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## PLURALISM AND PARTNERSHIP

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### Introduction

In his book, *Yemei Zikaron*, master theologian, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, points out a central implication of the core concept of Judaism that the human being is created in the image of God. He builds on the halachic principle of *shlucho shel adam k'moto* - that in order to serve as someone's messenger/agent, the agent must be like the sender, e.g., must share values, attitudes, goals of the sender in order to fully fulfill the delegated role.

Soloveitchik reorients the metaphor and plays it backwards. The fact that the human is so like God as to be in the image of God is a sign that the individual (every human being) is God's messenger or agent. The human dignity/capacity and God-like qualities which constitute 'being in the image of God' are a faithful sign that the human being is appointed by God to serve as God's agent in the world.

The key question that each person must ask is: what is my appointed mission?

Since today there are no instant oracles, no priests with direct lines to God, no prophets available to give the answer, the individual must reflect deeply. One must read the sources, pray, listen to instruction and the community, and ponder the events of one's life to detect the mission and try to carry it out. (It may take a lifetime to discover.) While there is no easy answer, says Rabbi Soloveitchik, there is one powerful hint that everyone is given. The time, the place, the circumstances, the community into which I am born is the hint. The mission is rooted in the time and place.

If I am a Jew born in America in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I can guess that my mission is less likely to be a model how to live as a pariah people, treated as

outcasts clinging to a purportedly superseded religion and trying to maintain dignity and identity in the face of persecution and vulnerability. My task is less likely to be how to keep hope of restoration of Israel alive at a time when one cannot act on this hope and the way to Israel is barred. Yet this was the essence of the mission of most Jews (or their leaders) in the years between 70 C.E. and 1900.

The mission of a 20<sup>th</sup> century Jew in the free world (including Israel) is more likely connected to serving God and working for *tikkun olam*, to preserving Jewish identity and applying those values under circumstance of freedom, access to power, and affluence - for these are the circumstance, the challenges and the temptation of my time and place. There is where my search for my mission should focus.

In the spirit of Soloveitchik, I would like to explore: what is the mission (or a mission) of Jews and Christians (and for that matter, Moslems and other religionists who share their values) in the free world on the brink of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the third millennium?

My thesis: We are living through one of the great cultural transformations of all time; it is simultaneously an extraordinary religious breakthrough. It is the arrival of a society so free and open that it enables us to discover/experience the image of God of the other human beings. The Talmud tells us that being born in the image of God brings with it three fundamental, intrinsic and irrevocable dignities: *infinite value, equality and uniqueness*. One might say that if I encounter the other human being as he/she really is (*viz.* an image of God), then I am struck by their infinite value, equality and uniqueness. This evokes awe, respect, love from me. Then my treatment of the other person changes. If I experience their equality I cannot enslave them. I cannot abandon them in poverty or hunger if I experience their infinite value. Then much of religion's task is to first identify and teach that the other human being is in the image of God. Then it must work to restructure the world to respect the image of God. This is the meaning of the messianic vision of Judaism in which humanity overcomes poverty, hunger, oppression and war. Even sickness and death are to be defeated for they are incompatible with the value and uniqueness of the individual. They will be overthrown in the Messianic Age, the goal of the Jewish and Christian covenant.

Unfortunately, for most of history, the human being's dignity as image of God was obscured by the poverty and deprivation which pitted people against each other in a struggle for survival. Furthermore, the internal culture hid the truth by presenting outside group members as less than the image of God. Throughout human history, dominant cultural groups (indeed almost all groups) created a moral/cultural world in which their own people/faith/culture constituted the illuminated foreground (= The Children of Light) and the rest of humanity made up the shadowed background (= The Children of Darkness).

In an insulated, ethnocentric world, one's own value, beliefs, heroes were

presented positively. The Other was 'not present' or was presented in a 'skewed' version, frequently stereotyped, manifestly inferior to the in-group and its values. The Other was rated from the scale of my group; in general, they were less worthy or unworthy of the ethical/religious treatment that the in-group morality demanded in the treatment of my own group's members. In this world, only some people, mostly in my group, were encountered or treated like a true image of God. Similarly, my/our truth - the nurturing ground of the human - was divinely revealed, absolute, correct. The other truth of the other culture was, at best, a paler reflection, typically inferior, if not evil or beyond the pale.

