

GOD VS.



By Sara Yoheved Rigler

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http://www.aish.com/spirituality/growth/God_vs._Prozac.asp

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David Rosmarin was a sophomore in college in 1999 when he began to feel anxious. His nervousness -- about academic stresses and social woes -- was probably typical of all college students everywhere, but when David experienced difficulty falling asleep at night, he considered going to the campus psych to get medication.

After one of his weekly Torah learning sessions, David consulted Rabbi Nissan Applebaum about the sleep he was losing. "Rabbi, would it be a good idea for me to speak to a mental health professional like a psychologist or psychiatrist about my anxiety?"

Without replying, Rabbi Applebaum rose from his seat and ran out of the room. Confused yet intrigued, David followed him. "I watched," recalls David, "as he proceeded to photocopy pages from a book, preparing a sheath of papers for me that would change my life."

When he was finished, Rabbi Applebaum placed a copy of a 61-page document into David's hands. The first page read: "The Gate of Trust in God." The pages were an excerpt from the book *Duties of the Heart*, written by Rabbi Bachaya Ibn Pekuda in 11th Century Spain. "I don't know if you should speak to a mental health professional about your anxiety," the rabbi said to David, "but I do know that reading these pages will help you. Learn them for 10-15 minutes each night before you go to bed, and contemplate deeply what is written here."

David followed the rabbi's "prescription." As he recalls:

To my surprise, within 8 weeks, not only was I able to fall asleep without difficulty, but my anxiety had almost completely vanished. Even more remarkable was that the improvement in my psychological state had occurred despite the fact that *none* of the anxiety-producing factors in my life had been ameliorated. In actuality, at this later period of time, I was faced with a grueling exam schedule, worse social woes than before, and I remained completely uncertain about my future! What had changed was my attitude towards my difficulties and towards life in general. I had increased my level of trust in God, and had gained the spiritual acumen necessary to navigate through the world of anxiety. In the same way that a medical patient faithfully places himself in the hands of a highly skilled and competent physician, I had realized that the events of my life were ultimately controlled by God's highly capable hands and that at the end of the day, I had little to worry about.

After graduation, David entered an MA program in psychology. When faced with preparing a Master's Thesis, David remembered his own experience contending with anxiety. He started re-reading "The Gate of Trust in God," this time analyzing the text from a psychological perspective. "Less than three pages into my reading," David remembers, "I realized that the text could be understood as a complete psychological theory of the etiology of human anxiety."

This ancient piece of Jewish wisdom elucidated a secret method of eliminating human anxiety based on spiritual wisdom. I presented the material to my academic supervisors who were equally impressed by Rabbi Bachaya's insights."

DO RELIGIOUS BELIEFS HELP HANDLE STRESS?

In fact, David had stumbled into the growing field of the psychology of religion, which has published almost 1,800 psychological studies in the past two decades, investigating questions such as:

- Can religious beliefs/practices be a source of coping in times of stress?
- Is weekly attendance of religious services linked to levels of anxiety and depression?
- Do religious individuals have better or worse outcomes in psychological treatment than non-religious individuals?
- Can spirituality and religiousness be integrated into clinical practice for the treatment of psychological problems?

A recent example of one such study was reported in Canada's *National Post* on March 4, 2009. The study, led by Michael Inzlicht, a University of Toronto psychology professor, had been published in the journal *Psychological Science*. The researchers measured activity in the part of the brain - the anterior cingulate cortex - that registers stress. Subjects were asked to perform a stressful exercise, called a "Stroop task."

Prof. Inzlicht said that initially they were simply trying to understand what factors would activate these brain waves, not investigate religious belief. At first, they asked people to describe themselves as being liberal or conservative. Then they asked others to describe their level of self-esteem. Neither of those parameters correlated with the activation of the "stress brain waves." Only when the researchers asked about a belief in God and religiosity did a pattern develop. Those with the deepest religious belief were more likely to let mistakes roll off their backs, while those who tend toward atheism were more likely to suffer stress and anxiety after committing an error. Prof. Inzlicht reported that no atheist in the study showed low anxiety and no religious person showed high anxiety.

