

Using Symbolic Exemplarhood Day By Day ¹

Rabbi Jack H Bloom PhD ©2009

Being a rabbi means being 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. No matter how hard rabbis try, there is no shaking off being symbolic exemplars. It clings to us, 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.

A rabbi's private and public life 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 woman or man doing the job. Rabbinic and Chaplain skills, especially in the hospital setting, where all others are valued for their perceptible skills, whether that is the surgeons hands, the accountants audit, the nurses ability to take blood, is pastoral and ephemeral in nature, nebulous, hard to evaluate. A rabbi's symbolic exemplarhood is hostage to others perception of one's inner qualities.

I have, over the years, in working with a large variety of professions, found rabbis and other 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, more loving and more dedicated. And the depth of one's caring, integrity and other inner qualities is often too exposed for comfort.

Rabbis are symbolic exemplars. There is no choice! There is no way to avoid being a symbolic exemplar.

¹ Ubergetiched unFarbersert (emended and edited) from a presentation to the Convention of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF JEWISH CHAPLAINS, Boston Mass. 1995 The thinking I present here has been influenced by Stephen Gilligan, my teacher and friend and creator of Self-Relations.

Len Hirsch z'l² offered, "Understanding power is understanding that courage is needed to act in the face of awesome ambiguities and pressures." For rabbis the awesome ambiguities include the fact that though "only" human, rabbis are needed to act in the face of awesome ambiguities and pressures." For rabbis the awesome ambiguities include the fact that though "only" human, rabbis are symbolic exemplars of the divine and of a people who encountered the divine. This is the baggage rabbis' carry. This is also what gives rabbis a special efficacy.

To use the rabbinic power implicit in being symbolic exemplars, Rabbis must

accept and be comfortable with being walking talking symbols, and need to be skilled in using symbolic exemplarhood as a major source of rabbinic power.

Symbolic exemplarhood is not a substitute for competence, or for personal integrity. Used competently, and with integrity, it is the 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. It is because of symbolic exemplarhood that rabbis can intone “**By the power vested in me**” and recognize that the words are true. Being symbolic exemplars can help rabbis do many things.

1. Rabbis can 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. Being symbolic exemplars of the God who heals far beyond what the physician is capable of, and of the people Israel whose love, caring and responsibility extends to its member who is ill, gives rabbis great power to heal people spiritually and yes, even to aid and abet physical healing. What people believe has a great deal to do with their resources for healing, from their immune system to the state of their body the physician is working on. Rabbis use of language, presupposition, seeding ideas, reframing, relabeling, normalizing, linking, accessing resources, using stories, which I have dealt with in other contexts³ can do much toward healing.

² Len Hirsch, an experienced Organizational Development thinker who had served in the Mondale White House entourage, whom Rabbi Steve Shaw brought to many Rabbinic Training Institutes of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

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³ Viz; The Rabbi As Symbolic Exemplar; By The Power Vested In Me; Haworth Press; 2002 & Jewish Relational Care A-Z; We Are Our Other's Keeper; Haworth Press; 2006; Especially Chapter 2; Language as a Relational Tool: Using Your Mouth With Your Head?

2. Rabbis have the power to name and by naming sponsor all the parts of a human being. Rabbis by judicious naming can bring forth and create what seem like new entities.

When Rabbis say; "I now pronounce you husband and wife", they, by saying these words, create a new status. Rabbi's words are vested with the power to marry, to name a baby, to give a convert a new identity. Being symbolic exemplars, rabbis have great power to name, to characterize; "You are a loving man, a courageous woman, a proud Jew or whatever." Beyond that Rabbis have the power by careful and judicious naming and sponsoring to do special work with the ill and dying that involves sponsoring parts of one's personhood that we might call the neglected self. (those parts neglected)(the other side of what is being presented to a rabbi.)

3. Rabbis bless people by bringing sponsorship to neglected parts of them.

This is accomplished in a very special way. Not simply "Yevorechacho". All of us recall someone in our past who "blessed" us, and how important that was. What was it that they touched in us? Rabbis need to believe that when they bless someone, especially the ill, that they are doing something very important. Establishing what about the person, needs sponsorship and what blessings are needed and how they are to be given, so that they "take". This is a crucial part of a rabbi's work.

