In 1913, a writer of children’s literature named Eleanor Porter wrote a book called *Pollyanna*. Pollyanna is a young orphan who goes to live in Vermont with her cruel aunt. Pollyanna’s philosophy of life is a robust optimism that she had learned from her father called “The Glad Game.” Whatever happens to you in life, however dark or disappointing, look hard, and you can find something that will make you glad. One Christmas Pollyanna was hoping for a doll. Instead, she received a pair of crutches. Don’t be sad that you got crutches instead of a doll, her father taught her. Rather, be glad that you don’t need to use the crutches. The Glad Game.

Pollyanna takes the Glad Game with her to her cruel aunt’s home. When the auntpunishes Pollyanna for being late to dinner by sentencing her to bread and milk in the kitchen with the servant, Pollyanna plays the Glad Game, and is happy because she likes bread and milk and she likes the servant. Her unbridled optimism is put to the test when, one day she is hit by a car and loses the use of her legs. After some initial discouragement, Pollyanna is able to play the Glad Game and be glad that she once had legs. The novel ends with Pollyanna regaining the use of her legs, and learning to walk again, ever glad for her recovery.

The Glad Game. There is something, in every situation, to be glad about. This sickly sweet message has given rise of course to the adjective Pollyannish, which stands for an optimism that is not realistic, not helpful, which leaves us exposed to a hard world that is not worthy of, and that will ultimately crush, our innocence. It is possible to get optimism wrong.
I have been thinking about the perils of unfounded optimism in light of a story Daniel Kahneman tells in his new book *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Living in Israel at the time, he was meeting with officials in the Israeli Ministry of Education every Friday afternoon for a year about the need for a curriculum to teach judgment and decision making in Israeli high schools. After a year’s worth of weekly meetings, Kahneman asked his colleagues: take a scrap of paper, and write down your best estimate of how long it would take for us to complete a textbook. Most estimates came in at 2 years. In fact, it actually took 8 years for the book to be completed, by which time Kahneman was no longer living in Israel, the initial enthusiasm for the project had long since dissipated, and the book was never used.

Kahneman uses this story to illustrate what he calls the “planning fallacy:” namely, things always take much longer, and are much more costly and complicated, than we initially assume. Our optimistic forecasts not accurate and not helpful. You know this if you have ever done a kitchen renovation. It always takes longer and costs more than you initially project. Kahneman cites a survey of American homeowners who remodeled their kitchens who fell prey to the planning fallacy. They expected the job to cost about $18,000, and it ended up costing on average over $38,000. It is easy to get optimism wrong.

Kahneman’s critique of unfounded optimism, our discomfort with Pollyanna’s Glad Game, made me reflect on optimism. It may be easy to get it wrong. But isn’t it helpful when we get it right? Isn’t a well founded optimism in fact necessary to get through life’s ups and downs? One of the reviewers of Kahneman’s book, Jim Holt, in the New York Times review last Sunday, observed “Optimists are more psychologically resilient, have stronger immune systems, and live longer on average than their more reality-based counterparts.” We don’t want to be Pollyanna, that is true. But we also don’t want to be Debbie Downer, that memorable character
from Saturday Night Live played by Rachel Dratch who plays the Sad Game. She sees what is sad in every occasion. Once, she is at an engagement party, and her friend shows off her new diamond ring, and Debbie Downer laments how many diamond workers had to lose their lives when searching for that diamond ring. Or, at a Thanksgiving dinner, she wonders out loud how many chemicals and antibiotics have been ingested by the turkey we are eating.

How do we find the sweet spot between Pollyanna and Debbie Downer?

This morning we encounter the story of Jacob in the full bloom of his adulthood. Jacob has one crucial thing in common with every one of us. His life is a mixed bag. He has much blessing in his life. In our portion this week he ends up marrying Leah and Rachel and Bilha and Zilpa. He becomes the father of twelve sons and his daughter Dina. He becomes a man of immense wealth, acquiring flocks and herds from his father in law Laban. And he has much sorrow in his life. He lives in exile, broken relationships with his parents Isaac and Rebecca. He knows that he stole the blessing from his brother Esau, who has vowed to kill him. And later in his life, he comes to believe that his son Joseph has died, and he mourns him for more than 20 years.

