

THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF RITUAL ACTIONS IN JUDAISM

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Abstract: *This article examines the meaning of the practical mitzvot (good deeds) in Judaism from a psychological point of view. There is an attempt here to trace an explanation that is not essentially religious, but aimed at getting to know the human soul and its needs.*

In the article, I will provide examples of rituals in different cultures and religions, while referring to theorists who study this field, who examine the power of rituals as a means of healing, and connecting between people and their communities.

Keywords: *rituals, stories, symbols, mitzvot (good deeds), Judaism*

Introduction

"You should know that the human being acts according to his actions, his heart and all his thought always follow his deeds...for hearts are drawn to actions – that is the explanation in "The education Book" with reference to precept number 16: "do not break a part of Passover" (Halevy, 1958).

This basic principle attempts to position it as infrastructure for the entire religious world view which regards holding the good deeds as external actions impacting the psyche. That principle which surprisingly reminds the principle of psychodramatic action in Moreno's doctrine, is the basis of this article, which seeks to examine the meaning of the practical mitzvot in Judaism from a psychological point of view.

Therapeutic Value of Rituals, Stories and Symbols

Rituals

Rituals are social events with clear and defined structure that is repeated. Some see them as dramatic forms assisting in coping with emotional, universal distresses. Other researchers emphasize the role of rituals as factor that moderates and combines between the psychological needs of the individual and those of society while these are expressed through symbols (Gafni, 2000). Menuha Gafni describes in her article a work model which is based on the sources of power and healing found in the ritualistic, dramatic and creative ingredients and on the fact that the process is held within the group framework.

One of the power sources of rituals and ritualism is the use of symbols, gestures and external objects aiming to impact the psychic layout of those participating in them (Shahar-Levy, 2000). In her article, Shahar-levy examines human need for rituals, the ways through which the therapist builds or the Shaman or the witness to the individual and the group, emotional and cognitive supports through preservation and organization of experience and norms in language, joint symbols and rituals. She tries to find out

what are the sources for the healing power which are latent in traditional society as opposed to the frameworks available for the contemporary therapist.

Giertz (1990) presents as example the known healing rituals of the Navaho tribe called "chanting". Chanting is a kind of religious psychodrama in which three major actors are taking part: "the singer" or the healer, the patient and the patient's family and friends who fulfill the role of a chorus singing alternately in two voices. The Navaho have approximately sixty different chants for different purposes but most of them are dedicated to the healing of physical or spiritual illnesses. The structure of each chant, of the dramatic plot is more or less identical. There are three major acts: purification of the patient and the audience, declaration of the wish which is to bring the patient back towards recovery ("harmony") through repetitive chanting and ritualistic actions, the patient's identification with "the holy nation" and his "convalescence" following it. The symbolism of the chanting focuses on the problem of human suffering attempting to cope with it through its location within meaningful context or by providing mode of action through which it can be expressed and understood once it was expressed and once it is understood- to bear it. The bottom line is that support action through the chanting can grant the hurt person vocabulary through which he can grasp the essence of this suffering and connect it with the wide world (Giertz, 1990 p. 104).

Giertz argues that the ritual is not just cultural pattern but also pattern of social interaction (Ibid. p. 160). He proves it on the basis of researches and observations he performed on traditional tribes as well as on the basis of the theoretic approaches he presents:

"The sociological approach that originally stemmed from Dirckheim's book 'The elementary forms of religious life' and through 'The lectures about the religion of Semite nations' written by Robertson-Smith, emphasized the manner in which belief, and particularly the ritual, intensify traditional social connections between individuals. It accentuates the way in which the social structure of the group is intensified and perpetually gains strength through ritualistic and mystic symbolization of basic social values on which it is founded.

The social-psychological approach of which Fraser and Tyler were its pioneers, but whose clearest expressions is found in the classic book by Malinovski "Magic, science and religion", emphasizes the activity of religion on the individual- the manner in which it provides both cognitive and emotional desires for the stable world, understanding and able to impose and the manner in which it enables him to protect his inner confidence in view of the natural randomness" (Ibid. p. 138)

Stories and Myths

The therapeutic value of stories, mythologies and myths as ones connecting the human being to the circles he belongs to and clarifying his unique identity within his family, community and nation- do appear in many researchers.

