The Jewish Roots of Gestalt Therapy

The History of Ideas

The history of ideas is a branch of philosophy which makes explicit those ideas which usually remain implicit, for the purpose of increasing our self-knowledge. By 'ideas' we mean here the concepts which enable us to order and interpret the major part of our experience (R. Hausheer, cited in Kuypers and Burggraewe, 1998, p. 27). Ideas come into existence not only, or even mainly, through clear thinking but equally through the unreflected assimilation of perceptions of reality and cultural assumptions from our upbringing: at home, on the street and in educational institutions. Language plays an important role in this implicit assimilation of ideas. It is after all a bearer of collective ideas prior to the language user forming his or her own ideas and remains so even when it is intended to be the bearer of the individual's ideas. Gestalt therapy is thus obviously, just like any other concept for ordering and interpreting experience, a combination of implicit and explicit ideas.

Further exploration of one of the many sources from which Gestalt therapy derives, Jewishness, will certainly contribute to the increase of our self-knowledge as Gestalt therapists. The influence of Judaism on our culture in general and Gestalt therapy in particular is so deeply embedded that we fail to recognise originally Jewish elements for what they are. On the other hand however certain elements from Judaism remain at odds with our concepts and interpretation of experience. It is the eternal conflict between things which are self-evident on the one hand and those which are paradoxical on the other which characterises the place of Judaism within our culture and Gestalt therapy. Strikingly enough, the position occupied by Gestalt therapy in the world of psychotherapy is marked by the same tension: on the one hand many people 'do Gestalt' - often without being aware of it - while on the other hand Gestalt therapy tends to be scorned. This somewhat curious parallel between Judaism and Gestalt therapy provides even more reason for going more deeply into the history of ideas within Gestalt therapy. A complicating factor in this exploration is the rigid view which is generally held about 'Jewishness' (which is also a problem for Gestalt therapy). An important tool in this sketch of Jewishness will thus be the many references to Jewish humour and wisdom in the article. The succinctness of this humour, the pleasure of seeing oneself in perspective, the down-to-earthness, the stubborn individuality and the mildness of Jewish humour and wisdom often express the essence of what Jewishness is more directly than a long explanation.

The Chief Rabbi of London, asked how he defined anti-Semitism, answered:

'Anti-Semitism is hating Jews more than is strictly necessary.'

In fact the proposition that Gestalt therapy has important Jewish roots is not difficult to prove, as indeed the whole of Western psychology is principally founded on discoveries made by Freud, who himself was Jewish. Moreover our whole culture is clearly marked by Jewish traces: both natural as well as medical science have their origins in the Middle East, as also Christianity and classical music. (Abicht, 1998, p. 216v.) Actually not only Freud but many other founders of psychotherapeutic schools were Jewish: Adler, Reich, Moreno, Frankl, Cohn, Fromm, Lowen and so on, as well as the three most important founders of Gestalt therapy, Fritz and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman.

What is Jewishness?
The essential question in regard to the exploration of the Jewish roots in Gestalt therapy is of course: What does Jewishness actually mean? There is no simple answer to this question. Different categories have been used in order to try and reach a definition of what it means to be Jewish:

1. The most notorious category is that of racial theory. Jews are supposed to belong to a certain race. Luckily we need occupy ourselves no longer with such nonsense. There is no such thing as a Jewish or
Semitic race and indeed biologists nowadays tend to find the whole notion of race to be inapplicable to human beings.

1933, in a German school: 'Moritz, which race do the Jews belong to?'
'The Semites'
'Correct. And the Germans?'
'The anti-Semites'.

2. Jewishness is not a specific culture either. A Jew in Ethiopia differs culturally a great deal from a Jew in New York. It is precisely these cultural differences which have caused such tensions in Israel.

3. Jewishness cannot be called a religion either, because Freud, Marx¹, Charlie Chaplin, Trotsky, Perls and Jesus were all called Jews by themselves or others without belonging to the same religion.
   A Jewish anarchist in Tsarist Russia is condemned to death and wants to be baptised before his execution.
   'Has the threat of death driven you into the arms of the true belief?' asks the Russian orthodox priest.
   The anarchist: 'Not really. I just thought: If I have to be hanged, then let it be as a goy (a non-Jew).

