

# A worrying thought

It's mad what we worry about, and what we don't worry about.

Is Alfred E Neuman Jewish? His creators at *Mad* magazine – “the usual gang of idiots” – certainly were. But Alfred himself? I don't know. His cheesy grin and carefree motto has always worried me. After all, “What, me Worry?” which later became “What? Me Worry?” does not exactly describe the universal Jewish condition.

Jews worry. That is what we do. Yes, I know that Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, he of the Na-Nach-Nachma- Nachman graffiti all over Israel, has taught us that “It's a great mitzvah always to be happy – B'simcha Tamid”. But my impression, and I may well be wrong on this one, is that it's a mitzvah observed more in the breach.

And that worries me too. But my worries are as naught compared to those which 155 of the world's most renowned scientists, artists and thinkers have expressed in a book: *What “Should” We Be Worried About? – Real Scenarios that Keep Scientists Up at Night* (Harper Collins). The book was published in January, but it worried me so much that I couldn't bring myself to write about it. Until now. Come December, however, I figured that enough time had elapsed, and that it would be good to share my worries with *The AJN's* readers.

For some years now, John Brockman, the founder of the think tank/website [www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org) has asked the world's “best and brightest” intellectuals a question, and then put the answers together in a book. So in 2010 it was: *How is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?* And in 2007 *What are You Optimistic About?*

Now we have the 2013 rejoinder where the thinkers worry about the impact of technology on our minds and relationships, China's birth rate, scarce water resources, and the death of mathematics. Inter alia. Some writers were especially provocative. Thus I was profoundly shaken by Lee Smolin, a physicist who began: “I worry that we don't really understand quantum phenomena.”

Or consider the views of Seth Shostak, a distinguished astronomer: “... There are serious scientists who worry that Armageddon could soon be headed our way – an attack by malevolent extra-terrestrial beings.”

Hmm. Except that if there are indeed serious scientists who stay awake at night worrying about that, they may want to see one of the other contributors, psychiatrist Joel Gold, whose biggest worry is that “morbid anxiety” is affecting hundreds of millions around the world.

Not surprisingly, many of the worried thinkers are Jewish.

## Partisan



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Disproportionately so. By which I don't mean that the Jews worry disproportionately. Although they do. Just that there are more of them quoted in the book. That's not said to be chauvinist, or to make a value judgement, but merely to cite some data. Among the better known Jewish contributors I enjoyed reading were the physicist Haim Harari, former President of the Weizmann Institute of Science; David Gelernter, Yale computer scientist and Dan Sperber, a French expert on cognition.

We may worry, but we are also the people of hope.

As with quite a few contributors, Sperber is worried that we worry about the wrong things, “misplaced worries” as he calls them, and that we are becoming less able to distinguish between what we should really worry about, and those worries that will do more harm than good.

We worry about the internet, social media, genetic engineering, and intelligent robots. We worry about terrorism and war and technology's threat to liberal democracy. There are enough atomic, chemical and biological weapons to destroy the world many times over.

As I read him, Sperber's views on some matters would not sit easily within traditional Jewish theology about the after-life. But his conclusion on the “misplaced worries”, is very Jewish. He compares it to riding a boat in the rapids which we can't control and which it's pointless to try to slow down, “not because safety is guaranteed and optimism justified – the worst could still happen – but because there is no better option than hope.”

Yes, very Jewish. We may worry, but we are also the people of hope. I wish I could end on that note, or maybe with another throwaway line about *Mad* magazine. But I can't.

Because here's my main worry. The one that keeps all too many Israelis awake at night. Unless I missed it among 155 of the world's leading minds, not one of them, Jewish or otherwise, was worried about the very real and concrete threat to Israel – but not just to Israel – of a nuclear armed Iran, driven by an ideology of terror and destruction.

Against that reality, hope is not enough.

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