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THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION: VICE OR VIRTUE IN JUDAISM?*

Chazal exhort us to strive for ever higher goals. It says in [illegible] (When will my deeds equal those of my forefathers)? Likewise, the concept of *shleimus* ("[illegible]"), which can be translated as perfection, is also an honored goal in *chazal*. On the other hand, clinical experience and research indicates that perfectionism is often associated with serious emotional disorders (Blatt, 1995; Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Sorotzkin, 1985, 1998) which, in turn, eventually results in lower levels of achievement.

This paper will briefly review the psychological literature on perfectionism, examine *Yiddishkeit's* attitude toward perfection, some common misconceptions and misapplications of this concept, and the impact of the above on *frum* patients and therapists.

PERFECTIONISM

In a comprehensive review of the literature on ñthe destructiveness of perfectionism,ò Blatt (1995) states:

> The research literature on perfectionism has grown remarkably in the past decade. Numerous empirical investigations... provide consistent evidence that perfectionism is a multi-dimensional construct that can have an important role in adaptive and maladaptive functioning, including a wide range of disorders, especially depression and suicide (p. 1005).

Regarding specific diagnostic categories, perfectionism has been associated with obsessive-compulsive disorders, where the person seeks perfection with regard to **self-control**;

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* An earlier version of this paper was published in the *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, Vol. 23 (4), 1999, pp. 179-195. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association on May 9, 1996, in NYC and at the Nefesh Conference, May 21-25, 1998 in Spring Glen, NY.

with narcissism, where the individual needs to see **himself** as perfect (Miller, 1996); and with depression, which is often a **reaction** to the failed attempt to achieve perfection (Blatt, 1995). Sarno (1998) has also attributed chronic back pain and other somatic conditions to the stress associated with perfectionistic tendencies. Elsewhere (Sorotzkin, 1998), I have discussed how perfectionism is especially prevalent among religious patients, particularly adolescents.

Much attention has recently been paid in the *frum* community to those youngsters who act out their emotional distress by rebelling against *yiddishkeit*. I contend that perfectionism is, in effect, an internalized version of the same phenomenon. Rather than rebelling, these youngsters react to their feelings of failure, rejection and disappointment by trying to be perfect, in a desperate attempt to gain the recognition and acceptance that they lack and so desperately crave.

In recent times, a new awareness of the dangers of perfectionism can be found among *mechanchim*. In fact, a recently published *sefer* on *chinuch* issues devotes an entire chapter to this issue.[1]

WHAT'S WRONG WITH TRYING TO BE PERFECT?

A common objection I hear from patients or their families, when I suggest that they are suffering from ñperfectionismò is: "Whatôs wrong with trying to be perfect?ò Being ambitious, competitive and striving for ever-higher spiritual goals are seen as positive attributes by *frum* patients. It is assumed by most *frum* people, that the *chazal* that states that being [illegible] (happy with oneôs lot) is one of the [illegible] (a prerequisite for acquiring Torah knowledge) refers only to [illegible] (temporal possessions). In regard to [illegible] (spiritual acquisitions), being happy with what one has already achieved is seen as a negative trait at best, or a fatal defect in oneôs spiritual makeup at worst.

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE vs. THE QUEST FOR PERFECTION

In order to explain the pathology of perfectionism, we need to distinguish between the pursuit of excellence (Hamachek, 1978) and the quest for perfection (Sorotzkin, 1985, 1998). People with healthy self-esteem can be motivated by a positive desire to excel in a particular pursuit. They would typically view this pursuit as a **process** where each step is experienced as a positive ego-enhancing event bringing them closer to their ultimate goal.[2] They are comfortable

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[illegible] **מכל מלמדי:** [illegible] 174-198.

[illegible] **אהל רחל** [illegible] **רבי יוסף חיים זוננפלד** [illegible] **דרש משה** [illegible] **משלי** [illegible] **גר"א** [illegible]

with their humanness and, therefore, accepting of inevitable personal and environmental limitations (Pacht, 1984), even while exercising their will power and sense of motivation to improve and excel.

