

How Has Anxiety Affected You, Your Family or the Jewish People?

Our second annual Elephant in the Room Essay Contest—in partnership with the Andrew Kukes Foundation for Social Anxiety—seeks to lessen the stigma surrounding anxiety by encouraging discussion of this important topic. The winning essays, plus finalists and selected excerpts, appear below.



WINNING ESSAY

For most of my life, I refused to buy into the stereotype of the anxious, neurotic Jew—not because I thought it wasn't true, but because I never thought it was a stereotype. To me, the Alexander Portnoys and Alvy Singers weren't mere caricatures, but instead accurate portrayals of the fearful, obsessive-compulsive Hebrew for whom even the slightest discomfort was cause for panic. As I struggled from age 10 with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and through my teens and twenties with panic attacks, depictions on TV, in film and in literature of Jews overwhelmed by worry legitimized my own neuroses and partially freed me from the self-loathing I felt for being afraid most of the time.

But if the racing heart, hyperventilation and gastrointestinal distress were expressions of a condition whose seeds were deeply rooted in my cultural and biological heritage, I wondered why the biblical record was less honest than contemporary pop culture about this pernicious malady afflicting my people. Didn't Abraham obsessively check to make sure his tent was locked before leaving for the land God promised to show him? Wasn't Joseph convinced he was having a heart attack while trapped in the cistern? Didn't Moses, drenched in flop sweat, consider canceling his audience with Pharaoh because he worried what would happen if the stick didn't turn into a snake? And that spontaneously burning bush—how could Moses have been sure the fire was really out once he was done talking to God?

In my thirties, I grew tired of heart palpitations induced by drives that were more than 10 minutes from home and weeks of stomach cramps preceding airplane trips. I desperately searched for solutions in the self-help section of Barnes & Noble, on DVDs of guided meditations and breathing exercises, in psychiatrists' offices and in prescription bottles. The

pills and the breathing offered much-needed relief from the incessant feelings of abject fear, and the psychiatrists offered relief from the discomfort of sitting on a wallet that was too thick. But learning that anxiety is a result of an untamed mind, and not of a cultural predisposition, was what truly liberated me. I understood that I could overcome the condition that for so many years I'd treated like a Jewish curse, whose symptoms could only be mitigated by an affinity with neurotic fictional characters. I realized that anxiety wasn't a Jewish thing, it was a human thing, and to celebrate it as a Jewish quirk was a disservice to the many who suffered from its sheer awfulness. Anxiety deserves no such respect, only the tenacious resolve to defeat it the way David bravely triumphed over Goliath, severing the giant's head and then probably obsessively washing his hands.

Uri Rosenrauch is a writer living in Staten Island, New York whose work has been featured in film and on television.

WINNING ESSAY

“Is everything okay?!” For as long as I can remember, this has been my mother's idea of a normal phone greeting. All the time. Every time. Which would make sense, had I conditioned her to respond thus by calling only for emergencies. But this is not the case; this catch-up call is routine.

Adrenals always on alert, she spirits me, against my will, into her covert world where anxiety rules, unacknowledged. She lives from the tacit, unsettling worldview of “Something must be wrong!” It's an unconscious, yet integral part of her. Growing up, I was bathed in this undercurrent of nervous energy.

She came by it honestly, my mother. “Is everything okay?!” This was the alarmist greeting that met my Zayda when he'd dutifully call his wife from every port

with a phone connection. Zayda, my mom's father, captained a small freighter that navigated the rough waters of Lake Superior. His was a risky business. If he harbored the anxieties of the immigrant with a precarious livelihood, it didn't show. In the course of his career, he risked his life numerous times to save others from certain death in those icy waters.

My grandmother, Meema, worried herself sick every time Zayda ventured out. Her coping strategy was to be the willing repository of worry. The irony, of course, is that if she didn't have something to worry about, she'd create it. My mother, steeped in this toxic environment, dutifully followed suit.

In me, this translated into unwitting rebelliousness—a need to find a different approach to face the world. I recalled reading somewhere that on a particular personality inventory, relatively high scores for depression and paranoia for Americans were considered normal for Israelis. That there is a higher threshold in a place of real and constant danger made intuitive sense to me. If I was destined to live with anxiety, I wanted mine tangible. I'd meet it head-on—in Israel.

