Erich Neumann and the Quest for a Jewish Psychology

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“In reality, this actual world is full of secrets just as it full of the divine. Its outwardness should not disguise its radiant, hidden inwardness.”

—Erich Neumann

Among the greatest Jewish psychological thinkers of the twentieth century was German-born Erich Neumann. Because he resided in Tel Aviv from 1934 onward and traveled little, he never attained the popular fame of such pioneering Jewish colleagues as Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, and later, Erich Fromm and Abraham Maslow. However, Neumann’s global influence has skyrocketed in recent years, particularly after a centennial celebration of his birth was held in Israel in 2005 with

the active support of his two adult children.

In this article, I'd like to highlight Neumann's life and key notions in building a psychology based on authentically Jewish foundations.

Erich Neumann: A Biographical Sketch

The youngest of three children, Neumann was born in 1905, in a Jewish section of Berlin.

He was raised in a secular, affluent family, yet felt a strong affinity for Judaism. As a teenager, he became an ardent Zionist, inspired too by Martin Buber's stylized writings on Hasidism as a pathway for Jewish spiritual renewal. "I feel God in everything…," young Neumann wrote in his diary, "I feel it in my essence that my ancestors must have had an intimate selectness with God for thousands of years. All Jews must (still) have that" (Lowe, 2020, p. 15).

By the age of 16, young Neumann had already begun forging a Jewish identity for

himself. He joined a Jewish debating society, which discussed philosophy and politics,

and he privately studied modern Hebrew. Upon graduating from *gymnasium* in 1923,

Neumann enrolled at Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen, where he took courses in education, philosophy, psychology, the history of art and literature, and Semitic studies. Upon receiving his doctorate in philosophy in 1928, Neumann enrolled in medicine at Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University with the goal of a psychiatric career. That same year, he married Julie Blumenfeld, a Zionist activist and nurse.

Coincidentally, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was an officially visiting student at

Friedrich Wilhelm University from 1928 to 1930—and it's fascinating to speculate whether Neumann ever met the future Lubavitcher Rebbe due to their mutual interests in Hasidic thought. Clearly, however, Buber's writings were still intellectually vital to Neumann, and the two exchanged correspondence in the early 1930s concerning his unpublished essay on Franz Kafka's surrealist fiction. Buber warmly wrote, "Your clear and precise methodology does remarkable justice to some of (Kafka's) references and contexts" (*Ibid*., p. 50).

Neumann finished his medical coursework in 1933, while also pursuing Kabbalah

and Hasidism at the University of Berlin. However, soon after Hitler came to power, Jewish medical students were barred from internships and thereby prevented from gaining licensure. Unlike many of their Jewish compatriots, he and Julie sensed that events would get much worse under the Nazis—and they departed Germany to settle permanently in Tel Aviv in 1934.

At the time, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Alfred Adler were the most celebrated psychological thinkers in the world—each with sizable international professional and lay followings. Their public statements on cultural, social, and even political matters were eagerly sought by journalists for European and American newspapers and were read by millions of people. Both Adler and Jung had originally been the most venerated members of Freud's inner circle based in Vienna, but first Adler (in 1911) and then Jung (in 1913) had decisively broken with Freud due to his overriding emphasis on sexuality in the human psyche. Jung's more optimistic writings on personality growth (which he called "individuation") as well as mythology and symbolism appealed to Neumann. As a result, he studied with Jung for eight months before joining Julie and their infant son Micha in Tel Aviv.

There Neumann became an analytic therapist and an independent scholar whose influential books included *The Origins of Consciousness*, *Depth Psychology and the New Ethic*,

and *The Great Mother*. Because Neumann held no academic position and most of his Israeli

colleagues were loyal Freudians, he was isolated professionally. However, along with the

Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem whom he knew collegially, Neumann in the late 1940s–1950s became an esteemed presenter at the prestigious Eranos conferences held annually in scenic Asconia-Moscia, Switzerland. Neumann's lectures were subsequently published as articles on such diverse topics as art and creativity, mystical experience, ritual, and

healthy child development. Many decades ahead of their time, these articles are still read by psychologists today.

A quiet man devoted to Julie (who also became a psychotherapist in Israel) and their two children (daughter Rali had been born in 1938), Neumann turned down an offer in the mid-1950s to direct the newly established psychology clinic at Tel Aviv University. Rather, he preferred to maintain his scholarly lifestyle—even refusing to own a telephone in an effort to minimize distractions. Their two-bedroom apartment on Gordon Street had a balcony overlooking the sea, and he felt continually inspired by the natural beauty of Israel. At the time of Neumann's sudden death from illness at age 55, he left behind a host of unpublished articles and a seminal two-volume manuscript titled *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness.*

Neumann began writing this *magnum opus* in 1934. His goal was to apply concepts from the Kabbalah and early Hasidism to create a new model of personality structure and growth. It was a bold, unprecedented project in the history of modern psychology. All through the 1930s and World War II, Neumann worked dutifully on the dual manuscript. But after finally completing it in 1945, he decided *no*t to publish this 11-year labor of love for reasons that are historically unclear. From the later recollections of Neumann's family and friends, it seems that Gershom Scholem persuaded him that the work was too weak in its Judaic sources to be released. It's also likely that Neumann felt that *Roots* was simply too unconventional for mainstream psychology of the time.

When Neumann died in 1960, the two manuscripts were still unpublished. As the decades passed, perhaps few survivors in Neumann's circle even remembered their existence. But thanks to a resurgence of interest in his work, initially spearheaded by a centennial celebration of his birth held in Israel in 2005 with the active support of his two adult children, these were translated from German into English—and with the aid of a team of prominent academicians and translators, published by Routledge in 2019. As evidence of its significance, the renowned Kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel wrote the Introduction to Neumann's first volume, *Revelation and Apocalypse.* The second volume, *Hasidism,* will form the focus of my comments.

