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TOWARD A THEORY OF MEANING: PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS AND THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

As I prepared breakfast on the day I had set aside to begin this article, an event occurred whose synchronicity, to use C. G. Jung's phrase, will be readily evident. I looked around the kitchen in search of reading material and came upon a stack of magazines given to my wife the day before. The magazine on top of the stack was open to a page titled, "The Last Great Mystery." The magazine, *Discovery*, was dated half a year earlier, April, 2002. Thinking of breakfast and light reading, not at all anticipating a meaningful event, I read:

Writer Brad Lemley remembers one of his high school science teachers holding forth on the Big Bang in the early 1970s: "He seemed to think it explained everything. I immediately asked him where all the stuff that went bang came from. He said no one knew, but he also seemed to think the question was unimportant. . . ."

In the years since, Lemley [met an MIT] professor named Alan Guth. "His inflation theory dares to address ultimate origins," says Lemley. . . . If the universe could come from nothing, Lemley asked, what does that mean to us as human beings?

"I think it undermines the belief that we are here for any cosmic purpose," Guth said. "It does not mean that our lives are meaningless. It means we must give meaning to our lives ourselves." That view obviously leaves little room for most of the world's religious teachings.¹

Lemley, judging from his article following this introduction, is sym-

This essay is dedicated with fondness and gratitude to Rabbi Emanuel Feldman and his wife for giving ten exhilarating days to a small group of Jews in Santa Fe, New Mexico, almost two decades ago, teaching by word and example.

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pathetic to Guth. The introduction, however, concludes with Lemley's own synchronous experience:

The next day, Lemley was jogging through the Bowdoin College campus near his home in Topsham, Maine. "I was thinking about Guth's assertion that science can explain the birth of the universe in the context of the laws of physics but has no clue about the origin of those laws." At that moment, Lemley noticed the phrase "Nature's Laws are God's thoughts" etched in granite on the Searles Science Building, built in 1894. "I had passed that building dozens of times and had never seen that before," Lemley says with a smile. "Back then, where those laws came from wasn't a mystery. In 2002 it's the last great mystery."²

The question underlying Lemley's thoughts is the question this article addresses: From what source does meaning spring forth in life and in the universe? The Theory of Meaning proposed here is this: The universe was created with purpose and continues to exist in fulfillment of purpose. Human beings connect with purpose through the meaning inherent in all events and experiences. Harmonious connectivity with meaning and, thus, awareness of purpose is the state of spiritual fulfillment and psychological well being. Disconnectedness from purpose is the state of spiritual emptiness and psychological disturbance. Spiritual emptiness is exhibited by retreat into a search for physical replacements, by being ruled by the unconscious, and by destructive behavior.

Three answers to "the last great mystery" will be explored: Freud-meaning is merely an arbitrary assigning of significance by the individual or society and has no valuable role in discovering physical or psychological truth; Jung-meaning is assigned by the human being and is an integral construct within the human psyche that can have psychological power and perhaps even affect the physical world; Jewish thought-meaning is embedded in objective reality, like energy and matter, and the human being can identify his or her purpose in life by identifying and connecting with the meanings of events and experiences.

The purpose of the comparative analysis is to gain from these therapeutic theories and techniques insights toward a Theory of Meaning. I do not set forth a complete theory of counseling and therapy, but share first thoughts that may lead to a useful therapeutic theory. While its source is in Jewish thought, perhaps it has therapeutic potential beyond the Jewish population.

The admissibility of a counseling theory based on religious thought is gaining acceptance.

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The three Eastern systems of thought have their roots in religion. They approach the psychological tradition through the definition of various ethical and religious practices. . . . Therefore, it is impossible to discuss Eastern mental health practice and core values without looking toward Eastern religious and philosophical thought. The ancient and traditional philosophy of the East is fused with the basic principles of Eastern mental health practices.³

I will discuss some therapeutic applications of the Theory of Meaning through a case study in *Counseling and Psychotherapy, Theories and Interventions* by David Capuzzi and Douglas R. Gross.

A DEFINITION OF MEANING

Physicist Alan Guth might be surprised to learn that his view on the source of meaning descends from Freud:

[In *A Godless Jew*,] Peter Gay focuses on Freud's religious faith rather than on his religious identity or, for lack of a better word, his ethnicity. . . . He posits that Freud was a direct philosophical and ideological descendant of the eighteenth century philosophers, Voltaire and Diderot, the nineteenth century philosopher Feuerbach and the biologist Darwin. This intellectual heritage was complemented by the important influence of his mentors who were arch representatives of the nineteenth-century physical science—the physicist Herman Helmholtz; the physiologist Ernst Brücke; the psychiatrist and brain anatomist Theodore Meynert and the internist Herman Nothnagel. All had the same scientific orientation—positivistic, atheistic and deterministic. There was absolutely no room for theology in their frame of reference, no place for “purpose,” “intention,” and “aim” in nature.⁴

