

UNCORRECTED PROOF - DIGITAL CHAPTER SAMPLE

MICHAL OSHMAN

Head of Culture, TikTok Europe & Former Leadership Expert, Facebook

A portrait of Michal Oshman, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a gold, metallic, long-sleeved dress with a belt. She is standing against a teal background. The title text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WEREN'T AFRAID?

Discover a life filled with purpose and joy
through the secrets of Jewish wisdom

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**WHAT WOULD
YOU DO IF
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AFRAID?**

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Head of Culture at TikTok Europe—Ex leadership development at Facebook

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First American Edition, 2021

Published in the United States by DK Publishing
1450 Broadway, Suite 801, New York, NY 10018

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DK, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC
21 22 23 24 25 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
001-322273-May/2021

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The phrase "What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?"
first appears in *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Dr. Spencer Johnson,
published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in 1998.

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Published in Great Britain by Dorling Kindersley Limited

A catalog record for this book
is available from the Library of Congress.
US ISBN: 978-0-7440-2910-9

DK books are available at special discounts when purchased
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For details, contact: DK Publishing Special Markets,
1450 Broadway, Suite 801, New York, NY 10018
SpecialSales@dk.com

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom

For the curious
www.dk.com

This book is a work of nonfiction based on the life, experiences, and
recollections of Michal Oshman. In some cases, names of people and
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*For my auntie Sara, who teaches me
bravery, optimism, and positivity*

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1 THE DISCOVERY

“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”

—Mark Twain

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On my first day at Facebook, as I stood at the company reception desk about to embark on what was, at the time, the most meaningful job of my career, something caught my eye. It was a question on the wall and it asked:

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

This question hit me because, despite serving as a commanding officer in the Israeli army, holding several university degrees, and working as a senior leader at top banks, advertising, PR and tech companies all my life, in one way or another, I had been just that: afraid.

On the surface, my life at this point was a success story. I was born in Israel, in a secular Jewish household, the eldest daughter of two intelligent and accomplished parents. I was raised “culturally Jewish,” respectful of our heritage without much practice of our religion. After graduating high school I’d carried out compulsory military service where, within the first two weeks, I was selected to lead an entire unit. I’d married a caring, loving, smart man and we had three (now four) beautiful children. Since relocating to the UK, I’d had a successful career coaching and consulting with some of the best leadership talent I could ever imagine working with, at companies like Danone, WPP, eBay and, starting that day, Facebook. Yes, my life appeared to be an impressive series of achievements.

Now let me tell you the *real* story.

At that point in my life, and for as long as I could remember, I had been suffering from anxiety. The kind that permeates every aspect of your life and consumes every waking thought. This anxiety meant that my mind

would naturally drift to the worst-case scenario in any situation. If my friend texted to let me know she was on her way to my house, I would imagine her having a car crash on the way. I would never suggest a time to meet up because then I would be complicit in her death. Each time one of my children asked me to sign a permission slip for a school trip or a day at the museum, it felt like I was signing their death sentence.

As anyone suffering from anxiety can attest, these imaginary scenarios can have very real effects on the mind and body. Those intrusive thoughts would send waves of heat coursing through my entire body. I'd become short of breath—all because of fear: fear that my children would get lost, forgotten, or kidnapped at the museum. That's how immediate negative outcomes were to me. They would flash into my head, then I would ruminate on them again and again, imagining them vividly, until in my mind (and body) they became reality.

Was there a reason for my anxiety? For the moments of despair that would wash over me? For my fears? Any psychologist would say there certainly was. When I was growing up, my father was Israel's top forensic pathologist. Throughout his career he performed tens of thousands of autopsies on children and adults who had died an unnatural death. He also conducted physical examinations of women and children who had been sexually assaulted or raped. He was called to visit crime scenes and sites of terror attacks on a daily basis. After conducting autopsies, he faced the hardest part of his job: meeting the parents, partners, or children of the victims, and telling them what had happened to their loved ones. At home, I'd sometimes pass his desk and

see the photographs spilling from his briefcase—horrific photographs that showed in graphic detail what humans are capable of doing to each other. Shows like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* never show you what the children of forensic pathologists are subject to. Of course, my father did what he could to shield me from these sights, but for my entire childhood I was surrounded by death and the horrors of humanity.