The perfectionistôs drive for success and accomplishment may seem, on the surface, very similar to that of the healthy ñstriver for excellence.ò However, the underlying dynamic of perfectionism is very different. There are pervasive feelings of shame (Miller, 1996; Sorotzkin, 1998) which induce a compensatory drive for grandiosity and perfection. Since perfection is necessary to negate deep pervasive feelings of defectiveness, anything less than total perfection is experienced as a humiliating defect and a narcissistic injury. In contrast to the ñstriver for excellenceò who is motivated primarily by a wish for success, the perfectionist is driven primarily by the fear of the humiliation of failure (Blatt, 1995; Sorotzkin, 1985, 1998).

It is important to emphasize that these distinctions are difficult to spot, since patients rarely spontaneously volunteer to speak about their grandiose/perfectionistic tendencies. In fact, most often they are only dimly aware of it - if at all. At most, they are aware of the resulting symptoms - e.g. being overly anxious about their performance, procrastinating and feeling depressed.

> *"Chaim"[3] was expressing his frustration over what he perceived as his lack of progress in therapy. I reminded him of his own occasional reports of progress and wondered why he resists keeping this fact in mind. After giving this question some thought, he responded: "As soon as I begin thinking about my progress, my mind immediately jumps to fantasies of perfectionistic, grandiose achievements, which just sets me up for great disappointment."*

The clinician can distinguish between the healthy and unhealthy forms of striving by investigating how the patient deals with his less-than-perfect performances. The healthy person can be satisfied, and even proud of a superior, albeit non-perfect, performance, while the perfectionist experiences it as a humiliating defeat and a narcissistic injury (Sorotzkin, 1985).[4]

Perfectionistic patients will often reject the suggestion that fear and other negative emotions motivate them. Rather, they insist that they truly enjoy what they are doing (e.g. learning Torah). It is only upon closer examination that it becomes clear that they are only enjoying avoiding the feeling of guilt and shame that they would experience if they were **not** learning. They are not capable of actually enjoying an activity or achievement for its own sake, since they will always be convinced that they are not doing it as well as they should. It is for this

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[3] Names and details in the case illustrations have been changed to preserve confidentiality

[4] **מכתב מאליהו**, ח"א עמ' 108; **בספר חכמה ומוסר**, ח"ב עמ' יז; **שיחות מוסר מרבי חיים שמואלביץ**, "שמושה של תורה", עמ' ס.)

reason that they can be very successful at what they do and yet still feel depressed. Likewise, they often experience strong feelings of jealousy accompanied by profound anger at the successful person who makes them acutely aware of their own imperfections.

RELIGIOUS ISSUES

Therapists who treat *frum* patients, report that these patients often use *frumkeit* as a defense, e.g. claiming that ñthe Torah **requires** me to be compulsiveò (Sorotzkin, 1998; Wikler, 1982). Non-religious therapists, or those not knowledgeable of religious issues, are more likely to avoid dealing directly with the religious challenges brought up by their patients (Worthington et al., 1996). They will feel more comfortable suggesting that the patient discuss these issues with his Rov. While this has the advantage of preventing therapy sessions from turning into theological debates, there are also distinct disadvantages. For one, a sharp distinction between religious and psychological issues is an artificial one for most *frum* psychotherapy patients. Their psychopathology clearly colors their understanding, or lack thereof, of the Torah and *chazal*. By keeping religious issues out of therapy, this dynamic is never sufficiently explored.

Even if the Rov to whom the patient turns is familiar and comfortable with psychological issues, in most cases the patient will not be as comfortable discussing details of his emotional life with the Rov as he would be revealing them to a therapist. Nonetheless, a *frum* therapist is certainly not a substitute for the patientôs Rov. Rather, the therapist should help patients get more out of their relationship with their Rov, by helping them become more open and knowledgeable about themselves, especially in regard to the interplay between their *frumkeit* and psychological concerns.[5]

A religious therapist is more likely to address religious issues with religious patients, at least at some level (Worthington, et al 1996). Peteet (1994) discusses four levels at which the therapist can approach religious issue, ranging from ñacknowledge the [religious] problem but focus exclusively on its psychological dimension, to ñaddress the spiritual problem directly within the treatment through the use of a shared religious or spiritual dimensionò (p. 237).

