



A Jewish Response to Mental Illness
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1. The Story

The room was dark.

Rabbi Eleazar was still in bed.
His face turned toward the wall.
He couldn't even bring himself to look toward the window at life and light.

Rabbi Yochanan entered the room.
He looked down through the darkness at his friend.
Rabbi Yochanan pulled a chair to the side of the bed.
He hung his jacket on the back of the chair and sat down.

The rabbi prepared to sit in this heavy silence for a long time.
He began to roll up his sleeve.
His face reflected the darkness.
But his hands and arms seemed to brighten the room with their own light.

Rabbi Eleazar turned from the wall to face his friend.

Yochanan asked: Why are you crying?

Is it because you didn't study enough Torah?
Surely we learned: the one who sacrifices much and the one who sacrifices little have the same merit,
as long as they direct their hearts toward heaven.

Is it perhaps lack of wealth?
Not everyone gets to enjoy a double portion.
Perhaps you suffer because you are jealous.

Could it be that you regret not being a father?
You are looking at a man who has buried ten children!

Rabbi Eleazar looked into the darkness
for another silent moment.
Then he blinked at the brightness
of Yochanan's crisp, white shirt.
His gentle hands.
The pale skin of his forearms.

Eleazar finally spoke.
I weep because all light fades into darkness.

Because all beauty eventually rots.

After some time Rabbi Yochanan replied: On that account, you surely have reason to weep.

They wept in darkness together.

Yochanan asked: Does darkness comfort you?

Slowly, Eleazar shook his head. Maybe it did in the beginning, but it can't protect me from my thoughts.

Yochanan asked: And the silence? Is it comforting?

No.

And being alone?

Eleazar looked into his friend's eyes.

No. No, loneliness adds to my suffering.

Do you continue to welcome this darkness, this silence, this sadness?

No. Before, I couldn't bear light, noise, or laughter.

Now, I can no longer bear the alternatives. But I didn't dare to look for a way back to living.

Yochanan asked: Will you let me help you?

I will try.

Can I give you my hand?

Eleazar stretched out his hand. He felt light and life touch him. He felt strength and warmth reach him. His friend raised him out of his bed and helped him to the door.

2. Stigma & Statistics

This is a story from the Talmud. The rabbis don't use words like "depression" or "mental illness." Maybe it's better that way. Without technical labels to alarm us, we can listen with open minds.

We hear the story and our hearts break.

If Eleazar had been labeled as a depressive, would we have been able to forgive him for staying in bed all day?

If the setting for our story had been the psychiatric ward of a local hospital, would we have listened with the same openness?

I ask these questions because I know that stigma against people with mental illness exists.



Author and Sociologist Thomas Scheff explains: “Those given psychiatric labels...are seen as different from others – weak and flawed, less capable and less competent, with undesirable characteristics such as dangerousness and poor grooming. Their opinions and feelings, presumed clouded by mental confusion, are not respected. [The stigma of] mental illness... casts doubt on the labeled person’s ability to be a good parent, [friend,] spouse, employee, or even citizen.” (Telling, p.13)

Discrimination comes from all directions.

From health insurance companies.
From friends.
From family.
From congregations.

In a book entitled Telling is Risky Business: One young woman living with mental illness reports: “I told my friend Sarah about my mental illness and I never heard from her again.” (Telling, p.48)

A woman living with a severe depressive disorder, told one author “my mother would never visit me when I was in the hospital.

It’s like [I] don’t exist when [I’m] in there, and that was ...hard because I felt rejected and abandoned.” ...My own sister says she wishes “I ‘had been born normal’” ...My family was “just so ashamed and they made me more ashamed of myself.” (Telling, p.51)

A religious mental health consumer sadly reported: “My deepest pain is with [congregant] families....It has happened to me in two states...When I’ve been ill, the backs of the [congregants] have been towards me....I never heard from them again.” (Telling, p.50)

According to the National Association for Mental Illness:

23% percent of American adults (ages 18 and older) suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. 23%

Another statistic estimates that 17.4 million Americans suffer from clinical depression each year. One in every seven.

Our congregation consists of approximately 1200 member families. Statistically, therefore, approximately 200 families at Beth Am are touched by severe depression. Statistically some form of mental illness affects at least 300 Beth Am families every year. And many of our families are afraid to tell their friends or their clergy.

