



HIGH HOLIDAYS MENTAL HEALTH READER



ABOUT THE HIGH HOLIDAYS

Rosh Hashanah is a powerful and transformative holiday, from the inspirational and poetic prayers we recite to the powerful and incisive blast of the shofar. This experience, however, cannot be fully embraced in a safe and healthy way without preparation, and for that, we have the month of Elul preceding the High Holidays. We encourage you to take this month to fully embrace and engage with your past with courage. It is only by building better selves that we can build a better world.

Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, can be a challenging subject for a lot of people. For some, it is a chance to make resolutions, accept the past, and commit to a better future. But for those struggling with mental illness, this process of self-criticism and introspection can be devastating to their mental health. Therefore, we all must do our best to cultivate self-acceptance and, above all, self-forgiveness, in a healthy and collected manner.





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VIDUI: REMEMBERING YOU'RE HUMAN

By Max Hollander

“Everyone can look inside their soul and decide what they can do to make a world at peace, to end this fighting that goes on every day around the world.” – Ruth Gruber, Jewish Author

During the High Holidays, we reflect on ourselves and the year we’ve had. In doing so, we often analyze our actions and behavior, which can result in a labeling of who we are as people.

For example, if someone gave a lot of charity, they might call themselves a “kind” person. If someone volunteered a great deal, they might say they are a “giving” person. Or, if someone just helped a friend out, they might call themselves a “thoughtful” person. But not everyone is lucky enough to have such a positive reflective experience. For many people suffering from mental illness, their experience with themselves can be overwhelmingly negative, leading them to define themselves in less positive terms such as “selfish,” “arrogant,” “self-involved,” etc. Or, they might define themselves by their illness: “I’m depressed,” “I’m suicidal.”

This kind of self-flagellation can most easily come to a head in the recitation of the infamous “Vidui” prayer, in which we confess all of our sins in the past year by reciting a long list of misdeeds Judaism demands we be cognizant of. Even when we don’t remember committing these sins ourselves, we understand we aren’t always aware of the misdeeds we perform. So we confess and apologize for all of them in this prayer. And while someone with a relatively healthy sense of self may recognize that this prayer doesn’t totally reflect upon them, it has the potential to exacerbate feelings of low self-worth and self-hatred in someone who is already suffering from those feelings.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the modern land of Israel, wrote that during the High Holidays, it is just as important to recall our good deeds and mitzvot as it is to recall our sins and misdeeds. To that end, there have been a plethora of new Vidui-style prayers written in the last few decades listing good deeds and mitzvot. One such prayer was written by Rabbi Avi Weiss, founder of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshivat Maharat.



בצלם אלוהים - B'tzelem Elohim

“In God’s Image”

VIDUI: REMEMBERING YOU'RE HUMAN

By Max Hollander

We need to be mindful of the complexity of human life and its ups and downs, and that we are far more than any one label, misdeed or illness. Just as the Vidui serves as a catch-all for misdeeds we might have done that we might not even have been aware of, we should recognize there are plenty of good deeds we performed as well without realizing it. We are not our sins, we are not our mistakes, we are not our diagnosis. **We are human and created B'tzelem Elohim - In God's Image.**

Traditional Vidui

We have abused,	אֲשָׁמנוּ.
We have betrayed,	בִּגְדָנוּ.
We have been cruel.	גָּזַלנוּ.
We have destroyed and embittered other people's lives.	דָּבַרנוּ דָּפִי: הָעוֹיְנוּ.
We were false to ourselves.	וְהִרְשָׁענוּ.
We have gossiped about others and hated them.	יָדָנוּ. חָמְסָנוּ.
We have insulted and jeered.	טָפְלָנוּ.
We have killed.	שָׁקַרְנוּ.
We have lied.	יַעֲצָנוּ.
We have misled others and neglected them.	רָעוּ. כָּזְבָנוּ.
We were obstinate.	לָצָנוּ.
We have perverted and quarreled.	מָרְדָנוּ. נִאֲצָנוּ.
We have robbed and stolen.	סָרְרָנוּ. עוֹיְנוּ.
We have transgressed through unkindness.	פָּשַׁעְנוּ. צָרְרָנוּ.
We have been both violent and weak.	קָשִׁינוּ. עָרְפוּ.
We have practiced extortion.	רָשַׁעְנוּ.
We have yielded to wrong desires, and misplaced our zeal.	שַׁחַתְנוּ. תַּעֲבָנוּ. תַּעֲיִינוּ. תַּעֲתַעְנוּ.

Good Deeds Vidui

We have loved,	אָהַבְנוּ,
We have blessed,	בָּרַכְנוּ,
We have grown,	גָּדַלְנוּ,
We have spoken positively.	דִּבַּרְנוּ
We have raised up,	יָפִי
We have shown compassion,	הַעֲלִינוּ,
We have acted enthusiastically,	וְחָסְנוּ, זָרְזָנוּ,
We have been empathetic,	חָמַלְנוּ,
We have cultivated truth.	טַפַּחְנוּ
We have given good advice,	אָמַת
We have respected,	יַעֲצָנוּ
We have learned,	טוֹב,
We have forgiven,	כִּבְדָנוּ,
We have comforted,	לְמַדְנוּ,
We have been creative,	מְחַלְנוּ,
We have stirred,	נַחֲמָנוּ,
We have been spiritual activists,	סָלַלְנוּ, עוֹרְרָנוּ,
We have been just,	פְּעַלְנוּ,
We have longed for the Land [of Israel].	צַדִּיקָנוּ, קָוִינוּ לְאֶרֶץ
We have been merciful,	רַחֲמָנוּ,
We have given full effort,	שָׁקַדְנוּ,
We have supported,	תָּמַכְנוּ,
We have contributed,	תָּרַמְנוּ,
We have repaired.	תָּקַנּוּ.

VIDUI: REMEMBERING YOU'RE HUMAN

By Max Hollander

Activity: Writing Your Own Prayer

Above we have provided the traditional Vidui text. Now, make your own prayer by writing down your own good deeds. We recommend you bring it with you to High Holiday services, reading both the traditional prayer and your newly crafted, personal prayer.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Parshischo said every person should have two slips of paper in his pocket. On one should be written: "The world was created for me." On the other should be written: "I am but dust and ashes." The trick is to have the wisdom to know which slip of paper to read at the right time.

We should always be thoughtful about the mistakes we have made, but we also need to remember the goodness we add to the world every day.



SHOFAR SERVICE AND OUR LONGINGS



By Rabbi Sandra Cohen

One of the highlights of Rosh Hashanah (at least in shul) is the blowing of the shofar. We hear its notes, the pleading sounds and the triumphant sounds as they mix together with our prayers. The shofar's call seems to reach out to the Holy One. Many of us look forward to this moment – if not all year, then at least once we get to synagogue and open our machzors (High Holy Day prayer books).

This year is slightly different, because of the calendar. The first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. It is minhag in many shuls (Orthodox and Conservative, usually) not to blow the shofar on Shabbat but to leave its ringing tones to day two of the holy day. On the first day, we instead read the words, the prayers and the verses from the Bible as a way to remember the sound of the shofar. In more progressive Jewish contexts, Reform and some Reconstructionist synagogues will sound the shofar even on Shabbat and then again the next day, to a considerably smaller crowd. How much praying is enough, we wonder.

In any case, the shofar service, located in halachic shuls in the midst of Musaf, while standing alone in more liberal synagogues, has three parts, three themes: Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot.

מלכויות/Malchuyot

Malchuyot/מלכויות, means “Kingship” or “Ruler.” In this section, the machzor discusses what it means for people to “enthroned” God, as it were, and to then accept God's leadership.

This is tricky, especially when our world – external or internal – is not going well. Where is God in the midst of my depression? I reach out to the Holy One and feel nothing; I look to the heavens, and the world seems enveloped in darkness.

When struggling with a mental health challenge – or loving someone who is – I find it hard to believe this is the way God wants my life to be. I do not believe God gives out illness as little punishments for who knows what kind of sins, just as I do not believe God only tests the “strong.” Here we are, all of us, strong – and suffering. Why?

No human knows. I certainly don't. But the idea of enthroning God on Rosh Hashanah is powerful. It allows us to say to ourselves, quietly, persistently: “I do not have to run the world. I do not have to ‘fix’ those I love who are hurting.” I can embrace my experience of mental illness, bemoan it and then hand it back to the Divine Presence to sort out. My job is me. And we can always ask God for help, in whatever form we would like.

