Judaism Confronts Psychology

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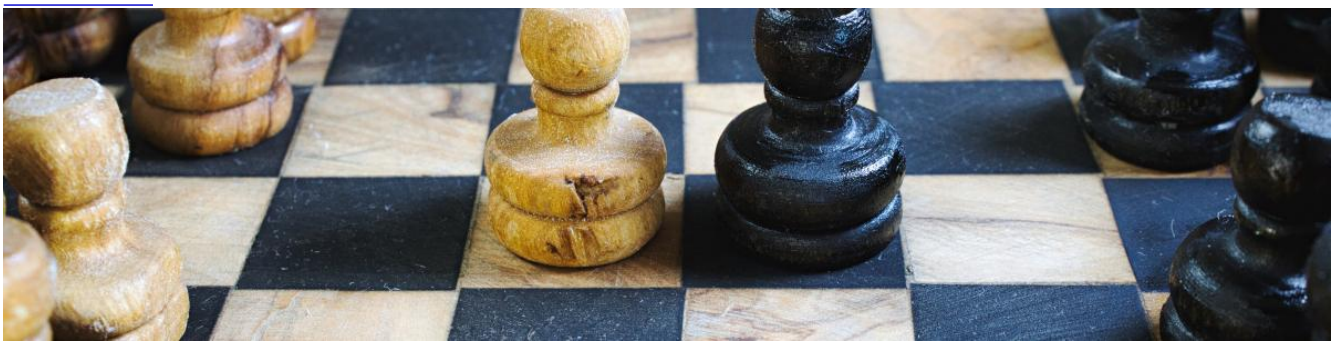

Dr. Bulka was Rabbi of Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. A prolific author, he has written extensively in the field of Judaism and Psychology. This article appears in issue 6 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Rabbi Bulka passed away in June 2021.

Psychology is the modern-day philosophy. If something is psychologically sound, it almost automatically becomes a desired reality that we should embrace. If it is not psychologically sound, it deserves to be dismissed, even if such dismissal contravenes religious norms.

Consider the matter of guilt. Psychology has just about convinced the general population that guilt is psychologically unhealthful; it raises our anxiety level, interferes with our blood pressure, and compromises our ability to function happily. The remedy—drop the guilt by dropping the values that instill the guilt.

We should therefore not be surprised that many of the hallowed values of yesteryear are under attack, either bluntly or subtly. Take for example the elementary idea of "should." The thought that we "should" do this or that, ostensibly because we are obligated, is the primary precipitant of guilt. This is because "should" and "ought" do not always translate into deeds. Those who "should" or "ought" (but actually do not fulfill), feel guilty about not living up to their responsibility. And we know where unresolved guilt can lead straight into the depression pit, an admittedly awful place, which in its extreme renders people incapable of any useful life activity.

Of course I am generalizing, even over-generalizing. Not all psychologists are radical anti-guilt proponents. But the main point is clear—that we live in an era of guilt avoidance, which has serious implications for any religion, and certainly for Judaism. We have no way of accurately measuring how many have left the fold entirely or even partially because they do not want to be imposed upon with obligations. With no obligations, there is no possibility of feeling guilty for failing to live up to those obligations. Thereby, one has removed a major obstacle to the ultimate apex of modern desires, to be physically and psychologically healthy.

The entire Jewish package is a potential guilt inducer, as are the separate but inter-related components within Judaism. Shabbat and kashruth, as arguably the most onerous and ubiquitous of Jewish observances, are simultaneously the most likely guilt-inducers. Undoubtedly, the major factor in choosing to abandon these observances, if consciously made, is the challenge these affirmations pose when trying to squeeze in the best that modern society has to offer, including unfettered access to all sorts of eateries and food, as well as a full slate of weekend activities either social-, cultural-, or sports-related.

Guilt is a factor in such value choice. How strong a factor I do not know, but a factor nevertheless. I have spoken to enough people over time that I can be sure of this; sure that some people have unburdened themselves of Shabbat, kashruth, and/or other components of Judaism, so that they

do not have to feel guilty if they do not fulfill all the obligations.

Assuming that these observations are correct, either partially or totally, the obvious question is—how do we tackle the situation? Is there a way around this? Is there a way to counter this trend?

I would like to propose two approaches, one dealing with the psychology part, the other dealing with the Judaism part.

For the psychology part, the issue of guilt avoidance as a way to live deserves further scrutiny. Clearly, psychological health is a major concern. We realize that the Divine Spirit (*Shekhina*) does not reside in melancholy (Talmud, *Shabbat* 30b). On the other hand, Judaism is loaded with mitzvah obligations, and general imperatives to fulfill them, aside from the explicit biblically based mandates. Such well known statements as "...if not now, when?" (Talmud, *Avot* 1:14), or "It is not incumbent on you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist therefrom..."(Talmud, *Avot* 2:21), speak to the notion of assuming responsibility and thereby living responsibly.

Judaism seems to run contrary to contemporary psychological wisdom, in that it affirms the value of a life that is depression free, yet seems to place upon its adherents a load of responsibility that if not fulfilled leads to guilt, which leads to possible depression. Obviously, there is a difference of world views.

