

Freeing One Another From the Shackles of Mental Illness

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Dedicated to the memory of Alec Becker, z"l

I first met Kate, sitting in front of Glatt Mart
– a kosher grocery
at the intersection of Pico Blvd and Shenandoah St. in Los Angeles. From time to time, people
would drop coins in Kate's paper cup,
or bring her a bag of snacks from the store.
But most ignored Kate, and looked away, as I did,
trying to hide my discomfort.

The Pico-Robertson neighborhood where Rachel and I lived
is home to an eclectic community of Jews –
it's busy, crowded, and full of grit.
The bustling city soundtrack woke us up on many nights:
fire engines, police cars, helicopters, and impatient drivers.
Other noises accented the city's rhythm, too:
A family arguing through the widow across the street;
two men from the shul next-door
shouting at each other in Hebrew or Farsi;
the squeaky wheels of a homeless man's shopping cart.
And every so often, we startled awake from a woman's mournful cries, or a shouting manic
monologue, coming from the middle of the street. That was Kate.

Having witnessed the episodic symptoms of her illness
from my second-floor balcony,
my instinct was to steer clear
as I pushed my son's stroller past the grocery store
in the early morning hours.
That was the extent of our interaction
until one day she smiled at me like a friend, and said,
"Wow, your son is growing so big!"
I stopped and we made small talk –
we learned each other's names.
She was thoughtful and kind.
She loved kids.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development reports that, 45% of adults
experiencing homelessness in America
also suffer from a mental illness.¹

¹ <https://www.bbrfoundation.org/blog/homelessness-and-mental-illness-challenge-our-society>

Schizophrenia, bipolar and anxiety disorders,
and unshakable addictions are the most prevalent forms
of mental illness plaguing our homeless population.²
We recognize these individuals every day
—on the streets of LA —
at the corner of Central and Walnut Hill.

For many of us, when we hear the term mental illness, we picture Kate.
A man or woman covered in the grime of the city,
struggling in public view, a human being we pity or ignore.
We often turn away - because we're afraid,
because we think we aren't at risk,
because we're in control of our lives and resist drugs,
because it's too hard to imagine ourselves in her shoes.
This could not be farther from the truth.

Helping people who struggle with mental illness on our streets
should of course be a priority,
but we miss the breadth of this human crisis
when we associate emotional disorders with only one population.
Homeless individuals who have a mental illness
represent about 0.1% of the US population.
But in each of the past three years—
20% or 1 in 5 adults in the United States suffered from mental illness,
and 1 out of every 6 youth between ages 6-17
experienced a mental health disorder.³
1 in 5 adults; 1 in 6 youth.
Long before we knew anything about the COVID-19 pandemic,
we faced another epidemic...the epidemic of mental illness.

Mental illness doesn't just exist on the street corners of our cities
and in hospital psych wards.
It is common, painful and isolating.
And sometimes, unimaginably tragic
right in our own homes and lives.
Just consider:
suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death
among people ages 10-34, and the 10th overall for adults.⁴

² http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/Mental_Illness.pdf

³ <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

⁴ <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/when-depression-terminal-illness-deliberative-suicide-chronic-mental-illness/2016-06>

In our community we've lost sons and daughters,
brothers, and sisters, parents too.
We have mourned them in this very sanctuary.
Our students. Our friends. Our family.

The loved ones we've lost to mental illness weigh heavily on our souls.
And amidst the pain,
the shock of these wounds has the power to help us learn.
We learn something about the power of mental illness,
that even with the best of the best:
a loving support system of family and friends,
and the most skilled medical and psychological experts and institutions
...that some mental illnesses are terminal.

And more, we learn how vital it is to see those who suffer
and not look away: We see them...

By breaking down stigmas.

By talking openly with one another, instead of whispering behind our hands.

By holding each other up with compassion and empathy.

Let us become a community where seeking help for mental illness
or simply support for day-to-day stress is normal, and not shameful.

We live in a society where we fear conversations about mental health.
This fear also pervades our Jewish community,
where our members can experience
indifference, judgment, and shame.

