Choose Life!
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Yom Kippur Morning 2023

There is a concept of angels in Judaism that I believe in. They are called *"malachim"* or "messengers." In the Torah the *malachim* appear as humans who show up in the right place at just the right time to point the protagonist in the direction they need to go in. Our tradition teaches that sometimes these *malachim* are divine creatures, and sometimes they are simply humans that Holy One places in front of us, helping us at a time when we need to be redirected. Sometimes we listen to their message, and sometimes we don't. It's not a perfect system.

I believe that I have had my share of *malachim* along the way. They were people who in retrospect seem heaven sent at the times when I was struggling with issues that were beyond my capacity. People who if they had not been just in that place, at that time, my life would have taken a radically different turn.

As I've mentioned in bits and pieces over the years, I had a very difficult childhood. What I haven't really spoken publicly about is that the events of my childhood caused me to battle with severe depression at different times in my life.
Actually, I don't know if my childhood "caused" the depression, or if it was just the trigger for something that was already lurking in my DNA just waiting for an invitation to present itself.

By the time I was 15, I wasn't just depressed, I was suicidal. But I didn't realize how bad things had become for me until one day early in my sophomore year of high school, when my friends mother came to speak to our Health Science class about depression and suicide, and how to spot it in teenagers. It was only then that I realized there was a name for what I was feeling. AND, that I was not the only person who felt that way.

She handed out a sheet with a checklist of 10 things to look out for with a person who was suicidal. I remember sitting in class and checking off one item after the other until I had checked 9 out of the 10 warning signs. The only thing I hadn't done yet was actually act on my plan.

This startled me, to say the least.

Looking back, I now realize that the depression had been creeping in over time, and I hadn't even realized how bad it was until that moment. My depression had simply become a normalized part of my life.

I remember sitting at my desk, staring at the list in front of me and realizing that I had a choice. I could remain silent and stay in the dark place that I was in, a place that I was pretty sure would cause me to end my life before I graduated high school, or I could choose life.

As you have already figured out, I chose life.

After class I pulled my friend's mom to the side and asked her to help me. I didn't know where else to turn.

My friend's mother was a psychologist, and she reached out to the mother of another friend of mine who was a social worker, as well as my carpool driver for religious school. Because the two them were not afraid to intervene, I was able to get help. And because of the help I received, I was able to find a better way out of my situation than suicide.

About a month into therapy, I got up the courage to move out of my grandparents' house and move in with the family of one of the mothers who had gotten me help, and because of all of the emotional support and therapy I was getting, things started to slowly get better.

And for about a decade my life was much better. But then, in rabbinical school, I felt the darkness creep in again. I was living in Los Angeles, a place I had last lived when my parents were alive. And it was there that all of my old ghosts came out of the woodwork. And it was back to therapy for me to work on all of the same issues I had worked on in high school, but this time from the perspective of an adult. It was the same loss, but new challenges to deal with, because I was in a different place in my life.

Throughout all of these things, both as a teenager and as someone in my late 20s, I seemed fine to the outside world. I did well in school, socialized with friends, got great internships, and finally, upon ordination, a job, here at B'nai Israel. But when I was by myself or allowed myself not to be busy doing homework or working, I would feel that same sense of isolation and overwhelming sadness creep in once again.
I could be irritable and was fearful that perpetual sadness was the best life had in store for me. While my depression was never again as bad as it had been in high school, it has been at times bad enough for me realize I needed to go back into therapy.

And thankfully for me, along the way, there were more angels, people who reached out to me just as I began to drown in my depression, throwing me a lifeline.

When I look back at those years, I have one regret. That I only allowed myself to get partial help. I know this is hard to believe, but I was stubborn. And that stubbornness was a two-edged sword. On one hand, it kept me from succumbing to the darkness within me. But it also prevented me from getting the proper help that I needed.

I now realize that what I really needed was not only people who cared about me, not only the therapists who gave me the skills I needed to cope with my depression, not only the community that I had surrounded myself with, but also a good psychiatrist. Anti-depressants, combined with therapy, combined with prayer and community, would have helped alleviate a lot of my pain, and shorten my suffering.

I don't talk a lot about this part of my life. Because like many people, I don't want it to define who I am, both in terms of how others would see me, and how I see myself, and because going back into that space can be painful. But I also know that silence about mental health issues helps no one. Not the person who is directly suffering, or the people who love them.
These last few years have been particularly difficult for most of us. The very things we needed to do to keep ourselves safe from Covid are the same things that can feed a depression or fuel anxiety. Human beings are social creatures. And even introverts need to interact in person with others. Uncertainty can feel destabilizing. And isolation can literally be crazy making.

And while we are no longer living in the grips of Covid like we were, the psychological consequences of what we went through, continue to linger with us as individuals and as a society.

Judaism teaches that much of the meaning we receive from life is by being in relationship with one another. But when we are actively suffering from a mental health problem, it is hard to even be in relationship with ourselves.

And as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, people have a need to be needed. People need, throughout their life, to feel as though they are of value to others. During Covid when we were separated from each other, for many people, our sense of personal value was lost. This is why we saw the severity of dementia radically increase with the ongoing isolation of the elderly. And why our nation's youth suffered from a startling increase in depression and anxiety.

