

By the Power Vested in Me
Symbolic Exemplarhood and the Pulpit Rabbi
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Being a rabbi means serving as a symbolic exemplar of the best that is in humankind. Being a walking, talking, living symbol is extraordinarily difficult. Though a component of the rabbinate that provides a major source of efficacy, influence, potency and power, it has over the years been a drain on many rabbis. Initially seductive, and often denied by "new" rabbis who say things like; "I'm just going to be a regular guy/gal"; I'm sure I can have good friends in the congregation; I'll have them call me by my first name, only to discover that their first name turns out to be "Rabbi". Rabbis find as they move towards mid-career, that their symbolic exemplarhood is at the root of their discontent. They complain about living in a "glass house," loneliness in the midst of the crowd, always having to be "on", and being treated differently than anyone else. Having picked one of the most public of callings, rabbis yearn for anonymity. Rabbis want to hold their husbands' hands, and not have congregants offer; "Oh, what a cute couple they are; look at how they kiss each other." They are relieved when going to the movies to find that no congregants are present. Yet no matter how hard rabbis try, there is no shaking off being symbolic exemplars. It clings to them, an irrevocable component of each rabbinate.

What makes rabbinic symbolic exemplarhood doubly difficult is its attribution to the rabbi of superlative inner qualities and inordinately deep set commitments which the rabbi must exemplify in a relatively unprotected private and public arena. The Queen of England has layer upon layer of insulation from her public. A political leaders inner motivations are not expected to be pure and holy. A star quality entertainer is measured by some verifiable talent. The rabbis private and public life though uninsulated, is expected to be a seamless whole marked by the warp of integrity and the woof of caring love. Rabbis know instinctively that their career is always the hostage of others perception of the inner "soul" of the man/woman doing the job. Pulpit skills, whether preaching, pastoral, administrative or others are subordinate to others perception of ones inner qualities. This also makes the rabbi hostage to his/her own spouse and family. What happens in those ordinarily private arenas, is perceived when opened to

public scrutiny as an indication of what the rabbis inner being is "really" like. Over the years, in working with a large variety of professions, I have found rabbis and other pulpit clergy to be among *the* most caring and dedicated of people. Yet a level of inner integrity is demanded that has no fathomable depth. One can always be more caring and more dedicated. And the depth of ones caring, integrity and other inner qualities is often too exposed for comfort. Being a symbolic exemplar has been until now perhaps the greatest source of rabbinic alienation, leading rabbis to rebel against the exemplarhood. Rabbis protest; "I don't bar/bat mitzvah them; it happens when they become thirteen"; "I don't bless them, I'm at best a conduit"; "I don't marry them, halachically they do so by.... The rabbis protest is an elegant statement of "*I just want to be me*", *I just want to be human*." As long as they have presented themselves as rabbis they are more than just "me", more than just human". Rabbis are symbolic exemplars. There is no choice!

The late Len Hirsch z'l, offered that; "Understanding power is understanding that courage is needed to act in the face of awesome ambiguities and pressures."¹ For rabbis the awesome ambiguities include the fact that though "only" human they are symbolic exemplars of the divine and of a people who encountered the divine. The pressures that come from being symbolic exemplars, rabbis know from their everyday "being" in the rabbinate.

To use the rabbinic power implicit in their being symbolic exemplars, Rabbis must *accept* and be *comfortable* with being walking talking symbols, and need to be *skilled* in using their symbolic exemplarhood as a major source of their Rabbinic power. Congregations which will lose much if they do not attend to the price symbolic exemplarhood can exact, and they need to help rabbis sustain and use their exemplarhood while avoiding the enervating price that can often result.

There follows a partial, limited, albeit important list of the rabbinic powers that symbolic exemplarhood aids, abets and indeed makes possible.

It is their symbolic exemplarhood that among other things, enables Rabbis;

¹ "Parables from Politicians: Lessons for OD From the Political Realm".
Speech to OD Network 1980 Spring Conference, May 1980

1. to bless people. All of us recall someone in our past who "blessed" us, and how important that was. Rabbis need to believe that when they bless someone, they are doing something important. Establishing what blessings are needed and how they are to be given so that they "take" is a crucial part of rabbinic work. Symbolic exemplarhood helps blessings happen.

2. to name and by naming create new entities. When rabbis say; "I now pronounce you husband and wife", they, by saying those words, create a new status. Rabbis are vested with the power to marry, to name a baby, to give a convert a new identity. As symbolic exemplars, they have great power to label, to characterize; you are a *loving* man, a *courageous* woman, a *proud* Jew or whatever. Rabbis need to recognize and believe in their power to create new realities with words, a power to be used carefully, with discretion and respect for its potency.