4. The most workable definition of what it means to be Jewish is based on the story. Jews can be described as a group of people who share the same story. They are all people who base their ideas on the story of the exodus from oppression. All the previously-named people (Freud, Marx, Chaplin, Trotsky, Perls and Jesus) have interpreted this story of liberation from oppression in their own way. A characteristic of liberation is that it presumes a captivity from which someone must be freed. This means that the underlying principle of action is the subjection imposed by respectively neurosis, capitalism, lack of humour, the law, introjects and systems. We can be freed from these through revolution, humour, awareness, love and insight.

**Totalitarianism**

Without doubt Gestalt therapy was originally inspired by the will to be free of fascism, in which generalisations, rationalisations, uniforms and uniformity as well as 'Du bist Nichts, Dein Volk is Alles' played an important role. And we know that Perls spent his whole life fleeing totalitarian regimes: first national socialism in Germany, then totalitarian racism in South Africa and finally Nixon's totalitarianism in the U.S. That is probably why, as Gestalt therapists, we are 'genetically disposed' towards the rejection of any statements which claim to be universally true. We abhor the totalitarian. This is something we share with Judaism.²

Some one asks a Jew: 'Why do Jews always answer a question with another question?'
And the Jew says: 'Why shouldn't a Jew always answer a question with another question?'
It is certainly not surprising that the renowned French philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, took opposition to the 'totalitarian' as a starting-point for his philosophy when you remember that he was originally a Jewish scribe.] Levinas establishes the fact that 'totalitarianism' is characteristic of Western thinking.³

A rabbi listens to a couple's marriage problems.
At the end of the session the rabbi's wife says:

---

¹ On Marx as anti-Semite (!), see Gans, 1994, p. 55 as well as 'Sein eigenes Werk ist zwar ausschliesslich aus altjüdischen Ideen gespeist: aus dem beduinischen Kommunismus (...) und aus dem prophetischem Ideal ...' (Landmann, 1988, p.32)
² 'What mysticism, philosophy, humour and anarchism share is precisely a rejection of the one eternally established dogma.' (Abicht, 1992)
³ See Kuypers, 1998
'You agreed with both him and her while their opinions were diametrically opposed. Surely they can't both be right.'

Whereupon the rabbi answers: 'And you're right about that too.'

Levinas opposes totalitarian thinking with the concept of the other. And this concept is again one of the many variations on the Jewish perceptual principle of what reality is: relational, dialectic, polar, and thus not: monotheistic, totalitarian, reductionist or striving for a simple world formula.

**The relational principle**

It is precisely this relational thinking as a principle of perception, one of the most essential elements of Judaism, which turns out to be the most difficult to integrate into our Western framework of thinking:

1. Again and again it appears that Gestalt therapists - in spite of what they maintain - assume the individual to be the starting point: 'a relationship', they say 'is something which takes place between two individuals', instead of: 'in a relationship I can suddenly perceive the other and the I.'

   An old Jewish saying:

   'I become more I as you become more you for me'

2. Over and over again it appears that what is meant by 'polarity' is actually dualism: one or the other. Dualism is actually no more than a form of totalitarian thinking in disguise, because its 'either ..or' reasoning makes it exclusive.

3. Thus the tension - and so the erotic - between the poles continually seems to be reduced to a vague religious feeling of unity; what in New Age terms is called connection usually appears on closer inspection to be nothing else than confluence. And resistance, a necessary constituent of polarity, is taboo in these circles. From these examples it is clear how on the one hand Jewish thought has been integrated into Western thinking and Gestalt therapy, while on the other hand it misses what is precisely the essence of that thought. We oppose the totalitarian and let it in through the back door again without even noticing.

