

MICHAL OSHMAN

# WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN'T AFRAID?



Discover a Life Filled  
with Purpose and Joy  
Through Jewish Wisdom



## What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?

Discover a Life Filled with Purpose and Joy Through the Secrets of Jewish Wisdom

By Michal Oshman

10-minute read

### Synopsis

*What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?* (2021) tells the story of how the author learned to cope with her feelings of anxiety and depression by getting in touch with her Jewish roots. The author shares what she's learned and shows how anyone can benefit from the insights of Jewish wisdom.

### Who is it for?

- Anyone coping with depression and anxiety
- Parents looking for guidance
- People who want to be better leaders

### About the author

Michal Oshman holds university degrees in sociology, anthropology, and psychodynamic and systemic thinking. She spent years as an HR expert and management consultant before joining Facebook's London office, where she was put in charge of international leadership and team development. She is now Head of Company Culture, Diversity and Inclusion at TikTok Europe.

## **What's in it for me? Learn how lessons from the Torah can lead to life-changing experiences.**

When Michal Oshman entered the reception area at Facebook's London offices, she marveled at the words written on the wall: "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" These words hit Oshman particularly hard because she recognized herself in them. Oshman was often afraid. Afraid that her kids might die if they went on a school field trip. Afraid that her friends might get into car accidents. Fear was just a constant for Oshman. Fortunately, this changed when the author began to learn more about her Jewish roots. She found surprising concepts and principles that helped her better understand her anxieties and find peace of mind. We'll explore them and see how they can apply to our daily lives.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how Jewish wisdom can help both religious and secular people alike;
- why stepping back and giving room is often a great way to lead; and
- why every parent should want their kid to grow up to be a *mensch*.

### **Jewish wisdom helped the author find answers to her ongoing anxiety and depression.**

If you've ever been to a therapist, there's a good chance you told them about your childhood. Certainly, the author, Michal Oshman, did. For much of her life, she has experienced anxiety; and she's also been through bouts of depression. So she sought help in psychotherapy. But time and time again, the focus was on her childhood and her parents.

Oshman knew that the issue wasn't her upbringing, even though her childhood wasn't exactly typical: Her father was a forensic pathologist, so his job was all about examining dead bodies. Other family members had survived concentration camps during the holocaust – and still bore the trauma.

As Oshman was growing up, corpses and pictures of dead bodies were not uncommon. But she talked to her parents and made peace with that. Childhood was not the issue: Oshman knew that there was something else behind her anxiety and depression. And yet, all therapists could do was push her back in time.

### **The key message here is: Jewish wisdom helped the author find answers to her ongoing anxiety and depression.**

Oshman grew up in a secular Jewish household, so it wasn't until later in life that she became familiar with lessons from the Torah and Jewish spirituality.

Her journey toward these time-honored concepts began when she was already an adult. One day, Oshman read the book *Man's Search For Meaning*, by Viktor E. Frankl. Frankl was a psychiatrist and a neurologist who'd survived Nazi death camps and used his experience to reach a deeper understanding of the human condition.

A significant part of Frankl's philosophy is what he calls *meaning*. In fact, he developed a form of psychotherapy called *logotherapy*, which stands for *therapy of meaning*. As Oshman researched it, she felt that she was now getting something other therapists couldn't give her. She was nearing real answers.

Shortly after reading Frankl's book, Oshman heard a talk given by Facebook executive, Lady Nicola Mendelsohn. Mendelsohn spoke about her main priorities in life. Those were – family, her four children, and her observance of Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest.

Oshman was amazed. Here was a top female executive who was, simultaneously, achieving professional success, embracing her role as a mother, and also observing the demands of her religion.

And then Oshman met Kate Miriam Loewenthal, a Jewish professor of psychology. When Oshman told her about her anxiety and depression, Loewenthal recommended taking a class in spiritual texts. It was Oshman's first step toward a new life.

### **Jewish wisdom teaches us to find our flame and uncover our purpose.**

At first, Oshman didn't know how lessons from the Torah could help her with anxiety and depression. But it wasn't long before she understood that teachings from Judaism's sacred book were both practical and helpful. Soon, Jewish wisdom was helping her to get closer to that meaning in life that Frankl had described.

