

# LIVING IN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER: GOD AND HUMAN PERFECTION IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

## Implications for Jewish Communal Professionals

RABBI DR. DAVID HARTMAN

*Founder, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem*

*The biblical ideal of perfection is rooted in relationship and interdependency, in contrast to the Greek conception of perfection as self-sufficiency. Our task as Jewish communal professionals is to create communities where people can fully develop the capacity to love and care for others. As Jews, we cannot reject the world but must live in relationship to it.*

In a very deep way, our Jewishness itself is being tested today. In response to this critical and challenging situation, let me analyze and illuminate the condition of Jews today in terms of two main visions of human perfection that have shaped Western civilization: (1) the Greek conception of perfection that informed the Stoic and Aristotelian traditions and (2) the conception of God and human flourishing rooted in the biblical and Jewish traditions.

In the Greek tradition, self-sufficiency — not being in need of others — is an ideal to which human beings should strive. The Stoics developed this idea in terms of *apatheia*, the elimination of emotional involvement and dependency on others. Aristotle's ideal of the philosopher and his conception of God also reflect the enormous significance ascribed to self-sufficiency and independence from others.

In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle describes the ideal human being, the philosopher, as a person who reaches a state of self-sufficiency with respect to the contingencies of everyday life and the need for others. The philosopher actualizes the human potential to its fullest not only in terms of knowledge — the intellectual virtues — but also in terms of the practical virtues and the

inner experiential dimension of living, specifically freedom from neediness, including the need for others.

Aristotle's conception of God expresses this ideal in its purest, most graphic form. According to Aristotle, God is totally divorced from the affairs of human history and from any activity other than divine self-reflection. God, the most perfect being, engages in the most perfect activity, thought, the content of which is the most perfect subject matter, God. What does God do? God thinks. What does God think about? God thinks about that which is most perfect. So God is thought on thought.

Aristotle's God has absolutely no interest in the human condition or in history. This impersonal God is totally distinct from and unrelated to the personal God of history. If it were possible to speak of this God in human terms, one would say that God is a totally self-sufficient, solitary being, the quintessential fulfillment of the Greek ideal of perfection.

Given this perspective, Athens and Jerusalem become a stark contrast of opposites based on unbridgeable, if not incommensurable human ideals and theological concepts. In contrast to Aristotle's description of divinity, the God of the Bible creates the world and has a deep and continuing interest in His creation. In fact, the most striking characteristic of divinity in the Bible is the constant urge to project itself outside

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of itself and to be in relationship with another.

From a metaphysical, theological point of view, the mystery of the Bible is why God becomes so deeply enmeshed with His creation, specifically with human beings. Why does God react so violently when the world does not turn out the way He, the Creator, expected and wanted?

The biblical narrative portrays a God who is constantly being offended by what human beings do. One of the most recurrent themes of the biblical drama is how the omnipotent God, who has great plans for the world He created, responds when He realizes that the human beings He created with such great expectations are actually undermining His original plans.

God created human beings in His image, thinking that this would guarantee that the world would turn out according to His dreams. However, the creation of humans in the image of God also involved the creation of human independence and freedom and the potential for disobedience and rejection.

In the creation of human beings, God expressed a divine desire for relationship with that which is other than Himself. God therefore endowed human beings with freedom, the essential condition of radical otherness. In the midst of an idyllic description of the divine origin of the universe, the Bible introduces the human being as a being separate from God, which among other things means a being capable of destroying the intended harmony and beauty of creation. The story of the Garden of Eden is not a soothing, fairy tale but the story of the unpredictable dynamics of human freedom.

In contrast to pantheistic religious traditions, on the one hand, and to speculative philosophical theologies rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, on the other hand, the metaphysics of the Bible is informed by a fundamental relational matrix, which is expressed in the philosophically "scandalous" idea that God seeks relationship with that which is other than God. Pantheism, which obliterates the otherness and distance neces-

sary for relationship, was never accepted within Judaism. The world is other than God. Humankind is other than God. Or, to summarize the biblical account of God after the original act of creation: God has to learn that He cannot fully control that which is other than Himself. God, in the early chapters of Genesis, gradually learns that relationship entails freedom, that if you control the other, you destroy the possibility for a genuine relationship.

