

# IMAGES OF THE INNER HEALER IN JUDAIC THOUGHT

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*This article uses a psychotherapy case example to demonstrate the therapeutic utility of the traditional Jewish concept of the inner voice of God for psychological and spiritual growth. Judaic concepts discussed and utilized as support material include the hasidic and kabbalistic concept of the spark of God within, teshuvah (repentance), and dream analysis. These concepts are related to the treatment of the case through object relations theory.*

Elijah the prophet, after his confrontation with the evil Queen Jezebel, retreats to the wilderness, frightened and dejected, in search of God. God summons him to stand on Mount Sinai. A great and strong wind tears at the mountain, but God is not in the wind. The earth quakes, but God is not in the earthquake. A fire breaks out, but God is not in the fire. God then speaks to Elijah in a "still, small voice." In this voice, He reassures Elijah and sends him on one final task (Kings I 19:11-18). Rashi comments that God's voice could not be heard out loud. In other words, Elijah experienced an "inner voice" of God. Elijah, the thunderous and zealous prophet, in the sunset of his career, learns that the power of God is represented in quiet spirituality (Hertz, 1967 on Kings I 19:12).

As a clinical psychologist, family life educator, and committed Jew, I have become increasingly aware of the interface of Judaism and psychology. As a professional, at times I am blessed with an "ah hah" experience, in which my Judaic training promotes insight and subsequently enhances my work as a healing professional. The following case of Joey, disguised to protect confidentiality, represents such an insight. I present the case, followed by an analysis of some traditional sources on the value of the inner voice of God. Finally, I discuss how these sources helped enhance my clinical interventions with this

young man.

## CASE DESCRIPTION

Twelve-year-old Joey entered psychotherapeutic treatment with me when admitted to a nonsectarian residential and day treatment program. He had a long history of abuse and neglect. This history translated into severe depression, poor social and self-care skills, and severely regressive behavior. For example, he often carried stuffed animals around with him, and when frightened, he would hide in a closet or under a table.

Through our program, Joey received individual, group, family, and milieu therapy, as well as special education services. I served as his individual and family therapist, the group home coordinator, and the consultant to the milieu and teaching staff. The course of psychotherapy was fraught with a great deal of intensity and symbiotic dependency. Often, it appeared as if Joey wanted to spend his entire day with me, taking over the role of my small infant. As a result, he managed to pull for added involvement and additional unscheduled contact with me in the milieu and over the phone (i.e., while on weekend call).

In spite of my all-encompassing involvement and the intensity of care, Joey was failing miserably in the program. The milieu staff reported that they felt drained and resentful of Joey in that they could never provide enough. He did not do well in the traditional behavioral program. Of particular note was his extreme need for self-care and assistance with social relationships. For example, he and his room were a continual mess. In addition, Joey was constantly involved in peer difficulties that took hours for the staff to even begin to sort out. As a result of his intense needs, the other five boys in the home began to display intense sibling rivalry. They then increased their acting out to receive similar attention. The staff spoke frequently about their desire to discharge Joey.

As Joey's psychotherapist, I found myself extremely committed to rescuing him. I often felt frustrated and found myself groping for one more magical solution to the problem. It never felt as if I could provide enough to fill the intense void inside of Joey. This "void" became a key symbol in my mind while treating this very disturbed young man.

Slowly I began to recognize that Joey felt annihilated

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without my constant presence. His emptiness could not be filled without a symbiotic connection with someone else. His ego strengths were so poor and full of holes that he did not yet possess the capacity for an "inner voice" to regulate his behavior.

As I worked with Joey, I began to appreciate the Judaic concept of the inner voice of God. My understanding of the model and its usefulness evolved in a gradual process. Yet, I emerged with newfound abilities that highlight the interface of psychology and Judaism.

