Orthodox Judaism and the Power to Change: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Jewish Community

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Applied Research Collective for American Jewry at NYU convenes scholars and practitioners, in and beyond the Jewish community, to collaboratively develop recommendations in funding and policy for Jewish foundations and organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

The question at the heart of this paper is both extremely broad and deeply personal, and at first glance, it might seem abstract and overwhelming. But whether or not a community—one steeped in tradition and intensely focused on survival—can change on a foundational level is an essential question that directly impacts the lives of so many born into Orthodox Judaism. Understanding and answering this question then becomes not just an intellectual exercise, but an opportunity to save lives; the lives of these individual people, and ultimately the life of the Jewish community. In order to begin to unpack the magnitude of this inquiry, I offer my personal story as a site to ground and actualize this question. I present my own journey here not because it is unique or particularly dramatic, but precisely because it isn’t. My story is just one among thousands of stories of Jewish people who have been marginalized by their Orthodox Jewish communities.
I was born to two immigrant parents from Egypt in a community commonly referred to as the “Syrian” Jewish community in Midwood, Brooklyn. This community is made up of Jews with heritage from various Middle Eastern countries, but mainly Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. The community’s practice varies from Modern Orthodoxy to ultra-Orthodoxy, or “black hat” Judaism. I was educated in a yeshivah from nursery through high school, where, unlike so many other yeshivah students, I received a solid education in both Judaic and secular studies. I prayed three times a day, wore tzitzit under my shirt and a kippah on my head, danced with my classmates every Rosh Chodesh, delivered Shabbat meals to families in need, and studied Talmud after school hours. I not only did all this (and more), but I loved it. I felt connected to God, to my community, and to Judaism in deep ways. I went to yeshivah and studied Talmud and davened not just because I was “forced” to, but because I cared about it and wanted it and felt grounded in a world that was so rich with tradition and meaning. As I got older, and became more and more aware of my homosexuality, I began to panic and search for a way out of those “abominable” feelings. I knew that my desire for the same sex was totally incongruent with the rest of my identity as a Jewish man and that it was incompatible with the community (and family) that I was born into and so loved. How could I possibly reconcile this within myself? Could I even give voice to something so unspeakable? How is it that the community that brought me joy and fulfillment could now cast me out? Why couldn’t there be a place for me?

In my journey to understand and try to find answers to these questions, I, along with thousands of others who don’t fit the normative mold, searched for a space to feel whole and connected again. Luckily for us, the larger Jewish community has created a plethora of alternatives to the more traditional, Orthodox world that we come from. I can easily enjoy a Kabbalat Shabbat at
Congregation Beith Simchat Torah, Lab/Shul, or Romemu and be accepted fully as my gay, Jewish self. I can watch *Trembling Before God* and see stories like my own and feel less alone. I may even be able to find an open-minded Orthodox therapist. I have done all of these things since leaving yeshivah more than 15 years ago, and while these spaces have been significant for me in my growth, they always fell short. I never quite belonged. It never really felt like home. The reason for this is really pretty simple: It was not my home. While the availability within the Jewish world to connect with others like me and to be accepted as a queer person was impactful, it could never be a replacement for the world I had come from and can’t be a part of anymore. These “solutions” provided by the larger Jewish community for me and other LGBTQ folks, as well as spaces for other marginalized groups within the Orthodox Jewish community (e.g., women, people of color), do not address the root issue that is begging to be addressed. That is not to say that these spaces shouldn’t exist—in fact, they are literally life savers for many people—but it is important to look beyond the building of alternative, open, Jewish spaces and address the structures that created the conditions that necessitated the building of those spaces in the first place. Can fundamentalist religious spaces accommodate the nuance and diversity of the individuals that make them up? Or does the very structure of the Orthodox Jewish community necessitate marginalization and exclusion of certain members in order to sustain itself? More broadly speaking, how does the Jewish community as a whole understand itself in terms of tradition, change, and outside influences?
An Analysis of Trauma

To answer this central question, I propose we examine it from a psychoanalytic standpoint. I have been served by this method as both a psychoanalyst and a patient of psychoanalysis, and I believe that this tool can be expanded and used to understand the psychology of a group of people (i.e., the Jewish community).

We can begin by asking why the Orthodox Jewish community diminishes and dismiss parts of itself and examining how this manifests. Through the use of psychoanalytic literature and through interviews with key community stakeholders—themselves grappling in different ways with this issue—a compelling and challenging picture develops, one that moves beyond the initial focus on the world of Orthodox Judaism, with implications for the entire American Jewish community at large.
Applying Freudian psychoanalytic concepts with the addition of a trauma lens will help us paint an even more accurate and useful picture of contemporary Jewish communal life.