To Freud the human being is an animal whose psychological processes operate from fixed laws similar to physical processes. This tenet of psychoanalytical theory was so vitally important to Freud that in his writings he not only reiterated it, but it became, ironically, a moral and philosophical imperative. “Science produces genuine knowledge, but world views do not. To accept the doctrines of a philosophical (or religious or artistic) world view is ‘to lay open the paths which lead to psychosis.’”⁵

This last phrase is in fact a statement of moral philosophy. Freud's tremendous efforts to strip psychoanalysis of moral, religious, or philosophical underpinnings have sprouted a whole body of scholarly work

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displaying Freud's moral, religious, and philosophical biases and structures. In perhaps the ultimate irony, Merold Westphal, in *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*, describes Freud's concepts themselves as "doctrines."^{5a}

Freud's denunciation of meaning and purpose as unscientific shows the bias he introduced into modern thinking about the human psyche. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, for example, in his theory of optimal experience called "flow," feels compelled to include, in a chapter about the importance of meaning and purpose in "turning all life into a unified flow experience," a bow to the ultimate meaninglessness of everything:

But isn't it incredibly naïve to expect life to have a coherent overall meaning? After all, at least since Nietzsche . . . philosophers and social scientists have been busy demonstrating that existence has no purpose, that chance and impersonal forces rule our fate, and that all values are relative and hence arbitrary. It is true that life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal built into the fabric of nature and human experience, a goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be *given* meaning. Much of what we call culture and civilization consists in efforts people have made, generally against overwhelming odds, to create a sense of purpose for themselves and their descendants. It is one thing to recognize that life is, by itself, meaningless. It is another thing entirely to accept this with resignation.⁶

The meaninglessness of life is an intellectual icon that Csikszentmihalyi must pay homage to as he nimbly steps around it, acknowledging with unresigned rebelliousness the role of meaning in a healthy psyche. Alan Guth does not have the same enthusiasm for meaning as Csikszentmihalyi. To sum up Freud's and Guth's philosophical position, "Meaning is made, not discovered." Meaning is meaningless, but "humanity is too dependent on its superstitions" to give it up any time soon.

Csikszentmihalyi is actually closer in philosophical attitude to a new wave of physicists working in cosmology whose work physicist Paul Davies has popularized. The very title of his last book, *The Fifth Miracle: The Search for the Origin and Meaning of Life*, shows the loosening of Freud's hold.

Since the heady success of molecular biology, most investigators have sought the secret of life in physics and the chemistry of molecules. But they will look in vain for conventional physics and chemistry to explain life, for this is a classic case of confusing the medium with the message.⁷

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of the inner life. . . . I likewise attribute a positive value to biology, and to the empiricism of natural science in general, in which I see a herculean attempt to understand the human psyche by approaching it from the outer world. . . . In my picture of the world there is a vast outer realm and an equally vast inner realm; between these two stands man, facing now one and now the other . . . I see in all happening the play of opposites, and derive from this conception my idea of psychic energy.¹²

Jung is clearly reaching toward meaning as a vital part of a healthy psyche. He savages Freud for imposing Freud's own sexual obsessions and neuroses on all of humanity. He accuses the Freudian school of being regressive: "The wheel of history must not be turned back, and man's advance towards a spiritual life . . . must not be denied."¹³

Aniela Jaffe, Jung's personal secretary, opened her study of Jung's understanding of meaning in life, *The Myth of Meaning*, this way:

"Life is crazy and meaningful at once. And when we do not laugh over the one aspect and speculate about the other, life is exceedingly drab, and everything is reduced to the littlest scale. There is then little sense and little nonsense either." Jung wrote this at the age of fifty-nine. Twenty-five years later, the same thought acquires a strangely different intonation: "Which element we think outweighs the other, whether meaninglessness or meaning, is a matter of temperament. If meaninglessness were absolutely preponderant, the meaningfulness of life would vanish to an increasing degree with each step in our development. But that is—or seems to me—not the case. Probably, as in all metaphysical questions, both are true: Life is—or has—meaning and meaninglessness. I cherish the anxious hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle." In old age the question of meaning becomes a fateful one that decides the value or valuelessness of one's own life. . . .¹⁴

Jung would consider Guth not a soldier in the camp of "hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle." Guth's temperament is squarely in Freud's camp: like Freud, Guth seeks an understanding of the universe as a self-winding clock operating on biological forces that are themselves based on chemical forces, which are in turn based on physical forces. The uniquely human aspect of the universe, conscious awareness, is merely another natural outgrowth of these forces. To Jung, Csikszentmihalyi and Davies would have a greater understanding and appreciation of the "crazy and meaningful" play of opposites that is life.