Death poked its nose in from other directions, too. My grandparents on both sides were Holocaust survivors and their firsthand experience of genocide left them permanently traumatized. Therefore, the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis in the Second World War was not a piece of history to me: it was an integral part of my life from the moment I was born. My grandmother's nightmares—I would hear her screaming that the Nazis were coming—were my nightly lullabies. She used to hoard food in preparation for another Holocaust. She would try to force-feed me chicken soup to ensure I didn't suffer the starvation she had experienced. To this day I still can't eat chicken soup. Even the smell of it makes me nauseous.

My grandparents' deeply traumatic Holocaust experiences left their imprint on both my parents, too. They were raised with a survival mindset and, as a result, so was I. Yes, I was born and raised with privilege, and I have always been aware of the fact that, as the white Israeli daughter of a professor of medicine and a teacher, I had access to education and opportunities that not everyone has. Yet, in our home, there was no space for being carefree; the imperative was to ensure that there was food to eat, that we were safe from harm,

and that we made ourselves indispensable to the world. Everything else was a physical or emotional luxury. Is it any wonder I feared death? Death just seemed more *likely* than life. There were so many things that could go wrong, so many illnesses I could contract, so many accidents that could happen.

During my teenage years, Israel was subject to constant terror attacks. There were frequent bombings, often on public transportation. Every bus journey began with me doing a quick scan of the other passengers and noting who was carrying a large backpack. My father would tell me to always sit by the window on the bus and open it to minimize injuries in case of an explosion. My greatest fear wasn't the explosion, getting injured, or even dying, it was the fear of ending up as a corpse in my father's morgue. I would fear his reaction to his daughter's dead body, the pain and horror that would cause him.

And it wasn't just death I feared, but a whole host of other things: messing up, being rejected, aging, not being taken seriously, disappointing people, and failing. My father is extremely hard-working and was successful in both his career and in academia. My mother holds numerous degrees and is an accomplished teacher. They expected the same success from their eldest daughter. I know now that my parents' love was unconditional, but it didn't always seem like that to me growing up. I felt the need to earn their love by making the right choices, by never making mistakes. I needed to be indispensable, remember? My mother is a charismatic and astonishingly confident woman—the type of person who walks into a room and turns heads, making an instant impression. How could I ever measure up? I feared that I would never

become the daughter, granddaughter, wife or mother everyone hoped I would be.

Don't get the wrong idea. Anxiety didn't stop me from functioning. On the contrary—I was *highly* functional. I had succeeded in the corporate world and at the same time was a mother to young children. I did those jobs well. I went to company events and social parties, danced on the dance floor, drank cocktails, laughed, wore the latest fashion trends, my hair and makeup always done to perfection. No one ever knew I was suffering inside because I had put up a thick veil that masked it. No one ever guessed.

So when I saw that question—What would you do if you weren't afraid?—on the wall at Facebook, I felt deeply moved. Throughout my life, anxiety had taken away the simple joys of life. It had stopped me from having joyful intimate relationships, from enjoying my job, from feeling good about myself. It had made me hide aspects of my personality and feel guilty and worried when I should have been content. The suggestion that I didn't have to live my life in a constant state of anxiety was almost inconceivable, and yet, here it was.

Of course, I'm not the only one to have experienced feelings of anxiety and despair, not the only one to have been ruled by them. In the US, it's estimated that more than one in ten adults are taking antidepressants or anti-anxiety drugs. Twenty percent of the population are on some sort of psychiatric medication and doctors estimate that another twenty percent need to be medicated. There are fifty million prescriptions per year for Xanax, one of the more popular antianxiety drugs, alone. Other Western countries are not far behind. What is it about

our times that leave so many people suffering from gnawing insecurities, ongoing frustrations, negative thoughts, despair, and limiting self-doubt, while so many others feel empty and disconnected? Why is it that in our society, where more people than ever enjoy freedom and choice, it has become a struggle to feel happy?

The Search

Like many people, I had looked to therapy and medication for the solution to my anxiety. My therapists explored my past—my childhood, and particularly my exposure to death. The Freudian model, on which they were trained, explains that mental illness is caused by events from our childhood. The focus is on the person's past and the assumption is that they will resist growth and change, instead relying on patterns formed in their earliest years. My father's job and the awful things I'd seen and heard, as well as the impact that the Holocaust had had on my family, were clearly—in my therapists' eyes—the causes of my anxiety. It was helpful, to a certain degree, to reflect on childhood memories, but at some point, after many years of therapy, I realized that the therapy wasn't going anywhere. We were revisiting the same stories, looking back through a blaming, limited lens.

