

Is Anxiety Ever Positive? Rabbi Maury Grebenau

There always seems to be something to be nervous about. Anxiety over the unknown future seems to be part of the human condition. Is there any value in concern or should we strive to be completely care free? Is there truly nothing to fear but fear itself or are there areas of life which are worthy of our concern?

Rabbeinu Bachyah ibn Pekudah (Chovos HaLevavos Sha'ar HaBitachon) gives us a list of reasons why it is logical to trust in Hashem. Since Hashem knows what is best for us and is able to accomplish anything it seems that we should be care free at all times. A famous story is told of the Chazon Ish who was almost knocked over by a young man who jumped out of the street to avoid being hit by a car. The Chazon Ish did not even turn around to see who or what had collided with him. His tremendous calm allowed him to just continue on. This type of serenity seems ideal and characteristic of our great Torah leaders, so why does Yaakov seem to get so nervous?

As our parsha opens, Yaakov is preparing for a reunion with Eisav and he fears the worst. The pasuk tells us that “וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצְרָ לּוֹ”, Yaakov is very concerned and upset, as he prepares to meet Eisav (Bereishis 32:8). Yaakov's fear is particularly surprising when we recall that Hashem has in fact promised him that he will be protected from Eisav. A few pesukim later Yaakov explains that he is afraid that he lacks the merit necessary to deserve being rescued. Rashi (32:11) quotes the Gemara (Brachos 4a) which tells us that both Dovid and Yaakov were concerned that their sins may have caused them to fall out of favor with Hashem; they expected serious consequences. The Gemara seems to accept this as an explanation for the fact that Yaakov was frightened despite the fact that Hashem assured him all would be well. Yaakov was afraid that he has sinned and thus the promise of protection was no longer in effect.

The Rambam, in the seventh chapter of Shemoneh Prakim (his introduction to Pirkei Avos), uses Yaakov's fear in our parsha as an example of insufficient faith in Hashem. The Rambam says that this type of anxiety acts as a barrier between the person who is afraid and Hashem. He seems to condemn Yaakov despite what the Gemara has said in Yaakov's defense. Why is Yaakov's fear unwarranted? R' Elchanan Wasserman (Koveitz Hearos #5) gives a beautiful answer to this problem. He explains that although Yaakov was correct to be concerned that he had lost the promise Hashem had given him he still should have trusted in Hashem without any specific promise of protection. This is what King Dovid expresses so beautifully in Halle (Tehillim 118) when he refers to '*chisayon*' as well as '*bitachon*.' Rashi explains that '*bitachon*' is trust that a promise will be fulfilled but '*chisayon*' is trust in a person even when no formal offer is given. Dovid tells us that it is good to trust in Hashem, rather than to trust in man. Even if Hashem has given no promise of protection, or the promise of protection had lapsed due to sin we still must have faith that Hashem will take care of us.

The Midrash (Pesikta Zutah Bereishis #32) understands from Yaakov's actions that it is proper for one to be fearful so that their fear encourages them to call out to Hashem. This is in fact exactly what Yaakov did. Rashi (Bereishis 32:9) tells us that Yaakov prepared in three ways, sending the gift to Eisav, splitting the camp and praying. Fear that is paralyzing will form a wall between us and Hashem but anxiety which jolts us to act and to reach out to Hashem is empowering. When anxiety stops us from being able to function properly then it is a serious issue that must be dealt with but when it helps us to realize our limitations and our dependence on Hashem it can truly be a positive force. Our response to our fear is far more important than the fear itself.