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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner on...

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OCD: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

[From "Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Parashat Ki Tisa 5768 – Translated by Rafael Blumberg]

Question: I am going crazy. I am always having doubts about whether I fulfilled mitzvot properly, so I do the same mitzvot over and over again. Maybe I didn't wash my hands properly for "netilat yadayim." Maybe I didn't have the proper intentions in prayer. Maybe I made an oath. Maybe my tefillin weren't placed properly on my head or arm. I can't be asking rabbis questions every second. My doubts are eating me up. What should I do?

Answer: You have a problem that is called OCD – obsessive-compulsive disorder. This is a problem that in varying degrees affects about 2% of the population. It is estimated that in Israel there are 140,000 sufferers, and the problem commonly begins from age 7. This problem reveals itself in various ways in both the spiritual and the secular realm, and there are various types.

- 1) Washing and cleaning – Such people bathe or wash their hands for hours, out of fear of dirt or stickiness, for example after touching a door handle, and they waste a lot of water soap and towels.
- 2) Checking and repeating – They say: perhaps I didn't do something well enough. Perhaps I didn't turn off the flame under the pot, or the gas spigot, or close the window. Perhaps I forgot to lock the door. Perhaps I didn't do my homework well enough.
- 3) Keeping order and straightening up – Everything has to be straight and symmetric, or placed perfectly parallel to the table.

4) Obsessive fears – They say: maybe I will run someone over while I drive. Maybe I have already run someone over. Maybe I trampled an infant while I was walking. Maybe I behaved incorrectly regarding some matter that is already in the past.

5) Religious Compulsiveness – They say: I didn't concentrate properly in my prayers or blessings. I didn't pronounce the words of the Shema correctly. I missed one word of Havdalah. When I ritually washed my hands, the water didn't penetrate all the creases in my hand. Meat and milk got mixed together. I made vows, orally or mentally, and I didn't fulfill them. There was an obstacle between my tefillin and my body. I didn't wash up properly after using the facilities. I thought forbidden, idolatrous thoughts. I (a woman) didn't remove a particular speck of dirt from my body before immersing ritually.

The same obsessive compulsive behavioral syndrome besets people who are entirely normal in other realms. For them, it is not classified as an emotional problem but as a sort of "emotional hiccup". Even so, it is very aggravating and oppressive, whether it takes on religious or other garb. For example, intellectually a person may know very well that his hands are clean. Even so, he will wash them over and over. He knows full-well that he turned off the light in the room and it is superfluous to check again, but he will still go back to check. This is a compulsion that it is hard to control. If the person with such problems does not humor them, he feels anxiety. He therefore performs all his actions as a rigid ritual. Moreover, he will not succeed in ridding himself of various obsessive thoughts about the past, even though he preoccupies himself with them over and over. The goal of compulsive behavior is to rid himself of his anxiety. All the same, the problem is not solved completely. In light cases, a person succeeds in saving himself alone and he adopts for himself emotional intimacy with that unpleasant situation. Yet in most cases there is a need for professional help.

In the case of religious compulsion, one should turn to a rabbi regarding any doubt that arises and not be embarrassed. Over time the doubts will diminish. Yet even in more serious cases in which one must get advice from a psychologist, one should seek out a religious psychologist who well understands what the issues are, and one should also approach a rabbi to receive rulings. I am referring to decisive, definitive rulings, without negotiations and reasoning that is liable to complicate matters all the more. In other words, such a person should simultaneously approach a psychiatrist who will prescribe special drugs to alleviate the problem. Under such circumstances, we must fulfill "Acquire for oneself a rabbinic authority and rid oneself of doubt" (Pirkei Avot 1:16). One should submit to rabbinic authority with innocence, without questions or debate.

All the same, here are several general directions that will be beneficial.

