

The Problem of Desire: Psychoanalysis as a Jewish Wisdom Tradition¹

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In Havah Tirosh-Samuelson’s extensive monograph “Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge and Well-being”, she argues that from ancient times onward within Judaism, the achievement of happiness, the eudaemonia so ardently sought by the wisdom and philosophical traditions of antiquity, became inextricably linked to the Torah. The Torah was seen to provide the blueprint, the basis, for a happy and fulfilling life. She writes, “the ancient Israelite Wisdom tradition {whose prime exemplar was the Biblical book of Proverbs} was practical and pragmatic. Based on the observation of nature and human conduct, it was concerned with ordering life so as to maximize success and prosperity. Its teachings enabled the learner to master his environment and cope with the dangers and vicissitudes of life” (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2003, p.58). Self discipline was thus not only a command, but a virtue, with the goal being the individual’s mastery of desires and impulses.

¹ I wish to thank Jonathan Fishburn, Rosh Kehilah Dina Najman, and Dr. Jill Salberg for directing me to some of the sources cited. My deep gratitude to Rabbi Dr. Yehudah Mirsky for his careful reading and comments of an earlier draft. A version of this paper was presented at the Shavuot retreat, Isabella Friedman Center, Falls Village, Conn., June 2008.

Seen in this light, the Ten Commandments came to represent the highest catalogue of virtues (Tirosh-Samuelson,p. 94). By following these commandments, wrote the Jewish philosopher Philo (15 BCE-50CE) words, one “ought to be free from all unreasonable passions”(as quoted in Tirosh-Samuelson,p.94).If one followed the commandments, happiness could be achieved via the required, implicit self discipline.

The curbing of desire is, Philo says, specifically addressed in the tenth commandment. Desire was seen as a “ fountain of evil” and Philo proscribed “discarding this passion, detesting it as the most disgraceful thing” (as quoted in Tirosh-Samuelson,p.96).Little, if any regard, was given to the individual’s internal life. The proscription was clear- if you follow the commandments and steer clear of unruly passions and desires, you are assured of a happy, prosperous and peaceful life.

However, with time, the interiority of experience began to be more recognized and valued. What once constituted Wisdom in Judaism changed over time and history. With increased attention paid to the individual’s internal life, it was no longer tenable to believe that the simple proscription of behavioral acts could lead to the curbing of desire and to happiness and fulfillment. We see a steady parallel evolution in both the range of Wisdoms that will lead to

the human being's flourishing, and in the complexity of the human and his or her motivations.

Tirosh-Samuelson describes the evolution of the Wisdom tradition in Judaism: "Wisdom became the pursuit of truth accessible to all human beings by virtue of their being rational. Under that rubric, Jews have acquired knowledge about the world and about God from a variety of sources and traditions....the pursuit of truth transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries" (p.447). By widening the concept of Wisdom –which itself drew from a well of ideas and traditions circulating in the ancient Mediterranean world-to include other areas of study and discourse, truth gleaned from philosophical, scientific and other forms of study, could be used to understand, expand and elaborate Jewish ideas and values, as seen perhaps most vividly in the extraordinary works of Maimonides and other medieval philosophers. .This exchange has, in turn, allowed Judaism to evolve and exhibit "a remarkable elasticity without losing its unique identity" (Tirosh-Samuelson, p.5). I would like to argue that psychoanalysis may, in this historical moment, function as further step in the evolution of the Wisdom tradition and propose to do so by looking at how we might we use psychoanalytic wisdom to understand the Tenth commandment against desire today. More specifically, given psychoanalysis' value of the individual's

subjective life and experience and the interpersonal relationship, how might a modern psychoanalytic approach help in understanding the difficult, ubiquitous problem of coveting?

The Tenth Commandment

“You shall not covet your fellow man’s house, wife, or his male slave, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that your fellow man has” (Exodus, 20,14)

In keeping with the ancient, pre-modern view, the tenth commandment is clear in its proscription- coveting, desiring what another has, is forbidden.

Rene Girard underscores the unique character of this commandment: “in a place of prohibiting an act, it forbids a desire “ (Girard,2001, p.7). Girard argues that the preceding commandments gradually build to the tenth; “if we ceased to desire the goods of our neighbor, we would never commit murder, adultery, theft or false witness” (Girard, 2001,p.12). The desire prohibited by the tenth commandment, said Girard, “must be the desire of *all* (italics mine) human beings” (Girard,2001,p.8). This natural inclination to envy and desire is at the very heart of human social interaction.

