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## JUDAISM AND PSYCHOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

For many decades confusion prevailed in respect to the role of religion in the behavioral sciences. Judaism as a religion and a way of life has always been concerned with the workings of the mind. One need only scan the *Aggadot* in Talmud, Midrash, and the vast Mussar literature, to stand in awe of the deep insights revealed of human behavior. To negate the possibility of a Jewish psychology because it is not as well systematized as secular psychology is simply to admit lack of familiarity with the corpus of traditional Jewish literature. How long must Jews perpetuate the myth that Sigmund Freud discovered the science of human behavior!

### JEWISH PSYCHOLOGY

The term "Jewish psychology" should not be used in the same sense as the psychology of the American, the German or any other national or ethnic group. Jewish psychology means that Judaism has a distinct approach to the discipline of psychology and the subject matter of psychology. Just as psychology claims insight into the mechanics of the human mind, and by extension claims insight into life's problems and the ability to cope with them, so too Judaism claims similar insight and therapeutic ability. It is because of this that Jewish psychology has implica-

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tions beyond the interests of its own people—it is relevant for gentile as well as for Jew. Human nature is most often the same, differing at times in degree, not in kind. Jewish psychology is psychology of man but is Jewish because it is “derived from and rests upon Jewish thought.”

There are several definitions and basic premises upon which Jewish psychology rests.

A. The term “mental illness” as used here refers to *acquired* mental illness, not cases of organic brain injury.

B. The term “psychology” is used here to subsume all of the behavioral sciences: psychiatry, psychoanalysis, psychology, social work, and guidance.

C. Judaism is in agreement with the psychological axiom that there is basically no difference in kind between the dynamics of normal and abnormal behavior, the difference being of degree only.

D. Judaism views acquired mental illness as a moral rather than a medical problem. It is only where communication with the patient is impossible that Judaism would assign the cure to the medical profession.

Basically there are only two schools of psychology: the Jewish and the secular. While there are psychological schools at variance with each other—as Mowrer has demonstrated, in certain basics the various schools are in agreement. Their disagreements are mainly in “so-called technical rules of analysis.” All subscribe to the one primary psychological theory of psychoanalysis.

### THE SECULAR VIEW

Psychoanalysis proceeds on the assumption that mental illness (neurosis) is the result of the repressions that the environment forces upon the individual—repressions of his natural sexual and aggressive drives. These repressions create unwarranted guilt feelings in the individual, guilt that has no basis in reality, for they are merely the result of standards externally imposed by society. If man fails to live up to these standards he experiences pangs of conscience. His conscience clashes with the repressed feelings that “unconsciously” clamor for expression. It is this

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clash which brings on neurosis. The cure, says psychoanalysis, is to release these repressed inhibited feelings, thus freeing the individual from his self-assumed guilt and ultimately bringing about his recovery.

This theory presents a distorted picture of the nature of man. Moreover it is basically contradictory to the principles of religious faith and destroys the Jewish concept of free will. Secular psychology believes man is an energy system, a kind of intricate machine whose behavior follows mechanistic laws. What emerges out of the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious is a kind of "psychic determinism" according to which man—normal as well as abnormal—is not in control of his behavior. Consequently he is neither responsible nor accountable. He has been reduced to the dimensions of a robot; driven by the irrational, mysterious whims of his unconscious that may do what it pleases with him. This unconscious may incite him to rape and bloodshed, and he gingerly pleads "not guilty" because he was coerced. He is not guilty of rape or murder, it is the being within his being, the unconscious which compelled him; the unconscious of which he is only an innocent tool.

Having marked repression as the culprit, psychoanalysis urges us on to practice its antithesis—encouraging freedom from repression, lack of inhibition, release of feelings of anger, expression of sexual drives and aggressions as the means for healthful living. Judaism, on the other hand, believes that for healthful living man must learn the art of subduing, conquering, controlling and repressing.

The Mishnah in *Avot* states: "Who is strong, he that subdues his [evil] inclination." Of course, Judaism does not encourage "over repression"—Judaism frowns upon any feeling or characteristic practiced in immoderation. It does, however, encourage moderate repression, the very reaction which psychoanalysis frowns upon and claims to be the root of mental illness.

### THE JEWISH VIEW

There are several premises upon which Jewish psychology rests. The first axiom is: man was created with a good and evil

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inclination and stands at all times during his adult life exactly mid-point between these inclinations. The two inclinations draw him simultaneously in opposite, conflicting, directions. Implicit in this concept is the fact that at every moment in our lives, in every one of our thoughts and actions there are two conflicting impulses driving us in opposite directions. One urges: look out for yourself only; the other: think about the other fellow; another urges: be charitable, content, modest, tolerant; the other: be cruel, discontent, arrogant, intolerant, angry, impudent, and aggressive.