3. to help people heal. Rabbis can make a positive difference in a person's physical health and well being by what they do in contact with the ill, in hospital and home. As symbolic exemplars of the God who heals beyond what the physician is capable of, and of the people Israel whose love, caring and responsibility extends to its member who is ill, they have great power to heal spiritually and yes, even physically.

4. to pray for others. If praying for others makes a difference rabbis need to believe that when they pray for others they do something that makes a difference. Symbolic Exemplarhood helps make that difference.

5. to confer significance. by symbolic presence and acts. The rabbi by his/her presence is at least the Jewish Peoples' minister plenipotentiary, and at most Gods ambassador. Rabbis need to believe that in their symbolic role *they* bar/bat Mitzvah a child, *they* consecrate a marriage, *they* make an event holy. Congregants stand ready to affirm that what the Rabbi is doing has a meaning beyond his/her own necessarily limited self. It is symbolic exemplarhood that makes this meaning possible.

6. *to absolve guilt on behalf of a higher power.* Rabbis need to know that symbolically they speak for God in letting people know that they are forgiven, that the God of us all is humane and understands their humanity.

Symbolic exemplarhood is not a substitute for competence, or for personal integrity. Used competently, and with integrity, it is a primary source of rabbinic power. These symbolic acts coming from and appealing to an experiential non-rational part of our being, are potentially the most powerful tools a rabbi has.

Yet, symbolic exemplarhood stresses the rabbi intrapersonally as well as interpersonally. Intrapersonally this may show in the conflict rabbis experience about revealing various aspects of their personality. The conflict may result in internal dialogue and self-alienating questions such as; Am I who I am *supposed* to be? If I'm not, *who am I* anyhow? If I'm not who they think I am-*am I a fraud?* If I keep them believing I am who they think I am, *I am a fraud.*

What can be done to ease the burden? What can we do to ameliorate the intrapersonal havoc and ease the stress and distress of the interpersonal dance that goes on between rabbi and congregant?

Rabbis, the seminaries that train them, and the rabbinic organizations that sustain them would do well to concern themselves with keeping rabbinic symbolic exemplarhood effective, while still protecting rabbis from the seemingly inexorable downside. This is no small task, for during the time these "rabbis to be" are in the care of our seminaries, their experience is the very opposite of what it will be in the congregation. At the seminary they are, on the inside of a tight knit group. It is a daunting challenge to make them understand that they are in for a shock and will soon be outsiders, seen as symbolic exemplars and "holy" folk, and their ability to be *themselves* will be constrained. Once in pulpits, rabbis get little enough chance to "be" outside of their symbolic role. They are caught in the symbolic dynamic from the very beginning of their pulpit work. The dynamic increases each time they function as a symbol. Each bar mitzvah, wedding, funeral, invocation, etc. adds to the rabbi being something other than simply human. Even rabbinic conventions provide little respite. Rabbis appear there in symbolic role as "Mr. B'nai Israel" or "Ms. Beth El," comparing the magnitude of their services, the

size of their budget, the scope of their programming and where they are in their career.

Though more needs to be done, some beginning has been made by rabbinic groups. The Professional (Mid-Career) Review Program and the Chesky Institute of the Central Conference of American Rabbis; as well as The Rabbinic Training Institutes pioneered by Rabbi Steve Shaw, and sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America have made attempts to at least partially deal with this difficult problem.

Congregations composed increasingly of intelligent, sophisticated and hopefully, sensitive people, who recognize the symbolic role power of those who choose and are chosen to lead us, need to do more to stem the loss of effective leadership that results from symbolic exemplarhood.

For both rabbinic and lay groups it will take no less than a revolutionary shift in our thinking to support symbolic exemplarhood and to prevent the depletion of resources it causes. A shift in our thinking so central that though it will be crucial, it will not be easy.

