Jewish mysticism can help achieve ‘robust health’

By SHERI SHEFA
Staff Reporter

I
did as I was asked: I sent Annette Poizner, a certified
graphologist and social worker, a sample of my hand-
writing, my 10 earliest memories, and two detailed
drawings of trees.

“Based on this, she thinks she’s going to
be able to assess my personality?” I
asked my skeptical self.

A week later, I met with Poizner in her
North York office, eager to hear what con-
clusions she had reached based on my
chicken scratch and juvenile drawings.

“You, you’re a girly-girl,” said Poizner
with a laugh.

Drawing on key concepts in Kabbal-
alah, she explained that all psychological
attributes can be placed on a continuum,
with some traits, such as dynamic and
forward-moving as masculine, and other
traits, such as introverted and detail-ori-
cented as feminine. She added that most of
my personality traits fall into the feminine
end of the spectrum.

“I’m a girly-girl?” I asked in disbelief. I grew up as an
athletic tomboy, obsessed with the Toronto Maple Leafs
and always at ease around a group of guys. I was not com-
fortable with that label.

Sensing my skepticism, she asked me to give her a
chance to elaborate and hoped that the projective person-
ality assessment — a method that allows clinicians to learn
about a subject’s personality by analyzing his or her draw-
ings, handwriting, earliest memories or other behaviours—
would help demonstrate the value of Jewish wisdom as a
means of providing guidance to people.

She began by providing background information about
Jewish mysticism.

“Any discussion about Jewish mysticism has to be
grounded in classic texts, in ideas that are part of our main-
stream that integrate absolutely harmoniously with tradi-
tional Jewish ideas,” said Poizner, who has a doctorate in
psychology.

As a doctoral dissertation exploring the use of graphology
(handwriting analysis) within psychotherapy.

“In Genesis, God said that it is not good for man to be
alone. At which point, he takes the rib [from Adam to create
Eve] and suddenly we have this bifurcation, which has a
man and woman standing separate side by side,” she said.

adding that mystics believe the whole
world is composed of two compliment-
ary systems.

In fact, Poizner said, native medicine,
traditional Chinese medicine, the Yogic
tradition and Jewish mysticism all share
the assumption that the body also has
this duality of nature — yin and yang,
or feminine and masculine — and balanc-
ing the masculine and feminine energies
promotes robust health.

The challenge is figuring out how to
create unity between the masculine and
feminine, otherwise we will be of two
minds, said Poizner, who specializes in

Treating patients with obsessive compul-
sive disorder using psychotherapy, hyp-
nosis and other techniques.

Throughout our session, Poizner fre-
quently referred to the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, a map made
up of circles and lines that depicts the body as a system of
energy centres (energy centres) that govern different limbs and
organisms, and channel energy down from a heavenly source.

She said the system runs optimally when all the energy
centres are enlivened and nourished by a balanced, active
lifestyle.

When the system is unbalanced, an individual can ex-
perience confusion, indecision, moodiness, and even phys-
ical ailments.

According to Poizner, this ancient map can help people
better understand their imbalances and determine which
of their psychological attributes need to be tamed and which
need to be developed or strengthened.

Jewish mysticism offers a map of the psyche that can help
people achieve a healthy psychological balance without
attributing negative disorders to the symptoms, she said.

For instance, in my case, based on the information
Poizner gathered from my handwriting and earliest mem-
ories, she was able to conclude that my tendency to pro-
crastinate is what hinders me from moving forward in life.

Whether I’m hitting the snooze button on my alarm
clock in the morning or checking my e-mail before I start
working on an assignment, this behaviour suggests that my
map lacks “chessed,” or loving kindness, the masculine
sfirah that gives us the energy and discipline to move
forward.

Instead, I apparently possess too much of its opposite,
gvurah — which means strength or might — the feminine
sfirah that “relates to the experience of fear, a trend toward
contraction.”

Poizner, who regularly speaks at various synagogues —
most recently at Temple Emanu-El in Toronto — has also
lectured undergraduate Judaic studies students at Queen’s
University about graphology and its correspondence with
Jewish mystical teachings.

She said she uncovered the association between Jewish
discipline and handwriting assessment many years after she
studied handwriting analysis in the 1980s with grapholo-
gist Baruch Lazemnik in Israel, where graphology is widely
used and accepted by clinicians, although not endorsed by
the psychology profession.

But, she said, there is a growing interest among other
health-care professionals in what she calls “medical an-
thropology,” which includes graphology and the study of
spirituality.

In 2002, the Continuing School of Education at the Uni-
versity of Toronto’s medical school hosted a conference
called the Second Canadian Inter-professional Conference
on Spirituality and Health Care, where Poizner spoke about
the use of Jewish wisdom in psychotherapy.

Seven years ago, Poizner launched the Jewish Health
Alliance, which produces programs and lectures about
Judaism and the healing arts.

“We are getting some mileage in terms of getting
Judaism out there as a very credible lens through which
to think about the healing arts,” she said.

She hopes that the programming will “rescue Jewish
mysticism from the celebrities and from sources that have
been questionable.”

Combining her expertise in Judaism and psychology
with her knowledge of graphology and Jewish mysticism,
Poizner was able to analyze my handwriting, my drawings
and my memories to determine things about myself that
only close friends and family know.

“You’re an introvert with a very strong interest in human
connection, meaning on one hand you’re emotionally re-
served and withdrawn, and you come to life in the one-on-
one,” Poizner said.

“When you go to party, you have to boost up all your
energy to flutter around and talk to a million people. But
to sit one on one with a close friend, you feel energized.
You are practical and realistic, grounded, good at organiz-
ing the tangible world, detailed.”

Poizner said that while I am intelligent and have a “wide
bouquet of attributes and talents,” I tend to doubt my com-
petence, which may hinder me from moving forward.

I am perfectly competent, but don’t feel it. I am a naysay-
er, a pessimist, she said.

Appropriately, my map is not balanced and I’m too yin.
So, it’s true. I am a girly-girl. But there is hope.

Using the kabbalistic tree of life, by understanding the
map and determining what areas need to be improved,
you can pursue robust health.

“You can do all this stuff and never talk about Jewish
mysticism, but there are far more intricacies that come out
when you use the map.”

Poizner will present a lecture titled “Kabbalah and the
Psychology of Handwriting” at the Lodzer Centre Congre-
gation on Feb. 11 at 8 p.m.

Tickets are $10. For more information, call 416-636-
6665 or visit www.amettpoizner.com.