My mother phones: “Is everything okay?!” It's January 1991. I'm walking around Jerusalem, gas mask in tow, awaiting the next Scud launch. Being in it was more manageable for me, as it had been for my Zayda before, and, ironically, less scary than for my mother thousands of miles away, her fear amplified—the unknown ever more menacing.

It was then that I found compassion for my mother. I wish she could experience what I've come to know: In moving toward those things we fear, fear dissipates. My life continues to confirm this. I now do my best to honestly confront those things that frighten me. In doing so, I leave a good chunk of the family fear legacy behind. My

daughter phones. “Hi, honey,” I answer. And with that, perhaps a new legacy is begun.

Amy Bearmon is a writer trained in counseling psychology who lives with her family in the Seattle area.

————— WINNING ESSAY —————

I drive around in the manner a stalker would, making sure I am not the first car to arrive but certainly, positively, never the last. If I am late, I just won't go in. I shouldn't feel this nauseous, anxious feeling, with sweaty palms on the steering wheel. It is just Shabbat services. It is just Shabbat services, I tell myself again, an audible reminder that it will all be fine. I park my car and exhale deeply. One last check: No, my dress isn't too short, no lipstick on my teeth, there is that one piece of unruly hair but I know I have a bobby pin somewhere. I rummage through my purse, breaking out in a cold sweat when I can't find it. That's it, get out of the car, I tell myself. I know that if I let it get to me, I will start up the engine and drive away.

Greetings are always pleasant, a hug and smile followed by “How are you?” I remind myself to use the word “well,” not the word “good.” “I am well, and yourself?” It rolls off my tongue perfectly rehearsed, followed by “Shabbat Shalom.” For a moment I feel like I have mastered the hardest part, if I can just find a seat and bury my nose in the bulletin.

I am not new to this temple. I know these people. But every Friday it's the same struggle. An internal battle. I always tell myself that I am glad I went, and I believe it, until it is time to go again.

Social anxiety makes me feel like a “bad” Jew. I can't always pull myself together to go or to get out of the car once I get there. I am not anti-social. I like people, and people like me, maybe because they don't know how hard it is for me to sit and have a coffee with them at the Oneg. Maybe it is hard for them, too. Maybe they weren't here last week because they drove away. But I know that probably isn't the case.

Jews are a collective group, but somehow I always feel like an outsider. But I am still Jewish, even if I don't make it to services or host Passover. I am still a Jew alone in my living room. And I need to remind myself and everyone of that when you haven't seen me for a while.

Lauren Schara is a writer living in Indiana who loves baking and aspires to travel more.

————— FINALIST —————

I was raised by a refugee from the Holocaust, who was raised by a refugee from pogroms. The terror my mother must have felt was

transmuted into relentless anxiety that attached itself to whatever was at hand. When real crises occurred, she handled them forthrightly; it was the ones that might occur that never stopped plaguing her.

Each time she left her apartment, my mother went back to make sure the stove was off, then recheck that the door was locked, usually more than once. Whenever I wanted to try a new activity, she knew someone who had either died or been severely injured by it. When I wanted to go camping, she informed me that a tree had fallen on her friend's nephew's tent. Even walking down the street might be life-threatening—the pharmacist, she reported, was almost hit by a large chunk of ice that came crashing off a building.

The letters I received when I went to college were not filled with anecdotes of the folks back home but with warnings not to ride on motorcycles. In the donut shop where my mother purchased coffee every morning, she asked the clerk to make sure the lid was on tight, twice. Every day.

How could I ever know what was dangerous and what wasn't? I see-sawed between heedless risk-taking and fear of almost everything. My zest for life and adventure was dampened by the potential for disaster that accompanied any action at all. Making a decision, even a minor one, became fraught with possible dangers that had to be carefully weighed.

On the other hand, I have never had my purse snatched because I learned how to cling to it so that the incipient thieves of the world can't get it. I have never been mugged, maybe because I'm always aware that everyone on the street could be dangerous. I have learned the term “catastrophize” and am still teaching myself that it does not have to be second nature to assume that someone is dead if they are more than 15 minutes late.