Therapy became limited and limiting.

Don't get me wrong—learning that my feelings followed a textbook pattern really did help to normalize my anxiety. But reliving the things I'd seen in my past became a never-ending cycle. It felt like picking a scab, scratching the same wounds over and over again.

Even though at times the wounds healed a bit, my therapists only seemed interested in digging up the horrors I'd been exposed to and what they termed the "unfinished business" with my parents. It got to the point where hearing the phrase "unfinished business" really triggered me. It didn't trigger me because I had unfinished business; it triggered me because I had actually resolved these issues after confronting my parents (which I talk about in greater detail in chapter two). Yet the healing didn't come and the pain was still there.

After going to therapy for many years, things had actually gotten worse, not better. But although I declared to myself that I was ready to give up on living a joyful life, *deep inside me*, I knew there was something else, something bigger than my anxiety, a spark of hidden joy that I just couldn't get to. I didn't know what the spark I felt inside was or how to reach it, but I *believed* it was there. And every time I tried to voice these feelings or ideas to my therapists, they would respond in exactly the same tone, with exactly the same phrases: "You are avoiding reality, Michal," "You're looking for an easy way out, Michal," "You are looking to suppress your real issues, Michal." I realized my healing would not come from any therapist.

For a very short time, I turned to Buddhism. I read and educated myself, but I wasn't ready to embrace Zen practices and I wasn't able to let go of pain. Actually, I didn't *want* to let go of my pain or to avoid it—I wanted to look it in the eye, I wanted to solve it. I tried a life coach. One day he asked me if, given the choice, I would choose to cut out the "anxiety part" of me, to remove it as if it had never been there. In all my years of therapy I

had never been asked such a powerful question. Would I? Would I want to completely get rid of the uncomfortable aspects of myself? Would I erase a whole part of me?

After several long minutes of reflection, I realized that the answer was a definite NO! I still think about this moment often. It was a turning point for me with regard to the way I viewed my anxiety.

Even though I suffered daily, I wanted to keep every part of myself, even the painful parts. Who would I be without my life experience? Would I become a different person? Ultimately, this baggage was part of what made me *me*. I just didn't want to only look back. I wanted to look forward, too, to move toward something and find hope and potential. But I didn't know the way. I decided that, instead of trying to wipe away all these parts of me, I would learn to understand myself through a new lens, using a completely different perspective to Western psychotherapy. But what was that other perspective? I just didn't know.

It was around this time that I read a book by Viktor E. Frankl called *Man's Search for Meaning*. Dr. Frankl was a gifted student of Sigmund Freud and a champion of psychoanalysis during its heyday in the 1920s. Frankl was a well-known neurologist, psychiatrist, and therapist who challenged Freud's ideas. He started to disagree with Freud on a number of things, namely what really drives humans to act and think the way they do. For Freud, the fundamental human drives are pleasure and self-preservation. But Frankl saw that humans had something else—a yearning for meaning in their life. He began to develop a theory of psychotherapy called logotherapy, which means “therapy of meaning.”

Whereas Freud believed that happiness comes from the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, Frankl believed that the more we pursue happiness, the less likely we are to find it. Instead, we should view happiness simply as a side effect of finding something we care about. Happiness is not the goal itself—Frankl believed that humans are not simply seeking pleasure for its own sake, but are seeking meaning.

Dr. Frankl came up with most of his findings during his time as a prisoner in the Nazi death camps where he was tortured, humiliated, and nearly murdered on several occasions. He experienced incredible cruelty and was exposed to mankind's ability to commit terrible crimes against their fellow human beings. But Dr. Frankl also made a groundbreaking discovery. He saw prisoners holding on to life, even when death would have been a relief.

But why? Why would someone want to survive, under horrific, hopeless, terrifying circumstances?

The answer he came up with was *purpose*.

What kept prisoners alive was their incredible internal drive to fulfill a unique purpose—a person to live for, a cause to support, or a meaningful task to complete. There, in the horror of the concentration camps, Frankl discovered that finding purpose changes your outlook on life. It can even *save* your life.

This resonated powerfully with me, and not just because I had lived most of my life in the shadow of the Holocaust, hearing my grandparents' stories, feeling their fears. Frankl's ideas captivated me because I had already felt that small spark inside me and I knew that it was capable of growing into something more.

