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Jewish Pastoral Counseling: a window of opportunity for Israeli Academia

Abstract:

Following participation in Dr. Yair Caspi's "Psychology in Judaism" workshop, the writers contemplate whether the teaching of Caspi's model in academic settings could become simultaneously a fresh addition to interdisciplinary approaches to the teaching of Judaism in Israeli Academic life, and an academic addition to the contemporary trend to Jewish renewal in Israeli society. The model is based on weekly facilitated workshops in which participants both reflect on and discuss their lives and also explore unique interpretations of Jewish texts and ideas, constantly seeking the borderline where their lives inform the text and vice versa. The process leads to the re-enchantment of ancient Jewish concepts, the reinvention of the Jewish religious experience in a contemporary paradigm and idiom, and the possibility of deep transformative insight.

Introduction

In the Israeli context, treating religion as an academic subject necessitates taking a stand on the ever evolving disagreement about what Judaism is. Staunch advocates can be found for the alternative, even exclusive, claims that Judaism is variously a culture, a nationality, a religion, a civilization, the folkways of the Jewish People, a set of normatively binding sacred laws, or a form of consciousness. Adjudicating between, or navigating one's way through, the competing claims is a tricky enterprise.

We increasingly hear voices in Israeli universities, colleges and teacher training institutes that call for Israeli Jews to have greater Jewish knowledge. Yet when efforts are made to create a curriculum that "connects the Israeli with his roots and Jews in the Diaspora," the objectives, aims, and subjects that should be taught remain very ambigu-

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ous (Kopelowitz & Bar Shalom, 2004). As if this were not enough, there seems to be agreement among different thinkers that knowledge alone cannot instill a sense of belonging, purpose, celebration, values, holiness, or whatever it is that being Jewish involves. If Judaism is taught purely as a body of knowledge, no matter how inter-disciplinarily, it remains a classic “academic subject,” that is, detached from the learner and disembodied from her/his life. There is a broad consensus that having even a good knowledge of Jewish subject matter cannot, by itself, serve as a sufficient tool to socialize Israelis for Jewish belonging and commitment, help them feel and be at home in their own cultural heritage, or enable them to engage with the spiritual dimensions of life. Thinkers who support this view can be found among very different Jewish Israeli groups: Modern orthodox Jews, Jews from Liberal streams, and secular Israelis. Indeed, they believe that without a different kind of serious engagement with Jewish texts and meaning, Israel will increasingly see the creation of a generation of what is peremptorily termed “Hebrew speaking goys” (that is, Jews who are just like non-Jews except that they happen to speak Hebrew).

Critics of this line of thought, taking a postmodern view on the matter, argue that this accusation against secular Israelis stems from a misunderstanding of the dynamic nature of culture, with its many formal and informal institutions of socialization and meaning-creating mechanisms (Bekerman & Silverman, 1997). They say that there is no boundary, behavioral, value-related, or otherwise, beyond which the authenticity of the Jewishness experienced by the Jew is put in question. Just as an individual is held to maintain her/his identity even through radical changes, just as the individual need maintain no fidelity with what s/he once was to remain the same person, this school of thought says that what Jews do and become is what defines what Judaism is. Fidelity to the past through a study process that “loads the Jewish software” is not a condition for true Jewish flourishing.

Nonetheless there does seem to be a thirst among many Israeli Jews to find meaning in Jewish knowledge. The meaning they search for is expected to be relevant to their lives, not an accumulation of facts. More and more institutions, such as *Elul* (the first Israeli adult Jewish study center, founded in 1989), *Binah*, *Kolot*, and Jewish culture festivals such as *Hakhel* and the *Kfar Blum Festival* invite different kinds of Israelis to engage in Jewish dialogue, explore Jewish texts, and examine possible connections to existential dilemmas and the moral and spiritual dimensions of daily life. In Israeli academia, interdisciplinary approaches to Judaism, ones that connect the affective and cognitive domain in a search for new meaning, can be seen mostly in teacher training colleges (Bar Shalom, 2007). It seems, though, that the teachers in these institutions bring to their teaching their experiences from informal institutions such as those we just mentioned. In other words, they see their teaching as new, innovative, informal, and interdisciplinary (Bar Shalom, 2007).

