

Anxiety No More

The Path Toward a Stress-Free Life

By Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Worrier

Yankel always worried about everything all his life. But one day his coworkers noticed Yankel seemed like a changed man.

They remarked that he didn't seem to be the least bit worried about anything. Yankel said he'd hired a professional worrier and no longer had any problems.

"A professional worrier?" they said. "What does that cost?"

"\$150,000 a year."

"150k a year?! How on earth are you going to pay him? You are about to declare bankruptcy!"

"Well that will be his first worry."

Stress

People are stressed, scattered, fragmented, afraid, confused, downtrodden, sad, and depressed. At best, we are overwhelmed, burdened, splintered, and all over the place. I want to share with you the "magic pill"—and it is a single verse in this week's portion.

The Cloud

The journey of the Jewish people in the Sinai desert, the Torah relates in this week's portion (Behaaloscha), was guided by G-d. A cloud hovered over the portable sanctuary, the Mishkan, built in the desert. In the words of the Torah: ¹

"Whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would encamp. They thus camped at G-d's word and moved on at G-d's word."²

The Definition of Work

There is a fascinating and perplexing discussion in the Talmud based on the above verses. A brief introduction is necessary.

"For six days shall work be done," commands the Torah, "but the seventh day shall be to you a holy day, a Sabbath of rest to G-d."³ But what, exactly, constitutes "work"? The Hebrew word employed by the Torah, *melachah*, actually means "creative work." Thus, writing a single word is a *melachah*, while dragging a heavy sofa from one end of the room to the other is not. Specifically, the Talmud enumerates 39 categories of "creative work" that are forbidden on Shabbat, such as "plowing," "planting," "sowing," "baking," "weaving," "writing," "building," "igniting a fire," "carrying" and the like—they are the 39

types of constructive work that were employed in the construction of the “sanctuary” (*Mishkan*), which the Torah describes immediately following its commandment not to perform work on Shabbat.⁴ The fact that the Torah juxtaposes the prohibition to work on the Shabbat to the construction of the Mishkan was its way of explaining what work is forbidden on Shabbos; any labor involved in the construction of the Mishkan.

So for example, in the Mishkan they plowed and planted herbs to make dye for the various tapestries, or wheat to bring meal offerings, so we are forbidden to plow and plant on Shabbat. In the Mishkan they cooked and baked the meat of the offerings, or the bread of the offerings, so we are forbidden to cook or bake on Shabbat. In the Mishkan they wrote on each of the beams its suitable number, so we don't write on Shabbat. And the Mishkan they built—so we are forbidden to build on Shabbat. They also demolished the Mishkan, in order to transport it and reassemble it elsewhere, so we are forbidden on Shabbos to demolish any structure.

According to Jewish law, the biblical prohibition to demolish on Shabbat is only if we are demolishing the structure, not just to destroy, but for the sake of renovation, just like it was in the Mishkan: it was demolished in order to transport and erect it at the next encampment. If I break down a wall in my home, or remove a brick, because I want to renovate my home, then it is a violation of the biblical prohibition to work on Shabbos.⁵

The Strange View of Reb Yosi

Yet there is an enigmatic view by one of the greatest sages, Rabbi Yosi. He maintains that demolition is only biblically forbidden on Shabbos if the structure demolished was to be renovated in the very same location. Only if one dismantles a structure with the intention of rebuilding it in its current place (meaning, in other words, that the very demolition is the genesis of the renovation, since it is being done in the very same space), is it a violation of Shabbos.⁶

שבת לא, ב: קסבר ר' יוסי סותר על מנת לבנות במקומו הוא סותר על מנת לבנות, שלא במקומו לא הוא סותר. א"ל רבה מכדי כל מלאכות ילינין להו ממשכן, והתם סותר ע"מ לבנות שלא במקומו הוא. א"ל שאני התם כיון דכתיב (בהעלותך ט, יח) על פי ה' יחנו, כסותר ע"מ לבנות במקומו דמי!