**Monism versus relational unity**

In order to perceive what is essential to Judaism we need to talk about God. This can already give rise to misunderstandings since, in our culture, God belongs to the category of 'the religious' or, to put this more precisely, the religious is confined to the emotionally irrational and separated from the relationally intellectual. In Judaism God is not confined to the religious. Levinas for example has argued for an atheistic view of God.\textsuperscript{4}

A psychoanalyst says to a rabbi:

'God is the projection of longing.'

And the rabbi answers: 'I know. Because that's how God created man.'

The fact that the Jewish belief is regarded as monotheistic clearly shows how on the one hand Judaism is integrated into our thinking while on the other it remains completely opposed to it. The most important Jewish sentence - a sentence which is spoken at all the existential moments in life - also seems to point to monotheism and thus belong to a totalitarian form of thinking. This fundamental statement is as follows:

'Listen Israel:

ADORAI is our God
ADORAI is one.'

\textsuperscript{4}Levinas can then justifiably argue that his search for God is independent of God's existence or non-existence (...) His questioning towards God is, in the literal sense of the word, preconditional thinking: It precedes the question of the proof of God. (Kuypers, 1998, p. 33)

'Jewish thinking has transformed the world and clearly opposes itself to (...) the numinous and sacred (...) such a transportation remains strange to Jewishness. It laments: they are the creatures of idolatry (...).' (de Bruin, 1983, p. 96)
To make things clear: ADONAI means 'sir' and is used instead of the name of God which cannot be uttered, because an important aspect of God is his relationship to man and the characteristic of a relationship is above all that it cannot be pinned down. Because in a relationship I am part of it and so cannot talk about it or name it, while on the other hand if I remain outside there is no relationship (and so also no God). The essential question of course is to capture what is meant by the statement that ADONAI is one. Because this indeed smacks strongly of 'mono-' and thus totality.

The Cabalists - Jewish mystics who focussed on the mystery of numbers - have come up with the following reasoning, which is reproduced briefly here for the sake of clarity.

In ancient times all numbers had a certain figurative value: The first letter of the alphabet = 1, the second = 2 and so on. Following this system the sum of the letters contained in the first line (Adonai is our God) in the original Hebrew script 10. And the sum of the numbers 1 and 0 (and so of 10) = 1. The sum of the letters in the second line strikingly enough also adds up to 1. This means - concluded the Cabalists - that the first line says the same as the second. This naturally suits the mystics, since it means that numerology produces the same result as the content of the statement itself. But this is not yet the main point of this Cabalist calculation. The first letter of the alphabet is the Aleph and thus represents the number 1. Moreover this letter is often used as an abbreviation for the word 'God' - so this too means: God = 1. But and this is the point of this 'sum' - if you examine the letter Aleph more closely, then the number 1 itself appears to be dialogic. The letter Aleph in Hebrew looks schematically like the following diagram:

What then becomes apparent is that this letter is composed of two parts, namely ‘ and , linked and separated by \. From this the Cabalists concluded that: God = 1 and that 1 = dialogic. Moreover they say: ‘is it not already written in the story of the creation that God said: let us make people’, rather than 'let me make people?' In other words: Jewish thinking is so fundamentally dialogic that 1 can never be a starting-point or a beginning. Or to elaborate: 'the one' should always be understood as polar. The meaning of the number 1 is the emphasis on connection, so: the sum of 1 + 1 always remains 1. 'What is special about this sentence is not that there is one God, but that God is one (...) We do not live in a fragmented universe… .' (Cahill, 1998, p. 162)

Whether you interpret this sentence as Levinas does by taking the other as starting-point (he does this in fact by placing the main stress on the subject), or like Martin Buber, by emphasising the polarity of I-it and I-you,( in which the emphasis lies on the moment at which the unity of the poles is experienced: the doing of not-doing, or in Gestalt terminology, the 'middle mode' (Buber, 1973)) or by foregrounding precisely the indifferent middle as Friedlaender does, the beginning is always - to put it like this for once - the Aleph, the unity of the dialogue.

If it's true that we are all shaped in God's image and likeness, how come we are all so different? Answer: it is exactly because we are all created in his image that we will never be exactly the same as another.

