

The Kabbalistic Tree of Life in Clinical Practice

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Abstract:

Though many clinicians have integrated spiritual modalities into clinical practice, the psychology of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, has attracted little attention despite reported brief therapy applications. This article explores the clinical use of the Tree of Life, the Kabbalah's conceptual map of the body/mind. On the strength of anecdotal reports, it is suggested that the Tree of Life can facilitate the assessment of clients and can thereby guide the therapeutic process. This paper will introduce the Tree of Life as it potentially informs clinical assessment, guides the intervention phase of psychotherapy and facilitates brief therapy.

Biography:

Annette Poizner, MSSW, Ed.D., RSW, is a Director of the Milton H. Erickson Institute of Toronto. She founded and chairs the Jewish Health Alliance, a continuing education organization which explores the intersection between Judaism and the healing arts. She completed her graduate social work degree at Columbia University. In the course of completing a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of Toronto, she investigated and wrote a doctoral dissertation on the clinical use of graphology. Her as yet to be published manuscript, *Reading the Soul*, presents graphology through the lens of Kabbalah.

The Tree of Life is an iconic symbol that is discussed with frequency in classic Jewish mystical texts. It is understood as a conceptual map of reality with the following explanation: according to Kabbalah, the Creator manifests 10 specific attributes when interacting with the creation. He used these attributes to create the world and continues to use them to maintain his creation. These attributes are consequently the core constituent elements of creation. Every being or object is comprised of these attributes in some configuration or permutation. For example, a rock may be composed of several of the lower attributes (which are denser and therefore relate to physicality). In contrast, only the human, made in the image of the Divine, is composed of all 10 attributes in approximately equal measure. In fact, the 10 attributes and the Tree of Life, more generally, are understood to correspond to the human body and to the psyche. The Tree of Life, then, is offered as a map of the self and as such provides an interesting framework for understanding human nature (Schneider, 2001).

The clinical use of the Tree of Life has garnered minimal attention from mental health practitioners despite clinical literature documenting this use (Frankel, 2003, Weiss, 2005). This paper introduces the Tree of Life by providing its context in Jewish scripture and summarizing how this map conceptualizes the human psyche and understands mental health. Finally, the clinical use of the Kabbalah's framework will be discussed, particularly referencing its application to the practice of brief psychotherapy.

The Tree of Life in Jewish Scripture:

First mention of the Tree of Life is found in the Hebrew Bible. According to the creation narrative, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil were both located in the center of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9). After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the

Tree of Knowledge, they were banished from the Garden to prevent them from accessing the Tree of Life and eating its fruit, thereby achieving eternal life (Genesis 3: 22).

The Tree of Life is mentioned only four times in the Hebrew Bible. In contrast, the ancient mystical texts, designed to elucidate the inner, hidden dimension of sacred text, make frequent mention of it. Likely, the oldest such reference is found in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Creation), a book whose authorship is undetermined. The date of authorship is also unknown. While commentaries of this book were written in the 10th century, references to this text appeared in the first century. Some traditions assert that this text dates back to biblical times. According to the text itself, its teachings are those of Abraham. Other sources attribute the text to Rabbi Akiva who lived from 12-132 CE (Kaplan, 1997).

The Tree of Life As a Map of Body/Mind:

The Tree of Life, visually represented by a diagram of 10 circles organized along three pillars and inter-connected by 22 pathways, functions as a map of both the human body and the psyche (and also as a map of the creation, more generally). Beyond just being a map of attributes and the pathways which connect them, the Tree of Life represents the energy flow between Creator and creation. It is an energy grid which is animated by light that courses in from Heaven above. The flow of light coming in is adequate to ensure vibrant health for the system as long as all the channels or pathways in the system permit full flow. When there is significant impurity in the system, though, channels become blocked, preventing the proper distribution of energy throughout the energy grid.

Describing the functioning of the Tree of Life, Steinsaltz (2006) recounts an allegory: a king has a small island which is inhabited by birds. The king has arranged an intricate network of

channels which provide the birds with the necessary food and water and, under normal circumstances, they will access the flow of nutrient without interruption. If, though, the birds play in the dirt and peck at the channels, they may block or break the channels, partly obstructing the flow from above. In keeping with this metaphor, we will understand that the state of flow that characterizes any given individual's energy grid will relate in part to the avoidance of sin. In other words, the practice of right thought, speech and action promotes purity and encourages optimal flow in the system.