The Talmudic sage Rabba raises a basic problem with the view of Reb Yosi. As we explained, all 39 forms of labor prohibited on Shabbos are derived from the types of labor performed in connection with the construction of the Mishkan. Now, when the Jews were prepared to travel, the Mishkan was dismantled so that it could be transported and then reassembled at the new place of encampment. If so, disassembling a structure for the purpose of transporting it and reassembling it in a different place should be prohibited on Shabbos, reflecting the procedure used by the Mishkan!

Whenever the Jews dismantled the sanctuary it was never to reassemble it in the very same location—but rather to travel with it till they reached a new location, and there it would be erected once again. Why then would Reb Yosi hold that on Shabbos the only form of demolition biblically forbidden is the one done with the intention to renovate in the same location, when in the Mishkan it was always done with the objective of recreating it elsewhere?

The answer the Talmud gives is cryptic: Since the Torah states (in this week's portion), "They camped at G-d's word and moved on at G-d's word," when they dismantled the Mishkan it was as though they had the intention of reassembling it in the very same spot!

This answer is puzzling, if not absurd. Why should the fact that the Jews followed the word of G-d in their travels cause us to disregard their movement from one place to another in the desert and state that they demolished the sanctuary only to be erected in the same location?⁷

In Mother's Arms

Three great Rabbis of the 20th century presented an almost identical and marvelous answer. Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein of Sochatchov, Poland (1855-1926); Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, the famed Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem (1901-1978); and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994).⁸

Here is the beautiful parable by Reb Chaim:

Imagine a young woman traveling halfway round the globe. From Miami she flies to Los Angeles, then to London, Moscow, Tel Aviv, Johannesburg, Sydney, and then New York. In each place, she must wait on the long and exhausting lines to go through customs and security. She needs to wait on lines to board and deplane. In each place, she needs to deal with luggage, travel, and settling in. As she enters each country, she receives a unique stamp on her Passport, indicative of the distinctive status of the new country she is about to enter, with a bureaucracy all its own. She then must research and find the proper place to lodge in each city.

But what if this young woman is holding an infant in her arms as she makes this arduous journey around the globe? If the baby was asked where he has been all these days and weeks, what would his response be? If you were to ask him, or her, how many countries has he visited, in how many places did he hang out, how many lines he waited on, how many passport controls he needed to endure, how many security agents did he have to deal with, how many migraines did he acquire in so many diverse airports? If you were to ask him, how he dealt with wandering through so many distinct locations and staying in so many hotels? His answer would be: I was in the same place all the time—cuddled up in my mother's arms.

For the baby, there is little difference between continents, countries, states and cities. All the long, grueling and strenuous lines don't mean much to him—as he is protected from all of it. Throughout all the journeys, he lay comfortably and stably in his mom's arms, oblivious to the vicissitudes and fluctuations all around him. From his experience, he is not even "moving around" from one end of the globe to the other; he's lodged comfortably in the safest and most nurturing place on earth: in his mother's or father's warm embrace.

This, then, is the meaning behind the Talmudic answer: "Since the Torah states, 'They camped at G-d's word and moved on at G-d's word,' when they dismantled the Mishkan it was as though they had the intention of reassembling it in the very same spot!" While journeying in the desert, the Jewish people experienced themselves as lodged 24/7 in G-d's loving and embracing "arms."⁹ From their perspective,

they were always situated in the same “place.” Sure, geographically, they moved around; but in their consciousness, they had not moved anywhere; they were in the same spot—in the loving and nurturing grip of G-d.¹⁰

As Moses tells the Israelites:¹¹ “and in the desert, where you have seen how the Lord, your G-d, has carried you as a man carries his son, all the way that you have gone, until you have come to this place.”

The Stable Life

This is what constitutes the secret to stability and wholesomeness in life.

Life can sometimes be compared to a slow tranquil ride on the Choo Choo train in the amusement park, but at other times to the Super-Duper-Luper roller coaster in Hershey Park or Disney World, where you are being turned upside down, and you are not sure if you are coming or going. Life’s excursions and voyages take us up mountains, down valleys, and sometimes—it feels—down cliffs. Sometimes, a promising day quickly turns into one of disappointment, anger, and anxiety. From my first appointment or class that I showed up late to, to a WhatsApp message that set me off, to a nasty interaction with my boss, to an argument with my spouse, to money issues, to mental health issues, nothing is going right! To top it all off, I hurt myself in the gym, only to discover when I came outside that my car was towed!