It is evident that this relational thinking is basic to Gestalt therapy. The influence on Fritz Perls of the indifferent middle from the Jewish philosopher Friedlaender's conceptual model is well-known. He calls Friedlaender his first Guru. The importance of Buber is recognised in particular by Laura Perls. And Daan van Praag rightly surmises that Levinas might very well occupy a more central position in Gestalt therapy in the future. This example of relational thinking by the Cabalists was mentioned here as an example of

---

5 This total is possible since Ancient Hebrew was a compact language using fewer words and omitting vowels in its script.
The fact that Jewish thinking is integrated in one way into Gestalt therapy, while in another, not at all. The difficulty of incorporating this thinking into Gestalt therapy now needs to be demonstrated more clearly.

The structured ground
The difficulty which Gestalt therapists also appear to have with relational thinking can best be demonstrated on the basis of the construction of the structured ground which has been introduced by Wheeler (Wheeler, 1991) and which now seems to have become a generally accepted part of Gestalt therapeutic theory. This construction secretly undermines relational thinking. This demands further explanation.

The figure-ground-formation is one of the most important forms in which Gestalt therapy expresses the relational perception of reality. This principle says that we can only perceive a figure against an otherwise diffuse background. A figure cannot exist without ground, nor ground without figure. And actually we cannot even speak about ground and figure as if they were separate entities, because both can only be recognised in their continual interaction. We cannot actually say anything about ground because we cannot perceive it! If our attention extends itself from a figure to its surroundings, then we can indeed recognise structure in what we call the context. However context is not ground. As soon as we speak of a particular context, we are talking about a figure against a background, a figure which you may be able to name more clearly.

Of course Gestalt therapists need to have a thorough knowledge of the context of their clients, but to think that this means that they have said something meaningful about their background is misleading. This would mean after all that they are victim to the illusion that it is possible to 'master' relationship. The adventure which the meeting with the client should always be is then replaced by calculation. However, the problem with ideas is that they are so deep-rooted and difficult to change. Our concept and interpretation of experience proves to be stubbornly that of a subject which perceives an object. This also means that the interpretation of our experience has something self-evidently causal and thus has a dualistic nature: first there is an object and then a subject that can perceive the object. That seems logical to our way of thinking, because that is how we have ordered our reality. The idea that individual human existence must precede the relationship between individuals is very familiar. This trust in causality, dualism and a reality which consists of objects which may communicate or not is thoroughly disturbed by the Jewish concept of reality: the Jew cannot utter the name of God (or reality), cannot posses him/her. The only thing he can do is to relate his history - or the process - with God.

'Hello Ornstein'
'But my name isn't Ornstein'
'Good heavens! How is it possible that a person can change so much! Your figure has completely changed, the colour of your hair, your nose is completely different .. And you're not even called Ornstein anymore.'

The beginning of the story: the letter Beth
The Cabalists also commented on the fact that their holy book, the Torah, did not start with the first letter of the alphabet, the Aleph, but with the second, the Beth. It would be logical, one would suppose, to think that the holy book began with the first letter because the Aleph, as stated earlier, stands for the word 'God'. Moreover the Torah begins with the words: 'In the beginning God created ..', another reason to start at the beginning, with the 'Aleph'. 'No', say the cabalists, 'the Torah doesn't talk about God, only about his/her history with people. And that shows us the letter Beth'. In order to follow the Cabalists' reasoning we need to be aware of the world view in ancient times: the earth was supposed to turn like a disc on dangerous primal waters (the shadowy underworld which can penetrate into our fragile existence through earthquakes and volcanic eruptions). This earthly disc was protected from the dangerous primal waters, which could erupt onto it, by the firmament.
Looking at the letter Beth and realising that Hebrew is read from right to left, the Cabalists reasoned as follows: 'the Torah begins with the letter Beth to indicate that it wants to relate neither what happens in the firmament above (1 = heaven) nor under the earth (2 = the underworld), nor about what might have happened before the start of time (3). The Torah tells us about what happens between God and man (4). In other words: Jewish thinking is process thinking. 'God manifests himself more in events than in things and these events can never be captured in things or fixed' (Herschel, 1965, p. 66)

