

Shayna Goldberg

What
do you
really
want?

TRUST AND FEAR
IN DECISION MAKING
AT LIFE'S CROSSROADS
AND IN EVERYDAY LIVING

Maggid Books

*What Do You Really Want?
Trust and Fear in Decision Making
at Life's Crossroads and in Everyday Living*

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To our next generations,

*Dalya, Cheli, Liad, Netanel,
Ronya, Jack, Benny, and Boaz*

*May you continue to carry the torch of Torah
and be the next link in the eternal chain*

Abba and Mommy

Laad – Jewish Leadership Fund



Dedicated in loving memory of

Mayer Penstein

מאיר יוסף בן אברהם ויתה

Devoted husband, father, and grandfather

Abba showed us by example how to lead lives guided by Torah in the modern world. He made his values and convictions perfectly clear and instilled them in his children and grandchildren, all while giving us the strength and confidence to make decisions on our own. He taught us that when approached from a Torah perspective, even life's most difficult challenges become experiences through which we can learn and grow. We miss him and his guidance more every day, but hope to live up to his example.

Mina Penstein

*Rivkie & Lance Hirt Chani & JJ Hornbluss
Shulamit & Avi Penstein Shoshana & Avi Mizrachi
and families*

In honor of
Judah and Shayna Goldberg
and all their tireless work on behalf of Torah and Am Yisrael.
Donny and Arielle Rosenberg



In loving memory of our fathers and Zadia and Saba,
Rabbi Jonas Hochman z"l
Noé Gidali z"l
Barbara and Simcha Hochman,
David and Ayelet Ellenbogen, and Ariel and Amalia Hochman



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Ayala Schnaidman Glass
Malka Schnaidman
who have all benefited from Shayna's insights and wisdom.
Menachem and Rena Schnaidman

*We are honored to play a role
in making Shayna's wisdom accessible to young and old alike.
May she continue to lead us all in personal and spiritual growth.*

Jordana and Kalman Schoor and family



לעלוי נשמת
הרב אברהם יואל בן פנחס



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and

Barbara and Manfred a”h Joseph

*who taught us the importance of supporting Torah education
for our children and grandchildren and who demonstrated and modeled
for us a steadfast commitment and unwavering dedication
to the continuity of our Mesorah.*

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for teaching and continuously guiding our daughters
who were her students at Migdal Oz, and by extension our entire family.*

With much gratitude.

Jennifer and David Ottensoser

Lily (2015)

Molly (2018)



*Dedicated by Dassi and Joey Silverman
in honor of Shayna Goldberg
for being a tremendous role model to our daughter.
May you continue to spiritually inspire young women
for many years to come.*



*In recognition of Shayna Goldberg's impactful work
with the women of Migdal Oz,
and in honor of her mother, Abby Lerner,
for her work on behalf of geirei tzedek and so many others in need.*

Robin and Joshua Rochlin



*In recognition of and appreciation for
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for her extraordinary devotion, tireless dedication
and unwavering commitment to her students,
the schools in which she has taught
and the communities in which she has lived.*

*Her outstanding character and integrity is an inspiration and example
for all who value and cherish living by Torah ideals.*

מחיל אל חיל!

Rivi and Avi Katz

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Preface

How This Book Came About and for Whom It Is Intended

When I decided to become a teacher, I imagined the classes that I would prepare, the skills that I would attempt to help students develop, the content that I would discuss, and the lifestyle that I would model. Already at the time, I anticipated that forming deep and meaningful relationships with students would be a fulfilling and significant part of the job for me – something that would hopefully develop naturally along the way. Eighteen years later, I can say with certainty that the relationships that I have been privileged to cultivate with so many students have been the most rewarding part of my career. Many of them have extended well beyond these students' years in the classroom and have evolved into mutual friendships, as these young women have matured into the finest of adults.

Admittedly, I didn't realize early on what these relationships would entail and the vast amount of time that would be spent on

and invested in personal conversations. While these conversations span lots of different topics and issues, a certain pattern emerged. I began to take note of how many of them centered around big decisions that had to be made by someone who was feeling confused and was in search of direction and advice during the decision-making process.

Earlier in my career, these conversations would terrify me. I was not sure what my role was. I certainly did not want to make a decision for someone; I did not want that responsibility. More importantly, I believe deeply in personal autonomy and in each individual charting his or her own life course. Acute awareness of these two issues led me to naturally shy away from trying to directly influence people's decisions, and instead, toward guiding them to figure out what they wanted for themselves.

In doing so, I found myself thinking about what constitutes a good decision, as well as reflecting on decisions that my husband and I made for ourselves. In retrospect, there seemed to be some key components that had helped us figure out what we wanted when we reached a crossroads and had to make a significant decision. For us, these components have often provided insight into how to proceed, and, over time, I have found myself sharing them in conversations with students and peers. In these pages I will do my best to describe the components that we have found to be helpful in our lives and in the lives of others.

Many of our major life decisions happen in our earlier years, as we decide where to study, what career to pursue, and with whom we want to build a life. They may also include questions such as where to settle down, when to start a family, and how many children to have. In this sense, this book focuses on a population most commonly between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, which often finds itself in the throes of weighty decisions at many different crucial intersections of life. A lot of the examples given throughout the book relate most directly to the first half of that age bracket,

as developing trust in our ability to make good decisions during those early adult years is especially important.

However, I believe the relevance of this book is by no means limited to a younger age group. There are major decisions that continue to challenge us in middle age and beyond. These might include thoughts about a possible career change, a troubled marriage, a looming retirement, or relationships with grown children and grandchildren. There are also ongoing decisions that we all face throughout our lifetimes with regard to how we spend our money or use our time, when professional counseling should be pursued, how we interact with family members, and what attitude toward religious observance we want for ourselves.

