

Yom Kippur 5779 Mental Health Part 2: Our Communal Responsibility
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“Thank you.”

“That is just what I needed to hear.”

“As someone who works in the field, I want you to know that it is so important that we talk about it.”

“It is so important to name it out loud.”

After I spoke about Mental Health last Rosh Hashanah, these were some of the many comments I heard from you, the TBO community. I am encouraged that my words struck a chord within the congregation. For one, it means that people were actually listening! More importantly, it means that we can have an important conversation in our community about this sensitive, difficult, and stigmatized subject.

In the past year, we have had members of our community hospitalized for mental illness. We have struggled through funerals of people who died as a result of mental illness. We have conversed with others facing mental illness themselves and spoken with people navigating the role of caretaker for someone with mental illness.

And we have seen the news cover the deaths of high profile celebrities like Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain, both of whom died of suicide. We are

inundated with reports of the approximately 115 people who die every day from opioid overdoses¹.

My focus last year was about building one's own mental health practices; finding ways to recharge that invisible power bar that follows each of us around. We can--and should--continue practicing gratitude and finding our own coping mechanisms in order to do that. *And*, what I've learned over the course of this year, is that it is not only about our own mental health practices.

Cultivating mental health is the responsibility of the whole community. It is our sacred obligation to build a community that supports those of its members who face mental illness. The Talmud teaches us: *kol Yisrael aravim zeh b'zeh*, all of Israel is "mixed up" with each other; we are responsible for each other. We are commanded to fulfill mitzvot of visiting the sick, welcoming the stranger, and burying the dead. We pray in community, to form a minyan, so that our prayers may be strengthened and that we may strengthen each other through our presence.

It is for these reasons that I have chosen to speak again about mental health, this time from a community perspective.

¹ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis>

Our Torah portion this morning, Nitzavim, teaches us, “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life-if you and your offspring would live.”²

Rabbi Eliezer Davidovits asks the obvious question: "Is there a person who would choose death?" What kind of choice is really being offered here? Wouldn't everyone prefer life to death, blessing to curse?³

No. Not everyone, not all of the time. Especially for those struggling with certain types of mental illness, choosing life is not so simple. In the face of mental illness, it is easy to feel alone.

Yet in Nitzavim, we also read that “*Atem nitzavim hayom kolchem*”, you stand here today *all* of you; you plural. Not just one or two people, but all the women, men and children; the Israelite and the stranger who resides among them. The wood chopper and the water drawer. In calling on all of us together, God makes us all accountable to one and other.

In addition, the covenant made at that moment, to choose life, was with BOTH *po imanu omed hayom*, those standing here today, as well as *asher einenu po*, those not standing here today. In that moment, the entire Jewish people, *l’olam*

² (Deuteronomy 30:19)

³ <https://reformjudaism.org/nitzavim-mitzvah-choosing>
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va'ed, for ever and ever--including us--were asked to choose life. So today, as we stand, all of us, together, we, too, choose life.

Rabbi Edythe Mencher, a clinical social worker who works with the Union for Reform Judaism in its initiative to include people with disabilities, describes that “having a sense of community and belonging goes a long way to helping us both to preserve mental health and to sustain ourselves if we do have a psychiatric condition.”

When we stand together in community, we support those who have trouble standing on their own.

So what would it look like to build a community that cultivates mental health and supports those facing mental illness - and what will it take for us to get there?

First: A mentally healthy community is a place where there is no shame in talking about mental illness. As Rabbi Richard Address writes in Caring for the Soul, “Mental illnesses are diseases of the brain; they are no-fault diseases. The challenge is not one of blame or shame, but of how to cope with and adapt to living with mental illness.”⁴ We would never tell someone with cancer to just snap out of

⁴ Pg 41 Caring for the Soul R'fuat HaNefesh edited by Richard Address)

it, nor would we suggest that someone with Tay Sachs disease could recreate nerve cells in their brain and spinal cord if they just tried hard enough.

[breathe]

I take medication every day to help cope with diagnosed anxiety and depression disorders. My medication, paired with cognitive-behavioral therapy, and the support of my friends and family, has been transformative in my ability to choose life.

This is the first time I have ever felt compelled to publically share this information about myself. At first, I was terrified: would you still think I'm competent? Would you incessantly ask me if I'm okay? Would every emotional turn be scrutinized and questioned? And then I realized: this is what it means to succumb to the stigma. Anxiety and a depression are a part of who I am--and they always will be. But I am also a talented, passionate person and rabbi. And in fact, I can contribute to the de-stigmatization of mental illness by sharing this piece of my story.

Second: To support those facing mental illness, we must build empathy along with a tolerance for discomfort. It is not our job, as a community, to cure people. Our role is to get comfortable sitting with people in their pain without taking their pain on as our own. Sometimes this literally means sitting with

someone and saying nothing. Sitting in silence can be awkward. Yet the value of our presence, simply *being* there with someone, far outweighs our own discomfort.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the Power of the Pause. The three ways I offered for us to give meaning to our pause are to act with *kaf zechut*, assuming good will, to ask questions out of curiosity, and to consider alternative perspectives. These three actions also help us empathize with others. Building empathy and a tolerance for discomfort takes time and it takes a tremendous amount of patience. Yet the result can transform our community.

Third: A supportive community makes resources available to those facing mental illness in the same way it provides resources for those with physical ailments. For example, if we provide meal support for families where one member is recovering from surgery, we can also provide meal support for families when one member is going through an episode of depression or alcoholic relapse.

One tangible action we can take is to provide educational opportunities within our community, and we can participate in learning sessions that speak to mental health issues. Last spring, several of our Religious School teachers participated in Mental Health First Aid training for youth. During this training, we were taught the importance of ALGEE, an acronym for a helpful action plan when supporting someone facing mental illness.

A: assess for risk of suicide or harm

L: listen non-judgmentally

G: give reassurance and information

E: encourage appropriate professional help

E: encourage self-help and other support strategies

We started with this training for our teachers. Now we need to extend this to a larger part of our community. In order to identify both the places we are doing well and the places where we need to grow our education and awareness, we will be establishing a task force to conduct a congregational audit. The goal of the task force will be to identify what resources we already have and which of those are being used. We will explore what else we could be doing to be a welcoming and supportive community to those facing mental illness. If you are interested in joining this task force, please be in touch with me via e-mail and look for more information in Temple Topics; our first meeting will be on Sunday, October 14th, at 3pm.

In some ways, we, as a Temple Beth Or community, are well on our way to building this kind of supportive community. We are talking about mental illness out loud, our teachers participated in the Mental Health First Aid training, we are working on maintaining our individual mental health. At the same time, we also

have plenty of room to grow. In the coming year, *atem nitzavim* - let us stand together, all of us, and continue to strengthen our community as we support those facing mental illness.