The Wisdom

And then it happened.

From the most unexpected place—a source I had never considered before—came a life-changing discovery: a powerful set of principles to better manage fear, anxiety, sadness, and despair.

I discovered a guide to finding joy that I had never known about. A source of psychological wisdom that could help me when I felt stuck in life, that could show me how to find meaning and confidence.

I discovered Jewish wisdom.

It happened around the time of the Jewish festival of Passover, which celebrates the release of the Israelites from their years of slavery in ancient Egypt. Although I am Jewish by birth, I wasn't aware of the deeper meanings of Jewish life and therefore hadn't ever considered the meaning of Jewish holidays—in this case, Passover. However, that year, having decided to stop going to therapy because it was getting me nowhere, I remembered what a Jewish friend had said to me years ago when I asked her what Passover meant to her. She'd explained that Passover is the time of year when you remind yourself that although you're no longer enslaved in Egypt, you are still enslaving yourself to damaging things. You will always have "your Egypt." "It's a reminder that you can get out of Egypt, but you can't get Egypt out of yourself," she added.

At the time I had wondered what she meant, but now I started to understand the significance of the story. Egypt doesn't just mean a physical country. It symbolizes any place where you are not free, where you are chained to something.

In Hebrew the word for Egypt is *mitzrayim*, which means “boundaries” or “narrow straits.” I realized that the story of the Israelites’ escape from Egypt isn’t *just* an historical story about liberation from slavery. It’s a story that is lived every single day. It’s the human story of liberating ourselves from narrowness, from our own personal restrictions, our own self-slavery. The fact that many of us are privileged enough to have physical freedoms to do whatever we want, whenever we want (within legal boundaries, of course), doesn’t mean we are truly free. We can have *internal* chains—thoughts and self-beliefs—that keep us trapped, limited. What “Egypt,” what *mitzrayim*, was I chaining myself to? What was I enslaved to that was making me feel so anxious? And how on earth could I set myself free?

Let me tell you, since discovering the ideas of Jewish wisdom, I have had many conversations with others on this subject, and I have realized that everyone has an “Egypt,” a *mitzrayim*, of their own.

What is *your mitzrayim*?

As luck would have it, shortly after that Passover, I heard a talk by the Vice President of EMEA for Facebook, Lady Nicola Mendelsohn. She was being interviewed in the British press, sharing her career journey upon joining Facebook as their most senior leader outside of the US. She spoke openly about what most mattered to her in life: her four children, her charitable work and holding a senior position in the social media and advertising world so she can facilitate change. She also said that observing the Jewish day of rest, Shabbat, was central to who she was.

I was amazed. I had never heard of any other top executive who managed to combine a job with having four children, as well as being openly observant of religion. Was it really possible to fulfill my personal goals and be successful, while also finding myself spiritually? Here was Mendelsohn, openly sharing what some might consider to be her most vulnerable or weak points—flexible working hours, having four children, the importance of religion in her life—and yet, all this only made her seem stronger in my eyes. Instead of trying to be a different person in each of the different settings of her life, she was simply herself in all of them.

It was Mendelsohn and the possibilities she represented that became part of my inspiration to join Facebook. Months later, as I stood in front of that question, I asked myself, “What *would* I do if I weren’t afraid?” And again, I felt the spark of something inside me, a tiny flame that was burning despite everything. I knew I was getting closer to discovery.

Later, I Googled “depression, anxiety, finding happiness, and”—although I wasn’t religious—“Judaism.” One of the first results pointed to the work of a Jewish professor of psychology in London and one of the leading academics in her field. Her name was Professor Kate Miriam Loewenthal. I decided to reach out to her. “I suffer from anxiety and am looking for new therapeutic solutions,” I wrote. Having told her my story, I was surprised when she suggested I attend a class in Jewish spiritual texts taught by a Hasidic rabbi. “A Hasidic rabbi?” I thought, “What does Hasidism have to do with me?”

At the time, all I knew about Hasidism was that it's a religious Jewish movement that was established in the eighteenth century in eastern Europe. It was founded by a Polish rabbi known as the Baal Shem Tov. I have since learned that Hasidism and its teachings, *Hasidut*, seek to bring spirituality, joy, and meaning to everyday life.

The way I embrace it, *Hasidut* teaches how to replace fear and anxiety with joy and purpose. It offers deep, yet down-to-earth and pragmatic teachings from the holy Jewish texts that can be applied to everyday life. By learning the hidden lessons from the Torah (the Jewish bible) it is possible to discover the "psychology of the Torah" and the deep, eternal meaning within the text.

