



Yehi Or Conference – December 11, 2005
Welcome and Panel Presentation
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Welcome

In the beginning did God create the heaven and the earth. And this earth was once confused and tangled, and darkness was over the turmoil, and a breath of God hovered over the waters. And God said: Yehi or – let there be light! And there was light. God saw the light, that it was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.

That is the creation story, in the words of the great Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. It is a story of *tohu va-vohu* – confusion and turmoil; or, as others translate it, “waste and desolation” -- shaped by a great and loving power into clarity and beauty. It is the story of a God who called out into the darkness “Light!”

This is our story, the story the Jewish people introduced into history and carried with them on all their journeys, the story we have clung to in all our times of darkness.

“And God saw the light, that it was good.” Why was it good? It was a light, says the midrash, that was radiant and bright – like a small house that is full of glowing candles. By its light one can see from one end of the world to another; in its light everything is illuminated.

And God saw the light, that it was good. Because vision is a privilege and a gift. Through sight, and insight, we leave the prison-house of our own small minds and enter into the experience of others. The invisible becomes present to us, and important and real. To see is to open ourselves and let the world in.

Today we gather to shine a light where there is darkness and confusion; to reach for clarity and understanding and to push back despair. We are going to talk about mental illness and the journey to health and strength. And even more important – we are going to listen, and learn from one another. At the season of the year when the days are short and the nights are long, all of us will lift up our separate candles and speak our own truth. As the famous Chanukah song reminds us: “Kol echad hu or katan, v’chulanu or eitan. Each of us is a small light, but together our light is strong.”

“Va-yar Elohim et ha-or ki tov...And God saw the light, that it was good.” The midrash asks: What was that light? And it answers: It was the light of good and righteous deeds.

Congregation Beth Am is honored to host this community conversation about a subject that is important to all of us. May our learning this day lead us to good and righteous deeds.

Panel Presentation for Yehi Or Conference

Dr. Michelle Friedman, a psychiatrist in New York City, writes: “A large sign paid for by one of the national movements for mental health, graces the side of a building on 72nd street between Columbus Avenue and Broadway. It reads: ‘Depression is a failure of chemistry, not character’” As

many patients coming to my office on the west side of Manhattan pass by that sign on the way to the subway, I encourage them to look up at those words and think about what they mean. We work together to make some kind of sense out of their psychological suffering.”

I choose to quote from that billboard at the start of my presentation today because I, a rabbi, am the representative of religion on this panel, and religion is often regarded as the source of shame and guilt. Religion promotes high moral ideals and elevated standards of behavior. Religion urges us to strive to improve ourselves and the world. And it is internalized religion, some say, that makes us feel bad when we fall short and fail to live up to these standards and ideals.

Some practitioners of religion use their faith to impose social isolation and disgrace on those who are ill. Just think of the way certain fundamentalists talk about homosexuals who are suffering from AIDS. They see that disease as God’s just punishment of flagrant sinners; they see illness as a manifestation of moral weakness.

Sadly, there are some remnants of this attitude in our Torah. Consider the disturbing story of Miriam, in Numbers chapter 12. In this story, Miriam, the sister of Moses, commits the sin of malicious gossip and slander against her brother. She is immediately stricken with leprosy, a disfiguring condition which our Sages understand as the outward expression of an inward ugliness. They see her illness, that is, as signs of a failure of character.

Most of us are far from fundamentalism and we would never blame a person who is ill for contracting a disease...or would we? Have we ever told ourselves that so and so got lung cancer because he smoked, or is afflicted with heart disease because she eats too much, or suffers from depression because he just can’t get it together to see a doctor and take his medication?

Believe it or not, this is a religious issue. The Talmud [Ber.5a] says that when sufferings come upon us, we are supposed to “reflect on our deeds” – to look within and ask ourselves whether we might bear some responsibility for our condition. But it never, ever tells us that when someone else is ill, our proper stance is to speculate about what that person did wrong to deserve his or her affliction.

When religion encourages its adherents to be harshly judgmental of those around them, and to look upon others with smug superiority, then religion is a destructive force indeed.

Fortunately, our religion offers a very different message. For even in the story of Miriam I cited a moment ago, the Torah takes a surprising turn. Once Miriam is stricken with leprosy she is banished from the Israelite camp for seven days so that she may atone for her sin. But the text says, “the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted.”

