

ברכה וקללה
Of Blessings and Curses

Mental Health in Our Community

Re'eh 5779

We returned from our vacation to some very sad news in our community, but very important news as well. One of you shared a message with me this past Monday night indicating that a precious nine year old girl from Englewood, a student in one of our local day schools, Miri Farkovits, whose name I only use with permission from the family, had died.

Our parshah begins with the notion that Hashem places before us blessings and curses, ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה.

While many of the commentaries, especially Ramban, note that it is our choice whether we will experience blessings or curses, sometimes, life, as the pasuk plainly reads, gives us both, ברכה וקללה. In different ways, we all experience blessings for which we must be grateful, and suffer curses, which we are forced to bear.

The death of any child is certainly a קללה which simply defies our ability to capture the magnitude of the loss and grief in words. Every person is an *Olam Maleh*, a full world, and the loss of that world, at such a tender age, constitutes a grievous tragedy.

As we said this Rosh Chodesh morning, יקר בעיני ה' המותה לחסידי, how dear, how difficult it is for Hashem, when He loses His pious ones, his innocent ones, his children. And, if it is difficult for Him, how much more so for mere mortals?

Miri, for those who knew her, possessed many special qualities and displayed these in her all too short time on this earth, which are her true legacy, as opposed to her tragic death. We should never lose sight of that, nor reduce anyone to misconceptions of who

a person was and what their life was like, based on speculations. And, it is not for us to characterize, from a distance, the circumstances of this tragic death.

Yet, Miri's parents, Doni and Lisa, have asked that the particular circumstances surrounding Miri's death be discussed by the community as a way of raising awareness regarding issues of mental health in our children, and, more specifically, to use one word that is very upsetting and very frightening in general, and especially when it comes to children, of raising awareness regarding suicide.

II.

Many of us spoke privately this week, especially those with children in Miri's school community, and I wanted to take a moment to share a word which I hope will be generally calming.

As upsetting and frightening as this tragedy is, suicide is exceptionally rare in children. According to the National Institutes of Mental Health¹, death by suicide occurred in 2017, the last full year during which data was available, in about 1 in 100,000 females between the age of 10-14, and 3 in 100,000 males of the same age. That is .001%, or .003% of the population.

For girls and young women ages 15-24, the incidence is .005% of the population, one out of every twenty thousand, and for males in that demographic, the incidents is four times as large, but still, a miniscule, .02% of the population, one out of every five thousand.

And so, when one hears talk about increases in suicide, we need to keep a sense of perspective, with knowledge of actual data.

Along similar lines, let's remember that every child experiences moments of sadness, anger, tantruming, and, certainly, children can verbalize their emotions in more extreme

¹ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>.

language than adults typically would. So, before we go any further, let's make sure that we are not generating any unnecessary panic or fear.

III.

And yet, what Doni and Lisa have allowed our community to do is surely of great importance. While we have made progress in the last five, and certainly ten years, there remains a stigma around mental illness, in adults as well as in children, in the general population, and in our community as well.

This stigma is perpetrated by our health care system itself, which does not relate to mental illness as it does other medical illnesses, leaving families struggling with mental illness in financial ruin.

This stigma is related to fear that we experience when considering mental illness. If someone has a broken leg, even someone who is not an Orthopedist or Radiologist can see a crack in the bone. If someone, God forbid, has a mass growing on an internal organ, we can grasp that, even if we may not be an oncologist. It is logical to us, and we can make sense of it.

The brain, and the mind, is infinitely more complex, and we understand so very little about both the underlying causes and mechanisms of mental illness that is all around us, be it depression, anxiety, bipolar, borderline, eating disorders, and many more. And, given this fear, we too often shy away from discussing it as the medical illness that it is.

Some have suggested that the general stigma associated with mental illness runs even deeper in our more insular community, where there is sometimes fear, given that certain mental illnesses have a genetic component and run within families, that marriage prospects for siblings or the suffering individual will be compromised.

