

COMMUNICATIONS

INSTINCTS

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

Since the appearance of my article, "Eros-Thanatos: A Modification of Freudian Instinct Theory in the Light of Torah Teachings" (*TRADITION*, Fall, 1973), your pages have presented a number of questions concerning, however unfortunately, some of the less crucial aspects of my thesis. This is that human instinct is best understood, not through the polarity of Eros versus Thanatos, but through the concept of "a single cosmic force" comprising them both. Another article would surely be required to answer all the questions raised. Therefore, I shall, in this space, address myself only to some of the more relevant issues.

In your Fall, 1974, issue, two letters, one by Mr. Moshe Spero and one by Mr. Nathan Grossman, commented on my article. I should note my difficulty in discerning exactly what it was about my essay that prompted the letter by Mr. Grossman. As to his stated confusion concerning the purpose of my article, I refer him and others who seem to have missed or ignored my

central thesis, to page 90, where I explicitly state,

It is the purpose of this paper to show that Jewish tradition . . . espouses an instinct theory that answers the major objections to Freud's theory and provides a compelling cosmological approach to the life of man.

It seems that Mr. Grossman preferred to see my article as an attempt to formulate a simple equation between Freudian theory and Jewish tradition. This distortion appears to be a result of Mr. Grossman's obvious revision for Freudian theory and everything for which he imagines it to stand. The degree to which Mr. Grossman's anger has distorted his objectivity is suggested by his free association to irrelevant material, such as Freud's feelings about Jews, his assertion that Freud's formulations "had nothing to do with Judaism," Adler's views on psychology, and even Mr. Grossman's views about psychotherapy. His indignant rage has led him into a confused, rambling, *ad hominem* attack.

In point of fact, it is rather difficult to find much real relevance to my thesis in Mr. Grossman's

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letter — with one or two exceptions. I find its main significance to lie in its striking exemplification of what I refer to in my article as “the sort of unlettered approach commonly employed” in vehement rejection of Freudian theory by the religious community.

Notwithstanding this, I would like to clear up one question raised by Mr. Grossman regarding my juxtaposing the death instinct with the commandment to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28). A similar challenge is posed by Mr. Spero in his letter, as well as in his article in your last issue.¹ Mr. Spero found my comparison between Thanatos and Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein’s interpretation of R. Meir’s dictum that “death is good” to be “singularly mistaken.” Both writers, for some reason or other, seem to have abandoned their own expressed understanding of Freud’s Thanatos in questioning my hypothesis.

Mr. Grossman himself has laid the phenomenon of aggression to Thanatos (p. 181). And Mr. Spero, in the very same paragraph in which he raised the above mentioned question and terms Freud’s Thanatos “an entirely pessimistic conception,” says, “This death instinct includes man’s essential aggressiveness [p. 158] . . .” Anyone (even a “novice student of Freud”) with even a casual knowledge of psychology understands that aggressiveness is a trait absolutely essential to human living. It can be seen pessimistically only by those who despair of man’s capacity to employ his instinct for his own good. Without the aggressive urge, man could not possibly fulfill the command-

ment to subdue the earth and have dominion over it (Genesis 1:28).

Mr. Spero, in his article, quotes Genesis Rabbah on Genesis 1:31 thus,

“And behold it was good” is a reference to the good *yetzer* while “behold it was *very* good” is a reference to the evil *yetzer*. But is the evil *yetzer* to be considered *very* good? Actually, without the *yetzer hara*, man would not build a house, marry, have children or do business [p. 99].

He neglects to quote the rest of the Midrash, which reads,

And therefore Solomon says (Kohelet 4), “It is a man’s rivalry with his neighbor.”

This, it seems to me, is a clear indication of how essential the *aggressive* component of the *yetzer hara* is to man’s existence.

Charles Brenner, the well-known explicator of Freudian theory writes,

Freud (1923, 1930, 1933, etc.) identified the aim of the death instinct as destruction of whatever is the object of the drive. This is in keeping with his concept that aggression is the psychological derivative, or counterpart, of the universally present death drive. It may be worth noting in this connection that the equivalence, death=destruction, is a psychological one, i.e., an equivalence which arises from man’s imagination. It is not a physical fact. On the contrary, in the part of the physical world which constitutes man’s immediate environment, there is no such thing as destruction of any material object, whether alive or inanimate.²

Mr. Grossman’s assertion that Judaism sees the sexual side of the

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yetzer hara as “a source of good” but the aggressive side as evil seems to me to be a gross distortion of the facts. And here is where, as I mention in my article, Jewish tradition and Freudian theory can illuminate each other. It is the major contention of my article that the *yetzer hara* cannot be divided into sex and aggression. This dichotomy is itself the fundamental flaw in Freud’s formulation of the instincts. The very phenomenon of reproduction requires both sex and aggression. As Brenner writes,

In the physical sphere, one can assume that it is the fusion of the two drives that accounts for the immortality of the germ plasm and makes possible the reproduction of the species.³

Similarly, Mr. Spero’s positing of a Thanatos that would represent “at least occasionally, a constructive — albeit sinful — force” leaves me quite confused. I would think Mr. Spero is obligated to explain the constructive value of sin.

