

“Mental Health: It’s No Shanda”
Rabbi Rachael Jackson
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The other day I was playing hide and seek with Adrian and we were having a great time. Now I love my child and I think he’s amazing at many things; this game is not one of them. He giggles when you’re close to finding him. Or he’ll say in his best rascal voice “you’ll never find me in here.” Not to mention his hiding places are less than stellar. Like under the open dining table or with toes sticking out from under a blanket in the middle of the room. One time it was my turn to hide and I wanted to demonstrate the intricacies of the game. So I hid in a dark room behind a mostly-open door. I made no noise, no indication that I was there. And I got lonely. And he gave up looking for me. Eventually, he recruited Danyul to help him. We found our way back together. He looked up at me and said, “I missed you, where did you go?” I replied, “I didn’t go anywhere, I was just hiding, but I’m back now.” We then switched over to playing Uno.

This is what depression can feel like. The agony of wanting someone to find you, but feeling like everyone has given up. The loneliness of isolation. The darkness. The feeling like there is a door in front of you, but there is no way to get out. But with the help of others, it is possible to extricate yourself from the suffocating disease.

Our society is slowly and finally coming to grips with the reality that depression has a hold on a great deal many people. It is one of many, such as anxiety, Post traumatic stress syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, bipolar, schizophrenia, which we are recognizing as treatable. We no longer categorize people as having “hysteria” or just “the blues.” But we still have a long way to go with them being fully accepted and out of our control, with no shame and stigma attached.

Think of physical health diseases. For the most part, we no longer use leeches or bloodletting to treat our ailments. We have anesthesia, we have antibiotics and vaccines, We have insulin to treat diabetes, chemotherapy to treat cancer.

And on the cutting edge of medical treatment is gene-targeted therapy—using the particular genome of a person to fight the illness. We’ve come so far with the way we treat physical disease, the future looks bright.

Yet, as we continue our advancement in treating physical health, it’s also time to shift our focus to issues of mental health. Presently, we talk about mental health like we used to talk about cancer...it’s deadly and impolite to discuss in public. But mental health is real and we know there are treatments for the majority of people. Depression is real. But we don’t talk about it. How can we bring depressions, PTSD, OCD, and other mental health issues into the light?

I propose that we provide each other with a toolbox, a mental health kit if you will. There are three steps: recognizing there is an issue, finding the resources to get the help that we need, and finally opening up to family and friends so we may ask for and receive the support that we desire and deserve.

So let's recognize one of the problems around mental health: let's recognize the silence. We even have a Yiddish word for it: *Shanda*, or shame. Let's try to erase that word from our consciousness when it comes to mental health. It's interesting that it even exists in this context because the Jewish tradition has known about some of these conditions since the time of the Bible.

For example after the death of King David, the new hero of the bible was Elijah. A miracle maker, we see that he is able to revive a boy thought to be dead, he is able to defeat the 50 false prophets of Baal, and yet even he is not free from torment. After his great victory against the prophets of Baal, Elijah is told that the queen, Jezebel, wants to kill him. Instead of fighting, his reaction is quite curious. We are told, "When he heard that, he arose, and ran for his life, he came to Beer-sheba." Okay, so far so good, but then we read this, "He left his servant there and he went a day's journey into the wilderness by himself.

He came and sat down under a broom-tree; and he asked to die; he said: 'It is enough; now God, take away my life.'"

What is this? Eliyahu is ready to give up, ready to die? But he has great victories, he performs miracles. Yes, he is able to work miracles, but he is constantly on the outside. Yes, he speaks to God. But that causes him to feel alone, to feel cut off from the rest of his people living around him. He feels like there is no one who can comfort him, so he waits for God to take his life. But an angel approaches Elijah and gives him the strength to go on.

Eliyahu is beautifully portrayed by the biblical author as a person in grief, in need of healing. He's outwardly together, successful in his business, but he feels alone. He is a model for us all. No one should ever have to feel that isolation. No one should ever feel that they are alone.

