

## *Book Review*

*Religious Objects as Psychological Structures: A Critical Integration of Object Relations Theory, Psychotherapy, and Judaism*, by MOSHE HALEVI SPERO (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 242 pp.

Reviewed by  
Pesach Lichtenberg

Once upon an era, prophets roamed the world, and even ordinary people apprehended God, at least in the distorted form of gods.<sup>1</sup>

Time passed, and God came to be less immediately present. We tried to stay in touch nevertheless, be it by philosophical contemplation or mystic gnosis.<sup>2</sup>

But where does that leave us today? Philosophical demonstrations of the Deity's existence have fallen out of favor, though we might console ourselves that they never did contribute much to piety anyway.<sup>3</sup> Mysticism has meanwhile been pushed by our rational pretensions to the fringes of society, if not to the psychiatric ward itself.

Yet one should never count God out. Being omnipresent, He turns up in even the most unlikely of places. Take, for example, that den of atheistic reductionist iniquity known as psychoanalysis. Ever since Freud dismissed religion as just another neurosis ultimately derived from a very earthly father figure, God has been relegated by practitioners of the art to purely intrapsychic existence. The occasional religious figure who wandered into the fold<sup>4</sup> did little to alter this state of affairs.

Moshe Halevi Spero is not deterred. His substantial and growing corpus already contains many original insights into the possibility of reconciling psychology with Judaism. The work here reviewed goes even further. Assuming the truth of a God who exists outside of our minds, Spero brings to bear the full weight of psychological knowledge to analyze how God can be perceived by us. At the same time, Spero searches the sources of halakha—our objectified relationship with God—for hints to understanding human psychology. As Spero declares in the introductory section, according to his hypothesis, “religious concepts would be conceived of as having a unique, specifiable psychological identity, and psychological concepts, structures, and mechanisms as having an intrinsic religious identity” (p. xvi).

This is certainly a bold statement for an orthodox (in terms of fealty to Freud) psychoanalyst with a significant reputation in the field. But in an age when even homosexuals are unabashedly out of the closet, we should not be surprised that a believing psychoanalyst has dared to follow suit.

In the complex and nuanced factional battles amongst Freud's spiritual heirs, Spero may be located in the object relations camp. While psychoanalysis traditionally reduced much of human behavior to a conflict between biologically based drives and the impediments of an external or internal(-ized) reality, the object relations school, though not neglecting the power of drives and conflicts, holds that an additional factor plays a seminal role in human character: man's essential nature as an object-seeking creature.<sup>5</sup> One can hardly envisage anything spiritual emerging from a morass of conflicting impulses; yet once we posit a need to enter into a relationship with others, God's place in our theoretical universe is assured for all who seek (and, according to object relations theory, we are all initially and ultimately seekers). Spero exploits this possibility with a bold adaptation of *imitatio dei* (p. 30):

Just as He addresses man through psychological structures within which He planted His image, seeing as man is, after all, a psychological, object-seeking being; so, too, shall you address Him through psychological structures, seeing as He wishes to make Himself available as an object! [exclamation mark present in original]

In fact, this approach echoes, in psychological tones, an insight expressed in more philosophical terms by the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

There is a definite trend towards self-transcendence on the part of the spirit. It strives to escape its private inwardness and infiltrate the concrete world encompassed by space and pervaded by corporeal forms. The morphological process of self-realization from the inward to the outward is typical of the spiritual act. The arrow points towards externality, spatialization and quantification; and subjectivity rushes along this route. . . . [T]he spirit tirelessly endeavors to achieve an end which lies beyond its limits and ends.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Soloveitchik was referring to the striving intellect; but the self-transcendence of the Rav and the object seeking of Spero seem at their core to be attempts to describe the same process: the yearning of the soul to relate to the world beyond the confines of the individual.

Assuming that God exists, and that He created us, we may infer that He is interested in entering into some form of relationship with us. Granted, we cannot know God in His essence. Yet, philosophical arguments aside, we all carry with us a certain image of God, even if it is the God-who-doesn't-really-exist of the avowed atheist. This image differs for different individuals, as well as for each person in the course of his lifetime. Accordingly, we may subject the human image of God to an analysis of its vicissitudes and influences.

One need not profess a belief in God in order to undertake such an analysis. Spero devotes the third chapter of his book to an extensive review of prior efforts to explicate the image of God in psychological terms. Freud considered religion nothing but "psychology projected into the external world," or, still less flattering, "a counterpart to the neurosis which individual civilized men have to go through in their passage from childhood to maturity."<sup>7</sup> The assumption for Freud and for many subsequent writers is what Spero terms the psychologistic bias, which means that God-images are reduced to purely intra-psychic derivatives, and are presumed to lack any objective reality. It follows that the well-analyzed patient will be able to surrender his necessarily "neurotic" religious beliefs.

