
CREATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR JEWISH CREATIVITY

Dr. Mitra Makbuleh

*Explanations sometimes do nothing
but ex-plain what was really quite plain.*

- Bob Gibson, Modern Mystic

In his entertaining book *Jewish Humor: What The Best Jewish Jokes Tell About the Jews*, Joseph Telushkin devotes an entire chapter to “Jewish Intelligence and the Playful Logic of the Jewish Mind.” One of the anecdotes that he presents goes as follows:

A medieval Jewish astrologer prophesied to a king that his favorite mistress would soon die. Sure enough, the woman died a short time later. The king was outraged at the astrologer, certain that his prophecy had brought about the woman’s death. He summoned the astrologer and commanded him: “Prophecy to me when you will die!” The astrologer realized that the king was planning to kill him immediately, no matter what answer he gave. “I do not know when I will die,” he answered finally. “I only know that whenever I die, the king will die three days later.”¹

For cleverness and ingenuity to kick in, sometimes all we need is fear. In my search for clues to the mystery of Jewish creativity, one of the first theories I encountered was that the need to survive in a hostile and fearful environment is what forced the Jews to make better use of their creative intelligence; their lives depended on it. At first glance, there seemed to be a grain of truth in this idea, but a closer look revealed that this explanation was inadequate, as explained by Nathaniel Weyls in *The Creative Elite in America*:

[This theory] does not explain the almost unique reaction of the Jews to economic, social and political persecution. The untouchables of India, the despised Etas of Japan and most similarly situated minorities have not reacted to economic exclusion and social ostracism by producing intellectual giants and dedicating their people to learning. On the contrary, they have reacted to exclusion by simply sinking more deeply into the mud. The Jewish reaction required a great deal more than oppression.²

As my search continued, I realized there were as many explanations for Jewish creativity as there were general theories of creativity.³ Theories are born whenever human beings try to make sense of the world around them. Theorizing is one of the things that sets humans apart from baboons and other creatures. But there is a danger in this enterprise. Too often we fall in love with one particular theory at the expense of all others, and love is blind, as we all know. As in the parable of the blind men and the elephant, we most often end up mistaking a small part of the truth for the whole.

Fickle as I might appear in matters of the heart, I believe it was fortunate I did not fall madly in love with any of the theories of creativity that I first encountered. Each explanation seemed to have something valuable to offer; yet none of them satisfied me totally. You will soon find out what I mean. But first, I must confess that what you are about to read is by no means an exhaustive survey but only a cursory overview of the most prominent theories of creativity. You will undoubtedly find some of these theoretical explanations of Jewish creativity especially fascinating—but please be careful not to fall in love!

Biological Theories: The Genes Made Them Do It!

Biological theories of creativity point to inborn or hereditary factors as the main source of genius and creativity. According to this perspective, superior racial genes are responsible for the differences in creativity among peoples. A longtime favorite of Hitler and the Nazis, biological theories of intelligence lost their popularity after the demise of the Third Reich. Nowadays, the pendulum has swung so far to the other side that you cannot even make an innocuous statement about biological differences among various groups without being labeled a racist.

Because I value truth over ideological and political correctness, I did not reject the biological perspective outright. Could Jewish creativity be explained by Jewish genes? Are Jews

a homogeneous genetic group? It took only one look at a photograph on my desk showing me with my *Sephardi* features (dark brown hair, Middle-eastern complexion, and brown eyes) standing next to my Jewish friends with their *Ashkenazi* features (red or blonde hair, European complexion, and green or blue eyes) to convince me that the idea of Jews as a homogeneous racial group was not viable. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand carefully gathered pieces of scientific evidence. In this case, scientific evidence seemed to concur with the vivid differences portrayed in the picture on my desk. I found that scholars such as the renowned sociologist Rafael Patai had come to the same conclusion:

A detailed analysis of the historical, demographic and anthropological data, as well as the available anthropometric, serological, and other genetic evidence . . . led to the conclusion that the Jews are definitely not a race in the genetic sense of the term . . .⁴

A more refined version of the genetic theory maintains that the subjection of the Jewish people to discrimination, persecution, and repeated pogroms throughout history has resulted in the survival of the “fittest,” that is to say, only the most creative and intelligent Jewish genes have survived. The fallacy in this line of reasoning is similar to the one we exposed at the beginning of this chapter with the help of Nathaniel Weyls: If being treated harshly is so good for creativity, why did it not help other maltreated groups?