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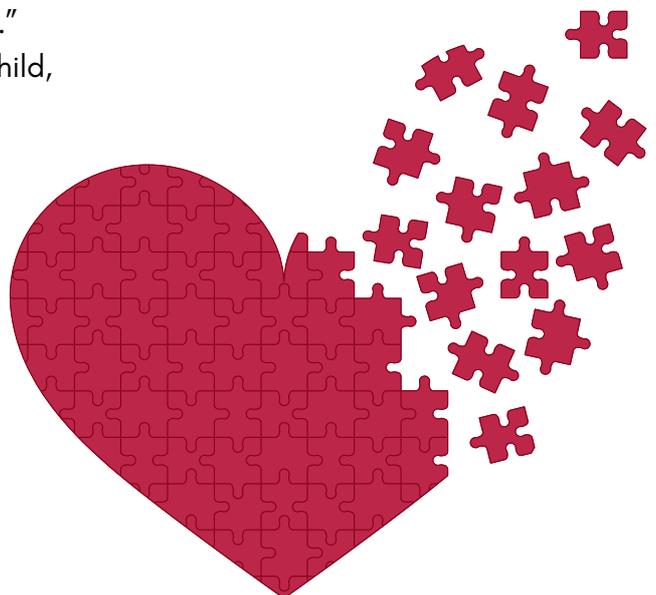
We might find God in the communal singing at shul or in the beautiful forest in our backyard. We might be terribly angry with God and need to tell God exactly where to get off, as it were. My prayers may be petitionary, or full of praise, or shouting internally into the great unknown. But even as we protest the mess the Holy One is making of our world, we are also affirming that God is present. We are, perhaps, like babies, crying and making a fuss when we hurt and cannot fix ourselves. We cry out, and, I believe, God hears us. How and what is a mystery. But as we start the new year, we affirm even through our tears that God exists. And the hope is that we will find God once again walking beside us.

זיכרונות/*Zichronot*

The next section of the shofar service is **Zichronot/זיכרונות**, which means remembrance. God remembers us over and over again. The verses in the traditional machzor cite how God remembered Noah, ending the flood and placing the bow in the sky. Our Torah service reminds us of how God remembered Sarah and gave her a son; God also heard Hannah and gave her a son. Finally, the service notes that God will remember all of us, will find us in our exile and gather us home once again.

This is a service of hope. If we struggle to believe God runs the world in an equitable fashion, the stories of God's promises and then God's fulfillment of those words might give us a branch to hold.

We should note that remembrance is seen here as an embodiment of hope, an act of fulfilling long-held dreams and long-ago promises. This is not a "God remembering all the sins I did this year." This is God saying, if you will, that you are God's child, and the Holy One will someday help you to make whole the broken places. God will redeem our pain in ways we can't possibly imagine and will give meaning to our suffering. Maybe not now, not this year, but someday.



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שופרות/Shofarot

The final section of the shofar service is **Shofarot/שופרות**, – the ritual sounding of the shofar but also the sounding of our voices in prayer, in song, in tears and laughter. If God remembers us during the Zichronot section of the service, then our actions, our crying out, is how we connect back to God.

On the other side of God's remembering is our remembering God. Do we set aside times to talk to God, to bless, to remember God in moments wonderful and difficult alike? We don't have to censure what we say to the Divine. But we do need to practice looking for God, creating spaces for the Divine Presence to dwell among us.

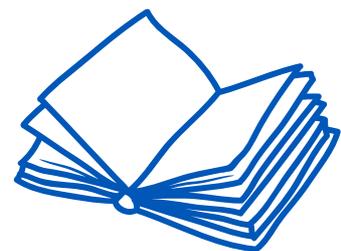
I believe patience will win out. Hope will win.

But...if I, for example, light Shabbat candles four times a year, and God "shows up," as it were, four times a year... then the odds of us meeting each other are low. But if I invoke God regularly, doing mitzvot, praying, blessing, celebrating and mourning, if I actively remember God, I am more likely to experience God remembering me.

So, in this season of self-reflection, of the sounding of the shofar, we need to find our own voices. Because certainly the painful cry from deep within us at this season goes directly to the One who loves us, each of us, for who we are.

Traditionally, the shofar is sounded in the month of Elul to help us prepare for the High Holy Days. Look inward, it urges, and then let the pure sound of a soul looking for God or meaning or help – let that sound of your voice cry out. It is the best we can do. And, God willing, it will be enough.

May we all be written for a year of health and blessings.



EXPLORING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND MENTAL WELLNESS

By The Blue Dove Foundation and JFS Jewish Disabilities Advocates (JDA)

Each year as we enter the High Holy Day season, we begin to prepare – for reflection, planning and celebration. Our preparation and celebration have looked different over these past few years as we adapted to the Covid-19 pandemic. As we enter the new year, we are thinking yet again about what this year will look like. In May 2023, the U.S. surgeon general released a new advisory on the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation and lack of connection in our country. With the holidays approaching and this public health crisis at hand, we must ask what our responsibility is to support ourselves and each other in fostering meaningful connection. The Jewish value, or middah

kol Yisrael arevim zeh la zeh - כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה,
All Jews are responsible for one another,

is a reminder of our responsibility. It helps us understand we are interconnected and must be invested in the mental wellness and overall well-being of others. We must be willing and prepared to help one another, because when we connect to and support others, we all benefit.

Social connection has an incredible impact on our overall health, both as individuals and as a community. Having stable and supportive connections as an individual leads to better physical and mental health outcomes such as longer life, better health and increased ability to cope with stress, anxiety and depression. Social connections also affect community health in a positive way by increasing a community's resiliency. Supportive and inclusive relationships in a community can lead to increased health and safety.

Elul, the last month of the year before the holidays, is often seen as a time of reflection and preparation before the new year.

The word Elul shares a similar word root with the Aramaic word meaning "to search."



EXPLORING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND MENTAL WELLNESS

By The Blue Dove Foundation and JFS Jewish Disabilities Advocates (JDA)

During Elul, we can reflect on what it is we are searching for when it comes to our own social connection in light of the public health crisis. Take some time to reflect on your own needs.



- What type of connection is most meaningful and fulfilling for you?
- Are you getting what you need from your social connections right now?
- Are there things you can adjust to better meet your needs?
- How can you express to others what your needs are?

In addition, you may find mutually beneficial comfort and support by reaching out to others who may be isolated, alone or less connected. We know people with disabilities experience significantly higher levels of loneliness and barriers to connection and belonging. In the spirit of kol Yisrael arevim zeh la zeh, we are responsible not only to ourselves but to our greater community. As we are searching for our own social connection, we must also support those around us who may be more isolated. If you have the bandwidth for extending yourself, consider taking one of the following steps:

- Talk with someone who you notice is alone.
- Call, text or email to check in on someone who you know has had a difficult year.
- Invite someone who is isolated to a social gathering, Shabbat dinner or holiday celebration.
- Plan a one-on-one get-together with someone who has barriers to connections.
- Offer a ride to someone who can't drive.
- Invite someone new to join a social or support group you attend. Understand they may have financial or other limitations in joining and reassure them they would be welcome at any point.
- Learn about someone's gift and talents and find ways to engage those talents so they can contribute to the community in a meaningful way.

Throughout Elul and the High Holy Day season, continue to reflect on your social connection needs and availability.

Friend's Name: _____

Friend's Number: _____

Friend's Email: _____



CATCHING FRIENDS BEFORE ROCK BOTTOM

By Max Hollander

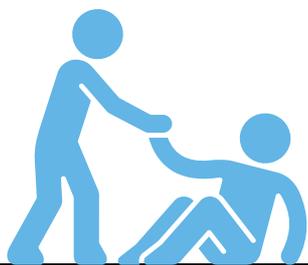
Hitting bottom and hitting it hard was the worst thing that ever happened to me and the best thing that ever happened to me.” (Dave Ramsey). Popular quotes like this one implicitly garner support for the infamous, yet false, myth that in order to recover from mental illness, those who are experiencing it need to hit “rock bottom” before seeking help.

Rock bottom is defined as “the point at which someone with a substance use disorder [or mental illness] feels the lowest they can possibly feel. This can be triggered by life-altering events such as losing custody of their child, getting arrested or other eye-opening experiences.” (American Addictions Center)

It is true that people aren’t always ready to accept help, even when they desperately need it, but that doesn’t mean we need to wait until they hit rock bottom before accepting or seeking help. We can and should intervene before our friends get to that point. But we need to understand how to do it most effectively and sensitively. Consider how the third-century scholar Rabbi Yoḥanan cared for his student, Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, in tractate Berakhot from the Babylonian Talmud.