Myths are stories describing experience in life. They represent culture, tradition, positions and values of nations. They reflect the dreams and ambitions of the members of that nation are transferred from one generation to another just as history. In myths there is attempt to respond to questions such as: where do we come from and who do

we belong to so that the person, group or race could find a framework for their existence and identification point with their ancestors (Daviyodi,, 1999). Daviyodi,, who researched therapy through stories in India, points out that in therapy, stories serve as model on which the patient can project the story of his life and find meaning in it.

Rogers and the humanistic psychologists acknowledge that we are all striving to discover our identity, our self-image. When a person discovers his identity he will manage to actualize himself. Searching for identity and striving for self-discovery and self-actualization is a process that continues all along life (Cohen, 1990). Adir Cohen reviews the different psychological theories siding with Bibliotherapy as process enabling encounter with the inner self. He devotes a special chapter for the folkloristic story and identification with stories whose roots stem from childhood of human history. He introduces the Jungian approach that refers to traditional stories told from one generation to another as to ones reflecting archetypes that express the collective unconscious. Adir Cohen quotes Jung who claimed that "these archetypes are the treasure from which all humanity draw its God and its demons and all those sublime ideas without which the human being would stop being a human being" (Ibid. p. 121).

In their book Michael White and David Apstone suggest that people should research the achievements of their family and community as well as historic documents that may be connected with particular areas of their life styles. Thus they would attempt to locate knowledge systems from the past which are in line with the unique results and the unique knowledge systems.

"Consolidation of historic descriptions of knowledge systems are enslaved beside the attempt to assume in which manner it would be possible to open space for the development of these knowledge systems and their flow which can help people to appreciate their unique struggle history and adopt these knowledge systems in a more explicit manner in order to shape their lives and their relationships" (White & Apstone, 1999).

Symbols

This is what Giertz (1990) writes about the necessary place of symbols in human's life:

"The human being can somehow adjust to anything his imagination can cope with but he cannot bear chaos. Since his characteristic functioning and his greatest asset is the achievement, his greatest fear is to encounter that which he is unable to picture in his mind....that is why our most important assets are always the symbols of our general orientation, the orientation in nature, on the planet, in society and in that which we do; symbols of our world view and our view of life" (p. 99).

Karl Gustav Jung believed in the connection between myths and symbols. Jung sees the collective unconscious as reservoir of latent memories from the cultural past, memory of the race, history of the human race and even of the pre-human period and also contains within it possibilities for the future. Jung believed that this understanding is essential for the human being in order to reach spiritual and psychic unity with

himself and his environment. His opinion was that a person should reach his uniqueness through process of isolation with his self but still must remain connected with the collective (Daviyodi, 1999).

Erich Fromm (in Cohen, 1999) emphasizes that "the language of symbols is a language by its own right; in fact it is the only universal language that the human race has ever developed". In his book, Adir Cohen presents the principles of Erich Fromm who accentuated that "the language of symbols is the language through which internal experiences, emotions and thoughts are expressed as though these were sensory experiences, events in the external world" (Ibid. p. 123).

Jung refers to symbol as to independent, energetic entity with tremendous power: the symbol is not an allegory and is not a sign. "The symbol is spontaneous image that stems from the unconscious without planning or participation of the ego" (Shalev, 1987, p. 184).

Shalev explains that the true symbol, when it is alive, is a kind of energetic entity. We feel its energy when it penetrates the awareness and through that energy (which at times is amazing and alarming) it can impact, shake and shock- meaning, to do its compensatory-creative work. In addition, the symbol usually contains many meanings, at times contradicting each other and that is why often it has diverse character, rich and paradoxical (Ibid.) that is to say, Jung argued that the same symbol, even if it has a supposedly ancient and fixed content, may contain and transfer endless meanings.

In Jungian therapy there is a long process of patient observation and listening to symbols. This is a process that turns into dialogue. The more the "ego" responds more to these messages and learns to understand them, thus more and more it deciphers the secret of its immanence, the mystery of its true being. That deciphering is meaningful and creative. When the "ego" enables the symbolic contents to be translated and be included in it, when it weaves them into the history of his life and actualizes it in his daily life, it becomes a true "creator" for, as explained before, because these contents are compensatory and prospective, they are the building blocks in the program of his most total and authentic entity (Shalev, 1987, p. 184).

