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The mystical roots of psychoanalytic theory

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Abstract *This paper examines the similarities and differences between ideas deriving from Rabbinic and mystical Judaism and psychoanalytic concepts. It will present material both from the Talmud and the Kabbalah (particularly the Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalistic writings). While not arguing necessarily for any historical continuity it explores how Jewish ideas provide a deep structure underlying psychoanalytic thought. Kabbalah and psychanalysis share an emphasis on restitution. For Kabbalists it is the soul which is reconstituted and for psychoanalysts the self. Both aim to explore the conscious and unconscious aspects of existence, the obvious and the esoteric. The similarities between Freud and Klein's ideas and Kabbalistic themes are discussed.*

Key words: Cultural psychiatry, Jewish culture , history of psychiatry

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INTRODUCTION Is psychoanalysis a 'Jewish science'? Did Jewish themes influence the development of psychoanalytic theory? These issues have raised much debate among both psychoanalysts and medical historians (Ostow, 1982; Ellemberger, 1970; Bettelheim, 1983; Bakan, 1965; Berke, 1996). The relation between Judaism and psychoanalysis has been discussed by a number of authors who draw parallels between ideas deriving from the Talmud and Jewish mystical texts and the theories of psychoanalysis. Bettelheim (1983) argues for the centrality of the soul in Freud's thinking. According to him it is erroneous or inadequate translations of Freud's writings along with the need for scientific respectability which have distorted an understanding of Freud's intentions such that the notion of the soul has become secularised in psychoanalysis. Cooper (1996) points out the relation between the Rabbinic concepts of *Yetzer Tov* (good inclination) and *Yetzer hara* (bad inclination) to the psychoanalytic idea of the ego and id. Others have discussed the similarities between the Rebbe-Hasid relationship and the psychoanalyst client relationship (Woocher, 1978; Safier 1978). Although all of these topics great interest they will not be discussed further. Here we specifically examine the ways in which Freud and Klein were influenced by Jewish mystical concepts.

Freud and Klein: their Jewish roots

Born in Moravia in 1856 Freud spent most of his life in Vienna. Both his parents derived from Galicia, an area which was highly influenced by Hasidism. Freud did knowledge that his father Jakob came from a Hasidic environment and he himself was familiar with mystical texts. We know that he had great interest in the work of Rabbi Chiam Vital, the renowned sixteenth Kabbalist and principle disciple of Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari) and had many books on Judaica and Kabbalah in his library. Although he rejected the ritualistic aspects of Judaism vigorously, possibly on account of his discomfort with Jewish marginality, for Freud his interest in Judaism

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lay in both a common identity and a readiness to stand up to a common enemy, in this particular case anti-Semitism. Nevertheless he still saw Judaism as especially congenial to psychoanalysis (Ostow, 1982).

Melanie Klein was born in Vienna in 1882 and she is considered by many to be Freud's foremost follower. Her father came from an orthodox Jewish family and her mother was the daughter of a Rabbi. Although she herself was not observant or religious in adult life, she did have a Jewish upbringing and maintained a particular fondness for *Yon Kippur* (the day of atonement).

Freud's interest in mythology

Freud implied in his writings that although he was familiar with classical Greece and Rome, he knew almost nothing about Jewish history. This however is unlikely to have been the case. Ostow (1982) has suggested that Freud had a good knowledge of Judaism and its mythology and its history, much of which he obtained in his youth. Apart from understanding the individual psyche, he held that the psychoanalytic method could be applied to myths with the aim of elucidating the early history of a group (particularly his work *Moses and Monotheism* relating to his attempt to understand the Jewish people through the Oedipal paradigm) and encouraged his students to investigate the possibility of a psychoanalytic study of mythology. Some of his disciples such as Jung and Theodore Reik made the study of mythology central to their own studies of psychology taking classical myths as clues to a transcendent eternal psychological reality from which each individual psyche derives. Here we argue that Freud was influenced by the Kabbalistic mythical corpus and some of his psychoanalytic ideas may have derived from it.

The kabbalistic myth

The term *Kabbalah* (`tradition' or that which had been received) has been used since the 11th century CE to refer to a diffuse tradition of Jewish mystical thought said to be "hidden" in religious law and which was received from the remote past, perhaps even given to Adam from the angels before the fall. It is said to have first been communicated as secret teaching to a privileged few, but by the early modern period had become a more open pursuit particularly in Hasidism. The most important of the more than three thousand extant texts is the *Zohar*, edited in the late thirteenth century probably by Moses de Leon (died 1305) and which came to be regarded as the "bible of the Kabbalists" and is a lengthy collection of tales, anecdotes, homiletics, and commentaries. The ideas were further elaborated by Isaac Luria (1543-1572) in Palestine in what is known as the Lurianic Kabbalah and which introduced a strong messianic element.