A New institution in Israeli Academia: The Psychology in Judaism program as a model for “Jewish Pastoral counseling.”

Compared to teacher training institutions and colleges, universities are often bound by the traditional academic paradigm and are usually slower to incorporate experimental and innovative curriculum. The “Psychology in Judaism” program at Tel Aviv University is a very unusual program. It does something usually unthinkable for classic

academia, where psychology is for the psychology department and Judaism is for Judaic scholars and rabbis.¹ Ironically, the founder of the program, Yair Caspi, discovered this dichotomy at Yeshiva University, where he wanted to write a doctoral dissertation on “Jewish psychology”. He ended up writing on a different subject, because even in this Jewish orthodox institution, he found the subject matter split, both in the institutional philosophy and among the staff members themselves. He sensed that the staff felt that a hybridization of the subjects constituted a threat to the high academic standing of the institution as an academic leader in the social work profession and in research.

Caspi’s independent study and inquiry, in institutions such as Elul, helped him create a model of teaching in which psychological counseling and Judaism are connected, intertwined, and even morphed. There is no other program in Israel that tries to create such a unified field. In the Christian context, though, the pastoral counseling program seems to be an equivalent, in the sense that both approaches seem to create a synthesis between theology and psychology, putting theology in the senior position, and trying to avoid confusion or a split between both fields (Hunsinger, 1995).

Caspi invites Secular Israelis to reclaim God, that is, to speak to God and to live with God directly, with no intermediaries, and he turns to the Orthodox and the ultra-Orthodox believers and tells them that they are “are too busy observing obsolete mitzvot (religious commandments) and are not involved enough in experiencing the closeness and love of God” (Levi-Barzilai, 2007).

Caspi is not the first Israeli who has strived to create a Jewish psychology. Rottenberg, like Caspi, rejects the Freudian Oedipal myth, instead offering an opposite myth in which the father’s fantasy is to commit homicide against the child, like in the Abraham/Isaac story. Finding its (non-violent) resolution, the intergenerational crisis is solved and tradition is passed on to the next generation (Rotenberg, 1993). Rotenberg, in creating a psychological theology that is “other-centered” and communal by its nature, seems to be influenced by Buber’s dialogical approach.

Caspi’s Jewish theology has a simple mission built on several clear and simple assumptions. Each person’s fantasy is not to solve an oedipal complex, but rather to have an ongoing, meaningful relation and communion with God. He sees that as a basic human need, a universal truth that was first recognized by the Jewish people millennia ago and handed down as a gift from them to all nations. In other words, borrowing from Kleinian understanding of object relations (see Meltzer, 1998), Caspi states that in Jewish “object relations” the individual simply wants to be one with God. This communion seems to be different from what Maslow (1970) described in *Religions, Values, And Peak Experiences*, wherein religion is a “spiritual high”. For Caspi, religion, or living with God, is to cultivate one’s capacity to understanding “what is the right thing to do?” in almost every dilemma in life.

How does the model work?

Caspi’s works with groups is based around weekly meetings. The meetings start with the study of an eclectic range of core Jewish texts pre-arranged around a theme. This thematic exploration is followed by an analysis of a daily situation in which one or more of the participants present a life dilemma. Initially, the dilemmas are small and mundane. As the group develops the issues, participants become more serious and the inquiry becomes deeper and more intimate. There are several questionnaires that allow

