50a). When the norm of generosity commands the respect and emulation of society, then one is still responsible to behave in such a way as not to impoverish oneself and is obligated to restrict tzedekah to a fifth of one's possessions. Maimonides further codified the practical aspects of the teaching by declaring that a tenth is "average," less than a tenth "miserly," and donating a fifth is a "mitzvah of the highest order" (*Yad,* Hilchot Matnot Aniyyim 7:5).

It is clear that the traditional teaching that seeks to elevate the self emphasizes living virtuously. Yet, does living virtuously embody the readiness or requirement to lay down one's life, as in the New Testament teaching, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13)?

It is fascinating that, in two recent essays on modern Jewish ethics, one by Jakob J. Petuchowski on the "Limits of Self-Sacrifice" (1975) and the other by Shubert Spero on "The Self and the Other" (1983), reference is made to Ahad Ha-Am's interpretation of the fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity in regard to laying down one's life to save that of another. Spero states that Ahad Ha-Am, the famous Zionist and Jewish thinker of the turn of the century, saw it correctly:

> All men including the self are under obligation to develop their lives and their faculties to the limit of their capacity and at the same time each is under obligation to assist his neighbor's self-development so far as he can. But just as I have no right to ruin another man's life for the sake of my own, so I have no right to ruin my own life for the sake of another's. Both of us are men and both our lives have the same value for the throne of justice (Spero, 1983, p. 221).

In proving this point, Ahad Ha-Am calls to our attention the famous talmudic Baraitha on the biblical verse: "That thy brother may live with thee" (Leviticus 25:36).

> This is what Ben Petura taught: Two men are journeying through the desert and one of them has a single jug of water. If one of them drinks it, he alone will get back to civilization. But if both of them drink it, both of them will die. Ben Petura taught that they should both drink and die, rather than one of them should behold his companion's death, as it is said, "That thy brother may live with thee." Until Rabbi Akiva came and taught, . . . "that thy brother may live with thee"; your own life comes before the life of your fellow man (Baba Mezi'a 62a).

Spero fundamentally agrees with Ahad Ha-Am and with Rabbi Akiva that "your

own life comes before the life of your fellow man."

Jakob Petuchowski, a professor of Jewish theology at Hebrew Union College, raises the challenge to Ahad Ha-Am's position posed by Louis Jacobs, the eminent English Jewish theologian, who argues that the history of Jewish martyrdom through the ages proves that "there have always been Jews ready and willing to give their life for others!" In truth, the New Testament phrase of "greater love" is a reflection of Jesus' preaching of Judaism. Jacobs further argues that there is doubt about the ultimate halachic position, which may indeed follow Ben Petura rather than Rabbi Akiva. "My contention is that if circumstances are such that the man with the water believes his neighbor's life to be of greater value (i.e., where he is single and his neighbor has a wife and family) Judaism would not frown upon his sacrifice but look upon it as an act of special piety" (Petuchowski, 1975, p. 109). Here Petuchowski refers to Jacobs' use of the term "special piety," which shifts the discussion from the arena of the halachically normative for all Jews to that of ethical idealism to be realized by the few. He quotes Raphael Lowe, who describes the development of halachah as "governed by a common-sense appreciation of what may, and what may not, be realistically expected of the average Jewish man and woman," whereas the Christian ethical scheme legislated the ideal morality that could only be achieved by the few. Petuchowski thereby adduces the difference in attitude between the halachic permission of divorce and the Catholic denial of its permissibility, even under the most difficult real-life situations.

The consistent effort on the part of Jewish thinkers from Ahad Ha-Am to Jacobs and Petuchowski to contrast Jewish concepts of the ideal self with Christian concepts, thus seeking to defend the high regard for self-interest against self-abnegation that is seen as idealized in Christian teaching, is itself challenged in the writings of contemporary Christian thinkers. Stephen G. Post, in a recently published essay on "The Inadequacy of Selflessness," declares:

> Such idealization of selfless love not only misleadingly exaggerates the valid principle of unselfishness, it rests on an unsatisfactory concept of God. Mutual love or reciprocity is the only appropriate fundamental norm for interrelations, and for the divine-human encounter as well. The idealization of selfless love inevitably obscures divine suffering, a serious negative consequence that has yet to be adequately considered. Divine love, so often understood as the perfect example to which human love must conform, is mistakenly interpreted as containing no element of self-concern. This view is based on the false assumption that the divine neither needs nor seeks the mutual good of fellowship with humanity (Post, 1988, p. 213).

Post points to Judaism as defining love as "fellowship" or shared experience. Judaism is neither a religion of "self-satisfaction" nor one of "self-annihilation." What Post insists on is that the goal of love is not to be sought only in the giving of self, but in mutuality—the sharing of self. Even divine love is self-concerned and seeks response, and in this regard Post calls to our attention Abraham Joshua Heschel's impressive set of scriptual quotes. From God's plaintive call to the hiding Adam, "Where art thou" (Genesis 3:9) to Job's complaint to God, "Thou dost hunt me like a lion" (Job 10:16), Heschel points to the fundamental premise of biblical faith: God is in search of man, and human faith is to be found in the response to God's search (Heschel, 1987, pp. 136–137).

Yet, Post then asks why the Christian tradition has had "considerable difficulty acknowledging the moral excellence of mutuality, as evidenced by a perennial strain that advocates the false ideal of selfless love" (Post, 1988). It is his contention that the image of Jesus has been misinterpreted to emphasize his being beyond all self-concern. Jesus sought reciprocity for

his love through his teachings and actions and his life "presents no normative model for love that violates the principle of reciprocity" (Post, 1988).