I was intrigued by another sophisticated biological explanation—the one proposed by Ernest Van Den Haag in his book *The Jewish Mystique*. Van Den Haag’s theory is partly biological and partly cultural. He argues that because Jewish culture held rabbis in such high esteem, those Jews with the best minds became rabbis. As part of their privileged status, these intelligent rabbis married the daughters of the wealthiest Jews. Unlike Christian priests, the rabbis were not hindered by codes of celibacy. As a result, these intelligent rabbis and their highbred wives produced the most intelligent offspring with the best chances for survival and creativity.⁵

Quite a clever argument, don’t you think? Except, of course, that it runs into the same problem as the previous ones. Why is it, for example, that the Zoroastrian Magi, the Confucian Literati and the Islamic Ulama who enjoyed similarly favorable circumstances did not produce similar results?⁶

Spiritual Theories: The Genies Made Them Do It!

Much like biological theories of creativity, the spiritual theories had their heyday and then fell out of favor—until recently, that is. With the rising interest in matters relating to the human soul and spirituality, the idea that creative inspiration might have a transcendent origin is no longer taboo. We live in an exciting era when both the Neo-Nazi ideology of biological determinism and New-ancient spiritual ideologies have resurfaced and are running neck-and-neck.

The idea that gifts of genius and creativity are bestowed upon humans by supernatural agents, such as demons, daimons, gods, devils, genies, muses, and so forth, has been with us since antiquity. The word *genius* is derived from the Latin word for a god, a spirit or a genie who presides over a person's destiny. The ancient Greeks were very fond of this idea, and talked endlessly about the inspirations bestowed upon the mortals by the heavenly muses. It has been claimed that the name “Moses”—“Musa” in Arabic—was derived from the word “muse.”⁷ In Zoroastrianism, there is *Spanta-Manu*—the *Good Spirit* or the *Expansive Mind*—who inspires humanity with constructive and creative thoughts, and there is *Angra-Manu*—the *Evil Spirit* or the *Restrictive Mind*—who plants angry, selfish, and destructive thoughts into the human mind.

Similarly, in the Book of Genesis, we read about the *Bnei Elohim* (translated as “the sons of God”) who became attracted to the daughters of men, copulated with them, and produced the *Giborim* or “mighty men of renown” (Genesis 6:1–5). But in the same account, we are told of these other beings called *Nefilim*—The Fallen Ones—who, as the text tells us, have always been around and up to no good. While there is a great deal of confusion in various interpretations of this section of Genesis, it seems that, as with the Zoroastrian version, here too we are informed of two agencies involved in the creative imagination of humankind: The “Sons of God” and their beneficent offspring (the *Giborim*) on the one hand, and the *Fallen Ones* or the *Nefilim* and their harmful incitements on the other. According to the Encyclopedia Judaica:

The Fallen Angels also taught man the use of weapons and other tools promoting immorality and crime. In this manner a demonic wisdom came into being, in addition to Divine wisdom, and this led to the corruption of mankind.⁸

Human experience seems to indicate that this mythological account is not too far off the mark. We all have the ability to use our creative imagination in producing beneficent or maleficent results. The *Evil Spirit* (Angra-Manu) of Zoroastrian mythology and the *Nefilim* or the *Fallen Ones* mentioned in Genesis seem to be the symbolic representation of a lowly inner faculty or base urge that incites human beings to use their knowledge, imagination, and creativity in harmful and selfish ways. This inner psychological interpretation receives a strong confirmation within the passage itself: Immediately after the information about the *Giborim* (the mighty ones) and the *Nefilim* (the fallen ones), we are told: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5). The next thing we hear is the story of Noah and the Flood.⁹

Along the same symbolic lines, and more closely related to Jewish creativity, in several places in the Bible, Yahweh (God) declares that He has chosen the community of Israel to be His lawfully wedded wife so that she may bring forth mighty deeds of justice, mercy, and loving-kindness and “Be a Light unto other nations”(Isaiah 49:6). Just as in the previous scenario, when God finds His wife, Israel, not living up to her contractual role, He chastises her with terrible calamities to open her eyes and to bring her back to Himself.¹⁰

What are we to make of these widespread accounts of mating between spiritual entities and human beings? Are they perhaps metaphorical descriptions of the process of creative inspiration? And if we dismiss them as nothing but fairy tales, what are we to do with the personal testimonies of so many creative artists, musicians, mystics, and even scientists who emphatically assure us that they have received their creative inspirations from something or somewhere beyond themselves? What about Socrates and his conversations with his wise inner daemon? What about Blaise Pascal, the ingenious French mathematician-physicist who witnessed the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” communicating to him through a fiery vision? What about the spiritual entity or *maggid* who intimately guided Rabbi Joseph Caro, the author of the *Shulchan Arukh* (The Prepared Table), one of the most influential books in Jewish history? What about Carl Jung and his famous inspirational daemon whom he called *Philomon*? What are we to make of these and hundreds of other similar first-hand accounts?