[Either/Or]

[Either/Or] thinking, has dominated our internal and external maps for a long time. The move from polytheism to monotheism has not been without its costs and dangers. The belief that there is only One True God has sometimes led to the blessed affirmation that all humankind is equal. It has with less benign consequences also led to rejecting that there is more than one way to know the one God, especially if that way is different from what we are told that God has commanded. Monotheism can be taken to imply an essential oneness in us and the world. Our thinking has been dominated by the pursuit of that unity, and the ultimate meaning seemingly implicit in it. It is a dangerous yet understandable inference drawn from Monotheism that as there is only one God, there is only one way to the divine and that just happens to be the way *I* or *my tradition*, or *my people* have discovered. *You either* acknowledge that "truth' ***or*** you are in some way benighted, and must be set right. Monotheism, and the quest for *ultimate*

meaning, for all its truth and benefits, unfortunately has produced a dangerous by-product- **[Either/Or]** thinking. **[Either/Or]** thinking is found throughout our own and other traditions. Things, ideas, etc. are either one way or another. It is in the dichotomies of sacred/profane, good/evil, rational/irrational, secular/religious, kosher/treif, clean/unclean (Tameh/Tahor), [this/not this] and seemingly endless other splits. **[Either/Or]** thinking is at its core a fundamentalist position. There is *one* way. Both intrapersonally and with others, an attribute, idea, person or whatever that is not that *one* way needs either to be converted to the "true" thinking or gotten rid of. We are obliged to bring both ourselves and others into line, both for the wayward's benefit. **[Either/Or]** thinking allows no other way. **[Either/Or]** thinking has spilled over from religion into many other areas, one of which is psychology/psychotherapy, where the quest for oneness has had a profound effect. It lies at the base of much psychological theorizing, and of struggles between the various schools of therapy. The psychological and spiritual pursuit of what our singular identity is, and just precisely who we are, has been a dominant theme in a whole garden variety of psychotherapies. The presupposition that underlies this thinking is that we are *one*, and need to integrate the disparate aspects of ourselves, and the task of psychology has been to explore, verify and bring us to *oneness*. In psychology this has led to much **[either/or]** thinking as when people describe themselves in [me/not me] terms. "It wasn't like *him* to do that. That's just not *her*. There is a TRUE YOU. Anything else is NOT YOU. And you are to aim at always being the TRUE YOU!

In thinking of symbolic exemplarhood, **[Either/Or]** inexorably leads to the fundamentalist conclusion that you (the rabbi) are either a symbolic exemplar of the **Divine** or you are **nobody**. Your task therefore should you decide and have the ability and commitment to undertake it, is to convert your unacceptable part, or get rid of it. Maybe the reason Orthodoxies become ever more scrupulous, ever more stringent, is their relentless attempt to convert this "unacceptable" part. Perhaps more stringency, more regulations, observing more minutiae will finally succeed in doing it.

In an **[Either/Or]** situation, distance is an advantage. It would not do, to see the Queen of England in her morning toilette. What you don't see you can more easily overlook in the **[Either/Or]** equation, which only has room for one view. The

offending part must be hidden from sight. "What will it look like to the congregants if what they see is a part not in keeping with who I am as a symbol?" That question is a result of **[Either/Or]** thinking. We cannot afford **[Either/Or]** thinking which makes an issue of conquering, transforming or getting rid of the other parts of us. We need to think differently. We have to learn to think in a way that affirms our multi-faceted selves and know that they can coexist and enrich our total being. They can even greatly enrich our rabbinic beings and our loving contact with those we serve. The "unacceptable" parts are an advantage and not a disadvantage.

[Both/And]

We have increasingly been realizing that there is overwhelming evidence "that people apprehend reality in at least two fundamentally different ways; one, variously labeled intuitive, automatic, natural, non-verbal, narrative and experiential, and the other analytical, deliberative, verbal, and rational",² Recently, The New York Times³ reported on the discovery of another brain, located in the gut, which produces a variety of experiences independent of the brain in the head. We have long known about our conscious and unconscious 'minds". All of this implies a new way of thinking about our selves, (and others), a way that involves **[Both/And]** thinking. We are not solely one or the other aspect of ourselves we are at all times **[Both/And]**. *No* part, aspect or characteristic stands alone. Each may serve as context for the other. Our concern is with the pattern that connects.⁴ And our task as [rabbi/people] is how to have the **[Both/And]** parts (and there may be more) of ourselves be in a loving relationship with each other. A relationship in which both are blessed and neither needs to be "converted" or gotten rid of, in a futile quest for oneness. When that relationship is going on satisfactorily, head and heart, rational and emotional, etc. are experienced as "just there," In Steven Gilligan's⁵ words the elevator between heart and head moves easily back and

² S. Epstein; Integration of the Cognitive and the Psychodynamic Unconscious, American Psychologist August 1994)

³ Complex and Hidden Brain in the Gut Makes Cramps, Butterflies and Valium. Sandra Blakeslee New York Times, January 23, 1996