It should be noted that the concept of “ambivalent feelings” operating in an individual—especially love and hate—is not one discovered by Freud. This, too, is clearly implicit in the Jewish concept of the two inclinations. Driven constantly by two opposing forces whose tastes are so antagonistic to each other, how could it be otherwise? In the Mussar literature these impulses are known as *Negiot* and *Priot*—delusions created by the evil inclination of the individual, deriving from and serving his self interest. These *negiot* have the power to make falsehood appear true, the forbidden permissible, and to interchange the irrational with the rational.

The second immutable Jewish axiom is the doctrine of free will: every individual is endowed with the capacity to choose between good and evil. In the words of Maimonides, (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 5:1):

There is none . . . either to pull him one way or draw him another way but he alone, of his own free will, with the consent of his mind, bends to any path he may desire to follow.

Free will, according to the Jewish view, is limited to the area of good and evil but does not extend itself to other areas where Divine Providence is the determining factor. The Talmud (*Niddah* 16b) clearly states that only “fear of God”—which in Judaic terminology connotes the righteous life—is not subject to the Creator’s control. In all other matters concerning man’s nature and well-being, God exercises complete control, in spite of one’s fancying himself the master of his fate.

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Judaism does not believe a man to be innately chained to certain characteristics, actions and behavior patterns. Man has only a natural predisposition to these. And this predisposition, or inclination does not stand in the way of one's ability to choose freely between good and evil. For example, a person who is predisposed to anger still retains the ability to control his fits of anger, though, admittedly, it would be more difficult for *him* to exercise this choice than for one of a more sanguine predisposition.

How *does* Judaism view man's complex behavior? How can Judaism explain man's behavior, which attests so many times to his irrationality, his apparent unawareness of his motivations, without introducing the concept of the unconscious? The answer is found in the concept of *Hergel Maasse Teva Shenee* (habitual behavior becomes second nature). The concept of habit is the most significant single construct which is responsible for the formulation of man's characteristics, actions, thoughts and behavior patterns according to Judaism.

Judaism sees the mind as a repository of impressions—impressions stored in the memory. No act or thought is ever lost; it finds some place in the memory. When a similar act or thought is repeated again and again the impression created in the mind becomes deeper; to the extent these thoughts or actions become habitual, they become in effect our second nature. These accumulated impressions on the mind become so deeply ingrained that man loses awareness of them and repeats these acts mechanically. The surface impression is that some kind of mysterious force is at work, a force which was subsequently labeled by psychoanalysis "the unconscious," while it is only the force of habit which is at work. This is a powerful force indeed as one who tries to shake off a habit discovers. Although we do not think of habit in the area of thought processes it too can become habitual as behavior. Habit is usually linked to an act, such as drinking or smoking. But we can as readily habituate ourselves to thought patterns that become second nature. Man can generate the "habits" of trust in God, contentment, tolerance, and charity—all requisites for mental health. Or he can cultivate fear, discontentment, intolerance, and cruelty—which will lead to mental

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illness. Habit formation shares the nature of personal bias, prompting us to act without awareness and making truth appear false, generating all the distortion of personal bias.

### HABIT VERSUS FREE WILL

Jewish psychology is confronted with a subtle paradox. If habit holds such powerful sway over man that it can make him unaware of what he previously clearly understood, then has not the individual in effect lost his free will? Does he not then—even in our Jewish system also—become a victim of his habits, no longer in control of his behavior and therefore no longer accountable? Have we merely substituted “habit” for the “unconscious,” gaining nothing in the process?

This dilemma is resolved by invoking a factor which does not lend itself to clinical study, yet is the single most significant factor in the understanding of human behavior—indeed of human life—in the Jewish system. This elusive factor separates Jewish psychology from secular psychology. The factor I speak of is *Siato Dishemaya*, “Divine assistance.” Judaism teaches that one who truly desires to rid himself of his base habits will be assisted towards this end by the One Above. The surmounting of deeply entrenched habits, a feat which unaided will-power would be incapable of, becomes possible through a conjunction of will-power and Divine assistance. In the words of our Sages: (*Yoma* 38b) “One who desires to purify himself is aided from Above.” In the Jewish system then, although the chains of habit are extremely powerful, the utilization of man’s free will in a sincere effort to rediscover the proper path is aided by Divine assistance which makes it possible for him to break these chains. If he fails to exert this effort he is held accountable for his actions.