Perhaps Mr. Grossman’s struggle with the good and evil aspects of the *yetzer hara* is a result of his basic misunderstanding of instinct, which is, as I noted regarding the *yetzer hara* in my article, neither good nor evil. It is patently absurd to speak of an instinct in moral terms, since moral standing is attained only by its derivative: doing or not doing the will of the Creator. I state this emphatically and also in response to the letter by Mr. Isaac Lakritz in your last issue. While Mr. Lakritz is most disturbed by my invoking the Rambam’s *da’at* as sublimated sexual energy, he

concludes that, “Contemplation of the Divine can be achieved only by rising from the plateau of the sensual to that of the intellect.” I would only add to this, “through sublimation.”

While Mr. Spero, on the other hand, seems to understand my point concerning the neutral moral value of instinct, he is very distressed over the proposition that man’s highest achievements have their beginnings in his most primordial drives. In his article, Mr. Spero asks if Torah study is “merely a tension reducing expression of transformed sexual energy or that, on another level, we learn Torah because of an impulse to *return* to our infantile stage to recover the feeling of pleasure experienced then [p. 107].” My answer is that, though Torah study is not “merely” this, this is certainly where it begins. While our capacity for spiritual experience differentiates us from the animal, the stark reality of our biological sources differentiates us from the Divine. It is not our instincts by which we are judged but by *what we do with them*.

In questioning whether the *Yetzer hara* is an instinct at all, Mr. Spero quotes *Sanhedrin* 91b for support. While I mention this *Gemara* in my article, I did not think it appropriate to elaborate on my conclusions concerning it. However, since Mr. Lakritz has legitimately challenged my interpretation and Mr. Spero has offered his, I shall explain myself.

Antoninus, in his debate with R. Judah, supports his connection that the *neshamah* is invested at conception rather than at “forming”⁴ by

asking rhetorically how "a piece of meat can stand for three days without salt and not spoil." The commentators (e.g., Rashi and the *M'harsha*) interpret this to refer to spoilage of the sperm, which would degenerate after three days without a *neshamah*. Interpretation here of *neshamah* as *life force* (and hence libido) seems to me quite compelling. I have indicated in my article the similarity in meaning with the usage in Genesis 2:7. Brenner's above quoted remark concerning "the immortality of the germ plasm" is particularly relevant here. Contrary to Mr. Lakritz's statement, I am *not* interpreting *neshamah* "as referring to the libido, rather than the soul." I am saying that this "breath of life" is the beginning of the soul itself. While Mr. Lakritz may wish to question the relationship I thus implicitly posit between the *neshamah* and the *yetzer hara*, that is another article.

The next question posed by Antoninus concerns the *yetzer hara*. Here, rather than the word נתנה (invested), the *Gemara* uses the term שולט (rules). I submit that this semantic difference, while not unusual, is an important one. To support his contention that the *yetzer hara* begins to rule at the moment of birth, rather than at "forming," Antoninus quotes Genesis 4:7, "sin coucheth at the door." Notice that the verse states that

sin, not the *yetzer hara*, couches at the door. It is my contention that the *Gemara* refers to the time when the *yetzer hara* rules, that is, *dominates* man. While it is *present* (invested, if you will) from conception, it begins to assert itself only when man encounters the possibility of *sin*, the requisite stimulus for expression of the *yetzer hara*. This, I submit, is the answer to the objection raised by the *M'harsha* (*ad locum*). That is, the *yetzer hara* was indeed present in the twins within Rebecca's womb. The very fact that they did not "kick their way out of their mother's womb" attests to the *yetzer hara's presence*, rather than its *dominance*.

Finally, Mr. Spero asserts that the id and the *yetzer hara* cannot be compared; since the former is unconscious, while the latter is conscious. It seems to me that, as suggested by the Midrash on Genesis 1:31 and the *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* 91b. *Chazal* often did not see fit to differentiate between conscious and unconscious, between instinct and behavior. It is not clear that *Chazal* maintain we have *complete* control over both conscious and unconscious components of the *yetzer hara*. Similarly, I must question Mr. Spero's statement that the *yetzer hara* is not available to sublimation.

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NOTES

1. Spero, M. H., "Thanatos, Id and the Evil Impulse," *TRADITION*, 1975.
2. Brenner, C., "The Psychoanalytic Concept of Aggression," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1971, 52, p. 139.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
4. According to the *M'harsha*, *ad locum*, forty days after conception.

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THE TUBE

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

Rabbi Bleich in his discussion of "Comet Kohoutek" in the *Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature* in the April 1974 issue of *TRADITION* notes that some type of optical instrument seems to have been extant in the time of the *Gemara* on the basis of the "tube" of Rabban Gamliel mentioned in *'Eruvin* 436. It ought, however, to be pointed out that although *Rashi's* explanation of the *Gemara* indicates some form of telescope the Me'iri, on the passage, quotes Rab Hai Gaon in offering two other explanations: (a) that the tube was a tube "simpliciter" without any glass and was used as an ordinary measuring instrument; (b) that the tube was an astrolabe which in fact he refers to by name.

A. P. Rose
London, England

RABBI BLEICH REPLIES:

I would like to express my appreciation to Mr. Rose for drawing attention to Me'iri's comments. Let me add one further point of interest. In addition to the *Bet ha-Bechirah*, Me'iri authored a commentary on *'Eruvin* entitled *Chiddushei ha-Me'iri*. The manuscript of this work was edited and annotated by Rabbi Simchah Ziesel Braudie and published by *Mosad ha-Rav Kook* in 5731. In the latter work Me'iri refers obliquely to Rav Hai Gaon's comments but dismisses them, stating that those interpretations are "difficult to understand" and that *Rashi's* interpretation "is sufficient."