At this point, it becomes clear that any given pathway or attribute in the energy grid can be characterized by blockage or flow. Clean channels facilitate the optimal flow of energy and are associated with vibrant health. Each individual can choose a lifestyle which will encourage purity, facilitating the free flow of channels, or its opposite. The individual can pursue self-perfection or choose to neglect this task. The individual who fails to maintain a state of purity is subject to distortions in feeling, thinking or doing. Negativity takes root which can manifest psychologically as difficult symptoms or behaviorally as inappropriate or immoral conduct.

To add more complexity, each individual is endowed with areas of blockage in his or her energy grid. The Creator deliberately implants flaw, physical, spiritual or psychological, so that each human can participate in a type of self-repair which, if done consistently, leads to ever-increasing levels of psychospiritual growth. Those individuals who have, in one way or other, perfected an energy grid otherwise flawed by defect earn the distinction of having truly made themselves in the image of the Divine -- who Himself manifests perfection (Luzzatto, 1997).

The Tree of Life and Optimal Mental Health:

One of the criticisms leveled at Western psychiatry is its focus on pathology (Walker,

1996). The Diagnostic Statistical Manual-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) delineates a detailed map of pathology. Classifying disorders and maladies, it lacks a systemic, organized way of understanding optimal mental health. In contrast, the Kabbalah's model of the psyche distinguishes itself by providing a hypothetical "map" of mental health in its ideal state.

As an energy model, the Kabbalistic Tree denotes 10 attributes, each of which, the theory asserts, must be cultivated in right measure in order to facilitate best health. Further, the map's 22 pathways connect the attributes to each other. Each pathway is associated with a particular psychological skill set, character trait or a particular archetype which must be mastered in order to experience optimal mental health. By way of example, the model asserts that each individual must be able to experience him or herself as strong and dynamic (thereby animating the archetype of the 'hero') and, conversely, must also be able to generate humility and have the capacity to be receptive to leadership from others when this behavior is appropriate. The two 'skills' just mentioned are each associated with one particular pathway in the mystical model.

When a given attribute is animated in right measure the individual expresses that attribute in a balanced way. By way of example, if the attribute governing the capacity to be warm and loving is properly animated, the individual is appropriately warm and loving -- neither too needy, on one hand, nor too emotionally distant, on the other. In virtually any circumstance, this individual expresses the appropriate degree of emotional warmth. When this attribute is overly-energized, the individual may be too dependent, too demonstrative or too oriented to pleasing others. When this attribute is under-energized, the individual may avoid emotional expression and be emotionally withdrawn. In order to experience optimal mental health, every attribute must be animated in a measured way.

Achieving a harmonious balance between the attributes is not simple for an additional reason: every individual has been endowed with one or two attributes which are over-energized. These attributes represent favored ways of relating in the world. Strongly energized attributes fuel talents and overriding interests, on one hand, but also fuel vices, on the other. Any over-charged attribute necessarily promotes excesses or even addictions in the personality. By way of example, the individual who possesses the attribute of discipline in overabundance may be productive and hard-working but may also be too frugal, too critical or otherwise be emotionally withdrawn.

The Kabbalah's model encourages individuals to manifest talents while taming down the vices that coexist beside the strengths. Doing this will create better energetic flow in the energy grid, taming those attributes which are bloated and encouraging better flow to attributes which are under-energized.

The reader may note that this model normalizes psychological problems by asserting that each and every individual is faced with excesses that need to be managed. There is no stigma associated with character flaws. The Kabbalah sees these challenges as no less than the reason the individual incarnates and perceives their remedy as the path to self-perfection.

In summary, Kabbalah offers a detailed map of those attributes, character traits and specific skill sets it deems essential for optimal mental health. The individual pursues perfection by calibrating each of the above. When properly modulated, they all operate harmoniously together and the identity emerges. Ten attributes and 22 pathways transform into the experience of a self that is unified.