### MIDDOT

It is important to examine the nature of the *Middot*, man’s individual characteristics which motivate human behavior. *Middot* start out neutral: neither good nor bad, although there may be predispositions in one or another direction. Judaism is con-

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cerned with what we do with our *Middot*. The *Middot* operate in a continuum between two opposite poles: tolerance and intolerance; contentment and discontentment; arrogance and humility; diligence or laziness. The Torah imperative is to come as close as we can to the path of moderation between the two extremes in each *Middah*.

None of the *Middot* stand alone: they are linked to each other; mastery of one is to some extent dependent upon mastery of the others. If we master one characteristic placing it in proper balance we gain the capacity to master others in favorable balance. And unless we master the primary *Middot*—faith and trust in God—we will fail miserably in our attempt to master all *Middot*. If man cultivates and nurtures faith and trust in his Creator he will more readily master his other *Middot*.

What bearing does this have on the causes, dynamics, and cure of abnormal behavior? It may all be valid for the so-called normal individual, but what about the abnormal? Since it was agreed that there is basically no difference between normal and abnormal behavior in kind except in degree, then the principles we have enumerated which apply to the normal individual are relevant as well to the abnormal individual. Furthermore, it now becomes possible to postulate that improper habits and undeveloped *Middot*, which lead man to evil, may very well lead him to mental illness.

### SIN AND MENTAL ILLNESS

There is a causal relationship between sin and mental illness. "Sin" should not be understood in the sense it is commonly used. It is the individuals who lack faith and trust in God, and have not learned to accept their lot, that induce excessive anxiety which in turn can lead to emotional disturbance. If individuals sin in the realm of *Middot*, not having acquired the ability to avoid excess in either direction, they will suffer emotional disturbance in proportion to their excesses.

Psychologists have correctly observed that the basic symptom common to all emotionally disturbed individuals is anxiety. Indeed, it is also common knowledge that some measure of

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anxiety is vital to normal functioning. Anxiety, however, when it reaches immoderate proportions, turns into fear, including every undesirable feeling that stands in the way of peace of mind, such as frustration, dissatisfaction, and insecurity.

In Jewish thought "fear" itself is sin—"a sin in *Middot*." For there is no rational reason for fear if man masters its antithesis: trust in God. Therefore, the primary cause of neurosis, in our system, is having permitted fear—the antithesis of trust—to set in and become a habit of thought. The *Chovot Halvovot* tells us: "If one trusts in God his heart is tranquil . . . if one does not, he is always in a state of anxiety" (*Shar Habitochon*, Chapter 5). Fear is the soil without which mental illness could not take root or sprout. Where there is no fear, there is trust and contentment and in their presence, there is no vulnerability to mental illness. This is not to say that other *Middot* do not enter into the etiology of the neurosis. In view of our postulate of the interdependence of *Middot* it is self-evident that they do play a part. Nevertheless trust and fear remain the principal determinants.

The psychosis is generated by the fear complex and in its early stages is characterized by neurotic trends. The difference between neurosis and psychosis lies in the intensity of the feeling that is experienced. The psychotic is possessed by overpowering ambition. The wide discrepancy between his potential and his overwhelming ambition leads to his breakdown.

It should be clear at this point that we are not suggesting that deterioration in *Middot* is the *only factor* in mental illness; but it *is* the major factor involved. It goes without saying that overwhelming environmental pressures may also lead to insanity as is evident from the *Tochocha* (Deut. 28:29, 34). Most people are not adequately equipped to ward off unusual traumatic factors which strike them. But this is only due to their inability to master faith and trust in greater proportions. What we should bear in mind is that it is not the impact of society that is the main factor in their inability but rather their "reaction" to these stresses. It is their internal reaction not the outer stresses that should be viewed as the main cause of mental illness.

RESTRUCTURING MIDDOT

If it is the deterioration of our *Middot* that is the major cause of emotional illness, it follows that the cure lies in restructuring the *Middot*. Since Judaism does not view psychology as a separate discipline but views it as a branch of *chinuch*, a process of re-education in *Middot*, it becomes the difficult task of the therapist to re-educate his patient in the mastery of *Middot*. In a sense he helps him analyze himself, know himself better, in terms of the continuum of *Middot*. He helps him understand the crippling nature of fear, the glory of faith and trust and the meaning of being content with one's lot. He must train his patient that he should not blame society for all of his problems.

