

Mental Illness-Countering The Culture Of Shame

By Giving Voice To The Pain

A New Year's Resolution

A man went to see his physician because he wasn't feeling well. "Doctor," he said, "I am suffering from a dark and unshakable depression. Nothing I do gives me any relief. I am overwhelmed with pain and most days, I can't even make it out of bed. Doctor, what should I do?" The doctor thought for a moment then offered the following treatment plan. "This is what you need to do. Tonight, go to the theatre where the Great Carlini is performing. He is the funniest man in the world and everybody who sees him finds him hysterical. By all means, go see Carlini. He is guaranteed to make you laugh and drive away your depression." Upon hearing these words, the man burst into tears and sobbed uncontrollably. "But doctor," he said, "**I am Carlini.**" *Rabbi Stacey Kol, Congregation Rodef Shalom, Kol Nidrei, 2014*

Mental Health. It is a topic that we read about often, but one that we rarely speak about aloud, let alone in from the bima in the synagogue. It is a topic that is often only discussed in hushed whispers, but that is painfully and silently affecting so many in society, and so many of us in this very room, at this very moment.

According to the statistics, one in every five adults has struggled, is struggling, or will struggle with mental health in some way throughout their lives. One in every twenty-five of us is currently living with a serious mental illness. And one in five children have, or will have, a serious mental illness between the ages of 13 and 18. (www.nami.org)

And yet- generally speaking, as a Jewish community, we say nothing. When it comes to physical health issues, we try to be the type of community that is present for one another. We have a *chesed* (caring) committee that calls, perhaps brings flowers, or even food after a hospital visit. Many of you call the synagogue to make sure that a friend or loved one who is having surgery is on the *misheberakh* list. We visit our sick friends at home, in assisted living facilities, and in the hospital. We take our friends and loved ones to rehab appointments or chemo sessions. But when it comes to mental health, we often don't know how to respond, what to say, or what to do. More often than not, we don't even know that someone in our inner circle is struggling. And so there is a deafening silence as we become paralyzed by the unintentional stigmatization of mental illness; as we fail in our sacred responsibility towards our friends, family, and community members.

On Rosh Hashanah we speak a lot about committing sins and transgressions. In Hebrew, the word that is often used for this is "chet," which is an archery term that is more accurately translated as "missing the mark on a target." When it comes to the way that we, as individuals, and as a community, generally handle issues of mental illness and health, I am afraid that we have missed the mark and need to do a much better job doing *teshuvah*, turning towards one another with love, care, and compassion as we seek to support and de-stigmatize something that affects so many in our community.

In May, actor Wil Wheaton, whose career has ranged from success as a child actor in the movie *Stand By Me* to roles in *Star Trek the Next Generation* and *The Big Bang Theory*, delivered a powerful speech at a conference for the National Alliance for Mental Illness that recounted his lifelong struggle with depression and anxiety.

When I was a little kid, probably seven or eight years old, I started having panic attacks. Back then, we didn't know that's what they were, and because they usually happened when I was asleep, the adults in my life just thought I had nightmares. Night after night, I'd wake up in absolute terror, and night after night, I'd drag my blankets off my bed, to go to sleep on the floor in my sister's bedroom, because I was so afraid to be alone.

When I was around twelve or thirteen, my anxiety began to express itself in all sorts of delightful ways. I worried about everything. I was tired all the time, and irritable most of the time. I had no confidence

and terrible self-esteem. I felt like I couldn't trust anyone who wanted to be close to me, because I was convinced that I was stupid and worthless and the only reason anyone would want to be my friend was to take advantage of my fame.

This is important context. When I was thirteen, I was in an internationally-beloved film called *Stand by Me*, and I was famous. Like, really famous, like, can't-go-to-the-mall-with-my-friends-without-getting-mobbed famous, and that meant that all of my actions were scrutinized by my parents, my peers, my fans, and the press. All the weird, anxious feelings I had all the time? I'd been raised to believe that they were shameful. That they reflected poorly on my parents and my family. That they should be crammed down deep inside me, shared with nobody, and kept secret...

And that's [how eventually] my anxiety turned into depression....

I knew something was wrong with me, but I didn't know what. And because I didn't know what, I didn't know how to ask for help.

I wish I had known that I had a mental illness that could be treated! I wish I had known that that the way I felt wasn't normal and it wasn't necessary. I wish I had known that I didn't deserve to feel bad, all the time.

And I didn't know those things, because Mental Illness was something my family didn't talk about, and when they did, they talked about it like it was something that happened to someone else, and that it was something they should be ashamed of, because it was a result of something they did.

One of the primary reasons I speak out about my mental illness, is so that I can make the difference in someone's life that I wish had been made in mine when I was young, because not only did I have no idea what Depression even was until I was in my twenties, once I was pretty sure that I had it, I suffered with it for another fifteen years, because I was ashamed, I was embarrassed, and I was afraid.

<http://wilwheaton.net/2018/05/my-name-is-wil-wheaton-i-live-with-chronic-depression-and-i-am-not-ashamed/>

Will's story is familiar to those of us who have ourselves experienced anxiety or depression, or who have witnessed loved ones go through these experiences and illnesses.

