

Parallel Thinking Part 34: Judaism and Psychology

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Psychology is the branch of science which investigates the mind and human behaviour. While ancient civilisations across the world developed psychological theories, it was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that

academic psychology took off. At the same time, psychologists realised that an understanding of the human psyche could help develop psychological therapies to treat disorders of the mind.

Jewish philosophers have also sought to understand the interaction between the mind and human behaviour. In Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew, the word *lev* (לב) is often translated as 'heart', as it is used in modern Hebrew. In fact, it is more accurately understood to refer to the mind. In the Shema (green siddur, p. 68) we assert that we should love God *bechol levav'cha* (בכל לבבך – Devarim 6:5), a plural usage, literally meaning 'with all our hearts'. The Talmudic sages understood this to mean 'with each of our inclinations' i.e. both good and bad (Berachot 54a).

These two inclinations are part of the psyche's apparatus used in making decisions and moderating emotions. The 11th century Spanish Rabbi, Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda explains in his *magnum opus*, *Chovot HaLevavot* ('Duties of the Mind') that: "Man is made up of diverse entities and natures which are conflicting and mutually antagonistic". Our emotional drives often conflict with our moral or spiritual convictions. Our soul is always yearning for Godliness whereas our body desires physical gratification.

In addition, each of our character traits weave together to make up the tapestry of our personalities. This determines how we respond to external emotional stimuli. Consequently, the virtue of personal character refinement is viewed as a fundamental part of Jewish practice. In works such as *Mishlei* (Book of Proverbs) and *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), we see examples of what

American psychologist Daniel Goleman calls 'Emotional Intelligence' – being in control of one's emotions and inclinations.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter (d. 1883) and his followers aimed to bring character refinement into the foreground of Jewish practice through the *Mussar* (discipline) movement. The Hebrew for 'character traits' is *middot*. Literally that word means 'measurements', because human character traits are neither good nor bad; it is how a particular trait is expressed which is crucial. The virtue of courage expresses a balance between recklessness and cowardice. Self-respect expresses a balance between narcissism and self-deprecation. Each trait has something valuable to offer, provided it is expressed in a balanced way.

The same is true for emotions. American Psychotherapist Richard Schwartz developed a system of psychotherapy that recognises each emotional part as playing an important role. One can only be in control when each emotion plays its part in a measured and composed way. The most refined individuals ensure their core 'self' is in control of their emotions, which in turn helps them to moderate their behaviour in the face of external emotional threats.

Some Jewish psychotherapists identify this 'self' as the *neshamah*, the core soul of a human being. By allowing it to keep our emotions in check, our behaviour can be elevated to supernatural levels, so that in the face of emotional needs, desires and external stimuli, our responses can be refined and virtuous.