Rabbi Yoḥanan’s student, Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, fell ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan went to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Do you desire to be ill and afflicted? Rabbi Ḥiyya said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward... Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yoḥanan raised him and restored him to health. Similarly, Rabbi Yoḥanan fell ill. Rabbi Ḥanina went to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: I welcome neither this suffering nor its reward. Rabbi Ḥanina said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Ḥanina raised him and restored him to health. (Berakhot 5b)

While not explicitly about mental anguish, this story presents a simple and important method of providing efficient care for those who are suffering. It illustrates how effective it can be to help someone you love by offering support early rather than forcing it. Had force been applied in the healing process in either case above, they would have run the risk of violating the autonomy of the people they were trying to help and pushing them further away.



CATCHING FRIENDS BEFORE ROCK BOTTOM

By Max Hollander

In a [story shared by the World Health Organization](#), a woman named Alexandra describes one of the key components in the success of her recovery: “Empowering people to have control over their life and mental health care instills personal dignity, value and respect. It can increase self-esteem and confidence.” She goes on to explain: “Receiving autonomy over my mental health care was the greatest contributor to my recovery...My current therapist sees me as a person rather than a mental illness. [When I first met her], she asked me about my interests, wanted to know my work style and was eager to work together to construct a pathway to my mental well-being.”

By asking about the thoughts and feelings of the people suffering, it made them more open to accepting the hand that reached out to them.

The story above has an additional moral in the proceeding lines of the passage:

The Gemara asks: Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan wait for Rabbi Ḥanina to restore him to health? If he was able to heal his student, let Rabbi Yoḥanan stand himself up. The Gemara answers: A prisoner cannot generally free himself from prison, but depends on others to release him from his shackles. (Berakhot 5b)

Some caregivers make the mistake of thinking they can't also be care receivers. Take physicians. The American Medical Association [offers an explanation](#) for why they are less likely to seek support from others: “Physicians encourage patients to share concerns about depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions, yet they are less likely to seek help themselves due to stigma.” Additionally, the AMA suggests the difficult life of physicians subtly encourages them to “cope” alone rather than seek help and risk looking weak to their peers.

This fallacy is played out in the story of Rabbi Yoḥanan and his students. Despite knowing the benefits of a helpful hand, Rabbi Yoḥanan, the regular care provider, neglects to reach out for help for himself.

This simple story underscores these critical truths. We need to be willing to listen to the needs of others in order to best help them, and everyone needs to be able to accept help from the people who love them.

GOD HAS MADE LAUGHTER FOR ME

The following includes excerpts from Ze'ev Korn, LCSW, MSW, EdM's upcoming book, "Stop Falling Apart, Start Cracking Up, Learn to Live The Way of Humor™"

"God has made laughter for me." Bereshit/Genesis 21:6 (from the Torah portion we read on Rosh Hashanah)

On Rosh Hashanah, Jews around the world will read the same section of the Torah. It is the story of the birth of Isaac, or *Yitzhak* in Hebrew, whose name means laughter. What a way to begin the new year, with the gift of laughter and humor being brought into the world. While everyone has experienced the pleasure of laughing, I (and I imagine others) have also known the experience of losing one's sense of humor. It has been my longtime personal and professional interest to understand how one can regain, maintain and increase one's sense of humor — the ability to see the funny side of things. I have found humor is not just an experience but can be a way of life — one that can help us not just enjoy but cope with, and triumph over, adversity and challenges. I believe each Rosh Hashanah we are reintroduced, and reminded, of the gifts of laughter and humor, the gifts God gave Sarah and Abraham — and all of us — with the birth of Isaac/Yitzhak.

Thirty years ago, which feels like just yesterday, I met a man who told me the following when he laughed: When things are dark and you can see no way out, there is a way. You were born with it. From time immemorial, people have sought out a way. In the East, they call it the *Dao*. All religions speak of it, and many self-help books try to guide one to it. But you and I, Michael's laugh told me, were born with a way inside of us. The ancient Greeks used the same name — *Humors* — for the fluids in our body; not the stagnant, fixed organs, but the liquid that flows inside of us. For those of us who have ever felt stuck and didn't know how to find a way out, there actually has always been a way, and we were born with it. And as the Greeks knew, it flows through us. It is time to discover, cultivate and live the *Way of Humor*. And for those who may be despairing, humor reminds us a way forward is possible; that we, too, can be joyfully surprised. Like Sarah, who gave birth at the age of 90, we can be given the gift of new life, of laughter.



GOD HAS MADE LAUGHTER FOR ME

The following includes excerpts from Ze'ev Korn, LCSW, MSW, EdM's upcoming book, "Stop Falling Apart, Start Cracking Up, Learn to Live The Way of Humor™"

This brings us to Rosh Hashanah and the Torah portion we read at the start of the new year. The story itself gives us clues as to why Abraham and Sarah, our patriarch and matriarch, named their first child Isaac/Yitzak/Laughter. God tells Sarah that, after a life of being barren and in her old age, she would get pregnant and have a baby. Sarah laughed at the surprise of it all. Humor always has an element of giving birth. Sarah could have argued with God and said, 'No way, not possible!' But she didn't, and we can wonder, why did she laugh instead? Sarah laughed at both the absurdity – the surprise of such a thing happening – as well as the possibility of it being true. If Sarah didn't believe it could be true, she would not have laughed at all. If she was wedded to the belief in what she thought she knew – that 90-year-old women don't get pregnant and give birth – she would never have seen or been open to the humor in God's statement that there was a new reality, a surprise, that something she didn't think possible was going to happen.

In the world of psychology, we might say God presented to Sarah a new paradigm, and she was open to hearing it. In the words of the mystics, we could say God was going to perform a miracle, something thought to not be able to happen was going to happen. **Sarah's laughter was a sign of her willingness to believe in a new reality, her openness to being wrong, to finding something true she didn't think was true before. It was that willingness, and openness to possibility, that allowed her to laugh.** And it is on Rosh Hashanah, while reading and hearing the story of Sarah laughing, that we, too, are invited to believe new realities are possible and, in doing so, we will also be gifted with laughter and new life.



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The following includes excerpts from Ze'ev Korn, LCSW, MSW, EdM's upcoming book, "Stop Falling Apart, Start Cracking Up, Learn to Live The Way of Humor™"

May we all be blessed in this coming new year to experience not just many "Aha" moments but a joyful "Haha!" with each one. And especially the laughter of an Aha! you did not expect – something new, something that tickles you, tickles your fancy or, more appropriately, your funny bone. Something that intrigues you, that wakes you up to something new and delights you. And fills you with life; specifically, the feeling – and maybe even the reality – of new life.

May we be blessed with the Ha that in Hawaiian is referred to as "breath of life"; the He He Ho Ho from Lamaze breathing used during childbirth while bringing a new life into the world; the laughter that Annie Lamont refers to as "carbonated holiness"; the laughter of the neurodiverse 11-year-old boy with ADHD and autism spectrum disorder who told me that, when he laughs, "it gets him on the upside of down," that laughter has taught him "nothing can have just one side." And laughter, Michael said, "is the way we take hope's temperature" and is "the gift of our character's indomitable courage to endure and triumph." And just maybe it is in the rapid-fire shofar blasts, the Truahs as they are called, we will hear instead of Sarah's cries, Sarah's laugh: he he he he he he he he he he, calling us to laugh along with her. And in doing so, we will be healed from past troubles and disappointments, and given the gift of new life.

The sages say, "When Sarah conceived, many barren women conceived as well. Many deaf people started hearing, many blind people started seeing, and many of the insane became sane" (Bereshit Rabba 53:8). This explains Sarah's statement, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Bereshit 21:6). For, to a certain extent, all were healed with her. (Peninei Halakhah, Simchat Habayit U'ViLrkhatto 8:3:4)

Ha
Ha Ha
Ha
Ha Ha

READING ALL THE CHAPTERS – A MESSAGE ABOUT NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION MONTH AND THE NEW YEAR

By Jennifer Greenberg

Many years ago, my husband, Adam, read a novel (a rare occurrence for him – he tended to read business articles over fiction) and absolutely loved it. He insisted I read this book, because he was sure I would love it as well and we could discuss it. I read it in a few days and really did love it.

Adam couldn't wait to talk about the climax of the story– when one of the main characters disappears under the water after rescuing a child from a raging river during a torrential storm. "I can't believe he dies!" was the first thing Adam said to me when I closed the book.

"What are you talking about? Nobody dies," I replied.

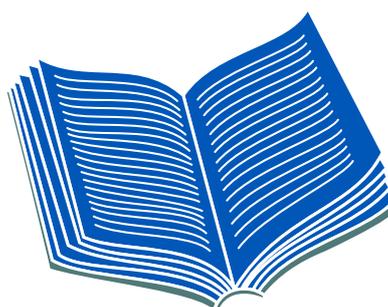
"Yes!" he insisted. "The main character dies saving the kid!"