The concept of the unified self warrants elaboration. By way of metaphor, a cook can

place soup ingredients in a pot but all the ingredients remain separate until the soup is cooked. Those ingredients only become unified (and useful) when they are cooked together, each intermingling with the other. In the mental health professions, we recognize the importance of integrating the disparate parts of the self which some call "parts" or "ego states" (Stone & Stone, 1989) -- likened to the soup ingredients -- into a unified, singular identity. This singularity of self, once achieved, promotes stability in the personality and is a hallmark of psychological health. It also has the individual coming to resemble the Divine -- who is known, in the Jewish vernacular, as One.

The Tree of Life in Clinical Assessment:

The Tree of Life has two specific applications in the context of clinical assessment, the second of which is a skill which follows from the first. The first application involves using the Kabbalah's intricate composite map of the psyche as a lens through which to understand personality and as a frame to map out intra-psyche dynamics of individual clients. Once the practitioner has achieved a strong working knowledge of the latter framework, he or she is able to engage in the second application: using that framework to interpret dreams or other projective material that clients bring to sessions.

Assessing Clients using the Tree of Life:

Psychotherapists who wish to use the Tree of Life clinically must study the attributes and pathways in some depth, familiarizing themselves with the character trait or skill that relates to each. Once they acquire a good working knowledge of this model, they can understand client's symptoms or personality traits through the lens of Kabbalah and can wake up wake up n formulate detailed feedback to give to each client in the assessment phase of therapy. That general

framework has been introduced above. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a detailed treatment of the character trait or skill sets associated with each of the 10 attributes and 22 pathways.

Understanding Projective Material through the Lens of the Tree of Life:

Once the therapist has a working knowledge of the mystical model and its component parts, he or she potentially uses that framework when interpreting clients' dreams or other projective material that clients bring into therapy. By way of elaboration, projective psychology is a discipline which presumes (a) that humans are fundamentally expressive and (b) that people inadvertently project their personality styles and character traits when they perform virtually any task. Projective assessment has clinicians analyzing materials that clients submit, which could include artwork, drawings, writing assignments or other productions, and discerning information about the client's personality and character (Murstein, 1965). Interestingly, anecdotal evidence accrued by this author suggests that the mystical model may have application when performing projective assessment, allowing therapists to give clients accurate feedback about their personality styles and character traits after analyzing materials using the lens of the mystical framework.

With regards to additional projective materials that therapists can use to analyze their clients: clients can be asked to make up a story in the session and themes generated can be analyzed using the mystical framework. Clients can generate a list of their 10 earliest memories which are then analyzed to reveal personality issues (Shulman & Mosak, 1988). In this author's experience, those 10 memories will show a correspondence to the 10 attributes of the Tree of Life and looking at them from this vantage point allows the informed therapist to derive

additional personal information.

This author has also explored the correspondence between graphic characteristics of handwriting and the 10 attributes of the Tree of Life. Handwriting can be analyzed to reveal information that relates to the personality and mental health of the writer (Poizner, 2003; Poizner, 2004) but can also be analyzed through the lens of the mystical model. In summary, clinicians who are familiar with the mystical model can derive personal information about their clients on the basis of projective material that clients either bring to session or that which they generate within the session.

Monitoring Change using the Tree of Life:

While therapists can use the mystical framework at the outset of therapy to gain insight into clients they can also use the framework over the course of therapy to perform ongoing assessments and register changes as they unfold. One of the most simple means of doing so involves the use of imagery. Clients can be directed to image any given specific pathway. By way of example, a client may be asked to image a pathway that, according to the Tree of Life, connects the right shoulder to the left shoulder. The client is not forewarned about which skill set is associated with that particular pathway in the energy grid.

In this author's experience, some clients, harboring extreme blockage in a specific channel, will not be able to conjure up an image of that channel. Some clients will be able to imagine the channel but will perceive that there is minimal flow of energy moving through it. Other clients who have no difficulties in the relevant skill set may report a channel flush full of energy. On the basis of anecdotal evidence, this author has found that clients' self-reports about the flow in channels reveals information about whether they have or lack mastery with the

character trait or skill set that relates to that given channel.

