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Psychology and the Torah: Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development and Beyond in Jewish Scriptures

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**Abstract**

**Psychology and the Torah: Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development and Beyond in Jewish Scriptures**

**Introduction**

**The Interface Between Psychology and Religion**

The interface between modern psychology and religion spans both practical and theoretical approaches. From the practical perspective, religious principles, as reflected in various scriptures, have been used to guide rabbis and pastors in counseling a myriad of human problems and challenges (Kille, 2002). Modern psychology has also incorporated the scriptures into therapeutic work. For example, Polsky and Wosner (1989) analyzed content of Hasidic tales, told by Rabbi Israel Ben Eliezer (1700-1760), better known as the *Baal Shem Tov* or BSHT (literally translated as The Master of the Good Name). These stories were essentially folk tales that contained metaphors with moral implications for daily life. Polsky and Wosner, who write that that the BSHT “was the first truly modern psychologist” (1989, p. 176) found parallels between the content and structure of the tales and modern psychology therapeutic principles such as pacing or rapport building, identification or empathy, and reframing or transforming the significant meaning of an act or an event. From the theoretical perspective, various psychological theories have been used to interpret and understand the bible, using various analyses methods (Hathaway, 2005). While modern psychology plays a role in understanding and interpreting the bible, the scriptures also play a role (intentional or not) in shaping psychological understanding of human nature (Capps, 1985; Hathaway, 2005) .

On its face, it seems that the interface between modern psychology and religion is intuitively unlikely due to several barriers. Johnson (1982) cites the positivist approach of psychology to scientific inquiry as maintaining the dichotomy between an empirical discipline and theological one. On the other hand, theologians focus on the divinity and thus argue that psychology, in as much as it studies people or animals cannot be used applied in a religious context.

Nevertheless, interpretation of the scriptures through the psychological lens is almost as old as the field of psychology itself. Freud (cited in Kolbrener, 2010) tried to understand the psychological origins of monotheism by studying the themes of murder, guilt and anxiety as they are manifested in the Talmudic interpretation of the narrative of Moses’ death. Some writers used principles of psychology to analyze the relationship between people and the divinity. For example, Knabb and Newgren (2011) used principles of self-psychology as described by Kohut to understand the father-son relationships as described in the gospels. Popp, Lubrosky, Andrusyna, Cotsonis and Seligman (2002) used a scoring system for assessing interpersonal relationships to systematically analyze the Torah and identify patterns of relationship between G-d and people. However, most writers who have applied psychological theories or principles to the interpretation of the bible focused on the human experience. For example, Capps (1985) draws parallels between the Beatitudes as described in Matthew and between Erikson’s theory of conflicting human tendencies across eight distinct life stages. Leeuwen (2005) analyzed old amd mew testament texts about gender to inform questions of gender relationship in the bible such as male dominance vs. an egalitarian approach to gender roles and purposes. Hicks, Bland and Hoffman (2010)used principles from three psychoanalytical theories- object relations, self psychology, and inter-subjectivity- to understand the dramatic dynamics among Amnon, Tamar and Absalom as described in the story of Tamar’s rape in Samuel 2.

**Morality in Modern Psychology and in the Bible**

Several authors examined the interface between modern psychology and the bible’s perspectives on morality. Rietveld (2004) examined parallels between Jewish understanding of the arrival of the Messiah and Messianic times as depending on human perfecting their behavior and between Adler’s understanding of human functioning in the social context. Rietveld compares Adler’s understanding of morality as an expression of harmonious co-existing of all human with Jewish understanding of repentance as expressed via charity and empathy (2004).

Peri (2012) used psychoanalytic theories to understand the conflicting motivating forces of Abraham’s behavior during the binding of Isaac as described in Genesis and interpreted by the first century rabbis in the Midrash. Using this approach, Peri argues that psychoanalytic theory helps to reframe Abraham’s willingness to kill Isaac, and Isaac’s willingness to die, not as psychopathological drives but as heroic martyrdom. Peri sees this as the ultimate expression of faith in G-d and His moral code.

Schimmel (2009) examined the parallels between Erich Fromm’s humanistic psychology and specific moral principles in Jewish scriptures such as “the sanctity of life; free will; the principles of justice and peace; respect for the natural world…” (p. 11). While Fromm rejected belief in G-d early on, he argued that one can follow universal moral principles, such as reflected in the Noahide laws and in the Ten Commandments, regardless of belief in the divinity simply because these moral principles are universal (Schimmel, 2009).

Universal moral codes are an important aspect of psychology’s view on moral development. Kohlberg (date?) wrote that the ability to adhere to universal-ethical principles is the highest level of moral development a person can achieve. This level of superior moral development is preceded by the basic pre-conventional stage of moral behavior that is guided by a fear of punishment and by the intermediate conventional stage of moral behavior that is guided by an instrumental adherence to the social order. Kohlberg saw biblical laws such as the Ten Commandments as concrete rules that guide moral behavior in the first two levels of moral development and “self-chosen ethical principles” as universal expressions of morality (Kohlberg and Hersh, date?) that develop through the process of internalization of social concepts and attitudes (Kohlebrg, 1963). Building on Kohlebrg’s theory of moral development, Shepard (1994) outlines the progress of moral development as it is expressed in the biblical narrative. According to Shepard, prior to giving of the Ten Commandments, people adhered to the moral code (that is, following G-d’s rules) out of fear of punishment. G-d’s revelation at Sinai ushers in the conventional stage of human moral development as G-d “provides humanity with an elaborate and well-defined system of laws” (p. 184) that establishes and maintains a social order. Finally, Shepard sees the appearance of Jesus and his teachings as symbolizing the post conventional era of moral development when the motivating force of moral conduct transcends the instrumental need to maintain the social order and is guided by principles of love for fellow man and for G-d (Shepard, 1994). However, this approach is somewhat problematic as pointed out by Motet (date?) since the universal codes of moral behavior are not specifically defined and therefore are left to one’s conscience and can be interpreted as “do your own thing” (p. 20). Motet argues that Christian theology solves this problem by suggesting the conscience of a G-d fearing person reflects either G-d’s presence in the human soul or an internalization of “G-d’s given universal-ethical-principles” (p. 21).

**The Current Study**

While the literature suggests a transactional relationship between the bible and modern psychology, in that interpretation of one can help to better understand the other, there is a lack of systematic analysis of biblical text that can help identify the scriptures’ perspective on human behavior, especially in the area of morality. The purpose of the current study is to examine Jewish theology perspective on human moral behavior in comparison to modern psychology’s perspective, specifically Kohlberg’s theory of moral development.

This analysis is guided by the following question formulations:

1. What is morality in Jewish theology?
2. What is the Jewish theology’s view on levels of morality?
3. What is the Jewish theology’s view on how people should develop, or strengthen their moral behavior?
4. What guidelines should a person follow to ensure moral conduct, especially in ambiguous situations?

Kohlberg’s concepts

**Methods**

**The Texts**

What texts have been analyzed? How many? How were they chosen

**Data analysis**

Deductive Qualitative analysis of texts to respond to above questions. Constant comparison analysis to uncover shared themes among texts.

**Results**

The actual responses to the questions above as they emerge from the specific texts, interspersed with relevant quotes from the texts- the more elaborate the better for this section

**Discussion**

Here we need a generalized summary of the responses from the texts, similar in nature to the general responses you have provided in the past, and emerging directly from the texts that are used for analysis.

Conclusion: Possibly suggesting a new model that incorporates connection with the divine as an additional dimension of morality?

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