

THE
Connections
Paradigm

*Ancient Jewish Wisdom
for Modern Mental Health*

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*In honor of my parents, Ian and Pam Rosmarin,
for investing so much in my Jewish education.*

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Introduction

The Context

By all standards, modern Western society is wealthier than any other society in history. The developed world enjoys unprecedented technological advancement, with broadband mobile communication, global positioning satellite navigation, lifesaving medical technologies, and many other innovations that improve and lengthen our lives. Yet, with so many blessings that previous generations never even dreamed could be possible, modern societies are experiencing unrelenting mental health decline.

According to the Harvard Medical School National Comorbidity Survey (NCS), the lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in the United States is 57.4 percent (more than one in two).¹ There were over forty-seven thousand suicides in the United States in 2017, making it the tenth-leading cause of death overall and the second-leading cause for individuals under thirty-five years of age.² Young Americans are much more severely affected by mental health problems than were their predecessors. The National Comorbidity Replication Survey—a study conducted by Harvard Medical School to assess the national prevalence of psychiatric disorders—recently reported that individuals aged eighteen to

1. “Lifetime Prevalence of DSM-IV/WMH-CIDI Disorders by Sex and Cohort,” Harvard Medical School, accessed September 21, 2020, https://www.hcp.med.harvard.edu/ncs/ftpd/ncs-R_Lifetime_Prevalence_Estimates.pdf.

2. “Suicide and Self-Inflicted Injury,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/suicide.htm>.

twenty-nine are more than twice as likely to have an anxiety disorder and nearly four times as likely to have a mood disorder as individuals over sixty.³ In March 2020 the world began suffering from a coronavirus pandemic, and our emotional and behavioral responses have been nothing short of extreme. Our rampant stress and anxiety created a run on household goods due to stockpiling, and almost toppled the financial markets after years of growth. In short, the state of mental health in the United States today lies somewhere between abysmal and catastrophic.

History of the *Connections Paradigm*

When I was in college, these trends in mental health decline created two pressing questions in my mind. First, why are Americans—the most privileged people in history—experiencing unprecedented mental health decline? Second, what can be done to reverse these trends and restore our society to a state of psychological well-being? These questions led me to pursue a career in clinical psychology, and I was blessed to spend twelve years as a student and trainee under the supervision of some of the brightest minds in the field. I emerged from my academic training with substantial knowledge of mental disorders and the skills to effectively treat them, but my years of study provided neither compelling explanations for America’s mental health crises nor plausible strategies for combatting them.

Since its early years, and particularly in recent decades, mental health science has made significant progress in distinguishing psy-

3. K. R. Merikangas, J. P. He, M. Burstein, S. A. Swanson, S. Avenevoli, L. Cui, C. Benjet, K. Geordiades, J. Swendsen, “Lifetime Prevalence of Mental Disorders in U.S. Adolescents: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication-Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A),” *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 49 (10): 980–989. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.017.

chological disorders and treating them, but we have learned little about the key ingredients to achieving a fulfilling life. Evidence-based therapies used by therapists across the world help countless patients recover from the dire depths of mental affliction each year, but mental health professionals mainly focus on returning their patients to a state of baseline functionality, not to a satisfying and fulfilling sense of contentment. This makes sense, because most patients come to therapy in the midst of a mental health crisis, so therapists focus on reducing the most pressing negative symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, or psychosis, rather than setting goals to help their patients achieve optimal functionality after the crisis subsides. However, after treatment, many patients are left with the same questions, which more than a few of them explicitly ask their therapists: Is *not* having a full-blown psychological disorder the best I can hope for in life? Am I missing out on a greater happiness that hovers just out of my reach?

I continued searching for solutions to modern society's mental health decline—and more broadly to the greater question of how to live a happy and fulfilling life—during my early career as a clinical psychologist. Then, a decade ago, I started to find compelling answers very close to home. As an Orthodox Jew, I've experienced the tremendous mental health benefits of a religious life since childhood. I pray every day, and I cannot imagine how significant a loss I would experience if that were to stop. Many other core obligations of my Orthodox Jewish life foster a deep sense of gratitude and fulfillment, which incidentally brings me into contact with other spiritually oriented people, who humble me and deepen my faith. Observing the Sabbath provides me with a full day each week to disconnect from daily stresses (and from technology), enabling me to refocus on what's most important in my life: my relationships with God and my family. This not only has immeasurable effects on my ability to manage stress but also gives

me a weekly opportunity to reflect on my actions during the previous week and assess their impact on my family, friends, and personal and even professional goals. The emotional benefits of dedicated religious practice have always been clear to me, and as I began seeing patients as a therapist in training, it was clear to me that many of my patients who lacked religious structure in their lives nevertheless wanted to benefit from spirituality-oriented therapy. But I found few established frameworks through which spirituality could be applied in the therapeutic process.