In my practice, I try to fine-tune the level at which I deal with the *frumkeit* issues to the specific needs of each patient. Some patients rarely bring up *frumkeit* per se, even if their problems involve *hashkafah* issues. Others focus a great deal on *hashkafah* questions, especially if they feel that I am religiously similar to them.

Discussing religious doctrine with a patient carries the danger of assuming the role of pastoral counselor. However, it also holds the opportunity to explore idiosyncratic distortions of religious beliefs. While for the most part I conduct therapy with *frum* patients by focusing on

[5] Many perfectionists seek advice from their rov not out of a wish to clarify their religious obligations, i.e., the 's [illegible] - rather they want someone to take responsibility for their behavior, in order to escape the wrath of a G-d they perceive as vengeful and capricious (see below under ñImage of G-dò).

psychodynamic issues, I do not hesitate to discuss *hashkafah* and *frumkeit* issues if it is indicated.[6]

Frum patients bring up a wide range of religious issues relating to their presenting symptoms. This paper will focus on religious issues related to perfectionism, which I have found to be an underlying dynamic among many *frum* patients.

Image of *Hashem*

As discussed above, the religious activities of perfectionists are motivated primarily by fear. This causes them, therefore, to be anxious, extreme, inflexible and lacking in perspective in their religious observances and to be overly concerned with how they are perceived by others (Worthington, 1996). An in-depth analysis of what is creating such fear usually uncovers a terrifying image of a capricious and vengeful G-d.

> *"Eli," a 20 year old yeshiva* bochur*, was referred with symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Among other things,* shachris *was taking him over four hours. He related that his Rebbi convinced him that indeed Hashem does not want him to take so long to* daven *or to be so anxious about his davening. But, in spite of these realizations, he was unable to* daven *any quicker.*
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> *Further analysis revealed that, although he accepted that Hashem wants him to* daven *quicker, he could not imagine that Hashem would forego a perfectly correct pronunciation of his* davening. *So, even though Hashem wants him to speed up his* davening*, if he mispronounced any of the words, there would be hell to pay (literally). Thus the Rov's well-intentioned efforts to help Eli - by telling him that Hashem wants him to* daven *faster - only added to Eli's pressure, since he was incapable of perceiving this as a dispensation. Rather, he experienced it as an additional requirement. As is often the case with perfectionistic/OCD patients, Eli perceived G-d as a bully (לץ) just waiting for his slightest misstep in order to severely punish him. He could only escape this fate by being so perfect that Hashem would not have a "pretext" to punish him.*
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> *Eli initially insisted that his image of a vengeful G-d was a normative belief in Yiddishkeit. I challenged the religious validity of his image. I suggested that his image of G-d as a vicious bully fit more with the understanding of the ancient idol-worshipers, who felt they had to* ***appease*** *their despotic gods, than that of our traditional understanding of* ***worshipping*** *our benevolent Creator. I showed him a passage from a history book written by a Rov:*
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>> Such was the ancient concepts of the gods... the world was populated by numerous powerful, capricious and unseen creatures who controlled the destiny and fortunes of mankind, creatures who were spiritual only in the sense that they

[6] In order for therapists to be able to identify their patientsô idiosyncratic beliefs and contrast them with authoritative, mainstream perspectives on religious issues, it is important that they review these issues with a knowledgeable rov.

> were invisible and immortal but were material in every other sense.... They could look benignly on human affairs or they could vent their anger... Men paid homage and brought sacrifices... in the fervent hope that the gods would be appeased and would not bring misery and sorrow to mankind (Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman, 1995, pp. 18-29).