"We must have read different stories!" I replied. "The man comes out of the woods a few hours later, unscathed. It's a miracle! They all live happily ever after."

"You are kidding. The book got so intense that I just skipped to the end. I wasn't patient enough to see it through. I skipped to the last page. That guy wasn't on the last page, so I just assumed he had really died."

I laughed so much about that silly occurrence. That Adam had loved the book enough to have me read it, when he didn't actually read all of it himself. I thought to myself, "Why bother to read at all if you aren't going to take in all of the details, no matter how painful or wonderful they may be!"

I hadn't thought about that story in a long time, until a few weeks ago when I was scrolling through LinkedIn. I came across this post from speaker/thought leader Jacob Brown:



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You can't skip chapters; that's not how life works.

You have to read every line and meet every character.

You won't enjoy all of it.

Hell, some chapters will make you cry for weeks.

You will read things you don't want to read and have moments when you don't want the pages to end.

But you have to keep going.

Stories keep the world revolving.

Live yours.

Don't miss out.

#FailForward

I can't get this post out of my head.

A few years after my husband failed to read the entire novel, he took another shortcut in his life. Instead of embracing all the moments, good and bad, he found himself in a place so intense and so painful that he couldn't push through. He said goodbye to me, to our children, to our dog, and he drove away from our house to take his own life.

After he died, our family, friends and community were shocked and bereaved. How could the happy, funny, always-there-for-you Adam Greenberg have died by suicide? How did they not know of his struggles?

The truth is, like Adam, many people suffer from mental illnesses in silence. They are so wrapped up in the darkness and pain that they can't find a way to get through to the light to ask for help. To see many others have been on this journey and can provide support and comfort. To learn their family and friends will embrace them as they undergo treatment. To know it is worth it to keep going to find out what happens next.

I'm proud to be part of the Blue Dove Foundation. To drive an organization that sparks conversation and education around mental health. We must make the narrative around all mental diseases (yes, diseases) – anxiety, depression, OCD, addiction and all the others – one everyone can hear and make their way through.

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During National Suicide Prevention Month, the month of Elul leading up to the High Holidays and always, I encourage you to discuss and learn about mental health in a nonjudgmental way in the new year. If your loved ones won't ask – or can't ask – for help, ask for help for yourself. The Mishnah says, "Whoever saves one life saves the world." Be it your own or the life of someone you love, everyone deserves to see what miracle might happen next. And you might end up in your own happily ever after if you can just get through. Shana Tova.



HIGH HOLIDAY LITURGY VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF DEPRESSION

By Miriam A.G. Baumgartne

Imagine for a moment you live with depression. It is not a family member or loved one who has depression — you are the patient. You are suffering. You are in so much pain and your brain is so ill, you have thoughts of suicide. Next, consider the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: We are commanded to “choose life.” Teshuva, Tefilla and Tzedakah, repentance, prayer and charity, are your ticket to the Book of Life for another year.

What I have asked you to imagine, if that is even possible, was, yes that is past tense, my life. It is the life of so many who struggle with depression and other mental illnesses, especially during the holidays.

For 10 years or so, while my doctors struggled to find the right combination of treatments, I suffered terribly with depression and anxiety. My (Jewish) psychologist pointed out my illness generally got worse during the holidays.

It's no wonder. Praying, asking for life, praying to be written and sealed in the book of life for another year, and forced to read “choose life” while I was so tempted to kill myself was beyond difficult. Nearly impossible is more accurate. My brain was too ill to see the liturgy as anything other than the words on the pages. I was not able to interpret, comprehend allegory or read anything in the spaces between the words.

My questions were silent. Why am I asking for another year of life? Is this really what I want? What's the point? And choose life ... do I have to? Why? Mine were the thoughts depression with suicidal ideation can cause.

Untaneh Tokef, the litany of how people will die, is still my least favorite prayer. I used to read the long list as a source of suicide plans. All I saw was ways to die. Now, with my illness controlled, I am able to appreciate its basic assumption that people will die during the year, and it's not because they missed too many marks or didn't repent, pray or give enough tzedakah during those 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.



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By **Miriam A.G. Baumgartne**

Rabbi Hirshel Jaffe has written about prayer, "It means looking into yourself, determining the meaning of your life, finding out what really is of value." That was not possible for me during the worst years of my uncontrolled depression. It is not possible for many people.

I have educated clergy regarding my personal history with this liturgy. One rabbi believed love, community, family, determination, medical treatments and counseling can restore life, meaning and laughter. I had all of that, and it was not enough. We both learned liturgy, traditional words on paper, is stronger.

My doctors and I have since found the "secret sauce" that allows me to once again participate in society. I am now stable, thriving even. My life is not what it was before mental illness. I take my medications daily, see my psychologist weekly and am no longer able to work professionally. I find joy in my volunteer work in the Jewish community. I find comfort in sharing my story and hope others will not suffer as I did. I am reminded of my past struggles daily and especially at this time every year. I am also reminded of how far I have come.



BEING WRITTEN FOR LIFE



By Rabbi Sandra Cohen

בְּרוֹשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוּם כִּפּוּר יִחְתְּמוּן - בְּרוֹשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן
y'chamtenu

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the fast of Yom Kippur, it is sealed. . .

This piyyut (liturgical poetry), the Un'taneh Tokef, is perhaps the most famous of all the liturgy of the Yamim Nora'im/Days of Awe. It tells of how our fates for the coming year will be written in the Book of Life. That book, we are told, is opened during the High Holy Days, and we read it together with G-d.

What is written? Our lives. We look back at pages we have embossed with our deeds and misdeeds, active and passive. And we ask G-d to help us write a better page next year. For G-d to help us cope with all the hardships and blessings that come our way: flood, famine, plague, restlessness. To write us for life, for a good life.

But. . .

What if one does not really wish to be written for life. Those of us struggling with depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, chronic pain and so many other challenges may not want to keep living. Many of us look at this poem and see ourselves as the one who is wandering and not at peace, as the one who is pursued and tormented. How long, we ask the Holy One, will I be sentenced to pain and not peace? Mercy, we explain to G-d, would be allowing us to die. Those feelings, either the hope that our lives will be better if G-d would just help out or the despair that one has been forgotten, relegated to the Divine wasteland, are very real and very painful. Sitting among other worshipers at shul (or following along at home with streaming!), one might feel terribly alone – and even angry. Why do others seem to look back at the year just passed and feel grateful? Why does my family member or neighbor have such faith in a good, sweet new year? Why am I alone in my despair?

It is a difficult thing – to struggle to wish for life, to put aside one's anguish and find a glimmer of hope.

The Un'taneh Tokef offers us strategies, if you will, ways of coping with the harshness of life. ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה. Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah/return (repentance), prayer and charity can help us avert the harshness of the decree. They will not be magic; every life has hard parts. Rather, we seek to manage our responses to the cards we are dealt: We cannot control the hand, but we can choose how to play our cards. Teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah, the piyyut tells us, can help us cope with challenges; they can transform who we are, both in our deeds and our spirit.

BEING WRITTEN FOR LIFE

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How do we take these words from the Machzor and turn them into realistic, doable actions?

First comes teshuvah. The root of this word for repentance means to return. Return to what? For those hurting, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, to return is to first ground ourselves in ourselves. Who are we? What are our gifts, our blessings? What are our struggles and hurt? What do we do well, and what would we like to do differently?

This self-analysis, if you will, works only if you can see yourself with acceptance, not harsh critique and self-hatred. No one is perfect. But as we look over the past year and into the next, we can enumerate our challenges (plague, depression, pain, fatigue, anger) gently and then, with love, think about how to cope with those issues. Change happens slowly: Setting one or two small, concrete goals to work on in the coming year is less overwhelming than trying to be perfect in all we do. We need to accept ourselves before returning to G-d.

And returning to G-d is what tefillah/prayer is all about. Prayer is not a divine vending machine, wherein I insert my needs and wishes, and out comes the response; rather, it is about a personal discussion between an individual and G-d. The words on the page of the Machzor are helpful; they are guides to the sorts of topics and details one might be thinking about during the Days of Awe. But . . . they are just that: examples, benchmarks, models of prayer. The Machzor uses the traditional words on the page in front of us as a way into our hearts.

What do you want to say to G-d? Are you angry? In despair? Lonely? Tell G-d. Yell at G-d. Not because G-d will immediately fix the pain at hand, but because prayer, traditional and personal, are ways of connecting to the Divine. Pretending all is well when, in fact, all is not well, destroys relationships. Honesty is the place to start. G-d can take it!

