

“Mental Illness is Not a Sin!”

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If you have ever been to downtown Jerusalem on a Saturday night, when all the shops, restaurants, and cafes open up around Ben Yehuda Street after Shabbat, you may have seen the following site. A van, colorfully spray-painted with Hebrew verses, pulls into a crowded thoroughfare. The loudspeakers that have been attached to the roof of the vehicle begin blaring loud, Hasidic-techno music, and a throng of guys pour out of the vehicle—many more than you thought that vehicle could accommodate! These guys climb onto the roof of the van where they start dancing wildly, their long beards and tzitzis flapping and flying with every leap into the air. If you were close enough to the action, you might have gotten pulled into the simcha dancing, and been whirled and twirled from one sweaty Hasid to another. If you hung back a little, you might have noticed a table set-up nearby with pamphlets and books about the leader of this movement, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. “Rebbe Nachman,” as he is referred to by his followers, was the great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Rebbe Nachman himself established his own sect in the Ukrainian city of Uman in the late 18th century. Thousands of Jews to this day make pilgrimages to his grave in Uman on Jewish holidays, and like many of the great Hasidic masters, Rebbe Nachman was revered as a leader of incomparable holiness, deep mystical insight, messianic pretensions, and otherworldly knowledge. In one of his most famous teachings, which has become a popular song in some circles even to this day, he instructs: *Mitzvah gedolah li'hiyot be'simcha tamid*...It is a great mitzvah, a religious obligation, to always be joyful. That's why those holy rollin' Hasidim show up with their music and dancing...they feel it is their mission to increase Jewish joy in the world. And that's certainly a beautiful thing! I am fully in favor of Jewish joy! Scholars have spent years studying Rebbe Nachman's teachings, his correspondence and other testimonials about his life. To make a long story short, you would never see Rebbe Nachman himself dancing on top of a van. It turns out that Rebbe Nachman suffered from severe depression, and very possibly bi-polar disorder. He was a recluse, who preferred nature to people, and was known to lock himself in his room for long periods of time, refusing to see or speak to anyone, even his devoted disciples. He once taught:

“The nature of man is to pull himself towards black bile and depression, as a result of the wounds and happenings of time, and every man is full of affliction. As such, he must force himself with great strength to be joyful, always.”¹

There’s so much to unpack here... You have to hand it to Rebbe Nachman for making a pretty novel claim about the causes of mental illness long before the advent of scientific or medical understandings of the mind. Many people regarded mental illness as a supernatural affliction, like demonic possession. They’d sooner call in an exorcist than a physician to treat mental or emotional disorders. But Rebbe Nachman suggests that mental illness was a symptom of the body, namely the “bile in the spleen.” Nowadays you often hear about serotonin in the brain, or the “happy chemical” influencing moods and behaviors, but Rebbe Nachman was ahead of his time in proposing a physiological source of mental illness. But I am even more struck by his words: “he must force himself with great strength to be joyful...” Anyone who suffers from depressive disorders can relate to the daily struggle to feel good, just to get out of bed, to find the energy to perform the most basic tasks, to interact with other people, even to put a smile on your face. What I worry about every time I hear that song after a Shabbes meal or a simcha about it being a great mitzvah to always be happy, is the implication that if I am not happy then I am either failing to do a mitzvah or worse, I am committing a sin. Is depression, or mental illness a sin? Is it the *yetzer ha’ra*, the evil inclination, manipulating our emotions? God-forbid that anyone should ever feel that way. And I want to make that absolutely clear, right now, right here, on the holiest day of the year. It is no sin to be depressed; there is no iniquity in mental illness. If you scour the list of *Al Chets*, you will not find one that declares depression to be a sin against God. Sometimes it’s okay not to be okay. If there is any mitzvah, it is to seek counseling, treatment, and support when we are not okay. In this morning’s haftarah, the prophet Isaiah condemns fasting solely to starve our bodies and present ourselves as contrite. Instead he implores us to care for the hungry, the poor, the naked, and then he turns the microscope back on us and says: *u’mibesarcha lo tit’alam.*² **Do not ignore your own health,** your own body, your own well-being. I think that is nothing less than a mandate for self-care, of both body and soul.