Now modernity has brought into being a society so open and mobile and increasingly free that one encounters the other directly and in their full dignity. Note: this model is idealized. Many people in the West and whole societies elsewhere are mired in poverty and hierarchy and do not experience this improvement. Yet it may be said that thanks to communications, many people become aware of this new phenomenon with its concomitant gift of dignity (of which they are deprived). Many then experience this deprivation with greater cognitive dissonance; it evokes greater resistance and protest and generates great guilt in the privileged to the extent that communication makes them aware of the oppression of others. Thus the encounter has effects even when it does not yet reshape the society. In these societies which are being reshaped, this new encounter in turn evokes more sense of the other's right to be free, to be treated with justice, etc. This paves the way for more transformation. This cycle leads to more freedom, more openness and more discovery of the image of God of the other. In this process, inherited fixed categories and hierarchies are undermined and the sense of fixity, permanence, givenness, gradually disintegrates. For this reason, modern culture is marked by the growth of liberalism but also relativism as the proliferation of experiencing the equality of the other leads to paralysis of the capacity to judge (which classically is embedded in hierarchy). Similarly, as each religion/culture loses its capacity to "other" the other and to skew and stereotype the alternate cultures, it loses its monopoly at being right as well as to its givenness. Therefore, modernity is often experienced as a culture which undermines faith. Our task is to reverse that effect, i.e. to assure that upgrading the dignity of the other does not erode the legitimate claims and teachings of religion.

What then is our mission? I submit that it is to explore and establish a principled pluralism. When culture and values are no longer embedded in structures that are fixed, 'genetic', absolute; when the sense of choice and freedom is strong, then the sense of absolute claims, that typically undergirded classic religions, is lost. For many, if not most people, the result that emerges is relativism, the loss of capacity to affirm any standards. But the deepest religious response is pluralism - the recognition that there are plural absolute standards which can live and function together even when they disagree. The deepest insight of pluralism is that dignity, truth and power function best when they

are pluralized, e.g. divided and distributed, rather than centralized or absolutized.

In this paper, I will try to describe the sociology, phenomenology and theology of pluralism. Then I would like to argue that our calling is to move even beyond pluralism to partnership between the faiths. To affirm the partnership is to take a further step away from viewing the world and the other from the self-centered concentric circle in which I and my faith/truth are at the center toward viewing the world from a 'cosmic perspective', i.e., I and my faith group see ourselves as participants, as one of the organized groups among the divine hosts to be deployed with others together - as God sees fit - to perfect the world.

### I. *Sociology of Pluralism*

Modern culture creates large urban concentrations of population with a variety of people and cultures living together. The neighbor is frequently someone from a religion or culture hitherto treated as strangers and presented through stereotypes and filters. Modern culture also is saturated with media and communication. For the first time in history, there is no shelter or 'in-group' environment. Often the other culture/faith is presented through the media in all its strength and particularity; thus there is no 'protective tariff' of favoritism or self-presentation for my culture. The community also loses the time period (such as childhood) when it had a monopoly over the information fed to its own constituents. Finally, the combination of mobility, affluence, and freedom leads to frequent direct and positive encounters with the other and the other's culture/religion. The net result is that the others are now experienced in their uniqueness, in their value, in their religion's religious power. Just as I recognize the other no longer as Other but as image of God, so is their faith recognized not as a foreign culture but rather as a dignified, spiritually vital religion, that raises people in the image of God. Thus technology and communication, which are theoretically neutral, play an important role in bringing the other - person and culture - into my life and into my universe of moral obligation.

Pluralism is the outgrowth of this situation. People recognize the power of the other religion as valued in its own right, yet experience their own religion's power equally. Since they can neither dismiss the other faith nor give up their own, the natural outcome is pluralism.

### II. *The Phenomenology of Pluralism*

In modern society the encounter with the other, followed by the recognition and then the affirmation of uniqueness and equality of the other, typically occurs in a frame that does not devalue or suppress the (erstwhile) insider faith, or its uniqueness and value. People experience the other faith as valued in that it nurtures other human beings

in the image of God. This evokes respect and honor for the other faith. Since one's own faith is not being suppressed, the result is two (or more) religions simultaneously co-existing in the believer's mind whose claims and expressions are experienced as valued. Sometimes the response is 'voluntary' and is articulated in the structures and language of the insider faith. Sometimes it is 'involuntary'; the respect is expressed behaviorally while it remains dissonant with the official claims of the faith. (This is what tolerance is all about.)