Anthony Storr, well-regarded scholar of creativity, discusses several examples of such mysterious inspirational phenomena in his book *Solitude: A Return to the Self*. For example, he quotes William Thackeray as saying: “It seems as if an occult Power was moving the pen. The

personage does or says something, and I ask, how the dickens did he come to think that?”¹¹ Storr then presents the following report concerning the famed author George Eliot: “...in all her best writing, there was a ‘not herself’ which took possession of her, and that she felt her own personality to be merely the instrument through which this spirit, as it were, was acting.”¹²

In their insightful book, *Higher Creativity*, Willis Herman and Howard Rheingold provide a long list of creative geniuses who have left similarly vivid descriptions of having been inspired and directed by a higher spiritual force. Goethe, William Blake, Richard Strauss, Puccini, Shelley, Keats, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, and many others are on this amazing list. Puccini, for instance, has declared unequivocally that: “The music of this opera (Madam Butterfly) was dictated to me by God; I was merely instrumental in putting it on paper and communicating it to the public.”¹³ Not all creative individuals report such intense spiritual experiences, but many of the highest among them do. Because of the similarity of their experiences to those of the mystics, I became more and more convinced that there was something here worth looking into.

Personally, I had no trouble with the idea that the true source of human creativity and genius might lie beyond the puny ego-mind with its limited vision and its greedy pursuit of more, better, and different. But I suspected this was only half the story. Given the idea that a transcendent source of creative intelligence is present at all times and longs to unite with us and to penetrate our minds, how, I asked, does one become a suitable consort for the heavenly muses, a receptive vessel for the Spanta-Manu, a fair mate for “the sons of God,” or a Kosher bride for Yahweh? Who does the choosing in this mating game? Do you have to be Jewish to be one of the “chosen people”? And what does being Jewish really mean, if it can’t be delineated biologically? These questions aimed at the heart of the mystery of Jewish creativity, but my search through the literature on inspiration and creativity did not yield any real answers.

Sociocultural Theories: Their Jewish Mothers Made Them Do It!

No matter how I try, I cannot find a better way to present this segment than Professor Arieti, of blessed memory, has done in his book *Creativity: The Magic Synthesis*. After an exhaustive survey of the various theories in this category, Arieti summarizes the following as the major sociocultural factors contributing to human creativity¹⁴:

- Availability of cultural institutions that promote creativity

- Openness and exposure to different and even contrasting cultural stimuli
- Stress on transformation and growth, rather than being satisfied with things as they are
- Free access to educational institutions and educational material for all citizens
- Freedom of expression
- Tolerance for diverging views
- Rewards and incentives for creativity
- Marginality, a sociological term which means belonging to more than one culture at the same time
- Family cohesion and group solidarity

Arieti then tests each of these factors with reference to Jewish creativity and comments that:

In conclusion, the evidence reported . . . does not prove that the Jews are biologically superior to non-Jews. Their great achievements since the middle of the nineteenth century can be attributed to a large extent to sociocultural factors prevailing in Jewish milieus. The study of these sociocultural factors is useful because . . . we may find that they can benefit Jews and non-Jews alike, and as a matter of fact the whole of mankind.¹⁵

I found myself agreeing with Dr. Arieti all the way, except for one thing. As important as these sociocultural factors seemed to be, once again I did not find them sufficient. What made the Jews, I asked myself, avail themselves of cultural institutions that promote creativity? What made them more open to contrasting stimuli? What made them have more tolerance for divergent viewpoints and enabled them to have more family cohesion? Why is it that in modern western societies where almost all the above factors exist for many cultural groups, Jews still tend to exhibit higher rates of creativity than others living in the same environment? While useful as a way of describing sociocultural factors that encourage creativity in the general population, the theory just didn't measure up as an explanation for the Jewish case.

Psychological Theories: The Unconscious Made Them Do It!

Perhaps one of the most popular theorists in this category is Sigmund Freud. Freud believed that the human *Ego* is caught in an ongoing battle between the instinctual desires (*Id*) on the one side, and prohibitive societal and cultural norms (*Superego*), on the other. This

conflict of interest is most pronounced in the areas of sexuality and aggression. The Id encourages the uninhibited expression of sexual urges and aggressive impulses, but the Superego, acting through social conditioning, prohibits such unrestrained expression. This adversarial situation results in a severe conflict for the Ego, which tries to resolve the conflict in several ways:

- **Repression:** The Ego tries to conform to the Superego's disciplinary demands and suppresses the instinctual urges of the Id. The problem with this approach is it can lead to psychological disturbances and physical problems. The predicament of those opting for this alternative can be summed up as: “Don’t get mad, don’t get even, grow tumors instead!”
- **Expression:** The Ego ignores normative rules and societal regulations and gives full expression to instinctual desires. This approach often leads to anti-social behavior, which evokes societal sanctions. Those who opt for violent behavior might not succumb to bleeding ulcers but stand a good chance of being incarcerated or dying a violent death.
- **Sublimation:** The Ego channels the unsatisfied instinctual energies into creative and socially acceptable pursuits. For example, aggressive impulses are sublimated and expressed in competitive sports, and sexual impulses are sublimated and expressed in music, art, and dance. In other words, you don’t exactly get to have your cake and eat it too, but you are convinced that you do.