the participant to explore the personal meaning of core Jewish ideas. Participants are required to think about the gifts they have received (*Chesed*), their desires (*Ratzon*), their bad/evil inclinations (*Yetzer Harah*), the locus of temptation to idolatry in this situation/dilemma (*Avodat Elilim*), their sacrifices (*Korbanot*), their sin (in Judaism, the term is *Het*, meaning 'to miss the mark', has a vastly different meaning from the Christian notion of 'sin'), what price they should pay for *Het* (*Onesh*), what lies they tell themselves to support their wrongful actions (*Sheker*), and what would be the right thing to do (*Mitzvah*). Idol worship is a very central subject, for Caspi claims that when we don't have God in our lives, we create a substitute by making other gods. That is, we elevate other aspects of our lives into the status and role of God – all powerful, all consuming, all determining. These gods include careers, ourselves ('me' as that which can give All, which can do Anything, or to which everything is Owed), wealth, our children, beauty, youth, consumer products, fame, authoritative figures, the nation Israel, the land of Israel, and the list goes on (Caspi 2001). Caspi monitors the group to try to differentiate between idol worship and true God, realizing that it is actually very difficult to get rid of our idols. "The world according to Yair Caspi is not divided between the Orthodox and the secular, but between those who have true gods and those who do not. Between those who recognize that they are idol worshipers and make an effort to part from their idols, and those who do not" (Levi-Barzilai, 2003). The focal point of the exercises and explorations is to answer the question: in this given dilemma, taking into consideration my relationship with God, what is the right thing to do?

Participants from all walks of life, secular and religious, seem to gain deep insights from this kind of work, as indicated by the testimony of this health care professional:

Psychiatrist Aliza Ring Rosenbaum, director of the adolescent department at the Abarbanel Mental Health Center in Bat Yam, is a graduate of the first year of the program. "The group experience was fascinating," she says. "I'm a secular woman, with a spiritual tendency. I liked his direction, that of a secular person who asks 'Why did they take God away from me?' and declares 'Nobody will determine my God for me.' Professionally speaking, I'm a clinician. It was interesting to discover a new way of seeing and relating to people's conflicts in terms of Judaism. It's entirely new to me. It's another language, another way to reach people" (Levi-Barzilai, 2003).

and that of an Orthodox Rabbi:

Rabbi Yair Ben Shetrit, from the settlement of Kochav Hashahar, head of the Aviv Institute in Tel Aviv and a graduate of the workshop, says: "I was enriched. The language he used was fascinating. As a religious person I study and teach, and I often sense the gap between the Jewish language in which I live and reality, the modern lifestyle. And here the man has made a very interesting connection between the two worlds" (Levi-Barzilai, 2003).

Rethinking the relationship between Religious Studies, religious experience, and the academic disciplines

The classic relationship of religion and the academy is one of unbearable tension, opposition, and rupture. The academic disciplines, in their role as the step-child of rationalism, seek to deconstruct, objectify, and explain away the religious experience. In Jewish studies, this process has a "glorious" history arguably starting with the *Wissenschaft des*

Judentums (“The Science of Judaism”), a nineteenth-century movement that set out to critically investigate Jewish literature and culture, including rabbinic literature, using scientific methods to analyze the origins of Jewish traditions. The polemic of the day was whether this school of scholars came to raise Judaism from its then pariah status in order to show it as containing the originality, profundity, and vitality it claimed for itself, or whether they in fact came to “bury” it. Samson Raphael Hirsch and others regarded the *Wissenschaft* movement as draining traditional Jewish knowledge of its “sacral power” (Mendes-Flohr, 1998), thereby undermining the possibility of maintaining a living Jewish community. In the non-Jewish realm, the pioneering work of writers like William James tried to put religious experience on a firmer footing by documenting the incontrovertible phenomenology of the religious experience itself. In the Jewish world, a long line of modern Jewish thinkers and philosophers grappled with the relationship between science, rationality, and universal truths on the one hand, and religion, spirituality, and the unique experience of the Jews on the other.

