

SOME RESPONSES FROM READERS AND SOME COMMENTS RE ISSUE NO. 3: WHAT MAKES SHRINKS TICK; OR, WHY DO RABBIS GO TICK TOCK

by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.

Here are some responses from readers, with thanks, and some comments.

Of course, if the therapist cannot get anywhere with the patient, she can always say that the patient "lacks insight". Sounds like the same problem the Rabbi faces when he hands the patient off to the therapist!

Well, at least the biochemical treatments can actually, sometimes, do some good.

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From: diaspora@194.90.1.6

Subject: Re: Mussar-Psych - #3: What makes shrinks tick?

Dear Rav Becker:

I always find your Torah stimulating and pretty "right on."

I really liked what you wrote about Rabbonim & Psychologists, except I strongly disagree with:

" 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. "

I believe that the true Torah scholar is "me'orav im ha'briyos" -- in harmony with the creations. He is

not distanced from the people, nor does he lack understanding of them. If that were so he would be the WRONG person to adjudicate their questions and lead them in their times of need and trouble. On the contrary, we find that a sage who is childless or in other ways unable to have experienced the common experience is disqualified from being on the Sanhedrin!

The baal mussar well understands the problems of the layman, in many cases he's had those same problems and overcome them... In some cases he feels he is still struggling with them, though perhaps on a different level ("he who is greater than his friend has a greater [evil] inclination"). In your analogy, I'd suggest that Mr. Bernstein WOULD remember how hard it was to learn those first steps; the difference is in attitude -- our sages and scholars have the humility to TRY and help those who come to them, IF they feel they can.

Which brings me to my answer to the question your friend posed? I posit that most Rabbonim help as best they can to the person standing before them! If they feel that he will respond better to a "trained mental-health professional" they'll refer him to one. If they feel he is really looking for psak (Jewish legal decision - ed note), tochacha (rebuke - ed note), tikun (program of "repair" - ed note) or spiritual advice, they will certainly give it to him as best they can or send him to the Rav they feel is best suited to give him what he needs.

This is exemplified in the famous story of the men who wished to convert that first came to Shammai and then to Hillel. They had "outrageous demands" accompanying their requests. Shammai told them to get lost, Hillel pulled them in. Is Shammai wrong? Nowhere does it say so. Of course these men praised Hillel and his approach, but Shammai is not denigrated for turning them away. Was he not a scholar? Absurd! Simply, he saw that HE could not help THEM; in fact, in his system of Torah, they were not ready to be helped. They would have to grow some themselves before they could be helped.

Nor is psychology a cure all. I know people who've been in "therapy" for years... Your friend speaks of psychiatrists and psychologists as if they "cured" ALL of those who came to them. I doubt their success rate is very much higher than that of most Rabbonim. And how many people will go to a private mussar shiur 2 days a week for 3 years at \$100 a session? [How would the world look at the Rav who asked for it?]

Sorry to have gone on for so long. I am hoping you'll "post" at least parts of this.

Lichvod haTorah v'Hogeha v'Ohaveha,

Your friend & talmid,

R` Dani Isaacs

PS: I have a weekly dvar Torah on a word from the sefer, The Chofetz Chaim al HaTorah. If you or anyone you know would be interested please write. It's not heavy.

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From: ayelet golowa

Subject: Re: Mussar-Psych - #3: What makes shrinks tick?

Bichvod Harav,

Is the torah concept of the soul found in secular psychology? sincerely,

Ayelet Golowa

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Dear Readers,

The issue of chemical imbalances which affect moods, attitudes and responses is a fascinating one from a Torah perspective. The issue does not only relate to those afflicted with psychotic ailments requiring medical intervention, but, on a more subtle level, a wide range of hormonal and chemical changes in the body which affect the way we think and feel. And, once we are mentioning these features of the person's makeup, why restrict our view to "changes" which impact on a person's mood; why not ask about the genetic material which predisposes the person to one mood type or the other?! What is the role of free choice in the face of such predispositions or chemical impositions.

The question itself stems from a further, fascinating assumption held by many that free choice implies the unlimited ability to choose any feeling, any time. I don't know the source of this notion, but I'm hard-pressed to believe that it has its roots in Torah and Mussar. The concept of free choice is nested in the most intimate relationship between the person and his Creator. Each individual has a measure of free choice (save those whose existence is designed only to create choices for others), but that free choice may be at very different points. Without restricting that broad statement in any way, we could say that for one it is the choice to seek medical assistance for a melancholy, for another to uplift his or her own mood and bring solace to others. Input from a competent physician who can detect the symptoms of certain chemical imbalances can help inform the person (often in consultation with spiritual guides) about what the choices in the situation really are. Each person, in consultation with conscience and with spiritual guides must reckon with the choices within the range presented by the situation. One who is fasting, say the Mussar texts, must be aware of the tendency to be short-tempered when deprived of food. Surely it is easier to be caring in some settings over others. Whether the call of the hour is to take medication in order to feel differently or to relieve the pain, or the call is to struggle with the challenge of adjusting one's mood, these are delicate questions and cannot be answered globally, nor even consistently for the same person.

Regarding the question of Torah scholars being able or unable to address particular types of human problems, it would seem, Dani, that the reference to Shamai and his "inability" to address the primitive needs of the would-be convert, supports the notion I am suggesting. A scholar can and, I believe, should, achieve a level whereby an entire day spent drinking beer and watching football is incomprehensible to him. His only reasonable response would be the Nancy Reagan slogan of Just

Say No. I think that the best form of education and counseling for our erstwhile beer-guzzling time-waster is to hear the scholar say, point blank, that he is way out of line. If we are to argue that one who is heavily addicted to such activities needs a more compassionate approach, I might agree. However, the pendulum has swung so far in that direction that I understand that in some countries there are murderers being let off because of the mitigating circumstances of their upbringing!

There are elementary features of human growth, best addressed behaviorally, and there are more advanced features of human growth, best addressed by a cognitive-behavioral combination. Just as the person who needs the behavioral intervention alone is unlikely to benefit from a purely cognitive discussion, so, too, will one who is truly an advanced student of human growth be unable to offer much "understanding" of the early stages. If he does offer such understanding, it is cognitive. That is, he acknowledges the existence of the primitive inclinations and he would be able to prescribe the Torah's response to those inclinations in a person but they are not of necessity current events for him. It seems only common sense to say that we can still be of assistance to those whose challenges we have long since outgrown. Might we not argue that the therapist who really "gets into it" with the struggling Sunday guzzler is but prolonging the course of that person's growth? In that case the intolerant (Just Say No) response is the more correct one! The fact that the listener was not ready for growth of any kind only points to a need for a dilution of the "therapy" in favor of those who have specialized in remedial growth. Good therapy, like good education, should maximize stress in the face of existing support, and should seek to raise the level of support to match the existing (or required) stress.

I'm glad to see that these comments have generated a fair amount of thought and, in some cases, strong reactions from readers. I've only sampled the responses in this posting and I thank each of you for sharing thoughts with me.

Ayelet, I'm afraid that I cannot answer your question clearly. If secular psychology would subscribe to the concept of an intangible soul it could hardly sustain the word "secular." The most secular psychologists I know, and they tend to populate the behaviorist schools, would certainly not be dealing with the soul as such. Perhaps our readers will have more to report on the subject.

A very happy Chanukah to each of you.