And, mind you, this is all pre-Corona. Now, after the Coronavirus, life created—or uncovered—a whole new set of challenges and setbacks. The future of my business is uncertain; the kids are climbing the walls; and life as I knew it may never return fully back to “normal.” My anxiety is hitting the roof.

But when I can come to realize that through all the ups and downs I am situated in my mother’s arms, that I am encircled by infinite love, it confers upon me a sense of stability and serenity.

Life can easily scatter you and frazzle you. In one day, you may have to run to ten appointments and juggle twenty duties. But when you realize you are in G-d’s embracing grip, all the time, then you remain in an integrated and wholesome space. You are not running from one appointment to another, from one meeting to another, from one bank to another, from one headache to another, from one doctor to another, from one lawyer to another, from one broker to another, from one manager to another, from one music teacher for your child to another art class for another child, to your therapist, to your gym, to your aging mother who needs your help, to your nursing baby who is screaming, from one zoom meeting to another—you are in the same space, 24/7. You are in G-d’s loving arms. At this moment, G-d leads you to one meeting; at a later point, G-d leads you to another one. He may take you today to 30 places. He may keep you today in the same space. (Nice! I like quarantine). But throughout it all, you are always in His space—and in that space you are safe, secure, confident, and protected.

Our lives become stressful and disorienting because they are fragmented, dichotomized, and splintered. We are all trying to achieve many different things, and we carry many different burdens on our shoulders. But if you discover that you are always, always, hugged and cuddled in G-d’s embrace, full of infinite affection, then even as you are moving from place to place, geographically and mentally, you always remain in the same space—in the space of love, joy and oneness.

In the unforgettable words of King David in Psalms 139 (which kept Sharanaky going for a decade):

*Where shall I go from Your spirit, and where shall I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to the heavens, there You are, and if I make my bed in the grave, behold, You are there.
If I take up the wings of dawn, if I dwell at the end of the west,
There too, Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will grasp me.*

Or in the words of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schnuer Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812):¹²

This is the essence of the faith for which a person was created: to believe that "There is no space devoid of Him"... Confidence and joy are in His place, because He is but good all the time. Therefore, first of all, a person ought to be happy and joyous at every time and hour, and truly live by his faith in G d, Who animates him and acts kindly towards him at every moment.

The Power of Psalms

The famed Soviet Refusnik, Nathan Sharansky, spent 9 years in Soviet Communist prisons for his activism for Israel and the Jewish people. He was arrested and accused of being a spy against Russia. First, they wanted to execute him, then they sentenced him to prison. He spent years in solitary confinement without a bed to sleep on. He was treated like a roach. His suffering was intense. What kept him alive? I quote from his book *'Fear No Evil'*:

"Just a few days before my arrest, I received via a tourist a small gift sent by my wife Avital (who has already left the Soviet Union), a book of Psalms. Frankly, it was in the middle of our struggle. I had to fight against KGB. I had no time for these things like reading Psalm books, so I put it aside."

"When I was arrested some days after this, I suddenly remembered about it, and I started fighting to get it. The Soviets confiscated the book sent by my wife. It took me three years to fight, to force authorities to give me this book. They gave it to me on the same day when they also gave me the telegram that my father died. I felt terrible, because I could not be with my mother, I could not support her in those days. So what can I do? I decided that I'll start reading this Psalm book."

"I can't say that I understood the Psalms completely, but I sensed their spirit and felt both the joy and the suffering of King David, their author... I especially liked Psalm 23: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for You are with me....' And Psalm 27 was a particular comfort to me: 'Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer. Though my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will take me in...'"

"For forty days I read the Psalms. Through reading these Psalms, I thought continually about Papa, Mama, and Avital, about the past and the future, and about the fate of our family. My feelings of grief and loss were gradually replaced by sweet sorrow and fond hopes."

"A few months later Mama wrote to seek my advice about the inscription on Papa's gravestone. Not surprisingly, I turned to the Psalms – in particular, to Psalm 25, with its prophetic reference to Israel, to my father, and to his imprisoned but hopeful son. The verse read, 'His soul will rest in peace, for his seed shall inherit the Land.'"

