Directed Travel: A Growth Technique in Early Hasidic Counseling

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Introduction

Openness to travel seems basic to the Jewish soul. Just as Jews are said to be "The people of the Book," they may be aptly described historically as "The people of the journey or voyage." As recent works such as *Pilgrimage and the Jews* by David Gitlitz and Linda Kay Davidson and *Reorienting the East* by Martin Jacobs reveal, voluntary travel has long held a vital part in Jewish communal history. Lesser known to Judaic scholars, however, is the role of travel in early Hasidism to promote individual well-being. Especially in light of growing psychological interest in how travel strengthens such desirable traits as gratitude, kindness, and contentment, I'd like to highlight the intriguing technique of early Hasidic counseling which I call *directed travel*. This paper will explore its basic features, the possible underlying dynamics that contributed to its success, and implications for adaption today.

The historical backdrop

Life was hard for Jews in 19th-century Eastern Europe. Especially for the majority who resided in impoverished *shtetls,* economic and political hardship, combined with social immobility, caused widespread despair. Stagnation was not only a communal phenomenon but also experienced psychologically by many individuals who saw no possibility of opportunity or change. In this milieu, early Hasidic leaders were highly concerned about identifying symptoms of melancholy (depression in today's terminology) and its resulting dangers. Even a casual perusal of their sermons and tracts indicates this outlook.

For example, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov stated that "One who is sad brings upon oneself many afflictions" and "Sadness leads to quarrels; joy to peace." Similarly, Rabbi Yechiel Danziger asserted that "Sadness is the worst quality in a person…To the one obsessed by sadness, one's very body feels heavy to carry around. One cannot abide oneself or others." More pointedly, the Chabad-Lubavitch founder Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady observed in his major work *Tanya* that "Melancholy renders a person unresponsive and unable to act. It deprives him of his capabilities and strips him of his energy."

To help congregants overcome such distress, Hasidic rebbes forged a variety of interventions. Some were relatively traditional in scope and format, such as relying on prayer combined with ritual objects to bolster religious faith and hope in general. However, one of the most innovative techniques, with particular relevance today for positive psychology and counseling, used travel as a way to break emotional stagnation and spur decision-making. This is how it worked.

At least twice per year, hasidim would typically meet individually with their rebbe in an

encounter known as *yechidus.* The term refers to a private meeting between rebbe and Hasid, and is linked to the Hebrew word for “unity”). In the *yechidus*, which was imbued with deep meaning for its participants, hasidim sought a blessing and sometimes specific guidance concerning troubling circumstances, such as involving livelihood or family matters. A dialogue would take place, often comprising question-and-answer between rebbe and hasid. The “advice” phase of the *yechidus* was known as the *etzah* (a cognate of the Hebrew root-word *etz* or tree), in which the rebbe would prescribe a remedy for action. Hasidic imagery depicted the *etzah* as a method by which the rebbe directs a hasid, just as an expert gardener turns or bends a tree for more fruitful growth; for this reason, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov poetically described the rebbe as the “master of the orchard.”

Within the *etzah* or action-remedy phase of *yechidus* that followed heartfelt dialogue, the rebbe’s advice to supplicants was sometimes to travel alone to a particular, unfamiliar location and “there you will find the answer to your problem.” That was all. Nothing more specific was provided in the rebbe’s directive and no time-frame for attaining the redemptive solution was given. In conveying this *etzah*, the rebbe’s tone was wholly supportive and confident. No matter if the stipulated location seemed irrelevant in relation to the hasid’s perceived adversity, the rebbe’s wisdom was viewed as transcending common-sense criteria, and rebuttal was therefore rare.

Regarding the rebbe as virtually infallible due to his holiness, the hasid would depart in an emotional state of high expectation, and often, with renewed hope and long suppressed optimism about the future. The assigned destination was not only unfamiliar, but also one in which he or she was a stranger. Trusting implicitly in the rebbe’s visionary ability, the hasid would be far more conscious than usual of surroundings: that is, in contemporary

English usage, behaving with much greater *mindfulness*.

Upon arrival at the assigned locale, the hasid was guided by the teaching that the divine is hidden within the ordinary aspects of everyday life. A related notion was that divine messages are often communicated by symbols, rather than direct and obvious statements, and lastly, that all people are potential messengers in a higher plan; whether they're consciously aware of their role isn't necessary or important. With ardent belief in these theological concepts, the hasid was sure that seemingly random events might harbor deep mysteries, revelations, and, ultimately, the "answer to your problem." And so, the hasid confidently opened his or her sensibility to observe and ponder the deeper meaning of commonplace, even trivial happenings.

How might the epiphany be catalyzed? Through an overheard conversation between strangers, an unexpected encounter in the marketplace with a past acquaintance, a beautiful natural vista, or a vivid dream that night in the inn? Possibly any or none of those. Instead, it might come as the hasid gazed at unfamiliar faces and scenes--and suddenly longed for home. Or it might come after experiencing hours of slow-moving time dissociated from all of one's familiar, daily routines. Whatever the specific spark, it would ultimately bring the "answer to your problem." When the grateful, newly-empowered hasid (or other individual) would return to the rebbe and extol his uncanny guidance, the rebbe's gentle reply was frequently reported as: "You already had the answer inside you. I simply helped you to find it."

Why was directed travel effective?