The other blessing from prayer is the communal aspect. We sing together and recite the traditional words. Look around and remember: Many people suffer, and we cannot see it. We are not alone in our pain, although we may feel alone and abandoned. Praying with others is a way of being part of a community – of being less alone. Just as no one person has committed all the sins we enumerate on Yom Kippur, none of us will get through the next year without some difficulties. Perhaps we can forge connections with others in our synagogues through praying together. We are, in fact, not alone.

BEING WRITTEN FOR LIFE

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Finally, we turn to tzedakah – charity. The root of the word here – **צדק** – is righteousness. On the High Holy Days, we start with ourselves (repentance/return) and then move on to our relationship with the Holy One (prayer). Eventually, we arrive at the interpersonal connections that can turn our hardships into blessings: doing what is right. Charity seems to connote simply giving money, whether to the beggar on the street corner, to your synagogue or to national programs for the hungry. And this is, indeed, part of tzedakah. Is it just that I have more while others struggle to feed their children? Of course, Judaism commands us to give, to balance out the huge monetary distinctions in our society.

But pursuing justice goes beyond that. It means creating relationships among people, to make deliberate choices in building a better world. Tzedakah reminds us we are not alone. We all have needs that need healing and help, and we all have gifts (not just money) to share with others. Together, we can build a better society.

Ultimately, the piyyut tells us, G-d does not wish ill on any of us. “For You do not desire the death of the condemned; rather, that they turn from their path and live. You wait for them until the day of their death, and if they repent, You receive them immediately.

G-d knows how fragile we are, how often we take the easy way out, how much help we need to live good lives. It is reassuring to know all we need do is to turn back to G-d, and G-d will forgive us and let us start again.

Reaching into the dark void to find G-d is scary. Looking at ourselves can be troubling. Being part of a community seeking justice for all is a heavy commitment.

And yet, if we are willing to take the chance during this holiday season that these deeds might, in fact, help transform the lives we are living, we might surprise ourselves. Will our depression disappear like magic? No. But our tradition reminds us these are the basic coping mechanisms for a good life. To accept ourselves and strive to do better, to stretch our souls toward the Divine and to connect with one another: This is the way toward a life worth living.

GRATITUDE, A BATTLE WITH SCHIZOAFFECTIVE DISORDER, AND THE NEW YEAR

by Douglas Meron

Countless studies have shown how practicing gratitude can lead to a better life. Gratitude improves mood, fosters optimism, strengthens social bonds and leads to physical health. Oprah Winfrey has been quoted saying, "Be thankful for what you have; you'll end up having more. If you concentrate on what you don't have you will never have enough." Gratitude can be accessed at any moment of your life and can be a useful skill for reaching the present moment. As humans, we all desire happiness, and a grateful heart is vital to achieving it. Happiness doesn't lead to gratefulness, but gratitude leads to happiness. Zig Zigler calls gratitude "the healthiest of all human emotion."

Living with a mental health challenge can make it tricky to express gratitude; however, gratitude is a key component in coping with this challenge and recovery. In my journey with schizoaffective disorder, I often felt that having this diagnosis and symptoms was some kind of curse. About three years ago, I was admitted to a hospital for yet another battle with psychosis. For about a month or so, I lay in the hospital bed in a deep depression and wondered if I would ever get back to being myself – one who saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

Then one day it struck me: Instead of being buried in my worries and feeling sad and alone, I could examine what I had that was positive in my life. I challenged myself to write a hundred things I was grateful for. I started going around to the hospital staff, "asking them for their names and informing each person to put them on my gratitude list. I started doing this 100item list every day, and suddenly my crippling depression started going away. Hope started rising. Then one magical day," I felt the doom and gloom disappear, and I was locked into the present moment. I felt my brain open up, and for about three weeks, I went to sleep as soon as my head hit the pillow."Gratitude put me on the right track. And although I still struggle with symptoms,gratitude has grounded me and given me a continual appreciation for my life, despite the struggle with my organic brain disorder.

Now I continue to practice gratitude every day. Although I don't have a hundred things to be grateful for each day, I search my mind for thirty things I'm grateful for before I go to sleep each night. Gratitude helps me recognize that even if I had a very trying day, I can take solace knowing I'm alive, safe, have a wonderful family and friends, and there still were some highlights of the day. I now hand write notes of appreciation to my family and friends, which gives them – and me – a very warm feeling and sense of connection.

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Looking back at my 20-plus years battling with schizoaffective disorder, I can think of tons of people to be grateful for. Let's face it; no one goes into the psychology field for financial rewards. I thank all the counselors who taught me great coping skills and the hospital workers who provided a clean, safe and positive atmosphere for growth. People in the field often get overlooked, but their jobs save lives and nurture people living with issues. The words "thank you" are embedded in my brain, and I use them generously every day.

THANK YOU GRATITUDE

Gratitude, I gratefully grab your hand; you helped me see the lay of the land.

Gratitude, you put my life into perspective, allowing me to be overly objective.

Thank you for my experiences that I label good or bad; I remember you even when I'm sad.

I'm thankful for every breath I take; I'm thankful for the day when I awake.

I love you with all my heart; no matter where I am you give me a fresh start.

I wish I could pass you to everyone who does not see what you mean to me.

If ever should I lose you, bite my tongue and take me back to where I began.

Gratitude, I humbly hear your call. I may stumble, but with you I shall not fall.



PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MENTAL WELLNESS

by Ruthie Hollander

Personal responsibilities and mental wellness may seem like different conversations.

After all, the world is seeing record levels of burnout, anxiety and exhaustion – partially resulting from our overwhelming lifestyles, never-ending to-do lists and unforgiving schedules. So how could adding more responsibilities improve things? How could having additional duties benefit our mental health?

Jewish scholars have been asking these questions for thousands of years, and they are particularly pertinent to the upcoming period of "hitbodedut" (self-reflection) and "tikkun hanefesh" (improvement of the soul); the months of Elul and Tishrei provide ample opportunities to rebuild, reinvigorate and pivot. The holidays that take place within these months – Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah – as well as the liturgy, traditions and culture surrounding them, all emphasize people's mental wellness via "understanding with their heart, return[ing], and be[ing] healed" (Isaiah 6:10).

Achieving an understanding of our hearts is no small feat, but if it is a first step to healing, we must work toward that goal. Practices such as mindfulness and meditation can be important guides to help us understand our internal worlds. The Jewish concept of "cheshbon hanefesh" – an accounting of the soul – can also aid with this enlightenment.

A cheshbon hanefesh is not as spiritual or ephemeral as its translation sounds. We practice different types of cheshbonot every day: When we check our credit card statements and resolve to work harder on our spending; when we realize we scroll on our phone for too many hours a day and install a time-management app; or when we recognize the ways we could be a better friend to someone who's struggling. Similarly, a cheshbon hanefesh is an analysis of the ways in which we can do and be better to ourselves (which, of course, can have an impact on the world around us).

This may sound like the idea of a New Year's resolution, and in many ways it is. The Jewish new year is a great time for reflection. It provides a benchmark by which we can measure our progress and see if our goals have changed, and it allows us to think about how best to move forward based on what has worked and what hasn't. That kind of clarity and self-acceptance can help us progress in our mental health journeys with intention and resolve, and it can feel deeply cleansing to engage with honesty and awareness.

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Maybe you're convinced and want to give cheshbon hanefesh a try. There's no "right way" to do it, but here are some places to start:

1. Assess the responsibilities you have to yourself, those you have to others and the ones others have to you. Are you meeting these responsibilities? Are others in your life meeting them?

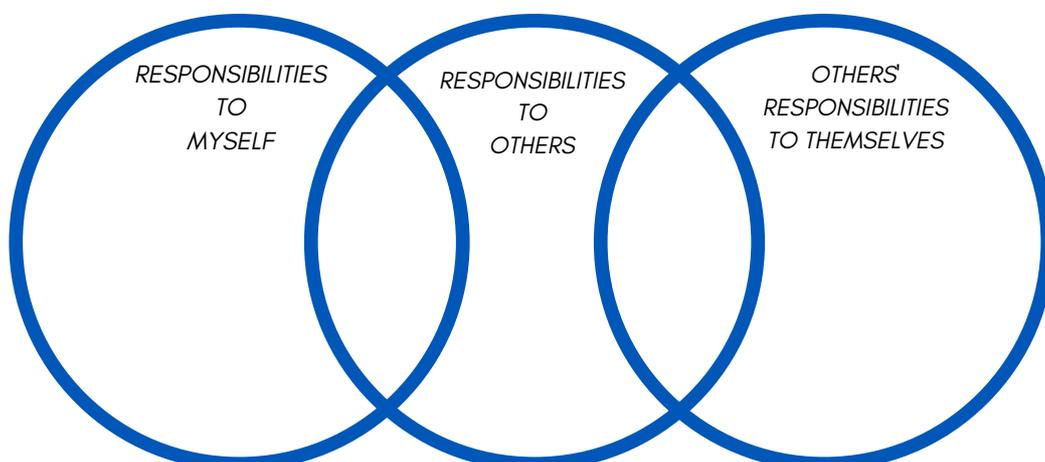
Taking responsibility starts with the recognition that we all have some power and ability to affect others, and every person has some capacity to affect the world. We have responsibilities to ourselves: Developing our mental wellness, keeping our spaces clean, working hard, managing our time and being honest. Other people have the same responsibilities.