### **The key message here: Jewish wisdom teaches us to find our flame and uncover our purpose.**

Let's start with *neshama*. The Torah uses this Hebrew word to explain how God breathed life into man. It's that intangible thing within us; that driving life force that is often referred to as a soul. But there is also something that can keep us apart from our soul, from *neshama*. That barrier – something called *kelipa* – can be money, fame, or even career ambition. It can obscure what's truly important, and what we're meant to be doing with our precious time on earth.

So, the Torah teaches that within each of us there's a flame that burns with the desire to fulfill our potential. That flame is the unique reason God breathed life into us. Unfortunately, the material world has many ways to lead us away from it.

This brings us to the next lesson – the practice of *bittul*. *Bittul* roughly translates to *nothingness* or *self-nullification*. It's a reminder that the world's not all about you. Quite a few lessons in the Torah are about letting go of your ego, and *bittul* is partly about that. It's also a way to remove those barriers that keep you away from your purpose.

The more you focus on your ego, the further you get from your true meaning. And that only makes you more anxious. This is why *bittul* is about both dissolving the ego and refocusing on community. It's a reminder that instead of thinking about how we can help ourselves, we should be thinking about how we can help others.

Practicing *bittul* can feel a bit like taking a self-assessment. If you want to try it, here are a few questions to get you started.

Think about your past and present. What gives your life the most meaning? What activities do you feel you're good at? And then, on the flip side, what thoughts, fears, or behaviors are unhelpful?

It may be difficult to consider these questions with the depth of reflection they deserve. But try and work through them because the answers could be transformative.

### ***Mistakes and brokenness are important paths to growth.***

There's an old song called *Gesher Tzar Me'od*. You can hear it wherever Jewish kids gather – in summer camp, or on a school bus. The title essentially means a *very narrow bridge*, and it's a metaphor for the road ahead of us in life.

The message of the song is this: though the path may be narrow, we shouldn't be afraid. We must move forward.

For the author, this was a big lesson to learn. Her life had been plagued by paralyzing fear and anxiety. But Jewish wisdom taught her how even a small first step could be life-changing.

We so often worry about making mistakes or getting hurt – but it's possible to learn to see things differently.

### ***The key message here is: Mistakes and brokenness are important paths to growth.***

There's a popular workplace motto at Facebook: "Fail harder." The execs at Facebook know that innovation doesn't happen by playing it safe. So the idea of not being afraid to fail is baked into the company culture.

The author experienced this firsthand when she received her first big project at Facebook. The stress and pressure of deadlines got to her, and it was all too apparent to her colleagues. She ended up giving orders to people rather than taking the time to talk things through. Ultimately, the project succeeded, but, deep

down inside, Oshman knew that it wasn't all rosy. As a leader, she'd failed.

Nevertheless, bosses congratulated Oshman for her first failure. The feedback was: take some time to reflect and learn from what happened. When you're ready, it'll be time for your next project. It's okay if you make mistakes in the future – but only as long as you're not repeating the same mistakes.

This approach helps to reduce workplace anxieties, and it's similar to the Jewish concept of *shvira*, or *brokenness*. As Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern explained, "There is nothing more complete than a broken heart."

As the author came to learn, the meaning behind this saying, and the entire Jewish concept of *shvira*, is that brokenness is not only an unavoidable part of life – it's an important part of growing. Maturity, wisdom, and strength all emerge through the cracks when we break.

No one enjoys feeling broken. But it's also nothing to fear.

### ***Learning to lead like a mensch is about giving space, as well as being positive and righteous.***

You don't have to be a CEO or military commander to be a leader. One of the most influential rabbis in Jewish history is Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He said, "everyone must be a leader."

All you need is something meaningful to contribute to the world – a cause that you want to champion. If you pursue this cause with bravery and honesty, that would make you a leader.

### ***The key message? Learning to lead like a mensch is about giving space, as well as being positive and righteous.***

One of the more mystical Jewish concepts is *tzimtzum*, which means *contraction* or *concealment*. The term comes from the idea of how God created the universe. He's said to have contracted His own presence in order to make room for his creation.