This makes the story an important medium because it always has a continuation. A 'finished' gestalt is always a new beginning for the next 'unfinished' gestalt. This also makes the here-and-now important. In Old Hebrew it is not even possible to indicate present, past and future time by means of verb tenses. It is possible however to indicate whether an action or event is finished or not. We would say: whether a gestalt is rounded off or not. This example also makes clear yet again how thoroughly language influences our interpretation of experience. It is after all very difficult to imagine how you would communicate with someone who does not include an indication of time in the verb, but whether an event has finished or not. We can learn in our Gestalt training that the 'here-and-now' is an important principle, but our experience of reality continues to be determined partly by our language, which is not a language of process. In other words here too a hidden tension can exist between the laws of gestalt and the way in which they are actually applied. Especially where Gestalt concepts have become clichés (as for example the here-and-now principle) the difference between Gestalt theory and therapeutic practice becomes obvious. How far-reaching the interweaving of language and the interpretation of experience can be is also clear if we try to realise how the world must have appeared to a Jew because the Hebrew word dabar can be translated as both do or make as well as speak. This is in complete contrast to our familiar opposition between words and deeds.

The Jewish background of the founders of Gestalt Therapy

We know that Fritz Perls was particularly fascinated by Zen. However, for anyone who has studied Buber it is clear that Portele is right when he claims that it is through Buber's texts on Judaism and Chassidism in particular, that we can understand the depth of Gestalt therapy rather than through what Perls has written about Zen.

In principle it is not really important for an exploration of the Jewish history of ideas in Gestalt therapy whether or not Fritz and Laura Perls and Paul Goodman themselves believed that their Jewish background had an important influence on Gestalt therapy. Especially since questions about what was specifically Jewish only became an issue because of extreme anti-Semitism under Hitler. At a time when your whole family could be destroyed on account of being Jewish (whatever that might be), as happened with Fritz

---

7 'As Buber shows, the single incident of each of these legendary stories conveys the meaning of life. In this story of education, story telling is a cornerstone (...) The zaddik strengthens his hasid (follower) in his hours of doubting but does not infiltrate him with truth' (Nevis, 1987, p. 76)

8 '.. our life is basically nothing else than an endless succession of unfinished situations - incomplete gestalts. As soon as we have finished a situation, the next open situation demands to be dealt with.' (Perls, 1973, p. 16)

9 'Durch Buber, vor allem durch seine Schriften zum Judentum, ist mir die religiöse Seite der Gestalttherapie deutlich geworden.' (Portele, 1994, p. 6) See also Waaiman, 1990, p. 33, which places Ich und Du (an important book for Gestalt therapists) in the third period of Buber's life. The first period was the mystical, the second that of existentialism and the third that of dialogic philosophy.
Perls's family, you could simply not fail to be preoccupied with the meaning of Jewishness. Fritz Perls positions his relationship to Jewishness in the context of fascism and sums up his relationship with Jewishness in a way which is somewhat unclear. But we know that he was very fond of many Jewish stories and that he greatly valued their richness and imagination.

In questioning the importance which the founders themselves attached to their Jewish background, the different cultural background of American and German Jewishness cannot be ignored. In Germany being Jewish was often experienced from the position of the underdog (although not in the case of Laura, for whom her Jewishness was something very matter-of-course in contrast to Fritz, who had some difficulty with his father and thus also with his Jewishness). In America however being Jewish was experienced with self-confidence and pride.

'I'm proud to be a Jew.
If I wasn't proud I'd still be a Jew.
So I'd rather be proud.'