The practice of using an individual model to understand a community is a well-trodden path in psychoanalytic theory, originating with Freud, who stated that “the contrast between Individual Psychology and Social or Group Psychology, which at first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely” (Freud, 1921/2017, p. 3). Freud is highlighting that the ways in which we understand the individual are not that different from how we understand our society at large—the same principles and ideas apply. Freud used this principle to great effect in his works on group and social psychology, most relevantly in *Moses and Monotheism*, in which he grapples with the particular psychology of the Jewish people. Applying Freudian psychoanalytic concepts with the addition of a trauma lens will help us paint an even more accurate and useful picture of contemporary Jewish communal life.

In my exploration of what unites the Jewish community, I found that various theorists have offered various answers (e.g., education, language, marriage), but I found that Malkie Schwartz, the founder of Footsteps (an organization that supports people leaving ultra-Orthodox Judaism), had the most succinct and resonant answer when she said, “Our trauma unites us.” That the Jewish community is informed by trauma is clearly manifest in the motivations and efforts of most large Jewish communal organizations. The idea of Jewish survival and continuity for the sake of survival and continuity is ubiquitous in the Jewish nonprofit world. In ultra-Orthodox spaces this idea is present in the many *kiruv* efforts of organizations like Oorah or Aish, where the goal of Jewish survival is front and center and stated clearly. Though ostensibly committed to building and bolstering community and connection, a thread of survivalism weaves throughout programs ranging from Birthright to One Table. But why is the American Jewish community so concerned with the continuity and survival of the Jewish people above all else? When an individual’s primary concern is survival, we cannot ignore the possibility that their trauma is informing their narrow focus; so, too, for a community. When a person is coping with trauma, they often cannot think of anything other than getting through the day and surviving, because “the human system of self-preservation seems to go on permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment” (Herman, 1997, p. 35). Anecdotally, I (and most other Orthodox people I know) was raised with the specter of the Holocaust and the threat that it could happen again at any time. While the Holocaust is the most acute and closest major
trauma in Jewish consciousness, there remains a very long history of trauma in the Jewish community going back to its very origin. As Ronnie Lesser points out, “For a people who have faced the specter of annihilation throughout their history, ensuring survival must be paramount” (2019, p. 46). We have to examine the ways people react to and manage that “specter of annihilation,” and what might be lost when survival is the highest priority.

Moving from communal intergenerational trauma and the focus on Jewish survival, we can now turn to individual psychological responses to trauma. The responses and coping tools a traumatized individual uses also apply to communities of trauma. Professor Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, explains that “denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level” (1997, p. 2). With this in mind, I propose we look for individual trauma responses and then apply them to the behaviors and mindset of the Jewish communal organism.

Herman organizes trauma responses into the three major categories of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. “Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; [and] constriction reflects the numbing response of surrender” (p. 35). Following these three trauma responses, and the major result of these reactions, is fragmentation, which will help complete the picture of the Jewish communal life we see today.

**Hyperarousal**

Evidence of Herman’s first category of response, hyperarousal, abounds in Jewish communal thinking and life. Along with the heavy focus on the Holocaust described above, the theme that came up repeatedly when interviewing stakeholders was the idea that any kind of communal change was seen as a threat to Jewish survival. In 2017, Rabbi Joseph Dweck, the Senior Rabbi of the Sephardic community in the UK, gave a now infamous (at least within Orthodox Jewish circles) speech in which he argued that the Torah prohibits only homosexual acts, not homosexual love. He received a great deal of backlash, which he situates squarely in the realm of communal fear. Dweck argues that the negativity from rabbis across the globe was not based on a halachic disagreement, but rather a deeply rooted fear that opening up the issue would threaten the security and stability of the Jewish community. This security threat was more important than the validity of his statements. As Dweck succinctly summarized, they prioritized “security over truth.”

The response to Rabbi Dweck’s speech is an example of hyperarousal, as are the general specter of communal fear of intermarriage, the banning of the internet in Haredi communities, and the persistent philanthropic fight for Jewish continuity. If we are fighting for our survival, then any indication of change, anything new, anyone “outside,” is a dangerous threat.
Herman’s second major trauma response is intrusion, which she describes as a repetitive process in which traumatic memories continue to enter into an individual’s consciousness. “Trauma arrests the course of normal development by its repetitive intrusion into the survivor’s life” (p. 37). Herman postulates that this repetition is an attempt by the individual to process the trauma and develop some mastery over it. Even with this positive intent, a prolonged state of intrusion compromises an individual’s growth. According to Freud, fighting against the intrusion of these traumatic memories is the basis of most pathology. He describes the process as such: “the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud, 1914, p. 150). How do we understand this unconscious repetition in communal terms? The larger Jewish community has been oppressed and excluded and “othered” throughout its history. I would argue that today this trauma manifests in the repetitive othering and exclusion of certain individuals within the community.