Later theorists have attempted to discern the stages of religious development, which they have considered a legitimate part of human behavior. The point of departure, however, generally remained that God is a human invention. As a corollary, the pinnacle of spiritual development was achieved when the moral content of religious teachings and symbols was integrated cohesively into the personality, while the sense of a personal, existing God dissolved. For example, Erich Fromm saw in the Maimonidean theology of the negative attributes of God the penultimate step in relinquishing belief in a Deity.<sup>8</sup>

Progress was made in the psychology of religion with the concept of the "transitional object," first formulated by the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. This is the teddy bear, or piece of cloth, or not merely proverbial security blanket, which the infant or young child carries about everywhere, and which serves to soothe or to comfort. The transitional object is transitional in the sense of existing in the twilight area between external and internal reality. While exerting the calming effect of a parent, it is, after all, only a teddy bear; what is actually occurring is that the infant is soothing himself. Ultimately, the functions of this semi-imaginary creation are internalized, and the object itself may be discarded.

Winnicott delineated here a realm of experience not subject to the usual forces of Freudian reductionism. He remarks,

This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.<sup>9</sup>

This formulation allowed theorists to understand God not as the relic of a childhood neurosis, but rather as an honorable transitional object representing man's more creative strivings.

In effect, God was promoted from objectified father image to cosmic teddy bear.<sup>10</sup> But He remained a product of our psyches.

In his book, Spero assumes that God exists independently of our psychological makeup; however, we can apprehend Him only through the same mental apparatus which we bring to bear upon the rest of the world.<sup>11</sup> Now, our idea of even very earthly creations may be rife with distortions, often the detritus of childhood development. Traditional psychotherapy is a process aimed at minimizing such distortions via the image of the psychotherapist. If the client tends to see the therapist in some fanciful way—say, as a powerful, beneficent miracle worker, or as a miserable, impotent money-grubber—a central goal of therapy is for that image (and hopefully other similar images disrupting the client's well-being) to be purified of subjective contaminants and to be edged closer to its objective correlate.

Our image of God, suggests Spero, traverses a similar route. The sense of God will undergo many permutations on the way to maturity. The young child's belief in a God who can bestow all good things and annihilate all his enemies may indeed contain elements of immature fantasies of self-grandiosity projected outwards. But the core of this image may well be an inchoate apprehension of the divine, which in the adult can finally emerge as "mysterious, all-encompassing, and understanding" (p.68), with greater reciprocity and a sense that the individual is of significance in the cosmic scheme.

The problem with many of these schemes of personality development is that what aims to objectively describe is instead determining normative standards. Health is not easy to define; nor is maturity. Spero is aware that any description of a mature image of God must leave plenty of leeway for different personalities: "the god who *initially* emerges during psychotherapy... [is] a representation in flux, a psychic residue of myriad forces, motives, internalizations, and perceptions" (p. 88). This is important, lest one particular subjective sense of God be deemed legitimate to the exclusion of others. Any scheme must tolerate both

the rational philosopher and the mystic seeker. The serene believer, as well as the lonely man of faith, have to be accounted for.

Spero is interested in the compatibility of halakha, broadly conceived as “the fundamental ethic and praxis of Jewish religion” (p. 97), and psychology, especially as applied in psychotherapy. One common straightforward approach would deny the possibility of achieving anything more than a *modus vivendi* of non-belligerence between the two fields: Torah is Truth, and will suffer psychology only insofar as the latter, in a pragmatic, evaluational manner, reduces suffering (as would be expected of any field in medicine). Halakha is how Jews worship God; psychology is how man worships man; the twain will never and should never meet. Deriving from this approach is a host of so-called “Torah psychologies” offering theoretically neutered approaches, highlighted by a selection of user-friendly rabbinic quotations.

Spero’s tack is different. He starts with a simple (though never quite thusly articulated) syllogism:

1. Given that halakha is true;
2. and given that the insights of psychodynamic psychology are true;
3. it follows, that halakha and psychology must be consistent with each other.

To start with the first axiom: what does it mean that halakha is true? Spero does not refer merely to the authentic binding validity of a Sinaitic-derived tradition of law. He is more interested in the *a priori* character of halakha. Statements that “He looked at the Torah and created the world” (*Bereshit Rabba* 1:1), or that the Torah existed before creation (B.T. *Pesahim* 54a), or the tale of the fetus learning Torah while in the womb (B.T. *Nidda* 30b), lend support to the notion that halakha is prior to the world.