Within this context of our individual development, it is important to indicate that Jung shows how through suitable symbols our collective development is directed, through the protection of certain similarity, mutual one, between us and the others. This is how the balance and connection develops between us belonging and us being special:

"One may say that the balance and cooperation between the collective side and the individual side, very much determines the mental health, the level and quality of functioning, the manner of being integrated within life in the community and society and the sensation of a person's satisfaction and happiness" (Ibid., p. 183).

Through the symbols the tension between these two parts of the personality would be revealed. The more the impulse for individuality is stronger, thus the conflict between the collective side and the individual side is deeper and more painful and the need to solve it and find the suitable balance between them is fatal. Jung emphasizes that such structure and struggle characterize people who are particularly creative.

Symbols within their social context were examined by other researchers too. In his book, Giertz (1990) examines the connection between religious systems and the use of symbols and reaches the conclusion that "the religious system is formed by a bunch of sanctified symbols that are integrated within some kind of organized totality. For the one who is committed to it, that kind of religious system is mediating tool of true knowledge; knowledge of the essential conditions which one must support life according to them" (p. 125).

According to Giertz, that is to say: the symbols mediate between reality and its meaning: "The power of religion as source of support of social values is thus latent in the ability of its symbols to chart a world in which these values, just as the powers that are obstacles on the road towards their actualization, constitute its basic ingredients. Religion represents the power of human imagination to build a picture of actuality in which, to quote Max Weber, 'events are not found or occur just like that but they have meaning and they do take place because of that meaning' ". (Giertz, 1990, p. 127).

Thus, religion uses symbols in a manner that grants meaning to life and even more than that:

"On the one hand religion presents authoritative world view about the general standard of actuality that serves as basis for the intensity of symbolic resources from which we draw concepts and ideas for the interpretation and analysis of reality. In the same manner it presents on the one hand general observation of the same kind about the spirit that pulsate the actuality, its special nature and internal trends and that serves as basis for the intensity of our resources, also symbolic, through which we express emotions- moods, sentiments, passions, feelings and emotions. Whoever can live in the light of religious symbols and as long as he can, these symbols provide him cosmic guarantee not only to the fact that he has the power to understand the world but also that once he does understand it he would be able to grant precise form to his feelings and define them so that they would enable him to bear his existence- with sad or radiating face, with pleasant expression of grumpy one but at any rate- bear it" (Ibid. p. 104).

Dr. Esther Elizur (1992) also points out that since the dawn of culture there was use of metaphoric- artistic language as part of traditional healing rituals (p. 157). In her article she presents many case studies of therapy based on symbols and metaphors and she talks about development of cognition in symbols as important therapeutic tool: "During the last two decades the efficacy of metaphoric language of "the right hemisphere" has been rediscovered as well as the use of various metaphoric tools" (Ibid.) The strength in the use of metaphor is in the optional space it opens. In her article Elizur mentions Pinchas Noy who compares between the artistic solution and the neurotic solution: "Instead of splitting and repression the effort of the ego is invested in the attempt to grasp standard which would enable it to organize parts of his self into perfect order and unite the contrasts inside him into integrative model. Indeed, the creativity of the metaphoric language illustrates for the patient possible solution that differs from the neurotic solution he was stuck in" (Elizur, 1992. p. 163).

As expected, Elizur refers to Jung and relies on his method to present the therapeutic moves she experienced: "Similarly to the symbols in dreams which according to Jung hold prospective-compensatory role thus too the healing metaphor may serve as a kind of road mark for the patient, tangible representation that aims to lead to the place which was yet unknown to the conscious ego" (Ibid.)

In another article Elizur explains the source of the concept "metaphor" which originates from Greek and means "transference from one place to another. That ability to connect two things that were not connected before to achieve transformation of meaning is innate for human beings and source for cognitive development and creative activity" (Ibid. p. 303).

