

At the Intersection of Religion, Spirituality, and Clinical Psychology: A Conversation With Two Jewish Psychologists

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This article presents a dialogue between two Jewish psychologists who share their respective personal and professional journeys on how spirituality and religious affiliation impacts their work as clinicians. They address the following questions: How would you identify your cultural background with respect to your religious or spiritual history and identity? How do you manage the competing demands of respecting both individual cultural identity and group cultural identity? How did your early experiences with Judaism influence your professional practice? What were your earliest academic influences on the question of spirituality in psychology? How have religion and spirituality manifested in your clinical practice? What are some of the specific challenges you have encountered along the way? It is the authors' hope that their responses to these questions will provide insights to all clinicians, regardless of one's religious or spiritual identity.

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We are delighted to participate in this special issue of spirituality in clinical practice. We respectively have practiced, published, and presented for decades, and yet rarely have had the opportunity to discuss how our spirituality and identification with Judaism impacts our clinical practice. We suspect this reflects a subtle taboo in our secular field regarding the exploration of these issues. We hope to shatter this taboo by talking openly about how our Judaism has influenced our work as clinicians. We have chosen to present our thoughts in the form of a dialogue, which we hope will provide useful insights to clinicians, regardless of one's religion or spiritual identity.

How Would You Identify Your Cultural Background With Respect to Your Religious or Spiritual History and Identity?

Bob: David and I share a common heritage known as *Rhodesli*—Sephardic Jews whose ancestors identified as Mediterranean Jews from the Island of Rhodes. As such, we represent in our own way a “double minority”—Sephardic Jews in a country (the United States) where most Jews identify as Ashkenazic (of Eastern European ancestry) rather than Sephardic (with roots in the Spanish diaspora) or Mizrahi (with roots in the middle east). Our grandparents and their kin spoke the ancient language of *Ladino* (sometimes referred to as “Judeo-Spanish”). A notable difference between us is that David's surname is identifiably “Jewish”; mine is not. So, I retain the ability to choose whether to be explicit in

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my Jewish identity with clients in ways not available to David. Ironically, we met, not through our Jewish circles, but rather when we were independently hired by a Christian University to serve as core faculty members. Go figure.

David: When I am asked the question, “How do you self-identify?”—in both professional and informal settings—my answer sometimes bewilders the listener. My response, “Jewish,” not infrequently prompts confusion, if not outright dismissal. I can only surmise that what I’m *really* being asked about is either my racial or gender identity. The fact is, being Jewish is a central component of my personal identity (more essential than skin color or gender preference), with manifestations in wide-ranging areas, including music, food, humor, philosophy, and worldview.

But it really is not as simple as all that. Most people equate being “Jewish” with only one (admittedly large) segment of the culture: Ashkenazic. But, as Bob noted above, we are both Sephardic, with our ancestors having descended originally from Spain, and then various areas of the Mediterranean, such as Rhodes, Turkey, and Greece. Contrary to most stereotypical expectations, we grew up hearing virtually no Yiddish (the language of the Ashkenazim); instead, it was Ladino (with some Greek, Turkish, and even Arabic sprinkled in).

None of this is to imply that we are entirely dissimilar from our Ashkenazic brethren and sistren. We all share common holy texts, religious holidays, and cultural rituals ... but with a distinctly different “flavor.”

How Do You Manage the Competing Demands of Respecting Both Individual Cultural Identity and Group Cultural Identity?

David: “If you’ve met one Jewish psychologist, then you’ve met one Jewish psychologist.” Or so goes a

variant of the classic witticism about individuals from virtually every cultural group. It serves as a not-so-subtle reminder that we all need to view each client as a unique being, rather than simply a stereotypical member of a larger group.

On the other hand, it would be an act of willful denial to discount the fact that certain commonalities exist within every cultural group; these are, in fact, the very fabric of group identity. If one has knowledge about shared characteristics within a group, it serves as a reasonable starting point to begin forming hypotheses about other members of the group.