In contrast to the Greek ideal of perfection as self-sufficiency, the biblical/Jewish ideal of perfection through relationship requires a deep understanding and acceptance of the fact that my own fulfillment is dependent on my relationship with an other who is free to choose not to live in relationship with me.

Every parent understands the anxiety and pain involved in arriving at this insight. In some sense, we all believe that the children we "created" are going to grow up to reflect who we are. The great shock of being a parent is discovering that the apple *can* fall far from the tree. When I was a congregational rabbi, I often met with parents who were beside themselves with guilt because their children were leaving them and going off in strange and unfamiliar directions. "What did I do?" they asked despairingly. "You didn't do anything," I told them. "You have to realize that you don't control your child, you are not the only influence on his or her development."

Becoming aware that you cannot shape your child, your students, or your community in your own image is the beginning of being a parent, a teacher, or a community professional. You have to be able to work with people's freedom and independence, to recognize the "otherness" of human beings.

That the creator God had to learn this lesson is one of the keys to understanding the biblical story. In the beginning God did not understand this lesson, and therefore, when the world did not turn out the way He thought it should, He decided to destroy it by bringing a flood. God, however, did not

choose to end the world once and for all, but rather to destroy what was existing until then and then to start from scratch on the basis of his obedient and compliant servant, Noah.

Noah is noteworthy in the Bible for being totally subservient and docile, like a child who asks no questions. God tells him to build an ark, gives him precise and complete instructions and measurements, and Noah says, "OK." When God reveals to him, "I am going to destroy the world," Noah says nothing. When you read this passage, you want to shout, "Noah, don't you have anything to say?" But Noah says not a word. Noah has not yet discovered his independence and freedom from God.

The biblical figure who does understand his independence from God is Abraham, and it is for this reason that the relationship between God and Abraham marks the beginning of Jewish history and of the Covenant. When God realizes that He cannot do it alone, He chooses Abraham. God makes a covenant with Abraham, saying to him, "Through you the world will be blessed."

When God decides to destroy Sodom, He utters what is perhaps the most revealing verse in the Torah: "*Hamechaseh ani meAvraham asher ani oseh*" ("Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"; Gen. 18:17). God no longer acts unilaterally in history (as in the case of the flood) but consults with Abraham before destroying Sodom. This new level of interaction between God and human beings is described powerfully in Midrash Sifre in connection with Abraham's use of the phrase, "the God of Heaven and the God of the earth" (Gen. 24:3): "*Ad shelo ba Avraham lo haya hakedosh baruch hu melech ela al hashamayim bilvad, umisheba Avraham himlichu al hashamayim veal haaretz*" ("Until Abraham came, God was only lord of the heavens, but when Abraham came, he (Abraham) made Him (God) lord of the heavens and of the earth"). God becomes the lord of the earth, the God of history, as a result of the efforts of human beings.

The idea of a covenant between God and

Abraham and between God and the people of Israel at Sinai is ultimately grounded in the metaphysical theme of divine self-limitation for the purpose of relationship with human beings. God gives up some of His power because of His awareness that He cannot create a world through His will alone. Unless human beings cooperate and take responsibility for their lives, the world—that is, history—cannot be shaped according to the divine intention. God therefore chooses to become dependent on human beings.

Abraham Joshua Heschel captured the essence of biblical theology in his seminal work, *God in Search of Man*. I concur fully with his view that the central metaphor describing God in the Bible is of a divine quest and need for relationship with human beings. If you cannot conceive of God in such graphic anthropomorphic terms, you cannot really comprehend what the Bible is about.

In this tradition, the concept of perfection that informs both human and divine spheres involves the need for relationship with another. The need for others is not regarded as an imperfection or an obstacle to achieving true freedom, as the Stoics believed. Human flourishing involves admitting that I am needy, that I cannot do it alone. Human wholeness is realized in relationship, through interdependency.

I recall a famous line from a movie I saw as a young man: "Love is never having to say you're sorry." What kind of love relationship involves never having to say you're sorry? The very meaning of love and of marriage is being able to expose your vulnerability to the other. To want to marry and, at the same time, to preserve your emotional independence and self-sufficiency is a contradiction in terms. The very meaning of marriage is being able to say, "I choose to live in interdependency."