Relativism emerges when the erstwhile insider faith has little or no persuasive power, once the monopoly is lost. The erstwhile believer does not convert to the new experienced faith, but concludes that there is no monopoly nor any standard of absolute truth anymore. (Since the old 'absolute' standard has been broken, all standards are judged to be accidental, arbitrary or notional.)

Fundamentalism emerges when people find that the old absolutes have lost their power once they are brought into the presence of the other. The fundamentalist fears (correctly) that this raises the threat of the loss of all values. Therefore, the fundamentalist proposes to bring back the old values the only way he/she knows, e.g. in the absence of alternative voices. The fundamentalist proposes to recreate the old conditions of absolute faith by the political/cultural action of repressing the new voices and reimposing the old in-group/out-group morality and cultural presentation. The problem with this solution is that it also restores all the old stereotypes, negative filters and the concomitant mistreatment and suppression of the Other (all for the sake of the 'highest good', the restoration of the absolutes). However, one must beware of simply dismissing fundamentalism. It draws its power from a more sophisticated moral calculus than we acknowledge. When people become convinced that all fundamental values - God, family, right and wrong - are being undermined by the new openness and its concomitant relativism, they may conclude that they must sacrifice the lesser good (choice, freedom, chance for mobility) for the sake of the greater good (fundamental values which guide life). Willingness to make this kind of sacrifice is particularly likely among people left out of the social and economic advantages of the emerging society.

Pluralism is made possible by the ability of a religion or a truth system to maintain its vitality and to continue to move its own adherents even in the presence of the other. However, for many, the breaking of the old absolute monopoly leads to an unthinking relativism since they do not experience the ongoing vitality of their faith.

The essential difference between pluralism and relativism is that pluralism is based on the principle that there still is an absolute truth. There still are valid values; we still can and must say no to certain systems and ideas. How then can this view coexist with allowing for alternate views and conflicting values?

The pluralist affirms the absolute values but has come to know their limits. They do not cover all the possibilities. Pluralism is an absolutism that has come to

recognize its own limitations.

### III. *Pluralism and Its Limits*

An idea, a faith, a truth may be absolute but nevertheless be bounded. This makes room for other absolutes which may lie beyond this cluster. Most ideas and operative truths in religion are not located at a fixed point of truth or existence. Most ideas and truths are, in fact, *continuum truths*. Take the concept of covenant. That is an alliance, a treaty between God and humans, which in Judaism and Christianity finds expression as a partnership between God and humanity (or in the more particularist form between God and the Children of Israel). [Israel is defined differently in Judaism and Christianity over most of their history.] The covenant idea ranges along a continuum beginning from one pole when God does just about everything. [Indeed one could argue that although Islam does not use the category of a covenant because of its emphasis on submission to God and the human's role as slave/servant of God, its position is the closest to the divine dominant pole and is the equivalent of covenant (albeit unnamed).] The continuum of covenant's meaning extends to the condition where divine intervention is constant, visible through miracle, continues along the continuum to prophecy and oracle, toward wisdom in which humans interpret and read more - especially in the Book of Creation which is less manifestly divine toward interpretation and human activity accountable to God and acting on behalf of the divine to the sector where human activity becomes increasingly central to (the modern schools of) the human coming of age where the line between the secular and religious is exceedingly thin. Perhaps the cut off point - where one is off the covenant continuum - is pure secularization where God is declared to be a figment of human imagination. The human is fully responsible for all actions and activity and there is no higher authority to which humans are accountable which can guide or forgive humans. Note: The same type of continuum can be laid out for most of the central ideas of religion.

In the past, the centeredness of each group and its sense that the world is organized around it gave rise to the absolute (unlimited) claims of one's own tradition. Now the presentation of the world/faith/truth beyond makes one aware of the limits of one's own position. One comes to recognize that one's own faith occupies an important point or sector along the continuum but it does not extend the whole length of the continuum. On a continuum from 0 to 100 perhaps my truth extends from 75 to 40; however before and after it, there are points on the continuum of the very same idea which are left for others to occupy. Perhaps within the range (or part of the range) of my truth, there is absolute truth (which may even contradict others' truth, see below). But there are other parts of the continuum, occupied by legitimate others who may be presenting (absolute) truths that cover other valid aspects of the same idea/value/truth.