Prof. Inzlicht called the study "statistically significant," and said that the results could act as a predictor to how people might react to real-world stress situations, such as today's crumbling stock markets.

THE SCIENTIFIC TRUTH ABOUT RELIGION AND PSYCHOLOGY

Freud insisted that religion was inversely associated with positive psychological health. Esteemed psychologist Albert Ellis, ranked by his peers as the second most influential psychotherapist in history, in the 1980s claimed that people who have strong religious convictions are going to have less tolerance to uncertainty, be less resilient, suffer more from anxiety, and be more prone to neuroses.

In the 1990s, psychologist Kenneth Pargament faced off with these giants and suggested testing their claims scientifically by conducting actual psychological experiments, without a religious or anti-religious agenda. Dr. Pargament made an empirical science of the psychology of religion, and has published two books and over 150 scientific papers. He has received

numerous awards from the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. In general, his studies have shown that spirituality is an important resource for people in times of stress, and connection with God can be ameliorative for symptoms of stress, worry, and depression. After reviewing Dr. Pargament's research, Dr. Ellis publicly retracted his statements and grudgingly admitted that, from a psychological standpoint, religion is "not necessarily a bad thing."

In truth, as secularization in society has increased, so have the levels of anxiety and depression. As Robert Leahy, clinical professor in psychiatry at Cornell University, recently pointed out in an interview with Dennis Prager: "We're experiencing a major historic trend in the increase in anxiety... The average child today between the ages of 11 to 13 is as anxious as the average psychiatric patient was in the 1950s." Dr. Leahy also noted: "There is research that shows that people having a belief system and a community that supports that have actually a better and happier life."

For the past five years, David Rosmarin has worked in a PhD program with Dr. Pargament, and recently received an appointment at the Harvard Medical School as a Clinical Fellow in the Department of Psychiatry. Rosmarin has published numerous studies in academic peer-reviewed journals and presented at several national conferences on the relationship between religion/spirituality and anxiety, stress, and depression. [See <http://www.jpsych.com>] Although many such studies have been done among Christians, Rosmarin has pioneered studies in the Jewish community. Consistently, his research has found that trust in God as well as religious practices (e.g., prayer, religious study, attending services) is associated with lower levels of psychological distress.

OPIATE OF THE MASSES

Since Marx famously declared, "Religion is the opiate of the masses," the masses have discarded religion in favor of real opiates: Prozac, Effexor, and Zoloft. Prescription rates for all psychotropic [mood-altering] medications among non-institutionalized adults in the U.S. have steadily increased over the past 20 years. In fact, their use doubled in less than a decade between 1994 and 2002. The use of multiple psychotropic medications almost tripled in the same short period.

These anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medications have side effects such as sexual dysfunction, nausea, and -- ironically -- nervousness and insomnia. Other common medications for mood/anxiety disorders such as tri-cyclic anti-depressants and MAOI's can have much more serious side effects, such as coma and death.

In light of these dangers, David Rosmarin wondered whether his own experience with increasing trust in God could help others. "I decided that I must try to use the knowledge I have to help people to reduce the amount of anxiety they experience in their lives."

Together with Rabbi Leib Kelemen, Rabbi Noach Orloweck, and Dr. Pargament, David Rosmarin developed a program for treating stress and worry in the Jewish community. The program is a spiritually-based intervention founded on the same "Gate of Trust in God" that helped him so much as a nervous college student, as well as other classic Jewish texts. The program is done through the Internet, so it can be completed anonymously by anyone at any location and at any time. It requires no therapist, just the commitment of a half hour every day

for two weeks.

For his dissertation, David Rosmarin has built a free, online portal that is testing the program's efficacy against an established and well-utilized intervention called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (See www.jpsych.com/dr for information). Currently, about 60 people have completed their involvement with the study, and many of the individuals receiving the spiritually-based treatment have attested to the benefit they received from it. I did the first half-hour segment, and personally found it life-changing.