And now can we talk about depression?
Roz Leiser has worked as a nurse and a grief counselor. Her writing has been published in The San Francisco Chronicle and other publications, and she is currently at work on a memoir.

————— FINALIST —————

The rabbis of the Talmud were very astute observers of human health and behavior, and were well aware of the corrosive effect worry can have on the mind and body. Indeed, the Talmud seems to have anticipated modern psychosomatic medicine when it tells us, “Worry can kill; therefore let not anxiety enter your heart, for it has slain many a person.” We now know that, indeed, there is an increased risk of fatal coronary heart disease among patients with panic disorder and related conditions.

It's not surprising, then, that the Talmud



instructs us, “Do not worry about tomorrow's trouble, for you never know what the day will bring.” So far, so good. But then the rabbis add, “Maybe by the time tomorrow arrives you won't be here anymore, and you worried about a world that was not yours.” This sounds a bit like Woody Allen's contribution to the Talmud! Were the rabbis being deliberately paradoxical?

No, I think they were providing us with a way of gaining perspective. After all, if death can come at any time, why worry about “the small stuff,” like whether you'll get that new car, or meet the next tax deadline? By reminding us of our own mortality, the rabbis—like good therapists—were teaching us to focus on the things in life that really matter.

Ronald Pies is a psychiatrist who teaches at SUNY Upstate Medical University and Tufts University School of Medicine. He is the author of Becoming a Mensch: Timeless Talmudic Ethics for Everyone.

————— FINALIST —————

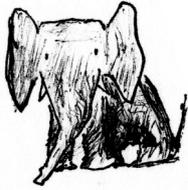
A few years ago, I went to see the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side of New York. An older couple asked me if my grandparents had lived in the neighborhood.

“No, my family came from Poland,” I said. “My parents came to the U.S. after the war.”

“Oh, your parents were survivors?” she asked. “Yes, of course,” I said.

There was a look of pity on her face. I'd seen that look before from American Jewish men and women of a certain age. I can well guess what it means: My family life must have been dark, without much joy and hope. Those looks of pity are, however, unnecessary. My parents loved a good story, a good meal, a good joke and a little too much schnapps on holidays. They weren't anxious. They were determined to live a good life. When my mother died, a Hasidic rabbi came to pay his respects. He said to me as he shook my hand, “*Don mameh iz geveyn a kriegער.*” My mother was a warrior. He was right. So was my father.

I'd like to posit that there are two major cultures that exist in Judaism today. There is the American-Jewish, urban, anxious culture depicted with great humor in movies, books and TV. Worry and fear seem



to be the main drivers in this culture. Quite frankly, I don't understand this culture. It's nothing I grew up with.

My parents survived World War II because they abandoned that culture. My father ended up in Stalin's Polish Red Army. My mother, with cunning and resourcefulness, lived through the war years in a gulag in Siberia. They were fighters. When a problem came up in my home, it was handled with efficiency and pragmatism. That's how I was taught to live. This is the culture not of anxiety, but of what is best expressed in Yiddish: the culture of *der shtarker*. It's a culture that demands all to show strength and be resolute. As my father told me time and time again when I was little and had to do something difficult, "*Shtark zich, shtark zich.*" Make yourself strong.

Like my parents and their friends who survived the war, Israelis follow this culture of swagger and strength. They associate the anxious culture of the pre-war Pale with weakness and, unlike American Jews, have very limited nostalgia for that time. I'm of the view that the culture of anxiousness—of fearing the next pogrom, of walking on eggshells—is of no value. My parents needed to move past it to live a productive life. The citizens of Israel needed to move on to create a new and vibrant country. It would be best if the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Jewish pre-war New York City tenements left it behind as well. *Stuart Rosb is a geophysicist, writer and musician. He is the author of the memoir Gone for Good: Tales of University Life After the Golden Age.*

EXCERPTS

My grandparents survived the Shoah. I grew up hearing bits and pieces of their past, but for the most part they tried to shield us kids from the details. We lived comfortable, blessed lives, and yet the one thing that they couldn't shield us from was what I call "the hum." The best way that I can explain the hum is that it is this underlying buzz of muted anxiety, rarely discussed, but ever-present. My grandmother, who has lived in Canada for 60 years, still needs to be cajoled into putting on her seat belt every time she gets into a car, and when she sits in a chair, she sits on the edge, readying herself to jump up if need be. The Gestapo isn't coming.