The fight against intrusion carries further consequences for the traumatized individual. As Herman points out, “the effort to ward off intrusive symptoms, though self-protective in intent, further aggravates the post-traumatic syndrome, for the attempt to avoid reliving the trauma too often results in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished life” (Herman, p. 42). This trauma response is prevalent in Orthodox communities in particular. Many interviewees pointed to the closed off nature of the community, shut out from the outside world. While the community, like the traumatized individual, may be doing this to protect itself, the insularity of Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox spaces can be harmful. Mordecai Levovitz, the Executive Director of JQY, described how artistic talent and inclination is discouraged in these communities. Not out of fear of breaking with halacha or tradition, but simply because creativity and personal expression pose a threat to the integrity of the communal structure. When a trauma response is so embedded and persistent within a community, members must fit into the narrowest of molds. The popular Israeli show Shtisel presents a fictionalized example of this issue, where the main character struggles with his inability to fully express the richness of his creative self. Art and creative expression widen a person’s consciousness and engagement with the outside world, but in their absence, the individual and the community are further impoverished.
Constriction

Herman’s final category of trauma response is constriction, which results when the impact of trauma is so overwhelming that a person freezes or detaches, both in the moment of the trauma and when reminded of it. Freud labeled this kind of response “dissociation.” Constriction, or dissociation, is a common defense, not only for traumatized individuals, but as a way in general to avoid repressed material in the unconscious. These “detached states of consciousness” (Herman, p. 43) prevent an individual from dealing with their trauma. As Herman points out, “Because these altered states keep the traumatic experience walled off from ordinary consciousness, they prevent the integration necessary for healing” (p. 45). In interview after interview, this theme of “walling off” in the Orthodox Jewish world came up repeatedly. Just as a disassociating individual is not aware of, and in fact, is actively avoiding, certain memories or feelings, so too the community, while dissociating, is actively unaware of parts of itself. Fraidy Reiss, founder of Unchained at Last, an organization fighting child marriages, described how she and many other women in the ultra-Orthodox community are shut down and turned away when describing domestic violence to their families and spiritual leaders. Turning a blind eye to the pain of fellow community members exemplifies Herman’s concept of being walled off from oneself. It is too painful to look at this terrible part, and so let us repress it and disconnect from it. The problem then emerges in individual or communal constriction, and “while this constriction is adaptive in captivity, it also leads to a kind of atrophy” (p. 87). This atrophy is evident in the thousands of people who have left Orthodox Judaism for these very reasons.

All three of these trauma responses start off as healthy adaptations to an overwhelming experience, but they eventually turn against an individual and “become disconnected from their source and take on a life of their own” (p. 34). In many cases, certain structures of marginalization have become so abstracted from their original source of trauma that they are taken for granted as facets of the Jewish community. As Herman points out, “Because post-traumatic symptoms are so persistent and so wide-ranging, they may be mistaken for enduring characteristics of the victim’s personality” (p. 49). Almost everyone I interviewed considered Orthodoxy’s intolerance toward difference as an inherent characteristic of the community. Naftuli Moster is the founder of Yaffed, leading advocacy efforts to ensure secular education for yeshivah students in New York.
In describing communal reactions to his work, he said that he seems to be fighting with a group of people fixed to a “mythical, almost supernatural, view of how they survive in which any change is a threat.” This abstracted, “mythical,” nature encapsulates Herman’s warning about the ways trauma inserts itself into the psyche, masquerading as enduring characteristics.

The final way in which trauma alters a person is through fragmentation, “whereby trauma tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion” (p. 34). On an individual, intrapsychic level, this presents as a splitting off of an unacceptable part of the ego from a person’s sense of self. However, those split off pieces are still present in the unconscious, thus the “fragmentation” of a complex self. These parts that are split off are the ones connected to traumatic memory and are not only “repressed in the ordinary sense of the word. Something worse happens to them. They are repudiated” (Krystal, 2002, p. 217). While, according to psychoanalytic theory, we all contain repressed memories that can be split off from the ego, in a trauma environment this happens in an even more violent and intense way. Looking back now to the subjects of this analysis—both Orthodoxy and the broader Jewish community—it seems to me that those marginalized individuals are the parts of our collective ego that are repudiated and split off. The Jewish community, suffering from intergenerational trauma and the resulting hyperarousing and constriction, adapted and survived through this splitting, this fragmentation. Those fragmented parts are projected out and then embodied by those individuals who are different from the norm and then decisively split off. On the ground, this looks a lot like my story and the stories of both marginalized people still living in these communities and those that have left (i.e., went “off the derech”). However, as theorists have explained, the fragmented parts need to be integrated in order for the person to flourish and be well. How then can we integrate the [fragmented parts of the] Jewish community?

