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Clinical Art Therapy and Hebrew Calligraphy: An Integration of Practices

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Abstract

Hebrew calligraphy is explored as a possible link between the image-based practices of clinical art therapy and the transcendent potential of the faith-based practices of Judaism. An art therapist attempts to integrate decades of clinical experience with current investigations into a traditional discipline. The project, including art making and meaning making, results in a discussion of important ways that clinical practice and spiritual explorations can be unified and mutually enhancing.

Hebrew Calligraphy and Clinical Art Therapy:

An Integration of Practices

This paper explores the process of integrating two apparently disparate practices: the first, clinical art therapy, a practice of psychotherapy that centralizes image making; and the second, Hebrew calligraphy, a faith-based practice that renders biblical script to access the transcendent. The first of these two practices is rooted in theories of psychotherapy that understand that internal human experiences can be accessed in dialogue and in relationship and that self-expression is inherently healing. The second of these two practices is rooted in a much longer history of human experience understood as a spiritual quest for meaning and or connection.

The exploration is based on my three decades of professional engagement in the practice of clinical art therapy, which has continuously affirmed the power of imagery as meaning making, albeit in the service of psychological and emotional self-awareness. In more recent years I have recognized potential limitations of the practice and its theoretical underpinnings in psychoanalysis, humanism, and family systems theory as unable to integrate and appreciate spiritual and/or religious yearnings. It is the intent of this project to explore and extend the possibilities of integration between the theoretically bound practices of clinical art therapy and the lived experiences of one of its practitioners. The work is my personal narrative, and I acknowledge its specificity as the ponderings of an urban, educated, middle-class Jewish woman in the seventh decade of life.

Informing Literature

A growing body of literature supports this attempt at integration. Informing this paper are art therapists (Allen, 2005; Farrelly-Hansen, 2001; Horovitz, 2002; McNiff, 2004; B. Moon,

1992) who have written extensively about the relationship between art, spirituality, and wholeness. Their perspectives suggest that the spiritual life of the art therapy clinician is a significant component of the healing relationship. Also informing this paper is a body of literature from a variety of religious traditions that supports the inclusion of imagery making as a spiritual practice (Adams, 2006; Kao et al., 2014; Milgrom, 1992; Wuthnow, 2006). These authors speak from the Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian traditions about the curative relationship between prayer/meditation and art making.

As a psychotherapist for over thirty years, I have lived my life mostly in the first practice, living within and informed by my clinical work. My education, my professional training, and my values have been shaped by the cultural norms of psychoanalysis, humanism, and family systems theories. I have believed that I can best be of help to others and to myself through exploration, explanation, and understanding. As an art therapist I have come to rely on the image making process as the pathway to explore, explain, and understand. As a university professor I have been indoctrinated to accept the disciplinary silos that academia has created to separate the study of psychology from the study of theology. Consequently, I have been educated out of the faith tradition in which I was raised and denied its riches and healing opportunities.

In 2002, I wrote about my dilemma:

> As a young person I felt marginalized by my religion, unwelcome as a woman into the Conservative/Orthodox traditions of my eastern European grandparents and Canadian parents and uneducated into the language and rituals that were themselves transitioning from *shtetl* to suburb. Like many Jews of my generation, I looked outside Judaism for my

> identity to the university for education, to psychotherapy for personal and professional growth, and to the arts for self-expression. (Linesch as cited in Rosove, 2002, p. 34)

The following year I began the long journey of attempting to link all that I had come to believe about image based psychotherapy with all that I yearned for from my faith tradition.

My first adult foray into the Jewish tradition began with Torah study, a process I could easily access because of my education and my proclivity to understand metaphor. I started inviting peers, friends, and co-religionists to engage in image-making as a process of studying sacred text. I based this innovative experiment on my art therapy appreciation for images as constructs of meaning and emotion. This work and the enthusiastic responses of both artists and non-artists affirmed that connections could be made between faith-based practices (my new territory) and clinical art therapy practices (my old territory). I continued exploring, and I published two books (Linesch, 2013; Linesch & Stettin, 2009) about this work. I thought I was done.