When taken to an extreme, either position is problematic. To see people only as individuals is to ignore culture. But to see them primarily as members of a group leads to stereotyping by minimizing or even ignoring their uniqueness. Put another way, these are two common cognitive errors: allowing differences to obscure similarities, and allowing similarities to obscure differences.

How then can we navigate these waters? A useful model would be to adopt a perspective that accommodates both similarities and differences, which I have discussed in previous publications (Levy, 2010; Shiraev & Levy, *in press*). To take one example, if I discover that a client is Jewish, I am apt to begin with some inferences about this individual. As we get to know each other, I can assess the ways in which our respective cultures both do and do not overlap. This “both/and” approach provides a fuller and more accurate understanding of who the client is. Along these same lines, it is well worth keeping in mind this sociological axiom: On a wide range of variables, differences *within* groups (let us say within the population of Jewish people) is typically greater than differences *between* groups (e.g., the population of Jews as compared to the population of Christians).

Bob: I hope that as I have practiced and studied psychology, I have become more aware of both how important my client’s cultural influences are and how important it is to avoid making assumptions. I find that to be particularly true for my Jewish clients. There is such a profound

range of cultural and religious observances that I always begin from a place of curiosity about their identity, knowing that my preconceptions are likely to be challenged when I make assumptions about my clients' group identity.

Let me provide an example in which I learned from my mistakes. I remember working with a Jewish client in his mid-20s who was describing his experiences of attending Hebrew school. I had never disclosed my Jewish identity to him. My experience of my Hebrew/Jewish education was dominated by rather boring and uninspiring educators, and I made an assumption that his experience of Hebrew school was less than positive. His experience was in fact quite positive, and he was taken aback by my assumption, and not knowing that I am Jewish, accused me of being anti-Semitic. Sensing the potential for a significant rupture in the therapeutic relationship, I quickly decided to disclose my Jewish identity and acknowledged that I had projected on to him my less than positive experiences with my early Jewish education. This in turn led to a productive exploration of how his assumption that I was not Jewish had led him to be very cautious in describing his strong Jewish identity to me. As I reflected afterward on the experience, I became aware that in choosing to not disclose my Jewish identity, I was subtly reinforcing his minority status in the therapy relationship. The experience with this young man was a turning point in my career and led me to understand both the importance of avoiding assumptions and how the disclosure of my Jewishness can assist Jewish clients in disclosing more fully their identity, including their experiences of anti-Semitism.

How Did Your Early Experiences With Judaism Influence Your Professional Practice?

David: I was raised in a relatively traditional Jewish family, and I passed through the customary rites of passage: Hebrew school, Bar Mitzvah, confirmation, and the obligatory Jewish summer camp. But what stayed with me wasn't strict adherence to religiosity per se. Instead, it was the

cultural values of Judaism that I grew to embrace and cherish throughout my life: the importance of education, life-long learning, curiosity, respect for tradition, empathy, belief in free will, and, of course, humor.

I view my clinical as well as teaching style as a hybrid of Socratic and Talmudic. In my interactions, I take an active and direct approach, asking lots of questions, and I thrive in an atmosphere of back-and-forth dialectics. I strive to be open to different points of view, but I am willing to respectfully challenge maladaptive, self-defeating, or simply false beliefs.

Starting at a very young age (I figure around second grade), humor and satire became vital components of my worldview, which can easily be traced back to the Jewish upbringing in which I was immersed. No doubt, when clients or students are Jewish, this typically serves as a natural shorthand with respect to our shared perspective. But this is definitely not culturally exclusionary: Jews and gentiles alike enthusiastically respond to the comedy of Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, Sarah Silverman, Adam Sandler, and going farther back, Mel Brooks, Jackie Mason, and Groucho Marx. These comedians—and countless more—have been influenced by thousands of years of Jewish experience, during which time humor became an indispensable coping strategy for dealing with adversity and tragedy. Although I cannot scientifically operationalize exactly what “Jewish humor” is, as a variant of the old adage goes, “I know it when I hear it.”

