What to do when there's too much to do: Ideas for Self Care

Keynote Address: NJ Association of Jewish Communal Service May 30, 2008

Rabbi Ellen Lewis

First, I'd like to thank Barbara Weisbart and Amy Cooper for all the time, energy and care they have put into creating this program today and for the advice they have given me in communicating the needs of this group; Howard Charish, my old friend from Metrowest, and Diane Naar, director of my own Federation, for allowing me to pick their brains; and all of you, for sharing your concerns and for being willing to begin this conversation with me.

I'd like to start today with a case study of a man who was enormously dedicated to his work with the Jewish people, although at times he felt reluctant and often frustrated. It seemed that everyone offered him an opinion but no one wanted the responsibility that came with making choices. No matter how hard he tried to do his job, the odds were against him. Even though his advice was good, no one listened to him. All they wanted to do was complain, and did they ever complain. Their needs seemed bottomless. He found himself working morning, noon and night. Years went by when he didn't see his family. He felt so alone. He felt pressure from the world outside as well as from the Jewish community itself, never mind the pressure from his own internal expectations. It wasn't until he was on the verge of collapse that he finally reached out and asked for help. The advice he got was simple: Don't try to do it all yourself. He was told: Share the burden with others. When he took this advice, it made a huge difference. He saw that it was better for the community and better for him. People still complained, he still felt frustrated at times and there was still

too much to do, but he no longer felt that he alone was responsible for meeting their needs and remedying their unhappiness. Life wasn't perfect. He didn't get everything he wanted, but he got enough to keep going and to be reminded of the value of his work.

This man – whom we know as Moses, if you haven't guessed – was the original Jewish communal service worker. Like you, he was in a position where the boundaries of his job were fluid. Like you, his work couldn't be separated from his dedication to the Jewish people. Like you, it was his impulse to serve that guided his professional choices, not the promise of financial reward. Like you, he had many bosses. Like you, his job was to Judaize as well as to socialize the Jewish community, although that may have left him too little time for himself. Like you, he heard the divine call, "*Lech, red min ha har*" – Moses, get down off this mountain and go be with the people, engage with them, love them, hate them, but no matter the cost to yourself, commit to them because that is your destiny. And no doubt you also know that after all that dedication, Moses got to see the Promised Land only from afar. He truly sacrificed himself for the Jewish people.

In the tradition of Moses, you have all been taught that the essence of Judaism is found in caring for others. If you use Moses as the standard for Jewish communal work, you get the idea that the community's needs come first and you have to beg, borrow and steal, if you want time for yourself. Later Jewish tradition would seem to support that idea, that the community's needs are primary. Our prayer book reminds us every day of the words of the Mishnah which say: "These are the

obligations without measure whose reward, too is without measure – to honor your father and mother, to perform acts of lovingkindness, to attend the house of study daily, to welcome the stranger, to visit the sick, to rejoice with bride and groom, to console the bereaved, to pray with sincerity, to make peace where there is strife." There is no explicit mention of caring for yourself. Where the Torah does explicitly mention the self, it tells us: *vahavta l'rayecha camocha*, love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. xix. 18), the most important principle of the Torah according to Hillel. Following Hillel, Akiba had declared the commandment "love your neighbor as yourself" to be the greatest fundamental commandment of Torah. But even there, Maimonides' advice on how to love your neighbor as your "self" is to follow the words of the Mishnah quoted above and take care of the community. No mention of self-care for its own sake.

Today I'd like to expand the idea of *gemilut hasadim* – acts of lovingkindness - to include self-care. I'd like to do that by turning to a second century Jewish source, Shimon ben Azzai. Ben Azzai disagrees with Hillel and Rabbi Akiba's position. Ben 'Azzai, says that a still greater principle is found in Genesis 5: "Zeh sefer toldot Adam - this is a record of the human line from the day God created human beings, making them in the likeness of God" (Gen. v. 1; Sifra, Ḳedoshim, iv.; Yer. Ned. ix. 41c; Gen. R. xxiv.). According to Ben Azzai, being made "in the likeness of God" is more important than "lov[ing] your neighbor as yourself." He says that the latter principle allows you to run the danger of saying: "Since I am hated, let my neighbor be similarly hated, or since I am in trouble, let my neighbor be similarly in trouble." Rather, he tells us, "You should remember that both you and your neighbor were

created in the likeness of God." Think of the implications of ben Azzai's position. You don't love your neighbor as yourself as if your neighbor's needs were the same as yours. You should love your neighbor as yourself because you are both created in God's likeness. Put this way, self-care isn't about putting someone else first; it is about caring for both your self and others as part of God's creation. There is no hierarchy of needs here. Community care and self-care deserve equal attention; the choice isn't an either-or, it is a both-and. The principle of *Gemilut Hasadim*, therefore, doesn't apply only to others; it also applies to how you treat yourself. I'd like to offer three premises regarding how to apply *gemilut hasadim* to yourself: first, that self-care starts with self-awareness; second, that you can't create self-awareness by yourself; and third, that you have to take care of yourself all the time, at home or at work, wherever you are.

