

Analysis Without The Couch

Time is up. Time to pack up and go back to life outside this room. My head is swirling from the intense effort of reaching to understand new things. Even the air in here feels thick, with ideas, feelings, and shadows of past generations. I need to jostle myself, body and soul, back to the present moment. It feels like the end of a psychotherapy session.

FIRST PERSON Now, I have spent countless hours on either side of analytic chairs and couches and I know what a good, hard-working therapy hour feels like for both doctor and patient. Like this.

The funny thing is, I am not in a hushed, tastefully decorated psychiatrist's office. I am gathering my papers after my Bible study class at Drisha, a center for women's study of Jewish law and text.

Our schedule sounds like something out of a primer for intensive psychotherapy. We come five hours every week. Beginners in



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this work, we cannot go solo. Translation is arduous, concepts are difficult, our minds wander. There are stumbling blocks, resistances as I am used to calling them, all along the road to insight. We spend the first half of class divided in *chevruta*, duos of study partners studying the text in preparation for our teacher's lecture. We spend the entire semester on the first 21 sentences of Shemot, the book of Exodus.

I am struck at how my class, all women, engages in this study. We are most interested in shades of feeling and conflict implied by the text. We are completely absorbed by the theme of childbearing and cannot get enough of Shifra and Puah, the midwives who save the Hebrew babies. Are these brave heroines, the only two characters who have names in our text, Hebrew or Egyptian? We wonder — does the root verb used for oppression, *anneh*, used to describe the Hebrews' plight, mean to evoke our own poignant associations with fertility and childbearing? There are no accidents in the unconscious. Similarly it cannot be coincidental that variants of *anneh* are used to describe women throughout the Bible such as Hagar, Leah, and Hannah who suffer on the

road to motherhood.

As we parse the text, I count on my *chevruta* to resonate with the same struggles the text provokes in me. Like me, she is married, has three children and is in a healing profession. We could chat endlessly over coffee about our many mutual interests, but here, in class, we rarely stray from our assignment. We fight the natural entropy toward conversation and focus our effort on our text. As in the psychotherapeutic encounter, the presence and participation of another person is essential. At the same time, there is uncertainty and vulnerability in exposing myself to another. I know what it feels like to be unsure of how much to tell for fear of seeming foolish, deficient, or, worse still, unlikable. *Chevruta*, like the psychoanalytic situation, is a profoundly intimate encounter that renders both participants exposed and vulnerable. It is crucial that therapy and Torah study create emotionally safe spaces in which inquiry can intensify and occasionally lead to insight.

Those moments of clarity, be they in therapy sessions or Bible class, feel the same to me. I sense my own rush of excitement when I, my *chevruta*, or one of our



classmates has a wonderful "I've got it!" moment. Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra and the other great commentators light our way. We struggle to decode their cryptic messages the way an analyst works to retrieve a fleeting dream or a shard of a long forgotten memory. Underlying both psychoanalysis and Torah study is the belief that understanding can be achieved, that truth will again be revealed to those who devote themselves to inquiry.

It was apparent to me that my classmates and I span a wide spectrum of belief as to the divine origins of the texts before us. I am also sure that I am not the only one who has been in therapy. I know that my analytic hours spent at Drisha have convinced me that these two pursuits are not only compatible — they enhance one another. Both Torah study and psychoanalysis work through stories to make sense of our lives. The smallest action, the most terrible suffering is redeemed in the tapestry of meaning. For me, the quest to unravel personal narrative slides into the effort to understand the collective, sacred narrative. My personal history and mythology and those of my classmates are woven with the same threads we find in Torah.

Just as in my experience with psychotherapy, studying Bible has helped me find my route inward, to the sources of my own story. □