Yesterday I concluded my dvar torah, my sermon, with the following words:
Our community is at its strongest when we are able to care for one another in times of need.
Our community is at its strongest when we delight in each other's simchas. Our community is at its strongest when we see each other, when we care for each other, when we sustain each other with hesed.

Today, I want to raise and highlight those statements so that they challenge us, and ask what this actually looks like in a world where the silence and stigma around mental illness makes it so hard for those who need support to ask for it and for those who want to support to know how to do so.

Mental Illness is not something that happens in some other place. As your rabbi, I see the ways in which mental illness impacts individuals and families in our community. Part of what I do is to visit you at home or in the hospital to tell you that you are not alone, to tell you that I am here for you, that we are here for you, that you have a community that loves you. Part of what I do is to hold your hands to give you strength when I know you have been holding the hands of your loved one who can’t get out of bed in the morning or whose medication is just not working. I cry with you, sometimes without much to say, but just to tell you, Here I am. Hineni.

Our community, specifically the inclusion committee decided a year ago to start a process of thinking about mental illness. To try to figure out how we can care for each other and see each other, when it is difficult even to just talk about this. How we can
help to break the stigma and the shame, and to make our community a place where people feel safe and welcome with their full self, acknowledging both the beauty and the dark places of their soul.

Today, I will share words that are not mine, these are the words of many of you, sitting here, who responded to a call from the inclusion committee, to share your own thoughts, experiences and challenges with mental illness. To share how mental illness has impacted you, your children, your family.

I share this as a collective voice of prayer for all of us to hear and to ask ourselves, if Olam Hesed Yibane, if building this world from compassion is a practice that we take on collectively as a community and individually, how do we support and respond to those in our community with mental illness.

These are the collective voices of our community, This is their personal prayer.

I had a debilitating depression for four years and eventually was unable to continue working.

I suffer from a serious mental illness, which requires me to manage my illness on a daily basis and negatively affects my well-being in ways, subtle and major. Mental illness impacts not only the person with the mental illness; but the entire family unit. I became very socially isolated and stopped coming to Erev Shabbos and Shabbat Day services which I used to attend regularly. I had trouble getting out of bed and showering and dressing could take hours. Forcing myself to go to any social event was very difficult and being there (at TBZ) was grueling.

I chose to disclose only to my closest friends at TBZ because of the stigma associated with my illness; (and I don’t know if I will ever feel comfortable sharing this broadly with the TBZ community.)
I had a great deal of shame about my illness—despite being a mental health professional—and this shame is, in fact, part of the disorder. I didn’t want people to know that there was something wrong with me.

Serious mental illness is NOT a choice - it is an illness and when it has you in its grip - it can be devastating.

Mental health challenges are lonely, isolating, and very destabilizing. It is hard not to feel alone, and like you’ve done something wrong.

The most important thing one can do for a person with mental illness is to be present for them and alert. If someone alludes to feeling bad or chased by demons, don’t respond with “but you’re handling it, right?” Even if you really don’t want to get involved, it is important to ask if they feel supported and especially if they are safe. A rare or sudden admission of feeling bad may hide suicidal thought or intent. Don’t be afraid. Getting down and dirty (acknowledging) with someone in their pain might be just enough to help them reach the first rung of the ladder out.

It would be easier if it were cancer. We’d be able to set up meal trains and be open and not feel ashamed and insecure about the way we are perceived.

One can never fully understand the impact that mental illness has on the person and the family unless one has lived through it. The shame and stigma that envelopes mental illness runs deep. It is one of the main reasons that people do not want to share about their experience with mental illness. And, this leads to feelings of isolation. As "far" as we’ve come to reduce the stigma and shame, there is still so much more work to be done.

Maybe in my children’s lifetimes talking about mental health challenges without the stigma will be truly possible. Until then, I take comfort that you are doing this and making mental health challenges a priority at our synagogue, which is my true community.

Olam Hesed Yihane - Building this world with Love
Collective Voices of our community, struggling with Mental Illness
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Rosh Hashanah Second Day 5780
It requires lots of inner strength to love an individual who is ill this way.

Eventually, I got better and reentered the world of the living with a deeper appreciation for life and for my own resilience.¹

What if we told everyone who enters these doors that they are not alone?
What if we would work together, to deepen our communal conversation around mental illness?
What if we told our kids, our teenagers, that mental illness is not something to be ashamed of, that we will support them and help them through it and that they can trust us, they can trust this community and know it as a safe place?

It is worth listening to this interpretation of a story told in the Talmud: “Rabbi Eleazar was ill, so his friend, Rabbi Yochanan, went to visit him. He found Eleazar in a dark room, facing the wall. Yochanan saw his friend crying and asked, “Why do you weep?” Eleazar answered, “I weep because all light fades into darkness, because all beauty eventually rots.” Yochanan sat down beside his friend and replied, “Yes, Eleazar, ultimately everything does die. Perhaps you have reason to weep.” And so Yochanan and Eleazar wept together. After a while Yochanan gently asked, “Does darkness comfort you? Do you want these sufferings?” “No,” Eleazar replied. Yochanan extended his hand and Eleazar grasped hold of it. He felt light and life touch him. Yochanan raised him out of bed and helped him to the door”²

Rabbi Alison Berry, dear friend and colleague, rabbi at Temple Shalom in Newton, wrote about this story: “There is so much we can learn from this passage. It reminds

¹ In gratitude to Danya Handelsman and Sue Brent, co-chairs of the Inclusion committee at TBZ, for collecting these words.
² Original story from Talmud Tractate Berakhot 5b. Interpretation heavily edited by Rabbi Allison Berry and prior to her edits, edited by Rabbi Stacy Friedman in her sermon: https://rodefsholom.org/rabbi-stacys-kol-nidre-sermon-2014-5775
us that when we fulfill our sacred obligation of Bikkur Cholim and visit the sick, it is not our job to convince a friend or loved one to buck-up or get over it. Instead, we are called upon to acknowledge their reality and sit beside them so they are not alone in their darkness. When we visit someone who suffers and simply listen to them, tradition teaches, we can remove 1/60th of that person’s pain.

Olam Hesed Yibane, “The world is built from love”: As I said yesterday, The word Yibane, ‘built’ suggests the world of kindness on earth is not created in a single moment, rather it is built like one builds a house, brick by brick, phone call by phone call, visit by visit, action by action, person by person, day by day, smile by smile.

Let us build a community that values authenticity and compassion. Let us reject whispers, assumptions and labels, and find the courage to share what is hidden on the inside. Let’s talk about it. If we can do that we come one step closer to living in a world of kindness, generosity of spirit, and peace.

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4 In gratitude to Rabbi Allison Berry’s sermon, Kol Nidre 5779, for inspiring me to write these words, and because her words said it so beautifully, these are also hers. [https://www.templeshalom.org/blogs?post_id=338423](https://www.templeshalom.org/blogs?post_id=338423)