



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo

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January 27, 2012

Bo

**Are You a Worrier?
A Formula to Deal with Anxiety**



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Are you a worrier?

Some argue that we are anxious today more than ever. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders today affect 18 percent of the adult population of the United States, or about 40 million people, and account for more visits to mental health professionals each year than any of the other broad categories of psychiatric disorders.

The reason for that is perhaps due, ironically, to the comforts and abundance in our lives. The information revolution and all our advanced technologies provide us with an unprecedented amount of options. More options and information creates more awareness, and more awareness of the things we can't have – and seeing how others have more than we do – increases our anxiety and sense of inadequacy. King Solomon the wise said it best: More knowledge more pain.

But is ignorance the only path to bliss?

Fear is perhaps our greatest enemy. Not because it is loud and aggressive, but because it is invisible. Is there a person alive that does not suffer from some fear, known or unknown?

Though fear has been with us throughout history, today it has taken on acute proportions, both globally and personally, as we face fears of all sorts, as an unstable economy undermines our feelings of security, as national and international tensions continue to escalate, unleashing underlying emotions in this climate of global uncertainty.

This week's Torah portion offers us a fascinating formula to counter fear and anxiety. But not before learning that fear is a very real part of our lives and even the great Moses found himself trembling, terrified of confronting a formidable adversary...

ARE YOU A WORRIER?**A Formula to Deal with Anxiety****1. The Vicious Cycle of Fear**

There is a legend about a mouse who was very afraid of cats. She wished she could become a cat. Her wish came true and she turned into a cat. Then she saw a dog and became afraid again and wished she were a dog. Her wish was granted and she turned into a dog. Then she saw a lion and she was terrified by his power and strength and wished she could become a lion so that she would not have to be terrified of the lion. Her wish was granted and she became a lion. Then she saw a man with a gun about to shoot her with his gun. You can imagine what happened next. She wished she could become a human and she did.

But then one day she was sitting in her house and she saw a... mouse and she began to shriek, terrified of the mouse.

2. Quick Phobia Cure (Joke)

-A man came to see a psychiatrist, reporting that every time he went to bed he could not sleep because he feared there was someone hiding under it. "It's driving me crazy," he wailed. "Can you help me?"

-“Just put yourself in my hands for two years,” said the psychiatrist, “Come to me three times a week, and I’ll cure your fears.”

-“How much will that cost?”

-“Two hundred dollars per visit.”

-“I’ll sleep on it,” said the man.

Six months later the doctor met the man on the street.

-“Why didn’t you ever come to see me again?” he asked.

-“You were too expensive, and besides a rabbi cured my problem.”

-“Is that so? How?”

-“He told me to cut the legs off the bed!”

3. Our Greatest Enemy

Today I would like to speak about our greatest – and most silent – enemy: Fear.

Though fear has been with us throughout history, today it has taken on acute proportions, both globally and personally.

Do we live in an age of anxiety? According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders today affect 18 percent of the adult population of the United States, or about 40 million people, and account for more visits to mental health professionals each year than any of the other broad categories of psychiatric disorders. By comparison, mood disorders – depression and bipolar illness, primarily – affect 9.5 percent. That makes anxiety the most common psychiatric complaint by a wide margin, and one for which we are increasingly well-medicated. Last spring, the drug research firm IMS Health released its annual report on pharmaceutical use in the United States. The anti-anxiety drug alprazolam – better known by its brand name, Xanax – was the top psychiatric drug on the list, clocking in at 46.3 million prescriptions in 2010.

Some argue that we are anxious today more than ever. The reason for that is perhaps due, ironically, to the comforts and abundance in our lives today. The constant stream of media inundating our lives and overwhelming our senses incessantly reminds us of the perils of our modern world. From minute to minute we are told about corporate and political corruption, the destruction of the environment, the dangers of nuclear energy, religious fundamentalism, threats to privacy and the family, drugs, abuse, pornography, violence, terrorism.

Plug in the word “fear” into the New York Times search engine, and you begin to see what people are afraid of: we fear higher taxes, we fear global warming, we fear losing our jobs, we fear China, Russia and Iran (not necessarily in that order), we fear the collapse of the Social Security system, we fear another terrorist attack, we fear further economic woes, we fear for our children, we fear for our soldiers overseas. You name it, we fear it.

In addition, the information revolution and all our advanced technologies and communication devices provide us with an unprecedented amount of options. More options and information creates more awareness, and more awareness of the things we can't have – and seeing how others have more than we do – increases our anxiety over the fact that we cannot have them. Not to mention that in our global village we are keenly aware of everyone else's anxiety, which only compounds our own. King Solomon the wise said it best: More knowledge more pain.

But is ignorance the only path to bliss?

4. What is Fear?

Awareness is half the cure of a problem. Understanding the nature of fear can help us defang the enemy.

