

# Positive psychology and judaism



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Expressing gratitude is something that is seen in various forms in Judaism; we have blessings for simple things like food and wine, and we have blessings for more powerful things, like love and healing the sick. However, there are traditions in Judaism that often remind us of our sins and mistakes, mainly during Yom Kippur. These traditions should they be taken too seriously can be psychologically detrimental and can produce unhealthy behaviors. Since Judaism requires us to express our gratitude through prayer, Judaism and Positive Psychology coincide with each other in that Positive Psychology focuses on what makes life worth living. Since Judaism has certain traditions that constantly remind us of the suffering of the Jewish people and can lead to unhealthy behaviors, integrating Positive Psychology into Judaism can prevent possible cognitive dysfunctions stemming from Yom Kippur traditions while still retaining the essence of the holiest day in Judaism.

Yom Kippur is Judaism's holiest day. Immediately following the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur marks a day for atonement in which we recognize the sins we've committed over the past year and atone for them. Yom Kippur is the day we feel closest to God, which is why we ask God for forgiveness through prayer. Atoning for past sins can make a person more self-aware, and in doing so this person can realize what actions he or she needs to take in order to become a better person. Yom Kippur's origins trace back to just months after Moses freed the Jewish people from Egypt. After Moses received the ten commandments tablets from God on Mount Sinai, he returned to see his people worshipping a golden calf. In order to repent for the sin of his people, Moses went back up to Mount Sinai to ask forgiveness

from God. Because of this, we are called upon to recognize the mistakes we have made over the past year and absolve them.

When split into thirds, the word “ atonement” becomes “ at-one-ment,” meaning that during Yom Kippur, Jews across the world become one with God and themselves. This sense of being one with God can be categorized into Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, specifically the level of Self-Actualization. Abraham Maslow defined Self-Actualization as “ realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, and seeking personal growth” (McLeod 3). As we atone for our sins, an aspect of personal growth comes along with it, in that when we recognize our past mistakes and modify our behavior to avoid repeated commitment of that said mistake, we have grown as people. Acknowledging that one has committed a sin and taking action to prevent repetition is an integral part of self-fulfillment as well, in that one can “ accept themselves and others for what they are” (McLeod 5). This is an example of healthy atonement, especially since there aren’t any self-destructive behaviors taking place.

When confronted with the concept of Yom Kippur, one usually thinks of repenting for their sins over the past year. However, given the right personality type, a person can overcompensate for the sins they committed and begin to focus solely on repentance, taking over their life. This can be seen as an obsessive-compulsive behavior. Psychologist Sigmund Freud compared over-atonement to interminable hand washing or extreme linen folding (Weiss). Cognitive behavioral therapists treat such ritual behaviors through exposure therapy. Just as germaphobes are encouraged to interact with dirty objects through exposure therapy, those who participate in “

spray-fire atonement” are encouraged to atone for the sins they know they have committed. Instead of atoning for hypothetical or future sins, atoning for verified sins can instill a feeling of achievement within a person while avoiding creating self-destructive tendencies.

Given the right personality type, one can become consumed by repenting for their sins and any future sins they might commit. Not only can these tendencies lead to obsessive-compulsive behaviors as stated previously, this over-repentance can also lead to learned helplessness and depression.

When one atones for sins both known and hypothetical, there comes a point where no progress in repentance is being made. When “ spray-fire atoners” want to keep repenting for their sins without making progress, the repeated failure to do so results in a behavior known as learned helplessness. This attitude basically shows itself as a belief that a person cannot change their situation due to outside factors, resulting in a lack of motivation to reach their set goal. While this may seem like a viable way to prevent spray-fire atonement, the inability to atone in a person subject to obsessive-compulsive tendencies can lead to losing hope in themselves, and ultimately depression.

