



# Bridging the Great Divide

## Torah and Modern Psychology at Harvard

BY DEVORA (GREER) SHABTAI

*Chances are you know someone like Sarah. She heads a committee on her shul board, eagerly attends simchos, and serves sumptuous Shabbos and Yom Tov meals to her family and many guests. Beneath Sarah's perfect facade, however, stress and anxiety simmer on a hot back burner. Her frequent headaches have gone beyond the need for another Advil.*

*Lately, stress and worry have been making it difficult for Sarah to function.*

*In desperate need of relief, Sarah consults a qualified therapist who lives a Torah-true life. She is among a large and ever-growing number of Orthodox Jews, both men and women, who insist on receiving mental health treatment that aligns with their Torah lifestyle and outlook. While hundreds of qualified Orthodox therapists provide Torah-informed approaches, the integration of Torah principles into evidence-based treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a rarity.*

*The research spearheaded by Dr. David H. Rosmarin of Harvard University has begun to bridge the gap between Torah and modern psychology. He is unique in having succeeded in getting the Torah-based protocol accepted in the academic world.*



## Supercharged With Spirituality

Most of the public is unaware that over twenty thousand scientific reports now document the robust links between religion and mental health. The vast majority of this research indicates that religion is a protective factor that can be vital for those in distress. A positive, meaningful relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has now been translated into lower levels of depression, anxiety and illness, and higher levels of life satisfaction, substantiated by a great deal of empirical evidence.

This growing body of literature also supports the inclusion of spirituality and/or religion in the treatment process, suggesting that doing so can “supercharge” the effectiveness of interventions. Dr. David Rosmarin has taken these advances a step forward, tailoring treatments to the unique needs of the Jewish community.

Dr. Rosmarin’s research is uncovering what our Torah sages have been telling us for 3,300 years — namely, that working on one’s relationship with G-d is important for mental health. Through the creation of JPSYCH, a Jewish-community-based laboratory, Dr. Rosmarin, along with thirty university-based collaborators around the globe, has conducted ten research studies with over 3,500 participants. Research conducted during his internship and postdoctoral fellowship at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School, which involved interviewing over 1,500 patients, supplemented what Dr. Rosmarin already knew as a *frum* Jew — that implementing the guidance of the Torah leads to improved mental health.

This groundbreaking Torah revolution is slowly taking the secular academic world by storm. Over twenty peer-reviewed publications and over forty scientific presentations have put Dr. Rosmarin’s revolutionary findings at center stage. The associate editor of two special issues on the relevance of

spirituality and religion to mental health and treatment, Dr. Rosmarin has also received numerous awards and honors for his research, including a biographical entry in *Who’s Who in America*.

One of the most advanced neuroimaging laboratories in the world, at Harvard Medical School, recently invited Dr. Rosmarin to embark on studies using cutting-edge methods to directly observe the effects of religion on the human brain. What this means is that instead of observing effects from the outside, Dr. Rosmarin and his team will observe the way Torah principles and practices affect the human brain in real time, as they occur.

Is this what the *Navi Yeshayahu* meant when he called the Jewish people “a light unto the nations”? Indeed, what scholars like Dr. Gerald Schroeder (*Genesis and the Big Bang*) have done for science, Dr. David Rosmarin is doing for psychology — proving that spirituality is beneficial in reducing anxiety.

Best of all, though, Dr. Rosmarin’s work is easily accessible and can be used to improve individuals’ lives right now.

## Improving Lives

Thanks to Dr. Rosmarin and JPSYCH, people like Sarah now have a place to turn. JPSYCH studies are raising awareness for all therapists, particularly Orthodox Jewish therapists, that it can be vitally important to integrate spirituality and religion into clinical practice. For those coping with moderate levels of stress and worry, JPSYCH recently launched a self-administered, Torah-based online treatment.

This groundbreaking program, called “Increase Your Trust in G-d,” encourages clients to tap into their own relationship with G-d as a source of psychological strength and support. It’s based on principles outlined in *Chovos Halevavos* and other *sifrei mussar*.

