



Learning To Like Yourself

One of the obstacles in the path toward spirituality is the reluctance among many people to consciously reflect upon themselves. The reason for this became apparent to me when I attended a health spa to treat my chronic low back pain.

On the first day at the spa, I was placed in a whirlpool bath in a small cubicle. It was nothing less than paradise. I was at peace and there was nothing to disturb that peace. After about five or six very enjoyable minutes, I emerged from the whirlpool, telling the attendant how relaxing the experience had been. To my astonishment, he said, “You can’t get out yet, sir. The treatment here requires you to stay in the pool for 25 minutes.”

I returned to the tub, but not to an enjoyable experience. Every minute lasted for a painful eternity and after five minutes I could no longer take it. On my second exodus, the attendant informed me that unless I completed the requisite 25 minutes, I could not continue to the next phase of treatment.

Later I reflected on what had been a rude awakening. I had been certain that my distress had been due to the relentless pressures of my practice: a busy emergency room, receiving cases around the clock, a 300-bed acute psychiatric hospital for which I was responsible. Now I had been temporarily liberated from these overwhelming pressures, yet I found more than five minutes of peace intolerable. Why?

We are adept at diversion, at amusing ourselves one way or another, but

many of us are unable to truly relax. We entertain ourselves by reading, watching television, chatting with someone, listening to music, etc. But to be entertained is to be diverted. By focusing our attention on these activities, we divert our attention from everything, including ourselves. When all diversions are eliminated, we are left alone with ourselves, forced into direct contact with our own personalities and the personality flaws that trouble us. And this is where the difficulty lies.

I had been left totally alone, in absolute communion with myself. When one is left alone in a room with someone one dislikes, it can be a very unpleasant experience, and one can hardly wait to get away. What was there about myself I didn’t like? Why could I not tolerate being in my own presence?

I hypothesized that I must have some character traits I would prefer to disown, but whose existence I could ignore as long as I was distracted by various external pre-occupations and stimuli. As I persisted in my introspection, I found myself to be a jealous person, often trying to impress people. I had temptations and impulses I thought should be alien to a truly moral person. I reasoned that if people ever discovered what emotions existed beneath this facade I presented to the world, they would probably reject me. And how could I ever merit blessings from G-d if I was indeed a base person?

Along this rather depressing course of self-reflection, I came across a passage in the Talmud that enabled me to gain

a different perspective. The Talmud explains (Shabbat 89a) that the various Biblical commandments of behavior were given to us precisely because we have a fundamentally animal body, subject to all the instincts and drives of the animal world. Our distinction is that we can become master over these impulses. In other words, the discovery of animalistic traits within myself was no reason to consider myself a “bad” person.

A little investigation with my patients confirmed my hypothesis: many people are indeed incapable of tolerating themselves because they harbor self-directed feelings of negativity. Their discomfort with themselves may be so great that they employ a variety of tactics, some of them quite drastic, to escape or deny their identity as they perceive it.

These people are actually fine, competent and likable people. The problem is, instead of seeing themselves as they really are, they somehow develop a distorted image of themselves, and it is this distorted image – which they assume to be their real image – that becomes intolerable.

Spirituality relates to what is unique in humans and how they master their animal-like instincts. This requires a valid and accurate self-awareness which may be distorted by negative delusions about oneself. For spirituality to be pervasive, aspects of one’s humanity must be viewed realistically and appreciated.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski is a psychiatrist and rabbi, and founder of the Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Pennsylvania.