Positive Psychology manifests itself in the traditions of Yom Kippur in various manners besides the atonement aspect of the holy day. Directly after the fasting period, the Jewish people are mandated to break the fast at sundown among family and friends. As is with any meal in a Jewish home regardless of their chosen branch, the reciting of blessings always takes place. While the blessings over wine, bread, fruit, and various other food items may seem routine or repetitive, the expression of gratitude for something as common

as food displays a sense of gratitude that is one of the foundational aspects of Positive Psychology. Rabbi Rick Schechter believes that Judaism and Positive Psychology make excellent companions, and that the discoveries in Positive Psychology are mirrored in Judaism, albeit thousands of years prior. For example, the Talmud advises the Jewish people to say one hundred blessings per day, with each prayer expressing gratitude for God and his creations. Positive Psychology's recent developments show that a daily practice of gratitude can increase happiness and decrease depression for up to six months (Schechter). One can simply experience psychological benefits such as increased optimism and heightened awareness (Elmon) through prayer. Harvard University professor Tal Ben-Shahar teaches a positive psychology class in which even he sees parallels in his curriculum and his Jewish upbringing.

There have been many studies in which gratitude is proven to yield psychological benefits. For example, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of UC Davis and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami conducted an experiment in which participants were asked to write down events that affected them in a positive or negative manner and their feelings towards said events over a ten week. The results showed that the “ positive event” group were showing more gratitude and therefore feeling more optimistic about their lives. This group was also more likely to exercise, yielding health benefits as well. The inverse was true for the “ negative event” group, who frequented physicians due to higher levels of stress stemming from the focus on negative events (Harvard Health Publishing). This is directly related to prayer in Judaism. Expressing gratitude through prayer will yield health

benefits as well as an optimistic outlook on life purely through being grateful for God's creations, no matter how commonplace they might be. This study can also be applied to Yom Kippur, in that those who participate in "spray-fire atonement" will have similar results as the "negative event" group. When overcompensating for their sins, participants of spray-fire atonement will be subject to increased levels of stress. These increased stress levels can lead to unhealthy behaviors such as social withdrawal, drug/alcohol abuse, and eating disorders.

Another study regarding gratitude conducted by Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman of the University of Miami showed a correlation between gratitude and well being. Participants were asked to perform a once-weekly activity, one of them being writing and personally delivering a gratitude letter for someone who hadn't been properly acknowledge for their kindness. Upon doing so, the participants experienced a huge increase in happiness scores (Harvard Health Publishing). While this study can't necessarily prove cause and effect, the results are strong enough to show a positive correlation between gratitude and well being. This can also be seen in Judaism through prayer and even some of the holidays. While Hanukkah may seem like a Jewish adaptation of Christmas to the outside eye, the Hanukkah story has aspects of gratitude sprinkled into the age-old tale that even some Jews seem to overlook. The Hanukkah miracle of one day's supply of oil lasting for eight days prompted the Jewish sages to establish an eight-day festival to celebrate their victory against the Greeks and the miracle given by God that their oil lasted for eight days. Gratitude shows itself in other holidays as well. The New Year of the Trees, known as Tu Bishvat, can be seen as an

expression of gratitude towards God's greatest creation: Earth. In Israel, Tu Bishvat is also celebrated as an ecological awareness day in order to spread the concept of *tikkun olam*. Sukkot is another holiday with aspects of gratitude mixed in. Celebrated just five days after Yom Kippur, Sukkot commemorates the harvest and sheltering of the Jews after their escape from Egypt. As the Israelites trekked across the barren desert to the Promised Land, God provided food and water to keep them alive and able to settle in Israel. The Sukkah represents the huts that the Israelites made as temporary shelters in the desert, prompting us to remember their trek to the Promised Land and the help given to them by God.

Positive Psychology reveals itself in Judaism albeit very subtly and only to the trained eye. When delved into completely, it isn't very difficult to draw the conclusion that Positive Psychology and Judaism are intertwined and should be used in tandem to further enhance one's religious experience while practicing traditions in a healthy manner. The link between expressing gratitude and reciting prayers can lead to a healthier lifestyle and an enhanced religious experience while striving to reach the level of Self-Actualization outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. While concepts such as obsessive-compulsive repenting and spray-atonement exist, it is important to take preventative measures against these self-debilitating behaviors to avoid possible unhealthy behaviors and mental disorders, while simultaneously preserving the essence of Judaism.

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