Judaism, let it be stated unequivocally, has a different view of guilt: Guilt is a healthy part of who we are. This sounds absurd, even crazy. But give the thought a chance to develop.

Guilt is a debilitator or a motivator, depending on the attitude we take to it. The attitude is the key. There are those who, in the face of having failed to fully actualize a responsibility, will be devastated by it, crushed to the point of being convinced they are unworthy. And there are those in the face of having failed are motivated to improve, to do better the next time.

Attitude is the key to whether failure is the excuse for more failure, or the catapult to future success. And it all begins with the importance of realizing that we are mortal, that we are not perfect, that we are not expected to be perfect. The aforementioned citation that, "It is not incumbent on you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist therefrom...," directly addresses this matter. We cannot do everything; we are not expected to do everything—but we are expected to try our best.

We will fail, either via acts of omission or commission. That is certain. What is not certain is how we will bounce up or down after that. And if we use past failure as the boost to future fulfillment, the failure itself is transmuted into fulfillment. How do I know this? I know this from the Talmud, and I know this from corroborating life experience. The Talmud (*Yoma* 86b) tells us that those who willfully sin but then, in the expression of penance, joyfully and completely renounce the sin and embrace the right way, have transmuted the sin into a fulfillment.

This is something we see in so many different aspects of life; in the flunkee who jumps to the head of the class, the weakling who becomes strong, the loser who resolves to become a winner, the sinner who embraces the way of righteousness.

Put another way, a life totally free of guilt, devoid of any responsibility, is most likely to become an unfulfilled life, even an empty life. And emptiness is itself a more dangerous harbinger of depression; anomie gives birth to aimlessness, to a vacuous, depression-inviting existence. It may therefore be forcefully argued that we need a balanced measure of healthy guilt in order to be fully human. It is all the difference between feeling "guilty from," or embracing the approach of "guilty toward."

For the Judaism part, we need to look more carefully and critically at how we package Judaism—in the home, in the classroom, and from the pulpit. There is no escaping that the dictates of Judaism, the do's and the don’t’s, the affirmations and prohibitions, are obligations, not options. Whether or not we choose to observe does not diminish from the reality that we must embrace the full package.

The question is—how do we inspire ourselves and others to fulfill the commandments? There are those who have no problem imposing Judaism, precisely because there is no choice. They will sometimes succeed in at least achieving a perfunctory adherence to Judaic norms. But it is all too often realized at a heavy price, the price that is exacted when people feel imposed upon, with no joy in what they are doing.

Enlightened pedagogues and parents will try to transmit the joy of Judaism, the meaning and fulfillment associated with each mitzvah. They will not resort to the harangue that if you do not do as God says, God will punish you. They will not convey the feeling that failure to observe should make one feel guilty. Instead, they will attempt to show that non-compliance is a missed opportunity to experience the joy of mitzvah fulfillment.

This is guilt-free Judaism. It is Judaism perceived, transmitted, and lived in gratitude for having been blessed with such a wonderful formula for life. Gone is the imposition, gone is the guilt, and in its place, we find the wonderful opportunity to live life as God wanted for us. And God wanted it for us to enable us to appreciate the fullness of life in God's wondrous world.

The goal of Judaic value transmission needs to go beyond doing the mitzvoth. It needs as its aim that the mitzvah is actualized with joy and with enthusiasm. Lest you think this is apologetics, pray tell me how you understand the prophetic charge (Isaiah 58:13) to call the Shabbat "*oneg*," or delight? How can something transmitted as an onerous collection of impositions be experienced as a delight? Obviously, something is getting lost in the transmission. In other words, if we experience Shabbat as a burden, then you can be assured that you have missed the essence of Shabbat.

It is clear that in order to teach Shabbat properly, its status as *oneg* is essential to the way we teach. Can anyone dispute the simple proposition that the more Shabbat is conveyed as *oneg*, the more likely that those being taught about Shabbat will be eager to embrace it fully and enthusiastically?

Does it sound absurd to suggest that God is “pained” when the mitzvoth of God are apprehended as burdens, rather than joys? If it sounds absurd, then again we have missed the boat. God did not put us here to tantalize us, waving all the niceties of life in front of us and telling us—do not touch, do not taste, do not enjoy.

We are told that we will have to answer for all the good things God created in this world that we failed to enjoy (Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 4:12). The more we meaningfully enjoy God's world, the more we are likely to appreciate God in the fullness of appreciation. Of course there are rules guiding how we experience the world, and parameters for enjoying, but they are parameters, not the objective. The objective is to enjoy, to appreciate, to share; the parameters are to give proper context to how we enjoy. How interesting it is that the guilt of which we speak is the guilt for "not enjoying," instead of the more standard, accepted, and wrong idea of guilt as associated with enjoying. It is clear that we are missing some vital ideas and ideals in the experience of living as God wants us to live.