But at that point, my understanding of Judaism was limited. I had thought of it as a series of laws and rules that Jewish people were instructed to follow, as told by God. I had never thought that what had happened to ancient figures like Abraham, Sarah and Moses thousands of years ago could have anything to do with life today. My instinct was to be doubtful that Jewish texts could be a helpful resource for me. Still, something inside made me go.

I attended a class taught by Rabbi Mendel Gordon. We turned to an early work of Hasidic wisdom, first published in 1796, by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The book is called the *Tanya* and the wisdom it contains helps people like you and me find their purpose and bring spirituality into everyday life. It talks about the existence of the soul.

Transfixed, I read:

[The soul] is comparable to the flame of a candle which, by nature, continually flickers upwards, because a fire's flame is naturally inclined to detach itself from the wick. ... And even though by leaving its wick, and uniting with its source, the flame would be extinguished, and would cease to shine at all down here... nevertheless, this is what the flame is naturally inclined to do.

—Tanya 19

And then I realized: the spark I felt inside me—that something I couldn't name or define—wasn't anything to do with my upbringing, my experiences, or my thoughts. It was my *soul*. And this image of a flame, continually flickering, faltering, unceasingly trying to break free but always being held down, made me look at my anxiety differently. My inner angst was not a disease, nor was it some irredeemable damage I had picked up in childhood. *It was part of the human condition.* Like a flame, the soul can never be settled; it always flickers. My struggle, I thought, is really something quite beautiful: it is a symptom of always yearning to grow, like the flame which is pulled upward. I wasn't a failure, I was just a beautiful flame.

Break Your Chains

My discovery of the hidden lessons of Jewish wisdom didn't happen overnight, but once I learned about them, they changed the way I experienced life and helped me

heal the most painful parts of myself. I am still the same person, but what I learned allowed me to finally breathe, sleep, and smile.

Instead of treating my anxiety and unhappiness as things I needed to completely get rid of, which is what I'd been trying to do my entire life, the Jewish ideas I was learning helped me control my thoughts and heal my heart. They allowed me to move forward, toward a joyful, confident life. Jewish wisdom showed me ways I could become a better version of myself.

I not only use Jewish principles in my personal life now, but also in my role as a leadership and culture consultant. The principles help me coach leaders to be better at their jobs and at their lives. I want to share these ideas because I truly believe that Jewish wisdom can help you become more resilient, more courageous, more connected, more fulfilled, and—most importantly—more yourself.

I'm not an expert on Jewish scripture—and this is not that kind of book. But Jewish wisdom points out a great universal truth: that struggle is part of life. It's not a bug in the system. Life was designed this way. *This is the system!* And although it took me a long time to realize it, there is no life or growth without internal and external tension.

This book is not meant to convert you to religion. The principles I share come from Judaism, but they apply to people of all religions and none, to anyone who needs help. Ancient wisdom of course exists in many other cultures and religions, too. But the principles I focus on are the ones that resonated with me. They have helped me with my marriage, helped me solve conflicts at work, deal with teenagers at home, be a better mother, be a supportive sister, find meaning in my community,

build and invest in friendships, and cope with the inevitable juggle of commitments that is common to many women and men in the way we live now.

I don't know what pops into your head when you hear the words "Jewish wisdom." Maybe you're thinking, "What does this have to do with me? I'm not Jewish." Or maybe you are Jewish but not connected to or aware of the unique wisdom that lies within Judaism. Maybe when you think of Judaism, you imagine orthodox Jews who live a lifestyle so different from yours. Or maybe you are curious and think, "What is this universal Jewish wisdom and how can it help *me* in *my* life?"

I invite you to be curious. Take that first step and explore something you would never have expected to explore. Step out of your comfort zone. Who knows where it could lead? As Viktor Frankl said, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

Self-reflection is the key to growth. So, too, is taking action, even if it is just one tiny step forward. One step at a time. I want to offer you a place for reflection and a way to "take action" right here, in this book. I am going to end each chapter with a few coaching questions, titled "If you change nothing, nothing will change." Answer one question, answer two, or answer them all, as long as you remain honest with yourself and make space for your personal growth.

As we embark together on the journey this book will take us on, ask yourself:

What would you do if you weren't afraid?