While celebrities like Will Wheaton have been more forthcoming about their struggles, sometimes mental illness comes to the forefront of our attention only after tragedy strikes. Just a few months ago, within a few days of each other, a world famous fashion designer, Kate Spade, and an internationally acclaimed chef, Anthony Bourdain, made headlines when they each died of suicide, losing their lifelong struggles with mental illness. Writer Jordana Horn wrote a powerful blog post responding to these tragic deaths, reminding her readers that:

You can be the wealthiest, most beautiful person on earth. You can have a spouse who loves you more than anything, and children who love you and fill you with pride. Basically, you can look like you have it all. But if you are depressed, or anxious, or coping with any number of mental illnesses, you feel as if you have nothing.

When you are struggling with depression, for example, you might feel as though someone is holding your head underwater. You cannot see the light, whether that light is the idea that the depression will one day abate, or the gratitude for all the blessings in your life, or the idea that people love you fiercely and would be utterly destroyed if you were gone. You cannot see beyond the furious darkness of the depression. It engulfs you. It prevents you from sleeping, it keeps you from rational thought, and it leads you seductively to the idea that all those people who love and care for you would be better off if you "weren't around."

People with depression or any other mental illness are not deserving of stigma. They are deserving of even more of our understanding and compassion. Mental illnesses are fierce enemies of life, just like cancer or sepsis. They are indiscriminate and prey on the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the confident and the insecure. That pretty woman that you see in the carpool line whose Instagram feed is all beautiful pictures of her children? She could be fighting a battle you know nothing about, and she might not be so sure she's going to win it. <https://www.kveller.com/kate-spades-death-proves-mental-illness-can-affect-anyone/>

We all know that she is right. I know that there are those of you in this room who are struggling, even as I speak. I know because I have had counseling sessions with some of you concerned for the mental health of a family member or friend. I know because I have made countless referrals and recommendations to mental health professionals and urged many congregants to seek professional help. I know because I have visited some of you in the hospital, or in your home, when you have been struggling with your mental health. And I know because I have officiated at funerals for individuals who lost their lifelong mental health struggles and died from suicide.

Thankfully, times have changed when it comes to the Jewish response to suicide. No longer is suicide understood by a majority of the Jewish world to be a conscious and selfish act. It is, instead, understood as it ought to be understood -- as a death due to an illness. This is a small, yet positive step forward in the de-stigmatization of individuals who struggle with their

mental health. But there is so much more that we can, and should, be doing to raise awareness, offer support, and de-stigmatize the silent suffering that lurks just beneath the surface of so many.

Our response must begin with a willingness to truly see, listen to, and support one another- in public as well as in private. In our Torah portion this morning we read about a painful scene in which Sarah tells Abraham to throw her handmaid Hagar out of the house. After serving as Sarah's surrogate and giving birth to Ishmael, the two of them are banished to the desert, with little to eat and Hagar places Ishmael under one of the bushes so that she won't have to watch him suffer and die. As she begins to walk away in order to avoid witnessing this terrible suffering and loss, the Torah tells us that God calls out to her, saying:

Fear not for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.

Hagar couldn't bear to watch her son suffer. But God heard the cry of the suffering Ishmael "*ba-asher hu sham*," where he was. God invited Hagar to lean into the pain, take her suffering child by the hand, in order to be there for him during his suffering. Taking a lesson from God, we too, who are made in God's image, must learn *to hear the cry* of those who are suffering.

We must learn to *lean into the discomfort* that we feel when it comes to recognizing, discussing, and offering support to those who are struggling with their mental health.

Indeed many of our biblical characters suffered from mental anguish. Even Moses himself, after being worn down by years of complaining and bitterness from the children of Israel, cries out in despair to God:

Why have You dealt with Your servant, and why have I not enjoined your favor that You have laid the burden of this people upon me?...I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. IF You could deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness (Numbers 11:11,14-15)

Rachel, struggling with her inability to conceive, cries out to God in Genesis: "Give me children- or I will die!" King Saul, who was overcome with his jealousy of David suffers deeply: the Hebrew Bible says that a he was greatly distressed and "*ruach ra'ah*" an evil spirit, took hold of him... (I Samuel 18). This is a term that the great Maimonides referred to as a " type of illness that is "black bitterness, in which [those afflicted] can only rest when they sit in the dark secluded from people." (Rabbi David Schuck, quoting Rav Ovadiah M'Bartenura On BT Eruvin 41b)

In Psalm 13, the author cries out to God:

How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? (Psalm 13:1-3)

And then of course there is Job, who cries out in suffering to God:

Perish the day on which I was born, and the night it was announced 'A male has been conceived (3:3)!...Why did I not die at birth, expire as I came forth from the womb (3:11)?