Even though Freud considered the sublimation of instinctual energies to be the most likely impetus behind human creativity, he cautioned against the oversimplification of this idea. Many of his disciples, however, ignored his advice and tried to prove that Mozart’s heavenly music and Michaelangelo’s magnificent creations were nothing but the results of early toilet training and sexual frustrations.

What do Freud’s ideas contribute to our understanding of Jewish creativity? In line with the concept of sublimation, Freudians will argue that Jews have exhibited more creativity because both Jewish cultural norms from the inside and social restraints imposed from the outside made it more difficult for this minority group to express overt hostility and sexuality. Therefore, to sublimate their instinctual impulses and express them in socially acceptable ways, the Jews resorted to economic, artistic, and intellectual creativity.

Although I, like many others, find the Freudian viewpoint narrow and one-sided, I still believe Freud’s ideas are not entirely without merit. Freud has contributed to our understanding

of human creativity by pointing out that when cultural guidelines and societal rules for the handling of sexual and aggressive impulses are too repressive, the inner conflict between the Superego and the Id can waste a lot of human psychic energy and lessen its availability for more creative pursuits. (As we shall find out in a later chapter, too much permissiveness is not that good for creativity either.)

But even if we accept the Freudian perspective on creativity either in part or in its entirety, we are still faced with the question: What enabled the Jews to sublimate creatively and survive while other minorities under similar circumstances disappeared?

Another famous figure in the field of depth psychology, Dr. Carl Jung—Freud’s chief disciple at one time—has also proposed some intriguing ideas about creativity. Jung was quite familiar with the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, and a number of prominent Jungian psychologists have noted that there is a significant degree of correspondence between Jungian ideas and those of the Kabbalah.¹⁶

Jung proposed that there are archetypal forces within the human psyche that induce the human Ego to establish contact with a hidden reservoir of creative ideas called *The Collective Unconscious*. Jung maintained that this mysterious source of all creativity, communicates with us through such channels as dreams, visions, inspirations, mythical symbols, and so-called coincidental or synchronistic events. Others have called this collective source of creative inspirations “Pre-conscious,” or “Supra-conscious,” and there is solid evidence to suggest that creative individuals do indeed have easier access to this inspiring inner realm.¹⁷

I was truly impressed by Jung’s insights. It appeared that his ideas did not contradict but rather complemented Freud’s.¹⁸ But given Jung’s idea that creative individuals are more receptive to the prompting of the “Collective Unconscious,” I was still faced with the question: What is it that enables the Jews to be more receptive to this source of creative inspiration than other peoples who have had experiences similar to their own?

I saw the same question staring me in the face when I examined the great works of humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Eric Fromm. For example if, as Maslow rightfully proposed, human beings have a built in growth mechanism that, given the proper circumstances, guides them toward the pinnacles of self-realization, self-actualization, and outstanding creativity, what made it possible for the Jews to benefit more from this universal

mechanism? Once again, these were excellent general theories of creativity, but they failed to connect the dots between creativity in general and Jewish creativity in particular.

Personality Theories: Special Traits Made Them Do It!

One of the favorite pastimes of researchers in this field has been the documentation of character traits that might set creative people apart from more ordinary folk. Personality theories claim that certain personality traits predispose an individual to creativity. They propose, for example, that creative people tend to be more introspective, more independent, more rebellious, more adventurous, more self-critical, and more open-minded than non-creative people. Creative people are also said to have a greater sense of humor and a stronger self-image than non-creative people.¹⁹ Others have described the creative personality as spontaneous, expressive, effortless, innocent, unafraid of the unknown, tolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity, and able to integrate opposite perspectives.²⁰

Perhaps the most significant observation made concerning the personality style of highly creative individuals is that they often embody contradictory traits in their personality with apparent ease and integrity. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the foremost authorities on creativity, writes:

If I had to express in one word what makes their personalities different from others, it would be *complexity*... They contain contradictory extremes... they tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves. These qualities are present in all of us, but usually we are trained to develop only one pole of the dialectic. We might grow up cultivating the aggressive, competitive side of our nature, and disdain or repress the nurturant, cooperative side. A creative individual is more likely to be both aggressive and cooperative, either at the same time or at different times, depending on the situation. Having a complex personality means being able to express the full range of traits that are potentially present in the human repertoire but usually atrophy because we think that one or the other pole is “good,” whereas the other extreme is “bad.”... creative persons definitely know both extremes and experience both with equal intensity and without inner conflict. It might be easier to illustrate this conclusion in terms of ten pairs of apparently antithetical traits that are often both present in such individuals and integrated with each other in a dialectical tension.²¹

I found it highly interesting that, as the following account from Jewish mystical literature seems to suggest, Jewish mystics believed that this complex “twofold character” can and should be cultivated:

The Ladiar Rabbi said: “A man should so master his nature that he can habituate himself to both the positive and negative aspects of every character trait. For example, he should be both a conservative and a progressive; a man without fear and yet a man of peace; a man of strong personality, and yet a meek one.”²²

But what could all this tell us about the mystery of Jewish creativity? Had any of these personality traits been observed to characterize the Jews more than other groups? And if so, the question would still remain, why should this be? What makes the Jews more independent, open-minded, tolerant of ambiguity, and more able to integrate opposite perspectives? This theory was a good attempt at describing the results, but it did nothing to explain how the Jews achieved them.

Cognitive Theories: Peculiar Thinking Made Them Do It!

I have never liked the word “cognitive.” It reminds me of all the cold, humorless, and impersonal things in life. But it is really a useful word that contains almost everything our mind does, such as perceiving, judging, comparing, categorizing, relating, and thinking. “Cognitive style” is a fancy way for describing how the human brain processes information.

Cognitive theories have gained considerable recognition (re-cognition!) in the past few decades. These theories propose that the creative person's brain processes information differently from that of an ordinary individual. For instance, it has been claimed that the cognitive style of creative people is intuitive, holistic, convergent, and abstract, whereas the cognitive style of the average person is rational, analytic, divergent, and concrete.²³ In other words, the creative individual sees both the forest and the trees, but the ordinary person can only see one tree at a time. And then there are those who refuse to see the tree standing right in front of them until they bump into it and smash their heads!

The two main contenders in the category of Cognitive Theories are Arthur Koestler's "Bisociation" theory and Albert Rothenberg's "Janusian Thinking." Bisociation refers to the notion that creative people have a special knack for perceiving associations between radically incompatible things; a special ability for connecting seemingly unrelated levels of reality. For example, the Roman naturalist Pliny perceived a connection between the phases of the moon and the rising and falling of the ocean tides; and Guttenberg invented the printing press by associating the two different realities of wine-making and printing as he watched the working of the wine-press. Koestler proposes that bisociation is the mechanism at the root of both creativity and humor.²⁴ Koestler's idea is especially powerful because it explains both Jewish creativity and Jewish humor. And yet, Koestler does not explain what it is that enables some people to "bisociate" more frequently than others. Is it a case of "either you've got it or you don't," or can it be developed? Do you have to have a Jewish mother to bisociate or to have a sense of humor? Koestler doesn't say.

Rothenberg defined the most prominent feature of the creative mind as the capacity to conceive and utilize two or more opposite or contradictory ideas simultaneously, to see both sides of the coin at the same time. He called this ability "Janusian Thinking" after the double-headed Roman god Janus who could look in many directions at the same time. Those blessed with this cognitive ability can perceive opposing ideas and antithetical images or concepts as coexisting side-by-side and operating together. The creative breakthrough comes from the higher reconciliation of these opposing ideas. It would seem that people whose cognitive style is marked by bisociation would also be capable of Janusian Thinking, and vice versa.

It takes a Janusian cognitive style to conceive of matter and energy as interchangeable manifestations of the same unity or to discover that the subatomic particles can behave both as a particle and a wave. Einstein's perception that a man who is falling from the rooftop is simultaneously at rest and in motion was totally Janusian. To take a more mundane example, when it comes to child-rearing practices, most of us take sides on the issue of child discipline, some believing firmly in strict discipline and others advocating just the opposite. But those blessed with Janusian Thinking can easily apprehend that aberrations in human character can result from either too much laxity or too much rigidity.