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Physicists are not abandoning the random and mechanistic inherency of objective reality. However, the stranglehold of Freud's antagonism to meaningfulness and his philosophical pessimism is loosening among a growing number of influential scientists. Like Csikszentmihalyi, Davies is "unresigned" to the meaningfulness that seems to inform the existence of life. In his Templeton Prize address he wrote:

To me, the contrived nature of physical existence is just too fantastic for me to take on board as simply a "given." It points forcefully to a deeper underlying meaning to existence. Some call it purpose, some design. These loaded words, which derive from human categories, capture only imperfectly what it is that the universe is about. But that it is about something, I have absolutely no doubt.⁸

Davies' enthusiasm for the finding of natural laws that will account for purpose and meaning match Csikszentmihalyi's enthusiasm for the relationship of purpose and meaning to psychological health. Their intellectual attitude is in reality closer to Jung's view than to Freud's.

C. G. Jung's relationship with Freud is well documented. Some authors downplay the relationship, limiting their mutual attraction to a shared interest in the unconscious.⁹ Others cite a "close association" that lasted until their split in 1913.¹⁰ Yet others see the relationship as formative for Jung and the split traumatic enough to be called "Jung's rejection of his father figure."¹¹

Whatever coloration we assign to the personal relationship between the elder Sigmund Freud and the younger Carl Jung, the intellectual break between them was profound and its therapeutic implications seismic. Twenty years after their split, Jung wrote: "The contrast between Freud and myself goes back to essential differences in our basic assumptions."

Freud is [unable] to understand religious experience, as is clearly shown in his book, *The Future of an Illusion* . . . Freud's psychology is based upon a view of the world that is uncriticized, or even unconscious, and this is apt to narrow the field of human experience and understanding to a considerable extent. . . .

I attribute a positive value to all religions. In their symbolism I recognize those figures which I have met within the dreams and fantasies of my patients. In their moral teachings I see efforts that are the same as or similar to those made by my patients. When guided by their own insight or inspiration, they seek the right way of dealing with the forces

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If we look carefully, however, we have to agree with Jaffé that in the final analysis, meaning to Jung is “a myth that man creates.” Jung saw in “all happening a play of opposites” but this play takes its highest form and has reality and meaning only in the realm of the psyche, where the shadow exists in opposition to the ego, and the unconscious and conscious are locked in an eternal battle:

There is no form of human tragedy that does not in some measure proceed from [the] conflict between the ego and the unconscious. . . . The repressed content must be made conscious so as to produce a tension of opposites, without which no forward movement is possible. The conscious mind is on top, the shadow underneath, and just as high always longs for low and hot for cold, so all consciousness, perhaps without being aware of it, seeks its unconscious opposite, lacking which it is doomed to stagnation, congestion, and ossification. Life is born only of the spark of opposites.

Religions, along with mythologies, rituals and fairy tales are the raw material that human beings use to form the symbols that can bring the unconscious archetypes to individual consciousness (primarily through dreams and dream interpretation) from the collective unconscious. The turning of archetypes into symbols within one’s conscious life brings the play of opposites into a proper relation, a transcendent relation:

From the activity of the unconscious there now emerges a new content, constellated by thesis and antithesis in equal measure and standing in a compensatory relation to both. It thus forms the middle ground on which the opposites can be united. If, for instance, we conceive the opposition to be sensuality versus spirituality, then the mediatory content born out of the unconscious provides a welcome means of expression for the spiritual thesis, because of its rich spiritual associations, and also for the sensual antithesis, because of its sensuous imagery. The ego, however, torn between thesis and antithesis, finds in the middle ground its own counterpart, its sole and unique means of expression and it eagerly seizes on this in order to be delivered from its division.

If the mediatory product remains intact, it forms the raw material for a process not of dissolution but of construction, in which thesis and antithesis both play their part. In this way it becomes a new content that governs the whole attitude, putting an end to the division and forcing the energy of the opposites into a common channel. The standstill is overcome and life can flow on with renewed power towards new goals.¹⁵

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To state this in universal rather than individual terms:

In Jung's view, changes in the collective unconscious, which might take centuries to complete themselves, were responsible for alterations in the way in which men viewed the world and thought about themselves. The decline in conventional Christian belief, for example, is related to the fact that the Christ-image, which excludes both evil and the feminine, can no longer symbolize wholeness for modern man

Jung believed that causeless events were creative acts "as the continuous creation of a pattern that exists from all eternity, repeats itself sporadically and is not derivable from any known antecedents". The recognition of patterns of order affects human beings as meaning.¹⁷

To Jung, meaning is the end product of the psyche's journey through each portion of life. Meaning is the satisfaction that infuses the individual as he or she brings the psychic matter, stored as complexes and archetypes in the personal and collective unconscious, to consciousness. Meaning is not solely dependent on the individual's assignment of meaning. Rather, it springs forth from the existence of humanity itself, its collective unconscious infused by eternal patterns that repeat themselves sporadically.

These eternal patterns, Jung concedes, are coincidental. The universe could indeed come from nothing; objective reality is random events governed by physical and psychic forces; meaning, as Jaffe notes, is a myth. (It must be noted that Jung "believed in an ultimate unity of all existence. Using the terminology of medieval philosophy, he referred to this as the *unus mundus*. This unity is outside the human categories of time and space, and beyond the separation of reality into physical and mental."¹⁸ Functionally, however, patterns of events are acausal.)