In what sense could this be true? The strong argument would hold that the nature of the world—which would include the nature of the human personality—is determined by the precepts of the Torah. Spero adopts this argument: “...halakhic categories already influence the human prior to birth, inducing some sort of structure even when a human is in what one would consider a prementational state” (pp.24-25). Insofar as this is a statement of an ultimate Unity in creation, the claim is monotheistically unimpeachable, but does not much advance

our understanding.<sup>12</sup> Spero seems to be saying that our *a priori* halakhic categories can teach us something about the way the world, and certainly our internal world, is constituted. Such an approach led him to an extravagant and unfounded speculation in an earlier work that, *a priori*, the High Priest mourns loss differently because the laws of mourning are different for him.<sup>13</sup> Spero does not articulate such a claim in the current work, though the position he elaborates allows for the same conclusion.

The notion of a conceptual edifice reflecting reality while being built upon the tenets of halakha has had Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as its greatest exponent in our day. In *The Halakhic Mind*, for example, after demonstrating that science cannot claim exclusive epistemological authority for explaining the world, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that concepts such as time, or causality, may be legitimately expounded by halakha on its own terms, reflecting a religious reality. In *Isb haHalakha*,<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Soloveitchik goes to greater length describing how halakha may provide an idealistic basis for conceptions of the world. Spero misunderstands this point when he marshals Rabbi Soloveitchik in support of his views (p. 26). For certainly to attempt to describe the world *a priori* from halakhic concepts is the sort of enterprise which ought to have had its last gasp with Galileo's heresy trial.

Simply stated, I think that the first leg of the syllogism is overstated by Spero. A more moderate interpretation confirming the validity of a specifically halakhic world view would not at all impugn the subsequent unfolding of Spero's argument.

The second leg of the syllogism states that the insights of psychodynamic psychology are true. This is not necessarily a claim for the therapeutic efficacy of psychoanalysis,<sup>15</sup> but rather a statement that the insights into human nature and development gleaned from the analyst's couch are valid. In particular, as noted, this relates to the vicissitudes of each person's object-seeking disposition.

The "truth" of psychoanalysis also has a strong sense and a weak sense. The strong sense holds that psychoanalytic concepts reliably reflect the reality of personality development. This is what analysts have traditionally claimed for their craft. The weaker sense sees the validity of psychoanalysis in a hermeneutic, as the analysand existentially creates his own reality through his words; a self-made *midrash*, as it were.<sup>16</sup> Spero seems closer to the first view, as serves his purposes well; after all, God is more than a product of midrashic creation.

What of the conclusion of the syllogism? Spero's central and oft-repeated goal is "to make it logically untenable to state any longer that psychology, psychotherapy, and religion (halakha) are *in principle* anti-

thetical or incompatible” (p. 128). He accomplishes this with the aid of a unifying concept he calls “halakhic metapsychology.”

The term “metapsychology” has taken on different meanings for different people. Freud used the term to indicate the most fundamental principles of psychology, which may not be directly derivable from clinical experience.<sup>17</sup> For example, that our most basic drives are sexual and aggressive is not a proposition which can be easily verified or refuted, yet it forms the framework for much psychoanalytic thinking.

By metapsychology, Spero seems to refer to an even wider usage: “it is first and foremost a ‘framework of meaning,’<sup>18</sup> defining what can and cannot occur rather than predicting eventualities in every instance” (p.94). Or, as Spero explained in an earlier work,

Metapsychology is designed to explain why the practice of psychology is possible. It should not be confused with a *theory of psychology*, for the latter . . . is concerned with the direct study of human or animal behavior but not with the assumptions that precede the possibility of studying human or animal behavior.<sup>19</sup>

The assumption which precedes Spero’s psychology, and which constitutes his halakhic metapsychology, is the third leg of our syllogism. There exists an “intimate similarity between the psychotherapeutic relationship and the relationship between God and humans” (p. 94). Halakha and psychology (and a “*lehavdil*” is certainly not in order here), each in its own terms, are explicating the same reality. Halakhic metapsychology empowers us to discover how these two different systems are essentially analogous, even identical. Certainly their approaches differ; but according to the assumptions of this new metapsychology, the differences will complement and enrich rather than contradict one another. Halakha can offer models which extend the relationships of a purely humanistic psychology beyond mortal confines, while psychology will enable us to flesh out the intricacies of our relationship with God.