I would summarize the human ideal in Judaism by rephrasing Descartes' existential dictum, "*cogito ergo sum*"—"I think, therefore I am"—as "I love, therefore I am." It is only through relationship that I become a full human being.

The text in Genesis says: "*Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*" ("It is not good for a person to be alone"; Genesis 2:18). *Lo tov*—it is not good—is meant in the existential and not in the utilitarian sense. A person alone cannot be whole and complete. Or consider this command: "*Al ken ya'azov ish et aviv ve'imo, vedavak be'ishto*" ("Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh"; Genesis 2:24). Celibacy was never a Jewish ideal.

The Jewish ideal, then, is to acknowledge your vulnerability and not to be ashamed of your needs.

Maimonides, in *Mishneh Torah* (Gifts to the Poor; Hilchot Tzedakah, Chapter 10), dealing with the laws of tzedakah, encourages a person to become self-sufficient, but then states forcefully that if you are in fact needy but you are ashamed to reveal your needs to others, you are a *shofech damim*, a shedder of blood. It is *shfichut damim* to give in to your feelings of shame and to refuse to admit, "I need others." You become a human being when you acknowledge interdependency, when you can say, "I need you."

Our task as Jewish communal professionals is to try to create communities where people are not ashamed to admit they have needs. The Jewishness of our communities should be measured by the degree to which people can experience relationships without shame. Our goal as Jews is to create frameworks of human relationships where human flourishing consists in developing the capacity to love and to care.

I recall a conversation about Jewish self-sufficiency that I had with a noted Israeli thinker, Eliezer Schweid, when I was planning on making aliyah. He spoke to me at length about how Israel had developed a sense of self-sufficiency, about how we as Jews could rely only on ourselves. He told me about how Jews applauded Ben Gurion's statement, "It's not important what the *goyim* will think; it's important what the Jews will do." Israel was created to provide us with a haven of Jewish self-sufficiency.

In spite of his well-meaning and impassioned remarks, which were intended no doubt to encourage me to make aliyah, I said to him, "Eliezer, I don't accept that. On the contrary, Israel will only survive if the world will be responsive to its needs and will acknowledge the legitimacy and importance of Israel as a home for Jews. If not, our future will be very bleak."

Our destiny as Jews depends not only on what the rabbi says in synagogue or on what the General Assembly decides. What President Bush thinks is also important. What's important is not only what takes place in the Knesset, but also how the world responds to us.

The very meaning of the establishment of the State of Israel is that the Jewish people chose to be dependent on the world. It is a very hard thing for many of us to accept that ultimately we will not survive without the support of the decent people of the world. That is why it is so painful to witness the reemergence of hatred toward Jews and toward their collective embodiment, the State of Israel, in France, England and throughout Europe. We are painfully aware of the animosity and resentment toward the Jewish people that often lie behind the so-called 'legitimate' criticism of Israeli policies and its leaders' rhetoric. It has become all too clear during the past several years that we can no longer ignore the repressed hatred that did not disappear with the Holocaust.

When we recognize this tragic fact, we have a tendency to say: "Who needs this world? Who needs the *goyim*? Leave us alone! We are tired to listening to what you think of us! We've had enough of your criticism! All we want to do is to learn some Torah. Leave us to study our own ethics; to organize our communities, social institutions, our families; to build Jewish unity."

If you asked me, our response to history after the Holocaust should have been to go into the coffeehouses of Greenwich Village, to sip cappuccinos, to read Sartre and Camus, to be consumed by existential angst and

to whisper aloud to one another: "Oy! The world stinks."

But we did not do that. Instead we chose Israel. The meaning of Israel is that Jews choose to be in the world, to enter into a relationship with the world. It is crucial that Jews everywhere understand this concept. Israel is a response to the Holocaust because we refused to allow the Holocaust to define our selves and our attitude to the world. The meaning of being a people burdened by a covenant with God is that we do not give up on the world, no matter how miserable it may be.

When we are exposed to hostility, our task is to listen, to understand, to feel it deeply, but not to allow it to define our response. Instead, we must respond to the world from our own identity—a covenantal identity that refuses to give up on history. I do not give up on the world because I believe in what Rabbi Akiva said: "*Haviv adam shenivra betselem*" ("Beloved are human beings who were created in the image of God").

