

Rabbi Eleazar fell ill, the Talmud recounts.

Eleazar lay surrounded by darkness, unable move, unable to get out of bed for days.

Rabbi Yochanan visited him in that dark room.

Seeing his friend in pain, he was grieved, and sat by the bed.

Yochanan bared his arm, and it seemed to radiate light.

In the glow, Yochanan noticed that Eleazar was crying.

“Why do you weep?” the visitor asked.

After a long pause, Eleazar responded:

“I am crying because all beauty rots and all light turns to darkness.”

The two men wept together.¹

“All beauty rots and all light turns to darkness.”

This story, captures Eleazar’s suffering and mental anguish.

It likely touches each person sitting here tonight.

Many of us have our own mental health struggles.

Many of us care deeply about someone ravaged by biochemical imbalance.

Over the course of a lifetime,

¹ BT Berachot 5b, following Rabbi Ruth A. Zlotnick and Rabbi Paul Kipnes.

one in four Americans will suffer from a diagnosable mental illness.

Some of you know that in my family

there are those who have struggled with anxiety, depression, and mania.

There is so much shame around mental illness.

I feel called to speak tonight

about both how those of us who suffer can respond to our struggles Jewishly.

And I will frame a Jewish approach for caretakers as well.

In earlier generations, the names of certain diseases were spoken in a whisper – “*cancer*” – reflecting our lack of understanding and our helplessness to do anything about them.²

Today too, we sometimes whisper when we speak of “depression” or “suicide.”

The words themselves are both taboo and shaming.

A congregant shares her story³:

I was thirteen when I knew I was different from the other kids in my class.

I was different because I was at the onset

of my lifelong battle with bipolar disorder.

It was the 80's and in those days people didn't talk about mental illness in adults,

let alone in children,

² Rabbi Dean Shapiro, Yom Kippur 5775.

³ *Ibid.*

and you absolutely couldn't talk about it in my father's house.

I was fifteen when I tried to kill myself -- the first time.

I took a bottle of Tylenol and washed it down with half a bottle of Jack Daniels.

*My parents chose not to take me to the hospital,
opting instead for pouring Ipecac down my throat
until I vomited all of the pills I had swallowed.*

*I can remember hearing them say, "We can't take her to the hospital –
what will people think?"*

That was the day that I learned to be ashamed of who I was.

*It was the day I learned to start lying, the day I learned to hide my true self,
the day I began to think no one would ever truly love me.*

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What is it that feels unmentionable or embarrassing about mental illness?

Perhaps it is that there is nothing concrete to "see" when someone is suffering.

There is no arm in a cast or hair loss from chemo to clue us into pain
or demonstrate hardship.

There is no objective blood test.

Oftentimes, those coping with mental illness appear fine.

More importantly, I believe there is not more acceptance around these diseases

because symptoms fall on a spectrum.

They are not black and white.

Gradations of mental anguish affect each of us.

We all have times of anxiety, depression, euphoria, and compulsion.

I know that part of my own journey

has been to find compassion for the fragile sides of myself,

so that I can extend that same *chesed* toward those who suffer chronically.

So too, those who suffer are not always sick.

Every human has periods of greater or lesser stability,

greater or lesser competence and equilibrium.

Some of us, tragically, confront it more often.

Many people with psychiatric conditions take medication.

For some, the pills are liberating.

Others find their side effects oppressive.

And many never find medications that help.

My family member falls into that last category.

I add this because we sometimes self-righteously ask

“Why won’t they just take meds??”

Sometimes decades of trying medications is fruitless.

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Another story:⁴

*As someone who has suffered from depression for several decades,
I believe that only those who have suffered
can truly know what it's like to have depression.
People are quick to give advice -- what I call the "if you could just" people.
They mean well,
but they think I should be able to will myself out of bed on those dark days.
One of the hardest parts of this illness is that the ordinary person cannot relate.
They don't understand that I cannot function,
that my brain cannot work like theirs.
I cancel a lot of dates with people, and this affects my friendships.
I am lucky to have a husband who is understanding and supportive.
Support is the greatest medicine one can give.
I struggle with the day-to-day...bathing, cleaning, going shopping.
I have anxieties about large crowds.
All these things prevent me from living normally.
Seclusion from the world is a big part of depression for me.
I feel I don't belong.
I know my husband hurts when I am hurting, and he picks up the slack.
I blame myself for my depression, and for my family having to suffer through it.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

And from this brave recounting, I'd like to share some wisdom from our tradition:

The morning prayer "*Elohai N'shamah*" contains a powerful reminder:

"The soul you have given me, O God, is pure.

You created it. You formed it. You breathed it into me."

As Rabbi Ruth Adar, who is public about her own chronic depression, teaches,

"I'm not bad, even if I feel bad. My soul is pure and I can do good:

I can do mitzvot. I can study texts. I can pray.