Bob: Like David, I participated in the traditional range of religious training, from Hebrew school, Bar Mitzvah, observance of the Jewish holidays, and so forth. Having said that, my cultural identity as a Sephardic Jew has often felt more essential to my being than my religious training. Hearing the ancient language of Ladino spoken among my extended family was a core element of my childhood. Like many young people, I drifted from Judaism as a young man, and then returned to more active participation when I met my wife who comes from a more observant family. Her influence is

largely responsible for the manner in which we raised our children and certainly deepened my identity as a Jewish person.

As this aspect of my identity deepened, my ability to attune to clients' spiritual identity increased. Prior to this, I rarely noticed the spiritual issues my clients brought to therapy. I began to identify these issues more readily and felt more comfortable bringing them to my clients' awareness.

What Were Your Earliest Academic Influences on the Question of Spirituality in Psychology?

Bob: Much of my early training as a psychologist was influenced by traditional psychodynamic notions of remaining a *tabula rasa* with clients so as not to interfere with their projective process. Thus, as an early psychologist, when Jewish clients mentioned their religious or cultural identification, I explored their values and beliefs without sharing mine. Over the course of my career, I have let go of the notion that being a blank slate is most helpful to my clients and have become more forthright in sharing my religious and cultural identity when relevant issues emerge in psychotherapy. Contrary to my early concerns about doing this, I have found that the vast majority of clients appreciate my willingness to share and use my self-disclosure as a stimulus to productively explore their spirituality in psychotherapy.

David: During my graduate schooling, I was exposed to the usual buffet of clinical models. But I always found myself drawn to the more existential orientations. I came to appreciate that the themes of *purpose, meaning, hope, and free will* seemed especially trustworthy North Stars in navigating life's challenges.

The writings of Viktor Frankl, Irvin Yalom, Thomas Szasz, R. D. Laing, Martin Buber, and Rollo May held particular appeal to me. Only later did I discover that many of these writers were Jewish, at least in terms of their familial and cultural background. Although not religious per se, I do not think it is a stretch to hypothesize that their Jewish heritage played a significant role in their existential worldview. Some of them—in particular Buber (1971)—even set out to synthesize existentialism with spirituality. Writings with existential themes have, both explicitly and implicitly, significantly informed how I conduct my clinical practice, the perspectives I share with clients, and even reading materials I might suggest for them, everything from Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* or Yalom's *Love's Executioner*, to Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

I have come to appreciate the degree to which Judaism embodies a highly existential worldview. The predominant focus is life on earth (rather than an afterlife), the duty to perform deeds for others (*mitzvot*), and always seeking greater meaning and purpose in our existence. And it is this quest for meaning that can guide us toward a path of more spiritual existence.

How Have Religion and Spirituality Manifested in Your Clinical Practice and Clinical Training?

Bob: Religion and spirituality manifest frequently in regard to working with issues of trauma and assisting clients to develop healthy practices in mindfulness. Early in my career, I rarely asked clients about their religious and spiritual practices. As I have become more comfortable doing so as an experienced psychotherapist, I find that many clients who have experienced trauma find that their religious and spiritual beliefs play a key role in helping them heal. I find that clients are often pleasantly surprised when I explore these issues with them, as many of them assume that those topics are off limits in psychotherapy. Many of my Jewish clients have been in previous psychotherapies and

assume that such topics are to be explored in other contexts such as religious communities but not with their therapists. Many have expressed gratitude for my willingness to explore this with them without judgment or imposing my beliefs.

In regard to the mindfulness, one area that consistently puzzles me in the realm of mindfulness with my clients from the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) is the way in which many therapists encourage clients to engage in practices stemming from Eastern religions without ever inquiring of practices that might be more congruent with the client's religious background. Consequently, with clients from religious backgrounds, I begin the discussion with an exploration of their current practices of prayer and encourage them to use those practices to increase their mindful self-awareness. I will share an anecdote from a conference I attended about 10 years ago in which a Jewish psychologist presented on how he has integrated Buddhist prayer/meditations in his mindfulness work with clients. When I asked him whether he ever asked his Jewish clients about the manner in which they learned to pray, he replied no, and explained that his own Jewish education had turned him off to Jewish prayers and thus he did not perceive those practices to be potentially helpful to his clients. I hope that colleagues who value cultural humility will begin to think about starting with the clients' culturally congruent practices rather than introducing mindfulness in the form of practices from other religious traditions.