Within this search for a way for Judaism to fully enter the modern world, among the most prominent and influential thinkers are Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel. They are part of what might loosely be called the school of Jewish religious humanists. They eschewed the dichotomous approach to the science-religion question and, in their writings as in their lives, they argued for the critical importance of an existential engagement with Jewish texts; with seeing the real meaning of the text through the prism of life and the meanings of life through the prism of the text. Amongst others in this broad category, each it must be said with their own emphasis, are Franz Rosenzweig, Mordechai Kaplan, Eric Fromm and Viktor Frankl. This school of thought continues as a vital tradition today. There is, alongside it, a tradition that says that study is not enough, that only the revitalization of the Jewish tradition will enable it to remain a potent (religious) cultural force. This view is carried forward, among others, by the Jewish Historian Yosef Yerushalmi (Yerushalmi, 1982). Whereas Buber thinks that Jewish texts can be a gateway to a dialogue with the Divine, Yerushalmi thinks that recreating ancient Jewish forms and reimbuing them with religious intention will yield that result. This can be represented schematically thus:

Item →			
Thinker	What is happen- ing?	What is ‘remembered’?	How does it happen?
Buber	Reactualization	Living in relation with God through I-Thou relationships	Revelation through dialogic study of text and rituals that enable realization and find fulfillment in the lives of the participants.
Yerushalmi	Reactualization	The matrix of elemental meanings that are the ‘genetic code’ of the Jewish religious experience	Experiential reactualization through ritual, the Jewish Festivals (Chaggim) and the repetition of the Bible (Torah) in a cyclical manner ... liturgy, ritual and Jewish Law (Halacha) were experienced then with all their rich associations

However, within the realm that sees the right kind of textual study and exploration as a gateway to religious living, Heschel and Buber would support the thrust of Caspi's effort to realign academic and religious learning, or study, of Jewish texts. Heschel stresses that a real reading of the Bible is necessarily a religious reading, of which the Academy can become an excuse for avoidance.

Man of today resists the Scriptures because he cannot endure revelation. To endure revelation is to endure this moment full of possible decisions, to respond to and be responsible for every moment. Man of today resists scriptures because he no longer wants to accept responsibility (Heschel, 1959).

Yet Heschel does not advise us to rely on the Bible as a proof text. He requires a real engagement with the text:

Judaism is based on a minimum of revelation and a maximum of interpretation, upon the Will of God and the understanding of Israel (*meaning, the people called Israel, i.e. Jews*)... He gave us the text and we refine and complete it (Heschel, 1959).

If one had doubts about his desire to bring and integrate real academic scholarship in this undertaking, one need only read his magnum opus "The Prophets." Based in meticulous historical research through which he pieces together a phenomenology of the prophet's experience, he tells us that:

The prophet is human, yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. [S]he experiences moments that defy our understanding. He is neither 'a singing saint' nor 'a moralizing poet,' but an assaulter of the mind. Often [her] words begin to burn where conscience ends. The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions (Heschel, 1962).

Martin Buber similarly talks about the importance of the text and also stresses the importance of our lived experience. Our lives partake of creation, he explains, they are part of the unfolding, created world: "Creation is not a hurdle on the way to God, it is the road itself" (Martin Buber, 1979). From this standpoint, how could one only study the ancient Jewish texts without seeing how they resound in and are explained by our lives? Buber's Theology turns the usual direction of revelation on its head. Buber describes revelation as the experience in which God does not "show Itself," but rather one in which in and through the natural events and experiences of life, God "lets-Himself-be-seen." Buber tells us that theophany is not so much a "breaking through" of the Divine to the finite lives of those who live on earth, as it is the radical perception of ever-present holiness embedded in and refracted in the mundane, "And in seeing that which radiates from Him, they see Him" (Buber, 1958).

Again, put schematically, we can map the extreme secular and orthodox positions as seeing scientific/academic knowledge as (at best) irrelevant to the correct way to relate to the Biblical texts. Caspi stands in a long tradition of third-way, Jewish religious humanist interpreters: (see the table below.)