It is Post's intent to retrieve the ideal of mutual love between humans and between God and human as superior to self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. The prophetic tradition—of needing God and being needed by God—must be recovered as there is both human and divine pathos. He also seeks in the writings and teachings of feminist writers the corrective antidote, not to the sin of self-assertion that preoccupies male theologians, but the sin of self-negation. The antidote to that sin is a "fitting affirmation of self in the mutual good of participation in reciprocal love" (Post, 1988). There is a normative ideal of "mutual love in which human beings experience joy, a secure sense of well-being and identity, as well as the affirmation of the self that encourages the giving of the self" (Post, 1988). The Christian emphasis on God imitation rather than on the moral society, which constitutes the halachic norm of rabbinic Judaism, causes the Christian theologian to turn to Hebraic sources and Judaic teachers in Buber and Heschel to posit a notion of divine need and partnership in mutual giving, sharing, and love.

Is the normative ideal as it emerges from ancient and modern interpretations of rabbinic teachings, grounded as it were in the mutuality of ideal love as reinterpreted in examples drawn from biblical passages, adequate for all times? Are there times when a different, if not higher, ideal is necessary? Is there such an ideal as an "altruistic personality" that emerges, when called upon, out of the normative personality because it is in its own way a realization of the self? If so, what does it teach us about the elements of the ideal self?

A major research project on *The Altruistic Personality* (Oliner & Oliner, 1988) has been published recently. The book jacket features the eye-riveting question, "What Led Ordinary Men and Women to Risk Their Lives on Behalf of Others?" This is obviously intended to be taken as an unusual act of courage as evidenced by the subtitle: *Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe.* The Oliners interviewed over 700 individuals, both those they classified as rescuers and as nonrescuers who lived in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II.

Behavior was characterized as altruistic when "(1) it is directed towards helping another, (2) it involves a high risk or sacrifice to the actor, (3) it is accompanied by no external reward, and (4) it is voluntary." The Oliners attest that "rescue behavior in the context of the Holocaust meets these criteria" (Oliner & Oliner, 1988, p. 6).

In the concluding chapter of this fascinating work, the researchers take sharp issue with the usual reasons given for heroic action, which are based on an individualism rooted in a sense of moral autonomy, or what might be termed the "Lone Ranger syndrome." They challenge the popular belief that the true hero acts alone, based on his or her own independent moral reasoning. Rather, they offer the view that if we need to rely or depend upon only the "few autonomously principled people . . . then the future is bleak indeed" (Oliner & Oliner, p. 260).

What characterized the rescuers, who were ordinary people before the war from different walks of life and religious faiths, "were their connections with others in relationships of commitment and care" (Oliner & Oliner, 1988). These connections were extensive (the authors title this concluding chapter, "Moral Heroism and Extensivity"), and they were initially established in the parental home by close family relationships in which loving parents set high standards for moral behavior. Parents provided continuous "explanations of why behaviors are inappropriate, often with reference to their consequences for others" (Oliner & Oliner, 1988, p. 260). Children who mature out of these solid family relationships tend to internalize their parents' values, which provide for them the basic value structure for

assessing right and wrong and acting upon these assessments. Those individuals establish networks of caring relationships and, as a result of their aiding others, develop high self-esteem, reinforcing the original personality characteristics that led to their willingness to help in the first place.

The altruistic personality that led rescuers to risk their lives to help Jews and others escape from certain death may seem to be an extreme model for the ideal self, especially in the more normal setting of peacetime life, but it points to an attitude toward life and self that is significant in all circumstances. The rescuers refused to accept the prevailing value system; they refused to see Jews as beyond help nor themselves as helpless. In the powerful final sentences of the book, "They made a choice that affirmed the value and meaningfulness of each life in the midst of a diabolical social order that repeatedly denied it. Can we do otherwise?" (Oliner & Oliner, 1988, p. 260).

The moral of the Oliners' research is caught in the percipient writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, an altruistic personality who loved life and friends, lived and wrote with passion, and risked his career, his reputation, and his life for his convictions.

> In fact, only he who truly understands the justice of his own rights is capable of rendering justice to the rights of others. Moral training consists in deepening one's passionate understanding for the rights and needs of others in a manner equal to the passionate understanding of one's own rights and needs. . . . The value of sacrifice is determined, not only by what one gives away, but also by the goal to which it is given. The Hebrew word for the verb to sacrifice means literally to come near, to approach. Our task is not to renounce life but to bring it close to Him. What we strive for are not single moments of self-denial but sober constant affirmation of other selves, the ability to feel the needs and problems of our fellow men (Heschel, 1987, pp. 398–399).

There are, at least, three ideal selves that constitute Judaism's response to the demands of being ethical. There is the halachic norm of self-realization coupled to living virtuously and helping others. There is the self of mutual sharing and loving that enables each partner in mutuality to give and receive. And there is the altruistic self of risk and sacrifice, which yet enables the individual to realize truly the riches of self above all other approaches to living.

The halachic self, the self of mutuality and reciprocity, and the altruistic self are all facets of every self. Today's changing times call forth different facets of self-realization, of *generosity of spirit,* which is something other than the *spirit of generosity* with which this article started. The teaching with which we began still speaks to us, but in a deeper and more challenging voice: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And being for myself alone, what am I? And if now not, when?"

REFERENCES

Golden, Judah. (1957). *The living Talmud.* New York: Mentor Books.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. (1987). *God in search of man.* New Jersey: Jason Aronson.

Oliner, Samuel P. & Pearl M. (1988). *The altruistic personality.* New York: The Free Press.

Petuchowski, Jacob J. (1975). The limits of self-sacrifice. In: Marvin Fox, Ed. *Modern Jewish ethics.* Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press.

Post, Stephen G. (1988, Summer). The inadequacy of selflessness. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, LVI* (2), 213.

Spero, Shubert. (1983). *Morality, halacha, and the Jewish tradition.* New York: Ktav Publishing.