My hope is that this book can be helpful, in different ways, for individuals at any stage of life. For a younger cohort, it provides concrete tools for those on the brink of major decisions who might feel stuck about how to proceed. For someone who has already made many of life's big decisions, it may help them articulate instincts and intuitions, positive and negative, that are often difficult to verbalize. The language of this book may enable some readers to better understand why they look back on some decisions with regret or resentment, regardless of the consequences, while other decisions have left them feeling empowered and energized. These insights can provide clarity that not only helps us interpret our past but also allows for better understanding and self-awareness in the future.

Finally, this book is intended to be a resource for anyone counseling others who need to make decisions. Teachers, administrators, therapists, counselors, friends, spouses, and, perhaps most significantly, parents and grandparents are often consulted and asked to weigh in and share thoughts and guidance with students, clients, campers, children, and grandchildren who seek their advice on some significant and important decision. Beyond specific chapters about parenting and educating with trust, case

scenarios (either fictionalized or shared with permission, with names changed) that cover a spectrum of life situations and decisions may shed light on the different factors and fears that often arise as someone contemplates what he or she wants. Understanding these factors more deeply and thinking about them from the inside may enable us to better guide and direct another toward a good decision.

Given all that, I will reiterate that this is not an academic or scholarly work, but rather a presentation of ideas that reflect only my own thoughts and experiences about elements that I have found to be helpful in decision making. As the main theme of this book is developing trust in one's intuition, I would encourage anyone for whom this book does not resonate to follow their own instincts and search for and rely upon alternative approaches that speak to and work for them. At the same time, it is my hope that this book can be informative and helpful in empowering each of us to make our own decisions from a place of trust, rather than fear, and that it provides tools to help us guide others to do so as well.

Acknowledgments

It was my husband, Judah, who first introduced me to the language of trust and fear when we were dating. From that time on, we found ourselves referencing it often and thinking about why trust and fear are, indeed, often dichotomous emotions. As we began our journey through life together, it became a cornerstone of our educational approach, regarding both our children and our students. Over the years, we have had many conversations about its implications in our own lives and in the lives of others.

It was also Judah who initially raised the idea of my writing this book and who continued to encourage me over the last several years to see it through. While the book may be written in my voice and illustrate many of the interactions I have had during years of teaching and mentoring, in reality it is a joint project that Judah has been heavily invested in throughout. Judah is always there to support me in everything I do, and there is no piece of writing that I ever publish without him reading it over, sharpening it, and improving it in numerous ways. His patience and attention to detail far exceed mine, and his ability to find just the right way to express a complicated thought always impresses me. Both the content of this book and its presentation have been influenced and shaped by his thoughtfulness, precision, emotional intelligence, dedication,

humility, and insight. His many hours of editing were a labor of love, and his touch can be felt in every sentence of the book. I feel blessed to have a partner in life whom I trust so deeply. I genuinely feel that *sheli shelo* – with regard to this book and everything else I am involved with in life. Our most meaningful and significant endeavor together has been raising our precious children: Shmuel, Elyashiv, Akiva, Netanel, and Tzofiya. When I look at them and I see how they reflect Judah's values, intelligence, passion, commitment, and sensitivity, I feel for all of us that *ashreinu ma tov helkeinu*.

I am grateful to the many friends, mentors, students, and relatives who read drafts of this book and offered me their feedback. Their insights, critiques, and perspective helped refine the content in numerous ways.

From the moment I sought his professional opinion, Reuven Ziegler, editorial director at Koren Publishers Jerusalem, provided me with encouragement and direction. His initial enthusiasm enabled me to imagine that my vision for this book could be realized and gave me the strength to invest my all into developing the manuscript.

My thanks also to Matthew Miller, publisher of Koren, and the multiple staff members of Maggid Books with whom I have had the pleasure of working. I could not have asked for a better editor than Caryn Meltz, who oversaw every detail of this project from beginning to end. I am indebted to Tani Bayer for her creativity and patience in designing the beautiful cover. It has also been truly wonderful to work with Aryeh Grossman, Debbie Ismailoff, and Dvora Rhein. Each of these individuals excels in their professional roles and are the finest of people to engage with personally.

I am overwhelmed by the generosity of the couples who helped make the publication of this volume possible. Many of them I first met when I was privileged to teach their incredible daughters in Maayanot Yeshiva High School in Teaneck, New Jersey, or the Stella K. Abraham Beit Midrash for Women of Yeshivat Har Etzion (Migdal Oz) – or both! Others are friends with whom

I have collaborated in the pursuit of shared ideals and visions. All of them are dear to me, and I am grateful for their moral and financial support.

Dr. David Pelcovitz, a renowned psychologist whose reputation precedes him, is also a close family friend, and I feel blessed that he read an early version of this book and so graciously shared with me ways to give more context to its content. His support for and belief in the project meant a lot to me and gave me the confidence to forge ahead with it, even during some of the more challenging moments.

Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, an esteemed lecturer and social worker, offered pointed critique and insight which allowed me to better formulate whom the book is meant for, what it can offer, and what its limitations are. I am so appreciative that she took the time to read through an early draft and offer her feedback.

My cousins Dr. Jennie Goldstein, a well-known psychiatrist; Bracha Krohn, a master educator; and Aliza Shapiro, a talented social worker, all read the book thoroughly and used their expertise and experience to suggest little tweaks, as well as more significant additions and reformulations that enhanced the content, relatability, and presentation of the manuscript. I feel so grateful to have family members who are also such wonderful friends and whom I respect so much.

My nieces, nephews, and first cousins' children responded with delight to my requests to read the manuscript, and their comments ensured that the book would be relevant to and resonate with young adults. A special thank-you to Ruthie and Ephraim Goldstein and Rachelli Pearl, whose specific recommendations made a real difference in the formulation of several sections of the book.

