

WHAT MAKES SHRINKS TICK; OR, WHY DO RABBIS GO TOCK TICK?

by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.

A Reader Writes:

I have gotten the feeling that very few Talmidei Chachamim [Torah scholars - ed note] know how to apply Mussar to the current generation - either they give "textbook answers", or they view the world from a vantage point of the pre-war generation.

My questions are:

- 1) Why is it that the therapist (in my situation) succeeded where Rabbonim [Rabbis - ed note] did not (and were sometimes unwilling to concede it)?
- 2) As above, but on a global level: If Torah has the true answer to what makes a person tick, why are only "professionals" (Psychologists) able to treat many cases? Even Rabbonim refer cases to the "shrinks" - even the Rabbonim that I implicitly criticized in my introduction!

Please answer me if you can. B'vircas ha'Torah.

Dear Reader,

I'll let you tell me if I can or cannot. ;-))

Your question touches upon an important fundamental of mussar-psychology. Permit me a word of introduction:

The Torah was written for and given to an audience, namely the Jews, at a particular moment in our history, the Revelation at Mount Sinai. Nevertheless, there is an assumption that the Torah has a message for all Peoples and is relevant at all times. Still, there are those who are more or less the audience of the Torah. A person who, for example, has just committed some serious moral (or immoral) offense will not be able to "hear" the words of Torah being transmitted at a shiur (class) the same way that the same person would be able to "hear" the Torah had they not succumbed. Similarly, one who has perfected some of his or her character traits (middos) is a much more able audience for the message of Torah than one who has yet to embark on the difficult road of self-improvement.

We might say then, that there are many characteristics which will determine a hierarchy of

audiences. Our mission, should we (or should we not) choose to accept it, is to become, progressively, more so the "audience" to which the Torah is given. I would suggest an analogy to the connoisseurs of opera versus those who cannot wait for the final bell, however the analogy fails since there is no particular mandate to become the audience for such productions, unless one wishes to travel in certain circles and is afraid to admit their boredom. In the case of the Torah, we are called upon to study the Torah in order to better understand how to become the audience to which the Torah was ideally directed.

One of the features of the ideal audience of the Torah is well-centered emotional good health. Again, this is not to imply that the Torah has nothing to say to, or about, the absence of such good health, but it is safe to say that the Torah is expecting us to strive towards emotional good health in order to more completely receive the Torah's message.

It might be said that the mission of the psychotherapist is to help the client become the audience, and the role of mussar is to make the student still more ideally the audience to which the Torah speaks. And so, on and on, until prophesy.

It is only a short step from there to say that those who have immersed themselves successfully in Torah over an extended period of time have become so accustomed to this aspect of the Torah's audience that they do not think outside of the "box" and cannot successfully reckon with the "pre-introductory" nature of certain types of therapies. It is not for lack of caring that the Rabbis sometimes do not deal well with emotional neediness on the part of their students. I haven't thought through all the implications of this analogy, but it feels a bit like calling Leonard Bernstein in to give your child his first piano lessons. Not knowing Mr. Bernstein, I would nevertheless imagine that he would have great difficulty if he could not hand the youngster the score and begin waving his wand while the youngster "read" the piece. The youngster would surely feel that the composer/conductor was incompetent. However, I do not think that most people would be able to teach chopsticks and compose accompaniment to Tchaikovsky on the same day.

Now, what have we now said about therapists??!!!

Perhaps we might say that a good therapist has become an expert in helping people gain the toe-hold for future growth. I don't know if therapists would agree with the statement that their role as therapist has to be carefully balanced with their personal Torah growth to monitor for the point where the hand that they hold out for the client is too far away for the average client to reach. Does this involve a certain amount of self-sacrifice? A "burnout" phase for a growing therapist? A selection process whereby therapists are relating to those clients who are "with" them? I cannot say. In general, it has been extensively written that Torah education is a delicate separation of the personal growth of the teacher (carried out in private) and the effort to make Torah accessible to the student, when the teacher is focused entirely on the ability of the students to comprehend his message (Rav Wolbe, shlita, quoting the Tomer Devorah). So maybe I cannot answer you, after all.

Best wishes.