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Dear Colleague:

What do we want out of life? Love, admiration, respect, honor, prestige, money, and so on. Maybe it all mounts to power. Even love, for as Kissinger says, power is a great aphrodisiac. We academics can't afford to be too honest about what we really want. Not so a mobster. So let's hear what he has to say. To a reporter's question, "What's so great being a mobster?" one such person replied: "It's the greatest thing that a human could experience... When you sneeze, 15 handkerchiefs come out. I mean, everywhere you go, people just can't do enough for you. At Christmas people are hangin' on your door, dropping off gifts. If it rains, 25 umbrellas open up. If you walk into a restaurant, they'll chase the person out of the best table and put you there. There's just so much glamor and respect and money... In the Mob, you've got friends, you belong to an army, something that is powerful. You're with the elite. Your word is law... Anything you say is final. You feel that you're so superior that you're chosen" (Time, June 17, 1991).

Sound great, but since even a mobster can command these privileges they are somewhat devalued in my eyes. What about using God as a model of what it really means to be powerful? When it rains in heaven, 25 archangels spread their wings over his balding head. Ok. So there is a touch of the Oriental despot in him. On the other hand, God's greatest manifestation of power lies not in the pageantry of his court but in his ability to make things--including us. He makes things, according to the Zohar, by a process of withdrawal: in other words, God plus all creation is less than God alone. God, by withdrawing, provides space for beings other than himself to exist. This is especially true of human beings, whose independence--whose freedom to deny the existence of God himself--depends on God's making himself scarce. If we take God as model of the all powerful, it becomes clear that the human beings who come closest to knowing such power are the good parents and teachers, and, to a lesser degree, artists and inventors. Their special technique lies in knowing when to intervene and when to step tactfully aside, with arms outstretched.

On second thought, it still would be nice if I step out of Science Hall one rainy day, and a student umbrella opens up over my head!

Best wishes,

*Zi-Fu*