The physical reality of picking up a magazine to read at breakfast has no objective relationship with my internal state, neither my thinking about the meaning of life nor my intention to begin writing this article. The synchronicity between the physical reality and my internal state is, therefore, completely coincidental. "But this does not alter," says Jung, "the fact that the psychologist is continually coming up against cases where the emergence of symbolic parallels cannot be explained without the hypothesis of the collective unconscious."¹⁹ The connecting of physical reality and the internal realm is definitely a function of the human mind.

Synchronicity, as Edward Edinger writes, "is the term Jung coined for a postulated connecting principle to explain the occurrence of meaningful

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coincidences. Whether or not an event can be considered an example of synchronicity depends on the individual's subjective response—whether he feels it to be a *meaningful* coincidence.”²⁰

Jung, following Freud, was also concerned with maintaining the “science” of psychoanalysis. As much as his research and explorations into the world's cultures and esoteric knowledge led him to place the stress on the word meaningful in the phrase “meaningful coincidence,” he paid homage to the scientific orthodoxy requiring adherence to a mechanistic universe. He never abandoned coincidence as the objective aspect of “meaningful coincidence.”

It is precisely on this point that Judaism's definition of meaning can be most clearly described: meaning is embedded in the very existence of reality. There is no event so small as to be meaningless; no mineral placed randomly. The ultimate statement of the Jewish Theory of Meaning is, “There is no such thing as a coincidence.”

Everything that is created exists in relationship. The law of nature is the rule of cause and effect. The stately oak tree came forth from a small acorn in its relationship to the soil and water. Guth will agree that the first “ancestor” atoms of the acorn came from nothingness and, thus, end of mystery. In Judaism, however, this origin of energy and matter from nothingness must be taken to the farthest reaches possible for the human intellect. The Vilna Gaon, anticipating Einstein by 150 years wrote in his commentary on Genesis that time was the first creation necessary for space to exist.²¹ Time, he explained, is sequence, the orderly progression of cause and effect. Time is thus the first product of purpose, the future implied in the present.

The very first law in the *Mishneh Torah* states, “The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdoms is to know that there is a Primary Being who causes to exist all existence.” The question may be asked, why did Maimonides choose to write “causes to exist” instead of the more concise phrase, “who creates”? R. Eliyahu Touger answers: “Before creation, there was utter nothingness . . . and no potential for existence. Indeed, the term ‘nothingness’ is also inappropriate, for it implies empty space waiting to be filled.”²² Before a universe emerges from nothingness, a readiness for existence must be provided, the first cause. In other words, existence can be in relationship with “nothingness,” but only if we can account for the “potential” for existence.

This potential for being, which preceded the existence of the universe, is a synonym for purpose. Reality, the universe, and thus, existence, all fulfill a potential, a purpose. Meaning is embedded in the very

existence of every single mineral and in the occurrence of every single event through every passing moment. This is what the Sages referred to when they said that no blade of grass grows without an angel smiting it and saying, “Grow.” The word “smiting” was chosen purposefully: No life comes into being mechanically or accidentally. To smite means to command from an outside source; the “angel” refers to a connector to God’s purposeful command.

The Sages, however, are teaching an even more profound and immediate lesson. The grass not only comes into being but also “grows.” It is not only birth or creation that requires guiding energy; it is the continued life of every living creature, even as minutely significant as one blade of grass, that is dependent on the continuing guiding energy for its very existence.

This is also inherent in Maimonides’ principle quoted above, “who causes to exist.” This is framed in the present tense. Life and reality itself are continually being caused to exist, continually infused with the energy of purpose. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, in his seminal work, *The Way of God*, put it succinctly: “There exists a first Being, without beginning or end, who brought all things into existence and continues to sustain them.”²³

The purpose of each human being and of the entire universe exist, in Judaism, in an interdependent and symbiotic relationship. It, like meaning, is embedded into objective reality, not dependent on the awareness of either the individual or the whole. R. Eliyahu E. Dessler states:

The whole of creation functions like a huge machine, all of whose parts work on and with one another. This is certainly true in the external sense. All the parts of the world are mutually necessary and together maintain the world in its decreed order. It is true also in the inner, spiritual sense; everything in the world serves one unified purpose. But still each individual organism feels its independent existence and seems to pursue its own ends. The bee collects the nectar as food for its own hive; it knows nothing of the fact that by doing this it helps to pollinate the plants. A human being is busy selling his merchandise for his own profit; he rarely has in mind the fact that from a higher viewpoint his function is the distribution of goods among the wider public.²⁴

R. Dessler is not only referring us to the relationship between individual reality and collective reality but also to the relationship between external, physical reality and internal, spiritual reality. The individual’s

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interaction with the collective in fulfilling a purpose is achieved in both parts of a dualistic universe, physical and spiritual. We have two fundamental principles here. First, the essence of all existents is duality. Second, the basis of this pervasive duality is the universe's own dual nature, physicality and spirituality.