I am lucky to share deep friendships with multiple talented and experienced educators whose encouragement and input were invaluable for this project. Leora Bednarsh took a particular interest in the topic of the book and helped push me to share these ideas in writing. Leora happily read a few different drafts

and offered suggestions that made a significant contribution to the final product.

Dena Rock encouraged me to better develop some of the crucial sections of the book. Her questions prodded me to think more carefully about how to describe some of the concepts and present them more clearly.

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Laurie Novick read a final draft of the book and offered some concrete suggestions for how to both sharpen and flesh out various ideas. Laurie's attention to detail and her years of teaching and writing made her comments particularly valuable and impactful.

Rachel and Aminadav Grossman are former students who have become colleagues and the dearest of friends. I am grateful that they each took the time to read the book and share with me their thoughts. It has been many years now that we have been discussing these themes together, and these candid conversations have been very meaningful to me and influenced the development of the ideas presented here.

Indeed, this book is a product of numerous conversations with many students over the last eighteen years. I have been blessed to teach the finest young adults, who are thoughtful, insightful, ambitious, and committed. They have pushed me hard with their questions and have forced me to think carefully and with nuance about issues in education. It is through working with them and being privy to their thoughts, struggles, and aspirations that the approach in this book has been explored, tested, and honed in real life in a spectrum of circumstances. The relationships that I have been privileged to develop with so many special and extraordinary young women are among the most cherished in my life. Although I could not mention each of you by name, I wrote this book with

you in mind, as your lives and your decisions have provided me with enormous personal inspiration.

I am grateful to the SKA Beit Midrash for Women of Yeshivat Har Etzion (Migdal Oz) and its *rosh beit midrash*, Rabbanit Esti Rozenberg, for taking a risk, just ahead of my aliya, and inviting me to play a part in its educational mission and vision. The *beit midrash* is a place that encourages, believes in, and thrives on a trust-based educational philosophy, and I feel fortunate to be part of its vibrant and rich spiritual community.

Racheli Schmell has been a partner, colleague, and among the closest of friends for almost ten years. Beyond the day-to-day work that we do together in the *beit midrash* of Migdal Oz, we share an incredible bond of understanding and mutual respect. Most of the ideas in the book I have discussed and processed with Racheli, and her emotional intelligence, sensitivity, love, and support have been guiding forces in my own personal and professional development since we made aliya.

One of the most significant blessings of meeting Judah was becoming part of the Goldberg family. From the early days of our marriage, my siblings-in-law, Daniella and Joseph Hellerstein and Rabbi Efrem and Yocheved Goldberg, have been true confidants and friends. We have the best time together, laughing and enjoying each other's company, both on our own and with all our terrific and entertaining children. Most meaningfully, they are always incredibly supportive and have been there for us with love and dedication in both wonderful and difficult times.

My in-laws, Murray and Basheva Goldberg, shower me with their love and attention and are exceedingly proud and supportive of the various projects and initiatives in which I take part. I have learned so much from their Shabbat table, their *hakhnasat orhim*, their *hesed* and *tzedaka*, and their never-ending devotion to every member of their immediate and extended family. May they be blessed with many more healthy and happy years together.

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My three sisters, Hudi Elsant, Havi Bitter, and Sefi Hefter, have always been my closest friends. From the time we were little girls and had weekly Friday night sleepovers, we have confided in each other about everything and have been through it all together. My sisters are my greatest cheerleaders and my most honest critics. This book has benefited enormously from their careful reads and reflections upon it. They shared with me both small and major recommendations that greatly enhanced the content. I am in awe of each of my sisters and the amazing wives, mothers, and professionals that they are. I am boundlessly grateful for the depth of the relationships that I share with each of them and that Judah and I share as a couple with my sisters and brothers-in-law, Nachman, Elichai, and Jonathan, and their precious children.

My parents, Rabbi Yaacov and Abby Lerner, may not have used the formulation “trust and fear” when they raised my sisters and me, but everything in our upbringing reflected the incredible trust that my parents have in Hashem, in the inherent goodness of people, and in us, their children. They taught us to trust ourselves and our instincts and to rely heavily on our intuition. They raised us to have self-confidence in who we are and what we believe and to be strong and independent thinkers. It is they who always encouraged me to think about “What do you really want?” and it this underlying and enveloping spirit that I hope I am able to bring to life and concretize in this book.

As this project reaches completion, I am overflowing with gratitude to the *Ribbono shel Olam* for the opportunities He has presented me with over the course of my life. I daven that Judah and I, along with our children, will always have the wisdom to use the *berakhot* He has bestowed upon us in meaningful and significant ways.

Introduction

“And the Main Thing Is to Have No Fear at All”

When I was very little, I learned a song to the well-known words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov: *Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar meod*, “The whole wide world is a very narrow bridge.” These words illustrate the harsh reality that sometimes we feel and experience “the whole wide world” as an overwhelming, dangerous, precarious, and risky place to live. In this epigram, fear is acknowledged directly and not denied. And yet, Rabbi Nachman ends the quote by reminding us that *veha’ikkar lo lefahed klal*, “the main thing is to have no fear at all.” Fear, although natural and normal, will often inhibit us from accomplishing our goals. Fear can stand in the way of what we know to be true and necessary. Fear can stop us from doing what we feel we want to do and should do.

Back when we were a newly married couple – and faced with lots of decisions – my husband recalled an article from an old *Jewish Action* magazine (Summer 1989) by Dr. Mordechai Breuer,

where he discusses the educational philosophy of his great-grandfather, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. There was one line that stood out for my husband and which led to many conversations about the kind of teachers and parents we hoped to become: “In education let ourselves be guided by trust and truth, not by fear” (p. 8).