This unusual mitzvah, which prohibits a feeling, raised the question for Biblical commentators(more so, incidentally, than other mitzvot involving

feelings , such as honoring one’s parents)-can one, in fact, legislate feelings such as desire, covetousness, and envy? If so, how? The modern Biblical scholar Robert Alter explains that the verb “hamad” in this commandment (‘Lo tahmod’) “ exhibits a range of meaning from ‘yearn for’, ‘desire’, even ‘lust after’ to simply ‘want’. But here.....it clearly suggests wanting to possess something that belongs to someone else and so the King James version rendering of ‘covet’ still seems the best English equivalent” (Alter, 2004, p.432)

The Biblical Commentaries on Desire and Coveting

Many of the Biblical commentaries were clearly troubled by this injunction against desire. Some recognized the need to operationalize such an elusive concept in keeping with the ancient tradition, while others took a more behavioral approach, and a select few focused on the subjective experience in understanding the dynamics of desire.

Ibn Ezra

The major medieval Biblical commentator, Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167), in an uncharacteristically lengthy exposition, provides a sensible, rational, and ultimately somewhat implausible answer to the question—can one legislate desire?

As Ibn Ezra wrote,

“Many men have raised questions about this mitzvah (referring to the prohibition against coveting). How is that a man will not have desire in his heart for something desirous and beautiful that he sees?”. Ibn Ezra goes on to provide a parable:

“A peasant who sees a beautiful princess will not have any sexual desire for her. Because he knows this can never come to be. And don’t think this peasant is one of the delusional, unrealistic types who may wish to grow wings so as to fly. Similarly,(in an unexpected pre-Freudian nod to the incest taboo) a man will never wish to sleep with his mother, even though she is beautiful, because he has become accustomed from his youth that she is forbidden to him” (Ibn Ezra, Exodus, 20, 14).

Ibn Ezra proclaims (perhaps too confidently, says Robert Alter) that a person will never desire anything beyond his reach, because he realizes how utterly implausible his desires and fantasies are. He will condition himself, as he does

with Oedipal desires, to simply do away with such feelings. It is important to note another factor- that of class. Ibn Ezra was living in a world in which social and class distinction were hard and inescapable facts (as reflected in the example he uses).

Ibn Ezra's approach is a hyper-rational one, and one which seems to proscribe behavior, more in keeping with the ancient Jewish, pre-modern view of not giving credence to the interior life (e.g. what might contribute to such strong passionate feelings). Ibn Ezra acknowledged desire's place in the Decalogue and yet, dismissed the power of affects that drive an individual's desire. Bott Spillius, in her discussion of 'varieties of envious experience', notes how envy has the distinction of being recognized in the Ten Commandments and the seven deadly sins, and yet, is often "rapidly dismissed" (Bott Spillius, 1993).

Maimonides

The great 12th century philosopher and legal scholar Maimonides (Rambam) (1135-1204) attempted to operationalize the prohibition in his quintessentially rational manner.

His explanation is found in his great legal code, the Mishneh Torah, in the section dealing with the laws of Theft and Loss.

There he wrote,

“Whoever covets his neighbor’s servant- male or female, house, possessions or anything that he may purchase from his neighbor, and covets them so much so that he coerces his neighbor to allow him to purchase it—even if the neighbor is compensated well- is guilty of “Lo Tachmod” (You Shall Not Covet”).

For the Rambam, one isn’t guilty until one takes action and actually takes possession of the coveted object. The feeling, in essence, is meaningless; it is the action that is critical. Maimonides, then, is separating feeling and desire on the one hand, from action on the other. Jimmy Carter, according to the Rambam, was not guilty of anything because, as he told Playboy magazine in a famous interview, he did not act on the ‘lust in his heart’; he only harbored it. Carter’s merely feeling lust rather than acting on it makes him innocent, according to the Rambam, of breaking this commandment.

In the next section, the Rambam goes further:”Desire may lead to theft because if the owners don’t wish to sell, even at a great price, it may lead him to steal the object. And if the owners attempt to prevent the theft, it may lead the one who covets to murder the owners to gain possession of the desired object” (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Theft and Loss, 1, 9-11).

Ultimately, the transgression is not due to the feeling, but to the actions set in motion by the desire.(2)

(2) The Rambam's emphasis on the act, rather than the desire, introduces intriguing questions such as whether Judaism is based on a behavioral or depth psychology as well as the role of kavannah (intent) (Aron, personal communication). Space does not permit the elaboration of these questions.