It was during my second year of college that I initially met Rabbi Leib Kelemen, my beloved rabbinic mentor from Jerusalem. On a whim, I decided to go to Israel on a three-week summer program, and he was one of the many lecturers. However, unlike most of the other talks I attended on the trip, I remember his remarks vividly. He spoke about his personal journey from secularism to Orthodoxy when he was a young man living in Los Angeles, and how the entire purpose of life is for love and connection. I was immensely inspired by his warm and enthusiastic approach to Judaism, but even more by his core message. In fact, the concept that love is our core purpose on earth was so inspiring to me that immediately after the talk I decided to propose to my wife! Over the following years, I was fortunate to persuade Rabbi Kelemen to teach me individually, and over time I learned more and more about his worldview regarding the centrality of love and connection to human thriving. This perspective as well as Rabbi Kelemen's guidance was a major factor in my decision to become a clinical psychologist.

In 2008 I flew to Jerusalem to meet with Rabbi Kelemen in order to discuss the problems I was observing. The world was in need of a widely relatable spiritual approach to mental health that could simultaneously explain *why* our blessed society struggles so much and provide *practical solutions* to help people flourish. With-

out so much as batting an eyelid, Rabbi Kelemen took a small Hebrew text from the hundreds in his many bookshelves and formally introduced me to the *Connections Paradigm*. I realized right away that this was the source of the core message I learned from him years earlier. Over the following days, as we learned the Hebrew text together and my wonderful mentor patiently answered my many questions, it became clear what I had stumbled across: an ancient Jewish spiritual teaching that offered practical solutions as well as an explanatory framework to address the modern world's growing mental health problem. Over the subsequent weeks, months, and years I soaked up whatever I could in order to know and understand this paradigm and to harness its profound depth and breadth within my personal and professional life.

Rabbi Kelemen learned about the *Connections Paradigm* from his mentor Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, who in turn had learned it from his mentor Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, who had learned it from his mentor Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, who had learned it from his mentor Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, who had inherited it from previous generations of rabbis in an unbroken chain of oral tradition stretching back to the divine transmission of the Torah on Mount Sinai over thirty-three hundred years ago. It was first formulated in modern Hebrew print by Rabbi Wolbe, in a book entitled *The World of Connection (Olam Ha'Yedidus)*, which was the book that Rabbi Kelemen had plucked from his bookshelf during our meeting in 2008. According to Rabbi Wolbe, our universe is composed of two parallel realities: the *World of Connection*, characterized by love, harmony, optimism, and compassion, and the *World of Disconnection*, characterized by fear, self-centeredness, and isolation. Depending on our behaviors and the perspectives we choose to foster, we exist in only one or the other reality at any given time. Our experience of life is entirely dependent on which reality we choose.

Over time, I have noticed many distinct features of the *Connections Paradigm* that set it apart from every other conceptualization of the human experience I've encountered in my secular training as a clinical psychologist. First, although the paradigm demonstrates significant concurrence with the most prominent schools of modern psychological discourse, it was developed wholly in the context of Jewish spiritual thought by rabbis with no formal academic training. Rabbi Wolbe and his intellectual forebears were so heavily engrossed in Torah study that they neither received any formal university education nor spent any significant amount of time outside of religious study halls. Yet, the *Connections Paradigm* possesses a profoundly deep and broad understanding of human thought, behavior, and emotion—one that is simpler yet more comprehensive than any school of clinical theory that I have studied in secular academia, and one that is now echoed by many findings within the clinical science literature that modern psychology has now identified. Furthermore, the paradigm provides a practical framework to help people not only recover from severe emotional distress but flourish and thrive as healthy people. When we are in love, not only are we protected from distress but we feel truly happy and energized and can flourish. By contrast, modern clinical psychology seeks only, as Sigmund Freud wrote, to deliver patients “from hysterical misery to common unhappiness.”⁴ What I found *most* compelling about the *Connections Paradigm*, though, is that it can promote thriving and contentment for all people—regardless of their religious beliefs or views.