And for those of us who live somewhere in between youth and old age, we didn't do so well either.

I believe this is why our Shabbat attendance increased substantially during the pandemic. Watching services together, even if it was only on YouTube, enabled us to have a shared experience, and broke through our isolation, making us feel less alone for a brief time each week. It provided us with a way to connect in a meaningful manner with our community.

I think this is part of the reason why for me, my depression didn't come roaring back during the pandemic, I felt like what I was doing mattered.

But as I said, that was only part of the reason. There was a serendipitous turn of events that occurred right before Covid. I started getting hot flashes, and my doctor prescribed a mild anti-depressant for me because the side effect of it was to reduce hot flashes.

So ironically, I finally got the medication I needed, just for a different reason. As the noted psychologist, Dr. Glenn Hammel likes to say, "a broken brain can't conceive of its own brokenness. From the perspective of the brain, what it sees appears to be normal." Like many people, it is easier for me to go for medical assistance for *anything* other than a mental illness. Because this kind of illness just becomes the "normal" way we see the world. We are more in tuned with the pain in our bodies, than in our souls.

Because of this, when I have been in the throes of a depression, I don't necessarily see myself as worthy of healing, and I can't imagine a time when I could be feeling better again. I literally can't conceive that there is something that can actually help me feel better. Because this is now just who I am, and not what I am suffering from.

And it is in those moments when I know that reaching out for help is what I need to do, that I not only feel too paralyzed and unable to do it, but I will actively try to hide what I am going through from others.

It is in those moments when I need someone to reach out to me, that I will find myself trying to hide from everyone, including myself.

I shudder to think what would have happened to me had had it been anyone other than my friends' mother who came and talked to us that day when I was in high school. I knew her well enough to trust her, but not so well that I was ashamed to talk to her about what I was going through.

By the time I was in high school I had normalized my depression. And when I look around the world today, I feel like that it is what we have done as a society.

We are facing a myriad of societal pressures, including a post pandemic world, a fractured society here and in Israel, the anxiety that comes with climate change, and not to mention the ever-increasing anti-semitism here and abroad. And while these things didn't create the current mental health crises in our country, each one of these have exacerbated it exponentially.

This combined with a shortage of mental health providers, and inadequate insurance coverage, puts us all in a particularly fragile place. And it makes it even more critical that we look out for each other, that we become the *malachim* – the messengers that can bring help and healing to those around us.

The biggest surprise to me in my rabbinate has been how much the mental health struggles of congregants has been at the center of it. Even before Covid, I was seeing a steady increase in depression and anxiety amongst not only our youth, but people of all ages. So much so that when I come across a family that doesn't have anyone in the immediate family circle dealing with anxiety, depression, a mood disorder, or some other mental health crises, I'm actually shocked.

Now if there is something that the Jewish community has a long history of dealing with, its anxiety, depression and agitation. It's kind of our thing. Between genetics and intergenerational trauma, it's something we have been wrestling with, individually and collectively, for a very long time.

It's not that we suffer from it at higher rates than the general population, but we are more likely to talk about it. In the Bible, in the Talmud, and throughout the generations we have discussed issues of mental health, in our sacred texts, our prayers and with each other.

And the rabbis of old have tried to create frameworks for us to hold onto when life is spinning too quickly around us. This framework forces us to be engaged with the community, so that we don't isolate ourselves and exacerbate our mental health issues.

Judaism gives us a daily, weekly, and annual calendar for us to hold on to in those time when life is overwhelming, or when just getting through the day is almost more than we can bear. Judaism has created an external structure for our lives when chaos reigns inside our minds and souls.

The prayers that we are supposed to say each morning and evening, are meant to anchor and comfort us as well as to give us a sense of perspective. Our evening prayers are words of reaching out, asking for connection and protection. And our morning prayers are meant to remind us to have gratitude that we are here for another day, even when the day that lays ahead of us appears bleak.

And because we are supposed to pray in a minyan, we are doing two important things. Firstly, praying as part of a community forces a person out of their home, and into community, into relationship with others. And secondly, when someone is part of a minyan, the community is literally counting on them. So, if all you have the energy to give is your presence, you can begin to internalize that you matter to others. And then when you stop showing up, others know it's time to check in with you and make sure you're ok.

Therapy, medication, prayer, holidays, these are external structures to help calm internal chaos. Each one provides an opportunity for us to choose a healthier path. But when we combine all of these actions, we create a structure to support us through the difficult times.

Judaism is at its essence a religious and cultural framework designed to make us appreciate life, and to urge us to choose life, every day, again and again. And by that I don't merely mean being alive, but being full of life, living a life that is filled with blessings, with meaning and with others.

On Yom Kippur this is presented to us in the clearest of ways. In this morning's Torah reading we heard Moses speaking to the Israelites saying:

> "This day I call heaven and earth to witness regarding you: life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. Choose life." (Deut. 30:19)

As we enter this new year, let us commit to a life of meaning, a life where we pursue a healthy body and a healthy spirit.

A life where we are unafraid to reach out to those who are in psychological pain, offering them friendship and support.

And may we find both meaning in - and healing from - our own pain.

Ken yehi ratzon – may this be God's will.