



HOW
JEWS
DEAL
WITH

anxiety

N'SHEI CHABAD NEWSLETTER
INTRODUCES A NEW FIVE-PART
SERIES ON ANXIETY

RABBI MANIS FRIEDMAN

A WORD LIKE *anxiety* IS VAGUE;

what precisely does it mean? Is it a control issue, a trust issue, or perfectionism? There's also a medical condition called anxiety, which we won't be addressing here. Our goal is to determine how a person experiencing non-clinical anxiety can proceed in life, with wisdom and a little *sechel*, so that one is in charge of one's feelings, and not a victim of them.

But first, a little insight from *davening*.

Right at the beginning of the *siddur*, there is a brilliant little paragraph in which we ask Hashem to protect us from things from which we cannot protect ourselves. I cannot protect myself from false accusations; I cannot protect myself from *lashon hara*; I cannot protect myself from unforeseeable tragedies or illnesses; the list goes on and on.

What a healthy and grounding way to start the day! From the get-go, we need to recognize that there are things that are out of our control. Instead of trying to control them, or worrying about how we can't control them, we need to consciously put them in G-d's hands. We need to say: "I can't control these things, G-d, so I am trusting You to protect me." Just saying those words out loud every day is psychologically healing, and makes it easier to proceed with the unpredictable and uncontrollable future of the day.

When it comes to facing the conundrum of life, and the natural anxiety that results from it, the ultimate answer for every Jew is *bitachon*. *Bitachon* means:

1) You have to let G-d run the world (because you really don't have a choice anyway).

2) You have to know that if G-d runs the world, the world will end up in a very good place, because He's very good at it. He knows how to run worlds.

3) You have to trust that it will not only be good for the world, but that it will also be good for you. How? That is what we will be discussing in this series, mostly through questions that callers asked during the podcast on this topic.

QUESTIONS ANSWER

MALE CALLER: I have a friend who is always calm and happy, no matter what happens. I, on the other hand, am very nervous and constantly doubting myself. Is there something I can do to be more like my friend or is that just who I am?

RMF: You want to understand what your friend is doing right that allows him to be comfortable in different situations. Here's really the crux of the whole issue: the worst thing an intelligent being can be is aimless.

A guy is a *melamed*. Every day, he wakes up and wonders whether he is supposed to be a *melamed*. Maybe he would be happier or make more money doing something else? His entire day is just one huge uncertainty. That aimlessness undermines everything, and creates space for every possible insecurity and anxiety to pop up and confuse him more.

The thing you need to ask yourself is, what is the purpose of your life, and how well are you doing that? Not whether you should be doing this job in the first place. If you have a job, do it well. You're good at something? Then stick with it, and try to improve. But to always wonder, "What should I do when I grow up?" Well, you're all grown up and you already are something. Sure, you can be other things, but that's a self-sabotaging thought.

On the night before Pesach, you search every nook and cranny in your house to make sure there's no *chametz*. There is a *mishna* that says that after you clean a room and it's free of *chametz*, you should not go back and check it again. But what if while you turned your back a mouse dragged a piece of *chametz* into the room? "*Eyn choshishin*," we do not entertain that suspicion. Why? Because, "*Eyn l'davar sof*," there's no end to it. You'll check again, but then you'll have a doubt again. This *mishna* teaches us that the words "but maybe..." can make you crazy. "But maybe..." are aimless words; try not to use them because they will lead you nowhere.

So if you want to be more like your friend, you have to stop telling yourself, "But maybe." Embrace whatever it is you are doing in your life. You may not be the very best *melamed* in the world, that's a realistic assumption, but you can give it your all and keep trying to improve. That direction, that destination, will allow you to move ahead in life without constantly doubting yourself.

MALE CALLER: One of the tools that is taught in Chabad is "*tracht gut vet zein gut*," one should think good thoughts and then things will be good. But whenever I go through a challenging situation and I try to think positive, an inner voice tells me I'm being negligent and delusional. Negligent, because if you're nervous every second at least you'll keep trying to resolve the situation. And delusional, because if *chas v'shalom* the worst thing happens, I was fooling myself all along. If I expect the worst, at least the pain will be minimized because I am ready for it. How should I resolve these inner voices?

RMF: First of all, it's important to clarify that "*tracht gut vet zein gut*" applies in situations where you are not responsible. It's not a cop-out for areas of life where you are supposed to be working and making a change. "*Tracht gut vet zein gut*" is a mindset for when you've already done your best, and now it's out of your hands. Now, Hashem is in charge and you are trusting that it will be good.

Second: Lowering your expectations so that you won't be terribly devastated when things go wrong will protect you a *little bit* from heartbreak, but it'll take *all* the enthusiasm out of life.

