

Shmirat Hanefesh and Tikkun HaGuf: Cultivating Mental Health

YK Sermon 5778

Co-writers: Rabbi Dusty Klass, Rabbi Leah Citrin

Editing Team: Rabbi Asher Knight, Rabbi Paul Kipnes, Tim Klass

“The journey you are embarking is sacred, and holy, and hard.

Find two people as soon as possible.

A good masseuse, and a great therapist.”

These words, offered by Rabbi Dvora Weisberg during my second year orientation during rabbinic school, have stayed with me ever since.

It was the first time an authority figure in my world had spoken

- out loud, in public –

about therapy and massage as health-sustaining practices, rather than solutions to issues that had already arisen.

In suggesting that all of her students seek therapy,

Rabbi Weisberg gave us permission

to take our mental health

as seriously as our physical health.

Yet when I chose to take a mental health day,
my emails to professors explaining my absence
merely stated that I was not feeling well.
I feared that if I included the words “mental health” in my
explanation,
my absence would be deemed illegitimate.

We are constantly reminded of the importance of building
and maintaining strong physical health;
we are bombarded with advertisements
for workout programs and at-home gym equipment,
reminders about the importance of exercising regularly.
We constantly talk about needing more sleep.
Nutrition plan after nutrition plan
promises to help us be more intentional
about the food we put into our body.
But health is more than just physical.

As Rabbi Weisberg taught me,
our mental health matters too.
“Mental health includes our emotional, psychological,
and social well-being.
It affects how we think, feel, and act.”¹
Some of us struggle with illnesses or challenges

¹ <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health/index.html>

that affect our mental health,
just as some of us struggle with various aspects of our
physical selves.

But each and every one of us eat,
each and every one of us move, according to our ability and
desire;
and each of us has mental health.

But we rarely speak about mental health. When we do, we
tend to focus on mental health crises or mental illness.

Mental illness refers to a wide range of conditions
--disorders that affect mood, thinking and behavior.²
Many mental illnesses are diagnosable, treatable conditions
when they are approached with the same level of care and
treatment one would take in approaching any serious illness.

We would never tell someone with cancer to just snap of it,
nor would we suggest to someone with Type I Diabetes
that if they just tried hard enough,
their pancreas could produce the right amount of insulin.
So too with mental illness.

² <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/basics/definition/con-20033813>

Except that mental illness makes many people uncomfortable.

We are uneasy about that which we do not fully understand, and despite amazing advances in medical research, we know so little about how the human brain works.

Reb Nachman of Bratzlov tells a story of a “prince who came to believe he was a turkey. He took off all of his clothes and got under the table and lived there on scraps and crumbs and bones.”³ The king exhausts all of his resources trying to “fix” his son, until one advisor – today, we might call the person a therapist – joins the prince on the floor, gets to know him first, and helps the prince regain his place at the table.

In a world that asserts that every problem should have a tangible solution, our feeling of helplessness transforms into discomfort. But sometimes the solution is in reframing the problem.

We best help the “turkey-prince”

³ As told by Rabbi Alan Lew in “This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared”

by accepting the prince for who he believes himself to be,
no matter how uncomfortable that may be for the rest of us.
Tragically, the stigma and the silence surrounding mental
illness
makes it hard for people suffering from mental illnesses
– and the people who love them –
to feel accepted.
So often, they too remain silent,
fearing they will not be believed, understood,
or taken seriously.

As one teen writes, “Even if I were to ask for help,
[I was sure] no one would answer my call...
I isolated myself from my mom,
the most selfless and fiercely loving person I have ever met.
[Yet I could not believe I was loved, and that belief]
banished hope from my head altogether.
I was on the edge of a cliff,
and I came very close to falling off.”

Perhaps this has been you, at some point. Or perhaps it is
someone you love.

Or maybe this is not you, not exactly, not to this extent.

Perhaps it's just that you get super stressed sometimes.
Or sad.
Or deeply overwhelmed.

Or maybe you have experienced the helplessness of sitting
with someone in silence,
wondering what to do,
hoping your presence alone might help.

We have an obligation to take mental health
as seriously as we take physical health,
for ourselves and for all us
struggling to cultivate our mental health.

Because when we distinguish
too entirely between our physical and mental selves,
we create a false separation
between all of the parts that together make us whole.

This past Sunday,
Along with my sermon collaborator Rabbi Leah Citrin,
I ran a half-marathon.

For me, preparing for this run,
especially in the lead-up to the High Holy Days,

was about mental wellness.

To train properly required me to step away from my computer and my phone and my calendar, and focus simply on putting one foot in front of the other, over and over again.

And yet, running is a physical activity that when done correctly (wearing the right shoes, stretching, hydrating) builds physical health.

So as a byproduct of what I considered a mental health practice, I also strengthened my quadriceps.

Our morning prayers also illustrate this holistic concept of health.

In *Asher Yatzar*, we acknowledge our physical body – in Hebrew, the word is *guf* – the vessel that holds our soul.

Our bodies are mortal and subject to all sorts of aches and pains,

and the prayer notes that truth:

“If one of [our pathways or openings]
is wrongly opened or closed,
it would be impossible to endure and stand before You!”

Immediately after offering gratitude for our bodies,
the prayer *Elohai N’shama* reminds us
that we also have a unique, God-given *nefesh*, a soul.
Interestingly, while *Asher Yatzar* speaks explicitly
to the potential for brokenness,
Elohai N’shama focuses instead on the strength of our souls.
While we may literally lose physical aspects of ourselves,
the soul remains an integral component
of our holistic selves.

“As long as my soul is within me, I will give thanks to You.”
But our souls are subject to pain, too.
They too can be diminished.