I became aware that the study of Torah, as central as it is to Jewish life, was not the primary experience I was seeking. What I wanted to understand, engage in, and integrate was the experience of prayer. Could I find a way to extend the practices of clinical art therapy into my faith-based explorations to encompass more than text study and possibly find pathways for engagement with the transcendent?

I found inspiration for this possibility in several places; I found it in the literature I accessed in diverse fields (Allen, 2005; Cameron, 1992; Milgrom, 1992; Wuthnow, 2006), and I found it in art. The work of the twentieth century printmaker Ben Shahn, in particular, moved me to explore the process of rendering the ancient script. His work, as illustrated in Figure 1, incorporated idiosyncratic calligraphy as personal expression. In this print, Variation of Psalm

133, Shahn has reproduced sacred text and reinterpreted it with additional contextualizing imagery, a process that inspired the work I would do.

Figure 1. Variation of Psalm 133.

Shahn (1963) referenced Rabbi Abulafia, the great mystic, who identified the transcendent power of Hebrew letters:

> In letters were to be found the deepest mysteries, that in the contemplation of the shapes the devout might ascend through every purer, more abstract levels of experience to achieve at last the ultimate, ineffable abstraction of union with his God. (p. 5)

I became aware of the history of Hebrew calligraphy as a pathway to the mystical and found support for the intention to render the ancient letters as a spiritual practice in the work of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner (1975). Kushner explains the mystical connections:

> The OTIYOT (letters of the Hebrew alphabet) are more than just the signs for sounds. They are symbols whose shape and name, placement in the alphabet, and words they begin put them each in the center of a unique spiritual constellation. They are themselves holy. They are vessels carrying within the light of the Boundless One. (p. 17)

Inquiry Process

Although I did not intend this project to be a formal research inquiry, I understand its affinities with the methodology of autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), a research process that embraces product and process simultaneously. Looking for a disciplined and rigorous art-based approach, I devised a multi-step investigation that I hoped would link everything I held as true from my clinical art therapy practice with everything I wanted from my faith tradition. I divided the process into seven steps: the first three extracted from my faith based practices and the final four extracted from clinical art therapy practices.

1. Study and practice Hebrew calligraphy
2. Study and practice the daily prayers of traditional Judaism
3. Select liturgical fragments as a meditation
4. Render the fragments for 40 days
    i. First using pen and ink Hebrew calligraphy
    ii. Second embellishing the Hebrew with other materials
5. Examine the imagery
6. Explore the process with others
7. Find meanings

Steps 1 and 2

I found help for the first two steps in my own communities, both Jewish and Jesuit; Rabbi Anne Brener (Academy of Jewish Religion) helped me study and extract liturgical fragments from the traditional daily prayers, and Rabbi Ilana Schacter (Loyola Marymount University) patiently taught me Hebrew calligraphy.

Step 3

I paid careful attention to the internal stirrings that I experienced as I studied and repeated the daily liturgy. I noticed in particular the ideas of vulnerability expressed in the nighttime prayers, the expression of gratitude in the morning service, and the reminders to stay connected in the mid-day liturgy. Selecting these three inner states as manifestations of my own experiences, I crafted a daily meditation/rendering (see Figure 2).

...before bed (MAARIV)

הַשְׁכִּיבֵנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְשָׁלוֹם
וְהַעֲמִידֵנוּ מַלְכֵּנוּ לְחַיִּים

Grant that we may lie down in peace, Eternal One, and awaken us to life.

(reflecting my)
VULNERABILITY

...arising (SHACHARIT)

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיָּם
שֶׁהֶחֱזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחֶמְלָה

I offer thanks before you, eternal One, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me.

(reflecting my)
GRATITUDE

...mid-afternoon (MINCHA)

אַשְׁרֵי יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתֶךָ
עוֹד יְהַלְלוּךָ סֶלָה

Happy are those who dwell in Your house; they are continually praising You.