One of the major goals of therapy for this patient was to uncover how his image of a harsh and punitive G-d was shaped by the parental image rather than by normative religious belief. If one grows up with parents (the first and primary authority figures for all children) who are harsh, capricious and unfairly punitive then it is understandable that he will also come to see the ultimate ñAuthority Figureò in the same light. The patient came to see that his image of *Hashem* did not accurately reflect traditional sources in *chazal* which emphasize that *Hashem* is benevolent and wishes us well.[7]

Psychic Determinism and Free Will

Attribution of responsibility for the patientôs problems, both by the patient and by the therapist, can have a substantial impact on the therapy process (Hayes & Wall, 1998). *Frum* patients (and their families) will often resist the therapistôs attempts to put their negative behavior in the perspective of their past history, especially if it seems to them that the therapist is ñexcusingò their negative behavior. They will often frame this resistance in religious terms, that *chazal* proclaim that a person has total free will (*bechira*), so that regardless how disadvantaged or abusive a personôs life-situation was or is, this in no way limits his range of free-will. They will also employ the oft quoted phrase "אין עומד בפני הרצון" (nothing stands in the way of the will ï or ñif there is a will there is a wayò) as a means of denying the possibility that past history can limit a personôs options in the present. This issue is especially problematic for perfectionists, since acknowledging limitations (internal or external) to oneôs freedom of action is, in itself, experienced as a narcissistic injury.

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[7] [...."אור החיים (בראשית ל:לא) "...וקודם אקדים המושג אצלינו מכל התורה, כי האדון אלוקי ישראל מדותיו הם להטיב, ויותר מחשק המקבל חשקו להטיב. ... רש"י ... מכתב מאליהו (ח"ב עמ' 55) [...- ... אמת ליעקב (...) ... מעין בית השואבה (...) .... כ"כ הוא לאידך גיסא, שאי אפשר להחליט על האדם שהוא רע לגמרי... עד שיתברר שאין למצוא שום צד זכות בשבילו.... וכל זה מפעולתו של מדת הדין.... רש"י יחזקאל ... ובגמ' סוטה יא. "... מתנת חיים (רבי מתתיהו סלומון, ...) - .... הקב"ה ברא את עולמו להיטיב לברואיו וזהו כל תכליתו ורצונו... [...] (...) "... [500]. ...

I counter these arguments with the following. The idea of unlimited free-will regardless of circumstances (past or present) defies both traditional sources and logic. The *Rambam* clearly states that a ñ[illegible]" (*tinok shenishba* - a Jew raised since infancy as a non-Jew) is not held responsible for violating Torah law ([illegible]), so obviously we cannot be totally oblivious to history in attributing responsibility for behavior (i.e., free-will). The *Rambam* also makes it clear that merely informing a *tinok shenishba* that he is a Jew and that he is obligated to observe the *mitzvos* is not sufficient to take a person out of the category of *tinok shenishba.*

Even the most radical proponent of unlimited free-will will concede the limits of free-will when presented with an actual extreme case of external pressure. Take, for example, a case where a child was raised by a ñreligiousò parent who had beaten him viciously on a regular basis for many years until the child rebelled against religion. Would anyone claim that this child should be held equally responsible as would a child who grew up in an ideal setting?!

Elsewhere (Sorotzkin, 1996), I have shown how - based on Rav Desslerôs concept of ñpoint (or level) of free willò (ñ[illegible] - 111-120 [illegible]) - *Yiddishkeit* recognizes that life circumstances can restrict a personôs level of free will and subsequently, his degree of responsibility, (although Rav Dessler emphasizes that an element of [illegible], at some level, always remains).[8]

At the other end of the spectrum, while psychologists can often illuminate the meaning of a personôs past behavior by exploring his history, they are much less effective in predicting future behavior. This is due to the unpredictable factors of will power and free will (Basch, 1978).

Balance and Perspective

The most difficult task in treating perfectionistic and obsessive-compulsive *frum* patients is not in challenging specific distortions in their religious belief system. Rather it is in overcoming the superficial, non-contextual, perfectionistic (ñblack and whiteò) perspective with which they approach **everything** they do. With *frum* patients, it expresses itself most destructively in their religious observance only because that happens to be a major, important area in their lives.