Spero, not one to settle for bombastic generalities, illustrates halakhic metapsychology in action with a carefully crafted example, drawn from *arevut* (see pp. 110-128). Through *arevut*, in its various forms, responsibility or power is transferred by a halakhically sanctioned action which is accompanied by a particular intention (“One who does not acknowledge [the concept] of *eruv*, his *eruv* is not an *eruv*,” B.T. *Eruvin* 31b). In psychotherapy, responsibility, trust, and the affective components of relationships are transferred to the therapist (the technical term for this process is “transference”).

*Arevut* and transference, in their differing frameworks, are each describing a relationship of the same nature. Employing the method of halakhic metapsychology, each concept may deepen our understanding of the other.

For example, how can the client in psychotherapy attain greater freedom (by making decisions unshackled by neurosis) by foregoing his freedom within the therapy? This paradox is resolved through the halakhic paradigm of *arevut*, whereby certain powers or functions are temporarily invested in another person. "In the light of the halakhic metapsychology, each incidence of transference bears within it the developmental potential for interpersonal and emotional responsibility" (p. 117). The nature of the responsibility of the therapist within therapy may be discerned by studying *arevut*, with very practical ramifications. Just as *arevut* legitimizes actions which in another context would be forbidden (as the lender who may not violate the domain of the borrower to regain his loan, yet he may enter the *arev's* home to collect a security), so too can the therapist—the client's *arev*—invade the client's conscious and subconscious domains, even while such interventions will be avoided in other situations. This is not mere homiletic analogy; halakha and psychology are ultimately describing the same entities.

Similarly, our understanding of halakha may benefit from psychological insights. I offer an example not appearing in the book, yet consistent with its spirit. Commentators have noted the grammatical inconsistency of the text of blessings, which commence in second person ("Blessed art Thou") but conclude in third person ("Who sanctified us with His commandments"). Rabbi Soloveitchik, drawing upon Rashba,<sup>20</sup> views this as a reflection of our stance before God: rapturous closeness with the source of all being alternating with fearful retreat before the awesome truth of His existence.

Through the creative synthesis of halakhic metapsychology, we might try to extend this insight. Changing perceptions of stable objects is the very fabric of the process of childhood development; and this process is intentionally revived and exploited in the course of psychotherapies derived from Freud. The manner in which our shimmering glimpses of God are captured and objectified in the text of the blessing may therefore be usefully explicated by psychology, which has dealt in depth with such processes. Ultimately, the development and coherence of our fragmented perceptions of God will bear much in common with the psychoanalytic process itself.

Spero is not an armchair theorist feeding upon the solipsisms of introspection; he finds reverberations of God in the psychotherapies he

conducts. He remains alive always to His possible presence in the room with the client. That a therapist or patient is or is not considered “religious” matters not for this sort of therapeutic listening. A struggle with a relationship expressed in the course of therapy may intimate a struggle with the innate image of God. Or—in one of the more extraordinary parallels drawn in the book—the therapist who refrains, due to therapeutic considerations, from intervening with an interpretation or from revealing a part of himself to the client, may in fact be perceived as reenacting God’s own self-limitation (*hastarat panim*) (see pp. 101-104).

Spero’s point is that, starting with the assumption of God’s existence, we can study how we apprehend Him; halakha and psychology, in their separate spheres, contribute to our understanding. The practical ramifications, illustrated with two fascinating case studies (of an intermittently observant young Jewish man, and of a troubled nun), are immense. The therapist listens in a different way. Ideas of God may often be merely projected distortions of a father figure; but by the same token, images of father, or mother, or the therapist, may be distortions of our innate sense of the objective God. How the therapist might decide whether the source of a particular image is heavenly or earthly is not clear. As with many interpretations by therapists, the distinction doubtlessly requires a subtle combination of intuition, sensitivity, and good fortune. But only if the therapist allows in principle for such a possibility will he be able to do justice to the full scope of the patient’s inner life; and only if the therapist is released from the thrall of psychological reductionism will he be free to search for God in the therapy. For He is there, too.

This book is not easy reading for the lay reader, for it is part of an occasionally abstruse dialogue among theoreticians of psychotherapy regarding the place of God in psychology in general and in the therapy session in particular. Nevertheless, the ideas to be mined herein deserve a wide exposure amongst all readers who consciously consider themselves seekers of God.

At the end of *The Halakhic Mind*, Rabbi Soloveitchik declares, “Out of the sources of halakha, a new world view awaits formulation.” With this learned and insightful work, Spero has made a great stride in meeting Rabbi Soloveitchik’s challenge and applying it to psychology. In so doing, he has advanced the possibility of not merely dialogue, but a profound synthesis, between two fields too often assumed to be incompatible, but which in fact may be conjoined in a shared struggle to grasp man’s place before God.

