Min HaMeitzar Karati, ya
Anani, anani

Psalm 118 says, Min HaMeitzar, Karati, ya, anani… anani

From the depths I cried out to God, answer me…
ANSWER me!

In May of 2020, two months into a brand-new pandemic, long before vaccines were available, when lockdowns and isolation swept the world, I posted a picture of a hand to my Facebook profile page.
Just a hand. The back of a hand, in fact.
What was notable about this hand was that it was not in good condition. It was inflamed, with peeling skin, not just around the nails but all over. The entire thing was raw and flaky, held in a curved, almost clawed way, threatening to tear and bleed with each movement. It was painful to look at.
And that hand was mine.

I remember standing in my tiny little bathroom in my tiny little apartment, tears in my eyes, unable to stop washing my hands, losing count of how many times I had done so, because I was so scared of accidentally killing someone if I missed a spot.

Min HaMeitzar Karati Ya. Anani, Anani.

This is a sermon about crying out, and it is also a sermon about answering.

I started showing symptoms of Obsessive-Compulsive disorder a little over a decade ago, and I was formally diagnosed a few years after that. This delay in diagnosis wasn't because I didn't notice the symptoms. It wasn't because my family and friends weren't supportive.

It was because I was scared.

It was because I was scared of what a diagnosis of OCD would mean for me and my life, for my career, for my relationships.

It was because of stigma, both external and internalized, that had seeped into me from the outside: stigma born of TV shows like “Monk”, where the character’s repetitive actions are the butt of countless jokes, and stigma from everyday acquaintances referring to taking a little extra care with something as “being OCD”. These people meant well, of course, but regardless of intent, it meant that brains like mine were again and again the punchline, the thing to apologize for.

There are many parallels between mental and physical illnesses. Both are real, and important to treat. Both may require medication, both can be acute or chronic, both can be hereditary or in response to a trauma, both can affect anyone, and both may impact our abilities to socialize, go to school, or complete our jobs.

Plus, both mental and physical illnesses can have visible symptoms or sometimes be completely invisible.

However, there is also a deep, qualitative difference that sets mental illnesses apart.

Unlike with physical ailments, mental illnesses often change the narrative inside a person's head. They change the way that a person's own mind talks to them. A mind experiencing mental illness might tell a person over and over that they are worthless, that they are a monster, or even that they should hurt themselves. A suffering mind can also struggle to be kind to others and to themselves.

This sort of unhealthy internal narrative can make it harder for a person struggling with their mental health to ask for help, and it can also make it harder for others to give that help.

As for me, when I finally did speak up and share my struggles, when it got to the point that I could not hide it anymore, I remember well-intentioned people telling me to "just think positive thoughts." or "embrace the mind-body connection." But in a brain like mine, that actually sent the message of: "Your suffering is your fault. If you just tried harder, you would be OK. "

But I wasn't OK, and that narrative of "if you just focus harder, you'll be able to control your mind" was not working.

Ultimately, for me, in addition to regular therapy and medication, a big part of learning to live with my mental illness has meant learning to adapt and nurture the narrative in my own head, to coax it and reframe it from a narrative of shame and silence into one of compassion and communication.

And it turns out, that process of modifying and adapting a narrative is a very Jewish thing to do.

Really, it's one of our greatest strengths. Ours is a tradition that grows and swells with each generation, while remaining grounded in our roots. As Rabbinic Jews, we don't throw out the old wisdom, but we also engage with the new, whether we're talking about building more egalitarian prayer spaces or debating the kashrut of lab-grown meat. This is to say that broadening the tent of Torah to fit both traditional content and new understandings is in our spiritual DNA.

And when it comes to the topic of mental health, this adaptive tradition is incredibly helpful. Our Scripture is full of characters who face trauma and grief, who lash out, and who doubt their own worth. Yet as 21st-century Jews, the lens of our modern research regarding mental illness and mental health can actually deepen our understanding of what our ancestors faced. This recent body of scientific and psychological data does not in any way negate the value of traditional interpretations of our ancestors' stories. To the contrary:, it can help us connect with them on an even deeper and more personal level, to feel for them, and to sympathize with them.

Consider the following biblical characters:

King Saul, prone to intense moods and melancholy, was gripped by a Ruach Ha Ra-ah, an evil spirit, and calmed only by David's music, played on a lyre.

Noah, having seen the entire world drowning before his eyes, in turn drowned his sorrows in excessive alcohol.

Elijah, filled with prophetic vision, pleads with God, in misery, to take his life. קַח נַפְשִׁי, he

Cries, TAKE MY LIFE, God.

“Cursed be the day I was born”, says Jeremiah. “*why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?”* Jer. 20:14,18

The list goes on. Our scripture is full of toxic parenting, rejected children, and jealousy left to fester for years. This is in addition to the thousands of our ancestors who were beaten, kept as slaves, and robbed of their dignity.

It is an indelible part of the Jewish story that we have suffered.

