

## Psychological Wisdom, Insights and Interventions of the Sages

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The issue of what causes behavior change in people has been debated for decades. The psychoanalytically oriented practitioners and theoreticians insist that insight is a prerequisite to real change and that change without insight is an illusion. On the other hand, the non-dynamic cognitive-behavioral and strategic therapists argue that enduring behavior and attitude changes are made more likely by first getting a person to engage in new behavior. Insight, in their view, is frequently a by-product, rather than a cause of change.

“Many people who are depressed believe that they “just need to become motivated” but the very symptoms often block such motivation. Therefore, if the person waits to become motivated they wait in vain. Ironically, engaging in an activity even when you feel unmotivated to do so can lead to feeling motivated. We call this working from the outside-in.”<sup>1</sup>

The latter view seems to be consistent with that of the author of *Sefer Ha'Hinukh*, who in explicating the 613 Commandments makes the point many times that “one’s heart is influenced by one’s actions.”

Similar views are found in the Talmud. “Rabbi Judah said, ‘Man should always occupy himself with learning Torah and its Commandments, even for ulterior motives, for eventually he will do it for idealistic reasons’.”<sup>2</sup>

In his commentary to the *Ethics of the Fathers* Maimonides<sup>3</sup> recommends that a person who wishes to dispense a large sum of money for charity should dispense it in small amounts rather than in one large sum, in order that the trait of generosity become instilled in him or her.

(Likewise, Milgram points out in his classic study on obedience that prohibited and evil behavior, when repeated, tends to become the norm. “Once the individual has begun to do evil, he continues doing evil, rather than say to himself, ‘Everything I have done to this point is bad and now I acknowledge it by breaking it off’.”<sup>4</sup>

The Talmud says, “If a person transgresses a prohibition and repeats it, it becomes to him as if it was permissible.”<sup>5</sup>

The concepts of cognitive transformation and cognitive dissonance were also used by the rabbis in understanding and modifying human behavior. Ibn Ezra, in discussing the Tenth Commandment, “Thou shalt not covet...your neighbor’s wife” states:

Many people will be puzzled by this command. Is it conceivable that there should exist a man who does not, at some time or another, covet a beautiful object? Let me now give you a parable. A country yokel in his right senses will not covet a beautiful princess, since he knows it is impossible to possess her, just the same as he will not seriously desire to have wings like a bird. For this reason the thinking person will neither desire nor covet. Since he knows that the Almighty has forbidden him his neighbor's wife, such a course of action will be even further from his mind than from that of the country yokel in regard to the princess.<sup>6</sup>

By viewing his neighbor's wife as even more inaccessible than a princess (cognitive transformation) man can control his desires and train himself not to covet.

In the Tractate Avodah Zara, 7, it is recorded that when Rabbi Akiva saw the beautiful wife of the wicked Tornosrophus, he spat, laughed and cried. The Talmud explains that the reason that Rabbi Akiva spat was that he was repulsed by the thought that she came from a putrid drop of semen. By focusing on this thought, Rabbi Akiva was able to negate, nullify and counter his illicit and unacceptable feelings thoughts and impulses.

In Avot of Rabbi Natan, chapter 16, it is related that one night, the governmental authorities sent two women to seduce Rabbi Akiva, and he said that he thought of the detestable things that they ate in order to distance himself from them. By focusing on the above-mentioned negative thoughts and images, Rabbi Akiva was able to negate, nullify and counter any illicit and unacceptable feelings, thoughts and impulses.

Cognitive dissonance is a state in which a discrepancy exists between perception and expectation or precepts and concepts.<sup>8</sup> This situation motivates cognitive processes and defense mechanisms. There exists a strong human drive to reduce dissonance and resolve internal conflict by changing one's view or behavior to conform with one's statements and actions.

Examples of cognitive dissonance are found in the rabbinic literature. In Genesis Rabba<sup>9</sup> Joseph's behavior toward his brothers is discussed:

Simon incited his brothers against Joseph and also threw him in a pit. Since Joseph wanted to uproot the hatred and resentment he felt toward Simon, he [Joseph] catered to all his [Simon's] physical needs by providing him with food and drink, and he bathed and applied ointment to his body.

The rabbis comment that "An action retrains behavior and thought. A thought does not retrain behavior or thought."<sup>10</sup> If one really wants

to uproot an evil thought or feeling toward another, he has to do a benevolent act.

The Talmud sages ruled that if one is presented with a situation in which at the same moment a friend's animal is lying under its burden and an enemy needs help in loading his animal, one is obligated to first aid the latter, in order to subjugate the evil impulse.<sup>11</sup> Removing hatred from one's heart is a greater deed than relieving the suffering of an animal. By creating cognitive dissonance between negative feeling (hatred) and positive action (providing service) one is forced to change one's feelings to conform to one's behavior.

