



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Netzavim

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Netzavim

**The Best Remedy for Anxiety:
Xanax vs. Torah**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do you have anxiety? Does this question make you anxious?

What causes anxiety, stress and worry and how to get rid of it?

Not so long ago, our grandparents were busy running for their lives escaping their enemies with only one thing on their mind – survival. They didn’t have the luxury or opportunity to deal with stress. But today, in one of the great ironies of history, though we live in freedom and are no longer fighting for our lives, anxiety today is more prevalent than ever (albeit in another form)! Today, we are overwhelmed by a deluge of options, pulling us in more conflicting directions than we have ever been pulled.

Is the answer Valium, Xanax, or Prozac?

No, the answer is not found in a pill, but in a scroll, namely: the Torah.

The antidote to angst, worry and stress is found in the opening sentence of this week’s Torah reading, which features woodcutters and water drawers. And it prescribes three remedies: work, chop, draw.

By becoming woodcutters and water drawers in our personal and professional lives, we remove anxiety and find a clear, mission-oriented purpose in life.

What better time to conquer anxiety than right before Rosh Hashanah? Let us remove all that troubles us and enter the New Year fresh and worry-free.

THE BEST REMEDY FOR ANXIETY: XANAX VS. TORAH

1. Your Opinion (Joke)

A professor asks a grad student, "What's your opinion on the current state of mathematical research?"

"Absolute rubbish," the grad student says.

"Well, probably," says the professor, "but let's hear it anyway."

2. What's Your Opinion?

Opinions are, all too often, absolute rubbish. Once upon a time, even if someone had an opinion – and, I'm sure most people did – no one knew about it, save perhaps for that person's spouse and immediate family.

Today, with Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and the greater blogland, every Berel and Schmerel, every Tom, Dick, and Harry espouses opinions at an accelerated clip.

That's bad enough on its own; the bigger problem, however, is within our own selves, we hold many different opinions, opinions that often clash with one another. These various conflicts create much anxiety and stress.

What is the solution? How can we act as Jews, as the Nation of Israel, and fulfill our vast potential while not succumbing to stress in the process?

3. Parshat Netzavim

The first sentence of this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Netzavim*, hints at the answer:

*You are all standing this day before the Lord, your G-d the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your converts who are within your camp, [everyone] from your woodcutters to your water drawers, in order that you may enter the covenant of the Lord, your G-d, and His oath, which the Lord, your G-d, is making with you this day.*¹

When the verse states, *You are all standing this day*, it includes everyone. Then the Torah explicitly states, the leaders, the elders, the men, the women, the children, and the converts.

Which leads us to an obvious question: Why – after all that – throw in also woodcutters and water drawers? If everyone is already included in the previous list, why do they need special mention? And if the Torah had an inner reason for mentioning people's professions, why not mention some other professions too, why only woodcutters and water drawers?

4. The Midrash

The Midrash² explains why the Torah specifies woodcutters and water drawers.

Before being renamed the Land of Israel, that geographic location was called the Land of Canaan. It was not a country per se, rather it was a vast swath of land occupied by seven distinct Canaanite tribes whose members inhabited thirty-one fortified city states scattered all over the map, each ruled by its own “king.” When these people heard that G-d gifted the land they were occupying to the Jewish people, and that the Nation of Israel was preparing to enter and turn it into a divine oasis,

¹ Deuteronomy 29:9-11.

² Tanchuma ad loc (2). Cf. Yevamot 79a; see Rashi on Gittin 23b.

they came rushing over to Moses wishing to convert. But were they conniving or genuine in this desire?

According to the great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi,³ Moses did not trust them.⁴ Just when the Jewish people are about to enter into the Holy Land, suddenly they desire to convert? Because Moses did not trust them, Moses gave them jobs as woodcutters and water drawers.

A number of years later, when the Jewish people were already in the Holy Land, residents of one of the Canaanite cities, Gibeon, came to Joshua disguised as foreigners who desired to make a bond with the Jewish people and live with them. Joshua agreed and, as Moses did earlier, employed them as woodcutters and water drawers.⁵

This requires some further elaboration. But before I do that, let me share a Chassidic understanding of why the Torah adds woodcutters and water drawers.