Thus absolutes may coexist sharing the same basic idea/value/truth yet articulating or expressing a different mix of the constituent ideas' polar insights. Compare Islam's fundamental stress on submission and servitude to Christianity's emphasis on the mediating role of Jesus (and for that matter his mother) with Judaism's emphasis (especially since post-biblical times) on the human's direct and active role. [Note: Here again, I have simplified. Each tradition has its movements (and periods) that take up other aspects of the continuum and explore and apply it. Furthermore, there is parallelism and overlap between the truths. Still each dominant tradition seems to be clustered about a different sector of the continuum.]

In the past if one wanted to reject the other, one would abstract the central idea of each from the continuum, emphasize that contradiction between them and reject the other as if it comes from an alien or wrong source rather than being a neighbor on the very same continuum.

Just as there is a continuum of meaning to truths, so there may be a continuum of peoples to whom God reveals and who are chosen to be God's servants. Thus any truth may speak absolutely to me and others, yet it is not intended for others who may be spoken to by other revelations and chosen for another sector of service. If one considers the divine love of human uniqueness and the divine respect for the variety of geography, language and various forms of human rootedness, then one is particularly drawn to the concept of absolutes that operate over part of the human continuum, leaving room for others' experiences of the absolute that are different. Maybe in some details they are even contradictory to my experience, yet they are still authentic and chosen. Suffice it to cite Isaiah's vision that the day will come when Israel and its two chief enemy/oppressors in biblical times up to his day, i.e. Egypt and Assyria, would all three be recognized as covenantal, chosen people. [Isaiah 25, 19]. If these three can be in this class, then every people and truth can be!

Finally there is the continuum of cases. My truth can be 100 % valid over a range of cases but it may allow room for new cases or other circumstances in which others' truths are allowed/needed to operate. If one adds to this that some people or even cultures may constitutionally prefer answers that are balanced toward authority or uniformity while others may gravitate toward individual choice and variety, then the same absolute answer may not be appropriate for the variety of peoples. This leaves ample room for cases, peoples, etc. where truths do overlap and where the contradictions may lead to disagreements or even refutation without leading to delegitimization or conflict.

This brings us to the second principle of pluralism. Pluralism is an absolutism that recognizes that an absolute truth/value need not be absolutely right to be absolute. Absolute, needed truths may incorporate elements that are erroneous or even evil that need to be corrected. All revelation that is communicated to humans, all truth that is

given over to human beings is (like the humans to whom it is given) only true/absolute/divine on balance. A wise absolutism will understand that this limitation (imperfection or incompleteness) does not undermine its true authority. On the contrary, denying the weakness/limitation weakens the credibility of the rest of the truth, and may allow some evil to be done in the name of the faith system. This will further undermine the part that is the truth. By contrast, the awareness of limitation leaves room for the other's insights, truths which may exist in those interstices where one's own truth is flawed. Or the other's wrong element may be contradicted by one's truths without disqualifying the rest of the other's truth (or of mine).

This understanding leaves room for important faith systems/truths to be in conflict or even to contradict each other in part. Yet their bearers may come to see that there is room for both because they are united by some still larger, all encompassing principle which validates both, whatever their disagreement or whatever the errors or contradictable truth on the other side. In the era of ethnocentric culture/faiths, typically the criterion truth was defined whereby the other forfeited their validity. Today, with an enlarged vision and interactive encounter, one may frame the conflict within the broader principle which contains the disagreement and prevents it from escalating to delegitimization. Thus in the past, Christians defined belief in God incarnate, mediating and sacrificing for humanity as the criterion for religious legitimacy. By this standard Judaism (as Islam) was found wanting; so it was delegitimized and defined as superseded. Judaism in turn made this very Christian criterion, the definition of idolatry, which meant that anyone coming to this view must leave the community. Anyone who accepted that belief, was delegitimized.

Today, one would define the broader principle as God in our midst as we seek to respond by engaging in the task of *tikkun olam*. Within this broader rubric, one can continue to disagree and even contradict the other without leaving the same camp. Thus we are disagreeing *l'shem shamayim* - for the sake of heaven - without losing our legitimacy, without being pressured into compromising our integrity. With this broader definition, sustaining our particular distinctive, even contradictory views of the Godhead, we avoid being sucked into conflict, or even aggression and cruelty, by the theological argument; in the past our 'contradictions' prevented working together for the greater goal.

