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New Views



Religious, and happy

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David Rosmarin recently posed the following question to me: “If you knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that there was some sort of higher power – call it a God-being – watching over you and making sure your life was a good one, would you be a more or less anxious person?”

I weighed my answer: On one hand, I’d probably feel less anxiety about my life, were I to know for sure that (a) God wanted my life to be a good one and (b) that He was looking out for me, personally, all the time. Then again, assuming both “a” and “b” are true, why the heck is my life – like most lives, I imagine – so imperfect? If God is supposed to be looking out for me, and this is how He’s chosen my life to turn out, what gives?

Rosmarin has been asking this same question to a lot of people lately. The query – and, more importantly, how people who suffer from stress, anxiety and depression answer it – is the subject of his doctoral work in clinical psychology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. He and two professors in BGSU’s department of psychology, Kenneth Pargament and Annette Mahoney, recently co-wrote a paper, titled “Religiousness, anxiety, depression and happiness among Jews.”

The study of the relationship between religion and psychology is nothing new. Freud, the most well-known of psychologists to the layman, considered the topic in great detail. He thought of religion as a sort of neurosis, associated with repression, delusion, paranoia and helplessness. For Freud, religiosity is an expression of anxiety, and so can only aggravate human symptoms of anxiety.

But more recent research into the relationship between religion and anxiety diverges from Freud. Over the last 30 years, studies have shown that, for the most part, higher degrees of religious observance lead to lower levels of anxiety.

Until now, however, all the evidence of an inverse correlation between religious observance and anxiety, stress and depression has been focused on Christianity.

Rosmarin’s work is the first to consider the relationship between Jewish religiousness and anxiety. His study finds a strong link between what he terms “trust in God” and lower levels of anxiety among Orthodox Jews. Similarly, he finds an association between “mistrust in God” and higher levels of anxiety and depression among the same demographic.

So far so good. But what about non-Orthodox Jews? As Rosmarin writes: “Among non-Orthodox Jews, mistrust in God was a consistent predictor of increased anxiety and depression, though trust in God was not a

significant predictor of psychological health.”

That seems weird – does the mere practice of religion lead to increased mental health, or does mental health depend on the seemingly less significant details of how one practises religion?

Rosmarin’s study seems to point to the latter hypothesis — that the manifestation of religious belief, more than the simple belief itself, is a predictor of mental health. If study after study detects a positive relationship between mental health and religiosity, does that mean religious groups who don’t fit the results are less religious? Should we be stocking up on straitjackets for the non-Orthodox?

My answer to Rosmarin’s question, by the way, is yes. I would, I think, be less anxious, less stressed about life if I believed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there was God up there looking out for me, making sure I lived a good life.

Then again, I’m an Orthodox Jew, and Rosmarin’s study clearly outlines the benefits that I can expect for believing.

As for all the non-Orthodox Jews out there who also believe in God, what can I say? Apparently, God doesn’t like you quite as much – that’s why you’re all a bunch of mental marshmallows compared to us blissed-out Orthos.

In any case, the non-Orthodox are in trouble whichever way they choose to look at it: either God is just not convinced that they really trust Him, or they all have one hell of an oedipal complex.