

JEWISH SOURCES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND THE VALUE OF LIFE

These sources can be used as text studies or conversation starters for youth about Judaism and mental health.



ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני יהוה
And you shall love your neighbor
as yourself; I am God. (Leviticus 19:18)



Some of us need to remember to show kindness to others in the same way we ourselves want to be treated; others of us need reminding to treat ourselves as well as we'd treat a dear friend. **Which are you? What helps you remember to treat others – or yourself – kindly? What are the barriers for you doing that?**



החיים והמוות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקלה
ובחרת בחים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך

I have put before you life and death, blessing
and curse; choose life so that you and
your offspring will live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)



It may seem obvious that in a choice between life and death, God would want us to choose life. **Why do you think the Torah reminds us to choose life? Do you think we ever have a choice between blessing and curse? How have you chosen life, death, curse or blessing in your experience? What would you tell a friend who was struggling to "choose life"?**



JEWISH SOURCES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND THE VALUE OF LIFE



דָּאָגָה בְּלִבְאִישׁ יִשְׁחַפֵּה וְדָבָר טֹב יִשְׁמַחֵנָה

If there is anxiety in a person's mind,
let him quash it and turn it into joy
with a good word. (Proverbs 12:25)

Commentary on Proverbs

Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi [3rd century sages who studied together in Babylonia and later became the leaders of the Beit Midrash in Tiberias] disputed the verse's meaning. One said, "The person should forcefully push the anxious thoughts out of his mind."

The other said, "It means he should tell others his concerns, which will lower his anxiety."

(Talmud Bavli, Tractate Yoma 75a)



Rashi added: "And a good word with which his friend consoles him will change the concern to rejoice." Anxiety or overactive worries are not new. Our Biblical texts and commentators were discussing the best way to respond to anxiety. The two rabbis disputed the meaning of the word that is translated as "quash" in the Proverbs text. Who do you agree with? What is the best way to handle worries or anxiety? If you could create a "proverb" or words to live by when you feel anxiety, what would you recommend for yourself or others?



JEWISH SOURCES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND THE VALUE OF LIFE

Once, the Hasidic rabbi Zusya came to his followers with tears in his eyes. They asked him, "Zusya, what's the matter?"

And he told them about his vision: "I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

The followers were puzzled. "Zusya, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusya replied, "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?' and the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'" Zusya sighed.

**"They will say to me,
'Zusya, why weren't you Zusya?'"**

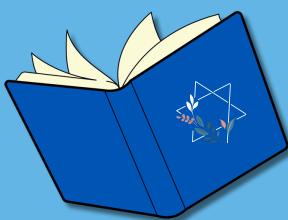
(From Martin Buber's Tales of the Chasidim)



Why was Zusya upset? What does it mean to live an authentic life? What are the ways we are taught or pressured not to be our authentic selves? How does living an authentic life relate to mental health?

JEWISH SOURCES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND THE VALUE OF LIFE

From the Liturgy



ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם הפותן לישע פח

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who gives strength to the weary. (Selection from Morning Prayers)

ובטובו מחדש בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית

Out of goodness, God renews every day the work of creation. (Excerpt from the Yotzer Or Prayer)

יהי רצון מלפניך ל אלמי ואלמי אבותי. שתשלח מהרה רפואה שלמה מן

השמים. רפואת הנפש ורפואת הגוף לחוליה פב' פ בთור שאר חולין ישראל

May it be Your will, my God and the God of my ancestors, that You quickly send a complete recovery from the Heavens – a recovery of the soul and a recovery of the body – to this suffering person (insert name) among the others in need of healing among Israel.

(Prayer for Recovery)

- Do you experience God as strength giving? How might the first prayer be helpful?
- What does it mean that God renews the work of creation each day? How could this message be helpful to those who are struggling?
- Did you know the traditional Jewish prayer for healing includes praying for both “nefesh” (soul) and “guf” (body)? What does this tell us about the Jewish attitude toward health?
- Do you believe prayer can help bring about our own or someone else’s healing? What helps you feel most supported when you are suffering?

