

## The Bible & Spirituality in Psychiatry

A few years ago, one of our colleagues, **Dan Myers MD**, wrote a book called **A Child Psychiatrist Discovers the Bible**. He was invited to discuss his book at one of our NTSP meetings. He noted that the *Old Testament* was a treasure trove of information on "how to live your life" while he thought the New Testament was designed to help you attain heaven. As a secular Jew with little knowledge about the Bible, I was intrigued. What had I been missing that could inform my life and my understanding of human beings? Since I espouse the bio-psycho-social model of psychiatric care, I thought that I had better learn more about this ancient text, particularly since there are numerous articles that document that religious beliefs, practices, and experiences are important in most patients' lives. At the very least I thought I should understand how spiritual beliefs can affect my patients.

The Saturday morning Torah class at Temple Emanu-El has been an ongoing class of many years that pulls in people of various stripes. The lawyer, the business person, the accountant, the retired biochemist, the housewife, the physician all contributes their particular perspective to the bible study class. And I have been pleased to see how right Dan Myers was in his assessment. Each week we review a portion of the Five Books of Moses as well as some of the commentary on this portion from the Talmud, the Mishnah, and thinkers throughout the centuries to the modern day. What a refreshing challenge to think about psychic structure, interpersonal struggles, and social development from a text that has been discussed over many centuries by the great thinkers of the Western World as well as by us common folk.

To summarize my thinking, I have come to understand Judaism as an effort to achieve object constancy in emotional maturity as Margaret Mahler and others describe it. In the Five Books of Moses, both the main protagonists and Yahweh are engaged in vibrant relationship that encompasses all emotions and behavior. Love, compassion, fear, envy, deceit, rage, retaliation, murder, incest, reconciliation, forgiveness, and everything else get played out on both sides of the equation. (What kind of God asks that a child be sacrificed to prove one's devotion to him?) But an essential element in the stories is that the dialogue deepens and both sides develop and grow within the context of their relationship. (Does this sound like interpersonal therapy to you?) And Jewish monotheism dictates that you make the effort to synthesize both the pain and evil in the world with the beauty and good so that you can experience a sense of wholeness and integrity. After all, everything emanates from G-d and one must reconcile the pain with the good.

Much has been written about the cryptic nature of the writing in the Jewish Bible. The stories are often told in ambiguous uncertainty, as with the creation stories; one story in one chapter, another similar but with strikingly different details following in the next chapter. There is a message and there are meta-messages. The words are poems and meditations of tremendous beauty. The family sagas match any current novel for intrigue and excitement.

Interpretations flourish and match the context of the times in which they are written. As with so many books, but specially this one, an individual reads it one way at one age and another way at a later age. And human beings are different and yet still the same, still a creature of biology struggling with their conscious awareness of their mortality and still evolving in their development of morality and society.

If this topic stirs up some thoughts regarding spirituality and psychiatry, please send me your comments and perhaps an article that could be included in our next newsletter at [Madeline.Harford@gmail.com](mailto:Madeline.Harford@gmail.com).

~**Madeline Harford MD** Editor in Chief

## Loose Associations

Imagine that. They keep asking me to write pieces for our newsletter. Apparently all the fan mail, phone calls, emails, and text messages convinced the leadership. I just don't know if my wife and kids will keep up the pace month in, month out...

We had an idea of starting a blog on the website to get discussions going about various topics, to allow the free exchange of information and ideas between (paying) members.