Of course, it's unlikely that every case of directed travel in early Hasidism was successful. Undoubtedly, some supplicants including the most ardent hasidim failed to gain an epiphany with transformative power; as to what the next step might have been for such persons is historically unclear. However, from the commonality of this technique in early Hasidic counseling, we can safely assume its general effectiveness, and more importantly for us today, unravel the underlying reasons why. This

latter task is necessary because Hasidic rebbes did not produce any texts that explicated the theory and practice of directed travel as a means to empower individuals feeling emotionally blocked or stymied, or to paraphrase Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady, those "unable to act and stripped of energy." Based on concepts from positive psychology, however, it's possible to construct a viable explanatory model, one with relevance for contemporary application. Four overlapping considerations seem most relevant.

Firstly, the rebbe's warm, empathic encouragement during the *yechidus* encounter can be seen as strengthening hope--a quality that scientific research has linked to such beneficial outcomes as increased happiness, greater personal achievement, and even lowered risk of death. Empirical studies have shown that hopeful people have a greater sense that life is meaningful, and that emotional hope in particular is connected to happiness. Indeed, an entire body of positive psychology, known as hope theory, emphasizes the vital role of hope in bolstering daily well-being.

Secondly, the rebbe's directive to travel alone for several days allowed the hasid to escape, at least temporarily, from the tight, often constricting, network of social relations that characterized Jewish life during that era.

Indeed, this getaway for some may have marked their first time to be unfettered from constant interaction with social intimates, however well-meaning,

who imposed their own perceptions and values on the hasid's life. Such a sense of freedom,

whether consciously or unconsciously felt, must surely have been uplifting and helped generate

an epiphany.

Thirdly, the process of journeying alone for several days can be identified as creating a

precious "space" for mental de-cluttering and self-reflection. Certainly, this phase would have

complemented that of physical disengagement just described. It may be no coincidence that

Jewish mystical theology, such as conveyed in the 13th-century *Zohar* and embraced by Hasidic

leaders, taught that the physical universe was created by a "vacated space" in which the divine

essence was withdrawn. In the esoteric branch of Judaism known as Kabbalah, this classic

theological concept is called the *tzimzum*. Thus, deeply embedded within early Hasidism was the

notion that even at the highest levels of existence, creation requires "space" or "room" for

growth. Guided by this notion, rebbes may therefore have deliberately sought to foster mental

detachment (and subsequent creative problem-solving) by mandating several days of solo travel.

Fourthly, in considering the hasid's heightened sense of awareness in arriving at the assigned destination, where everything seen and heard is potentially meaningful, the concept of mindfulness advanced by Dr. Ellen Langer of Harvard University seems highly relevant. That is, based on the socio-cognitive notion that people often go through daily life in a mental state akin to "autopilot," she has defined mindfulness "as the process of paying attention on purpose to the present moment, of being aware of novelty in experiences and contexts and events." Dr. Langer emphasizes its importance in constructive thinking and learning, and additional researchers have linked such mindfulness to fewer symptoms of emotional distress including anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies.

Thus, it seems likely that by experiencing a wholly unfamiliar locale in a state of heightened awareness, the hasid could transcend his or her usual condition of "autopilot" functioning and achieve a state of intense mindfulness, in which insight and epiphany could emerge. This third phase of the hasid's journey might be called that of *discovery*. Involving a heightened interest in one's surroundings, it also appears relevant to mounting research in positive psychology on curiosity as a motivating force contributing to personal meaning and well-being.

Implications for Application

Can the technique of directed travel be transferred successfully from such a different cultural milieu to our own time? After all, mental health professionals are hardly regarded as holy figures, and for most of us, travel is less arduous and adventurous than it was in 19th-century Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that meaningful adaptations are indeed possible to spur personal growth and decision-making; these particularly relate to Langer's concept of

mindfulness versus auto-pilot functioning. Indeed, people today may have an even greater need to transcend their daily routine than those during the early Industrial Age. Of course, nowadays it's constant dependency on the Internet and smart phone usage that negate self-reflection and encourage passivity, rather than the social pressures of small-town life.

Firstly, as a method of personal growth, individuals can self-initiate directed travel: that is, without the necessity for obtaining a mandate from a rebbe-like, external guiding figure. Self-initiated directed travel can be undertaken whenever decision-making is needed on a pressing matter, or when feels chronically bored, stagnant, or emotionally adrift. Rather than responding to an external directive, one chooses an unfamiliar location at least several hours away by transportation, preferably where extended strolling or hiking is possible, and goes there alone. Certainly, before embarking, it's useful to plant the "seed thought" through deep relaxation that within the self-assigned locale, "the answer to my problem will be found." To avoid the possibility of egoistic influence in selecting the destination, one can invite a friend to suggest it, or with eyes closed, make a random choice on a regional map.

To enhance receptivity to events large and small, it's preferable to use public transportation, since automobile driving tends to narrow rather than expand our attentiveness to surroundings. No advance itinerary should be scheduled, and it's important to bring a journal for writing observations, insights, or epiphanies. As much as possible, it's best to adopt the early Hasidic outlook that witnessed events and overhead conversations of all types can be interpreted symbolically; sometimes "the answer" will lie precisely in such symbolism. What make self-initiated directed travel experientially different from ordinary tourism is the necessity for choosing an unfamiliar place, dispensing with an itinerary, and deliberately "seeding" an attitude of utmost mindfulness.

Secondly, directed travel can be used as an adjunct in counseling. In this situation, the counselor suggests a specific destination based on content from previous counseling sessions including the client's dreams. The crucial consideration is that the prospective destination is unfamiliar to the client from past experience, and one in which ample strolling or hiking is possible. For both self-initiated and counseling forms of directed travel, the ease of airplane usage allows for much more distant journeys than were common in the early Hasidic era.

Not all counseling cases may lend themselves well to the early Hasidic technique of directed travel. Of course, clinical judgment is necessary. But growing research from positive psychology and allied fields suggests a solid scientific basis for its efficacy in spurring personal growth and epiphanic experience.

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