Characteristic of American Jewishness is the cosmopolitan intellectual, articulated by Goodman, among others, in his affinity with anarchism. Goodman says of this: 'Anarchism is based on the following almost definitive proposition: Valuable behaviour exists only through the free and direct answer of individuals or voluntary groups to circumstances posed by the historical context.' This definition of anarchy as providing an adequate answer becomes an important concept for the founders of Gestalt therapy through their emphasis on responsibility as the 'ability to respond'. It is precisely autonomy and dialogue which are considered by Buber to be two important gauges of Jewishness. These are the gauges which Goodman is talking about in his description of anarchy. It is the tension between the concepts of autonomy and connection which express the essence of the concept of responsibility. Goodman's preference for the concept of creative adaptation rather than Fritz Perls's more biologically influenced concept of organismic self-regulation is a choice which comes from his Jewish background. He sees in the model of the self-regulating organism a Jewish Messianic parallel, because this too concerns the tension between autonomy and dialogue. What all three founders of Gestalt therapy found attractive in Judaism was that 'everything we say about God is actually neither true nor false. God has no body, while I can only know something about bodily things, including myself. I may not deify the body, as little as I may myself.'

**Conclusion**

Until recently, Gestalt therapy tended towards the alternative and thus vague. Many issues in Gestalt therapy came into being through reaction. Reaction to psychoanalysis, to the domination of rationalism ('lose your mind, come to your senses'), to objectifying distancing, to causal thinking and so on. Now of course there is nothing wrong with these subjects. The problem lies much more in the impulse from which these subjects were embraced in the first place, that is from a reaction rather than an aha-experience or sudden insight. And it is this reactive quality which has its roots in Judaism. Somewhere in the distant past of history, Jews broke free from cyclical thinking. The revolutionary nature of this breakthrough to process thinking should not be underestimated. Both the consequences of this revolution as well as the

---

10 'But Fritz had a tendency to blur the label 'Jewish'. Although in better years he could laughingly say he was a 'Zen Judah', he also seems to have been able to deny his background, as he did at first with (...) his first publisher'. (Shephard, 1975, p. 21). See also Hatcher and Himelstein, 1997, p. 31v.)


12 'I'll tell you, though Fritz and Pa didn't get along, in this way Fritz followed in his footsteps. After a while he too denied Judaism. He was even less religious than Father' (Gaines, 1979, p.2)

13 Stecovic, In Handbuch, 1990, p. 94


15 Goodman, cited by Sreckovic in Handbuch, 1990, p. 95

16 'Most of our best words were in fact given to us by Jews, such as: ... adventure, ... unique, ... history ...' (Cahill, 1998, p. 242)
resulting increase in relational thinking\textsuperscript{17} were so contrary to the general experience of reality and approach to life at that time that Jews were forced into the defence. Through living among people who think differently to themselves they have become jugglers of survival. This explains the importance of humour especially to east European Jews (this after all was where oppression was strongest). The price of being able to survive however has meant the identification of Jews with survival. When one says the word 'Jew' today, most people will almost immediately think of the art of survival. Living, however is something different than surviving. Sometimes survival is the opposite of living. Recently a growing number of voices in the Jewish community can be heard expressing a consciousness of this identification with the art of survival and a desire to return to the roots of Judaism.\textsuperscript{18} It is good to see that we Gestalt therapists are also orienting ourselves once again to our roots in order to free ourselves from the image of the alternative reaction.

Two Jews sitting one sunny day in the garden drinking tea.
One of them holds his glass of tea up to the sunlight and murmurs:
'Life is like a glass of tea.'
Says the other 'Why?'
Answers the first: 'How should I know. I'm not a philosopher am I.'

\textbf{LITERATURE}

de Bruin, T. (1983) \textit{Adam waar ben je?} Hilversum, Folkertsma Stichting.
Gaines, J. (1979) \textit{Fritz Perls here and now}. Millbrae California, Celestrial Arts.

\textsuperscript{17} See Cahill, 1998, p. 240
\textsuperscript{18} More and more often the opinion is expressed in Jewish circles that it is not necessary to continually talk about Auschwitz in talking about Jewishness.

Herschel, A.J. (1965) *Wie is de mens*. Baarn, Ten Have (druk 2).


Lambrechts, G. *Het eigen gezicht van de Gestalttherapie, Gestalttherapie opnieuw bekeken vanuit Figuur en Achtergrond*. Kortrijk, I.V.C.


Waaiman, C.J. (1990) *De mystiek van ik en jij*. Kampen, Kok.