

My Unique Pathology

By Mordechai Gafni

Mystical master Nachman of Bratzlav tells the following story: A son leaves his home and travels for many years in distant lands. Upon his return he tells his father that he has become a master craftsman. Particularly he has learned to make menorot—candelabrum. His father, wanting to demonstrate his son's wisdom and craft to the community, invites all the master craftsmen to see his work. The craftsmen, however, all quietly tell the father that they think the son's work is lacking; indeed each points out a different deficiency in the son's work. Both hurt and disturbed, the father confronts his son with the poor reviews. To which his son replies: "You will notice, father, that each of the criticisms addresses a different part of the lamp. In fact the deficiency that each person saw was a reflection not of the menorah but of themselves—of their own particular emptiness."

Nachman's point is that the true illumination the candelabrum can provide begins with the identification of each person's unique deficiency. To see the light means undergoing a spiritual transformation—what the book of illumination, the Zohar, calls "higher teshuvah" (higher repentance). However as a close reading of the Idra Raba reveals, "my light," literally, "my zohar," can only be reached through "my darkness." My personal shadow is the path to uncover my personal light.

We were all raised to think the light is the force that stands against the darkness. And, ultimately, we inherited the belief that in the long run good triumphs over bad and light dispels darkness. A famous wisdom text from biblical myth reads, "Wisdom is more powerful than folly, as light is more powerful than darkness."

However, the masters of the Kabbalah, ancient teachers from whom the Baal Shem received wisdom, interpret this text in a novel and radically different way: wisdom is more powerful when it comes "from" folly and light is more powerful when it comes "from" the depth of the darkness. That is, for the Kabbalists, the highest source of light is darkness. Mystical philosopher Schneur Zalman of Liadi asserts that this is not only true about light in the universe, but is true about ourselves as well. Our highest light comes from our darkness. This is the light that comes from the shadow.

At this point I want to significantly deepen our understanding of shadow, which was made popular in the West through Jungian psychology. My interest in doing so is not purely conceptual—it is very practical as well. I want to personalize the shadow so that we can begin to see that my personalized shadow is the path to uncover my personalized light. To gain clarity, I am going to refer to the concept of the shadow with a term new to the current discussion—pathology. "Shadow," is not quite the right word, because it doesn't allow us to see the connection between the spiritual and the physical. I introduce "pathology" because of its immediate physical association; tissue pathology refers to something going wrong in the normal functioning of the organism.

In order to understand why physical pathology is important as a complementary image to shadow, I need to introduce a core concept of the Kabbalah: "Mibshari. Through my flesh I vision God."

This quote from Job will be the guiding principle of the remainder of this essay. For kabbalistic readers of the Book of Job, this verse means that "through my flesh"—that is through my physical form and its guiding principles—I can understand much about my spiritual/psychological form. The concrete physical plane of reality mirrors and therefore models the spiritual realm. For the mystical reader of the biblical myth, to "vision God" is to understand being, for God and being are one.

Post-Lurianic Kabbalists go even one step further and read this verse with a pronounced emphasis on the word "my." My flesh means not only my physical form, but the body of my unique life experience. The verse is thus taken to mean, I access the epic of being through the drama of the psyche. And I can only access psyche through my psyche, i.e., my fully unique story. Herman Hesse in the prologue to *Demian* writes, "I have ceased to question stars and books; I have begun to listen to the teachings my blood whispers to me".

Motivated by the "mibisari—though my flesh" idea, biblical myth constantly draws analogies between the causes and manifestations of psychospiritual sickness and physical illness—that is to say, pathology. The teachings of blood.

One of the most powerful blood teachings is the notion that our spiritual pathologies follow a pattern similar to our physical pathologies. Let's unpack one image inherent in this teaching of startling relevance.