Like a hireling who waits for his wage. So have I been allotted months of futility; Nights of misery have been apportioned to me. When I lie down, I think, 'When shall I rise?' Night drags on...(7:2-4)

As Rabbi Elliot Kukla of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center writes, "What the biblical stories teach us is that mental distress is a natural part of human life and a part of every society. Surviving our own moments of emotional suffering and finding the strength to walk with others through incredible pain are ancient and sacred obligations." (<https://www.nami.org/Get-Involved/NAMI-FaithNet/Sample-Services-and-Sermons/Yom-Kippur-Sermon>)

There are so many people in this world who are suffering deeply and fighting emotional battles that so often remain hidden from view. We must not allow them to suffer alone.

The Talmud, in fact, makes this clear through the story of a time when our sage Rabbi Yochanan was suffering greatly. He was in both physical and

emotional distress. His colleague Rabbi Hanina went to visit him and tried to offer support by discussing matters of faith, but Rabbi Yochanan was suffering so much that he could not seem to find his way out of the darkness that surrounded him. Rabbi Hanina responded by offering his hand to Rabbi Yochanan -- a gesture that resulted in lifting of his spirits. Wondering why the great Rabbi Yochanan could not heal himself, the Talmud reminds us that: "The Prisoner cannot free himself from jail." (Berakhot 5b).

So many feel imprisoned by emotional pain and suffering. As this story reminds us, these members of our families and communities cannot, and should not, have to try to find their ways out of the darkness alone. Emotional suffering is nothing new, it is as old as our tradition itself. Naming that suffering, responding to that pain, and striving to see, to be present for, and to offer support to those who are in pain is the sacred task to which we must turn as this new year begins.

The idea that we are to strive for healing of both body *and* spirit is one of our most sacred obligations. Think, for a moment, about the words that we pray when we recite the *misheberakh l'cholim*, the prayer on behalf of those who are sick, we pray for "*refuat hanefesh v'refuat haguf*," healing of the soul and healing of the body; healing of the physical **and** healing of the

emotional. Here I should point out that healing is different from "fixing." I don't believe that this prayer, or any others, can lead us to magic "cures" sent down from heaven. Rather, this prayer and others like it should be understood as one in which we ask for the inner strength, the patience, the outside support, and God's healing presence to be with us in our suffering.

So what can we, as individuals and as community members do to be more supportive to those who are struggling with their mental health? How can we work to be more open and honest about this issue and strive to remove the harmful stigma that surrounds those who are suffering emotionally?

1. First- we can name the elephant in the room. If you are struggling with your mental health- I want you to know that I, as your rabbi, see you. We as your community see you. We value you. We care for you. And we want to be here to support you and get you help if you need it.

If you are suffering, please hear me when I say that there is no shame in this struggle. Please strive, with all of the strength that you can, to ask for help if you are able. Please remember that just as Judaism places a supreme

value on your physical well being, it also places the exact same value on your neshamah, your soul, your emotional well being.

2. Second- we must pledge to watch what we say. Saying things like, "That person must be crazy?" or "That person has a mental problem," or "Can't he just get over it already," or "She's just so sensitive, high strung, anxious, or sad all of the time," are not helpful. And in fact, they may very well be harmful. You would never make a snide or sarcastic comment about someone suffering from Cancer. Why should this type of illness be any different?

3. Third- we must learn how to listen to one another, and to make it clear to our fellow community members that they are not alone in this world. As Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen teaches so eloquently:

I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing that we ever give each other is our attention. And especially, if it's given from the heart. When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they are saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it...

(Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, 143-144)

4. **Fourth:** As a synagogue, I want to challenge us to consider ways in which we can publically and actively bring this issue out into the open. How can we proactively connect those who are suffering to mental health services, psychologists, and psychiatrists? What classes or panel discussions might we host, what support groups could we house in these walls? We are open to suggestions. Please email or call me if you have some ideas.

As a very small first step of acknowledging and supporting- on your way out you will see information from NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, as well as a list of some local resources in Monmouth County. I am asking all of you to please take one for yourself, or for someone else as you leave here today.

5. Finally, I would like all of you to know that this place can and should be a place of prayer, of refuge, and of comfort to you when it comes to using your spiritual tradition to nurture your suffering soul. Prayer, faith, and Jewish wisdom should never take the place of professional help and medication; but they can be an additional tool in your healing. We are here for you, to offer support and guidance in the limited way that we can, as a community of faith. When we recite the Ashrei prayer three times a day we say, "*Karov Adonai I'kol Kor'av*," God is close to all who call to God. It is my

hope that this sacred place is one where you feel comfortable seeking God's presence as a source of comfort and support in your life.

Hinneni. Here I am

It is a phrase that is uttered often throughout these Days of Awe.

It is a phrase with which I would like to conclude this afternoon.

Hinneni. Here I am.

Ready to lend a listening ear. Ready to not rush to judgment. Ready to offer support, comfort, compassion and care.

Hinneni. Here I am.

Ready to give voice to that which has been stigmatized. Ready to see the whole person and acknowledge that every part of what makes us human, from the physical to the emotional, from the whole to the shattered, is sacred.

Hinneni. Here I am.

Ready to ask for help. Ready to muster all of the courage and strength that I can to remind myself that I am not alone. Ready to remember that there is no shame in my suffering.

Hinneni. Here we are.

Ready to remember what it means to be a sacred community in which everyone feels loved, supported, welcomed and nurtured.

Shanah Tovah.