Some time ago I had a conversation with a parent in our community.
The parent shared with me how their teen
would be moving out of state to a residential school for treatment
and how humiliating this was for the family.
I responded, "I want you to know you aren't alone. There are other families in this situation."
The parent said, "that's just it – all we feel is that we are alone."
I have tried walking into Temple and I turn away.
I am afraid of the whispers and the judgment.

These feelings are totally valid.
We have yet to normalize mental illness
and the conversations surrounding the upkeep of mental health.
We can begin to change this paradigm by placing mental health alongside all of the other
awesome complexities of human health.
As our healing prayer, *mi shebeirach l'holim*, reminds us:

we ask for God's help to restore body *and* spirit .⁵

As one study explains,
“Everyone has mental health, just as we all have physical health.”⁶
Exercise is one way of maintaining physical health,
so is seeing a doctor,
going to the dentist,
or eating healthy foods.
These actions are familiar –
we discuss them at the dinner table,
on social media, and at the office.

Maintaining mental health
requires a different set of habits and expertise.
Getting enough rest, practicing meditation, taking time outdoors...
but seeing a therapist or psychiatrist?
or perhaps taking medication? – now we feel exposed.
Should that be the case?

46%, nearly half of us, will experience a mental illness in our lifetime,
just as many of us will endure physical illnesses like cancer, or heart disease, too.⁷
Unexpected events also impact our mental well-being
for a period of time, not unlike a season ending sports injury.
Consider the grief that follows the death of a loved one.
We struggle with this trauma
and process it through stages of ups and downs,
through personal growth, through adaptation and memory.
Along the path there are days
when we believe we'll never recover,
and other days when our swollen emotions subside and we carry on.

Right now, Covid-19 directly challenges our mental well-being.
The scope of the pandemic feels overwhelming,
but its universality presents an unparalleled opportunity
for us to address the cultural stigmas and assumptions
we make about mental health care.
Suddenly, everyone faces an obstacle to mental health.

⁵ With thanks to Rabbi Dusty Klass and Rabbi Leah Citrin Nelson for reminding me of this framing in their sermon, “Shmirat Hanefesh and Tikkun HaGuf: Cultivating Mental Health” YK 5778.

⁶ <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/q-and-a/whats-the-difference-between-mental-health-and-mental-illness>

⁷ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

During the pandemic:
we're all grieving social connection and feel stuck in isolation,
we all stand a chance of contracting a serious physical illness.
We share similar worries about the unknown path ahead.
Each parent feels the stress of child-care needs and school,
each worker questions whether his or her job will last,
and so many of us worry about those
who are most susceptible to the virus.

We can begin to change negative perceptions
about mental illness and emotional distress
by observing how we're supporting each other right now.
Countless Facebook groups allow parents
to voice their kids' struggles at home and seek advice.
At Temple we have support meetings
for people who have been laid-off,
and for teachers who are struggling with how to begin school.
We've increased the frequency
of small group conversations around current crises.
Our lay leaders contacted every one of our households by phone.
Our message is that we are here for you, to listen, to help, to be together in this time of real
stress.

But pandemic response aside,
our community can be stronger
if the parents, whose child engages in self-harm,
or the widower, who experiences deep despair
could reach out for support without feeling judged.
Imagine if we felt comfortable asking our friends
for phone numbers of their therapists
or of the resource centers they've used,
just as we share our pediatrician's name?
What would it be like to walk into Shabbat services
(God willing again someday!) and not feel embarrassed
when our eyes well up with tears during prayer?
What would it be like to trust that when others see us in distress,
they see us – rather than imagining our problems?

Talmud Berachot 5b⁸ guides us in this direction,
through a series of accounts of our sages
who lift each other up from bouts of depression.
The scene opens as Rabbi Yochanan

⁸ adapted.

finds his student in the corner of a room, suffering and afflicted.
Rabbi Yochanan sits with him and asks if he wants to be ill.
The student responds,
“I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward...”
Then Rabbi Yochanan asks for the student’s hand,
the student reaches back, and Rabbi Yochanan lifts him up.
It seems straightforward enough...