One of the issues associated with guilt is the damage that this causes to one's self image, or vice versa (the guilt that is caused by having a low self-image). It is the fad of this generation—the obsession with self-esteem. Try finding any mental-health worker who is not totally convinced that self-esteem is critical to proper functioning. And this is reinforced by the constant media barrage, linking delinquency, violence, addiction, and every other aberrant behavior with low self-esteem.

There are many problems with all this. The first is that this seems to suggest that low self-esteem is at the root of the problem. But this would only be the case if we could show that the majority of people with low self-esteem descend into the ugly cesspool of deviance. That is not the case. The fact that most murderers have low self-esteem does not mean that people with low self esteem tend to be murderers.

The same misleading presumption is true of the oft-cited fact that a higher percentage of abusing parents were themselves abused as children. This does not mean that most abused children become abusing parents. That too is not true. Most children who are abused do not abuse as adults. This does not excuse any abuser, but it does correct a misnomer that in a perverse way suggests to those who were abused that they are almost doomed to perpetrating abuse when they get married and/or have children. Such an implied suggestion is wrong—and irresponsible.

Another problem with self-esteem is that it can become dangerously addictive. If we demand to be told that we are good, and we are "lucky" enough to have parents and teachers who feed this esteem frenzy, then the moment that we get new teachers, or our parents slip up and do not offer compliments, we will be more open to becoming dejected or depressed. That is unhealthy, and the expectation to be constantly fed with prop-up compliments is fraught with unpleasant consequences when the unrealistic expectations are not met, which inevitably is the case.

A third, and perhaps even more serious problem with self-esteem, is that the notion itself seems to welcome some measure of arrogance into our daily vocabulary. How could it be otherwise if we are urged to think of ourselves as good, as worthy? If we then get into a tiff with someone, are we not more likely to attribute the blame to the other person, since we are good, and therefore unworthy of blame?

Arrogance, even a tinge of it, has no place within Judaism, which places uncompromising primacy on humility in the face of God. Arrogance is roundly condemned as being antithetical to Judaism. God cannot abide where arrogance exists (see Talmud, *Sotah* 4b).

But we cannot so easily dismiss the notion of self-esteem. After all, self-esteem is intimately connected to the fulfillment of the enveloping imperative to love our fellow as we love our self (*Vayikra* 19:18), which Rambam says that we fulfill by saying nice things to others, to make them feel good, as we would feel when we are told nice things about ourselves (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De'ot* 6:3).

The middle ground in all this is that we need to think of ourselves as capable of achieving good things, that we are not bad (see *Avot* 2:18). But any good that we achieve is nothing more than preparatory to achieving more good. There is a lurking danger in doing good, and then resting on whatever laurels that such good brings. We are here to do good, so whatever we achieve is nothing more than justification for our being created (see *Avot* 2:9).

So, self-esteem as the potential to do good, to be good, is essential. Self-esteem as actually being good is arrogant, unacceptable, and unhelpful for human achievement. All this may spark off some angry reaction by you, the reader. But before you let loose, let me share with you something about anger.

You and I, and almost everyone, have been raised with the teapot theory of anger—that anger is like a boiling kettle that needs to be expressed, to boil over, to spill over, rather than being repressed.

That too is a mistake. There is no way that you can read any of the major Jewish ethical treatises and not come away overwhelmed at how unanimously and fully anger is condemned. There is no halfway on this. Anger is put on a par with idolatry, and yes, according to *Sefer Haredim*, is biblically prohibited. Yes, you read that correctly—anger is biblically prohibited, like eating hametz on Pesah (see my *Best Kept Secrets of Judaism*, pp. 200–202).

The teapot theory itself is being questioned. Today, we are being told by more enlightened experts who have studied anger that rather than getting rid of the anger, exploding actually rehearses it. So what are we to do with anger? There are two facets to the approach. One is what to do when we are just about ready to explode. The mussar experts have suggested many good techniques, such as filling the mouth with water and holding the water for ten or fifteen seconds before letting the water out. Since anger is a seething fire, what better way to extinguish fire than by water?

The other approach is to confront anger on a long-range basis, to sit down and write an inventory of those things that are worthy of us losing our cool. If you try this on your own, you will be surprised at how empty your page will be. And then, having realized how few, if any items, are worthy of exploding over, the next step is to integrate that rational thought into our emotive selves. For some it is easier than for others—but it is an achievable goal.

This brings me to my final point. There are some who are more temperamentally cool than others, some who are more naturally hot-tempered than others. The main point is that with work, sometimes difficult work, we can overcome tendencies. We have the ability—and hopefully the will—to do so.

We need to get away from the rampant psychological determinism that suggests that because we were abused, we will abuse; because we are hot-tempered, we will lose our cool; because our parents were alcoholics, or drug users, we will be the same; or that because we were once addicts, we are doomed to a life of addiction.

We have free will; we have the ability to transcend innate tendencies. Yes, there are many good things in psychology, but when the philosophy underlying the psychology comes into direct conflict with Judaism, I will go with Judaism all the time. My faith includes the full confidence that God Who created us knows us better than any conglomerate of mental-health professionals.