About a year after the book of Tehilim that he had received from his wife Avital had been returned to him, it was once again taken away. "In reply to my protests a representative appeared... who said, 'It is the duty of the state to guard you in prison from harmful influences, so your religious literature has been confiscated with our consent.'"

Sharansky proclaimed a work strike until his book of Tehilim would be returned to him. As punishment, he was sent to a punishment cell in exceedingly difficult conditions for fifteen days, and every time that he refused to go back to work before his book of Tehilim was returned to him, he was sent back for another fifteen days. In this way his time in the punishment cell continued for about 100 consecutive days, and his health deteriorated to such an extent that his jailers were forced to admit him into the infirmary. When his health showed a slight improvement, he was returned to the punishment cell, where he stayed for another 86 days. He was then judged for his "crimes" in the work camp and sentenced to three years of incarceration in a horrible prison. There his book of Tehilim was finally returned to him.

Nathan was on a hunger strike for 110 days, because they would not allow him to read his wife's and mother's letters. They forced the food down his throat. "I took my Psalm book and for days on end, with the photographs of my dear ones in front of me, I recited all one hundred and fifty of King David's Psalms, syllable by syllable.

"I felt all the time that if this psalm book was with me, nothing would happen. I fought each time they took it from me: I was on hunger strikes, I spent hundreds of days on hunger strikes and in punishment cells, in order not to permit them to take it from me. Even when I was released, and I still didn't know that I was released, but I was brought to the airplane from the prison, and they took all the clothes, and gave me the different ones, and I suddenly understood that maybe some big changes are happening, but my psalm book was not with me. I was so scared to be without it that I lay in the snow and refused to enter the airplane until they brought it back to me. And that's the only piece of property with which I came to freedom from Soviet prison."

The Actor & the Jew

The story is told of an opera singer who was known for his readings and recitations from the Classics. He always ended his performance with a dramatic recital of Psalm 23. Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation—"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"—the crowd would listen attentively and then rise with thunderous applause, in appreciation of the actor's ability to bring the psalm to life.

One night, just before the singer and actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, an old Jew from the audience spoke up. "Sir, would you mind, if tonight, I recite Psalm 23?"

The actor was surprised by this unusual request. Yet he invited the old Jew to come onto the stage to recite the psalm; curious to see the how the ability of this Jew weighed against his own talent.

Softly the old man began to recite the words of the psalm. His voice was parched and weak, and his tune lousy.

"The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want..."

"Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they will comfort me..."

"Only goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord for many long years."

When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the man's recitation that every eye was tearful.

Amazed by what he had experienced, the opera star queried, "I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training -- but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. And frankly, you have a horrible voice and can barely carry a tune. Tell me, what is your secret?"

The Jew humbly replied, "Well sir, you know the Psalm...but I know the Shepherd."

¹ Numbers 9:17-18

² At the very center of the Israelite camp stood the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary that housed the Divine presence. Surrounding the Mishkan were the tents of the Priests (Kohanim) and Levites who served in the Sanctuary. And beyond the Levite camp radiated, like the spokes of a wheel, the tent communities of the 12 tribes of Israel—three tribes to the east, three to the south, three to the west and three tribes to the north.

Above the Mishkan hovered a cloud signifying the Divine presence which dwelled within it; when the cloud lifted, that was the sign that it was time to move on. There was no pre-set period for each encampment. Sometimes the cloud—and the people—stayed put for a year, sometimes for but a single night. Whenever the cloud lifted, the people journeyed on.

³ Exodus 20:8-9

⁴ See the seventh chapter of Talmud Tractate Shabbos (73a and further).

⁵ The Rabbis, however, prohibited even demolishing without the intent of renovation (Rambam, Laws of Shabbos ch, 10:15. Shlchan Aruch Orach Chaim section 314.)

⁶ Talmud Shabbos 31b

⁷ Rabanu Chananel explains that since they did not go where the cloud would take them, perhaps G-d would want them to erect the mishkan in the very same spot. Yet it still does not make sense: this was merely a possibility, but certainly there were other possibilities. What is more, they were en route to the Holy Land, why would He have them dismantle the mishkan just to erect it in the very same spot?