Then there are the responsibilities we have to others. They can be small, like saying "please" and "thank you" or throwing cans into the recycling rather than the garbage can. Or they can be big, sometimes very big, such as not letting people fall through the cracks or stepping up and taking a stand when we see wrongdoing.

A powerful quote from Pirkei Avot posits "[we] are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are [we] free to desist from it" when it comes to our responsibilities to others – and especially for those we have to the world.

Ask yourself if you are engaging realistically with your responsibilities. Are you able to manage them? Which ones are truly essential? Which people and environments support (or hold back) the fulfillment of these responsibilities?

Below is a Venn Diagram that can help with this exercise.



PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MENTAL WELLNESS

by *Ruthie Hollander*

2. Write a “personal mission statement.” In Greg McKeown’s bestselling book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, he writes about the ways we can achieve clarity and increase opportunities for joy within ourselves. One of these tools is the personal mission statement.

When a company or organization is struggling over the direction it should take, it often turns to its mission statement. Similarly, writes McKeown, we can create our own mission statements to help us determine the right path when we are conflicted or confused. A good personal mission statement should be:

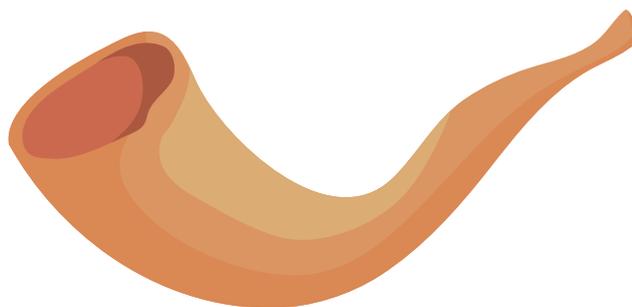
A good personal mission statement should be:

- a. Concrete – specific and narrow enough that you can plan properly
- b. Measurable – with a beginning and end you can measure your progress against
- c. Attainable – realistic and doable given your skill-set and abilities
- d. Inspiring – allows you to strive toward something bigger than yourself

McKeown encourages those struggling with this lofty set of adjectives to ask themselves two questions: **“If [I] could be truly excellent at only one thing, what would it be?”** and **“How will [I] know when [I’m] done?”** **Try writing your own mission statement.**

3. Look back and see where you were last year. Yes, really! Sometimes going backward for self-reflection can be tremendously helpful in knowing what’s next. Look back on the achievement of last year’s goals – and the things that affected their achievement, positively and negatively.

Like with any mental wellness practice, the goal is not to judge your progress but to observe it. Look for “cause and effect” over the last year, and reflect on why you may have been able to complete certain priorities and resolutions over other ones. There are many reasons we do or do not achieve the things we set out to do, including some of the following:



PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MENTAL WELLNESS

by *Ruthie Hollander*

- a. They aren't realistic. Sometimes we set goals that are too big or unattainable, given the place we are in life. It can help to work toward those goals by breaking them up into small chunks: If we want to learn guitar, we should start by learning how to play the chords and read music rather than aiming to play a very advanced song within a year.
- b. They don't make us happy or bring us joy. In *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything*, author B.J. Fogg recommends creating a celebratory routine that supports us in creating change. It may feel silly, but recognizing each moment when we make progress by doing a fist pump in the air or a little dance can help condition feelings of positivity toward our goals.
- c. They aren't supported. The environments we are in play a large role in achieving our goals. If we are looking to work on intuitive eating, being around people who fuss about calories and dieting is likely to disrupt our progress. If we want to work on the skill of positive self-talk, it may not be helpful to be in a social environment where people speak negatively about others. One of the most helpful examples of cause and effects comes from the people and places that affect our goals. Sometimes, in looking to make progress, we need to shake things up and seek new experiences or relationships.

If you can make the time over the next few weeks, find a quiet space, take a pen and some paper, and give yourself respect and self-acceptance as you reflect. May you use cheshbon hanefesh as a tool for making your entry into the Jewish new year feeling clear headed, recharged, hopeful and mentally well.



SHOFARS AND SEMICOLONS: STRUGGLING WITH SUICIDAL IDEATION AND FACING ROSH HASHANAH

By Jaime Glazerman, LCP and Max Hollander

Rosh Hashanah is an exciting time of year. It's a chance to reflect on our past and set our intentions and goals for our future. This opportunity for growth and achievement can be thrilling. But for people who didn't think they would make it to the new year — because they were struggling with suicidal ideation, survived an attempted suicide, or went through a traumatic experience that left them emotionally drained — entering the synagogue and facing the prospect of a new year can be overwhelming. In those moments that feel daunting, we need to reorient ourselves, breathe, and pause. In other words, we need Rosh Hashanah.

Jewish prayer is intended to bring participants into the present moment with contemplative liturgy and silent personal meditations. Yet Rosh Hashanah services, and the shofar blasts in particular, stand apart.

The blast of the shofar is a loud piercing sound meant to shut out the “noise” of the outside world. It creates a stillness that should inspire us to close our eyes, pause, and be fully present. Only within that pause can we begin to accept past mistakes, express gratitude for the blessings in our lives that helped us reach this moment, and move forward toward a new year. In many ways, this understanding of Rosh Hashanah can be seen as a “semicolon.”

The semicolon (;) indicates a pause between two main clauses, more pronounced than the pause indicated by a comma. A writer uses a semicolon to separate different parts of a sentence or a list or to indicate a pause.

This punctuation mark is reserved for important pauses — those that are more than our everyday “stop to look around” or to “take a breath” pauses. Through the work of Project Semicolon, it has also become a symbol of strength and survival for people struggling with suicide and general mental illness. “A semicolon is used when an author could've chosen to end their sentence but chose not to. The author is you, and the sentence is your life,” explains Project Semicolon's website. On Rosh Hashanah, we similarly pause and make a conscious choice to move forward.

In Jewish tradition, turning points in our lives — moments of pause and renewed intention, moments of a semicolon — are holy and are marked by a prayer thanking G-d for giving us life, sustaining us, and helping us get to this very moment. Most notably, this prayer is said at the beginning of Jewish holidays and before the performance of yearly mitzvot (commandments) such as blowing the shofar.

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בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעַנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה

Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Haolam, shehechyanu,
v'kiy'manu, v'higianu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You Eternal Spirit who has given us life, sustained us, and allowed us to arrive in this moment.

"This blessing is an opportunity to do teshuvah, to return, and in returning, to bring attention back to the miracle of this moment, to the realization of the blessing of being alive, conscious, and receptive," says Rabbi Shefa Gold of My Jewish Learning.

This year, as you recite this prayer and listen to the shofar, allow the stillness of its blast to wash over you. "The blessing over the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah refers to the mitzvah as 'hearing the voice of the Shofar,' but since that voice speaks without words, the message that is heard depends a great deal on who is doing the listening," says Douglas Aronin.

While listening to the voice of the shofar, contemplate the ways that you, your loved ones, and G-d sustained you, and helped you get to your present moment. Be proud of the fact that you are still standing despite the enormous obstacles that stood in your way. As the book of Proverbs states, **"a righteous [person] falls down seven times and gets up" (Proverbs 24:16).**

Recognize and be proud of the fact that you got up. And recognize that in order to become the best version of ourselves and move forward, sometimes all we need is a pause.



ON BROKENNESS AND BECOMING WHOLE IN THE NEW YEAR: HOW THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IS CONFRONTING MENTAL ILLNESS AND ADDICTION

By Rabbi Rachel Ain

Reb Nachman of Bratzlav once wrote: A certain king sent his son far away to study. The son eventually returned to the king's palace fully versed in all the arts and sciences. One day the king told his son to take a large stone and bring it up to the top floor of the palace. But the stone was so heavy that the prince could not even lift it up. Eventually the king said to his son, "Did you really imagine that I meant you to do the impossible and carry the stone just as it is up there? Even with all your wisdom, how were you supposed to do such a thing? That was not what I meant. I wanted you to take a big hammer and smash the stone into little pieces. This is how you will be able to bring it up to the top floor." The hard work of the High Holidays, is figuring out which stones need lifting, smashing, and rebuilding. It isn't easy to smash our hearts, but we need to begin to assess why we must do this.