The people refuse to abandon their leader. They love her, with her illness and with her human frailty, and they have no intention of going anywhere without her. So even here, in a story which presents an ill person as temporarily separated from society, the ultimate lesson is that the sick must be embraced by their community and never, ever abandoned.

I have begun by talking about shame and guilt and abandonment because when people in our congregation come to talk to me about the pain of living with mental illness – their own, or the pain of their parent, child, spouse or sibling – they often feel alone and ashamed. There are other feelings, as well, of course – anger and frustration, fear and confusion, fatigue, despair, resentment, and often

a deep sense of spiritual betrayal and bewilderment about why life has handed them such an unfair burden to carry.

I focus on shame and abandonment because those are the feelings for which we, as a community, are responsible. We did not create the illness. But we are the ones who create a climate in which mental illness is perceived as an embarrassing failure, and human beings feel alone in their human brokenness.

The quintessential Jewish response to illness of any kind is the Hebrew phrase “bikkur cholim” – literally, visiting the sick. I don’t just mean this in the literal sense of paying a visit to the hospital or home or a sick person, but in a more profound and holistic sense. Bikkur cholim is called a mitzvah that one performs “b’gufo – with one’s own body.” That is, you cannot fulfill the mitzvah by sending money; it requires personal presence.

Presence is the essence of this mitzvah. It is about human encounter and connection. It is about not erecting barriers between ourselves and those who are ill – avoiding them, denying their existence, pretending not to see, distancing ourselves physically or emotionally from the reality of their being.

Rambam, in his legal code, the Mishneh Torah, spells out the requirements of bikkur cholim. These include the following:

First, “All are in duty bound to visit the sick...One who does not call to see the sick is like one who sheds blood.” That is, outreach to those who are ill is not just a kind or charitable thing to do, or a special responsibility of the clergy; it is a fundamental obligation of every Jew, and of every Jewish community. And it is an act that can, quite literally, mean the difference between life and death.

Second, says Rambam, “The more often a person calls on the sick, the more praiseworthy he is, provided that he does not inconvenience the patient.” He goes on to specify the kind of visiting that is burdensome or distressing to an ill person. In other words, the purpose of our support and attention is not to make us feel good; we are supposed to offer the kind of care that the ill person actually needs.

And third, and perhaps most interesting, Rambam instructs us that when we visit the sick we are not supposed to stand over him or her. I take this in a symbolic sense to mean that it is wrong to adopt an elevated posture towards someone who is ill – to look down from the heights, with condescension and complacency, on those who suffer.

Rabbi Tzvi Blanchard writes: “when we visit the sick we must identify with the person. We must seek out our similarities; we must find how we are like him or her.”

That is what makes bikkur cholim such a powerful and essential religious response to illness, and especially to mental illness. Bikkur cholim is about entering into the experience of those who live with illness. It is about empathy, a sense of shared vulnerability and shared humanity. It means we can no longer think of “us” and “them,” or believe that families touched by mental illness are in some special compartment called “abnormal.” They are not abnormal. Mental illness is in my family. Chances are that it is part of most Jewish families, or that it will be at some point.

Bikkur cholim – visiting the sick – is an active concept. It is not about waiting for those who are ill to come to us; it is about seeking them out, about meeting them where they are, about extending ourselves and expanding our capacity for chesed, for understanding and unselfish love.

Bikkur cholim – erasing the artificial barriers between the healthy and the sick – is religion at its best. A community with bikkur cholim at its center does not demand that we put up a brave façade and pretend that all is well – happy marriage, successful children, thriving career, sunny state of mind – when inside things are falling apart.

Communities committed to bikkur cholim envision instead a spectrum on which all of us fall, and along which all of us travel – sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, sometimes able to give and sometimes deeply in need of care. All share in this network of interdependence and mutual support.

Such communities have a broad and generous vision of the human condition. They don't reject those who display unusual behavior. They foster patience and acceptance of those who do not conform to convention. They provide opportunities for all members to contribute and to rise to the best they can be. They honor the image of God, the spark of sacred individuality within every person, the inner spirit that struggles towards wholeness and health.

Failures of chemistry are challenges for the medical profession to address. Our sights in the religious community are focused elsewhere: on shaping character and heart and soul – on cultivating compassion, diminishing isolation and building communities that are human and holy. Sadly, we cannot banish illness from this world. But as Jews it's our responsibility to do everything we can to relieve the pain.