

WHAT TORAH DOES FOR THE PERSON

by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.

A delightful reader asks:

I was wondering...
Shouldn't the Torah itself be able to help a person attain mental health and the ability to grow?
Thanks!

Dear Reader,

You've touched on a wonderful question. We are all looking for a way to live which promotes healthy thoughts and feelings and it would certainly seem that the Torah, G-d's plan for Creation, should infuse, in one who internalizes it, ideal states of mental health and the ability to grow. I believe that an exploration led by your question can shed considerable light on the relationship between Torah (its existence and its study) and mental health.

The premise which I will operate with is that actualization of Torah would, indeed, lead to the ideals of thoughts and feelings for the one who internalizes it. The key to taking advantage of this most precious tool lies in understanding the tool and our needs for it.

The process of growth through the Torah follows a pattern of what might be loosely associated with behavioral and cognitive therapy. The process proceeds from behavior (doing that which the Torah prescribes) to affirmation of that behavior (a cognitive process). When we start out, our behaviors are dictated by our parents. As a parent, we are instructed to shape the behaviors of the young child towards conformity with the Torah's norms. That approach is basically behavioral since the Torah does not presume that a young child is yet capable of independent choice. As such, the performance of positive precepts and the avoidance of inappropriate behavior is to be conditioned by the parent, without significant recourse to the "reasoning" of the young child. What a person does today serves as the backdrop for his choices tomorrow. Since we are dealing with Divinely ordained norms, there is no fear that we might have "bought" a behavior which is detrimental.

If I may be permitted an aside here, I would say that all too often I see parents attempting to cajole their children into subscribing to the disciplines which a parent normally imposes upon a child. With great flourish they try to get the child to recognize the validity of this or that directive, often becoming frustrated with the child who persists in his unwillingness to see the wisdom of cleaning his room before going out to play. Clearly missing is the basic principle that adults choose and

impose those choices upon children. The goal of such choice is so that the child will, in turn, affirm those behaviors to which they have become accustomed.

The adult proceeds to affirm his or her conditioned behaviors, only to discover aspects of those behaviors which are rote/mechanical or, in some cases, in error. He is thus working on two planes. On the one hand he is attempting to infuse his Torah-compatible behaviors with personal intent, putting the "self" into the otherwise mechanical act. At the same time he is altering Torah-incompatible behaviors in much the same what that the parent molds the behaviors of the child. He thus embarks on a behavioral program of change which is designed to condition his own responses. Then, once those behaviors are in place, the person, in turn, contemplates those behaviors in order to infuse the mechanical acts with focus and intent, known in Hebrew as Kavannah. In this manner the person is ever conditioning the "child" within him or her self to the appropriate behaviors, and always infusing those conditioned behaviors with the breath of life, focused intent.

The person would continue this way for a lifetime, were it not for a number of land mines which lay in wait for him along the road. The list is as long as it is fascinating. We will try to explore some of them in future postings.

It pays to note that as one proceeds along the road of behavior/affirmation, he is continually altering his area of focus. That is, those behaviors which are already part of the person's automatic repertoire need to be addressed insofar as their deficiencies of Kavannah. Moving beyond those behaviors means that one puts them into the background (a maintenance approach) and sets out to instill or improve other behaviors, cycling back to discover that yesterday's Kavannah is a but a rote behavior in light of the insight developed in other spheres and behaviors.

BEHAVIOR a -> KAVANNAH INFUSED INTO a -> BEHAVIOR b -> KAVANNAH b -> RE-EVALUATION OF a -> REPEAT TO INFINITY.

Best wishes.