Forgive me if I generalize for a moment about the kinds of selves who become Jewish communal service workers: you are people who tend to be more attuned to the needs of others than to your own. You are by and large giving people and you are people with a mission. You may want to make the world a better place, you may want to make the Jewish community a better place, you may want to make a Jewish organization a better place, you may want to inspire, you may want to help others find spiritual wholeness, you may want to teach children to love God, you may simply want to increase Torah study *lishma* – but your focus tends to be more external than internal. All this is admirable but, at root, it is not entirely altruistic. Taking care of others can also reflect an unconscious wish to be taken care of. On

some level, you have the hope that if you treat others lovingly, you will get the love you deserve in return. If you are unaware that this is part of your motivation, it can make you sacrifice yourself on the altar of the childhood wish for love.

It isn't what we know about ourselves that creates problems; it's what we don't know. This is true for all human beings, not just Jewish communal workers. We all have feelings that we have learned how to bury, even those of us who had a pretty good childhood. Regardless of the quality or configuration of your respective family lives, each of you here figured out how to survive. Some of those survival skills are ones you feel good about and continue to rely on; others worked well for the time but, when you repeat them now, end in dismal failure and you can't figure out why. There is something about your own motivation that eludes you. The problem in your lives isn't carrying around the baggage that you know about; it's carrying around the other stuff that lurks behind that door of the brain marked "Do Not Enter." And that's what gets people into trouble. I believe the path to self-care requires unlocking that door and seeing what's behind it. And although each of you has the key to your own door, it's like those safe deposit boxes at the bank; one key doesn't do it. Someone else has to be there with the other key. This is just another way of saying that there are some things that you cannot figure out on your own. It isn't just a matter of "the unexamined life is not worth living." That makes self-examination sound like a voluntary ideal; I don't think it is. I think it is a practical necessity in your line of work. Because there is an additional challenge here beyond the usual challenge of knowing what's in your unconscious, and that is that people

who go into communal service are trained to know things about others but not necessarily to know things about ourselves.

Self-awareness is the path to figuring out what you want both consciously and unconsciously. How do you develop self-awareness? Many people like to work on this through reading, meditation, yoga, or journaling, but my experience is that you come to know yourself best through talking in relationship with others who are trained to listen as therapists and supervisors. When I speak about supervision here, I am not talking about task-oriented supervision, although that can be very important. I am talking about the kind of supervision that helps you figure out what gets in the way of your enjoying your job as fully as possible. Supervision can take many different forms. It can be individual or in a small group. It can be with other communal service workers or with people who have nothing to do with communal service but are in other helping professions. The model can be family systems or modern analytic or anything else you might create to meet your specific needs. What matters is that you find or create a model that gives you a regular opportunity to talk, to observe yourself in the moment, to get help sorting out issues, and to plan strategies for working well with others and for keeping yourself comfortable.

We communal workers – and I include myself in this category - are accustomed to being the people who are supposed to be listeners and responders. In order to do the job, it is important first to have an experience of being listened to and accepted without having to listen in turn. What I have learned is that only after I myself had the experience of being listened to could I truly listen to someone else. Only after I

myself had the experience of feeling accepted did I learn to fully accept others. Only then could I figure out which burdens belonged to me and which didn't, what to take personally and what not to take personally, how to shoulder only what I had to shoulder and how to share the rest. I learned – and continue to learn - that feeling listened to helped me learn how to be appropriately selfish and set the right boundaries and limits. If you can create an opportunity in which you can have this kind of experience, you model for others how they, too, can set the right personal boundaries for themselves. This kind of talking helps you move your feelings up to a conscious level so that you can figure out what you want.