⁴ Gregory Bateson, Mind and Nature A Necessary Unity E.P. Dutton 1979

⁵ Steven Gilligan, Personal Communication

forth.’ That is when we are just going about our regular business with little or no awareness of life being a problem. Whatever happens, takes place in the context of relationship, and not because of any individual characteristic in our selves and in the others we deal with. In **[Both/And]** thinking, these at least two selves are in relationship. **[Both/And]** thinking allows for the existence of multiple, constantly changing truths. The rabbi is in a **[Both/And]** relationship, both within him/herself and in the rabbi-congregation relationship. **[Both/And]** thinking allows for the pulpit rabbi to be *both* symbolic exemplar of the divine and just ‘plain folks’. The skill rabbis need to learn is deftness in shifting back and forth between the two, knowing that one need not interfere with or preclude the other. They need to avoid being short circuited by **[Either/Or]** thinking which seems so ingrained in us.

Rabbis need to learn how to be in touch with, accept and *love* their other selves. They need to move back and forth between their Symbolic self and their "regular" self with grace and elegance appreciating both without trying to obliterate either one in the service of a non achievable "true self". Rabbis need to recognize the fullness and richness **[Both/And]** thinking provides, and to shuttle back and forth without feeling duplicitous or hypocritical. A metaphor for this, which I am sure appeals to rabbis is that used by Gregory Bateson

"The acrobat on the high wire maintains his stability by continual correction of his imbalance." ⁶

For rabbis, the moving back and forth may not need to be as rapid as those of the acrobat, but rabbis need to be able to make the needed adjustments in order to maintain rabbinic stability and effectiveness. To do this means acting as Gods symbolic exemplar when that is appropriate, and being other than that when that is appropriate. "While I'm acting as that symbol, I *truly* am that. When I'm not, *I'm not*." Rabbis need to know clearly how not to get the two roles inappropriately combined, how not to do one when the other is needed, how to take each seriously and neither so seriously as to interfere with the other. Seminaries and rabbinic organizations need to help rabbis learn **[Both/And]** thinking, despite the pressures of youth,⁷ and of congregational life⁸ both of which foster **[Either/Or]** thinking.

⁶ Bateson, *ibid*.

⁷ Late adolescence and young adulthood are wonderful mediums for [Either/Or] thinking.

Congregations can do much that will make rabbi's lives easier. They provide a context for Symbolic Exemplarhood. When they engage a rabbi, congregations need to make sure that they know that they are entering a **[Both/And]** relationship. It is not enough just to say; "the rabbi is human". That is often taken to mean that the rabbi makes mistakes which take away from his/her true self. The implication is that if he or she cleans up their act, that one true self will shine through. If he/she can't "clean up their act", their true self is shining through but they are not cut out to be a rabbi. That is an inheritance of **[Either/Or]** thinking. Such thinking which attributes to the rabbi some "inner/innate" characteristic undercuts the power and efficacy of the rabbi's symbolic exemplarhood, which takes place in context. It is not sustainable under that mode of thinking. The rabbi is not one or the other, he/she is **[Both/And]**. In a **[Both/And]** sense being truly human means having more than one self. The task is for these selves to be in loving relationship with each other. Only when the rabbi is in such an I-Thou relationship with him/herself is an I-Thou relationship with the congregant/congregation possible.

Presuppositions need to be changed about who the rabbi is and what the rabbi-congregational relationship is. The Rabbi's self will be more richly experienced by congregants as a **[Both/And]** relationship, a relationship that's wonderful to behold. Human beings, rabbis and congregants included, are often astonished when they become aware that one can manifest one characteristic and its opposite and *can fully enjoy both*.⁹ Didactic and experiential instruction, workshops and lectures whatever is needed must be used to teach **[Both/And]** thinking and to detect and deflect **[Either/or]** thinking wherever it appears in congregational life. Such thinking can also inform congregants' relations with fellow congregants, with non-Jews, and with congregants inner selves. It can also immeasurably enrich rabbi - congregation relationships by recognizing that they too are in a **[Both/And]** relationship.

⁸ where the context in which the rabbi is experienced is another medium that grows **[Either/Or]** thinking.

⁹ The author has seen more eyes glaze over and trances begin, (the confusion that opens the way to new learning) when workshop participants responding to the question "Who are you?" "have presented an aspect of themselves and then have had the diametric opposite said about them, and then are told; "Isn't it nice that you can enjoy both at the same time. Exercise courtesy of Steven Gilligan Ph.D.

[Both/And] thinking may at least stem the loss of Jewish leadership that the difficulty of being a Symbolic Exemplar has entailed. Rabbis and laypeople must work together so that rabbis are able to know, believe and say;

*"I may not be much, and yet I'm a symbol of the divine and I'm here with you--
by the power vested in me.*