Another example of the above is the story about Rabbi Israel Lipkin (Salanter), founder and spiritual father of the "Musal" movement, who while riding in a train, was treated in a disrespectful and abusive manner by a fellow passenger. Upon learning later on that the object of his abuse was the revered Rabbi Lipkin, the young man apologized profusely and asked the rabbi for his forgiveness. Rabbi Lipkin informed him that he forgave him immediately and then proceeded to help him in various ways. When asked by his bewildered disciples why he displayed such kindness to a person who previously insulted and abused him, the rabbi explained that he wasn't sure that he totally forgave the young man, and by helping him, he was able to rid any remnants of anger and resentment towards him.

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Manipulation for therapeutic and altruistic motives has been sanctioned by leading Jewish religious leaders, although it was condemned when used for selfish interests because the values of integrity and honesty are paramount.

(An example of the latter is found in Tractate Yevamot (63a): The wife of Rav (one of the outstanding scholars in the Talmudic era) was in the habit of irritating him. When he requested from his wife to cook for him lentils, he received chick-peas and when he requested chick-peas, he would receive lentils. When his son Chiyah grew up, he reversed his father's requests to his mother. Rav said to his son: 'Your mother has improved'. His son said: 'I reversed the requests to her'. His father said to him. 'This is what people say, that your son teaches you wisdom. Even so, don't do this, because it is written in Jeremiah, 'Their tongues will teach deceitful things .)

Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century biblical commentator) in his commentary on *Ethics of the Fathers* (1:2) records the strategic-manipulative interventions of Aaron the High Priest, who pursued peace and infused love between

disputants and between quarrelling spouses, and who antedated Haley and Erickson, two of the most prominent strategic therapists, by 3300 years.

“One man became angry with his wife and chased her out of the house and swore that he would permit her to return only if she spat in the face of the High Priest. When Aaron became aware of this, he summoned the woman and told her that he had an eye infection which could only be cured if she spat at it. After considerable pleading, the woman acceded to Aaron’s request. Afterwards, Aaron summoned the husband and related to him what his wife had done. As a result of this, the couple reconciled.”

“When two men quarreled, Aaron would go to one of the disputants and inform him that he had just returned from the disputant’s friend and found him terribly upset and regretful of the pain that he had caused his fellow. Aaron would not leave the disputant until all jealousy and hatred had been removed from his heart. Afterwards, he would go to the other injured party and repeat the same thing to him. When the men met, they would fall on each other’s shoulders and tearfully reconcile.”

The most well known and psychologically sophisticated manipulative intervention by a Jewish religious leader recorded in the Scriptures, is described in Kings-1 (3, 15-28), regarding King Solomon’s judgment in the dispute between two women contesting the maternity of the live child.

Several examples are recorded in the Talmud of manipulative behavior by prominent religious figures whose intentions were to help fellow Jews. It is related in Tractate Nedarim (50a) that the Prophet Elijah appeared at Rabbi Akiva’s dwelling (a barn where he and his wife slept on straw) as a pauper and requested some straw for his wife who had recently given birth to lie down on. Rabbi Nissim explains that Elijah did this in order to console the couple and show them there were people poorer than themselves.

In Tractate Yevamot (11b) it is recorded that the Sages advised a woman to “playact” (to cry, tear her clothing, and dishevel her hair) when she appeared before Rabbi Judah in order to convince him that her husband had died, so that he would permit her to remarry.

In Tractate Arachin (23a), it is related that Moses the son of Etsri was the guarantor for the marriage contract of his daughter-in-law. His son, Rabbi Huna, was a scholar with little financial resources. Abaye said: “Is there no one to advise Rabbi Huna to divorce his wife and since he is without means, his wife will collect the money from his father and afterwards Rabbi Huna will remarry her. This way he will be able

to support her and himself.” The Talmud explains that this kind of conspiracy is permissible when it is done for the benefit of a son who is a scholar.

Jewish religious leaders, moralists, and commentators have always been acute observers of humanity. An analysis of their recommended techniques for interpersonal behavior, self-control, and behavior change may well be a practical contribution to contemporary psychology and psychotherapy.<sup>12</sup>

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1. Chaim Karlinsky (Karlinsky, C. *The First of the Brisk Dynasty*, Jerusalem Institute, 1984. In Hebrew) records an incident that took place in Warsaw in 1877. Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, an outstanding Talmud scholar, religious personality, and leader was overcome by a deep depression upon the incarceration of his highly revered and beloved mentor, Rabbi Joshua Leib Diskin, on false charges by the anti-Semitic authorities. On the Sabbath Rabbi Soloveitchik ate only the minimal amount of food necessary to fulfill the requirements of Jewish law. He isolated himself in his room and refused to receive any visitors, not even his closest students and colleagues. He discontinued going to the synagogue and teaching. A specialist who was called in to treat him recommended total rest, but added that if by chance the rabbi's spirit could be suddenly stimulated, healing would take place in a matter of minutes.