“It is proper that you should know that the whole world is made up of the material and the spiritual, so intimately mixed and fused, that each of them sustains the other, like body and soul in living creatures.”²⁵ While this quote is from the eleventh century *Duties of the Heart*, the concept permeates all of Jewish thought, originating in the very first verse of the Torah, which sets forth creation as “Heaven” and “Earth,” the spiritual and the physical. In fact, this dual nature of creation is anticipated in the very first letter of the Torah, a *bet*, the letter whose numerological value is two, which signifies relationship (requiring at least two) and the concepts of inner and outer. Talmudic, midrashic, and philosophical literature all derive meaning from the Torah's beginning with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet as an indication of the dual nature of all creation.²⁶

That the Torah mentions the order of creation as “Heaven” first and “Earth” second is significant:

The plan and purpose of creation is its spiritual content. Everything that exists in the physical world has a spiritual source. Its development, its activity, how it affects other things and is affected by them—all these take place according to spiritual needs, and to serve the spiritual ends set by the Creator for His creation. . . . Even the laws of nature depend on the spiritual purpose.²⁷

While the material and the spiritual are mixed and fused, they are also distinct: that which is physical (inorganic matter and energy, plant and animal life) is almost totally physical; that which is spiritual (the order of angels and other spiritual existents) is almost totally spiritual.²⁸ One creature stands in the middle, a mixture of both the physical and spiritual, with the rest of creation there to assist in the fulfillment of purpose:

God . . . arranged and decreed the creation of concepts of both perfection [spiritual completion] and deficiency [physical impermanence], as well as a creature with equal access to both. This creature would then be given the means to earn perfection and avoid deficiency. . . . For the intended purpose to be successfully achieved, means must exist through

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which this creature can earn perfection. This, in turn, will require that creation contain many different elements, interconnected by a multitude of relationships. . . . The creature destined for this great condition . . . is considered the main element of all creation. All else in existence is only an aid, in some aspect or regard, toward this goal, to have it succeed and become reality. . . . This primary, essential creature is man. All other created things, whether above or below man, only exist for his sake, to complete them. . . . The elements of perfection through which man can perfect himself are his intellectual powers [consciousness, awareness] and all good human traits. Material matters and evil human traits, on the other hand, are the elements of deficiency among which man is placed to earn perfection.²⁹

Dualities in creation flowing from the letter *bet*—light and dark, earth and sky, water and dry land, in fact, all duality encased in the physical and the spiritual—are the setting and the tools of the human being’s fulfillment of purpose.

It is important here to summarize clearly the philosophical and psychological foundation embodied in these teachings. The universe was created and continues in its existence each moment through an “energy.” That “energy” is purpose. This purposeful energy infuses the universe collectively and also every single item, small or large, within it. This purposeful energy also infuses every event in the universe, whether small or large. The essence of each item or event is, therefore, meaningfulness.

One creature was created with awareness of meaningfulness, the human being. This universe exists as the setting for human beings to become aware of the meaning of what surrounds them and occurs to them, both collectively and individually. The day by day “inhaling” of more meaning points the way to human beings’ fulfillment of purpose, again both collectively and individually. Fulfillment of purpose is the highest level of fulfillment in human life and is available to all people by virtue of being infused with human awareness. Uniquely human dualities exist between perfection and deficiency, spiritual completion and physical impermanence.

The most recognizable of human dualities is Adam and Eve. “Male and female he created them” (*Gen. 1:27*). Eve has not yet been separated from Adam, yet the pronoun used is “them.” The Sages explain that this refers to the dual nature of Adam; originally, both male and female were encased in one form.³⁰ In a sense, this creature was “too complete”:

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Although Adam was physically self-sufficient, s/he had a deep emotional void. . . there was no one else in the world with whom s/he could have an equal relationship. God created Adam this way so that s/he would feel an existential loneliness. In this state of physical self-sufficiency, with no one to whom s/he could give, the Torah says: “. . . it is not good, a person’s being alone” (*Gen. 2:18*).³¹

Adam and Eve were subsequently separated into male and female. That they were once commingled accounts for the female aspects in men and the male aspects in women. It also accounts for the unity available in a sexual union within a holy context. Sexual unity, as opposed to sexual pleasure, is considered a spiritual act in Judaism. It is the coming together of the spiritual and the physical to an ultimate unity.

It is no accident that this union, which can reach the highest form of meaning, can be lowered to meaninglessness, then to animal instinct, and finally all the way down to debasement and cruelty. The tension of duality in human life is completion on one side, represented by Adam and Eve coming together in union; and, on the other side, impermanence, represented by their needing to separate. Male and female is, therefore, the model in Judaism for all human dualities: awareness vs. animal instinct, the conscious vs. the unconscious, meaning vs. meaninglessness, and, as Luzzatto indicated, good human vs. evil human traits.

