

Strengthening a Jewish Woman's Sense of Self and Purpose in Life

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Reports of eating disorders among young orthodox women are rising at an alarming rate. A study of Orthodox Jewish girls in Brooklyn found that one out of nineteen were eating disordered, which is 50% greater than the occurrence of this disorder in the general population (Natenshon, 2000-2006). Concern exists that this may be, in part, a result of some orthodox women suffering from a lack of clear feminine identity and spiritual connectedness. Some call this "spiritual hunger". Jackie Heyen, a musician who recovered from an eating disorder, has expressed her yearning for spiritual sustenance in these song lyrics, "Show me the way to my soul/ finding the passion will lead to the soul/ the soul leads to me" (Heyen, 2009).

In attempting to create an illusion of control, some women who find themselves suffering from spiritual hunger withdraw from life, and are then alone with their thoughts, disordered behaviors, and the part of themselves they come to call "Ed", as if the eating disorder is an important person in their life. (Kleinman, in press, 2009). Many of these women have difficulty expressing and articulating feelings and thoughts, and it is not uncommon to hear them describe their relationship with their body as that of one with a stranger or even an enemy (Kleinman & Hall, 2006). Although sufferers may turn toward food issues and lack of satisfaction with their body size as a substitute for dealing with larger emotional issue, an eating disorder is really about underlying emotions that may seem too overwhelming to face.

A hallmark of this disorder is the tendency to short circuit feelings and focus on body distortions, obsessive thoughts, and concrete, black and white thinking. The inner lives of women who struggle with eating disorders are filled with isolation, emptiness, pain, fear, and a profound sense of disembodiment. While these women valiantly strive to present an outer appearance of perfection and control, this "false" self is like an empty vessel, devoid of life (Kleinman, 2007). As one young Jewish girl explained, "it is much easier to focus on how many calories I have consumed in a day than it is to deal with day to day events such as arguments with my parents, getting good grades, or feeling accepted by others." It is also easier to assume that lack of a good shidduch is due to not being thin enough, for example, rather than more substantive issues such as one's level of religiosity, education, and acts of chesed.

Practices in Judaism that support a connection between body and mind, such as Taharat Hamishpachah, can strengthen a woman's sense of wholeness and purpose in life as a female, as a member of the Jewish community, and as being in a relationship with God. It is a monthly reminder for a woman to reconnect and establish an embodied sense of self. The laws and practice of niddah are "designed to be in harmony with a woman's physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological makeup" (Abramov, 2005, p. 56).

Niddah is a body-based practice that follows a woman's menstrual period. It involves a number of laws and activities including refraining from physical intimacy and touch with her husband, internal inspections for uterine bleeding, and immersion in the ritual bath. In the practice of the rituals

associated with being niddah, women explore the rhythms of their cycles both through the bedikot and the calendar laws. They make conscious and informed contact with their bodies. They act and are simultaneously acted upon, being both the agent and the owner (Schwartz, 2007). This makes niddah an interactional experience with the body.

According to Stolorow and Atwood, at the center of a cohesive selfhood is the subjective experience of embodiment (Pallaro, 1996). Niddah is an embodied practice that has been found to impact the embodied sense of self of Orthodox women as seen through feminine identity, cultural identity, and spiritual identity (Schwartz, 2007). The practice of niddah offers Orthodox women an opportunity to encounter their body self and therefore enhance their integration of their sense of self.

Recognizing that Jewish rituals, such as niddah, can provide fulfillment is vital. However, for those who are exhibiting eating disordered symptoms, additional measures, such as therapies that focus on reconnection with one's inner spirit, can be helpful. Dance/movement therapy is one such psychotherapeutic process that is based on the assumption that the mind and the body are interrelated.

Dance/movement therapy provides individuals with an opportunity to develop a reciprocal relationship with their body, as well as to communicate and express emotions. "Body movements are influenced by thoughts, attitudes and feelings; thoughts, attitudes and feelings are influenced by the rhythm and movements of the body (Rice, Hardenbergh & Hornyak, cited in Hornick & Baker, 1989, p. 258.). Mary Whitehouse wrote that a fundamental belief of dance/movement therapy is that "the body is the physical aspect of the personality, and movement is the personality made visible" (as cited in Tortora, 2006, p. 221). Women with eating disorders can learn to trust themselves enough to explore new ways to give form to their feelings by transforming disordered behaviors into authentic, meaningful actions.

In treating Orthodox Jewish women who experience spiritual hunger, it is necessary to reestablish and strengthen these connections. By identifying and incorporating embodying practices which are religiously and therapeutically based, the spiritual hunger that these women experience can be transformed into opportunities for personal and spiritual growth. This can move them to experience renewal in the life force of their relationships with their higher power, their body, their "true" self, and with others.

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