Benno Jacob

Maimonides' approach in which he is seemingly unconcerned with the person's internal, psychological world, is in stark contrast to the 20th century German commentator Benno Jacob (1862-1945). Jacob, a 20th century scholar, an interesting mix of traditionalist and modern who engaged in dialogue with the intellectual currents of his time, wrote during a historical period, when, unlike, Maimonides, the inner life of the individual was much more accepted as a force to be reckoned with.

"It is totally wrong to state that the Hebrew Bible and its God were not concerned with inner motivation and only judges the resulting action."

(Jacob, 1992, p. 575)

Jacob, in contrast to the Rambam, is more psychological, focused more on the inner life of the individual, in his interpretation of the tenth commandment. For Jacob, the inner life of the individual is integral to understanding this mitzvah.

However, a notable exception to the lack of acknowledgement of the inner world can be found in the writings of Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi (1210-1263), a Spanish Talmudist, moralist and exegete of the 13th century.

Rabbeinu Yonah

Jacob's concern with the inner life finds early echoes in the work of this 12th century Spanish commentator, Rabbeinu Yonah. In his discussion of the tenth commandment, he wrote:

“...even desire that does not come to action falls in this category (emphasizing the inner life). Rabbeinu Yonah takes issue with the Ibn Ezra's pragmatic, common sensible approach.

He then wrote:

And whoever covets and hates the individual who appears to have good bestowed upon him ,thinks that it as if this goodness belonging to the other was stolen from him. And for the one who covets, all his days are filled with pain, as if the fire of his desire burns in his heart every day and he knows no peace.” (Rabbeinu Yonah, Exodus, 20, 14).

This is an extraordinary psychological observation. Whoever covets a desired object and comes to believe that the object rightfully belongs to him, believes

that the object was in fact, stolen from him and he is entitled to its rightful return. The projection of his desire allows him to assume rights over it, as it were, and this tie to the object consumes him, like ‘a fire burning in his heart’ and consumes his every waking moment. He becomes obsessed with the perverse morality (it was stolen *from* him) and his desire represents his inability to relinquish ties to an object belonging to someone else.

Indeed, in this linkage of thwarted desire with hatred for the one possessing the object of our desire, Rabbeinu Yonah foreshadows (by some seven centuries!!) Melanie Klein. Her ideas offer a psychoanalytic point of entry into the Jewish Wisdom tradition as regards the temptations and pitfalls of envy and desire.

“The infant’s feeling seems to be that when the breast deprives him, it becomes bad because it keeps all the milk, love and care associated with the good breast all to itself” (Klein,1957, p.183)

In a similar vein to Rabbeinu Yonah’s thinking, Bott Spillius, a contemporary Kleinian, further developed nuances of envious experience. She describes the person whose envy is “impenitent”; this person “does not suffer from conscious guilt and a sense of responsibility for his envy; he thinks it is the

envied person's fault that he, the envier, feels so wretched" (Bott Spillius, 1993, p.1203).

Melanie Klein on Envy

The universal struggle against desiring, coveting, and envying what is not ours is a central feature of the work of Melanie Klein (1882-1960). The underlying premise for Klein is that all experience is related to the relationship with the object. Klein believed that the infant is born with a rudimentary ego, which essentially gets built up from birth through the process of relating to the object. Through interaction with a (good) object, the infant can rid itself of bad experiences, experiences that are characterized by pain and discomfort. Initially, for the infant, these experiences are bodily based. Because Klein believed in the ubiquitousness of unconscious phantasy, the way the infant rids itself of these experiences is directly related to corporeal experience. Thus, for example, if the infant is hungry, the infant feels as if a 'bad' object has inflicted this painful hungry state on(into) the infant. By crying, the infant's unconscious phantasy is such that the bad feelings can be expelled and projected into the object via its tears and screams , who is there to receive it. Hopefully, the object responds by ministering to the infant, feeding it, changing the baby if necessary and in this way, demonstrating a good object response to the infant's distress. The infant then introjects the resultant

good feeling and in this way, acquires a positive, good object. Through accrual of these positive experiences, the infant gradually develops a good internal object that allows the baby to withstand times of pain and distress.