1) Prayer – It is true that we have to recite the Shema with intent to fulfill a mitzvah, but in practice there is no problem, for everything recited within the order of prayer is considered to be with proper intent even if one did not have this intent explicitly (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 60:4; Mishnah Berurah 7-10). Likewise, regarding the first verse of the Shema, the Rabbis clarify that the requirement to undertake the yoke of G-d's sovereignty is a matter of your agreeing to this within, and such agreement is always there. Furthermore, as far as proper pronunciation of the words and proper intent throughout the entire Shema, one must not go overboard either, for the Rabbis ruled, "If one recited the Shema while dozing, he fulfilled his obligation," and that person only has to be fully woken for the first verse (ibid. 63:5). Surely a dozing person is not exceptionally careful about all of these forms of intent. And altogether, Rashba ruled that even someone who doesn't know how to concentrate properly and mistakenly switches one word for another will receive reward for his general intent in praying to G-d. In general, of the great masses of the House of Israel, most did not understand Hebrew in the Exile (Responsa Rashba 1:427). Obviously, we mustn't learn from all the preceding to make light of prayer. Quite the contrary, a person must make his utmost effort in prayer. As with all character improvement, we have to pull ourselves towards the opposite extreme. We say to the person who prays in a slovenly manner: "Make an effort!" To the person whose efforts at concentration are obsessive we say, "Lighten up!" After all, we see that G-d-fearing people and Torah scholars do not pray for hours on end, and there is no call for you to be more saintly than they. Likewise, chazzanim pray at a regular pace and do not stop every second. So the conventional wisdom is this: Pray normally, like everyone else – in other words, like serious, G-d-fearing people. Don't linger and don't go back for fear that you didn't concentrate properly. Rather, just move on. Be like a combat officer who runs with his soldiers amidst enemy fire, and even if one of his soldiers falls, he does not stop his force and go back. Rather, he continues to run forward. You should do the same. Always move forward without stopping. You can see for yourself that the Rabbis have ruled that nowadays we don't go back due to lack of proper intent, but we continue on (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 101).

2) Tefillin – Certainly one has to place his head-tefillin in the right place, yet as Rav Chaim of Sanz ruled, there is no obligation to make precise measurements with a mirror since there is room on the head for two sets of tefillin, both lengthwise and widthwise. (Shut Divrei Chaim 2:6).

3) Washing up before mikva – The same applies to washing oneself in preparation for ritually immersing. Certainly we must prepare properly, yet we mustn't be overly stressed about this either beforehand or afterwards. If a minority of the body is covered by substances that keeps the water from touching it, and the woman does not mind those substances being there, after the fact those substances do not invalidate the immersion. After one washes, one is considered clean for a long time. For example, when a woman has to immerse on Saturday night when Thursday and Friday were Rosh Hashanah, she can bathe on Wednesday, and that bath is considered valid three days later on Saturday night. Hence a woman need not invest more time than pious women normally invest in this.

4) Strictures – In general, don't be strict about anything. The strictures weren't written for you. You are tough enough on yourself as it is. Remember what Ramban said: "It isn't good for a person to be too strict, focusing on uncertainties... For if you do that there is no end to it... One shouldn't get himself caught up in endless strictures" (Ramban, end of Hilchot Niddah).

5) "Everything is permissible to you!" – If you don't succeed in freeing yourself from your bind, even with the aid of all the previous advice, and the aid of a G-d-fearing psychologist with expertise in the obsessive-compulsive mindset, and with the help of "seeking out a rabbi", then in that extreme case, you are categorized as "annus" – compelled by outside forces – and you can refrain entirely from prayer. So ruled Ha-Gaon Rav Chaim Kanievsky and the Steipler Gaon in the name of the Chazon Ish. "They are entirely exempt from the Shema and the Shemoneh Esreh, and there is no need for them to recite the Shema or the Shemoneh Esreh at all, until they resume the conventional, pleasant pathway and are capable of observing mitzvot like anyone else. And this applies if they are perfectly intelligent people, evincing wisdom in all their other affairs" (Article: "Yira Tehora" [Pure Fear], published by "Ha-Mosad Le-Idud Limud Torah", page 19). And Ha-Gaon Rav Eliezer Mann Shach said, "Be aware that in everything involving the obsessive-compulsive, everything is permissible, until they accustom themselves to fulfilling mitzvot in the normal way." And the same was written by Ha-Gaon HRav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (ibid., p. 20). Of such matters we are commanded, "Do as they tell you" (Devarim 17:10).

We must be strong and courageous in our service of G-d, each person in accordance with the trials he faces (Most of the halachic information comes from the article mentioned at the end. Most of the psychological information comes from Dr. Avraham ben Yochanan).