## NOTES

1. See Maimonides, *Mishne Torah, Hil. Avodat Kokhavim*, 1:1-2. Also, Frankfort, H., Frankfort, H. A., Wilson, J. A., Jacobsen, T., and Irwin, W. A., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).
2. The clearest Rabbinic formulation of our growing alienation from God is the stark comparison of Israel's relationship with God to once passionate, now estranged lovers. See B.T. *Sanhedrin* 7a.
3. For a similar sentiment, expressing the failings of medieval Jewish philosophy, see Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought* (NY: The Free Press, 1986) p. 100.
4. See e.g. Guntrip, H., *Psychotherapy and Religion*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957); and Meissner, W. W., *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
5. An early exponent of this position was W. R. D. Fairbairn; see his *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1952). A more recent statement may be found in Eagle, M., "Interests as Object Relations," in J. Masling (ed.), *Empirical Studies in Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1983).
6. See Rabbi Soloveitchik, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.
7. These two quotes, respectively from *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) and *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933) [vols. 6 and 21, respectively, of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth)], are discussed by Spero on pp. 52-53. More than thirty years separate the two sources, yet Freud's denial of an objective reality of God is remarkably consistent. This does not prevent Spero from bringing to bear his considerable hermeneutical skills, no doubt honed in his pre-clinical days at Telshe Yeshiva, in order to derive from an early and obscure Freudian text the possibility of a primal relationship with God, even according to Freud. See pp. 193-194. While Freud's genius certainly allowed him to consider many possibilities in the course of almost fifty years of prolific psychoanalytical writing, one would be hard pressed to assign him a role as the forerunner of an object relational approach to God. This of course does not detract from the arguments of the book.
8. Fromm, E., *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper, 1956), pp. 69-71.
9. "Transitional objects and Transitional Phenomena," 1951, reprinted in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 242.
10. "Cosmic teddy bear" is the term coined by McDargh, J., *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).
11. The title of the book under consideration may sound a bit infelicitous to uninitiated ears. "Religious objects as psychological structures" does not mean that God is just that, a psychological structure. Amongst object relations theorists, all external reality has its parallel mental object representa-

- tion, which is a psychological structure. The “object”—be it a person, a memory, an abstraction—resides outside of us, but we perceive the object through our internalized object representation. Spero’s point is that God’s existence is certainly independent of us, but we may apprehend Him only within the limitations of our psychological makeup. Chapter 5 of the work under review offers detailed and imaginative models for a psychological exposition of our relationship with God.
12. For the same reason, I cannot agree with Spero when he tries to defend Maimonides against Rabbi Soloveitchik’s criticism that causal explanations of Divine commandments—e.g. a sociological explanation of animal sacrifices—render the commandment irrelevant by its very reducibility to an extrinsic, areligious factor. Spero argues that “the very *a priori* psychological, sociological, and anthropological structures that are to be addressed by the Torah have their own special claim on an *a priori* halakha status” (p. 127). That seems to mean that these worldly phenomena and halakha ultimately address the same reality. This is true, yet not relevant in any way that would aid our limited attempts to understand the commandments in a spiritually meaningful way. See *Halakhic Mind*, pp. 91-99.
  13. “In our view, halakha means that the High Priest cannot experience *avelut*—though he may appear to ‘mourn’ and ‘grieve’—because the halakhico-psychological phenomenon of *avelut* is based on an aspect of an *a priori* which plots a different psychological reality for the bereaved High Priest.” *Judaism and Psychology: Halakhic Perspectives* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Yeshiva University Press, 1980), p. 23.
  14. *Ish haHalakha*, Talpiot, 1:651-735, 1944. Reprinted in *beSod haYahid veHaYahad*, ed. P. H. Peli (Jerusalem: Orot).
  15. The most impressive work attempting to prove the therapeutic value of psychoanalytic psychotherapy is Wallerstein, R. S., *Forty-two Lives in Treatment: A Study of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1986).
  16. This view, consistent with some of the insights elaborated by Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) has derived surprising recent support from a very reductionist philosopher of the mind; see Dennett, D. C., *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), pp. 412-430.
  17. See Freud, *The Unconscious* (1915), *Standard Edition*, vol. 15, p. 181.
  18. Spero quotes here J. Rychlak, *The Psychology of Rigorous Humanism* (New York: Wiley, 1977).
  19. Spero, *op. cit.*, p.12-3.
  20. “*uBikashtem miSham,*” *Hadarom*, 47, 1978 (5739). See footnote 8.

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REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE:

PESACH LICHTENBERG is department chairman of psychiatry  
at Herzog Hospital in Jerusalem.