## JUDAIC SOURCES FOR THE INNER VOICE OF GOD

### The Inner Healer

Psychological theory points to the importance of the development of the ego and superego as structures to help us deal with the vicissitudes of everyday life. These "inner voices" help with such diverse tasks as self-soothing, reality testing, impulse control, and development of morals and values. Healthy parent-child attachments help the individual build and internalize these structures. Conversely, for a child like Joey, disturbed early relations lead to a serious void in structure. This structural void often translates into emptiness, extreme neediness, and poor reality testing and impulse control.

Complementary to this psychological concept of inner structure building, Judaic sources refer to the cultivation of the personal experience and inner voice of God. In a sense God is the "parent par excellence" who provides care, nurturance, instruction, and the ultimate in values.

Biblical sources point to the nearness of God for all of us. In Exodus, the children of Israel are provided with an avenue for God to dwell in their midst. When God commanded the people to build a sanctuary in the desert, He stated, "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). The rabbis point out that the wording of the statement "dwelling in your midst" suggests that God will dwell among the people, rather than in the midst of the sanctuary.

Likewise, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik (1965) pointed out that, in the revelation experience at Sinai, God came down the mountain, and human beings, through the representation of

Moses, went up the mountain to meet God personally, face to face, "as a man speaks with his friend" (Exodus 33:11). Thus, God is in our midst if we are prepared to meet Him.

Hasidic thought carries this concept one step further. God in our midst includes the "spark of God" within all of us. Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the first Lubavitcher rebbe, builds upon kabbalistic concepts. He refers to two souls within the individual. The second soul is referred to as the "part of God above" (*Tanya*), and it is involved in spiritual matters and a quest for knowledge of the Creator.

The concept of "the part of God above" supports a life force that can motivate us psychologically and spiritually. Like Joey, we all need to cultivate this part of our innermost selves to grow as human beings. This I choose to call the "inner healer."

### The Inner Healer and the Teshuvah Process

Not only are we blessed with the spark of God as an inner healer but we are also mandated to make use of it through the process of *teshuvah* (repentance) and self-growth. Maimonides comments that the statement in Deuteronomy (28:9), "And you shall walk in His [God's] ways," refers to an obligation to develop God-likeness in ourselves (*Hilchot Dayot* 1:5-7). For example, just as God is merciful and slow to anger, so too must we strive to act in this manner. In *Hilchot Dayot*, Maimonides spells out prescriptions for developing the necessary character traits. In a sense, he provides directions on how to become our own psychotherapists.

This self-growth and *teshuvah* are integral parts of the religious experience for Jewish people of faith. It is the vehicle by which we can reach beyond our mistakes, misdeeds, and remoteness from God to stand again in God's presence (Peli, 1984).

One of the most important aspects of the *teshuvah* process is the capacity for self-reflection or *heshbon ha-nefesh*. As Bindler (1983, p. 123) states, elaborating on Soloveitchik's concepts, "*heshbon ha-nefesh* is a process of attaining the deepest insights

concerning the roots and motives of thought and action, particularly as they pertain to religious life. In understanding and becoming aware of themselves, people of faith intensify the possibilities of becoming more aware of and related to God."

Finally, Rabbi Dr. Levi Meier, in his article, "The Loneliness-Togetherness Dialectic: A Psycho-Judaic Perspective," expands upon the *mitzvah* (commandment) of returning a lost object to its owner: "Just as we must restore a lost object and not turn aside, everyone of us is required to restore ourselves, to heighten our self-awareness and to acknowledge our dark side" (Meier, 1988, p. 91).

For the strong and healthy among us, *teshuvah*, *heshbon ha-nefesh*, and continual self-growth are imperatives and strong values in Judaism. However, those like Joey, who are plagued by dysfunctional relationships, abuse, and neglect, may need a trained professional to assist in the process. Eventually, they can cultivate a healthier "inner voice" that includes their Godliness.