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4. Symbolic exemplarhood helps rabbis heal, sponsor and bless.

Symbolic exemplarhood demands much. It stresses rabbis 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 dialog (alien possession) and 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! Do I have any power? Do I really make a difference?” Interpersonally it means that rabbis weigh; “Is what I’m doing appropriate to my being a rabbi and in relationship to their perception of that? What are the parameters? How much leeway do I have? What can I reveal of my own feelings of impotency--madness/badness-fear/anxiety -not caring, not empathizing”.

[Either/Or] thinking, a way of thinking that has impeded us, yet comes all too naturally, 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 affirming that all humankind is equal, but has also led to denying that there is more than one way to know the one God, especially ways different from those God seems to have commanded us. It is a dangerous yet understandable inference drawn from Monotheism that as there is only one God, and only one way to the divine and that just happens to be the way I or my tradition, or my people have discovered. One either acknowledges that ‘truth’ or is 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 at its core a fundamentalist position. There is one way. And if not yet, the goal is that there be one way. An attribute, idea, person or whatever that is not that one way needs either to be gotten rid of or converted to the "true" thinking, both for the wayward's benefit. And if not yet, the goal is that there be one way. An attribute, idea, person or whatever that is not that one way needs either to be gotten rid of or converted to the "true" thinking, both for the

wayward's benefit.

[Either/Or] thinking is found throughout our own and other traditions.

[Either/Or] thinking has spilled over from religion into many other areas. The quest for one way of thinking has had profound effects. **[Either/Or]** thinking is so prevalent around us that we are like the fish that do not know they are in water. It is like the air we breathe. It lies at the base of much religious, philosophical and psychological theorizing, and of struggles between various schools of thought as to who has the "right" way. Pursuing and discovering in psychological, spiritual, and other ways what our singular truth is, and just precisely who we are, has been a dominant theme in a whole garden variety of religions and psychotherapies. The presupposition that underlies this thinking is that we are one, and need to integrate the disparate aspects of ourselves to that oneness, and the task has been to explore, verify and establish and purify our oneness. 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! Things, ideas, etc. are either one way or another. It is in the dichotomies of self/other, me/you,us/them,good/bad,power/love,inside/outside,I/it,healthy/sick masculine/feminine,problem/solution,Rabbi/laypersonthinking/feeling,mind/body-conscious/unconscious-Divine/Human-Jew/Gentile-Tahor/Tameh-Kosher/Treyf-Holy/Mundane,sacred/profane,clean/unclean,this/not this, and seemingly endless other splits. In religion this has led to the search for certainty, for the True way of being and pursuit of the path, "halachic" or otherwise that leads to that sense of Oneness.

About religion, Gilligan comments on psychological theories; "I suggest it would be a lot more helpful to regard each theory as a poem rather than a scientific fact. We would not consider arguing over which is the right poem, but would be more interested in how a given poem touched and opened the experience of a particular listener"⁴

In thinking about symbolic exemplarhood, **[Either/Or]** thinking inexorably leads to the fundamentalist conclusion that you are either a symbolic exemplar of the Divine or you are nothing. Your task therefore should you decide and have the ability to undertake it, is to get rid of your unacceptable part, or convert it.

⁴Stephen Gilligan; Personal Communication.

We cannot afford **[Either/Or]** thinking, which makes an issue of conquering, denying, 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. The "unacceptable" parts need to be thought of as not only acceptable but appropriate, an advantage and not a disadvantage. Our self is not ONE. And

pursuing oneness is not the way.

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, (somatic) and the other analytical, deliberative, verbal, and rational",⁵ (cognitive). Recently, The New York Times⁶ reported on the discovery of another brain, located in the gut, which produces a variety of experiences independent of the brain in the head. This comes under the category TGTU. Things grandma taught us. We have known this in our Kishkes for a long time. We have long known about our conscious 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. Everything contains its opposite. Not over and against but containing. One without the other has pathological outcomes.

And our task, first for ourselves, is how to have the [Both/And] parts (and there may be more parts of ourselves be in a loving relationship with each other. A relationship in which both are there lovingly 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, are experienced as "just there", and the oscillation between heart and head moves easily back and forth. That rational and emotional relationship, moving smoothly along is experienced for most people when we are just going about our regular business with little or no awareness of life being a problem. In [Both/And] thinking, our at least two selves are in relationship. [Both/And] thinking allows for the

⁵ S. Epstein; Integration of the Cognitive and the Psychodynamic Unconscious, American Psychologist August 1994)

⁶ Complex and Hidden Brain in the Gut Makes Cramps, Butterflies and Valium.