[illegible]

In their desperate attempt to see themselves as flawless, perfectionists will often disavow or ñsplit offò their negative impulses and thoughts in a process termed ñthe vertical splitò by Kohut (1971). Rather than just repressing or denying their negative impulses and actions (a ñhorizontal splitò) they disavow that aspect of themselves (a ñJekyll and Hydeò syndrome[9]; i.e., ñ**I** could never do such a thingò). This has the ñbenefitò of making possible the illusion of self perfection since the person disavows the less-than-perfect parts of himself. However, when the negative impulse eventually asserts itself it does so without the moderating influence of the personôs positive attributes, since they have been split off and are not experienced as parts of an integrated whole person (see Sorotzkin, 1998, Goldberg, 1999, and Orange et al., 1997).[10]

I try to convey to my patients *Yiddishkeit's* complex, sophisticated, and multi-layered approach to all areas of life. An example is Rav Dessleróôs concept of [illegible] (level of free will) discussed above which delicately balances the need for people to take responsibility for their actions with the necessity of recognizing that external events impact on their range of options at any given moment. Likewise, I point out that the daily activities of a *frum* Jew often involve negotiating an area of tension between two poles. On one end are lofty idealistic goals; while on the other end is a realistic acceptance of human nature. There are major risks in going too far in **either** direction.[11] Overemphasizing the restrictions of reality can result in stunted ambition and a deficiency in the will to better oneself, while overemphasizing idealistic goals can result in grandiosity and perfectionism with its attending anxiety and depression and eventual burnout. A balanced attitude of striving for a realistic level of excellence, on the other hand, should not be seen as merely ñtoned downò grandiosity and perfectionism. It is rather, a totally different attitude with different underlying dynamics (Sorotzkin, 1998). As a patient once put it quite insightfully; ñI used to try to become taller by floating; now I try to grow taller with my feet planted firmly on the ground.ò[12]

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[9] From the famous novel by Robert Lewis Stevenson (1886). ñThe work is known for its vivid portrayal of the psychopathology of a split personality; in mainstream culture the very phrase óJekyll and Hydeô has come to mean a person who may show a distinctly different character, or profoundly different behavior, from one situation to the next, as if almost another personé [Wikipedia].ò

[10] **באר מחוקק** (**חובות הלבבות**): **'מן הזהירות, שלא תרבה להזהר'**, **שאם כל מי שעולה בלבו לעשות דבר טוב... היה עומד ומצפה שיתמלא רצונו בשלמות, ויגיע להבנה העמוקה ביותר ולשפה הצחה ביותר, אז לא היה אדם מדבר דבר....**

[11] **מכתב מאליהו** ח"ב עמ' 25 [illegible] עמ' 188-189

Most perfectionists grew up in homes where religion was of an extrinsic (Worthington et al, 1996) and superficial nature (Sorotzkin, 1998), and so developing a broader, balanced and more nuanced perspective is quite a difficult task for them.[13]

> *I first met "Dovid" when he was a 16 year-old Yeshiva student presenting with Oppositional Defiant Disorder and depression. One of the outstanding features in Dovid's parents' attitude to his emotional difficulties was their overriding concern with, "what will the neighbors say?" when they became aware of Dovid's non-conformist behavior, and their distress over his disregard for his religious duties, without regard for the obvious underlying emotional disturbance. This distorted their perception of the severity of Dovid's various symptoms.*
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> *A startling example of this distortion was an urgent phone call from Dovid's father two months into the therapy. Dovid's condition had deteriorated significantly. He had dropped out of Yeshiva, and was spending most of the day in bed. He had withdrawn*

For other examples of how competing religious imperatives define and refine each other -

שעורי דעת ל"ל (ל"א) ... **כל הנצרך** ל"ל: ... **מכתב מאליהו** (ל"ל, 55): ... **בשיחות מוסר** (**רבי חיים שמואלביץ**, ... **אמת יעקב** (**רבי יעקב קמנצקי**, ... **פחד יצחק** (**רבי יצחק הוטנר**, ...