¹ Likutei Mohoran II, 24, cited in “A Jewish Theology of Depression,” by Atara Cohen

² Isaiah 58:7

Mental health is not a subject that we talk about enough, not in the general community, and certainly not in the Jewish community. There is a very real stigma attached to it. We have no problems talking about our aches and pains. Our knee replacements our hip replacements our stents and our stitches; We've even become uninhibited about more serious diseases like diabetes and cancer. But mental illness still remains in the shadows; people feel shame and embarrassment. Think of how often words like "crazy" are used in colloquial speech:

"What are you, *crazy*?"

"Are you *insane*?"

"You must be *totally nuts*!"

"I'm going to have you *committed*!"

"I'd literally rather *kill myself* than have to do that again..."

Every time we use those expressions, we maintain the taboo around mental illness. But we do so at our own peril, and that of our loved ones. According to the National Institutes of Mental Health, Jews have higher rates of major depressive disorders than either Catholics or Protestants. Scientists at the Hebrew University a few years ago discovered a gene that substantially increases the chances of developing schizophrenia in Ashkenazi Jews.³ And the second leading cause of death for young men in America is death by suicide. More than cancer, more than heart disease, more than homicide, many more young men die by suicide. It is the fourth leading cause of death among young women in America. By the way, did you know that in the Israel Defense Forces, there are more deaths from suicide than from actual military operations? We cannot continue to pretend that Jews don't suffer from mental health issues, or that they are somehow less of a concern than other ailments and diseases, or that this topic shouldn't be spoken about as if it was some kind of *kina hora*.

Just before Rosh Hashana I received an email from a woman here in Potomac whose brother is a member of my former congregation in Texas. She wrote to tell me that her brother's 28 year old daughter had just died by suicide. I had officiated at her bat mitzvah years ago. I watched her grow up in the shul, in USY. I was aware that she struggled with bi-polar disorder, but from a

³ "Scientists Discover Gene that Predisposes Ashkenazi Jews to Schizophrenia," by Ido Efrati, *Ha'aretz*, November, 20, 2013

distance, she looked like she had it under control. She was a beautiful, smart young woman; an engineer with a great job at Ratheon. This is one of those examples of how Facebook is so misleading and deceptive. I scoured every picture she posted in the last six months for a sign, a hint of struggle or an inkling of pain. All I saw was smiling pictures with friends and family. She posted a picture from a Shabbat dinner with her peers the Friday before she died. Facebook allows us to wear all kinds of masks that cover-up what we truly feel and how we are actually living. When I spoke to her father on the phone, he wept so intensely. He gasped for breath and then told me that he and his wife decided that they were not going to keep Rachel's suicide a secret. They chose not to disguise the cause of her death, instead they wanted it to be an opportunity, hopefully, somehow for someone else to survive, to live because they allowed the word suicide to be spoken at the funeral; because they asked for donations to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in her obituary. A few years ago, there was a piece in the Forward written by a mother whose child died from suicide. Although she knew that her son was "obsessing about suicide," she was, inexplicably, counseled *not* to talk about it with him. Now she says "The enemy is silence, which stems from shame and embarrassment about mental illness..." She continued, "The general silence on the topic may actually propel a potential suicide toward his final act...[silence] accentuates their alienation."⁴

This year high profile deaths by suicide this year by Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade actually reflect a spike in deaths by suicide nationally. Here in the leafy suburbs of Montgomery County there has been an epidemic in suicide deaths, **especially among teens**. This is no time to be silent. It's time to talk openly and unabashedly about mental health. It's time to speak up if you think someone you know needs help. Experts inform us that saying the word "suicide" or asking if someone is having suicidal thoughts does not plant the idea in their head. On the contrary, "expressing concern and willingness to help" is perhaps the most important thing you can do for someone. "Reminding someone that suicidal thoughts are common and often associated with a treatable mental disorder can also be a way to support them."⁵ My friend Dr. Marc Nemiroff told me that one of the most unhelpful things a well-meaning friend or relative can do is to say something like "Oh, it's not that bad." Or "Don't worry, you'll feel better." While those may

⁴ <https://forward.com/culture/320006/breaking-the-silence-about-jewish-suicide/>

⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.com/kate-spade-death-part-of-rising-suicide-trend-2018-6>

seem like the right things to say in the moment, they have the effect of minimizing the other person's pain. A better approach is just to be a good listener.