He feels alone.

Elijah speaks to us, directly. *No one* who suffers from depression, from an eating disorder, from PTSD, from anxiety, from any mental illness: you are not alone. You are never alone. All you need to do is to ask for help.

Here in this community, you will always have someone to whom you can look, to whom you can talk. You are not alone.

We feel that we are not alone when we reach out, when we talk to others, when we ask for their help. And we need to be confident that they will not turn us away.

One of the first things that all of us can take note of to be inclusive, to help others feel that they can come to us, is the language we use. We are talking about mental health—not mental illness. Because health is the goal, just like it is with our bodies. We need to make sure that we try to stay away from disease-centered labels and focus on person-centered ones. For example, we would stay away from "Hey have you seen the diabetic?" and rather say "Hey, have you see the person with diabetes?"

Same goes for any non-physical affliction. Please don't say "I met a schizophrenic today", but rather say, "I met a person with schizophrenia today". Do you hear the difference? In the later cases, we put the person first. Because at the end of the day, we are all just human beings. And our personhood, not our ailment, should define us.

For once we can see each other, not see our illnesses, we can start to remove the stigmas. And hopefully we can start to remove the unconscious blame. The Director-General of the World Health

Organization in 2001 said, “Mental illness is not a personal failure. In fact, if there is failure, it is to be found in the way we have responded to people with mental and brain disorders”.

Did you know that The World Health Organization estimates that over 450 Million people in the world live with a mental illness¹ currently, but that figure jumps to 1 in 4 (or approximately 1.7 Billion people) if we look at people’s entire lifetimes? As of this year, depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide².

Over 16 million American adults deal with depression, and fewer than half of those who struggle seek treatment. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, nearly 8.5m adults over the age of 65 are depressed³ 8 million people have PTSD, 2 million people suffer from bipolar disorder, and 40 million people have anxiety.

That’s a lot of numbers I just gave you. And here’s another: one. One person can make a difference. One phone call, one dinner, one check-up, one person to say “I see you and I’d like to help”.

We need to be able to talk to one another about whatever is going on inside, and trust that it won’t be received with scoffing. We need to trust that other people care about us. We need to know that people will look beyond our appearances and see who we are... or at the very least, we need to trust that people will care.

There is a famous story about a doctor not listening to his patient, and not hearing what he is being told.

A man goes to a doctor. He explains to the doctor that he’s depressed. He says that life seems very harsh and cruel. He says that, even surrounded by people, he feels all alone in this threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. The Doctor smiled kindly and says, “The treatment is simple. The great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you right up.” All of a sudden, the man bursts into tears. He says, “But doctor...I am Pagliacci.”⁴

This doctor was kind, but was not truly listening. The man opened up his soul, told him deep issues, and the doctor brushed him aside, tried to fix his problem with a band-aid solution. Pagliacci felt even worse, knowing that the doctor did not truly hear what he is saying.

When we feel our mental health is in crisis, we need to talk to someone who will hear us. We need to use the right set of tools for the right set of the problems. Now, you yourself may not know to whom to turn, but someone in your life will. That’s where we stock our mental health first aid kit.

So let’s talk about what we might include in our toolkit. Inside our kit, we will find our individual general medical practitioners. They can then direct you to either psychologists, psychiatrists, or other professionals. Just like they do when you have a stomach ache they send you to a gastrointestinal doctor;

¹ http://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/

² <http://www.who.int/news-room/headlines/30-03-2017--depression-let-s-talk-says-who-as-depression-tops-list-of-causes-of-ill-health>

³ https://www.ncoa.org/wp-content/uploads/Depression_Older_Persons_FactSheet_2009.pdf [numbers updated to reflect population of 46M older adults]

⁴ <https://scifi.stackexchange.com/questions/131380/was-rorschachs-pagliacci-joke-a-real-joke>

or a heart palpitation, you get sent to a cardiologist, or cancer, you get sent to an oncologist. When your emotions or mental state are out of balance, you get sent to a psychologist.