Rabbi Hirsch believed that the opposite of fear is trust. Trust, however, unlike fear, is unfortunately not something we always feel instinctively. Fear is naturally the more powerful and dominant emotion, perhaps because at times it serves the important role of protecting us, both emotionally and physically. If something is even the slightest bit threatening to us, we feel that fear and are programmed to react. Sometimes, though, we are overly sensitive to our fears, and we can resort to them too quickly and let them dominate too easily. When this happens, we can find ourselves overwhelmed, depressed, and incapable of moving forward. When we are guided by trust, on the other hand, it is incredibly empowering and motivating.

In my teaching, I have tried to emphasize these concepts and, in doing so, have come to realize how many people struggle to develop trust in themselves. This challenge seems to confront today’s younger generation in particular, and there may be specific reasons why.

Much research has been done over the last couple of decades regarding changing trends in our society that affect our ability to trust ourselves and our choices. The research suggests that it has become harder for young people to confidently rely on their instincts. Instead, they often become paralyzed as they contemplate how to advance.

One factor is that we live in a world that inundates us with endless options, and narrowing them down to figure out what we want can be a harrowing task. Moreover, the more choices we have before us, the less satisfied we often feel with our decisions. In his 2004 book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*,

Dr. Barry Schwartz describes how we have not seemed to benefit psychologically from the greater freedom and autonomy that is available. It becomes especially difficult to own, take responsibility for, and be happy with our choices when we see so many alternative options surrounding us.

Furthermore, our contemporary pluralistic environment teaches us to accept and embrace a wide range of different ideas and approaches. This ethic of tolerance and respect, especially dominant in universities and certainly laudable in many ways, can sometimes leave us feeling hesitant to make even the most basic decisions when we feel that they might include inherent judgments about the options we are turning down. What might it say about me and my opinions if I make this specific choice and not another one? What does it mean regarding how I think about others who have made that choice? In a 2014 *New York Times* essay, “My So-Called Opinions,” Zachary Fine, then a junior at New York University, raised this issue when he asked: “How does the ethos of pluralism inside universities impinge on each student’s ability to make qualitative judgments outside of the classroom, in spaces of work, play, politics, or even love?”

Other studies document evolving changes in parenting and their effects on children’s decision-making abilities. Over time, we have moved from a more authoritarian form of parenting, where “father knows best” and would sometimes harshly discipline in order to instill values, clear standards, and obedience in his children, to a style of parenting that is much more relaxed and permissive – sometimes to the point where the parent struggles to assert authority and the child is less certain about what is wanted from him.

In addition, there has been an increasing trend to hover over children and to shield them from encountering obstacles and challenges as they grow up. In 1990, Foster Cline and Jim Fay in their book, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, coined the term “helicopter parents” to describe parents who oversee every aspect

of their children's lives in whatever way they can to ensure their children's success at school, at camp, in social situations, and even at work. While this style of parenting may yield more immediate, quantifiable results, children may never develop the instincts to make their own good decisions or fend for themselves.

More recently, in a 2019 *New York Times* essay, "How Parents Are Robbing Their Children of Adulthood," Claire Cain Miller and Jonah Engel Bromwich used the term "snowplow parent" to describe a parent who proactively tries to make sure that a child never encounters pain, difficulty, or failure. This approach appears to be rooted in fears of potential negative consequences for children who are exposed to hardship. Ironically, however, children of snowplow parents are often less resilient and have trouble dealing with frustration and solving problems independently. They can experience greater struggles developing the maturity and confidence needed to trust themselves and to make good decisions on their own. Moreover, in the long run, fear will inevitably play a large role in decision-making when trust in oneself is lacking.

In summary, while developing self-confidence has never been simple, the challenge has been magnified by an abundance of choice, an emphasis on pluralism, and current trends in parenting. The need to educate toward and encourage trust has never been greater.

This book explores a range of situations in which I have encountered the benefits of a "trust" approach to decision making. In my experience, when people are taught to trust themselves and their deepest and truest instincts, as well as to trust the world around them, they almost always make better decisions and end up happier and more satisfied and fulfilled as a result. The "trust versus fear" dichotomy is one that echoes throughout every area of life. In my own life experience and as a parent and educator, I have seen the effects that employing trust over fear can have, and I am hopeful that readers of this book may benefit similarly as well.

PART I

The Role of Trust in Personal Decision Making

Chapter 1

Common Fears in Decision Making

Throughout life, we are faced with a myriad of decisions. There are the big decisions that will affect the trajectory of our lives, such as where to study, whom to marry, what career to pursue, and where to live; and there are small ones, such as how to spend the day, what clothing to wear to a job interview, whom to invite as company for Shabbat lunch, or what to make for dinner. Any decision can be an unpleasant experience if we find ourselves doubting the way that we reached our conclusions. Wouldn't it be wonderful, then, if we could trust ourselves to make good decisions?

Before we can discuss how to trust ourselves and what elements might contribute to good decisions, we need to first examine some of our most common fears and explore how they can often get in the way of making the best possible decisions. When decisions are motivated from a place of fear, it becomes much more difficult to take responsibility for them – especially when

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the outcome is not the one we hoped for. There can be resentment, frustration, and even anger at the situation that we never really desired and only found ourselves confronting because we made a decision from a place of fear rather than following our intuitive sense of what we wanted. That resulting anger with ourselves and others leaves us less able to own the decisions we make and to move forward in a positive and healthy way.

In addition to concrete, narrow fears that stem from specific concerns about the options that face us, there are some broader, underlying fears that can often get in the way of making good decisions. Presented here are a few of the most common ones, which can manifest themselves in a variety of ways at different points in life.