She knows that. We all know that... but the thought of being stuck, unable to escape at a moment's notice is unbearable to her. That anxiety is always there; it's the hum.

Cheryl Wunch, Evanston, IL

At simchas, we are fun-loving and carefree, dancing wildly to Latino beats, but don't let that hip-shaking fool you one bit. We are a neurotic, anxiety-ridden bunch of Cuban refugees.

My grandparents came to Havana in the 1920s and 1930s from Warsaw and a village near Pinsk that was Russian or Polish, depending on the day. They fled virulent anti-Semitism, conscription and poverty to start a new life in the Caribbean. Mom, her sister and her cousins were raised by hardworking immigrants who provided them with happy lives in a temperate climate. However, they were waiting, as we Jews seem to do, for the next disaster. It came to them in 1959 in the form of Fidel and the ideology he brought to the island. My parents' generation fled to the U.S., leaving behind everything, often including parents and siblings. My sister and I were raised to fear Fidel, communism and much more.

I recently became a yoga teacher, studying breathing and relaxation techniques, applying them to myself and my students. After all, I cannot stop Fidel, terrorism or hurricanes. I can only try to slow my racing heartbeat and impending panic attacks with pranayama, a backup prescription of Xanax and letting loose to the rhythm of salsa.

Miriam Bradman Abrahams, Woodmere, NY

When I think about anxiety, I think about my grandmother. When I was a teenager, she confided in me that everything really bad in her life she had never worried about, and all the bad things she did worry about never occurred. At the time, I thought her anxiety had prevented her from living life; she never remarried, she never learned to drive and she was always worried about my mom. Thus, I took her comment to mean that being anxious was bitterness for all the time she had wasted. However, my grandmother's comments were like the Torah, and in the re-reading (and maybe even with a little wisdom), I now believe that she was not complaining, but was telling me to live life and not let anxiety control it.

Todd Waldman, Virginia Beach, VA

As a child, I didn't know the word "anxiety," but I knew that my mom was full of worries. She worried about what we were eating, whether we had slept

enough and whether our homework was done. Her worry was contagious. I agonized over every wrong answer on my history test and wondered endlessly if I'd ever succeed at anything. I vowed that no matter what, when I became a mom, I would never subject my children to the overprotected childhood I had endured. I was going to be a carefree parent—the kind who let everyone traipse over the beige carpeting with dirty shoes on and didn't care if her kids played in the snow without gloves and a scarf. Fast forward about 20 years. It's three o'clock in the morning and I'm rocking my week-old son to sleep in our dark living room. In the few days since he's been home, I've called the doctor three times with questions and consulted ten different parenting websites to find out if I'm bathing him properly. It's clear that I've inherited a little of my mother's worried streak. But it's also clear to me now why she worried as much as she did—she probably felt the overwhelming desire to protect me that I now feel toward my little boy.

Shira Forman, New York, NY

The realities of my anxiety-driven "drug problems" and an abortive college career constitute an "elephant in the room" in and of themselves. When combined with my criminal record of seven felonies and six misdemeanors, I become an "elephant man," something barely recognizable to an ultra-liberal, highly educated upper-middle-class Jewish family.

The anxiety attacks begin when I get out of bed. How many I will have during a given day depends on a number of factors: how long the day will be, the number of tasks to be completed, the relative importance of completing these tasks properly, and whether I have to drive or not. If I need to drive, I limit my dose of clonazepam to an amount that will hold off withdrawal symptoms without impairing my motor skills and reaction time. This dosage does little or nothing to lower my anxiety level.

While I can still speak openly with my mother and father, and gratefully accept their seemingly infinite capacity for forgiveness and generosity, and communicate with a similar candor with one sympathetic aunt, I rarely see or hear from the rest of the family, immediate and extended. On the rare occasions when I find myself in contact with any of them, no one speaks to me or questions me about these things, and I volunteer nothing; it's "don't ask, don't tell." The elephant is in the room.

Dan Mage, Oakland, CA