Perhaps one of these experts will also recommend medication. This is no different than needing a diuretic or ace-inhibitor for high blood pressure.

Perhaps one of these experts will also recommend exercise.

This is no different than your PCP recommending exercise. We can all use more movement and more time in nature.

Perhaps one of these experts will recommend therapy in addition to medication. This is just like being told that you need insulin to regulate your blood sugar, and you need to watch what you eat.

In many cases, both physical and mental, treatment is behavior modification as well as external guidance with the possibility of medicinal assistance.

The difficulty for many of us is that there is rarely a quantitative test, like there is for high blood pressure or diabetes. There isn't a test strip to prick your finger to let you know that you're dealing with anxiety. There isn't an arm cuff to tell you that you're not getting up in the morning because you're depressed. Maybe that day will come as it has for these physical ailments, but it's not here yet. This is why therapists are so important. They are a resource. They are imperative to treatment, and it is not a *shanda* to see one.

Another resource that you have at your disposal is the thousands-year old weight of Jewish tradition. Our history is rich in stories that explain the importance of mental and spiritual health, as is illustrated in this passage from Talmud:

Rabbi Hiya bar Abba was sick, and Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. Rabbi Yohanan asked, are your sufferings welcome to you? Rabbi Hiya bar Abba said, neither they nor their reward. Rabbi Yohanan said, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand, and he raised him up. Rabbi Hiya bar Abba was cured.

Then Rabbi Yohanan himself became sick. Rabbi Hanina went to visit him, and asked him the same question: "are your sufferings welcome to you?"

Rabbi Yohanan replied, "neither they nor their reward".

Rabbi Hanina said, "give me your hand". He gave him his hand, and he raised him up. Rabbi Yohanan was cured.

The Rabbis in the Talmud ask: Why couldn't Rabbi Yohanan heal himself[since he was able to heal Rabbi Hiya bar Abba] The response? A prisoner cannot free himself from jail⁵. When we are down, we need others to lift us up and help us through difficult times.

This leads us to the next part of our toolkit: once we have identified the problem, we can reach out, not only to medical professionals, but to those people who are most important in our lives, those who can lift us up and help us through difficult times. Do you know who that person is or persons are for you.

⁵ B. Berachot 5b as found: <https://www.sefaria.org/Berachot.5b?lang=en>

Who are the friends that you can rely on who won't casually ask how you're doing, who will bring you a casserole just because? These are also people who won't expect you just to get better or heal like maybe a broken bone would heal. Who recognized that this is a process, and we're still not understanding it in full.

These people can be your family, your friends, all your loved ones. And, I'd like to think, the people around you. Look around you, right now. Do you recognize the people sitting next to you? Do you know the people one row over? Of course you do. They are your community. You may be closer to some people in this community than others, but I like to think we can talk to the people around us, your Agudas Israel family, and more broadly, your Jewish tribe. We are all here for one another. We have each other's backs.

These past weeks, starting with Rosh Hashanah and up through a few minutes ago, we have been saying the Unetaneh Tokef. This prayer begins with listing a slew of physical ways that people will die, such as water, fire, sword, beast, famine, earthquake, etc. But, interestingly enough, it continues with telling us how we shall live. We want to live with rest, peace, serenity, wealth, and happiness. Our liturgy is concerned with how we live our lives, with our entire personhood, physical, emotional, and spiritual. And it speaks about it all, it acknowledges it all.

Living in silence is no way to live. Mental health is real. If possible, try not to hide. Or if that is not possible, let others seek you. Be willing to share and be vulnerable. And conversely, be willing to listen. True, deep listening which comes from not being distracted but rather being full present. This High Holiday season, and in all of 5779, I pray that we all may listen to one another. That we may all be present for one another. And that we may all have each other's names in our personal toolkit.

Ken y'hi ratzon, let it be so.

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