#### The Inner Healer of Our Dreams

Both psychological theory and Judaic tradition identify one very important source for self-growth, that of dream analysis. It is my thesis that the dream can be a powerful manifestation of the inner healer or voice of God.

Interspersed throughout the Bible are numerous accounts of important dreams—two dreams of Jacob (Genesis 28 and 31), the dream of Joseph (Genesis 37), and the dream of Pharaoh (Genesis 41). The Talmud makes multiple references to dreams. For example, in *Berechot*, six consecutive pages are devoted almost exclusively to the philosophy, psychology, and interpretation of dreams. In fact, the rabbis, much like analytic psychotherapists (Freud, 1953; Jung, 1963; Jung et al., 1964), offer interpretations of symbols in dreams. For example, they state that an elephant symbolizes a miracle (*Berechot* 57b).

The sages also recognize the importance of inner thoughts and conflicts in dreams. King Solomon states in Ecclesiastes 5:2, "The dream comes with a multitude of subjects,

and the voice of the fool with a multitude of words." Rashi comments, "It is the way of the dream to come from the many thoughts that a man considers and thinks about during the day." Similarly, Rav Jonathan states, "There is not shown to one [in a dream], but from the thoughts of his heart" (*Berechot* 55b).

Furthermore, talmudic scholars recognize the importance of interpretation of hidden messages in dreams. "There is no dream that does not have its interpretation (*Genesis Rabbah* 68:17). Rabbi Hisda states, "A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read" (*Berechot* 55a).

The "letter that is written" seems at least partially to be written by God. Our forefathers considered at least some dreams prophetic in nature. But what about the dreams of the common people? The Talmud states, "A dream is 1/60th of prophecy" (*Berechot* 57b). Rabbi Berekiah states, "While a part of a dream may be fulfilled, the whole of it is never fulfilled." Maimonides, in *Hilchot Taniyot* (1:12), discusses the concept of a dream fast. He states that a "person who has a bad dream is obligated to fast the next day in order that he will return and enlighten his ways. And he should examine them and return in *teshuvah*." Such a fast is so important that a person can even fast on *Shabbat*, which is typically forbidden.

In addition, when the *kohanim* (priests) bless us on the holidays, we offer a special prayer, asking God to help us understand our dreams (*Berechot* 55b). In this prayer, we state, "I am Yours [God's], and my dreams are Yours."

I believe that this struggle with our dream world and its unconscious symbols is at least, in part, a struggle with our second soul. Some of our dreams are more important than others in this process of self-growth. Dreams present to us a continuum of meaning and impetus for change. The part of God from above speaks to us if we choose to listen. We are presented with a unique present that speaks to our inner core. However, like Joey, we sometimes require assistance in this process of growth and transformation.

### CASE APPLICATION

Over the years as a psychotherapist, my Judaic knowledge of dreams, *teshuvah*, and self-growth increased, and I often compared and contrasted Judaic and psychological theories. However, it was with Joey that I finally recognized the depth of wisdom and utilitarian power of the "inner healer of God-liness." One crucial session was a turning point.

I used a combination of talking therapy and play therapy with Joey. However, often I felt as if his verbalizations and "insights" were mere words. He could say all the right things about his behavior and background, but he seemed unable to translate them into action. One day, as he talked and played in my office, Joey began to nurture a stuffed animal that represented himself. This was the very first time Joey had displayed any capacity to nurture himself. Instead, he had always asked for love and care from other adults, particularly his therapist.

As Joey began to nurture this animal, it became clear to me that he was internalizing the caring of our therapeutic relationship (i.e., better object constancy). Shortly after this turning point, Joey began to tolerate less attention and was somewhat more successful in the program. He had begun to develop his own sense of self-worth as a human being. Joey had incorporated his God-liness to make use of an inner healer.