(reflecting my)
PRESENCE

Figure 2. Liturgical scaffold for calligraphic meditation.

Step 4

The fourth step was the biggest challenge, involving the migration of art therapy practices (including materials, structure, and prompts). I established a daily routine that involved starting with a simple rendering of the liturgical scaffold, the three fragments in Figure 2. I decided that I would do this work for 40 days, reminiscent of Moses' experience at Sinai. I collected a variety

of inks and pens that I enjoyed using and augmented the supplies with metallic paints and the loosely woven cheesecloth that had become important in my Torah study imagery (Linesch, 2013), symbolically representing illumination and revelation. The use of gold, silver, and copper pigments was new in my imagery and tied to the sense I had that these elemental and glorious colors were appropriate to the explorations in which I was engaging. The cheesecloth with its capacity to hold dye and to be unwoven and reconfigured offered an exquisite symbol for the fluid and shifting appearance and disappearance of revelation. I was not sure how I was going to utilize the materials, but I trusted the process and decided that the pen and ink calligraphy would invite the other materials to create embellishments and extend meanings.

Step 5

After completing the 40-day engagement in image making, I began a disciplined process of examining the imagery. I looked at shape, form, color and texture, and I created journal entries that were reminiscent of the kinds of conversations I encouraged clients in clinical art therapy to have about their imagery. Eight examples of the imagery are presented accompanied by text that summarizes my observations and understandings (see Figures 3-10).

Figure 3. Second day rendering.

On the second day I realized that the metallic colors of gold, silver, and copper were my new palette.

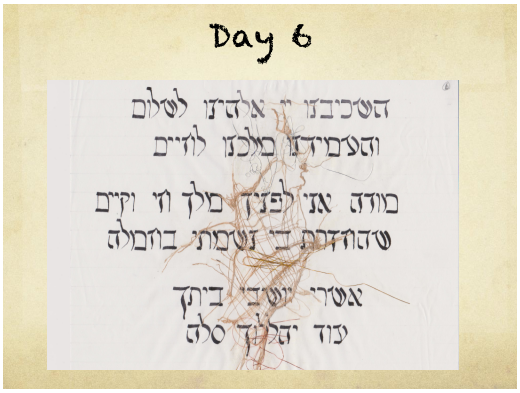

Figure 4. Sixth day rendering.

On the sixth day I began incorporating the deconstructed cheesecloth in shapes that shadowed the text.

Figure 5. Eleventh day rendering.

On the eleventh day I began dying the deconstructed cheesecloth in the metallic colors of my palette. I found the covering and illuminating of the text very provocative.

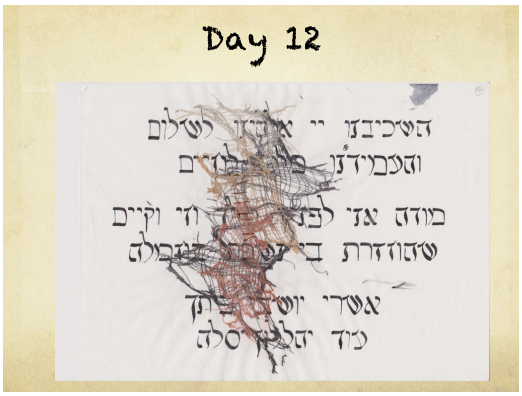

Figure 6. Twelfth day rendering.

On the twelfth day I witnessed the appearance of a self-image and found delight in the dancing, stretching, emerging woman.

Figure 7. Fifteenth day rendering.

On the fifteenth day I realized that the colors that contextualized the text were the colors that enlivened and spirited the emerging figure.

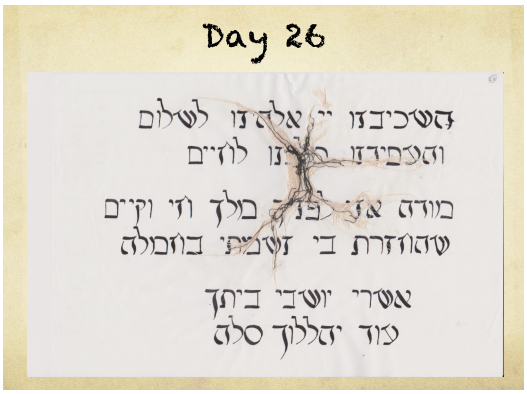

Figure 8. Twenty-sixth day rendering.

