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. Woody Allen of course turned Jewish worry in to 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 unsatisfied.

Take just one of the many worrisome headlines from the news of this past week or two, the scare of the spread of the Ebola Virus. The worry here is not confined to the Jewish community, in fact its not confined at all and that in the view of most health experts is more worrisome than the disease itself. Worrying about worry, that too sounds awfully Jewish.

I don't mean to make light of Ebola, in some ways, panic is justified. Ebola is a horrifying disease for which there is no cure. In West Africa, where the epidemic began, the number of cases has been soaring for eight straight months. As of this week, more than 10,000 cases have been confirmed and more than 4,000 lives lost. In the hardest hit regions, villages lack even the resources to stay hydrated and nourished. "If the international community does not stand up, we will be wiped out," a nurse told the world from Monrovia in Liberia.

But for the majority of the western world, the panic seems displaced and is far more deadly than the disease. Indeed health experts worry about just that, everybody panicking when they get the flu thinking it is Ebola, even though they have not travelled to Africa in the last 3 weeks nor exchanged bodily fluids with anyone who has will stretch the emergency system to a breaking point.

And yet we still worry, about Ebola, and about everything else.

And so what is the Jewish response to worry? I would suggest three important considerations as we worry about worry.

First, we need to know that a certain amount of anxiety in our lives is normal. It is part of life. We are shown this in the beginning passage of the Torah that we will read tomorrow morning:

"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).
- In the fifth verse of the Torah we read, *Vayikra Elohim la'or yom*, "And G-d called the light 'day.'" What this teaches us is that "day," which consists of both light and darkness, is the same word that is used for just light. This means that even though light and darkness may both exist, what is dominant and what defines the day is the light.
- 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 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 worry can be the precursor to action if we pay attention to it. Rabbi Isak Unna, an extraordinary rabbis who lived in the quite worrisome times of the first world war.

In a period ravaged by war, suffering and widespread despair, it was vital to Rabbi Unna identified the fundamental difference between pessimists and optimists.

Unna argued 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 man has no real control over his 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 pessimist 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 man with the prospect of progress and growth. The world is not a stagnant fixed conclusion, but an occasion brimming with infinite possibilities.

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.

The responsibility is on each of us to locate meaning in the world and to strive towards that meaning. Like the recent positive psychologists, Rabbi Unna strongly believed that optimism particularly in the face of worry and fear made a successful 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 Be Happy, Because you can do something about your fears.' Granted that doesn't fit as easily on a t-shirt.

The third teaching about worry comes not from Judaism but the times that we live in. Worry about what you can control and not what you can't.

Jeffrey Duchin, chairman of the public health committee of the Infectious Diseases Society of America made the following observation this past week. He observed, "People get very fearful and stressed out and have a lot of anxiety about things like Ebola that aren't a general health risk. But, just look at causes of death in the United

States. Everything is higher than Ebola, and there are things that we can do about many of them."

Duchin, a physician, moderated a panel of experts who discussed Ebola at the society's conference last week. These doctors sought to refocus attention on influenza, which lacks novelty but not potency.

Duchin also pointed out that between 2.7 and 5.2 million Americans are believed to be infected with the hepatitis C virus. Deaths related to it can range widely, from 17,000 to 80,000 annually, he said. There's a test for it. There's effective treatment. But the C.D.C. says that up to 75 percent of the people with the virus don't know they have it.

Stephen Morse, a professor of epidemiology at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, who appeared on the same panel added, "We have a lot of vaccine-preventable diseases and we see more and more people refusing to have their children take vaccines."

He was referring to outbreaks of measles and whooping cough in states and cities where parents have hallucinated a connection between immunizations and autism. They cling to this fiction in the face of scientific information to the contrary.

Both The Hollywood Reporter and Time magazine recently published accounts of anti-vaccine madness among supposedly educated, affluent Americans in particular. According to reports 57% parents of the children at a Beverly Hills preschool and of 68% percent at one in Santa Monica had filed personal-belief exemptions from having their kids vaccinated.

Such numbers, Baum wrote, "are in line with immunization rates in developing countries like Chad and South Sudan."

On CNN on Monday night, a Dallas pediatrician was asked about what she had advised the families she sees. She said that she urged them to have their children "vaccinated against diseases that we can prevent," and that she also stressed frequent hand-washing. Ebola or no Ebola, it's a responsible — and frequently disregarded — way to lessen health risks.

So are these: fewer potato chips. Less sugary sodas. Safer sex. Tighter restrictions on firearms. Anyone looking for an epidemic to worry and freak out about can find one right there, but those we can do something about – so why worry, just take personal responsibility.

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 be over things we can control and may it spur us to action. If you are afraid of the dark, turn on a light.