The Roots of Jewish Consciousness

To provide a detailed analysis of Neumann's far-reaching work lies beyond the scope of this article. Rather, I'd like to highlight three key features of Neumann's thought. These all

flowed from his conviction that the modern science of personality growth was badly inadequate—and that Jewish thought including the Talmud, *midrash*, and especially the

Kabbalah and early Hasidism provided a much-needed corrective. The extent to which Neumann at the time believed that these sources offered insights applicable to *all* individuals—and not solely Jews—is unclear. However, from his later writings, it seems that he felt that these insights had psychological universality.

First, Neumann clearly viewed our individual essence (he used the German word

translated into English as "soul," so I will too) as connected to the divine—rather than

comprising a wholly materialist entity. This notion was a radical break from all the secular psychological thinkers of his era—and in this regard, he relied heavily on the Kabbalistic conception of "Adam Kadmon" (the transcendental, primordial human being). Identifying the various levels of the soul posited by Kabbalists, Neuman asserted that through prayer and meditation, we're able to elevate our being beyond the wholly physical. However, he emphasized, this process of inner transformation is never privatistic, but necessarily aimed outward. Neumann stated, "The human being's exquisite task, (one's) actual service, is to connect above and below, heaven and earth. This is an essentially Jewish idea, which predates the Kabbalah" (Neumann, 2019, vol. 2, p. 75).

Presenting the classic *Tree of Lif*e diagram with its array of ten *sefirot* (divine energy-

essences) as a structure of the human soul, Neumann cited the *Zoha*r and the *Sefer Yetzirah.*

He gave particular importance to the *sefira* of *Tiferet*, positioned at the center of the

kabbalistic Tree—and which he accurately related, has traditionally expressed a multiplicity of meanings. "Some associate *Tiferet* with volition; others represent it as the highest aspect of moral life or moral perfection. It is also depicted as beauty, through the perfection of the good" (*Ibid.*, p.78). In this light, it's fascinating to note that though Neumann died nearly 40 years before the emergence of positive psychology, he anticipated its discovery of *moral elevation:* namely, that witnessing, or even hearing about, an act of intense goodness evokes an experience associated with beauty.

Second, Neumann posited that we have an innate capacity for altruism, central to our individual development. Alluding to Hasidic theology rooted in Lurianic Kabbalah, he called this capacity the "Elijah soul:" that is, a divine "spark" metaphysically connected to the prophet Elijah and existing

within each person. Its purpose? To nurture, emotionally support, and uplift others. As Neumann well knew, Elijah had long been identified in Jewish belief as having been transformed into an angel who returns to earth in countless disguises to aid to those in need—and

crucially for Neumann—harbors the messianic age.

"Elijah is said to be the precursor of the Messiah," Neumann wrote, "(Elijah's) redemptive function is the crucial fact in the world, from which comes the emphasis on the individual, on the here-and-now…and to human service" (*Ibid*., p. 19). Depending on the individual's soul, Neumann intimated, the "Elijah spark" varies in scope and intensity, but everyone has a vital part in bringing redemption to the world—and no one is immune from this responsibility.

Neumann meant this notion literally, while others may prefer to view it metaphorically for productive value. However one chooses to accept it, for Neumann the issue was that inner

growth is necessarily interpersonal, communal, and ultimately, messianic. He commented that with the rise of Hasidism, "Redemption (in Judaism) is now less than ever an event that comes

from outside. It (rather) depends on whether every single person fulfills their messianic (unique

capability)…at every moment and in every place, everywhere and at all times" (*Op. cit*.).

Intriguingly, Neumann contended that the "Elijah soul" within each of us is typically hidden: paradoxically, often *mos*t hidden from our self-awareness. Although it exists and possesses a divine essence, finding it requires that we trod a path "of darkness…through our own layers, our own casings and outwardness, through the conditionality of inauthenticity" (*Ibid*., p. 124). In this light, he emphasized the role of other people, exemplified by the *tzaddik,* to help us discover our intrinsic connection to the divine—and more broadly, our purpose or mission in this lifetime.

Third, Neumann in *Roots* emphasized that "joy is a central Hasidic theme" (*Ibid.*, p. 93) in its view of resplendent living in this world. Depicting this notion with Hasidic parables, he argued that joy is a "strengthening and life-enhancing principle" (*Op. cit*.) with both psychological and physical benefits. Although clinical evidence by the mid-1940s certainly suggested that chronic grief and depression had a harmful impact as Neumann also indicated, he was more than a half-century ahead of his time in affirming the mental and physical gains brought by joyfulness. Recently, researchers have begun to study this link empirically, and in my own published studies with colleagues on tears of joy, evidence supports these benefits from such experiences as the birth of a child, family togetherness, a long-awaited reunion, a major personal achievement, or moral elevation (mentioned earlier in this article).

Crucially for Neumann, joy is not important only for its individualistic benefits, but because it "opens the heart" (*Ibid*., p. 95): a maxim attributed to the early Hasidic leader Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. And in this way, Neumann elegantly stated, "genuine kindness (becomes) possible and effective." (*Ibid*., p. 94). In positing a positive relationship between joy and kindness to others, Neumann again anticipated recent scientific findings. Indeed, innovative psychologists have begun to recommend volunteerism as a means to ameliorate depression. Certainly, the notion that a joyful mindset makes caregiving more effective can be extended to a wide range of social relationships including parenting, teaching, and mentoring. In this domain and others, Erich Neumann's far-sighted vision for a new psychology rooted in Jewish traditions is coming closer to full realization.

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