⁸ Shem Mishmuel Ki Seitzei 5672 (1912). Sichos Musar, Beshalach 5733 (p. 139). Sichas 13 Tamuz 5715 (1955).

⁹ Cf. Jeremiah 2:2. Sichos Musar ibid.

¹⁰ This explains another enigmatic insight in the Talmud (Eiruvin 55b), that the camp of the Jewish people in the desert, though transient, was considered permanent city. Hence, on Shabbos you can walk till the end of the camp and then another 200 cubits further. Why? Says the Talmud, because their encampment was according to the guidance of G-d, hence it assumes the status of a permanent residence. But why? The answer is the same: Since the Jewish people experienced themselves as living in the Divine embrace, for them this space, just like any other space, was fixed, permanent, and stable. They were as permanent as one can be, lodged in the lap of eternity.

In the words of the Shem Mishmuel:

שם משמאל כי תצא תע"ב: ונראה עוד לומר בהקדם דברי הש"ס עירובין (נ"ה): אמר רב הונא יושבי צריפין אין מודדין להם [אלפים לכל רוח] אלא מפתח בתיהם, מתיב רב חסדא וכו' א"ל רבא דיגלי מדבר קאמרת כיון דכתיב עפ"י ה' יחנו ועל פי ה' יסעו במאן דקביע להו דמי, פירוש דחנייתו ומסען לא ה' מחמת המקום, הטובה היא אם רעה לחשוב חנייתו שהיא רק לשעתו כיושבי צריפין, אלא מחמת ציוני הש"ס ואחת היא להם מקום זה או זה, **נחשב כל חנייתו ומסען שהוא על פי ה' כמקום אחד בלתי משתנה וקבוע:**

This also explains beautifully why biblically we are only forbidden to construct a permanent tent on Shabbos, though the Mishkan was constructed on a temporarily basis, since it would soon be dismantled? Yet, for the Jews in the desert, the Mishkan was erected in this space permanently, because they never really felt that they had to "move" anywhere—they were always in the same space. They were always in the same exact space, in the tender hands arms of their "mother."

In the above address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe (13 Tamuz 5715) he added, that since G-d is beyond space, and their movement was under G-d's guidance, all the differences of distinct places were of no significance, as they lodged in the embrace of the infinite reality which transcends space.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 1:31

¹² Tanya Igeres Hakodesh ch. 11

Short Summary:

People are anxious, stressed, scattered, fragmented, afraid, confused. At best, we are overwhelmed, burdened, splintered, and all over the place. Today we want to uncover the “magic pill”—and it is a single verse in this week’s Torah portion.

The Talmud (Shabbos 31b) records a view by one of the greatest sages, Rabbi Yoisi. He maintains that demolition is only biblically forbidden on Shabbos if the structure demolished was to be renovated in the very same location. Only if one dismantles a structure with the intention of rebuilding it in its current place is it a violation of Shabbos.

The Talmudic sage Rabba raises a basic problem with the view of Reb Yoisi. As we explained, all 39 forms of labor prohibited on Shabbos are derived from the types of labor performed in connection with the construction of the Mishkan. Now, when the Jews were prepared to travel, the Mishkan was dismantled so that it could be transported and then reassembled at the new place of encampment. Thus, disassembling a structure for the purpose of transporting it and reassembling it in a different place should be prohibited on Shabbos, reflecting the procedure used by the Mishkan!

The answer the Talmud gives is absolutely cryptic: Since the Torah states (in this week’s portion), “They camped at G-d’s word and moved on at G-d’s word,” when they dismantled the Mishkan it was as though they had the intention of reassembling it in the very same spot!

This answer is puzzling, if not absurd. Why should the fact that the Jews followed the word of G-d in their travels cause us to disregard their movement from one place to another in the desert and state that they demolished the sanctuary only to be erected in the same location?

This message constitutes the secret to true stability and wholesomeness in life. Life can sometimes be compared to a slow tranquil ride on the Choo Choo train in the amusement park, but at other times to the Super-Duper-Luper in Hershey Park, where you are being turned upside down, and you are not sure if you are coming or going. Life’s journeys and excursions take us up mountains, down valleys, and sometimes down cliffs.

But there is one way we can maintain our deepest serenity, and remain in a space devoid of anxiety and turmoil.