First, we need to show our vulnerability because sometimes, we need to be broken in order to become whole; we might be scared of what is inside and it takes incredible bravery and strength to open it up.

In fact, there is tremendous power in showing our vulnerability. Theodore Roosevelt said "it is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly. Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least failed while daring greatly." During the New Year to be written into the book of life. But this doesn't mean to just be living, physically, it means to be truly alive. To be in the arena. To be the authors of our own stories. To know there will be peaks and there will be valleys but we need to be willing to be broken in order to be rebuilt.

As we head on our journey for growth we can use the Jewish version of a GPS, by focusing on a spiritual GPS. Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah. Repentance, Prayer, and Justice. Teshuvah is a process by which we reconcile our past actions with ourselves, with G-d, and with others, and pledge to change. After we have committed ourselves to teshuvah, we must use the next directional map that we have - the mahzor during the holidays and the siddur throughout the year - which help us with the second step, the step of tefillah, and it is the atlas of all atlas's on our journey towards a greater spiritual self. But, our spiritual journey doesn't end with prayer, at least not for us as Jews, because we are taught, *Al tifrosh min ha'tzibur*. Don't disconnect ourselves from the community, and that is where our third element, tzedakah comes in. People often translate tzedakah loosely as charity, but I would argue that we need to look at its root word, justice, to understand that to seek out justice means to work with and for a community.

ON BROKENNESS AND BECOMING WHOLE IN THE NEW YEAR: HOW THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IS CONFRONTING MENTAL ILLNESS AND ADDICTION

By Rabbi Rachel Ain

To be a part of something, not apart from it. There are many ways for each of us to get involved in these issues. Whether it is confronting our own vulnerability or participating in programs that recognize all of our challenges, we can enter this new year more whole.

As a congregational Rabbi, I have made the commitment to make mental health part of the conversations that we have with our congregants this year and so Sutton Place Synagogue will be hosting Dr. Sam Klagsbrun to speak about issues of anxiety and depression. Further, I am proud to be getting involved with the T'Shuvah Center, The T'Shuvah Center is a nonprofit residential center and community in New York and is a direct response to the addiction epidemic, that is steeped in Jewish values. Born out of Beit T'Shuvah Los Angeles, T'Shuvah Center follows the same mission to guide individuals and families towards a path of living well, so that wrestling souls can recover from addiction and learn how to properly heal. The T'Shuvah Center's faith-based model, founded on authenticity and wholeness, integrates spirituality, psychotherapy, Jewish teachings, and the 12 Steps. T'Shuvah Center believes everyone has the right to redemption. In thinking about this center, I am proud that I will be attending an all day conference on October 10th, at the JCC of Manhattan where topics will be presented that offer a Jewish response to the addiction epidemic through various teachings led by experts in the field of recovery.

Our journeys aren't easy. Whether individually or as a community. In 1853 an abolitionist minister Theodore Parker who studied at Harvard Divinity School and eventually became an influential transcendentalist and minister in the Unitarian church gave a sermon where he said "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."

To me this is the definition of faith in the year ahead, but it isn't pre-determined. It is hopeful. But to get it towards justice takes work. To understand that something needs to be perfect, first means to confront the idea that it isn't yet perfect.

None of us are perfect. We aren't striving for perfection, but we are striving towards our potential. And to do that we might need to go into our toolbox, take Rav Nahman's hammer, to break ourselves up first, and then rebuild it, with teshuva, tefillah, and tzedaka, in order that we may enter the New Year, better, more complete, more whole, if not a bit scarred.

THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE AND MENTAL HEALTH DURING KOL NIDREI

By Rabbi Brian I. Michelson

It was a moment I had almost forgotten, until I got the phone call. I had held her in my arms and blessed her when she was just a month old. I kissed her on the top of her head as I did with all the babies I named before the pandemic. As I held her, her life was full of hope and potential. She was sweet and innocent, and life was full of possibilities.

I know I am not alone in this, but sometimes when I remember a person, I remember the way they looked when I last saw them. They don't get any older, or grow, or mature in my memory. They stay the baby, the bar mitzvah student, the bride, or the mourner. I am often shocked when the b'nei mitzvah child returns, and I have to look up at them instead of down. They are fixed in a moment in time.

Then I got the phone call.

I knew from the instant the call was put through: It was not going to be good news. I can still hear the franticness in her mother's voice when she told me this baby I held in my arms had died. It was a suicide. She was 19 years old.

As a parent, I cannot imagine the pain and loss families feel, and I pray I am never in that position. As a rabbi, however, I know these calls are always a possibility; still, I pray they never come. The sense of helplessness and despair is overwhelming, and the only thing I can do is stand with the family.

Suicide, suicide attempts and mental health issues are an epidemic that plagues our society. There was a brief stir this year attached to the Summer Olympics and the participation – or nonparticipation – of Simone Biles and other athletes. People started discussing the stress they felt and its impact on their ability to perform. For a moment, a spotlight shone on the impact and importance of mental health issues. But that was so last month, and people have moved on.

If you think suicides are the outliers, something unusual, you are wrong. This young woman's death by suicide was the third to touch my family in the last year. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, suicide has affected 54 percent of all Americans in some way. In 2019, the United States saw nearly 1.4 million suicide attempts. Of those, 47,500 resulted in death. To put that into context, that's 130 people who die every day by suicide. Overall, it is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States and the second leading cause for people aged 34 and younger. More than a third of people who died by suicide were 55 or older.

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The suicide rate for veterans was one and a half times higher than in the general population. These statistics are all prepandemic numbers, and it is suspected that they will be even higher over the past eighteen months.

It is easy to think if these people would just get some help, this crisis could be avoided. But according to 2020 data, more than 73 percent of our country does not have enough mental health providers to serve residents. Among adults diagnosed with mental health conditions, nearly 45 percent did not receive mental health services in the past year. We may be amid the coronavirus pandemic, but we are also witnessing a mental health crisis that goes largely unseen. One in four adults experiences mental illness in a given year, approximately 82.5 million Americans. We cannot keep silent. It is believed that by 2030, depression will outpace cancer, stroke, war and accidents as the world's leading cause of disability and death. Tragically, too many people take their own lives as a result of severe depression. They leave behind children, parents and families who mourn their death and suffer in their absence. For them we cannot keep silent.

On Yom Kippur, on this holiest night of the year, I am speaking about mental illness, because as your rabbi for more than 20 years, I have seen just how many lives it affects. I have seen parents desperately worried about their depressed teens. I have seen families living with the painful legacy that comes from being raised by a bipolar parent. I have seen spouses exhausted after years of caring for a mentally ill partner. And I have seen so many who suffer from mental illness alone and isolated, looking for a way to connect. Most tragic are the families in our community whose lives have been permanently marred by the suicide of a son or daughter, a parent or sibling.

I am speaking about mental illness for all of you who love someone whose lives are darkened by it. I am speaking because I don't believe anyone should have to suffer alone or in silence, afraid to reveal their truth or their pain. As it so happens, September is National Suicide Prevention Month.

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By Rabbi Brian I. Michelson

Yet despite its prevalence, people who live with mental illness continue to feel ostracized, marginalized and misunderstood. Recently, a woman wrote about her friend who suffers from depression: "She is patronized, ignored and ridiculed...but rarely appreciated or respected. Why is it that we can laud cancer survivors for how hard they've fought, but we don't think about mental illness the same way?" The great Robin Williams, who took his own life in 2014, said in *Good Will Hunting*, "I used to think that the worst thing in life was to end up alone. It's not! The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel alone." Despite the advances in treating mental illness, so many misperceptions still exist. We need to be clear: Mental illness is not a moral failing. It is not a weakness. It is not a character flaw.

For millennia, Judaism has understood depression to be a part of life. Moses cried out to G-d, "I can no longer bear the burden of this people alone...it is too heavy for me...Please kill me, let me no longer see my wretchedness." King Saul was overcome by a ruach ra'ah, a "bad spirit" or what we may see as bipolar disorder today. Our biblical ancestors faced horrific darkness. Rabbi Elliot Kukla explains: "What the biblical stories teach us is that mental distress is a natural part of human life and a part of every society. Surviving our own moments of emotional suffering and finding the strength to walk with others through incredible pain are ancient and sacred obligations."