Our physical organism is fully unique. Each human being has a fully distinctive physical signature. Our immune system, for example, is designed to recognize and destroy any foreign substances—microbes, tumors, bacteria—which seek to violate the uniqueness of our signature. And because the signature of our body is unique, its pathological responses are also unique. No two tumors are the same. For this reason doctors can only diagnose in the most general way, based on statistical probabilities. Statistics however—as my friend Dr. Mark Kirschbaum, a bone marrow researcher at the Weizman Institute, verified for me—are by definition an incomplete guide as they ignore the radical uniqueness of every body.

Through my flesh I vision God—mibisari. Just as every body has a unique signature, so does every spirit. I have called the signature of the spirit a "soul print." A soul print is the unique story of the individual. The soul print's mantra, its call to holy and holistic living, is "Live Your Story."

Spiritual disease is the expression of a person not living their story, the psychological expression of that person's violation of the unique patterns of their spirit. When the psyche's signature is forged, pathological symptoms are not long in appearing. In a word, psychic pathology—our personal shadow—is a result of our failure to realize our particular soul print.

Furthermore, just as any given pathology itself is unique to the physical organism which experiences the disease—no two tumors are alike—it is unique in the psychospiritual realm as well. Specific shadow symptoms—anger, fear, phobias, jealousies, obsessions, lack of certain kinds of boundaries or discipline—reflect the specific nature of the soul print which has been violated. Not which symptoms but how the symptoms show up, in what particular intensity, texture, and frequency, can tell me much about the soul print that is not being expressed.

This idea of such a unique pathology—not just a shadow but a personalized shadow—lies at the heart of the thinking of nineteenth-century mystic Mordechai Lainer of Ishbitz and the school of students who followed him. The following is a brief formulation of his idea of

unique pathology which I have woven from his writing and from the pen of his student known as Tzadok the Priest from Lublin.

Everyone knows the place of his particular vulnerability to his darkness—to the attacks of his primal drives ... every person has a unique chisaron (pathology or shadow) which inhered in them from the day of their birth ... every person has a unique soul tikkun (fixing) to do in this world ... and this fixing is connected to his unique chisaron with which he was born.

And it is this place which is the vessel of his potential blessing.

It is with this place that the person must establish keshet ... an intimate relationship.

The first key word in the passage is "chisaron" which I have translated in the parentheses as "pathology" or "shadow." The literal translation of "chisaron," however, is some combination of the English words "lack," "absence," or "emptiness." We all are empty in different ways. There is a part of each of us that we would like to fill but that remains empty. In the Bible, the writer Kohelet has already pointed out that there is no saint without his share of pathology. Pathology is something we share in common. It is also true, however, that we are all pathological—as we are all silly—in wholly individual and unique ways.

Spiritual disease at its ultimate source is rooted in our unlived lives, in the feeling that we do not really exist in the deepest existential resonance of that word. We all have different unlived stories. I don't experience pathological symptoms because I haven't lived your story. I experience them because I have not lived my story. When the light of my soul print is pushed into the shadows, it festers and reemerges as the heart of darkness.

What is so hopeful and exciting about this idea is that it provides us with a yellow brick road back to our soul print. Chisaron as a signature characteristic actually reveals the unique work that the soul is called to do in this world. Moreover, it is critical to note that this chisaron, this unique pathology, is not a function of childhood, according to Lainer. On the contrary, he states clearly that every person is born with their unique chisaron. We are—according to the Lurianic Kabbalah from which Lainer derives—given parents who help us actualize our soul print. That could mean that they provide the condition of love so necessary for soul print perception or conversely that they are the force against which we must rebel or from which we must flee in order to achieve soul print. Contrary to Alice Miller and a host of orthodox Freudians, Lurianic Kabbalah believes that our soul print and not our parents determine our destiny. And that is a hopeful thought indeed.

Rebbe Mordechai Gafni serves as Dean of Melitz Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. This column is based on his forthcoming book, *Soul Prints*, (Pocket Books, 2000).

Source Citation

Gafni, Mordechai. 2000. My Unique Pathology. *Tikkun* 15(4): 8.