

To Your Health

Jewish mysticism can help achieve 'robust health'

By **SHERI SHEFA**
Staff Reporter

Did as I was asked: I sent Annette Poizner, a certified graphologist and social worker, a sample of my handwriting, 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 conclusions she had reached based on my chicken scratch and juvenile drawings.

"You, you're a girlie-girl," said Poizner with a laugh.

Drawing on key concepts in Kabbalah, 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-oriented as feminine. She added that most of my personality traits fall into the feminine end of the spectrum.

"I'm a girlie-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 comfortable with that label.

Sensing my skepticism, she asked me to give her a chance to elaborate and hoped that the projective personality assessment – a method that allows clinicians to learn about a subject's personality by analyzing his or her drawings, 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 mainstream that integrate absolutely harmoniously with traditional Jewish ideas," said Poizner, who has a doctorate in counselling psychology from the University of Toronto, a master's in social work from Columbia University and did

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 complimentary 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 balancing 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 compulsive disorder using psychotherapy, hypnosis and other techniques.

Throughout our session, Poizner frequently referred to the kabbalistic Tree of Life, a map made up of circles and lines that depicts the body as a system of "sfirot" (energy centres) that govern different limbs and organs, 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 experience confusion, indecision, moodiness, and even physical 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 memories, she was able to conclude that my tendency to procrastinate 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 "chesed," or loving kindness, the masculine sfirot 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 sfirot that "relates to the experience of fear, a trend toward contraction."

Poizner, who regularly speaks at various synagogues –



Annette Poizner

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 doctrine and handwriting assessment many years after she studied handwriting analysis in the 1980s with graphologist Baruch Lazewnik 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 anthropology," which includes graphology and the study of spirituality.

In 2002, the Continuing School of Education at the University 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 reserved and withdrawn, and you come to life in the one-on-one," Poizner said.

"When you go to party, you have to boot 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 organizing 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 competence, which may hinder me from moving forward.

I am perfectly competent, but don't feel it. I am a naysayer, a pessimist, she said.

Apparently, my map is not balanced and I'm too yin. So, it's true. I am a girlie-girl. But there is hope.

Using the kabbalistic tree of life, by understanding the map and determining what areas need to be improved, anyone 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 Congregation on Feb. 11 at 8 p.m.

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

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