

## **Mental Illness Is Not a Sin**

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In the course of preparing for the High Holy Days this year, I came across a sermon from last year written by an Orthodox Rabbi, Adam Raskin, from the suburban Washington, DC, area. He called it: Mental Illness Is Not a Sin. The title already tells you about his concerns.

He began by talking about Rabbi Nachman of Braslov and what an important figure he was in his time and continues to be today. Thousands of his followers still make the trip to Uman, Ukraine, each year and his chassidim never replaced him with a successor as rebbe.

Yet Rabbi Nachman certainly suffered from severe depression and possibly also bipolar disorder. He himself understood his illness as having a physiological component, as we are finding out more and more today about many forms of mental illness.

Rabbi Raskin also noted that Maimonides, the most famous physician of all time, described depression in his medical writings.

The text he used for his sermon was from the well-known Haftarah by the prophet Isaiah, which we also read on Yom Kippur morning. In it, the prophet urges us not to “hide ourselves from our own flesh.” Usually this is understood as

an instruction not to hide ourselves from others who are like us of flesh and blood—that is, other people—and to respond to their needs.

The Hebrew is *Miv-sarecah lo titalem*, which can also be translated as, Do not ignore your own body, your own flesh and blood; that is, take care of yourself. Though I had never seen this interpretation of this particular verse, there are many other verses in the Torah, particularly in Deuteronomy, which are universally understood to refer to our responsibility to preserve our own health, to take care of ourselves and not to endanger ourselves in any way.

It is acknowledged in the Talmud that no matter how great a rabbi was, how learned or wise, he could not heal himself. They tell the story of a time when Rabbi Yochanan was suffering from either depression or some other emotional pain. His dear friend Rabbi Hanina came to visit him. He reached out his hand and helped him to stand up. The Gemara asks: “Why didn’t Rabbi Yochanan stand up by himself?” The Sages respond: “A prisoner cannot free himself from prison.”

Living in a world where suicide is such a significant cause of mortality—the second leading cause for young men and fourth leading cause for young women, with rising rates among older people as well—this mitzvah of extending a helping hand deserves more attention. Further, I was shocked to learn that in the Israeli Defense Forces (which is mostly young draftees ages 18–22) there are more deaths caused by suicide than from military operations. I could not find parallel statistics from our American armed forces, but we know that suicide is a significant risk among US veterans.

In terms of the Orthodox community, the rabbi referenced Facebook and the general desire to look good on the outside. In one of the comments I didn't get to make during our High Holy Day services because of time, a contemporary rabbi warns of the disease that results from "comparing our insides to someone else's outsides."

A second issue in the Orthodox community is fear that acknowledging mental illness in a family will lessen the marriage-ability of their other children, that is, their ability to make sheduchim, arranged marriages. While this is not such an issue in our community, issues of stigma still exist.

Rabbi Raskin pointed out that the way we speak, and this is across all religious communities, perpetuates negative stereotypes. We say: What, are you crazy? Or, Are you insane? You must be totally nuts.

You might wonder, are Jews more likely to suffer from a mental illness? A study by the National Institute of Mental Health found a statistical difference in rates of depression among Jews, higher than Protestants and Catholics. There are also studies on anxiety and OCD, as well as investigation of a gene among Ashkenazi Jews that raises the likelihood of developing schizophrenia.

On the positive side, though, Jews are more accepting of therapy than many other ethnic groups and are more likely to benefit from it, perhaps because of their better attitude. Maybe the custom of including mental health in our *mi sheberach* prayers for healing helps create an attitude of acceptance of mental health as real

along with other illnesses. When we pray the *mi sheberach*, we say *refuat hanefesh urefuat haguf*, a healing of the soul along with a healing of the body.

Our local NAMI chapter (National Alliance on Mental Illness) has had a full schedule of programs this past week as part of Mental Illness Awareness Week, which was established by Congress back in 1990. They continue to advocate for better funding for research, protecting access to services for clients, and attaining mental health parity on all insurance plans.

Our Reform movement has been addressing mental health issues in both programming and resolutions since 1989. Recently there has been a focus on teens and college students and the increasing stressors in their lives, and on older adults and the dangers of loneliness.

May we find inspiration to continue this important work in the year ahead.