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In this essay, the author attempts to show how Talmudic sources suggest numerous modern principles of mental health. Dr. Spector is a clinical psychologist in Brooklyn, New York.

THE TALMUD AND THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY

Through the ages, man has always searched for security, whether physical or emotional. On the emotional level, inner strength and self-confidence gave the individual the ability to control his emotions and make satisfactory adjustments. With enough ego status and love, one can lower self defenses sufficiently to be considerate of others and share with them.

Insecurity, on the other hand, is selfishness that manifests itself in the lack of consideration for the rights and feelings of others. It is "inferiority" that expresses itself in constant criticism, self deprecation and the inability to take chances. It is "cynicism" that begets flattery and hypocrisy. It is "moral weakness" that is accompanied by poor emotional control and a distortion of real value. Finally, it is "rigidity," the inability to change or be flexible.

The sciences of psychiatry and psychology are most helpful in the search for security. Their insights are the product of much research and progress. But more than sixteen centuries ago the Talmud was compiled and in it five hundred years of careful observation of human relations were distilled. These same concepts are valuable aids in today's search for security.

INNER STRENGTH

For our discussion, inner strength will be considered in terms of the ability to adjust to circumstances. Many people permit

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themselves to be discouraged by the cruelties of fate, while others gain strength from them. The sages say that the Lord gives wisdom only to those who have wisdom.¹ If one profits from previous experience one has a much better chance to adjust to all circumstances. If you understand the old lessons, you will understand the new lesson.²

But insight is not enough. The ability to apply it is of equal importance. The Talmud states, for example, that temptation resisted twice no longer remains temptation.³ Certainly this is a sign of inner strength, as is the ability to suppress one's own feelings for the sake of others. Thus we are told that a man should not rejoice among the mourners, weep among the celebrants, stay awake among the sleepers, sleep among the waking ones, stand among the sitters, or sit among the standers.⁴ It is specified that he deserves credit who causes merriment at a wedding, keeps silent among mourners, listens at a lecture, comes early to meetings, concentrates when studying and gives charity when fasting.⁵ Such behavior requires inner strength.

The desire to be the "overdog" may lead us to interfere where we may cause more harm than good. The Talmud warns us not to placate some one at the height of his anger.⁶

Another injunction concerns itself with the difficulty of tolerating the fanaticism and bigotry of the ignorant perfectionist. He is often at variance with the average person. The Talmud advises against living near an ignorant perfectionist.⁷

SELF CONFIDENCE

Self-confidence is closely tied to the control of emotions. Self-confidence is engendered not only by success but also by good emotional control. When there is a genuine check on emotions so that they do not cause erratic and harmful behavior, there is the feeling that all challenges can be met. Such self-confidence is an integral part of security. The Talmud defines "the person of strength" as one "who subdues his emotions."⁸ Similar is the assertion that among the three types of persons that God loves are those who do not become angry.⁹

From another angle, emotional control also involves the

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ability to recognize and correct one's weaknesses and to avoid projecting them in others. The Talmud suggests that one should seek the truth (emotional control) in himself before expounding it to others.¹⁰ It is so much easier to criticize and correct others, but the so-called superiority feeling leads to insecurity. When will the corrector's faults be exposed?

On the manifestations of self-confidence the sages say, "A man's joy may be detected in his speech."¹¹ Self-confidence built upon knowledge is reflected in the ability to answer calmly all questions and differences of opinion.

ACCEPTANCE — BY SELF AND OTHERS

If an individual can accept his personality with all its limitations, he can live a full life, without self-pity or guilt feelings. Such acceptance begets respect by others.

The Talmud exclaims how humble the great are.¹² They can afford to be humble because they have no need to defend their prestige against challenge or threat.

Symbols of acceptance in the Talmud are in spiritual rather than material terms. One greets his neighbor first since he knows his neighbor expects it.¹³ One is not to drain the water of his well, when others can use it.¹⁴ Only secure persons can be that considerate, champion causes, and become real leaders. He who brings merit to many will be protected from sin.¹⁵ This consideration for the welfare of the community (others) is guaranteed not only by divine blessings but also by freedom from the sin of selfishness.

Another insight offered by the sages is that greatness accrues to him who flees from it.¹⁶ The very search for greatness is in itself a symptom of pride and insecurity. The man who can resist the blandishments of greatness will not trample over others. Still another Talmudic statement is rather strange: one should be of the cursed, not of the cursers.¹⁷ The cursers are usually insecure people, with little prestige, who find the need to establish false acceptance by attracting attention. On the other hand, being among the cursed seems to indicate ego-status impenetrable to the cursers, and sufficient self-acceptance and prestige to understand and tolerate the cursing.

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FAITH

Faith is necessary for success. Man, perhaps, may be able to change his personality, to control his emotions, and broaden his social vision, so that the thought of failure can be tolerated. But God, nature and events do not permit continued success, and support is needed when security is threatened. The Talmud wisely says that a man is enjoined to utter a blessing upon an evil occurrence as well as upon a happy one.¹⁸ Good is interspersed with bad, and one must learn to understand the alternation. This principle is further elaborated in the Talmudic maxim that not everything is created for light or joy.¹⁹

Another aspect of faith worthy of consideration is faith in one's abilities. It is foolish to pretend infallibility, for this would necessitate an effort to keep a perfect "front." The Talmud suggests that one teach his tongue to say "I do not know" lest he speak a falsehood and be exposed.²⁰

LOVE

Spiritual love is distinguished by its concern for others. The giver of his love and help gains the strength of independence and the feeling of superiority. The "togetherness" and "mutual responsibility" that Jews feel for their brothers everywhere in the world is a manifestation of such love. When one group of priests was relieved in their Temple watch by the next group, the former asked God's blessings on the latter, that He bestow on them love, brotherliness, peace and friendship.²¹

The last three are the basis of love because they involve tolerance, compromise and sacrifice. Brotherliness causes us to overlook hurts arising from the weaknesses of others. Peace rests upon compromise — with oneself and with others. Sacrifice is indispensable to friendship. One demonstrates true love when one foregoes deeply ingrained habits and practices in order to love and serve one's fellow man.