⁷Sandra X ⁷Blakeslee ,New York Times, January 23, 1996

existence of multiple, constantly changing truths. [Both/And] thinking allows for the rabbi/chaplain being both symbolic exemplars of the divine and just plain folks.

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", while avoiding being short circuited by [Either/Or] thinking which seems so built in to us. And the special task we have undertaken as rabbis and chaplains is to help others retrieve under conditions of trauma and violence or achieve for the first time that sense of relatedness, that sense of [Both/And]. 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."⁷**

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, and knowing that I am both at the same time. "While I'm acting as that symbol, I truly am that. When I'm not, I'm not." How to take each seriously and neither so seriously as to interfere with the other, is what we are going for.

Our concern is with the pattern that connects⁸

[Both/And] implies;

There are (at least) two of you:
You are not a self---You are a relationship.
Relationship is the basic psychological unit.

(As Bateson (1979) repeatedly emphasized, mind is relationship and difference is the basic unit of mind.)

Bateson, *ibid.*

The relational self is the experience of both selves simultaneously. The idea is that you are the field that holds and the spirit that connects the differences.

Each person is a relationship between selves, rather than the position of any given self. Self is a pattern of [me/not-me] connections experienced in a relational field.

Self is the experience of a dynamic relatedness between differences. Self is neither here nor there, neither you nor I: it is the conversation that bridges, the spirit that unites, and the pattern that connects the differences. This may be described as the principle of relatedness:

This me-not/me relationship may be expressed with just about any distinction. [One of Gregory Bateson's (1955/1972) great insights was that the simultaneous holding of multiple frames or truths underlies the distinctly human experiences, such as intimacy, play, hypnosis, mythology, and psychopathology. religion especially.

In holding multiple images or descriptions simultaneously, one is freed from the tyranny of what Bateson (1970/1972) described as the pathology of operating from a single position. Life begins to flow through a person's consciousness again, thereby allowing positions, images, and texts to

change.

The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by "God," but it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology. ⁹

To reiterate;

There are (at least) two of you:

You are not a self-you are a relationship.

Relationship is the basic psychological unit.

And that is true of the people you minister to as well.

We have two selves.

⁸ Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature A Necessary Unity* E.P. Dutton 1979

⁹ G. Bateson, 1972, p. 461,

1. **A SOMATIC SELF.** Life flows through the tender core, the soft spot, the (Tzelem Elohim) the N'shamah, of the somatic self, while it is understood, sponsored, and guided by the intelligence of the
2. **A COGNITIVE SELF.** ¹⁰

The relational self arises from the conversation between these two minds.

The **somatic self** is an experiential and felt sense of self. People experience it as located in the gut, or the heart. The somatic self is archetypal in quality and draws upon the collective experiences of human being. Kol asher yesh bo ruach chayim. There are a lot of names for it. Some traditions call it the center; others call it soul. Some talk of Chakras. Life moves through this center, activating the basic experiences of human being. This order of mind is, at its roots, collective and transpersonal. Born with it, it precedes the cognitive self. At the same time, the way such experiences are known and interpreted are different across individuals.

In addition to this archetypal self, this somatic self, this central n'shamah, a second self develops over time in each person. This cognitive self, living more in the head and based more in social-cognitive-behavioral language, makes decisions, meanings, strategies, evaluations, and temporal sequences.

The **cognitive self** develops a description of one's competencies, preferences, and values. To reiterate, the cognitive self refers to the basic, everyday sense of self that a person is aware of when life is not a problem. It is socially constructed, based on the person's present age and centered in the head. It includes competencies, resources, associations with present social others, skills, and multiple perspectives. It uses frames and models to plan, evaluate, and otherwise try to manage the world of experience. In a symptom, in a crisis, under severe threat or a reminder that evokes severe threat, this cognitive sense of self

disappears, contracts, dissociates, or is otherwise nullified. Some people in pain will talk about just wanting to get back to this "normal" self. The cognitive self typically predominates, except when self-identity is of primary concern--e.g. trauma, illness, among other things. (developmental transitions, art, or religious experiences. At such times, the deep feelings and archetypal processes of the somatic self emerge more powerfully. even to the point of taking over.

