

**Going to the Depths: The Healing Power of *Tisha B'Av* and when we go too Far -  
On Supporting Those with Mental Illness  
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It's a week since I saw many of you, but once again, so much has happened. I am horrified to stand before you, once again, now...what is it?...two weeks in a row?...where another shooting has occurred taking the lives of innocent victims, this time in a movie theatre in Lafayette, LA. It is sad that I have lost track of the number of times this has happened in recent weeks and months. I join the large number of members of the clergy who demand that something be done about guns getting into the hands of people who might use them incorrectly, including people like the suspect of last night's shooting, a 58-year-old male, who eventually took his own life.

But this gunman wasn't the only person who took his life this past week. We also recall the life of Faigy Mayer' a 30-year-old young woman who died after falling from a twenty-story building in Manhattan this past Monday. Her death was also labeled as a possible suicide. Faigy Mayer, a young woman who was born into the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community of the Satmars, went through an excruciatingly painful process of redefining her Jewish identity as she transferred out of the ultra-Orthodox community and into the modern-Orthodox community. The pain and agony that she experienced during this transition, which was probably induced, at least in part, by the lack of support by members of her own community, was eventually what led to her death. May your soul rest in peace, dear Faigy.

And if that wasn't enough, we recall what happened just two weeks ago to Sandra Bland, a black woman who was arrested in Texas after...get this...not using her turn signal. She was taken to jail and within three days, her body was found hanging from the ceiling of her jail cell with a plastic garbage bag. Her death, too, might be consistent with signs of suicide, although, this is being challenged by her family.

I've begun to tell you these stories, horrifying stories, but those are just the headlines. Let's face it. We all know of people who suffer from the tragic ramifications of depression and other mental illnesses that lead to taking their own lives. And if we don't know someone personally, we know of a family member or a friend of a friend. Someone may have died by a drug overdose or by self-inflicting wounds – the manner in which they died doesn't matter, but the fact that we don't catch them and support them in time does.

When I was rabbi at a small shul in Ulster County, NY, I remember the first funeral at which I officiated. The president of the shul drove me to the cemetery and showed me around the section for our congregation. We reached a lovely point at the cemetery, near a tree with some beautiful shade. And then he pointed to a different section. "That," he said, "is the 'suicide section.'"

Not just at this small shul, but in many shuls, it was once custom that people who died by suicide be buried in a separate section of a Jewish cemetery. Given the strong value that Judaism places on the importance of life, people who died in this manner were seen as heretics – those who defied the laws of the Jewish tradition. Therefore, it was once said, they didn't deserve burial in a place with other Jews who died a "natural" death, so to speak.

Thank God, we no longer follow those practices anymore. Having a "suicide section" assumed that the death of someone who died by suicide was solely their own responsibility, that it was their [quote] "decision" to die. But we all can appreciate, hopefully, that death by suicide is not necessarily someone's

“choice” because, in almost all cases, suicide is a result of a mental illness, a deeply imbedded emotional or psychological disorder which haunts them. Having a “suicide section” in a cemetery is as insensitive as it would be to have a section for those who “died by a car accident” or those who “died by cancer.”

I learned an important lesson when I was in rabbinical school from a dear friend and colleague about how we talk about those who take their own lives. Often, we hear the phrase that someone [quote] “committed suicide.” I beg you, please, to consider removing this phrase from your vocabulary. Why?

Because people “commit” crimes, meaning that they have done something wrong, that they have violated some communal norms, that they have broken the law – and that they have done so knowingly and often with a particular motivation in mind. But people who die by suicide are not committing crimes. They suffer from a deep illness, a disease of the psyche and heart.

We are about to observe the holiday of *Tisha B'Av*. Last week, we talked a little bit about the importance of going to a deep place, of allowing ourselves to have the time to reflect on both the historical and the modern tragedies that we face (or faced) in our world. But I suppose that I really didn't do this explanation much justice. Yes, the lesson that we learn from *Tisha B'Av*, on the one hand, is about the importance of going deep. It's about getting to a place of emotional understanding by allowing ourselves the time and the space to reflect on tragedies in our world. But, on the other hand, what I failed to mention, was that *Tisha B'Av* also demonstrates a healthy process for coming out of the depths, coming out of that deep, dark, place of tragedy. Yes, on *Tisha B'Av* evening we sit in the dark and lament the destruction of the Temple. We force ourselves into the darkness. Yes, we fast and “afflict” ourselves so that we can better experience these tragedies. Yes, on *Tisha B'Av* morning we refrain from the joys of wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* and we refrain from the joys of engaging in Torah study.

But...when *Tisha B'Av* afternoon comes around, we come out of “shivah,” so to speak. We get up from the floor, we put on our *tallit* and *tefillin*, we can begin to engage in the study of Torah again. Going to the depths can be a cleansing spiritual process for us, but we learn from *Tisha B'Av*, and death and tragedies in general, is that at some point, we are meant to come out of the depths. At some point, we are meant to move ourselves in a healthy emotional progression. We are meant to move forward to begin to take the reflections that we contemplated when we were in the depths, and use them to guide our future in a healthy, positive direction. If we are lucky, if we are healthy, we can do this...go the depths, and come back.

But... if we are not healthy, we get stuck in the depths, as was the case with the gunman in Louisiana last night, and Faigy Mayer earlier in the week, and perhaps Sandra Bland just two weeks ago, and so many of those in our community, and yes, even in our Jewish community. *Tisha B'Av* teaches us to go to the depths, but it also encourages us to get ourselves out of those deep places. And when one of us cannot do that, it is the responsibility of our entire community to help.

Oh God, grant us with the ability to feel when we are in pain and to recognize when someone else is stuck in the depths. When we feel ourselves too stuck, send a messenger to help us on our path. Comfort those who are affected by these awful illnesses. Let us work together, knowing that when we save one life, it's as if we've saved the entire world (Sanhedrin 37a).