But it is not inevitable that we should suffer alone or in shame, and it is never too late to begin the work to modify our narratives around trauma and mental health away from silence and towards compassion, processing, and recovery.

In her work on Trauma and Recovery, Dr. Judith Herman, a psychiatrist who helped invigorate the modern field of trauma studies, writes: “Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning.… Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.… “

None of the Scriptural situations I just listed off would be healthy, or safe, for any of us here today, and these situations weren’t healthy, or safe, for our ancestors, either. Our ancestors experienced miracles and redemption, yes, but they also suffered immense trauma, just like Dr. Herman described, and their mental health clearly suffered because of it.

I feel such sympathy and compassion for the incredible humans in our Torah who had to carry the immense emotional fallout of the stories we tell and retell every year. I wish I could sit with them. I wish I could sit with Cain, with Sarah, with Hagar, with Leah, with Dinah, with

Hannah, with Saul, with Job, with Jeremiah– sit with them, and accompany them through their pain, and affirm for them that their struggles are not punishments, and that they are so very worthy of love, and then help them find a good therapist. I know we have several in this room today.

And I wish I could sit with Abraham. And with Isaac.

But probably separately, after the story we just read today.

Because the story of the Akeidah, which we read every High Holidays, is one of the most traumatic stories of all, and our modern lens with more knowledge of mental illness can, indeed, inform the lessons we take from this story.

The story of the Akeidah has, understandably, bothered– even horrified– generations of Jews and others who have, often, been taught to take it at face value: God decides to test Abraham, and tells him to kill his own son. In perfect faith, Abraham takes Isaac up a mountain, binds him on an altar, raises a knife to kill him, and at the last second a

messenger from God intervenes and provides an animal instead, saving Isaac.

Rabbi Wendy Zierler points out that Abraham offers no personal ethical or emotional response to God's command to kill his son– he simply sets out to act on the command.

And the impact of Abraham's actions, made even starker by the absence of an ethical response in any direction, have been analyzed over and over: particularly the impact on his relationships with his son, whom he had attempted to kill, and his wife Sarah, the mother of Isaac, who is absent in the story, not confided in, not privy to her husband's intentions, and who dies shortly afterwards. Rashi speculates that she died from her grief over what had happened, שֶׁנִּזְדַּמֵּן בְּנָהּ לִשְׁחִיטָה

Because her son had been prepared for slaughter.

We can feel it, in our hearts, that there is something wrong with this story. We know there is.

Because if one of us, no matter how pious, believed that God was telling us to kill a child, that would be a HUGE red flag. And I would hope, I would pray, from the depths of my soul, that we would do the exact opposite of what Abraham did. That we would NOT listen to that voice we believed was God. And that we would NOT keep that voice to ourselves. I would hope that we would confide our thoughts in a trusted confidante, who would then assist us in getting the help we so clearly need. I hope that we would rally around each other, especially in times where our brains do scary things.

Now, I'm not a psychiatrist. I cannot make a diagnosis. But I am a rabbi, and the story of the Akeidah swells and aches with spiritual pain, with pain unexpressed. When I read the story of the Akeidah, what screams out to me, more than anything, is the silence– the absence of discussion or vulnerability, the absence of communal support, processing, or eventual apology, the utter lack of healing and teshuvah. The absence of a safe space

where thoughts, especially troubling thoughts, can be proactively shared and worked through.

How incredibly alone Abraham must have felt as he rode away from camp with his son and the belief that he was supposed to kill him.

How incredibly scared Isaac must have felt, when he realized what his father was trying to do.

How betrayed and anguished must Sarah have felt, to learn that her life partner was prepared to kill their child.

And how wide-reaching and devastating must have been the lasting effects of this trauma on the lives of all of those involved.

But none of this gets named in our text. All of this insight comes from us having the bravery and the openness, today, to truly analyze our tradition, and the messages it sends, with the benefit of what we now know about mental health.

But our ancestors in the Torah didn't have the benefit of our modern psychological studies and data.

Dr. Herman, in reflecting on research with trauma survivors, shares that "Survivors of atrocity of every age and every culture come to a point in their testimony where all questions are reduced to one, spoken more in bewilderment than in outrage: Why? The answer is beyond human understanding."

Our ancestors asked why, too, and as with so many inexplicable things in the ancient world, the first attempts to understand and explain symptoms of mental illness were bound up in an ethical system of rewards and punishments from God.

We see this belief reflected in Scripture:

Such as in Deuteronomy 28, where God

Promises to "strike us with madness, blindness, and dismay" if we disobey,

and decrees that we must “grope at noon as a blind man gropes in the dark” if we do not follow the mitzvot;

God, who promises that we shall not prosper in our ventures, but shall be constantly abused and robbed, with none to give help, if we do not obey.

Again, this narrative, where the entire universe revolves around a pure system of rewards and punishments, makes a certain amount of sense in the absence of other explanations and information.

But I fear that this traditional conclusion, the conclusion that God might indeed wield mental illness as a weapon, has, unintentionally, added yet another layer of harm to an already suffering people.