As the Talmudic aphorism puts it, love nullifies the rules of pride.²² Love creates the security that permits doing things for others at the expense of established and comfortable behavior

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patterns. Not only does love carry its own reward in greater security, but it also bears with it, too, God's blessing. "The man who loves his neighbors will receive God's answer whenever he calls."²³

The strong man is one who can convert an enemy into a friend.²⁴ From the self-discipline of accepting provocations and suppressing negative reactions evolves mutual love. Empathy is a pillar of love. It is much easier to measure others in our own image — to bolster our weaknesses at their expense. Yet, when others suffer, we often offer unsolicited help. But do they want our "consolation"? The Talmud states that a person should not be consoled in his grief.²⁵

There are problems in the donor-recipient relation. The Talmud recognized the need for even the poor to maintain their dignity by stating that "even a poor man, supported by charity, must give charity"²⁶ — anything which he can give, even if only a smile. On the other hand, if one gives a gift to an intimate friend he is obliged to inform him.²⁷ Then the recipient can accept the gift as a sign of love.

SOME OBSTACLES TO SECURITY

Feelings of inferiority often destroy the security of an individual so that he becomes hypercritical of others but unable to tolerate criticism of himself. The Talmud notes that he who shames others will be shamed himself.²⁸ Verbal attacks at the best bring only momentary security.

Another aspect of inferiority is self-deprecation, which involves some atonement, perhaps, for the failure to do or be better. This is exemplified in the assertion that a woman is jealous only of a neighbor's children.²⁹ The question "Why can't you be like so and so?" has caused much anguish. The sages state also that persons who degrade their garments eventually find no enjoyment in them.³⁰ The inferior person often tries to bolster his status by attacking those who possess the qualities he lacks. The Rabbis state that the hatred of the ignorant toward the learned is greater than that of the nations of the world against Israel.³¹ A third aspect of inferiority is the

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fear to venture, for fear of failure. Against this inhibition the Talmud advises that it is best to cleave to those whom fortune seems to favor.³² Simply, one should pick a winner and stick with him. Certainly, security obtained by hanging on to another's coattails is still security.

Cynicism and hypocrisy often result when man loses the finer touch with himself and his fellowman. Four classes of men, the Talmud states, will not be admitted into the Divine Presence: scoffers, liars, hypocrites and those who retail slander;³³ the Lord hates the individual who says one thing and means another, who can testify in behalf of his friend and does not do so, and who reproves mildly an evil that he sees in his fellowman.³⁴ Further, one must beware of him who gives advice according to his own interests.³⁵

Poor emotional control is yet another stumbling block to security. Uncontrollable anger leads to recriminations and hostility to the extent that forgiveness is impossible. The Talmud declares that all kinds of hell rule over the person who is constantly angry.³⁶

Another example of poor emotional control is the person who constantly must take on dares and unnecessary risks to prove the strength that he actually does not possess. When he fails, he usually places the blame on others and creates a chain of charges and counter-charges. One should never submit himself to unnecessary or impossible trials.³⁷

Finally, there is the matter of rigidity. The rigid person has so little emotional control that he builds around himself a "safe" wall of habits, feelings and actions. He is always on guard to prevent penetration of his fortress lest he lose the precarious control of his emotions and subject himself to injury and abuse. Any change in his ways is a threat to his security. The sages sympathize with his plight, but nevertheless realize its precariousness. They say therefore that a man should pray for the grace that his intrinsic and extrinsic being ever be made strong enough to meet all vicissitudes.³⁸

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NOTES

1. *Berakhot* 55a.
2. *Ibid.*, 40a.
3. *Yoma* 38b.
4. *Derech Eretz Rabbah*, 6.
5. *Berakhot* 6b.
6. *Ibid.*, 7a.
7. *Shabbat* 63a.
8. *Tamid* 32a.
9. *Pesachim* 113b.
10. *Sanhedrin* 19a.
11. *Eruvin* 54a.
12. *Sotah* 5b.
13. *Berakhot* 6b.
14. *Yevamot* 11b.
15. *Yoma* 87a.
16. *Eruvin* 13b.
17. *Sanhedrin* 49a.
18. *Berakhot* 54a.
19. *Taanit* 15a.
20. *Berakhot* 4a.
21. *Ibid.*, 12a.
22. *Sanhedrin* 105b.
23. *Yevamot* 62b.
24. *Avot De Rabbi Natan*, 23:1.
25. *Avot* 4:23.
26. *Gittin* 7b.
27. *Shabbat* 10b.
28. *Moed Katan* 9b.
29. *Megillah* 13a.
30. *Berakhot* 62b.
31. *Pesachim* 49b.
32. *Ibid.*, 113a.
33. *Sotah* 42a.
34. *Pesachim* 113b.
35. *Sanhedrin* 76b.
36. *Nedarim* 22a.
37. *Sanhedrin* 107a.
38. *Ibid.*, 44b.