

Languishing  
Shabbat Sermon - 6/11  
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“Only boxers can understand the loneliness of tennis players,” writes Andre Agassi in his biography *Open*. “And yet boxers have their corner men and managers. Even a boxer's opponent provides a kind of companionship, someone he can grapple with and grunt at. In tennis you stand face-to-face with the enemy, trade blows with him, but never touch him or talk to him, or anyone else. The rules forbid a tennis player from even talking to his coach while on the court. People sometimes mention the track-and-field runner as a comparably lonely figure, but I have to laugh. At least the runner can feel and smell his opponents. They're inches away. In tennis you're on an island. Of all the games men and women play, tennis is the closest to solitary confinement....”

Tennis has been on my mind the past two weeks - i watched the epic match today between Nadal and Djokovic and I've enjoyed playing with a few Beth Am congregants, but it's been on my mind because of the fascinating and tragic saga of Naomi Osaka - the number two tennis player and the highest paid female athlete in the world. If you don't know about Osaka, last week she resigned during the middle of the French Open, one of the world's most important tennis tournaments. Osaka did not want to speak to the press, something mandated by the tournament, and withdrew from the competition. In a social media post she shared “The truth is that I have suffered long bouts of depression since the U.S. Open in 2018 and I have had a really hard time coping with that,”

It's a pretty eye-opening and remarkable sports moment and one where sports can help shine a light on concerns beyond the court. A spectacular athlete, walking away from her craft for a period of time and openly admitting that she has mental health struggles. “We would not fault her if she had a sprained ankle,” said Benjamin F. Miller, the chief strategy officer for Well Being Trust, a national foundation focusing on mental health and well-being. “But when it comes to mental health — which we know is equally, if not more, important than your physical health — we have this arbitrary standard of what's acceptable and what's not.”

We know of the real mental health concerns that this pandemic has had on so many. It wasn't just COVID that people were struggling with but the harmful side effects that pandemic caused on so many. ‘As the pandemic set in last March, the percentage of people reporting they felt anxious or depressed spiked and has remained elevated since

..” Experts have also highlighted increases in sleeping problems and alcohol and other substance misuse, and point to clear causes: Uncertainty and fear about the coronavirus itself; job loss and housing and food insecurity; juggling working from home while dealing with cooped-up kids; grief and a loss of social cohesion as a result of restrictions.” (National Institute of Mental Health’s Dimensional Traumatic Stress Research Program)

And, while we are returning to normal and have emerged from the emergency stage of this pandemic - most of us are vaccinated, camps are up and running this summer, we are returning to in person work, visiting family across the country we know that mental issues, exacerbated by the pandemic continue. Reopening is not an antidote to mental health struggles. In fact - some are worried that mental health concerns will linger, despite our re-emergence into society.

The University of Pennsylvania Psychologist, Adam Grant, writes in the Times: “In the early, uncertain days of the pandemic, it’s likely that your brain’s threat detection system — called the amygdala — was on high alert for fight-or-flight. As you learned that masks helped protect us — but [package-scrubbing didn’t](#) — you probably developed routines that eased your sense of dread. But the pandemic has dragged on, and the acute state of anguish has given way to a chronic condition of languish.”

Languishing is the neglected middle child of mental health. It’s the void between depression and flourishing — the [absence of well-being](#). You don’t have symptoms of mental illness, but you’re not the picture of mental health either. You’re not functioning at full capacity. Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and [triples](#) the odds that you’ll cut back on work. It appears to be [more common](#) than major depression — and in some ways it may be a bigger risk factor for [mental illness](#).”  
Sound familiar?

You are not alone if you are languishing. Yes, a stigma about mental health still pervades our culture. But, many in our community continue to live with significant mental health concerns. Even the greatest of our biblical ancestors struggled with their mental health. Many of them sound like deep periods of languishing. Moses cries out to God about the emotional anguish and burden of leadership (Numbers 11:14-15). The midrash teaches that both Sarah and Aaron live their lives consumed with grief after traumatic events to their children. Elijah, the prophet, was discouraged, weary, and afraid. After great spiritual victories over the prophets of Ba'al, he feared and ran for his life, and there in the desert, he sat down and prayed, defeated and worn: (Kings 1) Jonah - runs away from his troubles, ending up in the belly of a fish. King David, in the book Psalms declares: “From the lowest depths, I call out to you (Psalm 130:1).”

Rabbi Elliot Kukla of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center explains that, “What the biblical stories teach us is that mental distress is a natural part of human life and a part of every society. Surviving our own moments of emotional suffering and finding the strength to walk with others through incredible pain are ancient and sacred obligations.”