OUR SELF-PERCEPTION/IMAGE WILL BE AFFECTED

We each have our own narrative surrounding how we think of ourselves and how we make sense of our personal stories. Based on that narrative, we create a framework that can heavily influence the way that we approach our decisions.

Bracha: Overachiever

Bracha, a medical student, had always been an overachiever who pushed herself hard and was often overworked and stressed as a result. When she began to date, most young men that she met were of a similar nature. When Hillel was suggested to her by a good friend, she was taken aback and even offended. Hillel was known to be a wonderful person, but he was a fifth-grade teacher in a local day school. Bracha could not even imagine beginning a relationship with someone who she rashly assumed had little professional ambition. "I'm the kind of person who of course is going to marry someone who is a serious intellectual. That's so defining as to who I am," she thought to herself. "How could anyone even think that Hillel could be right for me?"

Our preconceived notions of ourselves play a strong role in dictating what options we are willing to consider:

“Of course, someone like me who loves Israel so much has to make aliya.”

“I am the kind of person who is destined to have a high-powered job.”

“I always know what I want. If I’ve been dating her for a few months and I’m still not sure, she must not be the one.”

“I am independent and strong. There is no way I would benefit from therapy.”

But have we stopped for a minute to give ourselves room to think?

Do you actually want to make aliya?

Do you want to go into that specific profession?

Do you really want to break up with her?

Do you want to work through this difficulty completely on your own?

Who decides what is appropriate and not appropriate for us? Shouldn’t we decide for ourselves in the moment and not be boxed in by how we self-identified a year or two ago, or even last week? Don’t we want to leave room for what we feel, deep inside, might be right for us right now, even if it somehow does not jive 100 percent with the picture we have constructed of ourselves?

Sam: Passionate Zionist

From the time he was in high school, Sam knew that he wanted to make aliya. When it came time to choose a yeshiva in Israel, he specifically chose a hesder yeshiva, where it was not uncommon for American students who come to study for a year or two to then make aliya and join the Israeli program. After making aliya and being drafted into the Israeli army with his yeshiva friends, Sam found himself deliberating over whether to complete his service after fifteen months as scheduled or whether he should stay on and enroll in an officers’ training course.

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For as long as he could remember, Sam had been a passionate Zionist who was committed to giving his most to his precious country. He believed that it was important to serve in any way he could. He had even successfully convinced some of his friends who were wavering that they should make aliya and join the army. Didn't that mean that there was no other choice for him but to become an officer?

In conversation with Sam, it became clear that although he thought that continuing in the army was intrinsic to what it means to be a true Zionist, he did not actually want to give more of his time. His army experience was challenging – physically, emotionally, and religiously. He was happy that he had enlisted and served, but he was ready to move on and head back to civilian life. As soon as Sam understood that not becoming an officer did not necessarily mean that he cared less about Israel or that he was weak and was just choosing the more comfortable option, he was able to make the decision that was best for his overall situation.

Other people's concept of who we are can also influence our self-perception and affect our decision making.

Noam: Major League Player

Noam was a bright high school senior who did well in school and took his religious life seriously. In thinking about what yeshiva he wanted to attend in Israel, he felt torn between an established, well-known institution that for years had attracted motivated young men like himself, and a new, much smaller yeshiva that offered more of the kind of learning he enjoyed and wanted to pursue. When he shared his dilemma with his teachers, one after the other would respond with various retorts: "But you are a major league player; you belong in a major league school!" "How can someone like you even consider that yeshiva?" After hearing this so many times, Noam was left feeling that if he was going to be true to who he was, he had only one option, which was to attend the bigger and more established yeshiva, even though his heart was pulling him in the other direction.

Noam enrolled in the larger yeshiva and regretted his decision throughout his time spent there and beyond. He has lingering resentment toward his teachers, who never stopped to really listen to him and hear what he was saying, and he harbors anger and frustration toward himself for not trusting his own instincts.

WHAT OTHERS WILL THINK

What others think of us not only influences our self-image but can also sway our decisions in one way or another, even when we know that it is a mistake to let that happen.

Daniel: Settling?

Daniel had been dating Esther for a while and was very happy whenever they spent time together. Esther was caring, sensitive, understanding, and an all-around wonderful person. But he knew that his friends and family thought he could do better and that he was settling for the first girl he felt good about. Daniel didn't think so. He felt fairly confident that he and Esther had built a beautiful relationship and would continue to do so. He was also mature enough to realize that as soon as the week of sheva berakhot was over, life would go back to routine and no one would care anymore about the new couple. All that would matter, at that point, would be their own happiness. In fact, he knew that his friend Mark, who had married "a major catch," was miserable in his day-to-day life with her. And yet, Daniel was still struggling to move forward, as he dreaded the subdued reactions that he would have to endure after they announced their engagement.

Karen and Aryeh: Irresponsible?

Karen and Aryeh were a young married couple who were both still in school. Most of their married friends were open about the fact that they were using birth control and would continue to do so for some time until life had settled down and it made more sense to consider having a baby. Karen and Aryeh had discussed birth control when they were dating and

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had come to the conclusion that they both felt ready to have children. While school was taxing, they were used to juggling a lot in their lives, and they also both worked and made enough money to be able to support a baby. After much thought and conversation, they knew that this is what they wanted. Having a baby did not scare them; they felt ready to be parents. But they were nervous about how everyone around them would react. They were pretty sure that their friends would think they were crazy and that their parents would think of them as irresponsible.

Gila and Aaron: Traitors?