Since both David and I are educators who have spent much of our careers training psychotherapists, it is important to address implications for clinical training. The primary message I wish to convey to supervisors is to allow themselves permission to discuss dimensions of spirituality with their Jewish and non-Jewish supervisees. Far too many educators and supervisors avoid discussing these issues or assume that those issues are relevant only to students who have attended faith-based institutions, usually Christian universities. I think we do our trainees a disservice by neglecting this aspect of human functioning.

David: Prior to becoming a psychologist, my career was steeped in the world of the performing and written arts.

During that time period, I developed a deep appreciation for the potentially transformative effects of artistic expression, whether in music, theater, dance, or the written word. It would not be hyperbolic to describe such experiences as having a profoundly spiritual component. Along these lines, the psychologist Csíkszentmihályi (1990) described the state of *flow* as involving paths to personal freedom and a connection to something greater, beyond the mind and ego, and into the spirit or soul. This state of mind (i.e., being "in the zone") not only increases our well-being and productivity, but also is an opportunity to experience transcendent spiritual growth.

How has this applied to my clinical practice? It is fairly straightforward for those clients whose careers already entail some form of creativity, such as writers, designers, musicians, actors, and so forth. But virtually everybody has the capacity to respond to some form of artistic expression; the challenge is helping to find what connects with them, whether it is a song, a poem, a book, a movie, or even a video clip. In a different sphere, encouraging clients to engage in practices like yoga or meditation can also help them experience this heightened state. With that said, I wholeheartedly concur with Bob's admonition against the automatic "outsourcing" of meditative practices (and prayer) without first considering the client's own belief systems.

People turn to spirituality for many reasons, not the least of which is personal growth and self-enhancement. But their motivation becomes especially prominent during times of stress and adversity. In particular, I have found that when clients are having to confront issues of illness, death, and dying—either their own or that of loved ones—engaging with them in an exploration of their own spirituality can be the most potent and useful coping strategy we can provide.

What Are Some of the Specific Challenges You Have Encountered Along the Way?

Bob: I think my primary challenge throughout my career is overcoming

the subtle taboo to discuss religion and spirituality with clients. Having received my doctoral education and training at a large public university, I received no guidance in how to explore these issues, and some not-so-subtle messages that these issues are anathema to science-based, empirically derived treatments. As I have come to understand that broader area of evidence-based treatments, I now understand much more fully how these issues can be extremely relevant to my clients, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and I have learned to become more comfortable being transparent regarding my identity.

David: I can say with utter certainty that my challenges in this area have been more within myself than with others. Like most people (and many psychologists, I daresay), my ability to dispense advice, support, and kindness to other people is substantially more successful than it is toward myself. When I find myself struggling with life issues—both large and small—I frequently turn to friends and family for their support. But the real battles invariably lie on the inside.

What do I do when I am feeling untethered and adrift? When I seem to have lost my compass? When I am struggling with hope? In short, what do I do when I do not know what to do? In those disorienting and frightening times, I try to remind myself—and my therapy clients when appropriate—of these basics:

- Rather than trying to grasp for happiness, search instead for meaning.
- Find a way to use that meaning to regain footing on your path.

- Repeat that it is all transient and that things will change.
- Remind yourself that you have been here before and you have always managed to find a way to get through it.
- And last, seek any activity that takes you out of yourself, transcends your current emotional state and connects you to a more serene state of being. Sometimes it is music, sometimes it is hiking, sometimes it is reading, and sometimes it is writing ... like it is, right now.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the intersection of religion, spirituality, and clinical psychology from the perspective of two experienced Sephardic Jewish psychologists. In our dialogue, we discovered how our Judaism has played a vital role in our personal and professional development. We hope that readers will find this a useful catalyst for reflection on their own spiritual development and how this increased self-awareness can deepen their clinical work. In closing, we wish everyone *abi gezunt* (in Yiddish)—“be healthy”—and *bivas, kreskas, y engrandeskas* (in Ladino)—“live, thrive, and grow!”

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