On the twenty-sixth day I could no longer pretend that the experience I was having in rendering the text was not reflected in the energized movement of the decidedly self-representative figure.

Figure 9. Twenty-ninth day rendering.

On the twenty-ninth day the revelations I was witnessing scared me and I created a messy blotch.

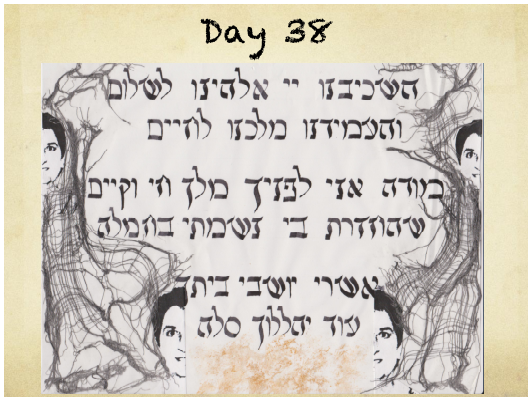

Figure 10. Thirty-eighth day rendering.

On the thirty-eighth day I could no longer avoid direct self-representation and included self-portraiture encased in dyed cheesecloth as curtains that frame the liturgical fragments.

Step 6

I shared the imagery with a variety of family members, colleagues, and trusted friends. With their input I began to understand what I had done. The conversations helped me see that through the construction and repetition of the art based ritual, I had learned to know and become intimate with the liturgy. Words that I had selected from my tradition became familiar, personal, and practiced. The observations of others helped me see how I had allowed myself to play with creative self-expression and how the embellished texts had become increasingly self-reflective. It became apparent to me that as I had moved through the 40-day meditation, I had found my own center in the prayer process and had learned something that now seems so simple and fundamental. The art process had helped me inhabit the liturgy and experience the kind of authentic engagement the text alone had not.

Findings and Meanings

Just as image making enhances the process of self-awareness and insight in the practice of clinical art therapy, image making enhances the process of spiritual connectedness in a faith-based practice. Just as I have learned to trust the preliminary and tentative art that patients, clients, and workshop participants create, so too I have learned to trust my own preliminary and tentative efforts to use my imagery to access that part of my faith tradition from which I have felt disengaged.

There are understandings in this work that can be extended to bridge the practices of clinical art therapy and spiritual engagement. Those interested in making spiritual practices more inclusive and compelling to individuals whose modalities of expression are not entirely text or language based can include image making as a form of worship. On the other hand, the practitioners of clinical art psychotherapy can find ways to include the theories and spiritual practices of faith traditions to ground their clinical work in deep and universal understandings of human experience. More work needs to be done to understand the role of imagery as a bridge between the unfortunately disconnected realms of the human experience identified reductively as 'psychological' and 'spiritual.'

My explorations have stimulated the following incorporations of spiritual considerations in my clinical thinking and practice:

1. Commitment to investigating one's own personal spiritual understandings supports the bold and necessary openness that is the foundation for authentic clinical work.
2. Open mindedness/open heartedness to spiritual exploration on the part of the art therapist invites expanded and broader engagement within the clinical dialogue.

As art therapist Pat Allen (2005) says, "Art is a vehicle that allows us to transcend linear time, to travel backward and forward into personal and transpersonal history, into possibilities that weren't realized and those that might be" (pp. 1-2). I am convinced that art can be a powerful vehicle for connecting the prayers or liturgical texts of religious traditions to an individual's experience in a deeply personal and creative way. Also, I am convinced that the practice of clinical art therapy can be deepened and broadened when the therapist opens her heart and mind to the reverberations of her own spiritual questioning and to the spiritual questioning of those with whom she works.

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