5. The Alter Rebbe's Deeper Explanation

In Hebrew, this verse reads, *may'chotev eitzecha* (from the cutters of your wood) *ahd shoyev may'mecha* (to the drawers of your water).

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe, once suggested the following psycho-spiritual interpretation:⁶

- *may'chotev eitzecha* – *eitz*, “wood,” could be an idiom for *eitza*, “counsel,” or “advice”
- thus *may'chotev eitzecha*, “cutters of your wood,” could be interpreted as *may'chotev eitzecha*, “choppers of your counsels,” suggesting that every single person must cut out and chop down the many counsels and pieces of advice that are offered to him

³ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 14, p. 114-118 for an extensive discussion of Rashi's process.

⁴ This is implied from the language that Rashi cites from the Book of Joshua 9:4 – “And they also acted with wile” – the word “also” implying that this had transpired previously.

⁵ Joshua 9.

⁶ Hayom Yom 19 Elul.

- this would seem to refer to the verse in Proverbs,⁷ *there are many thoughts in a man's heart, but it's G-d's counsel that shall stand*
- so cut out *eitzecha*, your many counsels and opinions and offers of advice and listen to the one piece of advice from G-d
- *ahd shoyev may'mecha* – “to the drawers of your water” – this phrase the Alter Rebbe interpreted as suggesting that one must drain out the water that “makes all self-indulgence grow.”⁸ When self-centered selfish pleasure gets in your way, become a water drawer and draw away all of the nourishing water that sustains and feeds that self-destructive pleasure.

Thus, the Alter Rebbe concluded that the verse adds *from your woodcutters to your water drawers* to teach us an eternal lesson in serving our Creator.

Often times the plethora of voices, opinions, counsels, and advices (there's reason that “advice” spells “add vice”) drown out the one true plan of G-d. This is why we must become “counsel choppers” and cut out all the distracting noise. And we also must draw away all the water that is feeding anything unhealthy and selfish, so that all that is negative will wither and fade away.

6. Canaanites as Merchants

Now there is one more piece of information that we must add to this interpretation.

The Hebrew word for “Canaanite” is *Knani*, which means “merchant” or “peddler.”⁹ The Canaanites were traders, businesspeople, merchants peddling their wares.

⁷ Proverbs 19:21.

⁸ See Tanya Ch. 1. “The appetite for pleasures (derives) from the element of water, for water makes grow all kinds of enjoyment.”

⁹ Rashi on Genesis 38:2. See also Torah Ohr, beginning of Vayeishev.

When a merchant or peddler comes to make a bond with you, you know that there is an ulterior motive. There are two ways to preempt or prevent that: 1) don't do business with him, or 2) put measures into place that will protect your interests.

The problem with solution number one is that it doesn't really allow you to ever interact with him at all, causing you to perhaps lose a good business opportunity. Which leaves you with solution number two. But what measures can you put into place to protect and preempt any shenanigans?

When Moses suspected the Canaanites of insincerity in their desire to convert – either because of their uncanny timing or because they were peddlers with ulterior motives – he declined to convert them outright. Instead, he accepted them into the camp as wood cutters and water drawers.

This had two positive effects:

- 1) It kept the wily businessmen of Canaan busy and preoccupied with cutting wood and drawing water so that they did not have the time or wherewithal to cause any trouble (hard to harass anyone when you are cutting down a tree or drawing water).
- 2) It provided the opportunity to test and see if the Canaanites were legitimate in their desires to make a pact with the Jewish people. If they did their job of cutting and wood drawing water, great! If not, then Moses would know that they were simply conniving and could never join the Jewish people.

7. Back to the Alter Rebbe's Teaching

Now we can see how this dovetails with the Alter Rebbe's teaching.

The Torah is telling us that even when we are businesspeople, merchants, peddlers trying to make ends meet in this world, we must cut out and chop down the plethora of counsels, which are telling us to do this or do that, and we must hone in on *G-d's counsel that shall stand*.