She presents examples from the period of Biblical prophets like Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Hoshea who made use of metaphors so as to transfer valent and educational messages to the nation in sharp and tangible manner which could draw as much audience as possible. Thus for example in the book of Jeremiah there is the story about the use of clay bottle: "Then shalt thou break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with thee and shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again and they shall bury them in Tophet, till there be no place to bury" (Jeremiah, 19 verses 10-11).

In her article, Elizur demonstrates how the use of metaphor helps in getting into the emotional-experience world of the patient aiming to form intra-personal and interpersonal change and strengthen the therapeutic.

Good deeds in Judaism

Good deeds as symbols

In his book "The good deeds as symbols" (1984) Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch researches the good deeds as science, that should be comprehended through the symbols it represents and their meaning. His claim is that God ordered doing specific objects or that He demanded that we do certain acts so that through them we would remember specific concepts and truths, always anew and in a more profound manner so that we could bring these concepts closer to our hearts. Understanding the symbolic meaning of the act enables its impact on our immanence and the process of our growth.

Through this review I shall try to reveal therapeutic messages at the basis of the demand to keep practical good deeds. Rabbi Hirsch (1984) opens his book with more extensive explanation about the nature of man and claims:

"By nature, the human being has that trait of expressing ideas through sensory symbols. This is a natural trait and he needs it just as he needs to grasp language through his ears....each body movement with which we escort the spoken word and which at times takes the place of the word is only a natural symbol we use and we cannot waive its use. When we confirm or negate, agree or refuse, express our joy about the success of something or our sorrow at lack of success, the sense of respect or the sense of contempt, our satisfaction or sorrow, our friendship and love- when we express all these

only by talking we would not be able to express even half of that which we wish to express; we reach our goal of expression only when sensory symbol escorts the talk or even takes the place of the word. When we part from someone and just say "so long" the word is soon forgotten; but when we shake hands even without saying a word, the friend would be remembered for a long time since for one moment we were united with him through sensory touch; thus we expressed our sadness about the parting forever and it is better preserved in the memory" (Hirsch, 1984, p. 2).

Once he explained our need for sensory experience and sensory expression, Rabbi Hirsch demonstrates that idea as it is expressed in Biblical stories. He points out that "in almost each new period in history of humanity, up to the giving of the law we see that God does not suffice with talking to educate human generation and particularly the people of Israel. When God establishes a fact for the future generations he hands humanity a symbol or demands from it symbolic action so these would deepen His sacred need and grant it more validity" (Ibid, p. 15).

Later on Rabbi Hirsch presents the example of the rainbow which is the symbol of the pact with Noah and the whole humanity, symbolizing the promise that there will never be another flood again. This symbol that continues and appears since then at each encounter between water and sun, reminds us repeatedly that ancient pact which is escorting us throughout our lives. Impressive nature phenomenon causes the human being to stoop for a while from the flow of life, stand in front of its glory and bless it.

In the next stage Rabbi Hirsch (1984) will encounter us with the practical good deeds we were ordered to perform by the Torah and wish to establish them as symbolic acts wishing to transfer messages, grant meaning and escort mental processes of the development of connections of a person with himself, with the other and with God. Here he reaches the core of his perception about the importance of the good deed: he emphasizes the importance of action over talking. In psychodrama one discusses the "do it" and not the "talk about". Rabbi Hirsch proves how that principle is the guiding line all along the historic story of the Israeli nation and regarding practical good deeds. Among others, Rabbi Hirsch presents example from the Passover holiday:

"In the time determining issues forever, issues with supreme importance that have far reaching results, we would have expected many and along speeches, declarations, salutations and whole lectures about the importance and the results of things that are important, about the great hour that determines the history of the nature for the future; we would think that only through exciting speech it would have been possible to cause all those present to feel elation in view of that time; but what do we see? Great silence! There is no one who can say a word and instead there are many actions instead of the speech and the actions lead to results that word could not even reach and even the most exciting speech could not have had the impact as that of these actions!