To test the efficacy of the program by statistical analysis, David Rosmarin needs another 30-50 Jewish people to participate in his study. If you are interested in participating, please visit: <http://www.jpsych.com/dr/>

BELIEF IN GOD AND THE EXODUS

The "trust in God" fostered by this program has three key components:

1. Belief that God is all-knowing (and therefore knows what you need)
2. Belief that God is all-powerful (and therefore can change physical reality)
3. Belief that God loves you (and therefore acts for your benefit)

As Mr. Rosmarin points out, it makes sense that a person who believes in an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God will not be consumed by worry or depression.

Or does it? Isn't it possible to believe in an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God who created the world, but doesn't care if I lost my whole pension fund in the meltdown? Isn't it possible to believe that God loves the world, but isn't going to intervene in my unemployment troubles?

Here's where the Exodus comes in. As any observer will notice, Judaism is obsessed with the Exodus. While the salvation from Haman's genocidal scheme is mentioned only once a year at Purim, and the salvation from the Syrian-Greeks is mentioned only once a year at Chanukah, the redemption from Egypt is mentioned not only at Passover, but every Shabbat in the Kiddush and every day in the morning prayers. In fact, it is a mitzvah to remember the Exodus every day. Why?

The Jewish belief in God has two essential parts:

1. God created the world.
2. God intervenes in human history.

Just as the first principle means that God created not only the Himalayas, but also your fingernails, so the second principle means that God intervenes not only in epic global events, but also in the daily circumstances of your life. In Judaism, the Exodus is a code word for the far-reaching concept that God micro-manages the world, that Divine Providence oversees and intervenes, that God is a hands-on God Who cares.

From the human side, the Exodus is a testimonial to the Jewish People's trust that God would indeed take care of them. Between Egypt and the Promised Land was nothing but a vast

desert, without sufficient water or food to sustain a multitude. Exiting from slavery in Egypt was like escaping Alcatraz by jumping into the shark-infested ocean. As God would say to Israel centuries later through His prophet: "I remember the love of your youth, how you followed me into the wilderness, into an unsown land." Thus, on Passover, we recall not only how God intervened to save us, but how we trusted that the mega-miracles of the Exodus would be followed by God's protracted daily sustenance.

Passover is indeed the holiday of faith in God. The matzah represents both "the bread of affliction" and "the bread of freedom." The Seder is full of symbols of both suffering and redemption. The message we must imbibe is that suffering and redemption are inextricably linked, that God gives us suffering in order to make us spiritually fit to receive redemption. On Seder night, we rise to a level of faith where each one of us affirms: "You **know** our suffering, You **can act** to redeem us, and I trust that because You **love** us, You will do what is for our ultimate good."

As David Rosmarin declares: "With the financial markets in crisis and with growing security concerns around the world, stress and worry have gone through the roof -- particularly in the Jewish community. Increasing belief in God may help to decrease a lot of distress."

Author Biography:

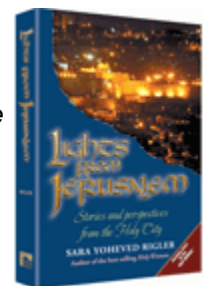
Sara Yoheved Rigler is the author of the bestseller [Holy Woman](#) and of the new [Lights from Jerusalem](#). She is a graduate of Brandeis University. After fifteen years of practicing and teaching meditation and Eastern philosophy, she discovered "the world's most hidden religion: Torah Judaism." Since 1985, she has been practicing the spiritual path of Torah. She is a popular international lecturer on subjects of Jewish spirituality and also presents a highly-acclaimed workshop for women, "Dressing the Soul." She resides in the Old City of Jerusalem with her husband and children.

Her articles have appeared in: *Jewish Women Speak about Jewish Matters*, *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, and *Heaven on Earth*.



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*Click here to order Sara Yoheved Rigler's brand new book, [Lights from Jerusalem](#). Like *Holy Woman*, the stories in this volume both fascinate and inspire. Sara's writings plumb the depths of human nature and aim toward the heights of spiritual aspiration. In the more than 50 selections in this book, culled primarily from [Aish.com](#), Sara Yoheved Rigler shares with the reader her ever-fresh wonder and love for the transformative power of Judaism.*



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