What do we make of a life which contains both blessing and sorrow, sometimes in voluminous amounts, at the exact same time? Here is what Jacob does. When he goes down to Egypt and learns that his son Joseph is not only still living, but thriving, second in power only to the Pharaoh, Jacob says to Pharaoh: me’at v’raim hayu shenai chayii v’loh hisigu et yemai shenai chayii avotai, the years of my life have been few and hard, nor do my years measure up to the years of my fathers. It is easy to get optimism wrong, and here Jacob gets it wrong by erring on the side of Debbie Downer. He doesn’t see his 13 children. He doesn’t see his immense
personal growth as a patriarch. He doesn’t see the women he has loved, and who loved him. He
doesn’t see that his son Joseph is still alive. He sees few and hard.

What happens to Jacob happens to us, all the time. We can’t see what is right with our
lives because our eyes and hearts are focused on what is wrong. We can’t see the blessing
because our eyes and hearts are focused on the sorrow. We look at our Shabbat table, or at our
Thanksgiving table last week, and some loved ones are thriving, and other loved one are
languishing. What do we do with that? We dance at the wedding of one child who has found
their beloved, and is happy as can be, but another child is lost and looking and lonely and not
happy. What do we do with that? It is said that parents are only as happy as their least happy
child. But what about receiving the happiness of the happier children? We see the problem of
the mixed bag everywhere. Our wealth is okay, but our health is not. Our health is okay, but our
wealth is not. What do we do with that?

I have found something that is personally very helpful to me in trying to figure out how
to get optimism right. We say that God is yotzer or u’voreh choshech, oseh shalom u’voreh et
hakol, God creates light and darkness, God is found in the texture of our totality. Every day,
with all the good and all the challenge, with all the blessing and all the sorrow, I am going to
make the most of this day, which comes around only once.

If you live with that kind of principled optimism, renewed daily, there is no telling how
much good you can do with your life. I have a niece named Nadine who lives in Teaneck, New
Jersey, in a very Orthodox community, where it was the norm in that world for girls to start
marrying as early as 18 and 19. Nadine didn’t get married at 18 or 19. In fact, throughout her
20s she did not have the mazal of finding the right man. Meanwhile, all of her friends got
married. Her older sister got married. Her younger brother got married. She danced at a
hundred weddings, literally, just not her own. To be married was something she deeply wanted, and yet it was not happening. What is it like to dance at somebody else’s wedding, not you own, over and over again.

And then her friends started having children. One child. Two children. Three children. Her older sister had three cute boys in quick succession. Her younger brother had a son. She was going to everybody else’s brit milah, but her own life was somehow stuck in neutral.

Now there was good in her life. She had a job that she loved and was wonderful at, doing occupational therapy in the New York public schools. She had a community and family and friends that loved her. She had her health. And she didn’t have the husband she would have wanted. Yotzer or u’voreh hoshech, light and darkness, all at the same time.

What is the right optimism to have in such a circumstance? Here is what she did. She went on date after date. Literally, she kept trying, and she never gave up. She worked with matchmakers, she worked with anyone who could recommend an eligible date. She went on 157 bad dates. 157 nights that ended badly. 157 times she came home, where she lived with her parents, and said not my time yet. But she never gave up.

And then, on the 158th date, she finally met her match, the man she married last Tuesday night in Brooklyn. He is a sweetheart and a mensch, and they are so happy and radiant together. She weathered 157 disappointments, but at the age of 29 she stood with her chatan under the chuppah, joy had found them, belatedly but profoundly.

There will always be light, there will always be darkness, and they will always converge on us at the same time. Each of us will have our own version of the 157 bad first dates, the 157 times things did not work out. But it is not Pollyannish to say keep on hoping, keep on working, because after 157 hard times, the 158th time is coming. Shabbat shalom.