Let's try to remember that just because the source of pain may be invisible to our eye, and perhaps beyond our full understanding, it is no less acute, and sometimes, far more

acute, than physical ailments. The Talmud Yerushalmi² cites the view of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov, a distinguished tanna whose views are always given deference, as interpreting the עול ברזל, yoke of iron, which the Torah refers to in the tochacha, as being רעיון, debilitating anxiety or obsessional thoughts. We know that it was a mental illness, a form of paranoia described by the Navi as a רוח רעה, that felled no less a figure than the once great King Shaul.

IV.

A stigma can be damaging in two ways.

First, and foremost, a stigma further isolates the individual and family suffering from the mental illness. As the Sages of the Talmud long ago recognized, communal support can reduce, if only modestly, and sometimes, far more substantially, the suffering of the individual.

Second, unfortunately, this stigma can translate into inaction. No parent in this room needs to be told by me to love their child. Nothing is more innate. When a child has a rash, every parent speaks to their pediatrician, who may indeed recommend going to see an allergist. When a child has some respiratory trouble, every parent speaks to their pediatrician regarding a referral to an allergist, immunologist, or pulmonologist, for an asthma consultation.

And yet, too often, when a child- and again, we are not talking about a single tantrum, an occasional bad day- but a child who is persistently crying, and sad, and expresses dark thoughts, may not always be taken for medical consultation which is absolutely critical to that child's health.

I am absolutely not referring to Miri or any other specific child, nor am I insinuating that any parent would maliciously deprive their child access to proper medical care. Nevertheless, given the stigma we discussed, sometimes there is simply a lack of

² ירושלמי שבת ד:ג. ועיין שם בתורה תמימה, "שמשתקע עצמו ברעיונות לחשוב ולדאוג הרבה..."

knowledge or awareness, or perhaps fear, of addressing a medical condition that may be highly treatable, or even curable, if we make sure to talk to our doctors and mental health experts regarding the behavior we are observing.

V.

I would like to emphasize this last point, based on my own experience doing my extremely modest part in helping steer families who are facing challenges in this area.

Mental illness is almost infinitely complex, a combination of genetic, environmental, behavioral, and psychological factors, and therefore requires truly expert care.

I don't think anyone with a heart condition would hesitate to go to an expert cardiologist, with decades of experience and outstanding training, or an expert oncologist for treating a rare form of cancer. I feel very strongly that we, as a community, need to treat mental health the same way, and make sure that we and our loved ones are receiving truly expert care from those who have highly specialized training in these areas.

Plainly speaking, this is not the present case. Due to the stigma surrounding this area, many believe that all care is 'more or less' the same.

Still worse, sometimes people are pressured, even by those who love them the most, to simply avail themselves of lesser care for financial reasons, even though so much more than money is at stake.

The Torah commanded us, and we just read the pasuk two weeks ago, **ונשמרתם מאד, לנפשותיכם**, that we have to guard our lives with a sense of great urgency and care, and that means seeking out the best medical care available.

Sometimes, finding the right practitioner, and the right match between patient and provider, takes time. Sometimes, identifying the right modality of treatment takes time. But, it can make all the difference in the end.

Given the highly unfortunate state of mental health coverage in this country, that can certainly be very expensive. As a community, we need to be there for families who are experiencing financial challenges as a result of mental health issues.

If someone were in need of a surgery, or special protocol of treatment for a rare form of cancer, we would be there for them. I know the kindness of our community. People are literally donating kidneys for people they don't even know. Mental health should be no different.

VI.

Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Ba-Zeh, we are all inextricably linked to one another, even if we do not even know one another in the personal sense. As the Talmud Yerushalmi explains³, all members of the Jewish people are like organs that belong to one body. When one is suffering, we all share in the pain.

As I had the opportunity to express in a letter I sent to Doni and Lisa this week on behalf of our entire shul community, we all stand together with the Farkovits family, and are deeply moved by their extraordinary courage and candor at this most difficult time.

ברכה וקללה, sometimes, we experience ברכה וקללה at the very same time.

We pray that הרופא לשבורי לב, He who heals broken hearts, will be constantly with the Farkovits family during this time, and that their efforts, in a moment of terrible קללה, in raising awareness in the wake of this tragedy, will, in the full measure of time, serve as a ברכה our community, our families, and our children.

³ ירושלמי נדרים ט:ד