Duality implies choice. The human being is continually choosing between a path toward spiritual completion, the realization of purpose, and a path toward physical impermanence, the abandonment of purpose. We cry out in moments of uncertain confusion, or despair against the burden of choice, asking why the path cannot be marked clearly instead:

If [man] were compelled to choose perfection, then he would not actually be its master, and . . . purpose would not be fulfilled. It was therefore necessary that man be created with free will.

Man’s inclinations are therefore balanced between good and evil, and he is not compelled toward either of them. . . . Man was . . . created with both a Good Urge (*yetser tov*) and an Evil Urge (*yetser ha-ra*). He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires.³²

Meaning is “meaningful” only when the human being has free will to choose. In truth, what are the choices a human being really has? Can he choose to be tall, wealthy, or not to be hit by a bus crossing the

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street while jogging for health? Jewish law states, “Free will is granted every human being. If one desires to turn to the way of good and to be righteous, the choice is in his hands. And if one wants to turn to the bad way and be wicked, the choice is in his hands.”³³

To be tall, wealthy, or healthy are the setting, outside our free will. They are part of the universe within which each individual must find fulfillment of purpose. Free will is the ability granted exclusively to human beings to choose only between the good, the meaningful inclination, *yetser tov*, and the destructive inclination, *yetser ha-ra*. Without these two polar opposites within the human being, free will would not operate. The struggle within the human being is a sorting through of dualities, a continual choosing of which way one wants to go. Human awareness does not grasp our collective or individual purpose in one grand sweep. Rather, purpose must be perceived through each bit of meaning garnered from life as it occurs, little by little, step by step.³⁴

THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS

In *Counseling and Psychotherapy, Theories and Interventions*, Capuzzi and Gross present a theoretical case study of a 36-year-old Native American male, Jonathan. I have chosen two points from this case study to illustrate therapeutic approaches based on a Theory of Meaning.

Jonathan was driving when his car was struck head on by a drunk driver. Jonathan’s brother was killed. This was *the* moment of defining meaning in Jonathan’s life. He was 16 at the time and quit school after the accident.

His guilt and grief over his brother’s death and the reaction of his family had all added up to Jonathan’s leaving school and spending the year trying to figure out what he was going to do about all of this. His parents and siblings were very upset by his leaving school, but were also dealing with their own grief and tolerated his not returning to school. Jonathan did not seem to be very sure about whether his family blamed him for the accident. He went back to school the following year and earned his high school diploma.³⁵

After spending that year “trying to figure out what he was going to do about all of this,” it appears Jonathan left the attempt unresolved, and without having gained any of the insight he had sought.

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Nor, it appears, did he receive help in that attempt from his family. No further mention of the event's consequences in Jonathan's life is made by either Jonathan or Capuzzi and Gross. They bring examples of how a number of counseling theories would treat Jonathan, but these treatments rarely mention the incident of his brother's death, or do so in passing.

Under the Theory of Meaning, however, this event would be the core event given to Jonathan to explore. We can imagine the year he spent after the accident as he grappled with finding meaning in the event: Why did my brother have to die? Why did I have to be the one driving the car, even if the accident wasn't my fault? Why was I merely thrown from the car, while he died? Why didn't I die? These questions were in the forefront of Jonathan's consciousness to the extent that he could not face life without resolving them. Not going back to school was Jonathan's way of demanding that life reveal the meaning of this event through answers to these questions. Were they answered, he would be able to regain his place in the family, which he had lost when his brother had lost his own place through death.

The family was not helpful to Jonathan. Busy with their own grief and search for meaning in the event, they did not at all see Jonathan's leaving school as a cry for help in his own search for meaning. They tolerated his state of withdrawal; he was left to his own devices.

It does not seem that Jonathan consulted the elders of his reservation, nor did he seek traditional Navajo purification rituals to gain clarity. There is no indication that he spoke with anyone in a significant manner or that he had any significant insights on his own during the year away from school. We can imagine as the year wore on these questions of meaning and purpose began to lose their power in the same way that his grief was beginning to fade into a dull ache and that his guilt was beginning to seem an unfair burden. As no answers were provided and no meaning discovered, Jonathan's *yetser ha-ra* took control, pushing away meaning and the event itself into the unconscious. Jonathan began assigning to himself the negative attributes of who he would become.

Jonathan struggled through that year in isolation; he was no longer able to sustain meaningful relationships. "[His first] marriage resulted in three children and lasted six years. During the last year of the marriage, Jonathan began drinking heavily and seeing another woman. . . . Things went well during the first few years of [his second] marriage, but earlier patterns returned."³⁶

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No matter what Jonathan tries, he is destined to failure, just as he had failed to bring his brother back home safely.