Sufferers of mental illness are afraid to be judged. They’re afraid to be told: You just need to cheer up. You simply need to learn to control yourself.

They’re afraid to be asked: Why can’t you just go get some exercise? Eat better? Take yourself less seriously?



Family members of those who live with mental illness are afraid to be blamed, judged, accused, silenced, or ignored.

If both of Eleazar's legs were broken, would his friend have demanded he try to get out of bed?

If his friend was bleeding, do you think Yochanan would have asked: Why are you crying?

If Eleazar wore a back brace or a neck brace, do you think his friend would have asked if he welcomed being stuck in bed?

The truths are:

Mental Illness is pervasive. And people who live with mental illness deserve the same honor and respect we show toward anyone else.

If we are truly a community, then we have a responsibility to welcome everyone.

We are Jews, so we have a responsibility to take care of people who are sick. No matter the diagnosis

And those family members and friends - The care-takers who wear themselves out taking care of people who are sick. We are responsible for them too.

3. What can we do?

We know our responsibilities.

We are more learning about the problem, it's depth and its breadth.

So, what do we do now?

One, we can educate ourselves. In the foyer tonight there are flyers with information and statistics about mental illness, lists of suggested books, lists of related websites.

We can remind ourselves that mental illness is not caused by weakness or lack of morality. Education itself can lessen the stigma of mental illness.

Two, we can make talking about mental illness easier. We can stop using words like nuts, wacko, crazy.

We can stop misusing precise scientific terms like 'psychotic' or 'schizophrenic.'

We can start really listening to people talk about their sadness, their exhaustion, their confusion, their hopelessness.

Three, we – as individuals and as a community – can fight for the same health insurance coverage for mental illnesses that physical diagnoses receive. No one would accept a limit on visits to the doctor for cancer or for a broken leg. Why should our nation accept any limits on health coverage for those people living with a diagnosable mental illness?

On Beth Am's website there will be a link to a site that will teach you how to



advocate for better mental health insurance. We can resolve to be patient with individuals But not with discrimination. The National Mental Health Association welcomes our support.
www.nmha.org

Four, together we can make Beth Am a more supportive place. We can remind each other that our clergy want to visit, talk to, listen to, support people living with mental illness. Our doors are open. We are here to listen. We invite people who are living with mental illness to call on us. We want to support care-takers, family members and friends who take care of people who are living with any kind of mental illness. And the clergy aren't the only ones who want to help. Together, congregants and staff could create support groups, Beth Am congregants could talk about mental illness more than once a year. Our website, our calendar, our Builder, the signs on our walls would declare our commitment to support people living with mental illness.

4. Story Reprise

Rabbi Yochanan asked: Will you let me help you?
Eleazar answered: I will try.
Yochanan offered his hand.
Eleazar took it.
Yochanan raised Eleazar up and walked with him to the door.

5. Relationships

If only it were that simple. If only depression or anxiety dissipated when your friend came to the door.

I wish I could tell you that if only our community accepted the obligation to visit the sick We could erase the stigma, the pain, the paralysis of mental illness. Relationships alone aren't the cure. But just like sleep, routine, and exercise. Talk therapy and medication. Reading books by doctors or biographies of people who suffer mental illness themselves. Like all of these, relationships are part of the cure. And they are what we have to offer.

Just like Rabbi Yochanan we can take our friends' arms as we walk toward the door. As they enter therapy. Or continue it. When they invite us to watch sad movies. Or when they cry inexplicably during the happiest ones. We can ask: How are you? And we can listen to the answer.

We can listen. Even if we don't understand. Even if what our friend says makes us fearful. Even if our own hearts might be breaking.

We can spend our time visiting sick people.
We can listen.
We can be patient when people don't just cheer up the next day or the next year.



We might not know what to say. Certainly Rabbi Yochanan asked some strange questions as he muddled through the darkness surrounding Eleazar. While searching for words, Yochanan mistakenly said some hurtful things.

But he was there. He showed up. He sat with his friend. Sometimes he felt frustrated or confused. Sometimes he fell silent. But he was there. He was patient.

We can support each other and just like Yochanan.
We can build relationships. And we can stay in them.