To be true, fear plays an important role in our lives: it alerts us to danger and keeps us vigilant. It warns us to protect ourselves. Concern about outcomes even gives us an edge: Anticipating difficulties allows us to project into the future, giving us a great advantage in improving our lives and successfully meeting life's challenges and opportunities. But when we begin to worry excessively, and it interferes with our ability to survive and thrive, then anxiety becomes a disorder.

When fear debilitates us it becomes our greatest enemy. Not because it is loud and aggressive, but because it is invisible. Is there a person alive that does not suffer from some fear, known or unknown?

What effects do our fears have on our lives – what impact do they have on our choices and ambitions, on our behavior and other emotions?

And there are so many other questions: Is our drive for success a way to mask or compensate for some of our fears? What critical mass effect does fear have on society? Can it even be measured?

Above all, what are we exactly afraid of and what is the root of fear? We must find the answer, because without getting to the core of our fears, we can hardly expect to alleviate them.

This quest is more compelling today than ever as we face fears of all sorts, as an unstable economy undermines our feelings of security, as national and international tensions continue to escalate, unleashing underlying emotions in this climate of global uncertainty.

No one is immune, yet we see that there are individuals – as has always been the case in history – that do not get paralyzed by fear. What is their secret?

Moses in this week's Torah portion can teach us much about fear, and the secret how to overcome it.

5. One God and Two Worlds

The people who are not paralyzed by fear see a greater reality.

Most fear springs from the fear annihilation. We fear losing the world to which we are accustomed. Think of a baby who draws its security from a pacifier – take it away, and it will surely cry. Similarly, if we draw our security from the material world and think of it as the only world that exists, we are bound to fear losing it, because it is all we know.

In 1927, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak was summoned by the Communist commissars in Moscow. When he refused to cooperate, one of them lifted a revolver and pointed it at him. "This toy makes people cooperate," he said. "Fear of it has opened a many mouth."

"That toy frightens only someone who has but a single world and many gods," responded the Rabbi. "But not someone who has but a single God and two worlds."

By two worlds, he meant this material world and the other, spiritual one.

6. The Snare of the Material World

Being attached to only one world – the material world – underlies our fears. Materialism by its nature is fleeting, and when our lives are built on such a temporary foundation, how can we expect to feel secure?

When we allow our life to be defined by the standards of this world – by its standards of success – we are constantly trying to keep up with the Joneses. And we become intensely afraid of not measuring up and not being accepted by others.

But accepted by whom? People whose standards are ever shifting? People who themselves are worried about being accepted by others?

When we are so worried about being accepted by others, we are placing our happiness and security in the hands of unpredictable people – a moody boss, a difficult client. We are constantly investing great amounts of energy into pleasing first one person then another. We are trying to be one person in the morning, another during the day, and yet another at night. No wonder we have no peace of mind.

A story is told about a young girl from a poor family who was having terrifying dreams. Her parents consulted their rabbi about this problem. He said, “The sages say that we dream at night what we think about during the day.¹ So ask your daughter, what she is afraid of during the day.”

When the parents asked her, she replied: “I often see how you both worry about money. Of everything, I am most afraid of your fear.”

When we are driven by fear, we run the risk of compromising our values and principles out of fear of how others will perceive us. This is one of the most difficult challenges in life, because none of us wants to be shunted aside, the wall-flower at the party, standing in the corner, friendless and alone. We all want to be loved and accepted.

How do we break this cycle of fear?

¹ Talmud, Brachot 55b.

7. Antidote to Fear

This week's Torah reading, in its opening words, provides a clue to the best antidote to fear: "And God said to Moses: 'Come to Pharaoh...'"²

Moses had already visited Pharaoh many times before this commandment, "Come to Pharaoh." But this time around, says the Zohar, the chief work of Kabbalah, Moses was suddenly frightened. Yes, the great Moses was also afraid.

This is why God said to him "Come to Pharaoh" instead of "Go to Pharaoh."³ What did that mean, and how did it assuage his fear?

Up till now Moses dealt with Pharaoh in his various archetypal manifestations. But this time, he was told to enter into the core essence of Pharaoh's evil, what the Zohar describes as "the supernal serpent" – the epitome of evil. This terrified Moses.

To assuage his fear, God responds: "Come to Pharaoh. Come with Me. You are not going there alone. I am coming with you, and I will help you eradicate the evil at its source."

8. The True Nature of Fear

And here we gain an insight into the true nature of fear and its antidote.

Why do we yearn for the acceptance of others? Why do we fear being shunted? Why are we willing to conform and compromise our values just to be part of the group?

Because at the core of all our insecurities lies the fear of being alone. Fear's true power lies in the loneliness that it imposes upon us.