The ultimate goal of psychotherapy for the patient is to develop a capacity for self-reflection and self-growth; that is, to develop and make use of an internal healer. Object relations theory, a branch of modern-day psychoanalytic theory (Blanck & Blanck, 1974; Kernberg, 1976; Mahler et al., 1975), focuses on the process of internalization in human relationships. Psychologically the infant experiences his or her relationship in relation to the mother or other significant caretaker. The infant quickly becomes symbiotically attached and has little sense of separate identity. As the infant grows into a toddler, he or she begins to develop a sense of separate identity. This process is aided by identification and internalization of a psychologically healthy mother. In a sense, the child borrows

some of the mother's identity to develop his or her own sense of self. This process is the beginning of an ego and superego or conscience for the child; it is also the precursor for healthy adult functioning. The child makes use of the nurturing and supportive mother to develop an inner voice that provides self-monitoring, self-love, and acceptance. It ultimately becomes the teacher and healer within.

Individuals like Joey who have more severe psychological disturbance (e.g., borderline, narcissistic, psychotic disturbances) have suffered from serious deficits in this process of internalization. The inner healer ranges from almost nonexistent to mildly dysfunctional. The job of psychotherapy is to help the patient develop a more functional ego or inner healer.

Similarly, Judaism teaches us to cultivate our God-liness through nurturing the inner voice of God. It is this God-liness that helps provide us with a sense of self-worth and an impetus for spiritual growth.

Joey was not Jewish. I never shared with him my thoughts on the Judaic parallelism of the internalization process. In that moment that Joey nurtured the stuffed animal, as a psychotherapist and committed Jew, I experienced an "ah hah" experience. As Joey internalized me, I internalized more fully an aspect of our Jewish tradition. IN psychotherapy, we often refer to this as parallel process.

I did not need to share my insights with Joey, and I am not sure they would have added anything to this particular therapeutic relationship. Instead, I utilized my associations and insights to further the internalization process. For example, I commented positively on any nurturance of the stuffed animal. I also verbally reinforced his growing abilities for self-care. My words and actions attempted to encourage internalization, to allow Joey to incorporate our work to build his own internal structure.

Like many of our most severely disturbed patients, Joey was not a shining success. On the positive side, he was not thrown out, and his small therapeutic gains helped make him

more tolerable to staff. Thus, he remained in the program for approximately 1½ more years. As Joey approached late adolescence, we all began to recognize that he would require long-term treatment that might extend into adulthood. At the time, our program was designed for adolescents who would achieve a great deal of independence as adults. Thus, we decided to discharge him to a different type of long-term facility. However, in spite of this discharge, I am convinced that we had helped Joey a great deal. He left us with increased maturity, improved social skills, and, most importantly, a more internalized sense of self-worth. His inner voice had begun to grow and prosper.

I worked with Joey while at an excellent and comprehensive nonprofit nonsectarian agency. My Judaism was incidental to the job I did. However, gradually, over the years I began to appreciate the depth and brevity of Judaic insights for the clinical work I did. I began to pay more attention to the inherent need for self-reflection, existential guilt, dream analysis, and, most of all, to the spiritual needs of my clients. My work with Joey was just one important step along a path I now travel with strength and perseverance. Currently I now work for Jewish Family Services (JFS) of Richmond as a Jewish family life educator and a therapist. Because of my JFS affiliation, I am able to identify myself as a psychologist and therapist with an identified interest and specialty in spiritual matters. Increasingly my work takes me to the heart of Judaic and spiritual concerns. I am convinced this has only enhanced my effectiveness with Jewish and non-Jewish clients.

I sometimes wonder what has become of Joey. I am confident that his inner voice has continued to prosper. Likewise, I recognize that he lives on in my life as a teacher and role model. He helped me to develop an internal sense of the inner healer. Perhaps, more importantly, Joey helped teach me to become more respectful of our existential struggle for meaning and spirituality. May all of us in the helping professions focus on the God-likeness within humankind—the *inner voice* and its capacity for growth and healing. It is through this *inner healer* that we are able to begin

with a spark and nurture it into a flame!

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