And even in business, when we think we must invest all our energy, all our water to irrigate our business, there too we must draw away the water from the selfish stuff and channel it only to that which is right and holy.

When we are praying or learning it is obvious that all other “counsels” and “advisers” must be cut away, and that all water must be drawn away from external superficialities and only focused on the holiness at hand. But that is not the only time when this is necessary.

Even when we are businesspeople, professionals selling a product – this obviously incorporates all work, doctors practicing medicine, lawyers practicing law, in this sense we are all peddlers and practitioners of our wares – even then we must remember our greater purpose.¹⁰

8. Three Remedies (Practical Advice)

Not so long ago, our grandparents were busy running for their lives escaping their enemies with only one thing on their mind – survival. They didn’t have the luxury or opportunity to deal with stress.

But today, in one of the great ironies of history, though we live in freedom and are no longer fighting for our lives, anxiety today is more prevalent than ever (albeit in another form)! Today, we are overwhelmed by a deluge of options, pulling us in more conflicting directions than we have ever been pulled.

Is the answer Valium, Xanax, or Prozac?

No, the answer is not found in a pill, but in a scroll, namely: the Torah.

The antidote to angst, worry and stress is found in the very discussion of woodcutters and water drawers. And in the three implied remedies: 1) work, 2) chop, 3) draw.

¹⁰ See Likkutei Sichot, vol. 14, p. 117.

1. WORK

First things first: Put yourself to work, especially the parts of you that are questionable in their reasons for suddenly desiring to join your soul's mission. When you have something negative in your midst – be it anxiety, worry, anger, addiction – put it to work, make it chop wood and draw water. When your negative traits are busy doing something positive, they won't lead you into mischief and the anxiety that always accompanies it.

Practical example: Say a great business or job opportunity arises, but you aren't sure if it is right and the unknown is causing you angst. Don't sit around fretting, put yourself to work exploring the opportunity. Two benefits: while you are exploring the opportunity you are busy and have no time to worry; 2) if the explorations bears fruit, great – enjoy them; if it does not, then you know the opportunity is disingenuous.

2. CHOP

Cut down the many opinions and heed the one true voice. Often the solution to anxiety resulting from too many options is to focus on the one option that is higher and holier than all the others ... to cut out the many conflicting voices and listen only to the one clear voice. Don't surf the web looking for direction, but when you find direction in divine sources, then you can surf the web to help you better understand what that is all about.

Practical example: Say you are planning a vacation with your family or friends, and you have many options where to go. Instead of stressing out which option is best (you got to love this world, where we stress out about vacation which is supposed to be tranquil), choose the option in which you can do the most good and is in alignment with G-d's counsel – i.e. which place allows you to eat kosher, enables you to experience something divine, will make your spouse most happy, etc.

3. DRAW

Draw away the nourishment that waters your unhealthy traits, be it anxiety or anything else, and instead focus it on something positive.

Practical example: Say you spend an hour a day on Facebook looking at cat videos or your friend's photos. Draw away that energy, and instead use that hour to write an inspiring Facebook (or any social media) piece based on a true source. Then post it. By drawing away the energy from negative time-wasters, you are redrawing the world into a divine garden.

9. Draw Your Own (Conclusion)

Rodney Dangerfield once joked: "My psychiatrist told me I'm going crazy. I told him, 'If you don't mind, I'd like a second opinion.' He said, 'All right. You're ugly too!'"

When it comes to medical advice, especially serious medical advice, a second opinion is more than nice – it is mandatory. The same may be true with financial advice, and even personal advice.

But when it comes to our purpose here on earth, we Jews do not need a second opinion. *There are many thoughts in a man's heart, but it's G-d's counsel that shall stand.*

Surely when we 1) busy ourselves with work, 2) cut down the forest of too much advice and counsel, and 3) draw away the energy from watering anything unproductive and turn it to watering everything G-dly, then the direct and tangible result will be the promise of this week's Torah reading: We will be able to *enter the covenant of the Lord, our G-d.*

Let us stand all together, and let us stand proud, as we enter into a new, purpose-driven, highly-focused, and anxiety-free year!

Shabbat Shalom!

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