The health of our bodies
is inextricably tied to that of our souls.
Guf and *nefesh* together make us complete.

And in order to strengthen our whole selves,
in order to care for our souls

in the same way we are taught to care for our bodies,
we must pay more attention to mental health.

Talmud teaches:

“Honor your physicians even before you have need of them.”
Our rabbis are instructing us to be proactive.

We need not wait to seek help until we are writhing around
in pain

or so depressed that we cannot get out of bed.

When we work during the calm moments
to build strong relationships with healthcare professionals,
both therapists and general practitioners,
we may find it easier to call on them
when we find ourselves in pain.

Going to therapy does not mean you are broken.

Going to therapy
is simply an acknowledgement
that we are not perfect,
that there is always work to be done,
and that we need not do that work alone.

Finding a therapist can take time,
and different therapy works for different people.

Please know that Rabbi Knight, Cantor Thomas and I are all here to help and support you, and that we can also help direct you toward the professionals best suited for your needs.

Even more importantly, we are fortunate to live in a community supported by Jewish Family Services, where nobody is denied services, including therapy, because of their inability to pay.

This year, Temple Beth El, along with our Shalom Park Partners, led by Jewish Family Services, will be emphasizing mental health and wellness.

Be on the lookout for information about learning opportunities and other events.

For some people, therapy isn't the answer, and being proactive is not about therapy alone.

We all have the ability to strengthen our mental health muscles.

As some of you know,

I love a particular form of intentional doodling called zentangle.

Perhaps for you it is golf, walks in the woods, very loud music, very quiet music, 12-step meetings, quilt-making, photography, meditation, studying text with a friend.

Many of you join us on Friday nights for Shabbat services.

Some call these practices coping mechanisms, Alcoholics Anonymous calls it “working your program.”

I call these practices – and I call them practices on purpose. Practice means that we’re still, constantly, working on it.

I could be the best zentangler in the world and it would still not prevent life from happening.

But the more we practice, the better prepared we can be to face the inevitable challenges we encounter.

And this work cannot be done entirely alone.

Part of “working your program”
involves reaching out to strengthen our personal safety nets.

We need community.

When we surround ourselves with people we trust
to listen to and respect our needs,
and who we feel safe calling on for help,
we build that safety net.

And should we fall
or jump
or get pushed off the trapeze,
that safety net will hold us.
Our net need not be large - but it must be sturdy.

Jewish tradition makes it clear
that we have a responsibility to each other,
to speak up and speak out.

The cry of the shofar calls attention
to brokenness in the world.

We too can be the shofar,
using our voices to raise up and support those who may
need their voice amplified.

In another section of Talmud, we learn the story of Rabbi
Eleazar.

Rabbi Eleazar could not get out of bed. It wasn't that he didn't want to; it wasn't that he didn't understand that staying in bed all day wasn't healthy. He just couldn't do it. He lay there, curled up in a ball, turned away from the door, pinned down by an invisible pain.

Rabbi Yochanan entered the room, looked down through the darkness at his friend, pulled up a chair and sat down. Preparing to sit in this heavy silence for a long time, he began to roll up his sleeve. Rabbi Eleazar turned to face his friend.

Yochanan asked: "Why are you crying?"

Rabbi Eleazar was silent for another moment. He noted the light Yochanan's presence had brought into the room. "I weep because all light fades into darkness. Because all beauty eventually rots."

After some time Rabbi Yochanan replied: "Yes, ultimately, everything dies. So perhaps, you have reason to weep." And together, they wept.

Yochanan asked: "Does darkness comfort you?"

[Shake head] "No - it did in the beginning, but now it can't protect me from my thoughts." "And the silence? Is it comforting?"

“No.”

“And being alone?”

Eleazar looked into his friend’s eyes. “No, loneliness adds to my suffering.”

Yochanan continued gently: “Do you still welcome this darkness, this silence, this sadness? Would you like me to leave for awhile?”

“No,” came the reply. “Before, I couldn’t bear the light, noise, or laughter. Now I can no longer bear the alternatives. But I don’t know the way back to the living.”

Yochanan asked: “Will you let me help you?”

“I will try.”

Yochanan extended his hand and Eleazar grasped hold of it. He felt the first pinpricks of light and life return to him. He gathered the first shreds of strength and warmth. He held on tight, his friend raised him out of his bed, and together they walked to the door.⁴

This is what it looks like when we strengthen our safety net. We develop relationships that allow us to show up for each other, sit with each other in darkness, check in and really listen to the response we are given,

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 5b. Adapted from an adaptation by Rabbi Paul Kipnes from a version told by Rabbi Susan Lippe in her sermon, *A Jewish Response to Mental Illness*.

and offer support.

Darkness may come.

Sometimes we can prepare for it,
Anticipate it,
Build up practices to help us move through it.

Other times it arrives unannounced, unexpected, and
entirely encompassing, and it is all we can do to keep
breathing, and sometimes we cannot see a reason to try.

B'rosh haShana yikateivun, uv'Yom Tzom Kippur yechateimun
- On Rosh Hashana it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
On Yom Kippur, we recount mistakes we have made, marks
we have missed, control we have lost.

And on Yom Kippur, we are given a choice – between life and
good, between death and evil.

May we choose, as the Israelites did at the shores of the sea,
to take a breath and one big step; to reach out.

May we seek out those practices that calm us and give us
strength.

May we give ourselves permission to spend real time
cultivating those practice

May we honor and nurture our whole selves,
and accept one another for the self we each bring to the
table.

Uvacharta bachayim, says God.
Choose life.

This Yom Kippur, let us choose life.