Some therapists may argue that their patients come to them having attempted this and failed. But did they *really* try it? These patients may think they trust in God. Their lives, however, betray their claims. Trust is not a declaration. Genuine trust in God involves the recognition that in the moral realm we are our own masters, creating our destiny, while in all other areas—especially in the area of material gain—we are essentially powerless; that while we should not desist from making every effort to succeed, whether our efforts shall meet with success is not in our control, despite all our wisdom and resourcefulness. Man wilfully works and toils, but what his toil accomplishes is determined by God. In our society, of course, the opposite belief prevails. Under the impact of psychoanalysis we have been trained to believe that when we sin society is at fault, and our own success or failure is determined by our resourcefulness. These beliefs and practices are glaring contradictions to the concepts of faith and trust in God. How can we take seriously a patient in therapy who tells us, “I have faith and trust,” when everything he does shows the contrary.

Our Sages tell us in *Avot* (4:28) “Jealousy, lust and [the desire for] honor remove a man from this world” — these are the major stimuli of mental illness. The frustration of these drives gives rise to severe and uncontrollable anxieties—not so much repression and guilt as psychologists would have us believe. Certainly excessive repression and unfounded guilt, as

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any other *Middah* distorted, can lead to problems. These, however, are not the primary stimuli of mental illness. Our Sages tell us "No man dies with even half of his desires fulfilled. If he possesses one hundred, he desires two hundred" (*Midrash Kohelet* 1:34). "An individual is not able to touch what is prepared for his fellow, even as much as a string" (*Yoma* 38b). This is the crux of the issue. We must recognize the nature of man, the enormity of his desires in all directions—honor, power, pleasure, wealth—and the crucial need for controlling these desires. We must learn to cope with the realization that most of our desires will remain unfulfilled.

### GUILT AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Psychoanalysis professes that repression—a severe super ego—which ultimately leads to guilt feelings, is a major factor in the development of mental illness. I do not accept this view. The nature of man inclines away from recognition of guilt. Man, goaded by his *yetzer horah*, tends toward self-interest, arrogance, and gross ambition. Man is by nature self-righteous, always finding good reasons for his behavior, no matter how anti-social it may be. His self-interest (*negiah*) makes him oblivious to his improper behavior.

The Sages tell us (*Yoma* 86b): "When a man transgresses and repeats his transgression, he deludes himself into believing that what he has done is permissible." Weak impressions of guilt remain buried in his mind, but they are too weak to create emotional stress. Guilt, in most cases, plays only a secondary role in mental illness. The Sages urge us to be constantly in a state of *teshuvah* (repentance), recognizing our guilt. If fostering guilt breeds neurosis, we should long ago have become a race of neurotics.

This is not to deny that guilt in many cases *does* play a major role. What I am saying is that in our over-permissive times the average patient suffers from conditions arising out of over-ambitiousness, physical lust, and the lust for power, pleasure, wealth, and honor. It is true, however, that the exceptionally virtuous individual, and especially the child, may bring neurosis upon

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himself through (real or unreal) guilt feelings. If parents set extremely high standards for their children, completely out of line with their capacities, the discrepancy between their abilities and the over-ambitious standards of the parents, now adopted by the child, may create severe guilt feelings which may bring on mental problems. The virtuous individual's fear of punishment for his sins may also create the same reaction if he is not fully aware of the possibility of repentance and forgiveness.

Freud, having lived in the Victorian age when high ethical standards prevailed—especially among the middle class patients he treated—of necessity saw guilt as the most potent factor in neurosis. This is, however, generally not the case in our over-permissive society. Nor does the nature of man in general lean in that direction. Psychology, recognizing the enormous role guilt may play in mental illness turned to release from repression as the natural answer. The Torah's answer, on the other hand, is found in the *Middah* of repentance (*Teshuvah*). The guilt-riddled individual has to be taught that Judaism recognizes that every man—even the greatest—will sin. He therefore need not feel so terribly guilty. Furthermore, he is able to atone for his guilt, through repentance which blots out his sins completely.

There is no area where Judaism and psychology are more in agreement than in the methodology of therapy. Psychology insists upon total acceptance and non-judgmentality as basic operating attitudes of the therapist towards his patient. Subsumed under these attitudes are sympathy, empathy, understanding, compassion and the like. Jewish psychology in general terms would be in full agreement.

As stated previously Jewish psychology is not limited to Jews but is relevant to all mankind. Our Talmudic Sages tell us that before the Torah was presented to the Jewish people, the "Sons of Noah" (all of mankind in those pre-Biblical times) were commanded by God to uphold the seven most basic precepts upon which humanity must exist. Faith and trust are implicit in the seven commandments. And it is this faith and trust that seek to eliminate anxiety and fear. It would be absurd to contend that they are effective in this respect for Jews only but not for gentiles. If the way to mental health for the Jew is faith and

