

Destigmatizing Mental Illness

A Rabbi on an ecumenical program visited the Pope in Rome. On touring the Pontiff's personal office he noticed a very unusual phone. "*Ma zeh?*," he asked. "What is that?"

"Ah," replied the Pope, "that's my special phone with a direct line to God Almighty. You can make a call, but it's quite costly."

"Really? How much?" asked the Rabbi.

"According to today's going rate, it's one million American dollars."

The Rabbi was a bit taken aback but regained his composure and said, "Well, it's a lot, but this is a special occasion, so I'll have the money transferred ASAP." He then made his call.

Just before the Pope traveled to Cuba, he made a quick and secret trip to Jerusalem to visit his new Rabbi friend. Once in the office of the Rabbi, the Pope asked him his advice about the upcoming trip to Cuba and the United States. "Well," said the Rabbi, "why don't you just call God?"

"I can't," said the Pope, "my phone is in Rome and besides it's so expensive."

"No problem," said the Rabbi. "Use my phone."

So the Pope made his call to God. After a while, he hung up and he asked the Rabbi, "So how much do I owe you for the call?"

The Rabbi responded, "Oh, there's no charge. Here in Jerusalem it's a local call."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just make a simple call and have a two-way conversation with God, instant Divine advice to help us navigate through life's challenges? Still, we do have the next best thing. We have the Divinely inspired Torah and over 3,500 years of accumulated wisdom to help guide us. At the core of Jewish wisdom is the understanding that we find God and a connection to the sacred not in a

Divine voice that thunders out of the heavens, but rather in the *kol demama dakah*, that still, small voice that resides in the heart and soul of each and every being. And it is through prayer that we seek to find that “still, small voice” within us. And it is through *mitzvot*, loving, compassionate, purposeful acts that we seek to recognize and honor the “still, small voice” that resides within others. These have helped us to create a sacred and social bond with each other.

Within Judaism, that recognition of the Divine that unites us is what has inspired Jews of every generation to tenaciously hold on to our sense of family. We are *B’nei Yisrael*, the Children of Israel. We form congregations and concern ourselves with the welfare of other Jews on the other side of the planet. Jews who we’ll probably never meet, who speak a different language than we, are still *mishpocha*, our family. (Now, of course, that doesn’t mean that we’ll always agree with one another or that we’ll universally share political or ideological opinions!)

At its best, a congregation nurtures our sense of being in an extended family. We rally to one another in good times and sad. We share *mazals* with each other, new births, B’nei Mitzvah, graduations, weddings, and personal achievements. We also offer tender support to one another during times of loss and illness.

And at its best, a congregation also has to recognize when there are those who are struggling with challenges that they do not feel comfortable sharing with others. I am speaking specifically tonight about our friends and loved ones who are suffering with mental illness.

It is important to note that mental illnesses come in many different forms and levels of severity and include: Anxiety Disorders, Autism, Bipolar Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, Depression, Eating Disorders, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and Schizophrenia. To these we can add addictive behaviors, brain injuries, and Alzheimer's. It is safe to say that just about every one of us knows of a loved one or friend who is dealing with one of these issues.

The statistics are overwhelming: 1 in 5 adults experiences a mental health condition every year; 1 in 20 have severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, and those statistics do not even account for the extended family and friends who are heroically supporting and struggling to help those suffering a mental illness.

One would think that with the enormous impact mental illness has on families that this nation would do to more help. It goes without saying that we need to become stronger advocates for greatly increasing government funding for treatment centers and facilities, for research and financial aid to help relieve the crushing stress on families.

But this evening, this night of Kol Nidrei, I want to address what we can individually do to help. We began this evening's service by declaring:

*All may pray as one on this day of return;
Let all find a place in this sacred assembly.*

And yet we know that there are far too many among us who do not feel comfortable sharing with others that they or someone they love is struggling with mental illness. For far too long, there has been a stigma associated with mental illness that has pushed

away and, even in some cases, excluded those who are suffering. The very people who desperately need the loving support of friends and community are thereby denied that help. That there is a stigma or taboo around an illness is baffling but sadly, not new.

Those of us of a certain age remember there once was a taboo about cancer. People would speak in hush tones about the “big C” as if even saying the word cancer might make one vulnerable. Fortunately we’ve come a long way since then. Medical advances have greatly improved our success rate in treating certain forms of cancer. In addition, we have developed important sacred and social responses, like our upcoming Pink Shabbat service on Friday, October 16. This is an annual service to increase awareness about breast and cervical cancer. Increasing awareness serves to encourage people to be pro-active with their physical testing and examinations, as well as to counteract any sense of embarrassment around the necessary treatments and surgeries. Likewise, when a loved one suffers from heart disease or diabetes or asthma or loss of hearing or loss of eyesight or any other physical impairment, we help them seek treatment. We rally to assure and comfort the family. We need to bring that same kind of loving response to those who suffer from mental illness!

That our society has a long way to go in establishing better treatment and care for those who suffer mental illness is widely recognized. That we have been so painfully slow in making improvements can be traced to that which has always plagued humanity, namely, ignorance and the subsequent hysteria that is created by ignorance.