With Rothenberg's Janusian hypothesis, I felt that I was positively on to something. Because of his anti-mystical bias,²⁵ Rothenberg would probably hate to hear this, but his

Janusian explanation is particularly applicable to Jewish mysticism and to Jewish creativity. For one thing, “the coincidence of opposites,” or the ability to tolerate paradox, has been observed to be one of the chief characteristics of the Jewish mind.²⁶ Also, regarding the Jewish mystical tradition, it has been reported that: “Kabbalists usually succeeded in combining in their system the most heterogeneous and prima facie irreconcilable elements.”²⁷ In his book *God, Sex, and Kabbalah*, Allen Maller makes the following remarks:

Greek rationalistic philosophers were absolutists. A concept was either true or false. Something either was or it was not. It moved or it didn't. Kabbalists were relativists, saying that often seeming contradictions are not opposite in kind but different only in degree Conflicting truths can each be true. Physicists tell us that light is both a wave and a particle. Heisenberg's theory of uncertainty in modern quantum mechanics and Gudel's proof in modern mathematics also support the Kabbalistic view of reality.²⁸

As I was reading Rothenberg's book, I noticed how the Janusian style he was talking about applied to the Kabbalistic-Judaic view of the relationship between God and Satan. I thought about the mysterious way this relationship was portrayed in the Book of Job; and how the Jewish tradition considered the One God, Yahweh, to be the source of both Good and Evil. In this tradition, Satan as one of *Bnei Elohim*—as a son of God—does not set up shop on his own and does not compete with his Father. He is an integral part of the family business, who functions ultimately to fulfill God's plans. His job is to test and challenge the human free will, to reveal the imbalances that need to be rectified, and to refine the human psyche so that it may become a suitable container for higher consciousness. We are powerful beings worthy of a powerful adversary, this tradition teaches, even though we might not like the treacherous ways Satan goes about his business.²⁹

It seemed to me that the Kabbalistic-Judaic perception of the relationship between God and Satan portrayed the Janusian cognitive style perfectly. These two opposing forces were seen as co-existing side by side and operating simultaneously as an integrated whole. Imagine my delight, when a little further on in the book, I found Rothenberg referring to this very case to illustrate his point:

“For example, first formulating an idea of God and later of the Devil would not be an instance of Janusian thinking. The Janusian formulation with its simultaneity is a way station toward integration of oppositions and antitheses into an overall theory or other type of creation.”³⁰

According to Rothenberg's theory, then, teaching our children about a God and a Devil who are forever separate and antagonistic with each other would not be good for their creativity. This kind of black and white viewpoint will make the person divide experience into rigid and separate categories, preventing him from developing a more Janusian cognitive style and cutting his chances for higher creativity.

In light of the Janusian model, the stubbornness of the Jews in asserting the Oneness of God began to suddenly make a lot of sense. John A. Sanford, a former Christian minister and presently a Jungian analyst and prolific writer, addresses the advantage of this Jewish perspective:

We may be bothered by the idea that Yahweh sends good as well as evil, but it nevertheless presents us with a bold and unflinching monotheism. The ancient Hebrews, with their instinctive religious genius, were grasping the idea that there was one underlying reality to all phenomena, and if this meant that evil, as well as good, came from Yahweh, then this was a conclusion to be faced fearlessly.³¹

Is it possible that the Jews have unknowingly applied the same Janusian cognitive style in other areas of life as well, allowing themselves an even greater potential for creativity? But even if we find this to be the case, the main problem still persists: What is it that has enabled the Jews to acquire and maintain a Janusian way of thinking more readily than other groups?

Brilliant as many of these theories were, none of them seemed to penetrate to the core of mystery of Jewish creativity. My search continued.

Summary

With the exception of biological theories, we find that all other theories of creativity can contribute something of value to our understanding of Jewish creativity. Biological or genetic explanations of Jewish creativity have been refuted because Jews are not a genetically

homogenous group. Spiritual or supernatural theories posit that gifts of genius and creativity are bestowed upon humans by non-human agents, a claim that has been supported by the personal testimonies of numerous creative geniuses and can also illuminate the creative significance of the image of “community of Israel” as the “Bride of God.” Sociocultural theories would have us look into such factors as Jewish marginality, family cohesion, and emphasis on education as the main sources of Jewish creativity.

Depth psychologists such as Freud and Jung would point to the role of un-conscious, sub-conscious, and super-conscious factors in the mystery of Jewish creativity. Humanistic psychologists such as Maslow and Fromm would recommend that we look into the Jewish drive toward self-realization and self-actualization. Personality theories would posit that Jewish creativity is related to personality traits such as independence, open-mindedness, tolerance of ambiguity, and a greater ability to integrate opposite tendencies. Cognitive theories would explain Jewish creativity by pointing to the greater capacity among Jews for Bisociation and Janusian Thinking—i.e., the mental ability to connect seemingly unrelated levels of reality and to perceive opposing ideas and antithetical images or concepts as coexisting side-by-side and operating together.

However, none of these competing theoretical perspectives are complete, because they all offer necessary, but not sufficient factors, to account for Jewish creativity. Also, since all of these theories seem partially valid when applied to the Jewish example, there must be an overarching factor that integrates them all. This all-important factor is revealed in my upcoming book.