The Zohar explores the inner workings of the divine in its relationship to man. It comprises a number of recurrent themes: the nature of the deity and his manifestations in the universe; the mysteries of the divine names; the soul of man, its source and future destiny; the nature of good and evil; the importance of the written and oral Torah; the expected coming of the Messiah and the future redemption. It speaks of the ultimate ultrahuman order as manifest in man, one which can be directly known through study or ecstatic experience. The experienced phenomenological world can be understood as an imperfect reflection of hidden, 'deeper' or higher principles. Knowledge of these can serve as a practical key to confer insight and sometimes power over mundane everyday events. The Zohar contains a number of medical and demonological themes.

According to the Zohar, the Infinite (*En Sof)* himself without qualities or attributes, made his existence perceptible by projecting ten successive channels of light, the *sefirot* in order to serve as media for his manifestations in the finite. These *sefirot* are understood as the names, agencies,

attributes and qualities of God and are the divine attributes which make up all existence. They are the ten divine structures which bring the world into being through emanation and make up the different levels of reality. They act as intermediaries between the completely spiritual and unknowable creator and the material world. The ten s*efirot* form a unity and should not be thought of as separate entities. They are figured in different patterns but may be divided up into three triads; the first representing the imminent intellectual power of the universe; the second the moral world and the third the physical universe. The tenth *sefira* is the female aspect of the divinity, the *shekinah*. The human individual is understood as a microcosm of the whole universe by which each person reproduces what is above in the celestial worlds. The sefirotic structure of man simultaneously reflects and is reflected onto that of the universe, and the *sefirot* may be represented in various ways as concentric circles, as the tree of being or as the cosmic man, *Adam Kadmon* . The *sefirot* are immanent in bodily experience. As the Zohar states (2.212):

"We were formed after the supernal pattern, each limb corresponding to something in the scheme of wisdom".

Exegesis in psychoanalysis and kabbalah

For a greater understanding of the influence of Kabbalah on psychoanalytic work we must turn to Bakan's (1963) text. *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, a text which is generally ignored by psychoanalysts perhaps because they do not want to be reminded that their origins lie in the spiritual (and mystical) as opposed to a scientific tradition. Although few contemporary analysts would acknowledge that any element of mysticism informs their psychoanalytic practice, this text presents a cogent argument for a major influence of Kabbalah on psychoanalytic thinking.

"…the contributions of Freud are to be understood largely as a contemporary version of, and a contemporary contribution to, the history of Jewish mysticism. Freud consciously, or unconsciously, secularised Jewish mysticism; and psychoanalysis can intelligently be viewed as such a secularisation" (Bakan, 1963; p25).

Judaism has always had a strong hermeneutic tradition with an emphasis on moving beyond the manifest text to excavate the hidden or latent meaning. Biblical exegesis has preoccupied Jewish thinkers, theologians and teachers for centuries before the destruction of the second Temple well into the present. Mysticism and psychoanalysis share similar purposes. Both relate to the acquisition of esoteric knowledge. In the former case the knowledge it is the transcendent. In the latter case it is knowledge of the unconscious. In both cases this knowledge is liberating. It is a common experience of the mystic to feel he is beyond mundane physical constraints. Similarly the neurotic feels a sense of freedom and relief once he or she has worked through neurotic conflicts.

Bakan (1963) argues that Freud's methods in particular 'free association' are similar to those developed by the early Kabbalists, especially the thirteenth century Spanish Kabbalist, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia who strove to '*unseal the soul, to unite the knots which bind it*' hence developing a theory of repression and a way to deal with it six centuries before Freud. Abulafia emphasised the mystical logic of letters, the logic of God's real world which for Freud became the logic of the unconscious elaborated by linguistic processes (Berke, 1996). He described the form of free association which he called "jumping and skipping" which involves according to Scholem (1955; pp*135-36*):

"a very remarkable method of using association as a way of mediation…..every 'jump' opens a new sphere….within this sphere, the mind may freely associate. The "jumping" unites, therefore, elements are free and guided association and is said to ensure quite extraordinary results are far as the "widening of the consciousness" of the initiate concerned. The "jumping" brings to light hidden processes of the mind".

Let us move on to consider the Torah. This involves an almost identical process. The Hebrew word *pilpul* designates an exercise in exegesis dating back to the Talmudic period and continued by *yeshivah* students thereafter. It involves an excavation of the Torah for deeper principles. We read in the Zohar (1984:211):

"thus had the Torah not clothed herself in garments of the this world, the world could not endure it. The stories of the Torah are thus only her outer garments and whoever looks upon those garments as being the Torah itself, woe to that man….observe this. The garments worn by man are the most visible part of him, the sense of people looking at the man do not seem to see more in him than the garments".