Even the Talmud, written 1,500 years ago, discusses depression and how best to offer support. In tractate Berakhot, we read the story of Rabbi Eleazar, who is ill and suffering from deep despair. When his friend Rabbi Yochanan visits him, he finds Eleazar alone in a darkened room, facing the wall. When Yochanan sees his friend crying, he asks, "Why are you crying?" Then Eleazar finally answers, "I weep because all light fades into darkness, because all beauty eventually rots." Yochanan, sitting beside his friend, replies, "Yes, ultimately everything does die. So perhaps you have reason to weep." Then Yochanan sits down with his friend and weeps alongside him. After a while, Yochanan asks, "Does darkness comfort you? Do you want these sufferings?" "No," Eleazar says. "Then give me your hand," replies Yochanan, and he lifts Rabbi Eleazar from his bed and out of his darkened room. Sometimes the best way to help people who suffer is not to talk them out of their pain; it is to be present with them and accompany them in their darkness.

THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE AND MENTAL HEALTH DURING KOL NIDREI

By Rabbi Brian I. Michelson

Judaism has always understood that physical and mental illness are equally deserving of healing, and we are all a key to that healing. We must make it safer for more people to come out from behind the shadows and find the support and care they need – both those living with mental illness and the family and friends who care for them. We need to start talking more openly about the “secret” illness nobody wants to talk about. It wasn’t so long ago when people only spoke in whispers about cancer. Judaism understands emotional and spiritual pain are as real and as serious as that of the body. Just look at the Mi Shebeirach, the prayer for healing: Refuat he-nefesh uh-refuat ha-goof, we pray for healing of the soul and healing of the body. So many of us require both.

In our society, we are so accustomed to avoiding darkness, with night-lights for our children to ward off monsters and televisions blaring at night to fill the silence. We forget darkness is not only inevitable; it can be a powerful and holy place as well. It is where Jacob meets the angel and where Moses comes face to face with G-d. While there may be monsters of one form or another in the darkness, it is only through confronting them that we can truly dispel their power. Tonight, on this holy night of introspection, the conversation begins inside of each of us. As we search our souls, we also examine our views and prejudices about mental illness. What words do we use? How might we be perpetuating harmful stigmas when we loosely use words like “wacko” or say someone is acting “crazy?” What might it sound like when we casually say, “That was so bad, I wanted to kill myself” or “I wanted to jump off the bridge?”

I want to speak directly for a moment to those of you who struggle with mental illness in one form or another every day. I want you to know that I, that we, can never fully understand the depths of your pain or the complexities of your life, but you are not alone. We, your clergy, and your community are here for you. We will try to sit with you in your darkness, we will cry alongside you, and we will take your hand and lead you to the light of day when you feel ready. Most important, we can help you find the resources you need. Continue to be brave and strong, and may this year help you to find compassion and contentment.

To help you, every member of the congregation will receive a postcard in the coming week that provides the names and phone numbers for national and local mental health and suicide resources. You will find information about the Blue Dove Foundation, a Jewish resource for our community whose kippah I am wearing this evening. Don’t just glance at the card and toss it into recycling. Keep it somewhere. Stick it on your fridge or where you keep important papers. Even if you don’t feel you need the information, someone you know, someone you love, may need it.

THINKING ABOUT SUICIDE AND MENTAL HEALTH DURING KOL NIDREI

By Rabbi Brian I. Michelson

For those of you whose loved ones suffer from mental illness or who have experienced the trauma of suicide firsthand – mothers, fathers, children, siblings, friends and partners – your heart is full of both love and pain. Tonight, as I stand before you, I stand in awe of you and all you carry every day. May G-d continue to strengthen you and lift you as you care for the ones you love and yourselves.

Finally, many of our congregants work as mental health professionals. To you, I offer the following blessing: May you feel the love and gratitude of this entire congregation, for your wisdom and insight, and for the tremendous compassion you show our children, our parents and us. You help us find life again and remind us we belong in this world, and we are worthy of love and kindness. May G-d bless you with peace and fulfillment.

I close with this blessing for us all: In this new year, help us, G-d, to have compassion for ourselves and others, help us to be understanding and kind. Give us strength to face the darkness as well as the light, and help us heal souls with laughter and joy. Keep our hearts open and loving, and bless us with goodness, compassion and peace.



EXPERIENCING YOM KIPPUR WITH AN EATING DISORDER



By The Blue Dove Foundation

Among the many traditions and prayers experienced on Yom Kippur, two stand out: fasting and repenting.

For most adults, these are uncomfortable but benign practices, and their pain is quickly forgotten when the fast is over. Unfortunately, the experience of fasting can be much more challenging for someone struggling with disordered eating. The rhythm of the holiday, with its large meals before and after the period of fasting, can be at best extremely stressful to someone in treatment for an eating disorder. At worst, it can be dangerous – both physically and emotionally. A person in recovery will often be assigned a structured meal plan of set portions at set times in an effort to establish a pattern of healthy eating. This schedule is crucial to their recovery, and disrupting this pattern at sensitive stages of recovery can be extremely harmful to the recovery process. Putting the brain and body into a state of deprivation can also be detrimental to the biology and chemistry of the brain.

For these reasons, fasting on Yom Kippur simply isn't an option for people struggling with disordered eating. And while many conceive of the day as a time when people are meant to "suffer" or "punish themselves" for things they did wrong, the Jewish value of "pikuach nefesh" – protecting human life – is first and foremost to any religious setting. After all, the Torah tells us:

You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the LORD.
(Leviticus 18:5)

Furthermore, the Talmud utilizes this verse to explain that one must not sacrifice their life in the service of the commandments.

The verse states: "You shall keep My statutes and My judgments, which a person shall do, and he shall live by them" (Leviticus 18:5), thereby teaching that the mitzvot were given to provide life, but they were not given so that one will die due to their observance.
(Sanhedrin 74a)

This ultimately means if you are participating in a mitzvah that is causing you harm, it is not a mitzvah you are commanded to perform. This perspective is crucial to one who is recovering from an eating disorder. One of the first lessons someone in recovery is taught is the importance of taking care of yourself, your body and your recovery, and that includes feeding your body, brain and soul.



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Repentance, or "teshuvah," also can be tricky territory for someone struggling with an eating disorder. Most eating disorders have several things in common: a pattern of negative thinking, poor self-image and low self-efficacy (a belief in what you can accomplish). For someone in this mindset, taking an inventory of mistakes, flaws and misgivings about oneself can intensify these distortions and severely affect their mental health. This is not at all what teshuvah is meant to achieve.

Whether you are in recovery from disordered eating or you don't connect to fasting as a means of repentance, Yom Kippur has a lot to offer a practitioner. At its core, it is a holiday all about self-reflection, transformation and setting positive intentions for the coming year, and there are approaches to making that process a positive and healthy one.

Writing Our Way to Repentance

One activity that has proved to be a healthy and effective way to reflect is journaling. It helps you collect your thoughts in a structured and slow-paced way, avoiding most forms of unhealthy reflection like overloading yourself or getting lost in your thoughts. Journaling also helps accomplish what cognitive scientists have called reinforcement, or calling attention to something in regular intervals. Reinforcement is one of the most effective ways to change our behavior, as it allows us to notice the things we are doing right or wrong and adjust our actions accordingly over time.

This can be complemented with "positive psychology," the process of identifying and engaging more frequently in thoughts, feelings and behaviors that benefit you rather than focusing on negative ones and avoiding them. The goal is to focus on doing more good things and creating a growth-focused mindset that makes us feel good about who we are and what we ARE doing – rather than on what we SHOULD or SHOULDN'T be doing.

As Yom Kippur approaches, the following journaling and thought activities can be helpful in cultivating healthy reflection and evolution, whether you are struggling with disordered eating or just looking for a different approach to repentance this year.



EXPERIENCING YOM KIPPUR WITH AN EATING DISORDER

By The Blue Dove Foundation

What are you currently doing that you would like to do MORE of? How can you feed your mind, body and spirit in a way that will help you meet your goals and be the best version of yourself?

- I want to feed my body by...
- I felt grateful my body was able to do _____ for me this year.
- My mind/body protected me by _____. If I do _____ I can experience this more often.
- I felt good about myself when I _____. I can set myself up for success by finding tools and reminders to keep close at hand when I need them like _____.
- I liked when I was able to solve a problem by _____. I'd like to remember how I started that strategy with this:_____.
- I felt grateful my body was able to do _____ for me this year.
- What makes me feel connected to others?
- What makes me feel connected to myself? To my body? To my spirit?
- What makes me feel connected to the Earth?
- What makes me feel connected to Judaism? To G-d?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Blue Dove Foundation has a variety of resources and publications available to help bring Judaism and mental wellness to your life and community, including **publications**:



Mental Wellness and Jewish holiday resources:



The Blue Dove Foundation also is thrilled to offer a number of **incredible workshops** to help bring mental health and wellness to your community, utilizing both medically backed information and resources, and relevant and impactful Jewish sources. This gives the materials a sense of practical significance and spiritual depth.