But soon, Rabbi Yochanan, himself falls ill.
Rabbi Hanina comes to him and asks Yochanan if he wants to be ill.
He, too, responds,
“I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward.”
Rabbi Hanina says, “give me your hand.”
Yochanan reaches out, and Hanina lifts him up restoring him to health.

The Talmud poses a logical question,
If Rabbi Yochanan had the power
to lift up and heal his student from depression,
why wasn’t he able to cure his own depression?
Why did he need Rabbi Hanina’s help?
To this the Talmud powerfully answers:
A prisoner cannot free himself from prison,
but depends on others to release him from his shackles.

Some of us who have experienced mental illness,
know what it feels like to be blamed for our condition.
“Why doesn’t she get some help?”
“If he would only get out of bed, he would feel better.”
No wonder we think twice
before asking our supervisor for a mental health day.
Blaming doesn’t help someone who’s suffering.
Instead we can listen more and avoid giving unsolicited advice.
We can be respectful of differences and be present with others.
We carry the keys to release each other
from the isolation, shame, and despair of mental illness.

Over the years, Temple has begun to open the door
to this type of support through our Mental Well-being Initiative,
led by our Sukkat Shalom lay leaders, Rabbi Ross and Meredith Pryzant.
As I shared earlier, one way we’re dealing with the pressures of the pandemic
is by gathering small groups to practice supportive listening.
Like Yochanan and Hanina, we offer a hand to one another.
If you need support, or would like to be involved,
please let any of us know.

While this work has brought success,
it will take all of us to change our culture-
to confront today's stigmas and feelings of shame.
We will see change...
when our instinct is to know the person for who they are
and not for their illness.
We will see change...
when we are comfortable and not ashamed to ask for help.
We will see change...
when we start to view those who are struggling with mental illness
as survivors rather than victims.

Over the last century,
the Jewish community traversed a long and painful path
from the terror of the Holocaust
to an era of vibrant American Jewry and a thriving State of Israel.
In the early years, the Shoah's trauma on individuals
was something many survivors buried beneath thick,
painful layers of memory.
For at least a generation,
and especially early on in the State of Israel,
we viewed Shoah survivors as unsuspecting victims –
as people who couldn't or didn't free themselves.
We learned this was the wrong response.⁹

Such a critique is a far cry from the *kavod*,
the honor we bestow on survivors today.
For decades now, we've treated Shoah survivors
as revered teachers of our community –
we've helped them share their stories.

People who suffer from mental illness
or struggle with an unexpected trauma
experience great pain and anguish.
They too are survivors,
struggling to live
with perceived insurmountable and pervasive threats
to their well-being.
When we are actively present with them in their struggles,
we help them unlock the shackles of isolation, shame, and despair.

⁹ see: Hannah Arendt: [Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil](#)

If I could go back today to the intersection
of Pico Blvd and Shenandoah St.,
I hope I would make different choices.
I wouldn't wait 4 years to learn Kate's name.
I would try to learn her story,
and I would work to confront my own fear.
I would find a way to see if she wanted help.
I would try to listen.

On this day of communal reckoning - the gates are still open.
Here we walk through an alphabet of woe –
but our shame is tempered by the presence of community
as we publicly confess our wrongdoings and missteps.
The spiritual openness we allow ourselves this day,
holds the power to help us see each other the rest of the year.
Our teshuva will feel complete
when we become more compassionate towards those in need
and more vulnerable with one another about our own suffering.

We change our culture
when we care for mental health
with the same respect we have for physical health.

We create a more holy community
when we take notice of those who suffer,
when we see rather than judge.

We honor the survivors of mental illness sitting next to us
when individuals and families
no longer feel alone in their struggle.

And we begin to bear the loss
of our sons and daughters,
our brothers and sisters, and our parents
who have died from mental illness,
when their testimonies teach us to talk openly and honestly,
when their legacies inspire us to build systems of support
for mental well-being
into the everyday fabric of our
schools, synagogues, and homes.

The gates are still open.

God's hand will open to us.

May we do so for one another
in a new year of blessing, healing and peace.

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