My theory is that when we come on this earth, many of us are ready-made Some of us—most of us—have genes that are ready for certain performances. Nature gives you these gifts There's nobody that's common. I think that in every human being there is greatness.³²

—Louise Nevelson, sculptor

Energy is the basis of everything. Every Jew, no matter how insignificant, is engaged in some decisive and immediate pursuit of a goal.³³

—Goethe, mystic poet and scientist

Creativity and mysticism are not merely similar; for some creators mystical religious feeling is literally a part of their vision. . . . Modern creators, born into secular times, have turned to creative activity as an apparent substitute for omnivalent religious experience. . . . When Einstein's early religious feelings turned sour with the discovery that biblical stories are not literally true, he devoted himself to science as the outlet for what he called "cosmic religious feeling."³⁴

—John Briggs, creativity researcher

We visit the Jew, we dine with him, and we see him at all times and places... We marvel at his talents, and we are struck by the adaptability and the universality of his genius. We admire his patience, his steadfastness and his courage, his military prowess and his successful career in every post and profession...while jesting about the Asian [Jewish] mystery, we cannot but feel there is something in the Asiatic [Jew] which we do not expect, which eludes our ken, which goes beyond us....³⁵

—Sir Richard Burton, British scholar

To take only the subject of the Jews: it would be difficult to find a form of bad reasoning about them which has not been heard in conversation or been admitted to the dignity of print; but the neglect of resemblances is a common property of dullness which unites all the various points of view.... The superlative peculiarity in the Jews admitted, our affinity with them is only the more apparent when the elements of their peculiarity are discerned.³⁶

Notes

¹ Telushkin, 1992, p. 41.

² Weyl, 1967, p. 149; see also Roback, 1929.

³ For a comprehensive survey of theoretical perspectives on creativity see Abra, 1988.

⁴ Patai, 1977, pp. 15-16; see also *The Myth of Jewish Race, 1975*. It is ironic that when it comes to Racial-Genetic arguments, as far as the Jews are concerned, it has usually meant, “Heads I win, tails you lose.” Whenever the intention was to persecute and scapegoat the Jews, they were considered a racially homogeneous group, but when the intention was to avoid acknowledging their high rates of creativity, they were then considered not to be an actual genetic, cultural or religious group.

⁵ Van Den Haag, 1969, p. 18.

⁶ According to Robert Needham, in China at the time of the ancient philosophical schools, it was the mystical Taoists, rather than the rational, government-sponsored Confucian literati, who stimulated Chinese scientific discovery (See the report by the *Committee on Psychiatry and Religion*, 1976, p. 789).

⁷ See Higgins, 1882, p. 615

⁸ See: Encyclopedia Judaica, *Angels and Angeleogy*. In the King James Bible, the word *Nefilim* has been rendered *Giants* which is inaccurate. Also, most interpreters have equated the *Nefilim* or the Fallen Ones with the *Sons of God* who married the daughters of men. But this view is mistaken as we are explicitly informed by the narrative that the *Nefilim* existed on earth before the *Sons of God*: “There were *Nefilim* in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them, the same became mighty men of old, men of renown.” (Genesis: 6:4). The reference in the sixth chapter of Genesis to the union of “sons of God” and “daughters of man,” the striving of “God’s spirit” with “man’s flesh” and the contrast between the *Gibborim* and the *Nefilim*, buttresses the idea that this entire chapter is concerned with the creative union of Spirit and Matter, God and Man, divine inspiration and human imagination.

⁹ This view receives further confirmation in the fact that the words *Gibbor* (mighty) and *Yetzer* (creative or formative imagination) appearing in this enigmatic passage of Genesis, are used in one of the most famous Talmudic aphorisms in the same psychological sense: “Who is a *Gibbor* (a mighty one)? He who masters his own *Yetzer*.” (See: Bulka, Reuven P., 1993, p. 141.). We become one of the *Gibborim* (the mighty ones) or one of the *Nefilim* (the Fallen ones) based on whether or not we have mastered the creative imagination and are using it appropriately.

¹⁰ See for example [Jeremiah 3:20](#); [Ezekiel 39:23–24](#); [Hosea 5:6–7](#), and the prophetic books in general.

¹¹ See Storr, 1988, p. 198.

¹² Storr, 1988, pp. 198-199.

¹³ Quoted in Herman and Rheingold, 1984, p. 46.

¹⁴ See Arieti, 1976, p. 324.

