



JEWISH TEEN WELLNESS Resources

BECAUSE EVERYONE IS GOING THROUGH SOMETHING.



JEWISH TEENS THRIVE

The Jewish community is committed to helping teens thrive in today's complex and challenging world. By being a part of their support system, we become a *kehilla kedosha*, a sacred or holy community dedicated to helping each individual feel like they belong.

Adolescence is a turbulent time full of both transition and possibility. It is when teens start to consider their place in this world, and the impact they hope to have. It can also be intensely challenging and hard to navigate.

The Jewish story is one of resilience. We offer the following Jewish wisdom, text and resources to support parents and Jewish educators working to build teens' resilience and help them thrive.

**INSIGHTS ON
MENTAL HEALTH
FROM CLASSICAL
JEWISH SOURCES**

TEXTS

BETZELEM ELOHIM

Our tradition offers tremendous insights illustrating the value of all people. “All beings are created in the image of God,” in Hebrew, this is called Betzelem Elokim.

This is a widely used concept that recognizes each person's individuality as an expression of God's will. It articulates that each individual was created by God, as if this world was created only for them.

When shared with teens, this concepts communicates strongly: “I am here, I am listening to your experiences, your pain, and your thoughts because they are uniquely your own. You are created in the image of God and you are sacred.”

This is a critical message for adolescents who may be struggling with their own self-worth, which helps teens feel the world was created for the individual and could not exist without them. Neglecting one's individuality diminishes one's holiness and one's own view of their own self-worth. Secondarily, mental health struggles often present a number of challenges. It is important to remember that each of us is created in God's image, and that even these challenges may serve a greater purpose for us or for our community.

TEXTS

MIDRASH VAYIKRA RABBA LEVITICUS 34:3

“A kind person takes care of his/her self” (Proverbs 11:17).

Hillel the Elder was this type of person. After class one day, he started walking with his students. They asked him, “Teacher, where are you going?” He said, “To do a mitzvah.” They asked, “What mitzvah?” and he told them, “To take a bath.” Surprised, they asked, “That’s a mitzvah?!” “It is indeed,” he answered. “It is someone’s special job to wash the statues of kings set up in public spaces like theaters. This person gets paid to wash those statues! And he gets a lot of respect! Those statutes are only the image of a king. I am responsible to wash myself because I am created in God’s image, as it says in Genesis 9:6, ‘God made people b’tzelem Elohim (in the image of God).’”

Rabbi Hillel instructs his disciples on the value of caring for our bodies by performing a “religious ritual.” Answering the students’ inquiry about the ritual, Hillel noted that just as people took time to clean and care for statues, how much more important was it for him to care for his body as one who was “created in the divine image and likeness.” Although Hillel’s reply focused on bathing, it is symbolic of Judaism’s belief that we are responsible for caring for the gift of our bodies – and thus maintaining our health becomes a positive act. How we treat our bodies reflects how we see our relationship to God and thus, how we see ourselves as well.

Self-Image

TEXTS

PIKUACH NEFESH

Pikuach nefesh, which literally means “guarding a soul,” teaches that a person must do everything in their power to save the life of another.

Preserving a life is ruled as more important than almost every other Jewish law, and other laws are often superseded for the sake of pikuach nefesh.

This Jewish value stems from Leviticus 18:5: “You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the LORD.” The rabbis added, “and not die by them.”

This concept communicates the importance of protecting the life oneself and others. God created man by breathing life into him. When a person leaves this world it is by gods hand too. Each of us has a “tikun”, a purpose in this world that we are put here for.

Purpose

life

TEXTS

HAMEABED NEFESH ACHAT

Jewish sources teach that in the beginning, only one human was created to demonstrate the importance of each human life.

According to Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 37a, whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world, as all potential future human life from that soul has been curtailed. Conversely, a person who saves a life, it is as if he saved an entire world by preserving the potential for creating generations to come. Those who work with teens during times of challenge and struggle may help save a life, which will have ripple effects for the future.

TEXTS

DEVELOPING I - THOU RELATIONSHIPS

The works of German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber serve an important role in navigating how one might frame interactions and relationships.

For Buber, a relationship between any two people must shift from an I-It encounter to an I-Thou relationship. An I-It encounter is one that objectifies a person, occurring by distance, observation, or categorizing someone as a tool which can be utilized in order to achieve a certain goal. However, an I-Thou relationship ensures embracing individuals as their whole selves. It is the ultimate acknowledgement of a relationship because the other person is not merely “seen,” but rather becomes related to the viewer. This restores their humanity and enables one to rid oneself of preexisting prejudices and judgments. Teenage years are a time of trial and tribulation. Teens are learning how to understand their feelings and express themselves. It is the opportune moment for an educator to engage in an I-Thou relationship. Teens seek to be understood when they have the hardest time expressing themselves. It is impossible for one to fully comprehend another person, and so instead, one must ask, inquire, and seek to understand.

Buber’s lessons are crucial to those working in a field which emphasizes interpersonal interaction. Buber reminds us that we are obligated to see the entire teen as an individual. It is less important that the specific teen “shows up” for a program; what matters is that we show up for the individual teen. This involves looking out for the teen as a whole person. It’s about the relationship one builds together that enables personal development and growth on both ends.