The contemporary Kleinian Robert Caper has explained good internal objects as “our states of mind”. “For example, ‘containing a good internal object’ is a vivid way of expressing what we would otherwise call feeling love. We do not feel love *for* our good internal object, or because we *contain* a good internal object ; the feeling of ‘having a good internal object *is* our feeling of love” (Caper, 1999, p. 56).

Such love can and is undermined by hatred and envy, the kind associated with coveting and desiring what is not ours. Our good internal object, our good, loving feelings and states of mind allow us to weather the inevitable times of despair, hate and envy we all experience.

Klein underscored the universal quality of envy. The infant requires milk/food to survive and via unconscious phantasy, covets the breast, which appears to have an inexhaustible supply of the very stuff the infant needs to exist.

“ My work has taught me that the first object to be envied is the breast, for the infant feels that it possesses everything he desires and that it has an

unlimited flow of milk and love which the breast keeps for its own gratification. This feeling adds to his sense of grievance and hate.”

(Klein, 1957, p. 183).

This grievance leads the infant first to covet the desired object as a possession.

When the infant realizes he cannot possess the object, he attacks it (in unconscious phantasy) in an effort to spoil and destroy it. Rather than tolerate the existence of such a powerful object beyond its control, the infant phantasizes attacking and spoiling the breast via assaultive projective attacks.

If I can't have it, no one can.

The person overwhelmed by envy can never be satisfied, says Klein (much like Rabbeinu Yonah's description of knowing “no peace”), because his envy stems from within.

Klein goes on to offer her own proscripton for the problem of envy --the building up of a secure , good internal object. With such a good object, one can “ withstand temporary states of envy, hatred and grievance, (states which Klein feels are natural and inevitable), which arise even in children who are loved and well mothered” (Klein, 1957, p.187).

The universality and acceptance of such desire also seem to be expressed in a story in the Babylonian Talmud Chagigah, 16a:

Rabbi El'ah the Elder said, “If a man sees that his desires overwhelm him, he should travel to a place where no one recognizes him, don black clothing and enwrap himself in these clothes, and do what his heart desires so as to not profane the name of God in public [in front of those who know him]”.

The author of this Talmudic passage (which may be the source for the title of Nathan Englander’s short story “For the Relief of Unbearable Urges”) seems to understand that desire and coveting cannot be controlled through simply forbidding them, but rather must be dealt with. In Englander’s story, a young Talmudic scholar is instructed by his rebbe to travel to another town to relieve his intense sexual urges and visit a prostitute.

Rabbi El'ah appears to be sympathetic to one whose desires are overwhelming. He, much like Klein, acknowledges the universality of dark feelings and desires, desires that must be reckoned with and cannot simply be behaviorally conditioned away (in the style of the Ibn Ezra). The steps outlined by Rabbi El'ah represent various deterrents , as Rashi (1040-1105), whose range and depth of commentaries are breathtaking, pointed out. Rashi explains that by suggesting travel, purchasing unfamiliar clothing, donning these clothes , enveloping himself in them, the person overwhelmed by desire will rouse himself and not act on his feelings and desires. However, ultimately, Rabbi El'ah, although sympathetic to the idea that desires may rule the

human heart, in keeping with wisdom of his time proscribes a behavioral approach (travel, donning unfamiliar clothing, etc.)

The fact that one of the Ten Commandments is directed against the problem of coveting and envy indicates that such dark feelings and desires were clearly felt to be universal *at that point in history*. The wisdom then was for the individual to exercise self control and simply curb these ‘disgraceful’ feelings. Klein’s descriptions underscore the ubiquity of these feelings *today*. However, what Klein underscores is the interpersonal matrix in which envy and desire occur. How, then ,may we use a modern psychoanalytic approach to proscribe an approach to the problem of desire?

A psychoanalytic approach to the problem of desire and envy

These psychoanalytic-wisdom on the proscription of envy shift the emphasis from the individual trapped in his envy and desire: Man alone cannot conquer covetousness and envy, rather it is via relationship.

‘The Diary of Anne Frank’ is an extraordinary document . Anne Frank’s perceptiveness, empathy and humor—especially remarkable at a time of horror-- all underscore what promise her life might have held.

