Don't worry – Be happy!
Natan P.F. Kellermann, 2018

When we feel down and out, we may hear someone say: “Don’t worry. Be happy!”

But we still feel miserable.

Perhaps we have also said these words to someone. We just wanted to cheer them up, to give them hope that everything is going to be fine. Or, just because we didn’t know what else to say.

These words are also repeated in the famous song by Bobby McFerrin which he quoted from the Indian mystic Meher Baba: *In every life we have some trouble. When you worry you make it double.* And then he repeats it again and again: “Don’t worry, be happy!”

It’s as if repeating this Mantra again and again, it will finally sink in.

Does it?

Will anxious people stop worrying just because someone tells them to?

Will sad people become happy just because they are told to?

Really?

Similar well-meaning words of advice are readily available. They tell us to get busy, to get a dog, to do exercise, not to be alone, not to think about it anymore, to rely on God’s mercy, or just to drink a glass of water.

When that doesn't help, they try to make us feel better by telling us that many others are much worse off than we, and that we should know better than feeling sorry for ourselves.

But the words don't sink in. We still worry. And we still do not feel happy.

In the face of trauma and loss, people tell one another all these things.
But for the person listening, it’s all very frustrating to hear, especially when we are tormented by terror and feel that the end of the world is all around us.

Even though there is no comfort in these recommendations, the chorus line is repeated again and again: “Don’t worry. Be happy!”

As if worrying and happiness was a choice.

Some say that if we only stop thinking about it, if will get better.

But whatever is bothering us is always on our minds.

Oh, I wish they could at least remain silent.

It’s almost like hearing *May the Force be with you!* from the film Star Wars.

When the Force has disappeared, however, we need something else.

But what?

If we have had a bad experience, should we not be upset?

If we survived a natural disaster, a famine or a war, should we not worry and be sad?

To trauma survivors, most well-meaning advice doesn’t make much difference.

Nothing anyone ever said really helps to undo what was done.

Coming from those who have *not* ‘been there’ and *not* ‘seen that’, the words become nonsense rhetoric.

When emotions are the main thing that troubles us, we need to find a way to express it. If it has built up for a long time, and is threatening to suffocate us, we need to find a way to let it out.

We need to be who we are, feel what we feel, and think what we want for as long time as is needed.

Rather than getting advice, we need to feel understood, supported, validated.
But there are no magic formulas that can promise us that if we only do this or that, everything will be just fine.

A few years ago, I participated in a seminar on trauma therapy in Jerusalem with some ‘experts’ in the field who tried to summarize what we had learned about the best practices for trauma survivors. We presented different kinds of ‘evidence-based’ therapies, abbreviated with a few letters, such as EMDR, CBT, ACT, PE, NLP, PD, PMT, etc. and explained how they worked with the help of studies from neurobiology.

At one point, Leah Balint (a child survivor of the Holocaust) voiced her own understanding on the subject. She shared the story of a fellow survivor who was weeping heavily after recalling the loss of her parents during the war. Leah suggested that the woman take a hot shower with a lot of body lotion and ensured us that it was immediately effective.

We first smiled at one another and teasingly called this ‘the Leah Lotion remedy’ because, after all, it can’t be so simple. Later, however, I reflected that there was a profound message to her story.

It’s of course impossible to come to terms with things that are lost forever. So, what else can we do, except to take a shower and go on with our lives?

It may even be another way of saying; ‘Don’t worry, be happy!’ without actually using those words.

When nothing will ever be the same again, life still goes on.

It will be an incomprehensible journey. It’s sometimes short, sometimes long, sometimes a life time – and then we may suddenly find ourselves ‘on the other side’ without really understanding how we got there.

It will include many hot showers.

With time, the words of Meher Baba may become our own inner voice. We may suddenly stop to worry about the future, think less about the past and even start to enjoy the hot shower in the present.