Gila and Aaron lived in a community where most couples in their close-knit circle of friends sent their children to the same elementary school. They and many of their friends were active members of the board and PTA. Gila and Aaron had happily sent their oldest three children to the school, and they had been pleased both with the education and the overall experience. But their fourth child, who would be entering first grade in the fall, had some unique learning needs, and Gila and Aaron had not felt satisfied with how the school had addressed them in pre-K and kindergarten. They knew that another local school was known for having a wonderful resource room and for providing exceptional resources for children with unique needs. They began deliberating if they should switch their son out of his current school and enroll him there instead. They both felt that would be best for him, but they were consumed by worry over how their friends would view their decision and if it would be seen as a betrayal of the school on whose behalf they had all worked so hard.

Should these types of concerns influence our decisions when we feel confident about what we want?

IS THIS NORMAL?

People like to think of themselves as mainstream and “normal.” We like our reactions and behaviors to fit within accepted societal norms, and we judge ourselves by whether what we are experiencing, thinking, and feeling are “normal,” by which we mean typical,

expected, and accepted by people similar to ourselves. “Feeling normal” gives us a sense of relief that we are OK. It allows us to be confident that what we are experiencing is par for the course. If we don’t feel that way, we may fear that something is wrong, and that can affect our decision making.

Hannah: Unfazed, Until...

Hannah hung up the phone feeling shaken. Her best friend Maya’s husband had to travel for business for a week, and Maya had just confided in her about how awful it was to be apart from him. She sounded absolutely distraught. A few weeks earlier, though, Hannah’s husband had to return to the Israeli army for two weeks. While it had been tough and she had missed him, she had made it through OK and had found other ways to busy herself and to use her time productively. Now she was plagued with doubts about her relationship. Was it normal that she had managed their time apart decently? What did it mean that she had not been distraught the way Maya was? What did it say about her marriage?

We never really know what is going on in other people’s lives. Every individual both processes and expresses emotions differently. While Hannah should be honest with herself about why she is so disturbed by Maya’s comments, Hannah should not judge her own relationship by what she interprets to be normal based on Maya. In this situation, the concern that she is “not normal” can lead her to come to conclusions and make decisions that she does not really want.

Sometimes the opposite can occur. The very fact that we are feeling normal can stop us from trusting our instincts.

Dina: First-Time Mother

Dina was a first-time mother. She loved her baby dearly and could not get over how intense her feelings were for him. When she was home with him, she spent a lot of time holding, playing with, and snuggling

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with him. The older he got, the cuter he was. He was playful, interactive, and all-around adorable. Lately, though, something felt off to her. He didn't seem to be as active as usual, and his movements seemed heavier and more laden with difficulty. When she asked her mother about it, her mother brushed it off and told Dina that she had always been a worrier. Her friends, who had kids of similar age, told her that it was normal for children to go through different phases and that nothing she was describing seemed too worrying. Even the pediatrician didn't seem concerned; but Dina was not certain they were right. She felt that they had been at the pediatrician on a better day and that the doctor had not seen the baby at his worst.

Dina's gut told her that she should take her baby to a specialist, but she was afraid of what she would find out and have to deal with. Most of all, she was scared that she would go from being a typical mother of a typical kid to something "not normal," and this fear prevented her from trusting her instincts and acting on them.

FEELING UNSETTLED/LOSING A SENSE OF CLOSURE

Most of us enjoy feeling settled. We like having a sense of control about where our lives are headed and certainly don't want to needlessly rock the boat. Therefore, when we do find ourselves at a crossroads and in a state of uncertainty, it is typical to want to resolve that as quickly as possible. It is an uncomfortable place to be. Wanting to avoid this stage of uncertainty can therefore sometimes prevent us from allowing ourselves to consider making decisions that could take us in new directions. Alternatively, it can also push us to make decisions before we are ready. There is an urge in us to know where we are headed, even if the situation is premature.

Yosef: Too Quick to Commit

At the beginning of Yosef's year in Israel, he was already toying with the idea of deferring college further and staying for another year in Israel. He loved the environment that he was in and felt

confident that he would want to be there for a second year. Despite his teachers telling him that he did not need to make a decision about the following year until March, Yosef wanted to know what he was doing so that he would not have to spend the next five months stressing over the decision. He told all of his friends what his plans were. As the year progressed, though, thoughts would creep into Yosef's mind that maybe he had decided too soon. He began to feel that maybe he had made the wrong decision. But he wasn't sure. In addition to the embarrassment that he would have to face when he told his friends and teachers, he also did not want to reenter that state of uncertainty. He felt that he had made a decision and should stick with it.

So many fears are affecting Yosef's decision. He is afraid to feel unsettled, and that leads him to make a decision before he is ready to. And then, on the other hand, he is reluctant to consider making a new decision once he has closure because he does not want to return to that place of uncertainty. He is also worried about what his friends and mentors will think of him. But if Yosef is honest with himself, he will consider the fact that he does not really have genuine closure. Though he is trying his best to deny it, he is already in limbo. He is unsure if he wants to stay for *shana bet*, and it would not be wise to force himself to make the decision final before he knows what he really wants.

Abigail and Reuven: Desperate to Move

Abigail and Reuven were desperate to move. For some time they had felt that their family had outgrown their modest home and that they would all benefit from additional space. They had already been in touch with a real estate agent and had looked at several houses, but each time they were disappointed to discover that the house was not a viable option. One morning, they finally saw a house that appealed to them, was in the right neighborhood, and approached their price range. "Let's make an

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offer!” Abigail said the minute they got into the car. Reuven knew that in order to maintain a strong negotiating position, they needed to play this smart and not appear too eager. But Abigail was so nervous that they would lose it. She pressured Reuven to make an offer that very night.

Abigail knew intuitively that Reuven’s approach was correct, but she desperately wanted and needed a sense of closure. She was anxious to know what the future held. She so badly wanted to move, and she was eager to jump on the first option that looked like a realistic possibility. Ironically, her very need to feel settled might jeopardize their ability to get the house that they want to settle down in.