There is a third aspect of a relational self: in addition to

- (1) **The somatic self**
- (2) **The cognitive self**, and that is
- (3) **Influential others.**

A third aspect of the relational field may be described as influential others. These others may include social individuals such as parents, friends, teachers, enemies, children, spouses, etc. They may also include spiritual beings such as one's sense of a Higher Power, as well as one's ancestors.

In a perhaps apocryphal story, Golda Meier (the former Prime Minister of Israel) and a rabbi were once talking. The rabbi noted that he was able to consult with fellow rabbis about very important decisions, and wondered whether Golda's position as leader of the country allowed her to have confidants. She replied that she consulted with two people on every important decision: her grandmother (who was no longer alive) and her granddaughter (who had not yet been born).

That is where your symbolic exemplarhood gives you an edge if you use it wisely. These influential others are sponsors that guide and define one's life, especially when a person's identity is in flux (such as early or traumatic points in a learning cycle). A person has emotional connections to an influential other; that is, the tender soft spot at the core of each person is open, touched and vulnerable in such relationships.

An influential other may bless or curse one's beingness. Blessings and curses are not cognitive events; they are spiritual or identity events. Most people can identify human presences in their lives who really saw and blessed their essence.

That is what makes your function in Naming Sponsoring and Blessing so important.

When the relation is broken and the cognitive self is dominant-and tries to dominate or ignore the somatic self- alienation from other parts of the self results. What shows up then is denial, repression, intellectualization, ideological purity, and other forms of disconnection. When the somatic self is given free reign, the cognitive self is overwhelmed by the archetypal patterns and feelings of the somatic self. This shows up in terms of acting out, identification with a part, addictions, and other "out of control" behavior and experience. At such a time a person tends to revert to [Either/Or] thinking and take and "be" one side of the equation. People holding the identity,

"I am depression,"
"I am illness,"
"I am anxiety,"
"I am impaired,"

will find it hard to connect with aspects of their knowledge that are outside of this description, and would help them regain the connection.

The THIRD AND WHAT WE ARE GOING FOR, where neither somatic nor cognitive is overwhelming is **relational**, wherein the person experiences and expresses an integrated sense of their two selves. Experiencing these two in relationship in a Buberian [I-You] relationship in conversation with each other! The felt existence of an "I"; the felt existence of a "You"; the felt existence of interconnectedness between the different beings; and the felt existence of a deeper union supporting the differences.

The question of identity is central to our work as Rabbis.

The self as consciousness. The self as a relational field, and the self as a relational form or dynamic.

These distinctions correspond with the three principles of
Beingness, Belongingness, and Relatingness,

What to do?

First for rabbis, know yourself in a new way. Knowing your two selves relation to each other and the relationship between you and the context.

REMEMBER –The congregant/person you are dealing with is not a self, as we have hitherto understood that. He/She is a relationship. The congregant/person is a relationship between different selves. And our concern as rabbis and chaplains is how that relationship between different selves is going. What you are seeing and talking to is a relationship in which part of that relationship may be quite hidden, or neglected. The problem is that their sense of relationship is impaired.

It may have been impaired before they ever met you. It is, since they are human, seriously affected by what has happened to them. Your task is to create/recreate a spirit of connectedness between at the least, their two selves, somatic and cognitive, that they may be felt and fostered. In illness and or other stress, the odds are great that their relationship with themselves—their sense of being), is threatened. Their relationship with that which is beyond their selves, with you, with God, with significant others in their lives, is also threatened, and their relating is impaired.

We start with the assumption that symptoms reflect three types of sustained breaks: a "**break in beingness**" (and the awareness of goodness or blessedness), a "**break in belonging**" to something bigger (spiritual, organismic, social, psychological), and a "break in relatingness" between differences. To reiterate, there are at least 3 Forms

1. **Being**

A. The self as consciousness: The principle of being.

This is an alternative to (1) you are your past (personal history),

B. You are your biology, or

C. You are your social context (ethnicity, gender, family, etc.)

D. In the hospital --You are your illness, your diagnosis etc.

God defines it differently -You are unique. You are B'Tzelem Elohim

The beingness of life is distinctively present in each person.