When I was in rabbinical school back in the mid-70's, they didn't believe in supervision. We had student placements in congregations, in religious schools, in Jewish Family Service, in Federations, in Community Centers, and we were not supervised. I asked once why our training in pastoral counseling (in Cincinnati we called it Human Relations) was so inadequate. Surely there had to be skills we could learn. I was told: "These are not things that can be taught. Either you have it or you don't." My experience tells me otherwise; emotional self-awareness can be taught and it can be learned. I was lucky to experience good supervision some years later in a small group at a modern psychoanalytic institute. I didn't join the group because I had any intention of becoming a psychoanalyst, far from it at the time; I just knew that something was missing from my rabbinate and myself and I needed to figure out what that was. I was the only rabbi among social workers, psychologists, nurses and teachers. We were told to talk about anything we wanted to discuss; we could present a case or a situation or we could present ourselves as

the case. I was too terrified to open my mouth. I wondered: Who were these other people in the room with me? Could I trust them? What if they knew someone in my congregation; what if God forbid, they joined my congregation? If I discussed a situation involving a congregant, was I violating the rabbi-congregant relationship in some way? And so I sat silently for three sessions; I had what I would now call emotional lockjaw. As I listened over time, however, I became more comfortable in the group. I realized that I didn't have to talk about anything I didn't want to talk about; these people were there to help me sort out whatever I chose. Then came the sudden inexplicable death of a 17 year old girl in my congregation and I found out how lucky I was to have a place to talk. The group allowed me to express my feelings of devastation so that my feelings didn't immobilize me or get in the way of my helping her parents tolerate the very worst kind of loss. After awhile, I realized that I no longer experienced supervision as terrifying; in fact, I truly felt it to be liberating. I began to wonder how and why I had ever survived without it. What on earth had led me to think that even if I could manage 300 families on my own, that it was a good idea? If I had been the CEO of a small company, surely I wouldn't have operated without collaboration and consultation on difficult issues. Parker Palmer, who writes about the nexus of spirituality and leadership, calls this "functional atheism," the idea that "the ultimate responsibility for everything rests with [you]."

Too many communal workers feel alone in this sense of ultimate responsibility. At times, your job seems to be based on the idea that you are infinitely available and your time is endlessly expandable. But the truth is, there is never enough time and the needs of the community are endless. When I was in my first rabbinic position in

a very large congregation in Dallas in the early 80's, part of my job was to run the Religious School of 700 children. Although I was expected to be on the bimah, I wasn't expected to preach too frequently or to be on call for life cycle events. The other two rabbis were to do all that. But after I had been there for a year or two, my job began to change. Families I knew from the school requested me for their life cycle events. We had created a preschool with extended day that was taking up a lot of my time. I was suddenly on call for things I hadn't been on call for before. Plus I now had two children instead of one. I didn't talk to anyone about it and I kept trying to do it all myself because I didn't know any better. Luckily, the laypeople did know better. They talked with a management consultant who was a member of the synagogue. They gave him a copy of my job description. He said: this job description is useless because it has no priorities in it. How is the rabbi supposed to know what the most important items are on any given day? You, as a lay committee, and you, as the rabbi, should sit down separately and write down all the parts of this job. Then you should rank those parts in order of priority. Then you should come together to talk about it. But don't start with the school; the school will take up 150% of anyone's time. Start with the other things; if you only end up with 50% of the rabbi's time left over for the school, hire someone else to do that part.

I have always remembered these words because the experience taught me something simple yet profound: that it was better when everything could be talked about. I have learned that the consequences of not talking and of not being self-aware are potentially severe because when we can't talk, we act on our unconscious feelings. Feelings have to go somewhere. If you are aware of them and you

verbalize them appropriately, they are harmless. They remain just feelings. But if you are not talking and don't have an opportunity to express these feelings, you run the danger of "acting in" or "acting out." "Acting in" leads to all kinds of physical and emotional maladies. Your feelings get stuck inside of you and aren't available to your consciousness. Alternatively, buried feelings can cause you to "act out" on your impulses rather than know what you are feeling. And if you don't know your own feelings, you often hold others responsible for conflicts that rightfully belong to you. In the Road Less Traveled, Scott Peck tells an instructive story about how he acted out during his psychiatric residency in an outpatient clinic.