I have now studied the *Connections Paradigm* with Rabbi Kelemen for over a decade, spanning most of my early career as a clin-

4. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (London: Hogarth Press, 1895), 305.

ical psychologist. While my understanding of the paradigm continues to grow and evolve over time since I am very much a novice in the world of ancient Jewish spiritual wisdom, it has profoundly affected my personal perspectives on life and my approach to therapy. In addition to learning the concepts and methods of the *Connections Paradigm* from Rabbi Kelemen, I started to incorporate its teachings into my clinical methods and have been able to evaluate its effects on my patients. This sharpened my understanding of both human psychology and the paradigm itself. Then, a few years ago, I approached Rabbi Kelemen with a proposal to create a clinical treatment manual for the *Connections Paradigm* that would distill its profound perspectives into clear and easy-to-follow behavioral recommendations for my patients to implement in their day-to-day lives. Rabbi Kelemen and I had long discussed how potentially powerful the *Connections Paradigm* could be if only it were made comprehensible for readers without a background in rabbinic scholarship, so he was eager to assist with the project. And so I began organizing the paradigm into its respective parts and components in order to clarify for others how it can be used in their own lives, as well as in clinical practice. The program I created with Rabbi Kelemen's assistance was formally used with over seventy individual patients in a group format, and I have also drawn from the material with countless other patients in the courses of individual psychotherapy.

This Book

Two years ago, Susan Arellano and Angelina Horst from Templeton Press approached me with a request to author a text describing a Jewish approach to mental health. I initially hesitated, since I am not an expert in ancient Jewish wisdom by any means, but I ultimately decided to proceed since it seemed a wonderful

God-given opportunity to take the next steps in my lifelong journey to study the *Connections Paradigm*. At the same time, readers must be aware that given my nascent understanding of the paradigm, the pages that follow may contain errors and omissions. I accept full responsibility for any such issues in transmitting this knowledge to readers. Given that I am still finding my way through the deep and vast practical implications of ancient Jewish wisdom for modern mental health, the writing process was not an easy one. I therefore worked closely with my own student cum friend Sean Carp, whose support and assistance were invaluable and in fact necessary to bring this volume to fruition. Equally invaluable were input from and the careful editing of my wife, Miri Rosmarin—my life partner who has taught me more about the worlds of connection than she could ever possibly realize.

The present text culls from the treatment manual I previously created based on the *Connections Paradigm* under Rabbi Kelemen's guidance. It attempts to bring the material to life by illustrating how I have applied the paradigm's principles and practices with patients from my caseload over the past several years. In some cases, I was fortunate to consult with Rabbi Kelemen directly about clinical issues at hand, but in most cases I simply did my best based on my own limited mastery of the paradigm. All case descriptions in this book are composites of multiple cases that have been revised to protect patient confidentiality and reflect general concepts.

The ultimate goal of this book is to convey the core concepts of the *Connections Paradigm* and describe concrete skills to facilitate and maintain connection in the three domains put forth by the paradigm: *Inner Connection*, *Interpersonal Connection*, and *Spiritual Connection*. The book is divided into three sections, each of which is made up of five chapters. Each section covers one of the

three domains of connection, and individual chapters focus on specific concepts and strategies to create closer relationships between body and soul, us and others, and us and God. Throughout the book, explanations of theoretical underpinnings and case study illustrations are followed by practical instructions for applying the *Connections Paradigm* in daily life, in order to improve one's outlook and well-being. Each chapter therefore concludes with an exercise specific to the chapter teaching. I fervently hope and pray that in addition to providing some inspiration, this text will serve as a practical guide for people experiencing emotional distress, and for the clinicians who help them, so all of us can inculcate and build more connection in our lives.

As we will see in the pages that follow, connection is the basis of all human fulfillment. In fact, according to the *Connections Paradigm*, connection not only is a practical tool to achieve well-being but is at the heart of every person's spiritual purpose: to connect fully with our own spirits, with other people, and with God. Perhaps for this reason, connection is inherently challenging to create and maintain. Keeping focused on the goal of connection is challenging when we are grappling with mundane daily concerns, even more so for members of a society that tends to undervalue spiritual connectedness and prioritizes productivity over relationships.

