

# “In Treatment”

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

[In Treatment](#) is the title of a highly addictive series on HBO television in the United States. It is about a psychotherapist, played by [Gabriel Byrne](#). For anyone interested in psychotherapy it is compelling and I gather the whole fraternity (or to be more accurate, sorority, for there now seem to be far more women in the business) is hooked. The series involves not just Byrne but also his patients, family and his own therapist. Each half-hour segment is a separate case or situation dealing with a dysfunctional person, which they all are in their different ways.

The series is actually based on a very successful Israeli TV hit called [B'Tipul](#). You would not know this from the American series until the credits roll at the end, replete with Israeli Jewish names and a line that says that each program is based on one in the original series. There are adjustments for the American version. Instead of an Israeli pilot, it's a black US Navy man who was given the wrong coordinates and bombed a madrassa in Iraq by mistake and is trying to deal with his guilt. In fact, the characters are all so typically American, in so many ways, but for one point. There is absolutely no mention of religion at all apart from one negative reference to the Bible. This is the clue, if any were needed, for its Israeli provenance. It underline how alienated most secular Israelis are from religion. Whatever one may think of American society, religion, in all its variegated forms, plays a far greater part in the lives of more of its citizens than it does in Israel where it tends to be an “all or nothing” game.

This explains the tension and dissonance that exists in Israel between religious and secular Jews, for which the religious usually and sometimes unfairly get all the blame. It also shows why so many Israelis simply have no understanding of the significance of the growing place of religion amongst their Muslim citizens and antagonists and why so many prefer dabbling in esoteric remote religions and some in the more peculiar variants of Judaism.

On a wider level, this programme raises an important issue about psychotherapy. There was a time when psychotherapy was taboo in Jewish circles, despite its being originated primarily by Jews. There was a sense of embarrassment and shame attached to it, as if seeing a therapist was a sign of weakness, failure, even madness. This is changing in certain societies more than others. Still, in many Orthodox circles psychiatrists are asked to bill for medical services because any whiff of seeing a psychotherapist can do untold harm, such as damaging arranged marriage plans. In addition, cliches abound about psychotherapists being far more screwed up than their patients and often incapable of getting their own acts together. As with all professions, you have to sift and filter and make enquiries, and a really good one is worth his or her weight in gold, and is just as rare and expensive.

On the other hand, more and more people are coming to recognize the value of

discussing one's thoughts and problems, and a detached outsider can often be of great help. Woody Allen popularized the image of the neurotic Jew in need of constant therapy. Now virtually any New Yorker worth his or her salt has a "shrink", which term itself is derived from the implication that a psychotherapist might be no more than a sophisticated witch doctor!

Yes, talking can often help, and a great deal of rabbinic time nowadays is taken up with dealing with people's problems. Fortunately, more and more rabbis are actually getting training. When I started in the rabbinate no such possibility existed. But I sensed the importance of understanding people, so I devoted a lot of time to studying on my own. It seemed to work, because people kept coming back.

But at the root of the issue is the fact that psychoanalysis, if not strongly opposed to religion (that was certainly Freud's position), is at least negatively disposed to it. All innovators go to extremes, of course. Only Carl Jung amongst the early giants seriously tried to bring religion and faith into his psychiatric world, but Freud and his followers broke with him over this and other differences. It was the subtle antireligious subtext in the early history of psychoanalysis that alienated the religious world. This explains both rabbinic disapproval and the reluctance of religious societies to take it on enthusiastically.

Sadly, I think most religious communities are badly in need of a great deal of psychotherapy. In America, at least, more Orthodox men and women are acquiring the sort of expertise that allows them to bring the best of both worlds together, but still not enough.

*In Treatment* perfectly illustrates the problem. Religion has disadvantages of course—conformism, claustrophobia, and social pressure more than elsewhere. But it also brings important benefits that all the characters in "In Treatment" could have benefited from, such as structure, values, and discipline. I guess if one wants to know what's wrong with both wings of Israeli society, this would be a good place to start. There's material for a thesis here!