It is my impression that, while in the past it was more common for people in the American Orthodox Jewish community to overemphasize the restrictions of reality, today there is a greater danger of youngsters striving for perfectionistic and grandiose goals.

[13] Recently, some *mechanchim* have sadly noted that some contemporary religious people have a superficial and joyless approach to religious activities

"נפש הישיבה" (**"והיית אך שמח"**, ... 54-56.

totally from social interactions and a psychiatrist who had recently seen him, diagnosed him as "possibly schizophrenic." "Dovid has been leaving the Shabbos table in the middle of the meal to go to his room!" his father told me with a tone of urgency. But, his concern was not about his son's tendency to isolate himself. Rather, "How can he leave the table when he sees that we need him for a mezumen!?" It is not surprising, then, that three years later, after Dovid was no longer keeping kosher or observing Shabbos, that he found himself struggling with the issue of wearing jeans instead of black pants! Congruent with his upbringing, this was a more momentous issue for him than observing Shabbos or keeping kosher etc.

THE TORAH'S ATTITUDE TOWARD PERFECTIONISM

I often use sources from the Talmud and the Midrash to show my patients that an emotionally healthy and balanced approach to *frumkeit* is congruent with the Torah.[14]

Self Esteem vs. Humbleness

Perfectionistic *frum* patients will often resist attempts by a therapist to enhance their self-esteem by claiming that the Torah mandates being humble. While a *frum* therapist can quote *chazals* that discuss the importance of self-esteem,[15] this only confuses the patient who cannot understand how to integrate this with the sources that stress the importance of humbleness. The integration of seemingly contradictory thoughts and feelings (e.g. self-esteem and humility) is an especially difficult task for perfectionists (Sorotzkin, 1998).

Instead, I present a concept that integrates self-esteem and humility. It is an idea based on a fascinating discussion (cited in *Yalkut Lekach Tov,* Vol. 2, p. 190) on the well-known Midrash that, ñAny *talmid chochom* whose internal virtues are not consistent with his external appearance is not a true *talmid chochom*.ò The Midrash deduces this from the construction of the

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[14] I also encourage them to discuss these issues with their *Rabbeim,* but only if they can be honest about themselves. Otherwise the advice they get is not likely to be appropriate for them.

[15] **משנה סנהדרין** (ל.): ... **בשבילי נברא העולם.** „... **מכתב מאליהו** ... **ספר אהל רחל (רבי** (50 ,'ב ,"ס) ... **שמואל אויערבאך) רבי חיים מוולוז'ין** ... **היעב"ץ** .... **בספר מסורת החינוך** (מ"ס, ס"ל) **מרן רבי אליעזר שך:** .... **שיחות מוסר (רבי חיים שמואלביץ)** (מ"ב, ס"ל). **עלי שור** (ר"מ ס"ל): ... **רבינו יונה** ... **כד הקמח (רבנו בחיי)** – (ס"ל ס"ל, ס"ל) **כל זמן שלא עשה כן במזיד ולא התמיד בזה.**

Aron HaKodesh, which was shining gold both on the outside, and on the inside. Rav Goldwasser asks how we can learn the need for non-superficiality from the *Aron* when the *Aron* itself was not gold through and through, for it had a wooden core!? It would have been better to learn it from the solid gold *Menorah.* Rav Goldwasser explains that it is obvious that a *talmid chochom* has to have a respectable outward appearance (corresponding to the *Aron's* outer gold layer) with underlying humility (corresponding to the *Aron's* inner wooden core).

The Midrash reminds us that under the wood the *Aron* also had another gold layer. This represents a personôs core positive self-esteem. Thus, the personality of a *talmid chochom* can be seen as consisting of three layers. At the core, under the humility, is positive self-regard, since it is **low** self-esteem and excessive feelings of guilt that often leads to arrogance (Broucek, 1991; Miller, 1996; Sorotzkin, 1985).[16] The final external layer is one of a respectful appearance. The challenge is to integrate these seemingly conflicting attitudes into one healthy person.