There is an interplay between *Nigleh,* the revealed Torah and *Nistar,* the hidden Torah. The Torah is the Jew's word of God. It contains but also conceals his hidden illumination. One can penetrate the outer garments to uncover hidden meanings of the word. In the interpretation of scripture the Zohar employs four methods which are known by the Hebrew word *pardes* made up of their initial letters: *peshat* (literal interpretation), *remez* (allegorical), *derush* (hermeneutic) and *sod* (mystical). As Scholem (1955; p14) states:

"The Torah is to [Jewish mystics] a living organism animated by a secret life which steams and pulsates below the crust of literal meaning; every one of the innumerable strata of the hidden region corresponds to a new and profound meaning of the Torah. The absence of numerals, vowels or punctuation in the written Torah leaves it open to a large number of interpretations and some have argued that there are actually six hundred thousand possible interpretations of the Torah, corresponding to the six hundred thousand holy souls each of whom has a letter in the Torah."

Klein and containment

There are similarities between Kleinian thoughts about containment or holding and the Kabbalaistic idea of *shevirath ha-kelim,* the breaking of the vessels. According the great Kabbalahist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, when God created the world he drew his light into a single point, a process which is referred to as *tzimtsum*. In a vacuum left by the original contraction light continued to pour in. It was necessary to contain this in a vessel. However, the vessel shattered resulting in shards or fragments containing seeds of the original light. The fragments with the embedded light are known as *Klippot* and are responsible for the existence of evil. The whole point of existence is to free the light trapped in the vessels, undo this exile and re-establish God's unity.

What is the relationship between this process and Klein's ideas? For Klein, when a child is born, the unity between the child and his mother is broken. The child cannot contain the primary impulse which Klein recognises as a life impulse and death impulse (Freud's *Eros and Thanatos*). For Klein the child needs to contain these impulses to protect himself from terrible internal tension. To do this he splits or shatters his mind and projects large parts of himself outwards into others. The outer world becomes full of bad persecuting bits and pieces. To deal with the emptiness he may take back or introject many of the bad bits.

The Kabbalistic process of disintegration is repaired by establishing a relationship with God. In the same light for Klein the child can be a functioning container of his own impulses and life forces by re-establishing a close relationship with those who love and care for him. A strong containing function is the requisite for order. In the first few months of life Klein argues that the child realises that the mother he loves and the mother he hates are the same person. This instigates what Klein calls the depressive position, when the child becomes more concerned with preserving another rather than preserving himself and marks the onset of mental and emotional integration. Lutzky (1989) in her paper '*Reparation and Tikkun*', points out that both the Kabbalah and Klein use similar processes and symbols to affect repair. In the first instance reparative energies involve unification/integration and in the second containment/internalisation.

The mystical transference

Are the processes of psychoanalysis and mysticism so very different? In all mystical traditions the aim is to obtain unity with God. Similarly there are times during the analysis where the patient yearns to unify with the parent or the parent's representative, the analyst.

"There are periods, however, in many or most analyses when the patient yearns to be close to , and intimate with, to know and to merge with the parents and the parents' representation, the analyst . Such wishes are normal childhood wishes and they are reactivated in adult mental illness, but also in transference. When an illusion of merging develops, the transference acquires a mystical quality . It creates the impression of reunion with a parental object., the precursor of the image of God." (Ostow, 1982)

This experience has all the characteristics of a mystical experience: it is private, it is extremely gratifying, is associated with an altered perception of reality and is not easily susceptible to communication

CONCLUSIONS The above writings are strongly suggestive of an influence of Jewish mystical ideas on the thinking of both Freud and Klein. We have not been able to examine the influence of mystical ideas on other analysts. Every theory however has its critics. Although Bakan suggests that the discipline of psychoanalysis is a secularisation of Jewish mysticism, this theory has been disputed by Ostow (1982) who sees little merit in this hypothesis. He argues that whatever mystical element contributed to the creation of psychoanalysis cannot be distinguished from the mysticism of many other scientists such as Newton and Einstein who sought to elucidate what they considered to be the ultimate unity of the universe.

For Ostow there is nothing to warrant the mysticism in psychoanalysis more closely with Jewish mysticism than with Christian (the *unio mystica)* or secular mysticism. The challenge remains to further examine the influences of mystical thought on the development of psychoanalysis. Such a task requires an exploration of religious influences both from within and from outside Judaism which might have influenced Freud's ideas.

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