HAVING TO ADMIT A MISTAKE AND FACE “WASTED” TIME AND RESOURCES

It is always hard for us to admit our mistakes. It is even harder when we feel that we have “wasted” a considerable amount of time, money, or energy. The fear of having to shift course, start over, and deal with past events can hamper us from making the decisions that we want to.

Brian: “Who Drops Out of Law School?”

Ever since he was a young boy, Brian knew that he wanted to be a lawyer. Whenever he would spend time with his father at his law firm, he found the cases his father was involved with to be fascinating. Deciding to be pre-law in college was as obvious to him as his food preferences. He “just knew” that that was what he was drawn to and wanted to do with his life. Interning for a lawyer over the summer further contributed to his sense of certainty. From the time that Brian began law school, however, he had not been himself. He was stressed all the time and was not enjoying the studies. Areas that had once interested him suddenly seemed boring. It was hard to study for exams. There was so much information and little motivation. Brian missed interacting with people and having time to pursue other interests in his life. Older

classmates had told him that he would get used to the grind, but his first year of law school was coming to a close, and that was not the case. He had not fully appreciated what the field of law entailed and was no longer sure that he wanted to practice it. But how could he leave? Who drops out of law school? Could that even be done?

Beyond the fear of what others would think, Brian felt lost. Who was he, if not a future lawyer? What would he do with his life? All of these fears ate away at him, but perhaps the greatest fear of all was the thought that all these years had been a waste. He had spent so much time in high school investing in the mock trial team. He had studied hundreds of hours for the LSATs and had interned for multiple lawyers, and for what? He would never be able to recover that lost time and money. He was also terrified of having to start over from scratch. He would need to find a new career and go back to square one. Maybe that alone was a reason to stay in law school.

In life we can come to a crossroads where we need to think about how we want to move forward. If it becomes clear to us that we are looking toward a path that is different from what we previously assumed we would follow, it can be hard to change course. It is not easy to leave behind all the steps we took to propel us forward on the trajectory that we have been on. But the decisions that we made in the past should not hamper us from making the best decisions that we can in the present and for the future. Often, our sense of having wasted time and resources demonstrates a lack of perspective; most often we needed to walk that path in order to become the person we are and to arrive at the new turning point we now face. In any case, all we can do at any given time is make the best next decision we can, given all the information that we have at the moment.

In dating relationships, in particular, the fear of wasting time, resources, and energy can affect a decision in either direction. One can feel that one should end a relationship before one is ready to because of the fear of “wasting” any more time. Alternatively, individuals sometimes stay in a relationship when they

know that they should break up because they are afraid to admit that the time they've invested thus far has not brought them any closer to settling down. Denial, though, doesn't change that reality, nor does procrastination. At least we can take solace in knowing that every relationship builds us into who we are and helps us understand what we want and need from a life partner.

Coming back to Brian – should he quit law school? Not necessarily. He needs to weigh a lot of factors, including the challenges of setting out on a new path. But the fear of swallowing lost time should not be one of them.

MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY

When we think about different options lying before us, we might fear passing up on one that seems like an opportunity which will never present itself again. Even if we might be leaning toward one option or feel with certainty that it is best for us, the fear that we might miss out on something and regret this may push us to choose an option that is different from what we really want.

“I think I want to start college, but maybe I should stay for shana bet because it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn Torah for another whole year.”

“I don't really want to make aliya as a single, but if I don't, I may never integrate or know Hebrew as well.”

“I like the man I am dating, but I have not had the opportunity to date much and see what other options are out there.”

“I think I am happy in my marriage, but what if I could be happier?”

The truth, though, is that whatever decision is made, an opportunity will be lost. Inherent in decision making is choosing one option and shutting the door on another. Although someone might feel like *shana bet* or aliya at a young age can be a wonderful opportunity, the question, Is this what you want? cannot be avoided. If there is a feeling that this is an opportunity that we

really want to seize, then we should go right ahead and make the most of it. But if we realize that a fear of missing out (FOMO) is driving the decision, then we may need to step back and reassess.

HAVING REGRETS

A corollary of the fear of missing opportunities is the fear of having regrets. When we settle on one course of action, we may be not only concerned about missing out on the alternative, but also worried that, in retrospect, we will doubt our decision and have to deal with lasting negative feelings.

Yael: “Am I Being Irresponsible?”

Yael’s mind would sometimes race when she was not feeling well. If she had a headache, she wondered whether she had a brain tumor or aneurysm. If her chest hurt, perhaps she was having a heart attack, and various small birthmarks always got her thinking about skin cancer. It’s not that she was a hypochondriac; she had enough self-awareness and medical insight to know that she was probably fine. Yet she found herself worrying about the consequences of not being more assertive for herself, her husband, and her children. The doctor’s reassurances sounded reasonable, but was it responsible for her to rely on his assessment and just move on? “Should I see a specialist? Should I get an MRI?” she would wonder. But the question that plagued her most was, “Am I going to regret that I did not look into this further? Will I look back on this and feel like I handled these decisions irresponsibly, for myself and for my family?”

More than her fear of being sick, Yael is worried about dealing with potential lingering feelings of regret over her decisions to not seek further testing. This fear of future regrets can arise whenever we find ourselves making any decision that contains some inherent risk.

“What if we decide to go on a vacation and something happens to our child while we are away? Will we regret having left her?”

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“What if I go skiing and get injured? Will I feel foolish that I went?”

“What if I do not pursue a job offer that has some great perks? Will I feel dumb afterward?”