HASHEM'S ATTRIBUTE OF JUSTICE VS. *HASHEM'S* ATTRIBUTE OF MERCY

As indicated above, most perfectionistic patients, due to their negative experiences with overly critical and punitive early life authority figures (Sorotzkin, 1998)[17], are only able to relate to the stern and punitive aspect of *Hashem*, but not to His attribute of mercy and forgiveness.

I try to help these patients develop a more nuanced perspective of the complex and multi-dimensional attributes of *Hashem*. This balanced perspective recognizes that Torah does indeed make demands on us, but *Hashem* is ñreasonableò in what He expects of us and does give consideration to our circumstances.[18] The purpose of feeling guilty is to motivate us to improve

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16 [illegible]

17 [illegible] **והיית אך שמח** [illegible] **נפש הישיבה** [illegible] **אור יחזקאל**].

18 [illegible] **אין הקב"ה בא בטרוניא** [illegible] **עם בריותיו.** [illegible] **מעשה איש [חזון איש]** [illegible]

and not to overwhelm and emotionally paralyze us, since such feelings are more likely to induce further negative behavior.[19]

A powerful statement regarding the need for a balanced approach to guilt is found in the [illegible]. The *Keser Rosh* discusses those who are distraught with guilt over [illegible] - a frequent cause of emotional turmoil among *frum* adolescents. He criticizes those who quote from the *Zohar* regarding the severity of this sin and of the eventual punishment for it, yet neglect to quote the end of this same *Zohar*, which says that Torah study corrects this sin -- [illegible]

In an extraordinary footnote in the [illegible], the [illegible] quotes the [illegible]:

> Those *chasidim* (stringent ones) who are stringent and state that there is no correcting this sin... they are the ones who induce an increase of sinning among us, and cause people to distance themselves from *Hashem*, since the sinner, when he hears that there is no repentance for this sin will abandon all attempts to improve himself. [These *chasidim*] cause the *Shechinah* to go into *golus* and rather than be called *chasidim* (stringent ones)

[illegible]

נפש החיים ([illegible]): **... יסוד מוסד הוא בענין עונשי שמים, שבאמת אין זה כעונש ונקמה על התנהגותו,** [illegible]

דבר אברהם [illegible]

שפתי חיים ([illegible] 4): [illegible]

במכתב מאליהו [illegible] 14 [illegible] 336 [illegible]).

19 **ספר שיחות מוסר (רבי חיים שמואלביץ)** [illegible]

במכתב מאליהו ([illegible] 263) [illegible]

זכרון אליהו ([illegible] **הרה"ג ר' אליהו מאיר בלוך זצ"ל**) [illegible] **"נפש הישיבה"** [illegible]

רבי צדוק הכהן [illegible]

should more properly be called ñ*chaseirim"* (lacking ones) and their punishment will be very severe.[20]

AMBITION VS. SATISFACTION WITH ONE'S LOT

As mentioned above, perfectionistic *frum* patients often feel that they are prohibited from being happy with their level of religious observance. They believe that the dictum of *chazal* that one needs to be satisfied with his lot in order to be successful in acquiring Torah knowledge [[illegible]] is referring only to temporal (*gashmius*) acquisitions. In regard to *ruchnius* aspirations, in contrast, unchecked ambitiousness, competitiveness[21] and striving for ever higher goals is the obligatory attitude. In fact, most *meforshim* state clearly that the importance of being satisfied with oneôs lot applies to being satisfied with oneôs *ruchnius* achievements as well.[22]

Likewise, regarding the obligation, mentioned in the beginning, to strive to reach the spiritual level of our forefathers ,[illegible], we see a tension between two poles. The *meforshim* make it clear that we cannot actually expect to reach such high levels, still each person needs to strive to reach the highest possible level for himself.[23]

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20 [illegible] (ממרן הסטייפלער) [illegible] 275 [illegible] ורבי שלמה וולבה [illegible] 52 [illegible] שוכחים [illegible]