TEXTS

TALMUD BRACHOT

The room was dark. Rabbi Eleazar was still in bed, curled up in a ball, turned toward the wall. He could not bring himself to look toward the window at life and light. His friend Rabbi Yochanan entered the room, looked down through the darkness at his friend, pulled up a chair and sat down.

Yochanan prepared to sit in this heavy silence for a long time. He began to roll up his sleeve. His face was shrouded in the darkness, but his shirt, reflecting the light from outside, seemed to brighten the room with its own light.

Rabbi Eleazar turned from the wall to face his friend. Yochanan asked: “Does darkness comfort you?” Slowly, Eleazar shook his head. “It did in the beginning, but now it can’t protect me from my thoughts.” Yochanan asked: “And the silence? Is it comforting?” “No.” “And being alone?” Eleazar looked into his friend’s eyes. “No, loneliness adds to my suffering.” “Do you continue to welcome this darkness, this silence, this sadness?” “No. Before I couldn’t bear the light, noise, or laughter. Now I can no longer bear the alternatives. But I don’t know the way back to the living.” Yochanan asked: “Will you let me help you?” “I will try.”

Yochanan extended his hand. Eleazar grasped hold of it. He felt strength and warmth reach him. His friend Yochanan raised him out of his bed and helped him to the door.

Relationships

TEXTS

FIRST SAMUEL 1:9 - 18

The text below offers a powerful connection to the role of mental health and wellness in our Jewish sources. In this passage, read by Jews around the world during the High Holy Day season, Hannah, suffers from infertility. She makes a pilgrimage to the sanctuary at Shiloh and prays desperately but silently to God for a child. The High Priest Eli admonishes her, mistakenly suspecting that her inaudible prayer is a sign of drunkenness. "I am a tormented woman," Hannah says. Rebuked, Eli offers her a blessing and God answers Hannah's prayer. She becomes the mother of the prophet Samuel.

Hannah's inability to conceive causes her mental anguish - sadness, frustration, inescapable depression and she turns to spirituality, to prayer, to God, for guidance and help. Yet even in this holy place she faces discrimination and judgment from one who does not understand her pain. Hannah's story is a reminder that even today, negative stereotypes and stigma can cause further "torment" to those who suffer. What's more, Eli is a religious official with considerable power. May those of us who work professionally with Jewish young people see Eli's reaction as a warning. May we be wary to jump to conclusions or treat those who seek our help with anything less than respect and gentle presence.

10 In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to Adonai, weeping bitterly.

11 And she made a vow, saying, "God Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to God for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

12 As she kept on praying to God, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard.

Eli thought she was drunk 14 and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine." 15 "Not so, my Lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to God. 16 Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." 17 Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of God."

18 She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Prayer

CONTROVERSIAL ATTITUDES & STIGMAS TOWARDS MENTAL HEALTH IN CLASSICAL JEWISH SOURCES

While Jews have, throughout modern history, been hugely influential in the field of psychology, the Jewish community has not always looked favorably or acceptingly at those who suffer from psychiatric conditions. The controversial sources below are evidence of this fact. And yet, these texts exist within our tradition and, especially in more observant circles, influence how we interact religiously and otherwise with those who suffer poor mental health. Instead of ignoring them, how might we reconcile, reinterpret, or coexist with these texts with which we might at best disagree and at worst, find offensive?

TEXTS

DEUTERONOMY 28:15 - 34

This text, which famously details various blessings for following the word of God and various curses for not heeding God's laws, suggests that mental illness or instability is Divine punishment for sin. Even today, the word "shigaon" seen here in the text (and from which the Yiddish "meshugunah" is derived) is used as Israeli slang for "crazy."

15 But if you do not obey the LORD your God to observe faithfully all His commandments and laws which I enjoin upon you this day, all these curses shall come upon you and take effect: 16 Cursed shall you be in the city and cursed shall you be in the country. 17 Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.....

27 The LORD will strike you with the Egyptian inflammation, with hemorrhoids, boil-scars, and itch, from which you shall never recover. 28 The LORD will strike you with madness, blindness, and dismay.....

33 A people you do not know shall eat up the produce of your soil and all your gains; you shall be abused and downtrodden continually, 34 until you are driven mad by what your eyes behold.

- How might we reconcile the Torah's understanding of mental illness with what we know today? Does this text contribute to stigma?
- How can the language we use, even casually or in different context, potentially be a challenge in how our community addresses mental health?
- How might individuals suffering from mental illness feel when coming across a section like this in sacred text?

TEXTS

SOTAH 3A:4

The juxtaposition of sin and mental illness is continued by our Rabbis. See below in the text from Sotah where Reish Lakish expresses the belief that a person only commits a sin when in a state of "madness."

Reish Lakish says: A man commits a transgression only if a spirit of folly or madness [shetut] enters him, as it is stated: "If any man's wife goes aside [tisteh]" (Numbers 5:12). The word tisteh is written with the Hebrew letter shin, affording an alternative reading of tishteh, which is related to the term for folly or madness, the word shetut.

