

# EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT YITRO**  
**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN**

How can the Torah command us to feel or not feel certain emotions?

Many of us are under the impression that our emotions just happen to us without our input and against our will. Something or someone pushes our emotional buttons, which triggers a neural circuit in our brain and causes a physiological reaction, and there is nothing we could do to stop it from happening. My coworker makes me angry, my spouse makes me happy, traffic makes me anxious, and my neighbor causes me to be envious. Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, a neuroscientist and psychologist, labels this perspective as the classical view of emotions. It has roots in ancient philosophy and advocates in modern psychology. Yet, she argues based on her decades of research, that it is utterly incorrect.

In her bestselling book, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, Dr. Barrett describes her theory of constructed emotion, contending that our emotions are constructed and created by us. We are the architects of our own emotion through our own interpretations of events, which can be based on our past experiences and our social and cultural environments. This theory can be both empowering and (can be interpreted as) anxiety provoking, as it confers upon each one of us to take responsibility for our own emotions.

Writing in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra addresses the subject of emotional responsibility as it relates to the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment, namely, the prohibition to be envious of a friend. Many people, Ibn Ezra writes, believe that we are not in control of our emotions, and therefore the Torah cannot command us in matters of the mind. They could understand the legislation of behavior, but not of internal states of being. Yet, Ibn Ezra argues that the Torah can and does command us to regulate our emotions and that it is within our control to do so.

Ibn Ezra provides a parable whose relatability may have diminished in the modern era, but the message still resonates. He argues that a pauper living in the 12<sup>th</sup> century would not be desirous of a princess because of the impossibility of the prospect of courting her. He likens such a desire to wanting to have wings and fly in the sky. Since it is impossible, such a thought will not lead to an emotion. Similarly, there are certain religious perspectives, beliefs, and interpretations that we are expected to construct that will help prevent us from being envious of our friends. If we were to firmly believe that G-d provides us with all that we need, and we were to work on being content with our own lot, then we would not feel envious. While these may not be easy beliefs to inculcate, since they are within our control to work on, we are held responsible for the emotions we experience.

Building upon Ibn Ezra's idea that we can construct and control our emotions, later commentaries provide alternative strategies for how to do so in the context of envy. Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik in his commentary Beit Halevi suggests that if one has a strong desire or temptation and is then startled, the temptation will be drowned out due to the fear. So too, if one has awe of G-d, that awe would preempt the temptation. Alternatively, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg suggests that if one's heart is filled with love and passion for G-d, there would be no room for envious feelings of others.

While these strategies may seem awfully lofty, they position our emotions within our own ability and control. While it may not be easy and it may take time and effort, we can work hard on constructing our worldview in such a way that we can take responsibility for our own emotions. By doing so, we can live more empowered, spiritual and emotionally healthy lives.

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