

Selections from Eugene B. Borowitz, "The Autonomous Jewish Self," *Modern Judaism* 4,1 (1984), 39-56

The very most significant idea the Emancipation taught us, I venture to say, is the notion of the autonomous self....

Liberals today have lost the optimism connected with that 18th century notion but we are far from ready to give up its high estimate of the human value of self-determination. If anything, our experience with the moral failure of every kind of institution and collective has forced us back on the self as the proper, ultimate touchstone of righteous existence....

If Judaism

was to survive the Emancipation, acculturation was a spiritual duty. In that time one could well take the Jewishness of most Jews for granted. Hence the immediate task of liberal theologians was to clarify the ways in which Jews were not only permitted to be active participants in general culture but should see this as a new Jewish duty.

Living in a vastly different time, we have almost the diametrically opposite liberal Jewish theological agenda. Our universalism is largely secure, as our continuity at the university, in large cities and our subsequent secularization attests. Our new Jewish excitement comes from our turn to our particular roots. Liberal theologians now hear themselves summoned to recapture a compelling particularism without sacrificing the gains of the universalization of Judaism....

To meet our particularist needs we must find a way to reshape [a] ... relationally autonomous self so that it has a direct, primary, ethnic form.... A Jewish self is characterized not only by a grounding personal relationship with God but relates to God as part of the people of Israel's historic Covenant with God....

... I would like to devote some space here to analyzing in some detail the dialectic of freedom and constraint in the liberal Jewish self....

The folk, through its institutions, customs and folkways, could be seen as providing the forms for Jewish self-actualization, including a developing law....

They do not

"command" my sort of liberal Jew precisely because of their external, heteronomous nature.

That is, I and many Jews like me can accept Jewish tradition as guiding us, indeed as an incomparably valuable resource, but not as overriding "conscience." Identifying our dignity as human beings with our autonomy, we are determined to think for ourselves. However, we are not general selves but Jewish selves....

... the Jewish self gives patterned continuity to its existence by a continual orientation to God as part of the people of Israel's historic Covenant. Four aspects of this situation deserve comment.

First ... the Jewish self is personally and primarily involved with God. Jewishness is lived out of a relationship with God

Second, and inextricably bound with the first, though subsidiary to it, is the Jewish self's participation in the Jewish people as part of its ongoing relation to God.

Third, the Jewish self, through the Covenant is historically rooted as well as Divinely and communally oriented. Modern Jews not only did not initiate the Covenant, they are not the first to live it. While social conditions and self-perceptions have greatly changed over the centuries, the basic relationship and the partners involved in it have remained the same. Human nature, personally and socially, has not appreciably altered

Fourth, the Jewish self, because of its intimate connections with God, folk and tradition, is sensitized to more than the present and its call to decision. All persons, as

I see it, but certainly Jews, should put the immediate exercise of autonomy into the framework of attaining personal integrity. For a person lives in time and the self persists as well as chooses. The soul which lives only in the present with little connection to previous experience and minimal thought to the future denies not only the chronological character of creatureliness but the most creative of human acts, to give wholeness to an entire life.... in the clash between a pressing, immediate insight and an old, once-valuable but now empty practice, we will know ourselves authorized to break with the past and do acts which more appropriately express our deepest commitments....

... from a relational perspective, the Jewishness of the Jewish self should now be seen less in its obedient observance than in its authentically living in Covenant....

This multiplication of simultaneous responsibilities-to self, to God, to the Jewish past, present and future, and to humankind as a whole (through the Noachide covenant of which Jews remain a part)- obviously creates special problems for decision makers. Facing any choice, one must take account of many commitments. And not infrequently there will be conflict among them. This constitutes a further reason for acknowledging the legitimacy, indeed the desirability of pluralistic Jewish practice and thought. More, we must remain continually open to the possibility that new and unanticipated forms may arise to express genuinely the imperatives which flow from existence in Covenant.