Because how are we to turn to God in times of need if we believe that our very pain is a punishment meted out from the heavens?

How are we to believe, Adonai, Adonai, El Rahum v’Chanun, Erech, Apayim, V’Rav Chesed V’Emet, that God is compassionate and Merciful, if we believe that that

same God is intentionally causing us to suffer as a punishment?

Clearly, as Jewish theology has done for generations, we needed to adapt our narrative. And adapt, we did.

I said that this is a sermon about crying out, but it is also a sermon about answering. Over the last two thousand years, our rabbis have done incredible, beautiful, and affirming spiritual legwork to ensure that nobody has to suffer alone when faced with mental distress.

In the Talmud in Yoma 85b, Shmuel of Naradea concludes in regards to Torah laws that שימות וחי בהם ולא בהם, that we should live by them and not die by them, that is to say, that the goal of a halachic system is to promote life and health, not death and suffering. This statement allowed for the establishment of a system of Pikuach Nefesh, or guarding a life, wherein leniency in observance is allowed– and sometimes mandated– to protect both the physical AND mental health of an individual.

The rabbis also advocated for speaking up and not keeping feelings bottled inside. In the Gemara for Targum Mishlei, 12:25, the rabbis analyze a verse from Proverbs which says “if a person has anxiety or pain in their heart, they should quash it.” Rav Ashi says that this verse means that when we feel anxiety, we have to share our thoughts with other people in order to be able to quash it.

In another classic story in Berakhot 5b, Rabbi Yohanan, a prolific healer, falls ill himself, and requires the help of another rabbi to heal him in return. When asked why Rabbi Yohanan can’t just heal himself the way he has healed so many others, The Talmud concludes, **אֵין** חָבוּשׁ מַתִּיר עַצְמוֹ מִבֵּית הָאֲסוּרִים.

A prisoner cannot escape prison by themself.

Because yes, having mental illness can, indeed, feel like a prison. It can be one of the most isolating experiences a person can go through, even in a community as loving and as accepting as ours.

A study from the National Institutes of Mental Health found that Jews have similar overall rates of mental illness compared to non-Jews. In fact, the study found that there are several mental illnesses including major depression that occur at higher rates among Jews.

JSSA, the Jewish Social Services agency, recently released information showing worrisome trends and rising rates of anxiety and other mental health conditions among youth and teens. Calling the rise in teen mental illness and suicide a “national crisis”, JSSA urged Jewish clergy to speak to the matter.

This isn’t just a theoretical problem for us, and it’s not just a problem in our Torah. This is us, our hearts, our minds, our kids, our friends, ourselves. The way we talk to ourselves, and about ourselves, matters. Especially in an age of smartphones and social media, both of which have been shown to increase stress and anxiety, it is crucial that we be proactive in laying the foundations for open communication surrounding mental health in our families, our friend groups, and our synagogue. And it’s crucial as

well, that we openly address the messages that our core texts, such as the Akeidah, send about mental health, mental illness, and our responsibilities to one another in community.

Mental health is crucially important, and the first step is TALKING about it.

So, that's what we're doing here today. We're starting, or restarting, a discussion that has already been happening in whispers and behind peoples' backs or inside our heads, alone. We are bringing the topic of community mental health out into the open, because the community's response makes an incredible difference in the success of treatment and the likelihood of others to speak up when they, too, experience mental distress. Like the Gemara says, in order to quash anxiety, we must share it with each other, and shoulder responsibility for it together.

As a person in a position of authority within the Jewish community who lives with chronic mental illness, I believe that it is my duty to speak up and normalize these topics.

That said, while silence can no longer be an option for me, I want to underscore that each of us has our own personal mental health journey, and that none of us are obligated to follow anyone else's schedule or timeline for getting support. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and getting help can feel confusing, or overwhelming, or like a waste of time, or even like you're giving up.

But when you're ready, we are here. To sit with you, to listen to you, to encourage you as you get help, to pray with you, and to remind you that you are precious to this community and to God, no matter what.

At the back of the room, by the door, I've put a handout with all kinds of resources on it. The handout lists support organizations, including Jewish organizations, that are ready to listen, to guide, and to support you. Please take one, to have on hand in case you or someone you care about needs support. Use this sermon as an excuse to start a conversation with your loved ones about mental health. Take this opportunity to tell your family, especially your kids, that you will love them no matter what, and that

if their brain tells them something scary, they can trust you to sit with them in their fear.

Min HaMeitzer Karati Ya. Anani, anani.

From the depths, I cried out to God, Anani, Answer me!

Well, All of us, here, today, get to be part of God's answer in this community and this world.

We get to go forth from this room today, into the new year, with a promise in our hearts to each other and to God: a promise to look out for each other, and not only when the going is easy.

The spark of the Divine that each of us carries within us is ready to answer the cry of loneliness, of brokenness, to create a place of safety for each other and for our children.

Anani, Anani.

This year, let's answer the call.