The author has learned from this concept too, especially in her leadership roles. She now believes that, sometimes, it's best to lead by stepping back. Making room for others is extremely important: people will only grow if you give them the room they need.

Contracting the space you occupy as an authority can also mean holding back your judgments and your ego. If you give others room, they'll feel more comfortable about expressing their feelings and, ultimately, showing the best work they're capable of.

But giving people breathing space does not mean withdrawing feedback. Here, too, Jewish wisdom can help. Especially useful is the concept of *tikkun* – a word that means to *repair* or *correct*. It's part of the tradition

which says you should always work to improve yourself and the world around you.

The author practices the *one percent feedback tool*. It's based on the idea that everyone is, generally, more or less 99 percent on point. So, if something needs adjusting, there's only one percent to discuss.

This approach doesn't just apply to the workplace. The author uses it at home, too; and her kids now see feedback as a positive thing. They have even asked, "What one percent can you give me?"

Ultimately, the goal is to lead like a *mensch*. A *mensch* is essentially another word for a good person, somebody who acts with honor and integrity. But not just that. A *mensch* acts on behalf of others. This should be an important quality of any leader. It's not about taking the glory and grabbing the spotlight. It's about helping others flourish.

### ***Parenting should be about instilling values, rather than asserting control.***

As any mother or father would tell you, being a parent is a lot like being a leader. Similar principles apply: giving space and guiding with wisdom.

Mothers are under a lot of pressure to be perfect. But it's really a fool's game, to strive for perfection in parenting. Instead, the main concern should be to offer care, support, and love.

King Solomon, a Jewish ruler from the 10th century BC, offered this advice: "Teach a child according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not turn away from it."

It's all about guiding your child, rather than forcing him or her down any particular path. The Torah teaches that, as a parent, you should be facilitating discovery. Your job is to give the kids everything they need to figure out who they are and what's meaningful to them.

### ***The key message here is: Parenting should be about instilling values, rather than asserting control.***

The Hebrew word for education, as used in the Torah, is *chinuch*. It's also about values, and this is where parents can really make a difference. Everyone would like their child to grow up to be a decent person. Whatever profession they choose, above all they should be a *mensch*. This means instilling the values of giving back to the community.

The author has four children, and she encourages them to do volunteer work. As she puts it, that's the Vitamin V for her kids.

All these tools – rooted in ancient Jewish wisdom – are now in the author's armory, both at work and at home. But to use them properly, you need to know another important overarching concept, and that is *teshuva*. This word means *repentance* or *return*, and

it's a fundamental principle, a key part of Yom Kippur. This is the most sacred day of Judaism. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, when people take stock of their lives and consider how they can improve themselves and their relationships.

*Teshuva* has no negative connotation – it's just a regular part of life. It's full of forgiveness and completely free of judgment.

All these principles have one goal; and that is, to return to our essence – the flame that provides our meaning and purpose. This idea of meaning has the potential to change lives. For the author, it certainly did just that.

### ***Final summary***

The key message in these blinks:

**The author doubted that religious teachings could help with her anxiety and depression, but she was happily mistaken. Her life changed when she understood ancient Jewish concepts that promote self-awareness, dissolving of the ego, and finding meaning and purpose in helping others. These ideas showed the author that she'd lost sight of her purpose, and was caught up in the ego-driven distractions of the modern material world. By learning and embracing her Jewish roots, she finally learned to focus on what's important.**

Actionable advice:

#### **Replace fear with action.**

Think back to a time when you took a leap of faith. This could be any small action where you weren't certain of the outcome. Did something bad happen? Did you learn something about yourself or others? And if things didn't work out, what insights did you gain from that experience? For all of us, there comes a time when we can't move forward without making that small leap into the unknown. It can be scary, but remind yourself that even if you do make a mistake, you'll continue to grow and learn. Ultimately, that's what moving forward in life is all about.

#### **Got feedback?**

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to [remember@blinkist.com](mailto:remember@blinkist.com) with *What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?* as the subject line and share your thoughts!