In the diary, she wrote,

“It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too. I can feel the suffering of the millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will come all right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again” (Diary of Anne Frank, 1952, p.237)

How is that, during World War II, at a time of intense hatred, envy, and covetousness, Anne Frank was able to write this passage and to have such conviction of feeling? I would like to suggest that it was the presence of a good internal object (“yet if I look up into the heavens”) that allowed her to have the faith she did. As Klein wrote, “Hope and trust in the existence of goodness, as can be observed in every life, helps people through great adversity, and effectively counteracts persecution” (Klein,1957, p.194). Those with strong capacities for love and gratitude due to a deep-rooted relationship to a good internal object can withstand such destructive attacks. This is a result of a positive relationship with an other, a loving relationship that allows for the

accrual of positive experiences, and the development of the good internal object. Anne Frank clearly benefited from a relationship with a good internal object. This relationship was one in which her mind was met with another's, one who cared for and about her, thought about her with love, and allowed her to develop the unusual reflectiveness and empathy evident in the Diary. Such a nourishing relationship provided Anne Frank with a foundation that allowed this remarkable young woman to demonstrate and express hope and optimism at a time when the external world was filled with hateful aggression and destructive covetousness.(1)

(1)From her writing, it is clear that Anne Frank struggled with other issues, such as conflict, competitiveness and adolescent sexuality and aggression. For purposes of this essay, I am focusing on her ability to build up a good internal object which allowed her to withstand the wartime experience, in part due to her positive relationship with her father (cf. Dalsimer, 1986). In addition, adolescents' use of diaries and journals often allows them to forge a relationship with an other, who 'listens' to their innermost thoughts and feelings.

I believe we can find traces of such relationships in the Talmud. In the Babylonian Talmud, Brachot, 3a-b, the Talmud discusses three precautionary reasons why one should not enter an abandoned, dilapidated building alone. The first reason is that there may be undesirable people loitering there. The second reason is that the building may collapse and the person may be injured or killed. The third reason is due to the presence of

“mazikkim” (demonic spirits). In the course of the discussion, the Talmud says that if the person is accompanied, we don’t worry about the demonic spirits because they will not make their presence known if there are two people present, but will appear only if the person is alone.

I would like to suggest that these ‘mazzikim’ (alternatively called ‘sheddim’) represent projections of an internal world. These mazzikim are mentioned throughout the Talmud and I believe represent rabbinic efforts to make sense of internal, psychological experience by establishing external (projected) forces. These projections, which are demonic, evil, aggressive, hateful, not unlike the infant’s first experience of pain, are felt to be inflicted (in unconscious phantasy) by the aggressive other. With the introjection of the other, an other who ministers to the infant and contains the projections, these dissipate. The caregiver who meets and contains the infant’s projections is not perfect, but a “good enough mother” (Winnicott, p.145, 1960). (In fact, Likierman cautions against painting a picture of an idealized mother, “a being who is mentally ‘sanitized’ of all primitive impulses” (Likierman, p. 31,1988). This caregiver who helps the child build a good internal object contains the child’s phantasied destructive projections and metabolizes them (Bion, 1962), making sense of them and re-presenting (and representing) them to the baby in understandable , usable form. In this way, the child gradually

builds up an internal world populated by good, responsive caregivers and a good self worthy of such care.

This process is not unlike Fonagy et al (2002)’s ideas regarding mentalization. In order for the child’s mind to grow and develop, the child requires another mind to think about the child with love. This is what Winnicott referred to as “the mother’s [mirror] role of giving back to the baby the baby’s own self” (Winnicott, 1971, p.118).

It is via relationship-- the interpersonal interaction-- that hatred, aggression, envy, covetousness and the darker feelings and desires can be made sense of.

We need no longer be scared of the ‘mazzikim’ dwelling in the shadows if there is a benevolent other there with us along for the journey.

Conclusion

What, then, might be a modern proscription for the individual who covets?

The ancient categorical-and seemingly behavioral- prohibition of desire, coveting, and envy does not seem to make sense , given our modern

sensibilities .What we can do is to proscribe a good internal object

relationship for the individual plagued by destructive envy, a relationship in

which projected hateful, envious, destructive experiences are contained, made

sense of, and transformed, ultimately being returned to the individual in

more palatable form. Ultimately, this allows the person to withstand the temporary bouts of envy and hatred, and recover and regain his equilibrium(temporarily lost in these dark moments). Intense coveting can be mitigated and managed with the help of a good internal object.

We cannot wish away envy and covetous desire-it is there in all of us, throughout our lives. But, if we value relationship and prize interaction with an other, we can (hopefully, optimally) build an internal world populated with good objects that allow us to withstand the hatred, envy and aggression first identified in the tenth commandment, that each and everyone of us, as human beings, are prone to.

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