These kinds of thoughts are natural and understandable and probably should give any of us pause before we proceed with a course of action. But should they singlehandedly dissuade us from what intuitively makes sense for us? Furthermore, what is the alternative? To avoid any risk of possible regret under any circumstances? What price would we then pay in terms of giving up all that we really want for ourselves (and our loved ones!), including the ability to function without constant worry?

Inevitably, all we can do is make good decisions, with openness and honesty about the risks involved and how much we are willing to bear. Beyond that, the rest is in God’s hands. We can never succeed in eliminating all risk from our lives, but we can at least aim to make decisions that we can embrace with confidence and clarity. Even if things go wrong, we will know that we deliberated and chose responsibly, which is all that we (and God) can ever ask of ourselves. The antidote to regret, I think, is not avoidance of hard decisions, but the opposite – confronting them directly with levelheadedness, humility, and trust.

SELF-NEGATION

One of the more complex fears we might encounter is the fear that we are negating a feeling or thought we may have by not considering it seriously enough in our decision-making process. We should trust ourselves, however, to know how to appropriately weigh our different thoughts and feelings as we balance them in our everyday lives.

Ezra: Productive Enough?

Ezra, at the age of eighteen, was an extremely disciplined young man. He made calculated and thoughtful decisions about how to spend his time

and he was able to get a lot done each day. And yet, often at the end of the day, a thought would enter his mind that he had not been productive enough. Ezra knew in his heart that the thought was irrational. He could point to multiple concrete daily accomplishments, but at the same time he would still think that maybe he could have done more. While his gut told him to trust himself that he had had a good day and should go to sleep feeling satisfied, he was afraid that he was denying the voice within him encouraging him to do one last task before heading to bed. When Ezra allowed this fear to get the best of him, he would feel good and productive in the moment but would then always regret staying up late.

Over time, Ezra learned to trust himself and his gut feeling that he should go to sleep. Instead of allowing his thoughts to frighten him, he began to engage them by actively balancing them with his awareness of all that he had accomplished. Instead of negating them, he accepted them as a part of his thought process and of who he was. He realized that even when he had a particular dominant thought in his head, he could still actively choose to make a different decision.

Ora came to a similar conclusion in her own situation.

Ora: Protecting Her Needs

Ora was a forty-six-year-old mother of four wonderful but demanding teenagers. She felt that she was constantly being asked for one thing or another. One evening, Ora was in the middle of working at her computer when her sixteen-year-old daughter interrupted her and asked to be driven to the movie theater, where she would meet up with a friend. Ora felt the anger welling up inside her. "Does she not see that I'm working? Is she the only one who has needs in this family? Are my needs not important to anyone here?" She feared that no one took her and her endeavors seriously.

Ora was about to share these thoughts out loud, but then she paused and thought for a moment. Ora knew that she was sometimes overly sensitive to and easily triggered by people ignoring her needs. Growing up as the youngest sibling of two brothers who were much

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older, she would often be schlepped along to activities that were not suitable for her age. Those experiences in childhood had left a deep impression on her.

Once Ora acknowledged this, she was able to think about her situation differently. Instead of living in fear that she was forever being taken advantage of by her children, she realized that their requests were appropriate to ask of a mother. She trusted that if she ever felt that someone was crossing a line and legitimately not respecting her needs, she would be able to recognize that and tell them. At the same time, she did not need to allow that fear to get in the way of good and responsible parenting.

If we consider our thoughts and feelings, engage them, account for them, and then decide how best to proceed, there is no reason to fear that we are negating a part of ourselves. Rather, we can trust that we have made good decisions about how to balance our various thoughts and emotions.

FAILURE/REJECTION

Sometimes fear of failure is what stops us from moving forward with a decision that we want to make.

Asher: More Than Capable

Asher was a successful high school teacher who was well liked by his students and who had managed to accomplish all of the professional goals that he had set for himself in his teaching. But lately, he had been feeling that he was ready to move on to a position that demanded more of him and that made fuller use of his many talents. Without pursuing anything, he was offered to be the principal of a nearby yeshiva day school, whose board had done a search and had discovered Asher on its own. Asher was intrigued by the offer for many reasons, but he was hesitant to take it. He was so comfortable in his teaching job. He knew what it took to succeed, and he knew that he made a difference in the lives of his students. What if he failed as a principal? What if he didn't really have what it takes to

be an effective administrator? Deep down, the anxieties seemed irrational, but he considered declining the offer just to make them go away.

Although Asher knew that he was ready and wanted to move on to a more demanding professional role, and he was aware of the fact that being a principal appealed to him, the prospect of failing was so daunting that it clouded his thinking and made him extremely hesitant to make the leap.

At times our fear of failure comes not in the form of failing at a task, but, rather, feeling rejected in a relationship. That, too, can stop us from making the decisions that we want to make.

The Heller Family: Navigating New Friendships

The Heller family had recently moved to a new community, where they were greeted warmly by their neighbors. Many families invited them for Shabbat meals, and slowly the Hellers began to feel more integrated into their new group of friends. There was one family, though, that left them feeling confused about the nature of their relationship. When they accepted an invitation for a Shabbat meal at the Stein family, they had a wonderful time together and saw it as the beginning of a close connection. After a couple of years, however, the Hellers realized that despite the fact that they had hosted the Steins several times, the Steins had never reached out again. Mr. and Mrs. Heller really liked the Steins and wanted to invite them to their daughter's upcoming bat mitzva. They worried, though, that maybe the Steins were just being polite but had no real interest in pursuing this relationship, and they feared that their efforts would be rejected. In the end they decided not to invite them, so as not to face the fact that they might not come. After the fact, they regretted that they had let this fear of rejection influence them.

The fears discussed here are understandable. It makes sense why they arise, but ultimately, they prevent us from thinking about what we really want. Any time we are facing a decision, big or small, it can be helpful to consider if one of these general fears is clouding how we process it.