To illustrate this phenomenon let’s consider the role ignorance and hysteria have played in spreading misinformation about autism. In his recently published book, [Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism](#), Steve Silberman offers both a medical and social

history. Autism was first identified as a unique form of mental illness by Hans Asperger in Nazi-controlled Vienna. His chief assistant, Georg Frankl, fled in 1937 and brought his research to Leo Kanner in Baltimore where he developed his own theories about autism. Each inadvertently set the stage for misunderstandings about autism that plague us to this day. Hans Asperger was fully aware that autism was relatively common and that autistic patients fell along a wide spectrum. And yet, apparently in an attempt to help all autistic patients avoid the murderous Nazi campaign of euthanasia, he gave the impression that it was a rare condition that was primarily found among some brilliant, high functioning but socially awkward people.

Similarly, Leo Kanner in the US, taught that autism was a rare condition with biological causes and exasperated by “cold and distant parents.” Ultimately, by blaming parents for inadvertently causing their children’s autism, Kanner made it a source of shame and stigma for families worldwide.

The misinformation, that autism was rare and avoidable, caused an explosion of anxiety when subsequent DSM reports correctly broadened the definition of autism. All of a sudden it seemed like there was an “epidemic” of autism. The subsequent hysteria caused an outbreak of wild speculation as some searched for environmental causes. Even worse, others pointed accusing fingers at the poor parents of autistic children, adding insult to their difficult struggles.

Pointing fingers, wild speculations, misdiagnosis, shame, embarrassment, and frustration add to the already crushing burdens placed on the families of loved ones with mental illness. Let’s dispel the myths. NAMI, the National Alliance of Mental Illness which is a tremendous resource, asserts that “a mental health condition is not the result

of one event. Research suggests multiple, interlinking causes. Genetics, environment and lifestyle combine to influence whether someone develops a mental health condition.” But the fact is, our current medical understanding is simply not advanced enough to offer either explanations for the cause of certain mental illnesses or universally effective treatments. We simply do not know enough. We need more research. And our society needs to provide many more facilities for treatment or long-term care.

We also have to consider our own actions. For instance, struggling families often hear unintentionally hurtful comments about those who are suffering depression or anxiety issues. It is not only untrue, it is downright cruel to imply that a sufferer should simply “snap out of it.” It’s not a matter of “getting a grip” or being “more resilient.” In addition to improved medicines, treatments and therapies, we must de-stigmatize mental illness.

To that end, over the past year, Temple Sinai has established a “Mental Wellness Matters” program that meets almost every month. Some of the sessions are packed with our members as we share experiences and issues in a safe and confidential environment. Mental Health professionals led several of the sessions and enriched us with information about resources and treatments. Cindy Abramson, our talented staff member, helped to create and leads this program. Along with a dynamic and dedicated committee, they have designed a program that reaches out and responds to our families who are dealing with mental illness. Even if you are not able to attend one of these programs, the information will still be made available to you. If nothing else is achieved, it would be enough if every family dealing with mental illness

hears the message: You are not alone. There is no cause for embarrassment. We are all in this together. We are family.

Similarly, Temple Sinai is now hosting a Jewish group of Alcoholics Anonymous, which meets just about every Thursday evening at 7pm. More information about it can be found in our bulletin and website. Alcohol and drug addictions afflict so many of our loved ones, but there is a way through it. You are not alone. There is no cause for embarrassment. We are all in this together. We are family.

Throughout the year we'll have programs specifically for our teenagers concerning both mental illness and addictive behaviors. This is essential because 50% of mental health conditions begin by age 14 and 75% of mental health conditions develop by age 24. Making it even more difficult to detect is the fact that normal personality and behavior changes of adolescence may mimic or mask symptoms of a mental health condition. Early engagement is essential to help them receive the appropriate diagnosis and treatment in order to increase the promise of recovery. Parents and teenagers should know: You are not alone. There is no cause for embarrassment. We are all in this together. We are family.

I am blessed to be a part of so many wonderful and heartwarming moments in the lives of our families. Without a doubt, among the most memorable and inspiring are those where I have been privileged to help a young person who suffers from some form of mental illness become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. These are students who are all too often denied the opportunities to shine and who are defined but what they can't do. But in this Jewish community they hear a different message. With each meeting and every rehearsal, the hesitation and anxiety of the family gives way to a glowing pride as the

student's confidence grows. And on that wonderful Shabbat when the student leads us in prayers and teaches Torah, well there isn't a dry eye to be found. These are precious tears of joy. Beyond the accomplishment of the service and Torah is the family's realization that they are not alone. They have no cause for embarrassment. They know that they are a part of a large and caring family.

Tomorrow morning we'll read the prophet Isaiah's words about the true meaning of Yom Kippur:

*Is this the fast I desire? A day to afflict the body and soul?
Bowling your head like a reed, covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast, day worthy of Adonai?
Rather, is it not this the fast I desire: To break the bonds of injustice and remove
the heavy yoke;
To let the oppressed go free----and never to neglect your own flesh and blood?
(Isaiah 58:5-7)*

For too long, those who struggle with mental illness and their families have been neglected by society. They have suffered injustices and cruelties. Let us work to break down the barriers and attitudes that add to the stress of our friends and loved ones with mental illness. Let us build on the progress that we have made so far, knowing that we have so very much more to do. And let us help each person recognize the sacred call of that still small voice that resides inside. The still small voice that that links all to the Eternal One. And know this my friends, that voice, that connection is always a local call!