

On the subject of fear.

By [RAPHAEL BENAROYA](#) April 12, 2020

We have now entered the month of Nissan, whose commencement proclaims a time of renewal as we shift from one season to another. This is the end of the winter, the time of renewal that comes with the commencement of the spring — shifting from winter stagnation to growth, when the trees awaken from their slumber and begin to blossom and sprout.

Although these turbulent days are full of immense danger and uncertainty, we must not forget that the month of Nissan is also a time of redemption, in which a new light and hope arrive following a period of darkness. It is not a coincidence that the Torah teaches us that the Jewish concept of a day is calculated from the preceding evening, as it says (Bereishet 1:5), “And it was evening and it was morning...” This is because as oppressive as the night may be, the reality is that it is removed by the light that must come after it.

It is difficult at times to focus our thoughts on that light while still enduring a time of darkness. It is challenging to focus on redemption in the time of distress, when worry and fear seem to overpower hope, and even our hope that the redemption will soon come seems elusive. Specifically, it is essential during these difficult days to examine the words of our holy Torah regarding the subject of fear and sorrow. We must guard ourselves so that we do not fall into these emotions to arrive at a state of inner turmoil and despair, which bring a person to the spiritual fragility that weakens him physically and causes him to become ill. Our sages warned us that, even if a person is sick, God forbid, he should not allow his spirit to fall, since this will enable his illness to overpower him. It is certainly the case, then, that even a healthy person’s low spirits can harm and weaken him and even bring him to a state of illness, God forbid.

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The Torah illustrates this lesson in the verse in parashat Bechukotai ([Vayikra 26:17](#)), in which the first curse in the series of fearsome curses is, “I will bring panic upon you.” In this context, the word panic precedes the ultimately more severe curses, such as swelling, fever, devastation, famine, destruction, death, and exile. These unbearably difficult matters only come after panic. Furthermore, King Solomon, the wisest of all men, stated ([Mishlei 1 8:14](#)), “A man’s spirit nourishes his illness, but who can bear a broken spirit?”

Regarding this verse, Rashi comments, “The spirit of a gevev, a mighty man, does not allow worry to enter his heart and he accepts all that comes upon him with understanding and love.” Furthermore, Rashi

explains that the expression “A man’s spirit nourishes his illness” means that such an individual with a positive attitude will not lose his physical strength.

Similarly, regarding this verse, the Metzudat David commentary explains, “The spirit of a person can bear his situation and strengthen him against physical illness since one’s mental disposition and spirit leads the body to wellbeing even if it is already sick. However, if one’s spirit is wounded and broken with sadness and despondency, who can manage? This is because the body does not propel one’s spirit and maintain it. Rather, it is the spirit that propels the ability of the body to sustain its strength.”

This is an amazing idea! That is, a person’s emotional state protects his bodily health and not the opposite. In this manner, our sages teach us to guard ourselves from worry and sorrow, since they bring about a broken emotional state, which weakens the body.

Furthermore, in his comments to the aforementioned verse, the Vilna Gaon added that “happiness comes through one’s spirit, which is the ‘spirit of a man’ mentioned in the verse. When one is always content and in good spirit, even if illness should, God forbid, fall upon him, his happiness will nourish his ability to end his illness. However, regarding ‘one who has an injured spirit,’ which refers to one who is in a state of sadness, the verse says, ‘who can manage?’”

In Masechet [Berachot \(60a\)](#), the Talmud relates that Hillel the Elder was out walking when he heard screaming coming from his city. He said, “I am certain that this [cry] is not coming from my house.” The Vilna Gaon explains in his book “Imrei No’am” that in the merit of his complete trust in Hashem, Divine providence ensured that no tragedy would come to his home.

In continuation of this passage, it states, “Yehuda Bar Natan was walking behind Rav Hammuna and sighed. Reacting to his sigh, Rav Hammuna said to him, “Do you want to bring suffering upon yourself?” It says [[Iyov 3:25](#)], “Due to the fear that I was terrified of, it has overtaken me, and that which I dreaded has come upon me.” Such worry that arises in a man’s imagination can cause the matter about which he fears the most to materialize, as it says (in Mishlei, *ibid*), “That which I dreaded has come upon me.” Perhaps if he would not have dreaded certain calamity, it would not befall him.

We can add to all of the above the explanation of Rabbenu Bachye, which appears in the introduction to his book “Chovat HaLevavot,” where he writes, “Of the things that we must be cautious about is not to be too cautious.” This means that we must take caution to be safe, but our caution should not bring us to immobility and paralysis due to fear or the ruminating of worrisome thoughts that are so heavy that they shake our hope and trust in Hashem and hope.

