DON'T WORRY BE HAPPY
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A Frenchman, an Englishman, a German and a Jew are on a trip through the mountains. The Frenchman says he is so thirsty he must have a glass of wine; the Englishman, a cup of tea; the German, a pint of beer.

The Jew says he is so thirsty he must have diabetes.

Why do Jews worry so much?

Maybe all people worry, but honestly, I think our people have made it into a national pastime. Larry David of course turned Jewish worry and neurosis into a career.

But back to the question, why do Jews worry so much?

When I asked this question of a group recently one person suggested that it is because we have been persecuted for so long, it is the worriers who have survived. I call this Jewish Darwinism, only the neurotics survive.

Another said that Judaism's emphasis on personal responsibility promotes worry. With so many commandments we are literally commanded to worry that we might be violating one at any moment.

A more positive spin on this is that because the Torah and other Jewish texts encourage the idea that we can always do better, be better and make the world better, we have a sense that we're always falling short of expectations. As I have shared with you before one of the things that I admire so much about Judaism and the Jewish people is that we are eternally unsettled and dissatisfied.

Take any of the many worrisome headlines from the news during this pandemic. We all worry about the spread of this virus, whether we are flattening the curve, the immediate and long-term impact on the economy, our society. Many of us, stuck at hope in isolation read and watch every new piece we can and that too only leads to more worry, prompting more google searching for answers, and it becomes a feedback loop of worry. Worrying about worry, that too sounds awfully Jewish.

Many health experts have pointed out the compounding negative health impacts of this virus and our social distancing response. Not that we have any choice, without a vaccine or testing on a global scale our only choice is to do what we are doing, stay home, we all know that, and I think the vast majority accept it. But we also know that this is deepening the disease of loneliness and isolation that I spoke about on Kol Nidrei. We know that mental health incidents are up, that domestic violence is up. In China following the easing of stay at home orders in Wuhan Province divorce

lawyers were inundated with new clients. Each of these are diseases of worry as well, worry that we can't cope, can't get along, are being forgotten, ignored.

So what do we do? With so much to worry about where do we start and more importantly how does it end?

I would suggest three important Jewish considerations as we worry about worry.

First, we need to know and accept that a certain amount of anxiety in our lives is normal. It is part of life. We are shown this in the very first verse in the Torah:

"In the beginning . . . the earth was without form and void . . . and darkness was on the face of the deep . . . And G-d said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. G-d saw that the light was good, so G-d separated the light from the darkness . . . And it was evening, and it was morning, one day." (Genesis 1:1–5)

From this seminal passage we learn a great many things that should set our fears and worry at ease.

- Darkness preceded light. The unknown always comes before the known. Uncertainty before certainty.
- In order for light to exist, it had to be created. It didn't exist on its own. And even when light was created, it was still mixed together with darkness and had to be separated from it. At the heart of worry is reason that has been set aside or hidden in darkness, knowledge and wisdom can remove the darkest fears. We can gain knowledge; we can acquire wisdom.
- A full phase of revelation—"one day"—is complete only when it includes both darkness (evening) and light (morning).
- It is known that the darkest part of the night is just before the dawn. Often it is easy to think that life would be so nice, so easy, if it were simply smooth—a life filled with only light and no darkness. But just as on an EKG, the sign of life is a heartbeat that goes up and down . . . so too our lives have bumps in the road, and the ups and downs; peaks and valleys - are all a part of living. The question is not if there will be bumps, but rather how will we deal with those bumps when we hit them.

The second lesson from our tradition is that worry can be the precursor to action if we pay attention to it. Rabbi Isak Unna, an extraordinary rabbi who lived in the quite worrisome times of the first world war.

In a period ravaged by war, a Flu Pandemic of its own, suffering and widespread despair, it was vital to Rabbi Unna to identify the fundamental difference between pessimists and optimists.

Unna taught his community that the key contrast lay in how one understands the role of human beings in the world.

At their core, pessimists see themselves as passive recipients of fate, helplessly blown around by the winds of history. The pessimist is static, either fortunately receiving or being fatefully deprived of worldly happiness. In short, pessimism believes that human beings have no real control over their life. Thus, when faced with adversity, the pessimist will simply accept the world as it is, rather than seeing how the world ought to be.

Rabbi Unna taught that Judaism thoroughly rejected this pessimistic worldview in favor of true freedom which Judaism endowed upon every human being. Rather than seeing the world as a series of permanent and unalterable obstructions, Judaism views setbacks as opportunities for growth and as springboards to inspire achievement. While misfortunes are certainly painful and ought not to be ignored, they also present humanity with the prospect of progress and growth. The world is not a stagnant fixed conclusion, but an occasion brimming with infinite possibilities.

We need only look so far back as our Passover Haggadah from the past two night's Seders to hear echoes of this teaching in our master story of redemption from Egyptian bondage. Why retell that story year after year, because it is a story of resilience, of worry and dissatisfaction that led to faith and to action.

Yes in the story redemption comes from God and miracles, and still it was the Israelites that called out to God in their suffering and seeing the opportunity created by the moment rushed out of Egypt without even time for their bread to rise.

What is perhaps most interesting about Rabbi Unna's theory of optimism is that it is not based on blind optimism, the "Don't Worry Be Happy" approach to life. Rather a bright future can only be attained through hard work and by surmounting the considerable barriers that lay in wait. Worry is good Unna concluded if it leads one to action to not paralysis. In the case of COVID-19 worry has lead us to social distancing, to wash our hands more, to covering our cough, to making public health a public priority, and much more. All of these are good things; actions that are needed but only come as a result of worry that leads to rational action.

The responsibility is on each of us to locate meaning in the world and to strive towards that meaning. Rabbi Unna strongly believed that optimism particularly in the face of worry and fear made a positive future all the more attainable. He grounded this teaching in the Talmudic (Shabbat 31a) axiom requiring every human being to anticipate the redemption of the world. Once the foundation of hope was in place, all was possible. Rather than Don't Worry Be Happy, his teaching was, 'Don't Worry, You're Not Powerless, Therefore Do Something About It and You Will Be Happy,' because you can do something about your fears.' Granted that doesn't fit as easily on a t-shirt.

The third teaching is simple but so hard for us to do. Count your blessings. We have much to be grateful for in the midst of our worry. I think we would worry less if we focused on the blessings and not the curse.

Our zoom seders were not like the seders of every other night or year – but they had some unique blessings as well. Family could join from far away, our clean up was much easier, for many the stress of preparing was lessoned, we were permitted to have a shvach seder and attend in our sweatpants (night shirt and tie on top maybe)

The sages teach that, "one who enjoys the fruits of the earth without saying a blessing, it is as if that person has stolen from God." Have an attitude of gratitude, find the silver linings, say "thank you God" instead of, "Why can't you, won't you God…?"

How do you deal with worry in this worrisome time?:

1. Accept that a certain amount of uncertainty is normal, it is darkest before the light.
2. Let your worry spur you to action not to more worry – do something about it, take control of what you can, let go of what you can't
3. Recognize and acknowledge your blessings; find the silver lingings

The great Chassidic master Reb Nachman of Bratslav taught *Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar m'oad*. The whole world he said is a very narrow bridge. *v'hayikar lolefached klal.* But the most important part is not to be afraid.

We live in perilous times – we have since the dawn of creation – since God spoke and the world came into being. Its natural to worry, but let our worry spur us to action. If you are afraid of the dark, turn on a light.