Caspi, like Buber and Heschel, brings to the interpretative table the full panoply

of academic disciplines; psychology, sociology, Jewish studies in their different forms, history, and more. Further, his approach, resting as it does on the intellectual spadework

	Extreme Secular and Orthodox		Buber, Heschel, Caspi	Other post/modern Jewish thinkers	
Is there a self-awareness of hermeneutic process by the reader?	No The text is as it appears, we should accept the obvious, straight-forward meaning		Yes & No We should enter into dialogue with the text	Yes The moment or truth the text describes, or constitutes a trace of, needs to be re/constructed	
	Hebrew term for that way of reading: Pshat		Hebrew terms for that way of reading: Pshat and Drash	Hebrew term for that way of reading: Drash	
Type of position (philosophically)	Secular	Orthodox	Experiential/existential phenomenological, narrative, historical, dialogical	A-historical, Positivist, Idealist,	Romantic, Literary, Ethical
A priori attitude about what to do with the text	Reject	Accept	Read in order to enter into dialogue with the text, in order to better live in dialogue with God in one's life	Reveal the light it sheds on the human condition and archetypal situations or experiences	Look for meaning
What is the nature of the text?	The text is archaic, based on lies or child-like misapprehensions	The text is an accurate and straightforward report	- An invitation to enter the 'stage' which the text evokes - A way to retrieve or access past theophanies - A way to re-actualize the memory of past dialogues with God	A portrayal of archetypal events, tensions, truths that are and have always been part of human life. Whether or not based on true events, the text tells us not (merely) what happened, but what always happens.	The fact that the text can speak to us today across time and place - using the devices of characterization, plot, symbol, metaphor and narrative (etc.) - shows that it is great literature.
Disciplines required to understand the text	None	None	Anthropology, History, Psychology, Linguistics, Critical Theory	Psychology, Literary Theory	Literary Theory
Does the text contain a normative content?	No	Yes	The normative content is that we must seek our own ultimate truth. The subjective is given objective significance.	Yes, if it can be unearthed.	No, only a content that may speak to us and our community

of the likes of Buber and Heschel, resonates with French philosopher Roland Barthes, who tells us that to read a text is necessarily an interactive, collaborative enterprise:

The Text² is largely a score of this type: it asks the reader for an active collaboration. This is a great innovation, because it compels us to ask “who *executes* the work?” (a question raised by Mallarme, who wanted the audience to *produce* the book). Today only the critic *executes* the work (in both senses). The reduction of reading to consumption is obviously responsible for the “boredom” that many people feel when confronting the modern (“unreadable”) text, or the avant-garde movie

or painting: to suffer from boredom means that one cannot produce the text, play it, open it out, *make it go* (Barthes R., 1971).

Caspi's approach is one that helps us "make Judaism go" through combining the insights and methods of the academic disciplines with a deeply religious gestalt.

Future possible developments for Caspi's model in Israeli Academia

We decided to write this article after personally experiencing Caspi's workshop model. Indeed, as in the above testimonies, we felt that the program offered new insights into the human condition and our own lives. Furthermore, the program allows and encourages groups to continue afterwards as small support groups, believing that the group has the wisdom to help the individual in areas where he or she is blind to his/her idols, his/her unnecessary sacrifices, and most importantly, to God.

It would be a daring but positive decision for academic institutions to incorporate the teaching of Caspi's approach as a model of pastoral counseling. In the United States, such programs are on the rise. In an AAPC commissioned study it was found that of people seeking counseling for a serious problem, more said they would prefer to see a religious counselor (29 percent) than a psychiatrist (27), psychologist (17) or family doctor (13) (Buckholtz, 2005). Members of the therapy mainstream appear to be taking notice: one of the American Psychological Association's best-selling books is "Integrating Spirituality into Treatment: Resources for Practitioners," published in 1999 (Buckholtz, 2005).

The integration of this approach into Israeli academia could create a small yet important contribution for the possibility of Jewish renewal in the deepest sense. Still, many difficulties are on the way. Pastoral counseling is legitimate in the United States, but virtually unknown in Israel. Health care professionals in Israel, who have not experienced the program personally, may be threatened by a model that bravely questions myths and assumptions that have been fostered for more than a century since the Freudian revolution.

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Notes:

1 It's very important to mention that this is an informal, enrichment, external program, not a classic academic training program (yet).

2 For Barthes, the term "text" means something akin to "cultural artifact," anything that, in the broadest sense of the term, can be "read" as in "interpreted" or "understood."