The Tree of Life in Treatment:

Once a therapist has completed an assessment of the client and generated hypotheses about those areas of the client's energy grid which are blocked, bloated, under-functioning or clear and balanced, treatment can target desired change in the energy grid. The mystically inclined therapist can do specific resource building exercises to help the client cultivate the particular character trait or skill set under discussion. The therapist might use Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (Shapiro, 1995) or techniques derived from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Andreas & Andreas, 1987) in order to help the client cultivate particular character traits or attributes. Therapists may use hypnosis or whatever other modalities they routinely use to strengthen the client's access to a desired personality trait. While performing these exercises, the client is also directed to imagine the strong flow of energy coursing through the body's energy grid, specifically focusing attention on those spatial locations in the body that correspond to the character trait or skill set under discussion.

In summary, therapists can use the Kabbalah's hypothetical map of the psyche to tentatively identify those character or personality traits that the client needs to cultivate in order to achieve better mental health. Therapists can use the model to plan a course of treatment designed to activate the related channels and attributes. Therapists can also consider relationships between pathways and attributes, as posited by the model. For example, if a client is weak in a particular attribute, the therapist may begin by working on pathways that lead into the attribute according to the map. In other words, the therapist may not initially directly work on helping the client to cultivate a needed attribute. Instead, the therapist may target those character trait or skill

set associated with channels that feed into the energy center in question as a less direct but in some cases preferred strategy.

As an aside, one notes that this model requires clients to cultivate character traits or skill sets that are not necessarily deemed important in secular models of psychology. For example, one archetype that is construed by the mystical model as necessary for proper flow of energy in the chest area is that of the sage or wise elder. Kabbalah asserts that each individual needs exposure to elders and ultimately needs to manifest this archetype personally in order to achieve optimal mental health. Thus we see that Kabbalah, with its decidedly spiritual orientation, extends contemporary notions about those fundamental and necessary facets of selfhood that need to be developed in order to actualize the self.

Brief Therapy Applications:

In the context of current economic realities, therapists need assessment tools which expedite treatment by helping them quickly access information about any given client's personality style and intra-psychic situation. This author would assert that therapists who learn the mystical framework are well able to use this frame to interpret clients' dreams and also other projective materials that clients bring to session. When therapists are able to provide substantial personal information to clients within the first two meetings of therapy, they establish their credibility and clients often become intrigued, hopeful and motivated to undertake treatment, facilitating a successful brief therapy.

A case example illustrates the value of using the psychology of Kabbalah in the context of brief therapy. Hannah, 18, had been experiencing worsening obsessive compulsive symptoms for the past 18 months. She was gripped with worries that she was dying of a terminal disease.

She sporadically went to her doctor for a medical exam and each time he found her to be healthy. She routinely accepted the doctor's reassurance but then came to doubt it. Her worries always returned.

Further, every night, she would perform extensive checking rituals to ensure the safety of her parents' home. She could only rest after checking the furnace, the windows, all locked doors, the stove and other potential safety hazards. These rituals took two hours to complete. She was in her last year of high school and did not have any specific plans for her future because she was so preoccupied with the symptoms she was experiencing.

Her therapist referred her to a psychiatrist in order to determine whether medication was indicated. In an effort to avoid medicating the client, the psychiatrist recommended an assessment with this author. Upon reviewing the projective materials she had submitted (which included a written account of her 10 earliest memories, a handwriting sample and two projective drawings) the author hypothesized that this young woman was experiencing a pronounced deficiency in two particular energy channels located on the left side of the body. One of these channels governs the archetype of the hero and associates with the person's ability to experience the self as strong and dynamic. The other pathway associates with the individual's ability to powerfully move forward and have an impact in his or her environment. These psychological strengths allow the person to feel robust and competent in the world and were targeted for therapeutic intervention.

This author had 10 one-hour sessions with the client over as many weeks. The goal was to use a range of exercises, imagery techniques and therapeutic modalities in order to help strengthen her experience of herself as strong and well able to have a strong impact on her

environment. When the brief therapy was terminated, the client's symptoms had abated and she was only spending five minutes reviewing potential safety hazards in the home before bed. The client went on to enroll in a college program, having decided on a vocation that involved working with children.

Conclusion:

Using the psychology of Kabbalah to understand clients and to help clients understand themselves may expedite the assessment phase of therapy and catalyze the client to participate in a brief therapy process in an animated and motivated manner. Additional research is necessary to further explore the value of using the Tree of Life as a frame of reference in clinical practice. This will only occur if clinicians begin to extend their interest into one of the lesser-known spiritual frameworks that begs to be investigated.

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