I can give tzedakah. I can teach my students, and I can relieve suffering in small ways."

Perhaps you can find strength in reciting *Elohai N'shamah*, a reminder of our inherent goodness.

I know I do.

Let us remember the wisdom of *Pirkei Avot*: "*Al tifros min hatzibur* – do not remove yourself from the community."

It can be excruciating, at times, to go out in public when you feel that you do not have the resources to talk or interact with others, or even the energy to smile.

The grief of mourning your more capable self is desolating—but please know that you are ALWAYS welcome at Temple Beth Or.

Even if you come late to services. Even if you don't comb your hair.

Even if you can't fully participate.

Our Temple, the building and the people, are always here for you.

You are not alone.⁵

To those who bear the burden of mental illness, whether your own, or that of a loved one,

I acknowledge your strength, and your courage, in facing the challenge. //

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And what of the caretakers?

As I have journeyed these past 20 years, my struggles included a trajectory of:

a desire to distance myself,

guilt that I could not heal my loved one or fix them,

guilt about my own happiness and full life,

and wrestling with what it means to be a loving family member.

Now I contend with what it means to truly help.

Am I most loving by accepting someone in their space of crippling negativity and self-criticism?

Should I try to counter their harmful thoughts?

What are my obligations, and when do I decide that I have done everything I can?

As loved ones, what does it mean to get sufferers the help they need?

How do we stand by their side as they are hurting,

without the extremes of either absorbing all their pain or feeling detached?

How do we give them room to hurt?

⁵ *Ibid.*

What might it look like to just sit with them, to witness, and allow?⁶

Those who are ill need companionship.

We do best when we approach on their terms –

not by proclaiming “You need to snap out of it,” or “Your children need you!”

or “I know just how you feel.”

These have to do with our discomfort, with our need to feel good about ourselves,

or to express our own understandable helplessness.

We can approach with humility, asking “Is there any way I can help?”

or simply sitting and sharing the experience.⁷

Rabbi Jen Gubitz reminds us

that “we can listen to those who are able to express their sadness, pain and struggle

even if we can’t relate or understand,

and we can be patient when people who hurt can’t just ‘cheer up.’”

We can honor their neurological limits.

They will do the best they can in their own time.

Rabbi Dean Shapiro remind us that “care-takers cannot cure, but we can acknowledge,

hear, reach, and hold –

⁶ Rabbi Dean Shapiro, Yom Kippur 5775.

⁷ Rabbi Dean Shapiro, Yom Kippur 5775.

and that is a lot.

We can bring our loved one the phone number for a crisis hotline,
and hold their hand while they call.

We can take them to the nearest emergency room & sit with them while they fill out paperwork.

We can go with them to an appointment with a psychologist or psychiatrist.

We can help them look for support groups.

We are empowered. We can help.

And there is more we can do.

We can avoid using terms like “crazy” or “neurotic” or “psycho.”

These words stigmatize people, isolate them, and make it harder for them to seek help.

They are outdated and hurtful words” that worsen the experience.

They encourage self-blame and self-hatred.

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As Jews, traditionally speaking, we do not exchange greetings of “Happy New Year.”

Rather, we say “*L’Shana Tovah—to a good year.*”⁸

Rabbi Jeff Sirkman teaches, it’s not that happiness is necessarily out of the question;
it is just not our singular goal in the New Year.

For we know happiness is fleeting, if not overrated, and largely subjective at that.

Our aim, rather, is *tovah*—goodness...

Knowing that the burdens of those who suffer with mental illness

⁸ Rabbi Les Bronsetin, Bet Am Shalom Bulletin.

and those who care for them will be heavy....

Our hope is that the struggle does not drive us to despair...

Knowing that our climb up life's mountain may seem very steep,

And may—momentarily, drag us down...

What we wish is "*tovah*"...

that even in the depths of sickness—

even in the midst of hardship—

from beneath those burdens, we may still somehow find the good...⁹

This *tovah*, this goodness is manifest in the characters of Rabbis Eleazar and Yochanan.

For those of us who are Rabbi Eleazar, sitting in the pain of light turning to darkness,

I pray that we are able to affirm the good we do

and reach for self-compassion when we are hard on ourselves,

when we cannot accomplish what we wish we could.

For those of us who are Rabbi Yochanan weeping with him as a loving friend,

I pray that *tovah* comes from having the strength to sit with another in pain,

offering love without judgment, affirming their goodness,

and taking care of ourselves

so that we can be the most compassionate loved ones possible.

L'shana Tovah, may it be a year of goodness for each of us.

⁹ Rabbi Jeff Sirkman, Kol Nidrei—5767.... Choosing LIFE—"Against Depression," Larchmont Temple, Larchmont, New York.