The principle of interdependency in Judaism has two aspects: One, I do not give up on Jews, for they are part of my family and I recognize my interdependency with them. Two, I recognize my relationship to every human being because I believe in God, the creator of the universe, who brings me into relationship with the whole world. These two dimensions of Jewish interdependency reflect the relational ideal that shaped Jewish conceptions of God and human fulfillment.

How then should we respond to crisis today? By not allowing the crisis to define us; by not allowing anti-Semitism to set the agenda of our learning and community centers; and by enabling our communities to learn Torah and to develop an understanding of the depth of Judaism. We respond to crisis by not allowing crisis to overcome us. Arafat does not define who I am.

I disagreed with Emil Fackenheim – a great philosopher of beloved memory – when he coined the notion of the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment: "not giving Hitler a posthumous

victory." I told him that by talking about the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment you are in effect giving Hitler a victory by defining Jewishness negatively with reference to our vicious enemies. I am not a Jew because of Hitler. I am not a Jew because of anti-Semitism. I am a Jew because I fell in love with Moses' dream about what the Jewish people could become. I am a Jew not because *goyim* hate me. I am a Jew because I love my Jewish tradition to the depths of my being. It is through learning Torah, through thinking deeply about the Jewish tradition, and through experiencing the joy of Judaism that my identity as a Jew becomes meaningful.

The challenge for community professionals today is to make sure Jewish communities do not fall into the trap of defining themselves by the hatred of the *goyim*. The anti-Semite's distorted vision should not dictate our agenda. Our agenda should be defined from within our own tradition. Our agenda should grow out of our own philosophical understanding of what Judaism is about.

Judaism throws us into interdependency with the world. That is the meaning of believing in *Bereshith bara elohim et hashamiyim ve'et ha'aretz* ("In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"). While the norms of *tzedakah* train us to care for other Jews, it is the creation story that teaches us that we live in a larger world where we have broad human connections and interdependencies. We must never give up our belief that "Beloved are human beings who were created in the image of God," no matter what Theodorakis or the former Prime Minister of Malaysia says about us. No matter what Chirac thinks or what *Le Monde* writes, I still love Jews, I still love this country.

It may sound strange, but in living in Jerusalem I have developed a closer relationship with Christians throughout the world than when I lived in the Diaspora. I feel more able to reach out to the outside world because I live in Jerusalem. When I was in Montreal I lived like a *yeshiva buchur* (talmudic student). A *yeshiva buchur* lives

within the world defined by his Rebbe's *shiur* (lecture).

When I studied in Lakewood, I was struck by the expression: "*za welte kasha*" ("It's a world question"). I wondered to myself, "If this is a *world question*, then everyone must be asking themselves this question!" So I went into the streets of Lakewood and asked people, "Excuse me, are you bothered by this question?" Needless to say, their response, if any, was to question my sanity.

When we are immersed in a yeshiva framework, we think the world coincides with our *daled amot* (four cubits), our private little *shteibl*. This kind of ghettoization of consciousness is, unfortunately, taking hold of Jews in some circles of Orthodoxy today. "Our world is *the* world! Nothing of value exists outside of us." This is the great danger of unconstrained forms of nationalism. It can breed narcissism, a false sense of self-sufficiency: "We can only rely on ourselves; we don't need or belong to the larger world; what the larger world thinks doesn't concern us in the least."

For me, Israel is where Jews can live in open dialogue with the world. Why? Because here we can really feel rooted as Jews. We can feel anchored in our identity; we can feel pride walking the streets of Jerusalem. Instead of creating a Jewish ghetto, a surrogate *shteibl*, Jerusalem creates a Jewish world that is open to the larger, outside world. I say this not because I'm a fervent liberal, a true believer in pluralism, a follower of John Stuart Mill or an insecure Jew who wants to be liked by the *goyim*. I say this simply because I am a Jew. And being a Jew means living with two stories. One is about a God who throws me into the world and does not allow me to give up on it. The other is about a God who throws me into the Jewish people and says, "Don't give up on your people no matter what. Don't abandon them. Don't destroy their spirit."

As community professionals from around the world we have a vital and important mission to keep the Jewish people healthy, to keep them learning, and to liberate them from the poison of anti-Semitism.