This brings us to another theological dimension of pluralism. Today, all truths are spoken by humans to humans. That is to say, by an image of God to an image of God. Implicit in this fact is that all truths have a double dimension. In part they are expressing facts or objective correlatives with facts or some insights or illuminations. The other dimension is that they reveal the character of the one speaking or teaching this truth; that is to say, that an image of God, a being of infinite value, quality and uniqueness is speaking. If the truth assessment is complete and comprehensive, it will

take the speaker's nature and existence into account. Already in the *halachic* rules of truth, we find that the fact that the one speaking (and/or the listener) is an image of God may tilt the balance of a statement from true to false (a true statement that totally degrades the image of God may thereby become false) or a false statement that recognized the image of God of the other may turn true (as is the case of declaring that every bride is beautiful and of good character - the view of the School of Hillel. Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 17 A).

One can simplify this principle even more. Pluralism reflects a truth that if a person of such weight (e.g. of infinite value and uniqueness, who is equal to me) speaks, then that source alone gives an idea some putative truth claim. At the least, it implies that the person speaking has such weight that he/she has the right to be heard even if they are in error or totally wrong. Thus my ideas may be propagated by me even if they can be shown/proven to be wrong. By dint of being an image of God, I am entitled to be heard. My ideas [which come from me, an image of God] are weighty enough to be weighed, judged, criticized and not dismissed or suppressed. (The only limit would be if my ideas would harm others with no recourse. See below.)

There is another implication in this analysis. The image of God is not raised in a vacuum. The image of God is nurtured by a faith and by a culture. Then any religion or culture that shows that it can raise people in the image of God cannot be suppressed ethically. A faith which raises people in the image of God can be criticized, corrected, even rejected, but it deserves the consideration which comes after being heard. To suppress the other view is to claim that it is so unworthy, so evil that if it is heard it will create sub-human monsters. (This claim is contradicted by the quality of the people that it is raising.) This also explains why Christian anti-Judaism could not stop with the religious contradiction. If a religion is hateful, legalistic, spiritually blind, God killing, then why are its practitioners clinging to it? The only answer can be that they, the believers, are as monstrous as the religion which they are practising. This leads inevitably to antisemitism. (This application fits all religions, including Judaism, when they demonize other religions. This leads in a straight line to the evils committed in religion's name in so many places in so many cultures.)

Having articulated all the limitations on absolutism implicit in pluralism, one must reemphasize nevertheless that pluralism does not give up absolute claims or standards of right and wrong, in their proper place and boundaries. In principled pluralism, practitioners of absolute faiths do not give up their obligation to criticize that which is wrong (or what they believe to be wrong) or less than full realization in the other faiths. The critique is made within the rubric of a broader shared truth and does not deny the legitimacy of the other faith. In the argument between truths, the truth might be further clarified or the balance of support for truth improved. And because the other is not being demolished, one may listen and learn from the other or one may be persuaded

to modify one's own views or to illuminate them with the insights of the other.

There is yet another absolute dimension to the pluralistic view. Another faith/system/truth may indeed, upon analysis, be discovered to be totally wrong. Indeed it may be so evil as to be denied the right to be preached or propagated. After all, even images of God may turn to evil and use their free will to become murderers or child molesters or totally evil people. This raises the possibility that the faith/culture/truth by which they are being nurtured is evil and does not deserve to exist. (It may be that they are only misapplying or disturbing a valid system which will be dealt within another way.) But one can say of Nazism or of a religion that would teach child sacrifice or glorify killing, immorality, injustice that it is not only wrong, it is illegitimate. Pluralism allows for this possibility, albeit it operates on the presumption that this is unlikely. Also, given past abuses, pluralists will prefer to defeat illegitimate ideas without suppression. Pluralists prefer to give free speech and leeway to others - especially since unleashing this tendency to suppression may give free rein to the worst tendencies in one's own religion. It could bring forth behavior in my own system that could lead it to forfeit its own legitimate values. Still, in the end, pluralism shows that it has not relativized and has not given up right and wrong by its continuing ability to say no to that which demands a no - and not just by its ability to say yes to that which was hitherto (unjustly) denied.

#### IV For Pluralism and Covenant

The other fundamental theological ground of pluralism is the concept of covenant. In this concept, the main goal of the faith, of the divine human partnership - is to create a human being in the image of God and to reshape the world so that it will sustain the image of God in its fullest dignity. For this reason, one must work to overcome poverty, hunger, oppression, war, sickness and death - all of which contract the intrinsic dignities of the image of God.