He couldn't seem to relate to the people with whom he worked. They always seem to expect more than he can deliver. . . . He is having financial difficulties due to the cost of living in Phoenix and his need to pay child support to his first wife and provide financial support to his second wife and daughter. He is drinking more than he should and is having a difficult time controlling his anger and frustration. . . . From Jonathan's perspective the chances of reconciliation do not look good. He states that he loves his wife but does not know how to live in this type of relationship. He believes that this is the same thing that happened in his first marriage, and that no matter what he tries to do to make the relationship work, it is never good enough. His reaction is often to get very angry and walk away. . . . He feels that if he and his wife cannot salvage their marriage, he will never again place himself in this type of relationship."³⁷

Jonathan says that he misses his children, yet he seems comfortable missing them. He also misses his family but "feels that he had no future on the reservation." That relationship hit a dead end with the death of his brother. The fact that his frustration and anger did not abate when he left the reservation for Phoenix points to his continued need for meaning and purpose, focused in his psyche on the meaning of his brother's death and his own role in it. A part of him is not yet ready to give his psyche up to the dictates of the *yetser ha-ra*, but "[he] feels that he is trapped. In his own words, 'He is not wanted in the 'White Man's' world and has no future in his own.'"³⁸

In a therapy based on a Theory of Meaning, Jonathan would eventually revisit this painful event head on, searching for the meaning it holds that harmonizes with the meaning in the rest of his life. The following context, very different from Jonathan's, nonetheless illustrates a useful path for him as he focuses attention on why he had to be the driver of the car his brother died in:

One spring day in 1962, as Hershel Weber [a hasidic Jew in Brooklyn] was leaving his *shtibl* on Ross St., he heard a man who was walking in front of the *shtibl* cry out that he had a sharp pain in his chest. The man collapsed right in front of Hershel. Hershel screamed for help and within seconds people called the police and an ambulance. Hershel stood over the man helplessly, assuring him that aid was on the way. Hershel saw the man become unconscious and his face turn blue. Tragically, a few minutes later the man was dead on the sidewalk.

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A while later two police officers arrived. Hershel heard one officer say to the other, "If only we had gotten here ten minutes earlier, we could have saved this guy."

Hershel was traumatized. He convinced two of his friends to enroll with him in a first aid course at a local Red Cross office so that they could administer emergency medical help. All three friends bought small oxygen tanks.

A few months later an elderly gentleman died in his sleep. When his wife awoke the next morning she realized immediately that something was terribly wrong. She ran to the window facing the street and screamed hysterically for help. Someone yelled, "Get Hershel Weber!"

He came running with his trustworthy oxygen tank. There was nothing he could do. The man had been dead for hours. Twice now Hershel had been helpless in the face a person's death. For the next two days Hershel was devastated. He decided to go to the Satmar Rav (1887-1979).

Hershel recounted the incident and asked, "Wouldn't it be a good idea for a group of Jews to become well versed in emergency medicine so they could be available in the community on a volunteer basis whenever the need arises?" The Rebbe said, "Start the organization you spoke of!"

That's how Hatzalah was created. One man, seemingly in a place by coincidence, recognized an important need in the community.³⁹

This story, if Jonathan is prepared for it through a relationship of trust with his counselor or therapist, could have therapeutic effect on him. Instead of "Why me" questions, Jonathan might explore these: Was it a coincidence that Hershel was in front of the synagogue right then, or was there a purpose to it? What meaning does Jonathan see in Hershel's being so close to the first victim? Was Hershel correct in altering his life to incorporate the meaning he saw in the event? Hershel did not understand the positive meaning of the first death. It took the second incident to get his full attention. Why did it take two incidents? What would Jonathan conclude if there were two events pointing to similar meanings? Of what value was the Rebbe's role? Would Jonathan seek guidance from anyone whom he respects? Many questions could present themselves during therapy that might help focus Jonathan on integrating the meaning of the events of his life into healthy life choices and actions.

Under the Theory of Meaning, the therapeutic process would proceed in the following steps:

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1. Identifying the key events in Jonathan's life to focus him on the search for meaning and to begin training him to find the meaning embedded in them.
2. Helping Jonathan reopen these key events for his conscious examination after years of repression.
3. Guiding Jonathan in continuing the search for these events' meaning.
4. Presenting Jonathan with the awareness that he has the choice to pursue meaning or to abandon it in favor of different values.
5. Help Jonathan identify and categorize the choices driven, respectively, by the *yetser tov* and the *yetser ha-ra*.

FURTHER WORK ON A THEORY OF MEANING

A basic issue needing further investigation is the cultural specificity of a Theory of Meaning based on Jewish teachings. Is such a theory limited to people seeking a specifically Jewish outlook? One could argue that the concept of meaning as the controlling agent of every event mirrors Jewish law. Jewish law governs the totality of daily life, infusing it with spiritual content and imperative. Or, one could argue that a Jewish concept of meaning has infused Christian societies at least, if not also Islamic societies. Both built themselves on Jewish values and the precept of monotheism. Other cultures also share a view of meaning as an aspect of external reality, available to the human being. Non-Jewish clients may find the search for meaning to be a therapeutic event, even though they may not find the Jewish focus on even mundane aspects of daily life relevant.