For example, the night of salvation and Exodus! That was an unusual time in the history of all humanity. In the past it was the ambition of each nation and its whole future was based on it; one should turn reality into its contrast; the chains would be cut,

jails would open, slaves would become free, families would reunite, husband would return to his wife and children to their parents; people and communities rose from the dust and turned into the people of God. Those who previously were doomed to the most degrading moil now received the nomination to become the kingdom of priests to work the supreme God; free people who will never be slaves again. For in such a time there is much to be emphasized through words, speeches and many lectures; to describe the greatness of that hour and to let the event permeate into the cognition of all humanity! And in fact, what kind of words were heard? Almost nothing! Only actions were given to the people. The expression of the tremendous event was through the words: "Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the Passover" (Exodus 12 verse 21) and this is how a nation of poor slaves turned into free people! For there were all the mentioned actions regarding the Exodus with all of their details and all the good precepts and the negative precepts written there. For there were all symbolic actions that emphasized the greatness of that hour in such a way that no speech nor declaration could achieve such tremendous power to strike roots of that even in the heart of each and every one in the nation" (Hirsch, 1984, p. 33).

The Annual Circle

Passover is one holiday among many spread all over the year. Judaism relates to time as to central factor with meaning in the personal, national and global development. The act required by us on a certain day in the year is supposed to impact our feelings, thoughts, behavior and our whole personality:

"The Hebrew word for "year" is "shana" and in it are latent the wider and complementary dimensions of the spiral. On the one hand the circle that goes round and round and the meaning is to repeat it again and again (in Hebrew – root for 'year' and 'repeat' is identical). On the other hand the spiral curls and goes up into new and different dimensions. Thus we return, year after year and are celebrating each festive day and holiday, repeating the same cycle; we are forever different and changing (in Hebrew – root for 'year' and 'change' is identical) and we never truly return to the place in which we were before" (Cagan, 2005, p. 21).

So, despite the repetitiveness and perhaps precisely because of it, there is perpetual progress with the return to the same station in which we supposedly were the year before. Cagan emphasizes another idea concerning the circle of the year:

"There is a reason why we call that cycle the annual circle. The circle is a perfect geometric form in which all the points along the circumference are found at equal distance from the center. In Hasidism the sanctity and uniqueness of the circle are expressed through dancing. All dancers move in the circle with their eyes turned towards the center. There are no leaders and those who are led- all are leaders and all are led and the arms of all the dancers are extended towards the mutual center. No one is closer or more distant from the center than the others. This is the incarnation of the unity idea; endless line without beginning or end; harmony with the one, the divine,

perfection and indeed the meaning of the word dance "Mahol" in Jewish sources is both dance and circle" (Cagan, 2005, p. 11).

The idea of the circle gains practical form through various customs which we hold during holidays. For example:

"After crossing the red Sea the prophet Miriam came out with the women of Israel with dance and music. During the Sukkot holiday we carry The Four Kinds- palm branch, myrtle, willow and citron and we circle the stage in a circle. The four kinds represent us; metaphorically they represent different parts of the body (the spine, eyes, mouth and heart) just as our emotional, mental and spiritual levels. We tie them into one bunch and shake them together" (Ibid. p. 11).

However despite the major value that is given to specific contents precisely during specific time in the year, the ultimate goal is to lead us to take from that holiday "food for the journey" for each and every day during the year:

"The annual circle may be compared to fractal since the model of the whole year is found in every day and in each and every moment. We do not mention exodus only on the Passover Seder but every day and each Saturday. Each day we must check if we are slaves to something, and free ourselves. Each day we should repent, as though it was New Year's Eve of Yom Kippur. Each day we receive the Torah anew; each day we should rejoice as though it was Sukkot. Each day we should experience and publish the miracles; each day we experience the transitions from chaos to order and from order to chaos" (Ibid. pp. 10-11).

Summary

Don Yitzchak Abarbanal, one of the most important Bible commentators in the 15th century, writes about Israel's servitude in Egypt: "Because the mental afflictions and troubles are more difficult than the physical ones." From this, he observes the customs of Passover as aimed at healing the soul.

This short overview brought a light taste of the practical mitzvot in Judaism. Mitzvot that include rituals, use of symbols and repetition of stories. When we examine these facts in the light of the theories that attribute to the use of symbols, metaphors, rituals and stories a therapeutic power, we can understand how the traditional acts can strengthen the healthy mental development of the individual, and the mental resilience of the community.

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