Perhaps because I was more dedicated to my patients and my own education than most of my fellow residents, I found myself working much longer hours than they. They ordinarily saw patients only once a week. I often saw my patients two or three times a week. As a result I would watch my fellow residents leaving the clinic at four-thirty each afternoon for their homes, while I was scheduled with appointments up to eight or nine o'clock at night, and my heart was filled with resentment. As I became more and more resentful and more and more exhausted I realized that something had to be done. So I went to Dr. Badgely [the clinic director] and explained the situation to him. I wondered whether I might be exempted from the rotation of accepting new patients for a few weeks so that I might have time to catch up. Did he think that was feasible? Or could he think of some other solution to the problem? Mac listened to me very intently and receptively, not interrupting once. When I was finished, after a moment's silence, he said to me sympathetically, "Well, I can see you do have a problem." I beamed, feeling understood. "Thank you, " I said, "what do you think should be done about it?" To this Mac replied, "I told you Scott, you do have a problem." This was hardly the response I expected. "Yes," I said, slightly annoyed," I know I have a problem. That's why I came to see you. What do you think I ought to do about it?" Mac responded, "Scott, apparently you haven't listened to what I said. I have heard you and I am agreeing with you. You do have a problem. " "Goddammit," I said, "I know I have a problem. I knew that when I came in here. The question is, what am I going to do about it?" "Scott," Mac replied, "I want you to listen. Listen closely and I will say it again. I agree with you. You do have a problem. Specifically, you have a problem with time. *Your* time. Not *my* time. It's not my problem. It's your problem with your time. You, Scott Peck, have a problem with your time. That's all I'm going to say about it."

Peck reports that he strode out of his supervisor's office, furious and stayed that way for three months. But after awhile, he came to a new realization:

"My time was my responsibility. It was up to me and me alone to decide how I wanted to use and order my time. If I wanted to invest my time more heavily than my fellow residents in my work, then that was my choice, and the consequences of that choice were my responsibility. It might be painful for me to watch my fellow residents leave their offices two or three hours before me and it might be painful to listen to my wife's complaints that I was not devoting myself sufficiently to the family, but these pains were the consequence of a choice that I had made. If I did not want to suffer them, then I was free to choose not to work so hard and to structure my time differently. My working hard was not a burden cast upon me by hardhearted fate or a hardhearted clinic director; it was the way I had chosen to live my life and order my priorities. As it happened," he concluded, "I chose not to change my life style. But with my change in attitude, my resentment of my fellow residents vanished. It simply no longer made any sense to resent them for having chosen a life style different from mine when I was completely free to choose to be like them if I wanted to. To resent them was to resent my own choice to be different from them, a choice I was happy with." (43)

Somehow, like Peck, we have gotten the idea that work is the enemy of self-care. And there are times when that seems to be the case. I am reminded of something my colleague Rabbi Debbie Prinz told me years ago when she was first ordained. She said,, "The Reform movement supports the idea of the three child family and the idea of ordaining female rabbis, it just doesn't support the idea of a female rabbi with three children." If our institutions don't initiate the process, we have to be the ones to do the integrating of the personal with the professional. When I was first thinking about the rabbinate at the ripe old age of 22, I talked to my Rabbi Charles Kroloff. He said, "There are two things you need to know if you want to be a rabbi. First, learn how to say no. Second, never rely on anyone else to take care of your family but you." At the time, I had no idea what he was talking about. I didn't have

the self-awareness or experience to know. But now I know. This is my midrash on what he meant: don't let your wish to be taken care of by your employer interfere with your responsibility to take care of yourself and your family. Let them take care of you in the appropriate ways, like paying you for doing your job and treating you with respect. Control your own destiny. You're the one in charge of saying yes and no. You are the one who knows when you are comfortable and uncomfortable. If someone else is in charge of that in your life, it is because you have given them that power. No one else can tell you what you want unless you allow it. Know what you want. You might not always get it, but you stand a better chance of getting it if you know what you want than if you haven't a clue.

Self-care starts with self-awareness. It is the vehicle for knowing what you want. It can be achieved through working with others, in pairs or in small groups, but it can't be done alone. It includes the idea that you have to take care of yourself all the time, at home and at work, all day long. This morning we have begun a conversation. My goal isn't to offer you solutions but to encourage you to think about what it means to practice *gemilut hasadim* toward yourself as well as to others, what it means to love your neighbor not as yourself but to love your neighbor and yourself. I began with the case of Moses as the first Jewish communal service worker. I'd like to conclude with a different case, a modern parable whose author we don't know. It is called The Rabbi's Gift. This version comes from a different book by Scott Peck called <u>The Different Drum</u>.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of antimonastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost

and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again " they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years, "the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving --it was something cryptic-- was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an

ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

There is only one thing left to say and that is this: Remember, the messiah might be

one of you.

Parker Palmer, "Leading from Within: Reflections on Spirituality and Leadership." In Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation, John Wiley and Sons, Inc. Ch. 5.