In the Talmud (Yoma), two Rabbis Ami and Ashi debate a biblical phrase from the book of Proverbs. “If there is anxiety in someone’s heart, let them quash it (Proverbs 12:25).” Rabbi Asi says we should take this at face value and dispel our negative thoughts by pushing them out of our mind. Rabbi Ami teaches that we might understand the verse differently. “We should tell others of our concerns, which will lower our anxieties. Instead of quashing our anxieties, we should vocalize them. In the words of Rabbi Jake Franklin: “While general human tendency is to listen to Rabbi Asi and attempt to bottle up our emotions, mental health professionals will universally advise in line with Rabbi Ami. One of the best ways for us to navigate the ballooning mental health crisis is for us to talk about it communally, and for each of us to find outlets to process our emotions with a professional or someone whom we trust.”

While we often promote the idea of self-care, there are significant steps we can all make to set up an environment where self care is actualized. I hope Naomi Osaka is able to find supportive mentors, coaches and therapists who recognize not just the beauty of her game but the importance of mental health in her life. No doubt, no matter what type of work we do, we know that our jobs can impact our mental health and vice versa.

Furthermore, languishing is unlikely to just cure itself. The sociologist Corey Keyes who coined the term suggests that the people “most likely to experience major depression and anxiety disorders in the next decade aren’t the ones with those symptoms today. They’re the people who are languishing right now.”

I was delighted to hear that our local Jewish Federation recognized the difficulties that many have had during the pandemic - and are giving their professional staff a “summer slowdown” with the intention of allowing an intentional and sustained period of time away with the opportunity to recharge. With the blessing of the leadership, the professionals at Stanford Hillel are also taking extended time off this summer as a combination of vacation and time gifted from the organization - with the goal of communal health. These are really beautiful models - deeply Jewish - of prioritizing people and ensuring that mental well being is a sacred part of being in a community.

If you are a manager or leader at your job or organization, I encourage you to implement specific strategies to give your employees and staff, time to wind down this

summer. Maybe it's the implementation of summer Fridays or a few days off for an extended weekend. Maybe you can close your office for a period of time. We should do this for our house cleaners, gardeners and nannies as well - especially those who are already the most vulnerable in our community,

If you are living with a mental illness - or if you find yourself languishing please prioritize yourself. We know the impact of the pandemic will be continued to be felt throughout this year and beyond. Dr. Mario Lippy is director of behavioral health at the [Jewish Family & Children's Service Michael R. Zent Healthcare Center](#) in his blog writes: "As a director of behavioral health with JFCS, it is important to note that even though we don't know when the pandemic will be over and relief from stress and anxiety may not be immediate, there are things you can do to stay mentally healthy.

Self-awareness is very important. Pay attention to what your body is telling you. How are you feeling? What are your emotions and are you comfortable with your emotions? Pay particular attention to how you are expressing your emotions and how the body is manifesting those feelings. Is your blood pressure elevated? Are you getting enough sleep? Are you eating too much or not enough? If you are self-aware and taking small steps to control and correct things that may be detrimental to your health, it may help you take back the sense of control and ultimately improve your health.

I also challenge you to learn about yourself. Be insightful. What makes you happy? What wears you down? If you love to read literature that is heavy and dark but you're finding it tough to process right now, keep reading but switch to something light like comedies. Making small adjustments like this is self-medication in a good way. We all need to keep doing things that make us happy. We may just need to make adjustments to make sure those activities are still bringing us joy and promoting good health.

Give yourself permission to take a break and replenish your emotional resources so you can get back to what brings you hope, love, and happiness. The normal we will achieve in the future is going to be different than the normal we know now. The pandemic has allowed us to learn things about ourselves that I'm hopeful will benefit us in the future."

If you are struggling or languishing - please reach out. The Beth Am team and our amazing trained tikvah volunteers are here to offer help. One thing we all can do is continue to recognize, acknowledge and validate people's real feelings and emotions. We can follow the teachings of Rabbi Ami - vocalize our own needs and feelings and the feelings and emotions of our community.

The writer David Foster Wallace, a man who lived with great mental illness, wrote: I submit that tennis is the most beautiful sport there is and also the most demanding. It

requires body control, hand-eye coordination, quickness, flat-out speed, endurance, and that weird mix of caution and abandon we call courage. It also requires smarts. Just one single shot in one exchange in one point of a high-level match is a nightmare of mechanical variables.”

I look forward to watching the finals of the French Open this weekend. It’s exhilarating to see Athletes at the peak of their abilities stand in such solitude. No clock, no teammate - just a person, alone with their own focus and ritual, trying to perform at his or her peak. And, I’ll also be thinking of Naomi Osaka. May her strength in owning up to her own mental struggles - inspire us all.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styIn-pandemic-burnout&region=BELOW\\_MAIN\\_CONTENT&context=storylines-guide](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styIn-pandemic-burnout&region=BELOW_MAIN_CONTENT&context=storylines-guide)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/02/well/mind/job-work-mental-health.html>

<https://www.statnews.com/2021/05/07/as-the-covid-19-crisis-ebbs-in-the-u-s-experts-brace-for-a-long-term-impact-on-mental-health/>