

‘It is lonely to be a single voice insisting on holding a fixed ethic...’

Samuel Landau



Samuel Landau is a community rabbi and a trainee clinical psychologist. Here, he reflects on how wearing these two hats has required frequent consideration of difference, diversity and tolerance.

When I first embarked on a life wearing two hats, I would often joke with my congregation, ‘We Jews are *meshugah* [Yiddish for mad or crazy] – psychology must be helpful!’ Perhaps my off-the-cuff remark showed how unprepared I was for the challenge of integrating a life of clinical psychology with that of the rabbinate.

At first this conflict might seem strange. Both psychology and the clergy are about supporting people to make changes in their lives. Nevertheless, psychology and the rabbinate are not, I came to realise, hats that one can simply don or exchange as the situation demands. They are ways of being that permeate the core of a person. Being a rabbi means attempting to embody and model the values inherent within the laws of Judaism. Being a psychologist means approaching the world with a position of curiosity, non-judgement and understanding via psychological evidence and principles. And it is on this level of being that the challenges of integrating difference arise.

Some of the more obvious differences between the two approaches are found in power relations and methods of interaction. A psychologist works collaboratively with their patient and privileges the other person’s expertise-by-experience. Power is further equalised by taking a non-directive approach to intervention, instead attempting to co-create strategies for change. Meanwhile, a person seeking advice from a religious leader is actively seeking out a person with greater perceived power or authority, someone who might deliver directive guidance in a more top-down fashion.

Underpinning these overt differences is a divergence of values – the psychologist seeks a solution in a person-centred manner and so puts the person’s own preferences as the goal. The rabbi seeks a solution in a God-centred manner and so puts God’s directives and instructions as the goal. This does not mean to say that the rabbi does not also work for the person that is consulting them. Rather, the consultation operates under a particular agreed frame – that while God’s wishes may at times be challenging, uncomfortable or even disturbing, it is advice that is based upon those wishes that the person is seeking.

value-focus leads to a fundamentally different appraisal of, and response to, the situation.

Now put these two hats on at the same time. The rabbi-hat lives with a sense of moral idealism – that moral principles are fixed, independent of the situation and based on texts that contain Truth. The psychologist-hat lives with a sense of moral relativism – that moral principles are dependent on the situation. The rabbi seeks *the* answer or *the* truth, the psychologist seeks *an* answer or *a* truth. And it becomes more and more uncomfortable wearing these two hats at the same time.

Bringing the rabbi-hat into largely liberal and secular environments, such as the NHS or a university, can be lonely. It is lonely to be a single voice insisting on holding a fixed ethic, using an ancient and defined moral code. It can make one seem unyielding, unhelpful and even bigoted. It can fly in the face of popular opinion and create aversive reactions. Bringing the psychologist-hat into a traditional religious context, such as a synagogue, can also be tricky. It becomes

uncomfortable to preach messages that do not incorporate the complexity of lived experience. The knowledge of alternative avenues that a psychologist might take, but which are not open to the rabbi, becomes painfully stark, and one questions, ‘Perhaps “helpful” is better than “true”?’ Somehow this tension has to be endured, navigated and hopefully meaningfully integrated.

I wonder whether we all experience such a tension, not necessarily interpersonally, but intrapersonally. We come across those with different beliefs, cultures, politics and values. We meet many different hats. A frequent response is the request for tolerance – to tolerate the other’s difference – to agree to disagree. We will agree that you have the right to wear your hat while I have the right to wear mine. The problem with this response is that the rabbi still feels lonely in the NHS and the psychologist still feels duplicitous in the synagogue. Tolerance alone does not bring about integration, it just leaves people to co-exist; living alongside each other but not together.

Imagine if the response was changed, replacing tolerance with understanding of the other. Let me try on your hat – you can try mine. Teach me how to wear your hat, I want to understand what the world is like from underneath its brim.

As psychologists, we often rightly champion diversity and inclusivity. The challenge to that approach is when another holds views that are fundamentally at odds with our own. Such diversity can often end up simply being divisive rather than enriching society with a colourful patchwork of difference. Perhaps psychology has an important role to play in helping us understand why it is so difficult to wear another’s hat, and why it is so important to persevere.

For example, a young person is deeply troubled by the sexually explicit material they are viewing online and would like support to manage the situation. They are experiencing painful cognitive dissonance owing to the mismatch between their actions and beliefs.

While they believe that looking at pornography is wrong they cannot seem to stop doing so. In order to end this dissonance, either their beliefs or actions must change. The psychologist asks questions about what the young person’s goals are, seeks to understand the internal conflict that causes their distress, normalises their struggle and then considers a course of action; possibly re-evaluating the helpfulness of the young person’s beliefs, possibly offering strategies to seek alternatives to finding solace in the internet. The rabbi takes a moral stance on the affair – ‘This is wrong; I will compassionately support you in desisting from looking at this material.’ This support would similarly normalise the issue and attempt to understand the psychic drivers for this behaviour in order to more effectively assist the person in breaking the cycle of internet use.

The crucial difference between the two approaches is whether there is an option to challenge the underlying beliefs of wrongdoing. While it may be entirely unhelpful for this fictitious young person to hold strong moral beliefs about the inappropriateness of looking at pornography, this belief is not only left unchallenged by the rabbi, it is strengthened. That is because the interaction is governed in a God-centred manner under which the belief is inviolate. Conversely, operating in a person-centred manner might allow the psychologist to support the young person to modify their beliefs if the person indicates that their preference for overcoming this dissonance is belief-change rather than behaviour-change. The psychologist is not interested in whether the belief is true or false or whether the action is right or wrong; they are interested in whether the belief is helpful or unhelpful, or if the action is emotionally innocuous or depressionogenic. The divergence of

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