21 [illegible]

22 רבי שמואל אויערבאך ([illegible] גר"א [illegible] "עטרה למלך" [illegible] , מרבי אברהם פאם, [illegible] רבי חיים [illegible] :426 [illegible] מוואלז'ין [illegible] רבי ברוך בער [illegible] אור יחזקאל (רבי יחזקאל לווינשטיין, [illegible] מתנת חיים (רבי מתתיהו סלומון, [illegible] שיחת התחזקות רבי צבי מאיר זילברברג, [illegible]

23 [illegible] שיחות מוסר (רבי חיים שמואלביץ, [illegible] מכתב מאליהו [illegible] :184 [illegible]

Similarly, regarding the honored idea in *Yiddiskeit* of striving for "*shleimus*", that can be interpreted as perfection (but literally means wholeness). A closer look at how the concept is used in some *seforim* reveals a more realistic understanding. For example, Rabbi Mandelbaum ([illegible]), uses the term to describe someone who uses his potential to its fullest.[24] *Shleimus* can also be understood as requiring that one take a balanced and harmonious approach to his religious devotion rather than overemphasizing one aspect of Torah observance at the expense of a different commandment.[25]

The necessity for both the idealistic pursuits of lofty goals and grounded realism is best symbolized by the *Aron HaKodesh* that contained both the broken first *luchos* and the second *luchos*. As explained by Rav Dessler (*Michtav MeEliyahu*, vol. 2, p. 30), the first *luchos* represent the lofty spiritual level of *kedusha* and purity that the *Yidden* aspired to, but which turned out to be beyond their reach and therefore had to be shattered. The second *luchos* were of a lower level of *kedusha*, more in keeping with the *Yidden*'s actual level of *kedusha*. While we have to function at our realistic level, we also keep the broken *luchos* in the *Aron* as a reminder of our lofty aspirations in order to maintain our motivation for continuous spiritual growth.

It needs to be emphasized that the purpose of discussing these *hashkafah* issues in therapy is not primarily to convince patients to adopt a different *hashkafic* attitude. Rather, it is to bring out the point that their idiosyncratic religious understanding is a result of their personal psychological history that needs to be explored in therapy.

Summary

Chazal encourage us to aspire to lofty goals, while recognizing human limitations. Those who are emotionally predisposed to perfectionism, due to a fragile sense of self, are likely to lose this balance and perspective. They may instead develop grandiose fantasies and make extreme religious demands of themselves, resulting in various emotional disorders. When these issues are discussed in therapy, the patient may resist by insisting that he is religiously required to think and behave in this manner. In spite of the risks involved in discussing religious issues in therapy, it is often clinically indicated with *frum* patients. A religiously similar and knowledgeable therapist can help the perfectionistic patient understand the psychological factors that shaped his idiosyncratic religious attitudes.

I would like to conclude with a story that happened with the Steipler Gaon that illustrates some of the points made in this article.

[illegible] **קובץ מאמרים** [illegible] .[30 [illegible]

24 [illegible] **גבורת יצחק** [illegible] **רבי יצחק סורוצקין**, [illegible]

25 [illegible] **במכתב מאליהו** [illegible] 10 [illegible] ,(85 [illegible] **בבית הלוי** [illegible] :211 [illegible]

The Steipler heard of a *bochur* who was trying to emulate the Steiplerôs diligence by staying to all hours of the night learning and thus developing a schedule that turned night into day and day into night. The Steipler asked to speak to the *bochur.* At first, the Steipler cited *chazals* and stories from *gedolim* that actually supported this type of behavior and the *bochur* was elated. But then the Steipler reproached him: All this is true, **but… -** But there is a factor that needs to be the main consideration and trumps all other considerations ï **to be a normal person**! In the past, explained the Steipler, this was normal behavior for serious learners, but today this is no longer normal, and therefore all your arguments and justifications are irrelevant and if you persist the end will be tragic![26]

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26 **אבל!** - **להיות אדם נורמלי!**" (74-75).

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