There are, nevertheless, times when fear is in order. The Gemara discusses this in Masechet [Gittin \(55b\)](#) in its citation of the verse that states ([Mishlei 28:14](#)), “Praiseworthy is the man who is constantly in fear...” The Gemara indicates that this verse means that someone who is afraid of wrongdoing is praiseworthy. An example of the tragic outcome of the actions of individuals who lacked such fear is the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, through which Jerusalem was destroyed. Regarding this statement of the Gemara, Tosafot asks, “Did we not learn [in Masechet Berachot] that the only acceptable fear is the fear of forgetting one’s Torah learning?” Tosafot answers that the Gemara in Masechet Gittin says that this same verse actually permits another type of fear. This is the recognition that it is not his own personal might which will enable him to avoid or overcome an adverse situation, but rather the will of Hashem.

He should not think that his ingenuity and skill are responsible for his security and success, and that he need not be concerned for how he will affect others. It is very appropriate here to quote a statement of the Shomer Emunim, written by the holy and saintly kabbalist Rav Aharon Roth of righteous memory, in his discourse “Trust [in Hashem] and strengthening oneself” (Chapter 2, Pg. 188). Rav Roth quotes in the name of the Arizal: “If there is, God forbid, a plague in the city, it is only able to overtake those who are fearful. However, no evil can befall those who remain steadfast in their trust of Hashem in their heart and overcome their fear.”

We can, furthermore, add that depression and sadness that come as a result of anxious rumination and fear bring great harm to a one’s success. Concerning the subject of sadness, the Pardes Yosef (Parashat Vayigash) writes that sadness can even harm one’s material success. This is indicated by the verse that describes how Yosef told his brothers after revealing his true identity to them [Beraishet 4 5:5], “And now, do not be saddened ... for God has sent me [to Egypt] before you in order to provide for you.” The implication of the literal reading of these words is that Hashem will send sustenance to those who are not saddened.

The Gemara similarly states in Masechet [Horayot \(12a\)](#), “when one’s mind is weakened, his mazal is harmed,” which greatly inhibits his ability to serve Hashem. This is an incredible lesson that the Gemara teaches us. The weakening of a man’s mind and his emotional stability harms his mazal (his “fortune” or “lot”). Each person is more likely to succeed if he approaches his endeavors with confidence, a strong spirit, and inner tranquility.

We can now benefit from seeing the following excerpts from a letter that was written by Rabbi Akiva Eiger, the rabbi of Posen and one of the greatest sages of his time, who lived in Austria about 200 years ago, during the time of the terrible cholera epidemic. The rabbi issued instructions to his community, which obligated everyone to guard so that the epidemic would not spread. Included in these instructions were the directives to protect their health through maintaining personal hygiene, cleanliness of their home, cleaning the house with vinegar, minimizing public gatherings, foregoing praying in a minyan, and reciting Tehillim after each prayer. Regarding the absolute need to prevent public gatherings, Rabbi Akiva Eiger even authorized informing the authorities about those who violate the rule to abstain from public gatherings. The message at the end of his instructions is significant. Regarding the emotional spirit, the rabbi writes, “One must not worry and should distance himself from all types of sadness.” It is clear that Rabbi Akiva Eiger derived this last statement from all of the sources and statements of our sages from the generations before him.

It is understood, of course, that it is incumbent upon us to guard ourselves from all harm. Included in this obligation is the need to follow the instructions of the authorities whose directives are in line with medical professionals. We may not, God forbid, be lenient to not follow their guidelines due to our trust in the Creator of the world. After all, all of the scientific data and knowledge that we have was revealed to us by God, stage after stage, across the generations in order to assist us to fulfill the mitzvah to “Guard your souls very much” ([Devarim 4 :15](#)).

We will conclude with that what the Sefer Likkutei Moharan of Rabbi Nachman of Bresslev (Second Edition, the section called “The Value of Torah,” Chapter 28), tells us: “The entire world is a very narrow bridge, but the main thing is not to make yourself afraid at all.” Although different versions of this statement record that “the main thing is not to fear at all,” the authentic text has a slight but important nuance. This is that you should not cause yourself to fear at all. There is a deep lesson in this variation of

the text, which is that you must be careful not to dwell on worrisome thoughts, which will cause you to become afraid.

Now that we celebrate the holiday of our freedom, Chag HaPesach, let us remember what we find in our books — that the future redemption may occur on the night of Pesach. This is like it says in the Gemara (Rosh Hashana 11a), “In [the month of] Nissan we were redeemed, and in the future, we will be redeemed in Nissan.”

With self-sacrifice and anticipation, our ancestors maintained their inner essence and remained absolutely whole. They were, therefore, answered with the call of redemption. If we as well can strengthen our emunah and trust in Hashem, fear will not take hold of us from all that surrounds us, and we will be safe from all sorrow, distress, harm, and illness. We will see the redemption and ultimate respite soon, and the promise that Hashem made to Avraham (Beraishet 15:1): “Do not fear, Avram, for I am your protector.” Amen.

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