The principle of beingness:

When the direct experience of beingness is ignored, denied, or cursed in a person, symptoms are likely to develop.

To alleviate symptoms and relieve suffering, first connect with the basic goodness of being in a person.

A break in beingness means that a person loses a felt sense of their basic aliveness and uniqueness.

Rabbi's work is to help the congregant or other human being know that you really do exist as a human being. You have a center, a core of being that is blessed, that goes beyond your illness, that is beyond the part you present for the world to see. Achieving this will take more than just saying it -it will take reestablishing the feeling of beingness, which comes out of the relational self, and dealing with the other side whichever it might be.

The experience of beingness is first known via blessings from influential others.

Most people can remember someone in their lives--a family member, a teacher, or a friend--who really saw them as special and unique. This is **not** a cognitive event: it is about seeing and calling forth the spirit of life that infuses each person. Blessings are crucial acts in the emergence of each person into the world. Without them, love and other skillful human acts are not possible.

The opposite of a blessing is a curse. Curses are prominent in most traumatic events, which are the forerunners of many symptoms.

A combination of blessings and centering practices, may help a person resist the curses of alienation and recover the primacy of beingness.

1. When do you feel most like yourself?

2. When you need to reconnect with yourself, what do you do?

3. When is life not a problem for you?

This expanded feeling of self beyond boundaries of skin and [Either/Or] ideology, while maintaining a center, is the experience of self as relational field.¹

1. The consciousness of self belongs to (or is part of) a larger relational field.

The corollaries are:

2. When a person experiences a sustained "break in belonging" to a relational field, symptoms are likely to develop.

3. To relieve suffering and reconcile symptomatic conflict, reconnect consciousness to its relational fields.

The relational field may be spiritual; I belong to a higher power, and he/she/it moves through me);

Organismic. I belong to nature, and it moves through me); social (I belong to my marriage/family/culture, and it permeates my consciousness); or

Psychological. My experience/perspective is embedded within a larger field of experiences/memories/archetypes, and they guide/inform me).

If the conditions of violence or trauma prevail, a sustained break occurs in which the person or experience is split off from the larger relational fields.

A break in belonging means that communion and surrender to a larger presence--social, spiritual, ecological--is not felt, and isolation and the desire to control individually takes place.

Symbolic Exemplarhood can help all of these.

Relating 3. The principle of relatingness. Self as relational differences:.

A break in relatingness means that a person identifies with one side of a distinction and refuses to acknowledge or accept the complementary distinction. This leads to recurrent conflict or withdrawal, with increasingly painful consequences.

So far we have seen two different non-cognitive ways a person has of knowing self and life: the vibrant center and felt sense of beingness at one's core, and the

¹⁰ Much of what is on these pages comes from the work of and contact with Stephen Gilligan, founder of Self-Relations. My debt to Steve is enormous.

expansive feeling of communion with a field and intelligence larger than one's self. This in effect suggests two buffers for mental experience: the center and the field.

1.To learn (or become) who you are, relatedness between differences is required.

Its corollaries are:

2. When a "break in relatingness" persists, the experience of self disappears, the fundamentalist ego-mind reigns, and symptoms are likely to arise.

3.To reduce suffering and reconcile symptoms, reestablish a conversation between different positions of identity.

Self (me, us, I)/other (you, them, it)

Good/Bad

Power/Love

Inside/Outside

Masculine/Feminine

Healthy/Sick

Problem/Solution

Therapist/Client

Thinking/Feeling

Mind/Body

Conscious/Unconscious

God/Human

Jew/ Non Jew

Tahor/Tameh

Kosher/Treyf

Holy/Mundane

In healthy situations, these relational differences operate in a conversational connectedness, the sort of "I-you" relationship described by Martin Buber. In intimacy, there is an experience of a "me", a "you", and the relational self of "us" that is felt when both the "I" and "you" are respected and treasured.

We rabbis are in a unique position to make these things happen. Go forth with courage and know that being both your "Selves" and Symbolic Exemplars, opens up doors both within and without. Chazak V'ematz and may God who is also a relationship watch over you as you watch and teach God to be a better Exemplar.¹²

¹²

Hide and Seek; On Teaching God To Be A Better Exemplar-Crosscurrents, Spring 2008