CONCLUSION

Why the universe exists, "The Last Great Mystery," is a question that human beings must answer every day in order to live. The identification, awareness and living of meaning are the stuff from which spiritual and psychological health derive. Under a psychological Theory of Meaning based on traditional Jewish teachings, meaning is part of the structure of the universe and purpose is the unifying force; through seeking meaning and purpose the individual gains a relationship with the world. Human beings connect with purpose through the meaning inherent in all events and experiences. Harmonious connection to meaning and thus to awareness of purpose is the state of spiritual fulfill-

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ment and psychological well being. Disconnectedness from purpose is spiritual emptiness and psychological disturbance.

I did indeed finish my breakfast along with the article by Brad Lemley about the physicist Alan Guth. I thank them both for pointing out to me the real truth of synchronicity in our world, the ultimate statement of the Jewish Theory of Meaning, “There is no such thing as a coincidence.”

NOTES

1. Brad Lemley, “The Last Great Mystery” [introduction by the editors to “Guth’s Grand Guess”], *Discover*, vol. 23, no. 4, April, 2002, p. 31.
2. *Ibid.*
3. David Capuzzi and Douglas R. Gross, *Counseling and Psychotherapy, Theories and Interventions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), p. 354.
4. Emanuel Rice, *Freud and Moses* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 111.
5. Donald C. Abel, *Freud on Instinct and Morality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. xiii, quoting from Freud 1933a [1932], SE 22, p. 160.
- 5a. Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Use of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), chaps. 8 and 10.
6. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 215.
7. Paul Davies, *The Fifth Miracle: The Search for the Origin and Meaning of Life* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), p. 212.
8. Quoted in Michael J. Behe, review of *The Fifth Miracle* in FirstThings.com: www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9906/reviews/behe.html. Retrieved December 22, 2002.
9. Murray Stein, *Jung’s Map of the Soul: An Introduction* (Chicago: Open Court, Carus Publishing Co., 1998), p. 40.
10. C. G. Jung, *The Essential Jung: Selected Writings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), introduction by Anthony Storr, p. 13.
11. Levi Meier, *Jewish Values in Jungian Psychology* (Latham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), p. 13.
12. C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1933), pp. 117-124.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
14. Amiela Jaffe, *The Myth of Meaning*, translated by R.F.C. Hull (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1971), p. 11.
15. Daryl Sharp, *Jung Lexicon: A Primer of Terms and Concepts* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1991), p. 94, quoting first from *The Problem of the Attitude-Type*, CW 7, par. 78, then from *Analytical Psychology and Weltanschauung*,

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- CW 8, par. 706.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 136, quoting from *Definitions*, CW 6, pars. 825, 827.
 17. Jung, *Essential Jung*, p. 26. Internal quote is from CW 8, par. 967.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 341.
 20. Edward F. Edinger, *Quadrant*. Reprint 1 (New York: C.G Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1968), pp. 11-12.
 21. Vilna Gaon, *Aderet Eliyahu*. The Gaon asks and answers thirty-two questions on the beginning of *Genesis*, with the first focusing on the difficult grammatical structure of the first word, “*bereishit*.” The Gaon says that the word, which normally means “in the first of,” was placed here to teach that time, or sequence, was the beginning of creation and was necessary for the existence of space.
 22. Eliyahu Touger, *Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah: Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* (New York: Moznaim Publishing, 1989), p. 139.
 23. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *The Way of God*, translated by Aryeh Kaplan (New York: Feldheim, 1977), p. 31.
 24. Eliyahu E. Dessler, *Strive for Truth!* translation of *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, by Aryeh Carmell (New York: Feldheim, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 147-148.
 25. Bahya ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, translated by Moses Hyamson (New York: Feldheim, 1970), vol. 1, p. 139.
 26. Michael L. Munk, *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (New York: Mesorah, 1983), chap. 2.
 27. Dessler, *Strive for Truth!*, vol. 2, p. 252.
 28. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-Torah*, chap. 2.
 29. Luzzatto, *The Way of God*, pp. 39 ff.
 30. *Eruvin* 18a; *Berakhot* 61a.
 31. Lisa Aiken, *To Be a Jewish Woman* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), pp. 7-8.
 32. Luzzatto, *The Way of God*, p. 44.
 33. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:1.
 34. Rabbi Dessler describes this for us: “[A person’s life is] like a ladder firmly planted on the ground with its head reaching up to heaven. Rung by rung the person must work to combat his *yetser ha-ra*. He cannot jump any part of the way; all his life he has to progress laboriously from step to step.” *Strive for Truth!*, vol. 2, pp. 98-99.
 35. Capuzzi and Gross, *Counseling and Psychotherapy, Theories and Interventions*, p. 45.
 36. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-56.
 37. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
 39. Paysach J. Krohn, *Reflections of the Maggid: Inspirational Stories from Around the Globe and Around the Corner* (New York: Mesorah, 2002), pp. 100-102. The story is paraphrased and abbreviated here.