The Rabbis of the Talmud used the term "shoteh" to refer to someone who was mentally compromised. The term is derived from another word meaning "wanderer" or "vagrant." Though some early rabbis have fairly pejorative things to say about someone fitting this category, they are mainly concerned, as we might predict, with the religious status of a Shoteh. Is a person suffering mental illness obligated by certain ritual expectations? May he (or she, but usually he) perform those rituals on behalf of another, or on behalf of the community, etc? You can see some of these examples in the texts below.

- Psychology has long identified the connection between a well developed spiritual life and mental health. How might these texts restrict access to a meaningful religious experience to someone with a psychological condition?

Wellness

As seen below, our sources do seem to have a sense that there are varying forms and degrees of mental illness. However, their understanding of the cause of mental illness would shock most modern mental health professionals.

TEXTS

MISHNAH MEGILLAH 2:4

(4) All are qualified to read the Megillah except a deaf person, an idiot (mentally unstable person) and a minor.

TEXTS

CHAGIGAH 3B:12

Our Rabbis have taught, What is a “shoteh” [translated until now as a mentally ill person]? He who goes out alone at night, and he who sleeps in a cemetery, and he who tears his clothes. It is stated: R. Hunna said, So long as they all take place at one time. R. Yochanan said, Even [only] one of them.

TEXTS

MISHNAH CHAGIGAH 1:1

All are obligated in seeing [the Temple Mount], except for a deaf-mute, a shoteh, or a minor; a Tumtum [person with recessed sexual organs whose gender is therefore impossible to determine, presently, by external examination. an Androgynos; women, unfreed slaves; a lame person, a blind person, or a sick person; or an old person who cannot stand upon his feet.

TEXTS

MISHNEH TORAH TESTIMONY 9:9

(9) A shoteh’s testimony is invalid on a biblical [level] because he is not eligible [to perform] Mitzvot. This [does not refer to] only to a shoteh who goes naked, breaks things, and throws stones rather anyone whose sanity is impaired and finds his intellect constantly confused on some point even if he can ask [questions] and converse on topic regarding other things.

TEXTS

MISHNAH KETUBOT 5:5

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel says: if a man forbade his wife under a vow to do any work he must divorce her and give her kethubah to her for idleness leads to insanity.

Mental Health

WISE WORDS

DEUTERONOMY 4 : 9 – 10

“Guard yourself and guard your soul very carefully.”

ECCLESIASTES 4 : 6

“Better to work a little in joy than to be obsessed with work at the expense of tranquility.”

**HELLENISTIC JEWISH
PHILOSOPHER PHILO**

“The body is the soul’s house. Shouldn’t we therefore take care of our house so that it doesn’t fall into ruin?”

KING SOLOMON

“Anxiety in the heart of a person causes dejection, but a good word will turn it into joy.”

PIRKE AVOT

In Ethics of Our Fathers we read, “Aseh lecha rav,” make for yourself a teacher, “uk’neh lecha chaver,” and get yourself a friend.

RABBI NACHMAN OF BRESLAV

“All the world is a very narrow bridge. The important thing is not to be afraid.”

RABBI YIRMIYAHU ULLMAN

“In order for the soul to exist in the material world, it must be clothed in a body through which the soul may achieve its purpose. For this reason we must supply the body with its essential needs like food, water, sleep, and exercise, without which the body could not exist and the soul could not fulfill its potential.”

RAV KOOK

“Great is our physical demand. We need a healthy body. We dealt much with soulfulness; we forgot the holiness of the body. We neglected the physical health and strength; we forgot that we have holy flesh; no less than holy spirit...”

RABBI YITZ GREENBERG

“Being in the image of God means that each human being is born with three intrinsic dignities— infinite value, equality, and uniqueness. These dignities are mine, and yours, and everybody’s...”

Quotes

HILLEL

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?"

TALMUD

"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

ANNE FRANK

"How wonderful it is that nobody need to wait a single moment before beginning to improve the world."

RABBI SCHNAUR ZLAMAN OF LLADI

"A little bit of light dispels a lot of darkness."

KING SOLOMON, PROVERBS 24:16

"A righteous man falls down seven times and gets up."

RABBI SHLOMO WOLBE ALEI SHUR, VOL. I PG. 35

"The very knowledge of the fact that it is natural to have good days and bad days has the power to assuage a lot of despair and sadness."

MAIMONIDES

"Exercise refers to both strong and weak movements, providing it is movement that is vigorous and effects breathing, increasing it."

"The soul is subject to health and disease, just as is the body..."

MISHNAH SANHEDRIN 4:9 BABYLONIAN TALMUD TRACTATE SANHEDRIN 37A

"Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."

Quotes

MARTIN BUBER

"In spite of all similarities, every living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction that cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you."

"When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying, 'Have faith and take your troubles to God.' Act instead as though there were no God, as though there were only one person in the world who could help -- only yourself."

"A human being becomes whole not in virtue of a relation to himself [only] but rather in virtue of an authentic relation to another human being(s)."

"I think no human being can give more than this. Making life possible for the other, if only for a moment."

Quotes

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