It's not worth it.

We have to live life like it's the best thing we have in the world, not sit around constantly waiting for the worst. Imagine telling a couple when they're about to get married that they have a 50% chance of getting divorced, so they shouldn't get their hopes up too high. Yes, you've made the possibility of divorce less devastating, but you've made marriage less meaningful. You minimize the pain of it by draining the joy out of it.

On the contrary, if you're positive about life, you will be a joyful person. You will have a happier life. And if life ends, you will be devastated. And that's how it should be. Grief is a bitter pill, but it's a part of life. During the terrible days of Communism, somebody said to one of the Rebbetzins, "It has been a bitter moment, it has been a bitter experience." The Rebbetzin replied, "Bitter? Okay, just don't say bad." Bad is depressing. Bitter? Medicine is bitter.

There are things in life that we should feel extremely pained by because we prefer life over death. It is precisely *because* we are joyful and enthusiastic about life that we reject and object to death, with all our might. We don't accept it, we don't make peace with it, and we don't soften the blow. We live joyfully, and we grieve bitterly. That is how a Jew is supposed to live.

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want to go. It guides you to seeing the best case scenario. When a couple comes to me for marriage counseling, my first question is, "Are you hoping that this session will lead to a divorce or a reconciliation?" And my second question is, "If you want to stay married, tell me why." I ask them to describe all the reasons they want to stay together. That is positive thinking. And that changes the reality.

FEMALE CALLER: I had a very, very traumatic childhood and I'm living with severe anxiety and complex PTSD. I tried medication and it is definitely not the answer. All it does is dull me. I have trust issues, I live in fear, I'm single, and I feel like Hashem hates me. I hope I'm not scaring anyone by saying this, because I am okay, but four weeks ago I attempted suicide and I woke up 35 hours later very sick. I'm no longer suicidal, but I'm struggling a lot. I guess I'm asking, what's the point? I feel like Hashem hates me and is just trying to punish me and I have a lot of fear... I'll

just leave it at that.

RMF: Okay. Tell me, why do you think G-d hates you?

FEMALE CALLER: I know that by now I'm an adult, and I should be able to form logical thoughts, but for the first 18 years of my life I was constantly told, "You are such a bad person, you are going to *Gehinnom*, and you are the cause of all the problems." A lot of bad things happened to me, and I kept making deals with Hashem, like I am going to be really, really good and then nothing bad will happen today. But that didn't work out. So between all the messages that I got from the adults in my life and all the things that happened to me, it just seemed like Hashem really hated me. And now, as an adult, I am trying to better my life and I'm working so hard, but I feel like I'm constantly failing. So yeah, I feel like Hashem has turned His back on me, He hates me, and I'm going

to *Gehinnom*. It doesn't matter how many times people say otherwise to me, I just can't change that belief.

RMF: Let me tell you something. You are much smarter than you give yourself credit for. You are surviving by your wits because you've worked out a thought system that helps you survive. One of the reasons you're convinced that G-d hates you is that it explains a lot. So much went wrong, there was so much that hurt you, and you needed to explain it just to stay sane. So you found one of the best explanations, a really logical solution, which is: G-d hates me. What am I going to do, fight with G-d? If it was just a person that hates me, then I would have to go work it out with them, but if it's G-d that hates me, well, then, what do you want from me?

You see, that helps you survive. All your thoughts, which are painful and negative, are actually part of your brilliant survival mechanism. Give yourself a little credit.

Now the question is, is it true that G-d hates you? And the answer is: No. Not at all. Is it true that you're going to go to *Gehinnom*? No, you've already satisfied that experience. You've been there already, you're not going to *Gehinnom* anymore.

(Tangent alert: A young girl in Israel was convinced that G-d was angry with her. All attempts to persuade her otherwise were not effective. Finally, I said to her, "I'm jealous of you. How did you become so important?")

So first of all, give yourself credit for having come this far, brilliantly and resourcefully. But that strategy isn't working for you anymore, so now it's time for an even better plan. You need a survival mechanism that is actually true.

Try a new thought process. Tell G-d that you're not angry at Him. Tell yourself that He is not angry at you, He certainly doesn't hate you, and He does not want you to suffer. That's all in the past. From today on, make peace with G-d, ask G-d what you can do for Him, how you can serve Him, and tell yourself that whatever He offers you is fine, you don't need any more than that. It'll be such a relief after the old approach. The old one got you this far, but I think you're older, and wiser, and you're ready to move on to a better strategy now. ❄️

This five-part series on anxiety is based on an interview by Menachem Bernfeld with Rabbi Manis Friedman on 24 Av (August 2, 2021), which was followed by callers' questions. The podcast is called "Let's Get Real With Coach Menachem," and it may be found online.



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