Stephen S. Pearce, PhD, Visiting Professor of Jewish Pastoral Care  
The Graduate Theological Union Center for Jewish Studies

A CONTINUUM: FROM SELF-BLAME TO DENIAL (AND OTHER DEFENSES)

Defense mechanisms are learned, unconscious attempts to reduce anxiety. They all involve some degree of self-deception and reality distortion and make it possible for the person to deal with his pain in a “safe” manner, even if it is not the best or most direct method of doing so. Defenses operate in most people at some time.

The following narrative involves a 38-year-old rabbi describing his reaction to a contract termination. Seven defense mechanisms are illustrated: 1- denial of reality (refusing to perceive or face unpleasant reality); 2- regression (retreating to earlier developmental level involving less mature responses and a usually lower level of aspiration); 3- projection (placing blame for difficulties upon others or attributing one’s own unethical desires to others; 4- reaction formation (preventing the expression of dangerous desires by exaggerating the opposite attitudes and types of behavior); 5- fantasy (gratifying frustrated desires by imaginary thoughts and achievements); 6- repression (preventing painful thoughts from entering consciousness); 7- RATIONALIZATION (attempting to prove that one’s behavior is “rational” and justifiable and thus worthy of the approval of oneself and others);

I recently left my congregation after 5 years of service and I reacted in several ways. At first, I didn’t, no, I couldn’t believe it was true—five years of devoted service! Then, when I realized it was so, the loneliness was nearly unbearable; I cried most of the time, I ate continuously, put on weight and picked up my old smoking habit. I was certain that the members and leaders were suffering as much as I, and I even told a colleague that this was the case. Later, I realized that they probably weren’t as miserable and, besides, I decided that I could not possibly hate them or the congregation. It was then that I began to think about placement and began to update my c.v. But I was still miserable. I got to thinking about what it would be like to be back at my old temple and how secure I had felt there. I reflected for long periods of time on how happy we had been together and I thought that I could convince the leaders to give me another chance, but the strangest thing happened—I forgot the president’s phone number and then I couldn’t even remember his name. Meanwhile, time was passing, and although I was still unhappy, I was beginning to look at the situation more objectively. I evaluated my relationship with the temple leaders and realized that THEY ARE A BUNCH OF HYPOCRITES WHO ARE ON A POWER TRIP AND DON’T REALLY CARE ABOUT VALUES ANYWAY. I realized that I was just not cut out to be their clergyperson. After all, what clergyperson would be comfortable with the superficial lives they lead?