A final word before venturing forward: it is important to think of connection in all three domains (*Inner Connection*, *Interpersonal Connection*, and *Spiritual Connection*) as a lifelong project. Therefore, this book illustrates how to *begin* to use the *Connections Paradigm* to increase connection in daily life. I encourage readers to think of the process not as a way of achieving improvement in mental health or increased spirituality, but rather as a way of *embarking* on a path to living a more connected life. This path begins

with small steps, but as we will find, even modest movements toward connections can yield profoundly positive effects on our emotional states.

Overview of the *Connections Paradigm*

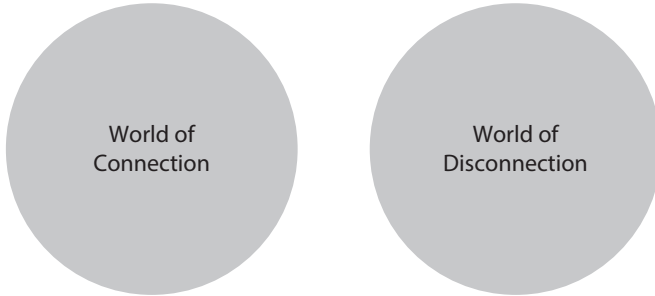
The *Connections Paradigm* can be summarized as follows (figure 1):

1. As mentioned briefly above, each human being dwells in one of two worlds at any moment in time: the *World of Connection* or the *World of Disconnection*. Each world is characterized by one of two states; the *World of Connection*, also called the world of love, is defined by interconnectedness, compassion, generosity, and bravery, while the *World of Disconnection*, also referred to as the world of fear, is defined by separation, isolation, resentment, fear, and anxiety. Our emotional states throughout all life circumstances are entirely dependent on which world we choose to reside in.
2. Connection involves the convergence of two complementary and opposite entities, in three domains: (1) between body and soul (*Inner Connection*), (2) between individual human beings (*Interpersonal Connection*), and (3) between humans and God (*Spiritual Connection*). By contrast, disconnection involves a separation or estrangement of any of these entities.
3. These three domains are hierarchical: our relationship with God is constrained by our relationships with others, and our relationships with others are constrained by the degree to which we maintain inner connection. Healthy interpersonal connections form on a bedrock of body-soul connection, and these two domains in turn provide

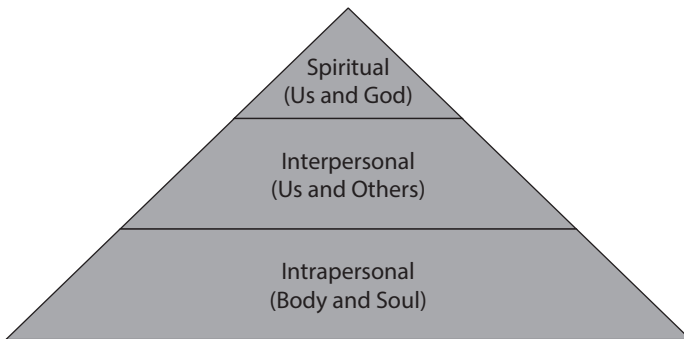
FIGURE 1 Overview of the *Connections Paradigm*

This program is predicated on a spiritually based paradigm for understanding human emotion called *Worlds of Connection and Disconnection*. Here is a brief summary of the paradigm.

1. At any moment in time, human beings dwell in one of two worlds:



2. Connection involves the coming together of two complementary and contrasting entities. By contrast, disconnection involves their separation or estrangement. This occurs in three central domains or levels: body and soul (*Inner Connection*), us and others (*Interpersonal Connection*), and us and God (*Spiritual Connection*).
3. The three levels are hierarchical:



4. At each level of connection, there is a giver and a receiver. Connection occurs when one entity provides for the other, which in turn accepts its gifts.

a foundation for developing a relationship with God. By contrast, it is impossible to sustain spiritual connection without interpersonal or inner connection.

4. In each domain of connection, there is a giver and a receiver. Connection occurs when one entity provides for the other, which in turn accepts the contribution.