Attempts by his family, friends, students, and colleagues to pull him out of his depression failed. Even the efforts of the renowned scholar and hasidic leader, the Master of Gur, failed to lift his colleague's depression through encouragement, support, and intellectual stimulation. One day, upon hearing about Rabbi Soloveitchik's deteriorating mental and physical condition, Rabbi Meir Simha Ha'Kohen, a brilliant scholar and student of Rabbi Soloveitchik, hurried to visit his teacher. Rabbi Meir attempted unsuccessfully to engage his rabbi in a talmudic discussion, as the latter was totally engulfed by worry for his beloved colleague. At one point, Rabbi Meir quoted some of the Torah novella that he had heard from Rabbi Diskin when he had visited him in jail some months previously. As Rabbi Meir discerned some reaction from his teacher, he began to challenge and criticize Rabbi Diskin's new insights and interpretations on certain talmudic topics and vigorously disputed the conclusions. Upon hearing criticism of his beloved teacher, Rabbi Soloveitchik began to defend him by quoting texts and rabbinical authorities and explaining and analyzing his teacher's Torah. Instead of remitting, Rabbi Meir continued to challenge Rabbi Diskin's Torah, which prompted Rabbi Soloveitchik to raise his voice and marshal all his

brilliance, analytic skills, and energy to refute his student's arguments and prove that his mentor was correct. Rabbi Meir soon began to raise other talmudic topics to which Rabbi Soloveitchik also responded in an increasingly intense manner.

After concluding their talmudic deliberations, Rabbi Soloveitchik accompanied his visitor to the synagogue, where he had not gone for a long time. Shortly afterward, Rabbi Soloveitchik resumed his teaching and regular activities as the spiritual leader of his community.

2. A distraught couple appeared before Rabbi Mordechai Lebton, the Chief Rabbi and head of the rabbinical court in Syria in the nineteenth century. Though the couple had been happily married for many years, during the last year the husband had become depressed, angry, and impatient with his wife because she was barren and therefore decided to divorce her. The rabbi unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the husband to reconsider his decision since his wife was a fine meritorious person.

The rabbi, an intelligent and perceptive person who was able to penetrate the inner recesses of people and discern their dynamics and weaknesses, decided on a plan of action to cause the husband to revive his affection and appreciation of his wife. He instructed the couple to return the following day for the purpose of arranging the divorce procedures.

The next day, as the rabbi was preparing to divorce the couple, his student (upon pre-arranged instructions) barged in and whispered into the rabbi's ear. The rabbi unexpectedly began scolding and yelling at his student to the astonishment of the estranged couple. When queried about his unusual behavior, the rabbi explained that his student had crossed the line of propriety. "My student had the audacity to ask me to hasten the divorce proceedings so that he could propose marriage to this wonderful woman." Upon hearing this, the shocked husband informed the rabbi that he decided to return to his wife and asked the rabbi for his blessing. The following year, a son was born to the happy couple.

3. Rabbi Ezekiel Landau, (18<sup>th</sup> century prominent rabbinic scholar and author) did not believe in amulets or in other supernatural remedies. Once he was consulted regarding an amulet. A distinguished woman was seized by a spirit of insanity. She felt that her condition was critical, and that she could be healed only with an amulet prepared by him. Rabbi Ezekiel took a blank piece of parchment, wrapped it in a small pouch, sealed it with his personal signet, and said: "This amulet should be worn around the neck of the woman for thirty days. After thirty

days, open the amulet. If the writing disappeared and the parchment is blank, it is a sign that the woman is healed. And so they did. After thirty days they opened the amulet and found the parchment blank with no sign of any script. The woman entirely recuperated from her illness.

4. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter wrote (Choveras Mussar, 10, 1926), “Do not spend a lot of time trying to push away negative thoughts. Human nature is that the more you push them away, the more they come back”.

5. A single 25 year old yeshiva student went to Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, the son of Rabbi Yisrael Kanievsky and a prominent haredi decisor who receives thousands of visits every year from Jews seeking religious advice and blessings, in order to receive a blessing from him because of his difficulty of getting up on time in the morning for prayer. The rabbi refused his request and told him to ask his mother to pour cold water on his ear when he refused to get out of his bed in the morning.

### References

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5. Talmud Yoma, 86b.
6. Ibn Ezra, on Exodus, 20:14.
7. Talmud Avodah Zara, 20a.
8. L Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson & Co., 1957).
9. Genesis Raba, 91:8.
10. Talmud Kiddushin, 59b.
11. Talmud Bava Metsia, 32b.
12. S Schimmel, “Free-will, Guilt and Self-control in Rabbinic Judaism” in: *Judaism and Contemporary Psychology* 26, no. 4 (1977): 418-29.