Loneliness is an inherent part of life. It is not possible to be alive and not to feel lonely to some extent.

² Exodus 10:1.

³ Zohar II:34a: "God brought Moses into a chamber within a chamber, to the ... mighty serpent from which many levels evolve ... which Moses feared to approach himself because he saw that he was rooted in supernal roots..."

This existential loneliness is a by-product of cosmic detachment, which the mystics call *tzimtzum*. The *tzimtzum* – the withdrawal of divine light which made creation possible so that we could exist independent from God and exercise our own free will – causes us to feel all alone, isolated in a desolate universe, disconnected from any source of sustenance.

This existential loneliness is the root of fear. And this is what so terrified Moses as he prepared to confront the core evil of Pharaoh, the “supernal serpent.” He was afraid of confronting this great evil *alone*.

Obviously, Moses’ fear was relative to him and to the unprecedented challenge he was facing. But fear is also relative to each of us and our situation, the difficulties we face and the strengths we possess. What frightens one person may not even stir another. Yet, the common denominator – and this is the relevant lesson we derive from Moses – is that our fear (whatever it is) results from our sense of isolation.

9. God is Always With Us

And therefore God’s response to Moses’ terror was, “Come with Me. You are not alone. I go with you.”

This is the powerful message that each of us must take from this Torah reading. No matter how lonely we may feel, especially in our loss and pain, we are never alone.

When the Baal Shem Tov was a little boy, his father died. The death of parent is a very traumatic thing, especially at a young age. Many who have had this experience are never able to shake the feeling of abandonment and insecurity which such a loss inevitably imprints upon a child. However, the Baal Shem Tov’s father left his son a powerful legacy in the words he spoke to him on his deathbed, and that made all the difference.

What did he tell him? “Remember that you’re never alone. You’re with God. And you must fear nothing except God.”

You can imagine the powerful effect this had on the little boy. It instilled in him the confidence that nothing can stand in your way because God is always with you. You don't need to be disturbed or intimidated by other people's opinions because God's opinion of you is all that matters.

The Baal Shem Tov went on to found the Hassidic Movement, working against the opinions of prevailing elite of his day, and opened up a new dimension of Judaism to all the people who were in danger of assimilating en masse.

And he had the courage to do so because of the message that his father conveyed to him: You are not alone. God is always with you.

The only answer to the invisible power of fear – the fear of being alone – is to recognize that it is an illusion. You are not alone. You are never alone.

You just have to realize it. And therein lies the challenge.

10. Connecting to God

Connecting to God is the only way to truly free ourselves from fear. By recognizing that we are an integral part of God's plan, that our existence is significant and our participation is vital, we can wean ourselves from the doubts and insecurities that feed our fears.

As long as we place the highest premium on the material world, we will continue to be fearful and anxious. We will remain a victim of circumstance, subjecting ourselves to the mercurial nature of materialism.

But when we have but one God and two worlds – the material and the spiritual – there is nothing to fear. The problems that loomed so large just a moment ago begin to seem eminently manageable. When money, status and acceptance stop being the primary forces that drive our life, we gain confidence that we are working for a higher goal and God is with us all the way.

Such confidence will spill over into our entire life. And when we have learned to focus on what truly matters in life, we will no longer need to worry about meeting the standards of others. God's standards are higher than man's, but they are actually easier to meet. While man's values are constantly shifting, spiritual values are fixed and eternal. When we connect to them, the trivial matters of life no longer frighten us. We are no longer like children afraid of the dark. Our fears are no longer crippling forces, but simply challenges that must be overcome.

11. How to Get There (Call to Action)

Easier said than done, you say? That's definitely true, but here are some concrete steps we can all take.

First, get rid of confusion in your life. This is an essential first step as confusion breeds confusion, clarity breeds clarity, so as you take one step in a positive direction, you gain momentum to travel whatever distance is necessary. Towards that goal, write down and examine the five highest proprieties in your life. Are they material goals or eternal ones? Are money and status more important than your family and helping others? If so, then this is one of the reasons why you are riddled with fears.

Second, get involved in projects that are profoundly gratifying and that bring to light your innate abilities or which connect you more deeply with the people you love. Soon enough your life will be full of meaningful activity, and there will be less time to focus on your fears.

Third, and most important, discover God within your life. Recognize that since you are a soul created in the divine image, God is always with you – because God is within you. And because God is always with you, there is nothing to fear. If you only follow His instructions – as set forth in the Torah – you will make of yourself a channel for His blessings.

Imagine coming to a place where money and power and vanity have no value. That place is here and now. The moment you look fear in the eye, it begins to crumble. Use your intellect to harness your emotions and use your spirit to conquer your fear. Above all, let joy and enthusiasm – and God – come into your life, and let the brilliant light of your soul shine into every dark corner where fear might flourish. Amen.