A JEWISH DISEASE?

By Avigdor Bonchek

What is OCD? How did it become a household word in the Orthodox community? Referred to in Yiddish as nervin, OCD manifests itself in repetitive, compulsive behavior. When a child of Yidden suffers from OCD, there is extreme stress since their uncontrollable thoughts and behaviors rule, and often ruin, their lives. They are continuously plagued with doubts. There is the woman who worries about her halachic readiness for immersion and spends four hours preparing to go to the mikvah. There is the man, who, uncertain if his beretuvin were correct, takes up to three hours to say morning prayers that should take twenty-five minutes. And there is the boy who washes his hands upwards of twenty times a day because of his fears that his hands are not clean enough to learn Torah or say a blessing. Other manifestations of OCD include obsessive, intrusive thoughts of forbidden things, such as avodah zarah (idolatry); plaguing doubts about whether a fleeting thought is halachically considered a sin (sins); long hours spent in washroom activities and extreme vigilance about meat and milk “contamination.”

Regarding Orthodox sufferers, a number of questions can be raised. Wouldn’t these people’s lives be more peaceful without the restrictions of the Shulchan Aruch weighing down on them? In other words, would they suffer from compulsivity were they not Torah-obsessive? Does observing halacha make them compulsive, or would they be compulsive regardless? Furthermore, how is a parent, spouse or rabbi to differentiate between a sincere striving for kedushah and a psychiatric condition that feeds on kedushah? How can a person himself know whether he’s crossed the line between healthy religiosity and unhealthy compulsivity? Indeed, many sufferers have no idea that their condition is a condition.

Is OCD a Jewish Disease? It is estimated that about 2 percent of the population suffer from OCD at some point in their lives. To be sure, there are no epidemiological studies showing that Orthodox Jews are more inclined to suffer from OCD than the general population. However, because of the complex relationship between religion and OCD (Orthodox compulsives tend to be obsessed with halachic matters), OCD is no longer known only to those in the mental health professions. Indeed, a fourteen-year-old client of mine, a yeshivah boy, recently turned to his mother during a session and exclaimed, “I think I have OCD!” (Which, in fact, he does.) During last month’s Yiddish Unreformed convention, my wife and I were stunned to discover a young Chassidic man delivering a lecture (in Yiddish!) to educators on treating OCD in school. (While not a professional, he was quite knowledgeable about this psychological enigma.)

Because of the growing ranks of psychiatric acronyms that have become household words, such as ADHD, PTSD and BPD, 1 remember the good old days when the only abbreviations we knew were IBM and NBA?) When the only abbreviations we knew were IBM and NBA?)

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Fortunately, treatment for this debilitating illness has progressed rapidly in the past twenty years. It is important that a parent or spouse not ignore the symptoms of OCD, believing it will go away with time. On the other hand, one should not jump to conclusions and immediately offer a “diagnosis.” The problem may be just a phase, as is often the case with teenagers. Check for the signs mentioned above: stress and inflexibility. Speak with the individual; ask him how he sees his behaviors. In this way, you can test his flexibility. Does he listen to reason, or does he agree to let up on his “religious” behaviors while actually continuing to perform them compulsively, almost surreptitiously? If you think there is a real problem, seek professional help. Psychiatrists will almost invariably recommend medications, of which there are some good ones (from the Prozac family) and some not so good (for example, excessive handwashing)?

Note 1. ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and BPD (borderline personality disorder).