The results of this program of empirically based *emunah* and





*bitachon* cannot be trivialized. In a randomized, controlled trial with over 125 Jewish individuals, participants who completed the program experienced dramatic reductions in anxiety in just two weeks. Even Dr. Rosmarin admits, "We truly never expected the program to work so well."

One young mother living in a large Jewish community in Canada says she now has the resources to cope with difficulties that used to overwhelm her. "Now, whenever anything bad happens, I keep remembering that I shouldn't be thankful just for the things that are obvious, but for the things that are not obvious." Her doctor, who had been considering giving her aggressive medication for a bout of clinical-level anxiety after she gave birth, withdrew the idea as she made progress in the program.

An elderly man living in a small Jewish community in the American Southwest says that participating in Dr. Rosmarin's unique brand of Torah-

based mental health treatment made him realize that Hashem was in his life in a way he had never experienced before. The son of Holocaust survivors and a war veteran, he professes that JPSYCH enabled him to resolve painful issues he had struggled with for many years.

JPSYCH's research showed that treatment gains with the program were significantly greater than those produced by progressive muscle relaxation, a well-known evidence-based therapy for stress reduction, and even improved over a six-week follow-up period, without further treatment.

What is it about enhancing one's connection to Hashem that reduces anxiety? Psychological research on anxiety has highlighted the important role played by intolerance of uncertainty. In other words, our fast-changing modern world makes life pretty stressful for people who can't handle not knowing what is going to happen next.

"It could be that when people feel connected to G-d, they realize that it doesn't matter if things are uncertain," says Dr. Rosmarin. "When I truly believe in my heart that G-d loves me, I feel palpably more calm and happy. I may initially feel sad when facing difficult life circumstances, but it doesn't get out of control."

The exciting news is that now this experientially proven path to well-being does not have to remain cloistered in a university laboratory or academic journal. Thanks to JPSYCH's unique online program, it is easily accessible to everyone. The site has welcomed over fourteen thousand visitors since January 2010.

### Torah-True Treatment

In a world of increasing demands and adversity, mental health challenges are common and understandable. One in four individuals suffers from anxiety.

Dr. Rosmarin as a graduate student at the Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University. (Insert) His thirty-minute program.

What many of us don't realize is that we do not have to live this way. It isn't a "*nisayon*," a "*yetzer hara*" or a "*dybbuk*"; it is a normal mental health issue, and it can be treated.

How many others like Sarah are out there? Dr. Rosmarin plans to find out. Thanks to hundreds of requests, Dr. Rosmarin and a team of other *frum* therapists will be launching The Center for Anxiety this summer in New York. The unique emphasis on empirically based, Torah-grounded treatment will enable thousands of other "Sarahs" in the Orthodox Jewish community to receive Torah-true mental health care.

Relief Resources, a nonprofit mental health referral organization for the Jewish community, reports six hundred to seven hundred referral requests per month. Though many Orthodox Jews are pursuing solutions for mental health challenges, the growing numbers also indicate that there are many who have not yet found a way to reach out for help. The Center for Anxiety hopes to serve as a beacon to help *frum* families and individuals break free of the stigma deterring them from seeking much-needed therapeutic intervention.

Dr. Rosmarin continues to serve as a *shadchan* between modern psychology and Torah wisdom. Through applying Torah insights to modern psychological dilemmas, Dr. Rosmarin and JPSYCH are providing a framework for spiritually based counseling to become an acceptable course of treatment in the academic world. For Orthodox Jews in the therapy room, JPSYCH and The Center for Anxiety are making connecting to Hashem, with all its proven mental health benefits — readily attainable.

"Learning to connect is a skill like any other. We can train ourselves to do it if we want to," explains Dr. Rosmarin. ■

*Devora (Greer) Shabtai is the clinical coordinator for The Center for Anxiety and a research assistant in the JPSYCH laboratory. She can be reached at devora@jpsych.com.*

