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"Does Jewish anxiety have a theological basis?"

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

There is an old story that tells how God shopped around the Torah from one nation to another before finally giving it to the Israelites. God first went to the tribe of Esau. They asked, "What is in the Torah?" When told that one of the commandments was "Thou shalt not murder" they turned God down. "We couldn't take on that rule," they said. "We live by our sword." And on it went, from one people to another. Each refused it for one reason or another.

God was not pleased by this round of constant rejections. In fact, it was getting God frustrated, tired and angry. So God decided to take a different approach when he came to the Israelites. Rather than give the people a chance to find out what was inside, God lifted up Mt. Sinai over their heads and said, "Will you take my Torah? If not, I'll drop the mountain on you." Immediately the people said, "We accept." And in that same moment, Jewish anxiety was born. And subsequently passed down, like alcoholism in a dysfunctional family, from generation to generation. God was scary and intimidating. Obey or else.

Secular Jews have broken this pattern. We have freed ourselves from fear of a bullying God. But that doesn't mean we are freed of anxiety. One doesn't need to believe in a supernatural deity to know that the world will always be a very frightening place.