Covenant teaches us that God's main purpose is to create a human being in the image of God; i.e. a creature of infinite value, equality, uniqueness. The goal is not to create an obedient servant for the greater glory of God. For if that was the goal then God could create a human who is programmed to obey or God could bring repeated floods/destructions until humans surrendered and obeyed. Instead God affirmed free will and the primacy of choice. God self-limited and allowed humans to exercise their freedom, even to the point of committing sin. In entering into covenant, God accepts that stopping evil and ending suffering will not happen at God's preferred pace but only as fast as humans are able to change and grow into full acceptance of truth and consistent good behavior. This concession extends the infinite divine suffering indefinitely; yet God so loves humans as to accept that delay. Clearly, the motivation is that God wants an

infinitely valuable, equal, unique - hence free - human being to come out of the covenantal process.

One cannot separate the ends and the means. Humans cannot grow into value and equality by being dragooned. They can only learn to be free by being allowed to act freely even if they sin or misapply their freedom. Thus they learn by trial and error to be responsible and free. This is the validation of pluralism which allows people freedom to err, to sin, to grow in order to arrive at a mature and free set of truths, beliefs and positions. Only such values can be lived in the full presence of the other.

This points to the deeper level of truths in the divine realm which undergirds covenant and in turn is the infrastructure of pluralism. The infinite God creates and sustains reality and is the ground and nurturer of life. God loves life; God's infinite power and love generate and stimulate life in all its varieties. But God's unlimited infinity is so overwhelming and so all encompassing that it leaves no room for any other existence. In order to make room for existence, God's pleroma which occupies all space and time must self-limit (= *tzimtzum* in kabbalistic language) - i.e. take on restraint and limitations - in order to make room for the others, their dignity and existence. In the same way the divine truth is so sweeping that it cannot be contained/absorbed by humans; again God must self-limit and dress revelation in human language and metaphor in order to make it graspable by humans. Direct, unmediated contact with God would consume and demolish humans. "For the human cannot see Me and live". (Exodus 33,20). Out of love, God self-limits and limits the word of God so that it can give life and sustain it. Thus we learn a deep truth. The Divine infinity supports the infinite variety of life and the infinite value of the human being. But it does so by accepting limitations on its self in order to make room for the existence and dignity of the other. God turns these limits into dependable structures by entering into relationships, especially covenantal relationships, with humans. Then the divine establishes reliable limits on which humans can depend and to which they can appeal. This gives humans room to grow and to flourish in freedom.

The human being's highest calling - being already born in the image of God - is to develop this resemblance even more by a process of *imitatio dei*. If the Divine Infinite who is capable of perfect modulation, nevertheless exercises the power by self-limitation, then we learn that all power, love, wisdom must self-limit to enable the full dignity and value of the other to grow. Thus, pluralism is a profound form of *imitatio dei*.

We can extend this principle one step further. Only the Divine Infinite which is self-limited can sustain life and not destroy the other. Thus the covenantal God, the God of revelation is the God of Life, and God's word is the Tree of Life. By contrast, human systems - even divinely revealed ones - are constantly being extended without limit by their believers - unless they stop out of respect for others. But the human by

definition, cannot enclose the infinity of God, either in its expression or by their comprehension. There is a real danger that the human version/understanding which is, by definition, finite, will be extended by believers into an infinite claim which allows no room for the other. This human extension ends up with a pseudo-infinite; **this is the definition of idolatry**. Idolatry is the partial, frequently the human partial, which claims to be infinite. Idolatry which mimics the divine, claims the absolute status of the divine, yet it is in fact, finite. This pseudo infinite cannot sustain the infinity of life (or of human dignity). In fact, we know that idolatry is the God of death and it creates a realm of death.

Thus we can generalize. All human systems - even those that are given by divine revelation - that claim to be absolute, that exercise no self-limitation, that leave no room for the other - turn into idolatry; e.g. into sources of death. It is no accident that Nazism which sought perfection and eliminated all restraints and limitations (resorting to political dictatorship, economic and social utopianism, *gleichschaltung*, and all out war on the Jews as the obstacle to perfection) created a realm of total death - the kingdom of night. All political systems, all religions that allow themselves to make unlimited absolute claims are led to idolatrous behaviors. They often generate death dealing believers - frequently driven by the excess of good rather than by purely evil goals or claims. Similarly, all social systems that "other" the other and absolutize their own host culture/policy turn idolatrous and then degrade or destroy others. That is why pluralism of power and power centers, of truth and truth centers, of dignity and dignity centers is the best ground for life and for human dignity for all. Since sustaining life is the purpose of the religious systems (at least as implied by covenant), this pluralism is the highest form of religious behavior.