There is a touching story in the Babylonian Talmud about the sage Rabbi Yochanan, who seems to be suffering from either depression or some other emotional pain. His dear friend Rabbi Hanina came to visit him and asked, Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Yochanan said, neither the suffering nor its reward. [This is based on an ancient view that suffering in this world led to greater reward in the next world.] Rabbi Hanina then said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Hanina helped him to stand up. The Gemara asks, "Why didn't Rabbi Yochanan stand up by himself?" To which the Sages respond: "*Ain chavush matir atzmo mi'beit ha'asurim*, A prisoner cannot free himself from prison."⁶

How profoundly true that is. Sometimes we need help. Sometimes we need someone to reach out and give us their hand, in order to lift us out of our suffering. No matter what, there is absolutely no shame in asking for or seeking help if you are suffering. And that starts right here. There are a lot of mental health resources and support in this community. But there is also a whole lot of love and concern right here. I want everyone here today to know that your synagogue is a sanctuary, not only in the physical sense, but also a sanctuary of refuge, of safety, of shelter. If we don't have the means to help, then we will find them, together. And we will always listen, always care, always be here to support, to encourage, and to offer a hand to lift you up when you need it.

One of Rebbe Nachman's other famous teachings turned songs is: "*Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od; ve'haikar lo lefached klal*...The whole world is a very narrow bridge. And the most important thing is not to be afraid." It's a lot less frightening to walk on the very narrow bridge of life when we are reassured that someone will be there to steady us if we get shaky, or to catch us if we fall. Somehow, that narrow bridge isn't so terrifying when we know that.

When we recite *Unetaneh Tokef* in just a little while, there is a yearning for mental health and stability in that ancient prayer. We wonder, in this coming year, *Mi yanuach u'mi yanua*...who will serene and who will be troubled; *Mi yashkit u'mi y'toraf*, who will be tranquil and who will be tormented. I know that those who suffer mentally and emotionally will be in my heart as

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 5b

those words are recited, just as they are every time I say the *mishebeirach*, praying for *refuat ha'nefesh u'refuat ha'guf*, the healing of spirit and body. And it is my deepest prayer that no one will have to recite *Yizkor* for a family member who died because they weren't able to find the help they needed to treat a mental disorder.

Before we recite *Yizkor*, I want to close with a poignant tale that Rebbe Nachman used to tell. I suspect that the story is really about himself. It goes like this...

There was once a Tzaddik who found sadness in everything. He was determined to serve God perfectly every day. He planned everything he had to do, every detail of how he would perform a mitzvah. But somehow his plans never seemed to work out. He would lose sight of his plans or he would get distracted by something or another. These failures haunted him and made him very sad. He wanted to find joy in life, but it seemed impossible to make himself happy.

One day, when he woke up, washed, and said his prayers he pondered God's kindness in giving him the great blessings of being alive and being a Jew. He remembered that God was watching him at all time, the way a parent watches a beloved child. The child stumbles; that is inevitable. He realized that God is a patient parent, who understood his falls from grace. All that day he was filled with God's love. He rejoiced and felt uplifted, until he reached the level of joy experienced by Moses at Mt. Sinai, when he ascended to receive the tablets of the Torah.

Uplifted by joy, the Tzaddik found himself flying through supernal universes, and the higher he went, the closer he felt to God. But eventually his joy came to an end, as inevitably happens, and he found himself descending little by little to the very place where he had started. He wondered if God would consider his descent a fall, like Adam when he tasted the forbidden fruit. Then he had a revelation—even though he felt that he came back to the exact same place where he had started, surely God could detect the difference, and recognize the effort he had made to leave sadness behind. That is when

he realized that even if he had moved away from sadness by a hairsbreadth, in God's eyes it would be recognized as a passage through a thousand universes.⁷

Let us pray today for the healing of soul in increments that perhaps only God can detect. Let us pray for the blessings of gradual, step-by-step progress, and the victories of living as fully as possible each and every day. And let us have faith, as the Tzaddik did, that just being alive is the greatest blessing of all. Let us take those words to heart even as we remember now those who lived and shared our lives, and who have gone from this world to the next. Yizkor is found on page 290...

⁷ Based on "The Tzaddik of Sadness," in *A Palace of Pearls, The Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*, by Howard Schwartz, pp.157-158