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Recommendations

Much like in an initial meeting with an individual in my therapy office who presents with complex and long-term trauma, the work ahead for the Jewish community can seem insurmountable at first glance. In fact, many stakeholders I interviewed felt like effecting the kind of structural change needed to stop marginalization would be impossible. There were times throughout this process when I agreed. However, I also discovered moments of hope in my exploration over the past year. There is promising work being done and promising ideas are developing, and we can gain more insight only if we continue to look at these issues through a psychoanalytic framework.
I believe the first step in healing the community lies in the very basis of psychoanalysis: talk. Psychoanalysis is often referred to as the “talking cure” because its main tool for change and healing is getting a person to put feelings and memories into words. According to Herman, trauma symptoms “[can] be alleviated when the traumatic memories, as well as the intense feelings that accompanied them, [are] recovered and put into words” (p. 12). I have personally experienced the success of this talking cure as I slowly learned how to give voice to things that previously felt unspeakable. I also see it play out daily in my work with clients. In expanding the idea of a talking cure to a community-level intervention, the same rule applies: Let’s get all the parts of our community to speak. Over and over, interviewees expressed how hard it is to have community conversations. Not just empty talk, but a real “working through” of issues that exist in the community. Nevertheless, all felt that these conversations were a necessary first step. Organizations like Eshel (which creates community for LBGT Orthodox Jews and their loved ones) and JQY (which focuses on supporting Jewish LGBT youth) are purposefully creating space for conversation. Miryam Kabakov, the executive director of Eshel, explained that, “talking about it [queerness] is the first step because it takes it out of the shadows.” Despite resistance and vitriol in the ultra-Orthodox community, Fraidy Reiss at Unchained at Last is creating similar spaces of dialogue around abusive marriages.

Issues like domestic violence, homophobia, racism, and child abuse are beginning to be talked about across the Jewish denominational spectrum, but there is work yet to be done, and our funding and energy need to be going to organizations, congregations, and individuals who are promoting open dialogue. After Rabbi Dweck’s speech about homosexuality, one of the main critiques from other rabbis was that he discussed the issue in public. It is this quest for privacy, or repression, that is precisely the problem. We must be careful that as a community, we are doing everything we can to encourage these conversations to happen in the light of day.
The second policy recommendation derived from this research is an end to Jewish survival, or “continuity,” funding. As this paper elucidates, the Jewish community’s extensive focus on survival is a trauma response and leads to numerous maladaptive and damaging results for the self/community. One of the most surprising discoveries through my research came from Yaffed’s Naftuli Moster, who pointed out to me that the organizations funding his effort to improve education in yeshivahs were simultaneously supporting organizations like the UJO and Agudath Israel, who vehemently fight against his efforts. I heard this line from others as well, many too nervous to call it out directly for fear of funder retribution. The effects of trauma discussed in this paper, particularly fragmentation and dissociation, immediately come to mind when observing these kinds of funding patterns. It is only in this climate of trauma that one funder can support an organization looking to uplift conversation for LGBT Jews and also support an organization uplifting the voices of conversion therapists. The fact that funders are not cognizant of this hypocrisy demonstrates the amount of disconnect and atrophy that can happen in a state of traumatic reaction. We must move beyond continuity as a central goal in Jewish strategic thinking. This is not to say we should be blind to anti-Semitism or uncaring about the next generation, but if outliving the anti-Semites is the only motivation, we will lose our sense of self, and a self-defined sense of purpose.
Conclusion

So, what then should be the anchor of Jewish communal funding, if not survival and continuity? Reflection on my own journey and therapeutic practice with patients, once a safe space is created to talk and process thoughts and feelings, an individual is able to move out of survival mode. The final step after that is to connect (and often reconnect) to deeply held values. When a person is in survival mode—repressing and dissociating and fragmenting—they lose touch with who they are, what they stand for, what makes them happy and fulfilled. This sense of self needs to be identified anew and built up again so they stop negatively identifying with their trauma and begin to positively identify with themselves. Therefore, our final step in funding policy must be to identify the values we have as a Jewish community and direct funding accordingly. We must promote reasons to engage in Jewish life that are for their own sake, and not simply because of a commitment to continuity devoid of content.
It can be incredibly difficult to look inside ourselves and see the parts that are painful and ugly. Instead, we often look outward and try to fix problems that lay at arm’s length. But, as Freud says in describing the treatment of an individual, “He must find the courage to direct his attention to the phenomena of his illness” (1921/2017, p. 152). And it does take courage. It took courage for me to look at the parts of myself that I was raised to deny and reject, and to then own them and integrate them into my identity. It takes courage for my clients to confront the abuse they experienced as children, understand its impact, process their feelings, and then build a fulfilling life for themselves. And it will take courage for the Jewish community to look at itself in the mirror—its full self—and address the injustices and oppression it exacts on itself.

The community must acknowledge that hurt, have meaningful conversations about it, and work to repair and integrate the fractured pieces. Only then can it build a community that is not just surviving, but embodies Jewish values and thrives.

References


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