It is a tribute to the 20<sup>th</sup> century's sweep that it has widened our perspective to appreciate the dignity of the others (and to feel their sheer weight). We also have learned the bitter lesson of the Holocaust which taught us the unlimited death dealing which is implied in modern totalitarianism.

## V *Pluralism and Partnership*

Having glorified pluralism and held it up as the model of true religious service, let me conclude by arguing that we must go one step beyond it - to partnership. Pluralism moves beyond tolerance - in that it not only accepts the existence of the other, it seeks to recast its own understanding to affirm the ongoing validity and dignity of the other. A pluralist faith also learns and integrates insight from the other in the course of expressing its respect and interest in the other. Partnership goes one step further. The concept of partnership suggests that my truth/faith system alone cannot fulfill God's dreams. Therefore, the world needs the contribution that the other makes for the world's

own wholeness and perfection. The partnership perspective suggests that God has assigned different roles and different contributions to different groups and that the other groups are needed for *tikkun olam*. The partnership perspective suggests that many existential truths are dialectical and that a truth that is deep in one area, may not be able to do justice to the antipode - so the other faith is needed to explore that possibility in its fullest depth. Between all of us we can provide for the fullest scope of human expression. We need each other to represent the full range of the service of God.

Thus a Jew with a partnership theology would affirm the classic Christian specialization in a religious system that explores faith and ideology as central categories - precisely because so much of Judaism's depth is organized around the significance of biology for faith community and the dialectic of birth and choice, of action and attitude. Thus a follower of Islam marveling at the perfect submission which Islam teaches would affirm the relevance of another path (Christianity) in which God intervenes to suffer with and to lift up humans and with a Judaism which places tremendous emphasis on human action and responsibility in the world. This would be a particularly valuable widening of the circle of faith in modern times; otherwise the growth of human power and capability may lead to a situation where the most significant human activity grows beyond religious categories and direction. (This has happened to some extent and it has brought terrible abuses and great secularization in its course.)

This approach leads Jews and Christians to learn and incorporate the other's insight (Islam's) and thus strengthen the reaffirmation of the importance of human humility and submission in an age when human power is at such a peak that it turns arrogant and threatens to spin out of control, threatening environment and culture alike.

One can point to the partnership role of Buddhism in challenging this worldliness through its negation of existence, or of Christianity's role in offering a dialectic of this world and the world to come and of modern Judaism's attempt to make the secular, this world, holy. All are needed; each individually is ineffective or overwhelmed; all may contribute to filling out each other's insights and correcting on-sidedness in the other or in itself. Each partner can recover main themes from the other, often by recognizing that this has been a minor theme in its own tradition, (a resource which can be drawn upon to find the vocabulary and repertoire to incorporate the other's insight). Each partner can see the other reaching certain people or deeply suffusing certain cultures in a way that it cannot. Together we can bring the whole world closer to God.

Partners seek out and show active interest in the other and draw upon the other's experience. (Neo-orthodox scholars and Protestant theologians were enormously helpful to me when my own Orthodox tradition had not yet coped with certain modern challenges.) Partners seek to help and strengthen the other such as Christians have done for Soviet Jews; such as Jews in the United States begin to do for persecuted Christians

and other faiths around the world.)

Together as partners we can work to check materialism and to sanctify the material. Together as partners we can work to channel and soften the power of market forces toward a balance with *tzedakah* (help that is righteousness and not just caritas; help that is redistributive and not just ameliorative). Of course, even as religions partner to restrain in capitalism, we must maintain humility in the face of the incredible productivity and human liberation successes which the market has accomplished.

If we can move to pluralism and then to partnership, we can see ourselves as servants of God who are content to achieve God's goals even if we ourselves do not turn out to be the center or the exclusive beneficiaries of the redemption. Then we can say that our model of passionate, principled pluralism can overcome both relativism and absolutism and offer a valid third way. Then we can learn the humility of seeing our limited role in the vast cosmic scheme as a worthy and fulfilling role. We can take satisfaction in knowing that *harbay shluchim lamakom* - God has many agents/messengers. We all should feel grateful that we can be one of them. "Blessed be all that come in the name of the loving God."