BEHAALOTEKHA: The anxiety of having it all

Clinical anxiety, and the other kind

There are two kinds of anxiety, and they should not be confused. One is clinical. It has a real cause: a concrete threat, the panic attack, the racing heart. That kind is medical. It belongs to doctors, and nothing here is about it.

The other kind is cultural, even spiritual. It grows out of materialism and abundance. It is not the anxiety of the man with nothing to eat. It is the opposite. It is the anxiety of the man who has everything. That was roughly the situation of the children of Israel in the desert. God gave them everything they needed. No generation since has known that kind of material ease. The man or manna fell from the sky each morning. Nobody had to plant it, harvest it, store it, or worry about tomorrow's supply. It was a complete food: tasty, filling, and nutritious. And it solved the problem that had haunted humanity since Adam: Where will my next meal come from? In Egypt they had worked like animals to answer that one question. Now it was answered. And right then, in the middle of all that comfort, the crisis hit.

Anxiety and emptiness

The mechanics are simple. The human mind runs on a kind of energy built to solve problems: find bread, protect your family, and put a roof up. That mental energy does not switch off when the problems go away. It stays on. It looks for something to do. And when it finds no real goal to attach to, it curdles into anxiety. How?

The small stuff floats up. The Hebrew word for trivial, superficial stuff is "shtuyot": nonsense. It rushes in to fill the empty space at the center of the mind. The question is no

longer “what will I eat.” It is “Do I want the steak medium or medium well?” It is no longer “what will keep me warm.” It is “which of my fifteen pairs of shoes goes with this dress.”

The same Jews who spent centuries as slaves, working for a piece of Matzah, now complain about the manna and demand meat. And fish. And melon for dessert. In the desert!

The first to complain were the asafsuf: the ones with the least spiritual inclination, the ones who never embraced the new national project, which was to learn the Torah they had just received and become God’s people. Freedom plus abundance minus purpose left a void they were not built for. They had nowhere to channel the extra mental energy. Slavery had been easier. At least slavery came with a job.

The wrong diagnosis

What happened in the desert is one of our problems too. We are the best-supplied generation in history. We wiped out hunger across whole continents. We have heat, air conditioning, medicine, too much food, and entertainment without end. We are also the most anxious people who have ever lived. But the curve runs backward from what we expected. More abundance, more anxiety. Fewer real needs, more shtuyot becoming needs.

It is easy to misread this. Many treat this particular anxiety, not the clinical kind, which is real and needs care, like a broken part to be repaired. But read through this week’s Parasha; it is not a psychological issue but a spiritual one. The fix is not chemical. It is a question of direction.

Testing or coaching?

The Torah frames the desert paradise as a nisayon: a test, or better, a training exercise. Take away the daily fight for survival, and one question is left standing. What will you do

with your mind when you no longer need it to keep yourself alive?

The answer is not to go back to scarcity. Hardships do not make us better. They distract us. The answer is to give that mental energy a target worth the effort. Build a family. Raise children. Build a home with values. Study Torah. Get closer to God. Improve your Amida. Volunteer at a hospital, at Bikkur Holim, or at a home for the elderly. Any real work for someone else.

A mind that isn’t occupied gets preoccupied. And preoccupation is where this type of anxiety comes from. The surest way to stop chewing on your own small troubles is to go do something that really matters for someone else.