¹⁵ Arieti, 1976, p. 336. Similarly, in his book *Secrets of the Jews (1994)*, Stuart Rosenberg attributes the miraculous survival of the Jews to sociocultural factors: “They are not so much a chosen people as a choosing people. They survived because they have chosen to continue to share certain secrets—what I call the ‘secrets of the Jews.’ These consist of dominant ideas, principles, and affirmations about God, man, and society which have shaped their shared consciousness in kind, formed their inner group identity, and ultimately powered their will to live—even, or perhaps especially—when others sought to deny them either life or hope.” (*Sundial*, an imprint of Mosaic Press Publishers, 1994, p. v). Rafael Patai, on the other hand, takes issue with some of the sociocultural factors such as “marginality” as being a major factor in Jewish creativity (See Raphael Patai, 1977, p. 332).

¹⁶ For example, Adam and Allee Blatner, researchers in the field of creativity, observed that there are: “. . . similarities between . . . aspects of the work of C. G. Jung and of David Bohm . . . and the work of the medieval Jewish mystics, the Kabbalists, who used a diagram called the Tree of Life to represent the basic components of the creative act.” See: Blatner and Blatner, 1988, p.155-163.

¹⁷ See research results reported in Gowan, 1975, p. 302–303

¹⁸ Brilliant as he was, Jung played into the hands of the Nazis and provided them with ammunition for their racist propaganda by publicizing his unscientific notion of “inborn differences” between the Jewish and the Germanic psyches. The possible impact of the bitter break up between Jung and Freud on Jung’s subsequent behavior vis-à-vis the Nazis has been alluded to by Stephen A. Martin: “More problematic is the question of Jung’s motivations, both conscious and unconscious, and the way they influence the allegation of his anti-Semitism. While some writers flatly deny this charge and others forthrightly affirm it, most feel that Jung temporarily lost his perspective, fell prey to unintegrated shadow feelings, and acted them out. The most obvious reason for Jung’s lapse is, as I have indicated, his unresolved feelings about Freud, the father figure, mentor, and friend by whom Jung felt painfully disappointed.” (Maidenbaum and Martin, 1991, p. 9). My own stance is that great men and great women can make great mistakes, and without a doubt Jung was a great man who made a great mistake. But we must not judge this great man too harshly for a temporary lapse of judgment. Above all, we must not throw away his exceptional insights into the human psyche just because of this one uncharacteristic blunder. Who among us is without sin?

¹⁹ Melrose, 1988; Kneller, 1965; and Mooney and Rasik, 1967.

²⁰ Maslow, 1962, p. ?.

²¹ Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, pp. 57–58. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the paradoxical traits of creative individuals include “the related combination of playfulness and discipline, or responsibility and irresponsibility.” (Ibid., p. 61). Csikszentmihalyi also reports “creative people seem to harbor opposite tendencies on the continuum between extroversion and introversion.” (Ibid., p. 65).

²² Polsky, and Wozner, 1989, p.174

²³ R. A. Prentky has provided a comprehensive list of all such cognitive theories in his book *Creativity and Psycho-pathology*, 1980, pp. 63–93. According to Csikszentmihalyi, one of the better known cognitive theories was first introduced by J. P Guilford, “the pioneer in the modern psychological study of creativity, who claimed that divergent thinking was peculiar to creativity and who developed the first tests

to measure it, which are still being used.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 411–412). “People who bring about an acceptable novelty in a domain seem able to use well two opposite ways of thinking: the *convergent* and the *divergent*. Convergent thinking is measured by IQ tests, and it involves solving well-defined, rational problems that have one correct answer. Divergent thinking leads to no agreed-upon solution. It involves fluency, or the ability to generate a great quantity of ideas; flexibility, or the ability to switch from one perspective to another; and originality in picking unusual associations of ideas. These are the dimensions of thinking that most creativity tests measure and that most workshops try to enhance.” (Ibid, p. 60).

²⁴ Koestler, Arthur, 1964, p. ?.

²⁵ Rothenberg adamantly insists on a purely rationalistic-materialistic model of how the human mind works, and he tries very hard in his books to disprove any explanation that might smack even faintly of mysticism.

²⁶ See Zewig (same as David Hadler) quoted in Patai, 1977, p. 543.

²⁷ Werblowsky, 1962, p. 201.

²⁸ Maller, 1983, p. 171.

²⁹ We will discuss the Kabbalistic-Judaic perspective on good and evil and God and the Devil in much greater detail in Chapter 8.

³⁰ Rothenberg, 1992, p. 140.

³¹ Sanford, 1981, p. 27.

³² Briggs, 2000, p. 132

³³ Quoted in *What Did They Think of the Jews?* Gould, 1991, p. 101.

³⁴ Briggs, 2000, pp. 120–121

³⁵ Gould, 1991, p. 161.

³⁶ Gould, 1991, pp. 152–153.